

Tribute

by Jan Carew

Introduction

The distinguished South African writer and African National Congress activist Alex La Guma died in Havana, Cuba, in October, 1985. We had met accidentally in Moscow, and it was one of several encounters over the years, a month before his death. It is a loss that will be mourned by friends and admirers all over the world. Dylan Thomas once wrote that, "After the first death, there is no other ...," but, indeed for writers and activists of Alex La Guma's stature, this is hardly true, for, after his tragic and premature passing, his works, the cause to which he dedicated his life, his diamond hard integrity, have given a new lease on life to the hearts of those who remember him. He has left us a heritage, as Homer once declared, about his literature, "more enduring than bronze, more lasting than the pyramids."

Alex, Alex, only last September we had met in the cavernous depths of the Ukraine Hotel in Moscow. I was running down the marble staircase between the mezzanine and the ground floor, and there you were with your wife in the midst of the hotel lobby bustle taking it all with a protean calm. When we greeted each other, I thought that you looked a bit tired. But, when you explained that you had just flown in from Pongyang, I knew that you were in fact wrestling with jet lag and your body-clock was trying to adjust to what must have been a ten-hour difference. After you had slept off some of the jet lag, we met in the park opposite the hotel. It was a pleasant Autumn day. Shafts of sunlight were striping the heroic bronze statue opposite us and children were tumbling in the grass at its base. One adventurous child had even climbed up and was clinging to the bronze coattails of the

statue. I remember your saying that for the first time in a long exile, the turmoil in southern Africa which was rocking the apartheid system to its foundations, had created conditions whereby you might be able to return to a free, non-racial home country within your lifetime.

Our conversation threaded its way from an easy banter to reminiscences. You recalled the day we had driven up to Michael Manley's mountain retreat, when he was Prime Minister of Jamaica, and we were attending an anti-apartheid conference in Kingston. After a desultory interval, we talked about world peace and the upcoming Geneva summit. We also talked about the fact that your applications for visas to attend conferences in the United States had been repeatedly turned down, while the head of the South African Secret Police, a man with the blood of innocents dripping from his hands, had been an honoured guest of the Reagan Administration; but you also expressed admiration for the thousands of Americans from all walks of life who were challenging the sly, malevolent and immoral Reaganite policy of constructive engagement. We talked about the liberation movements in Latin America, East Timor, the Phillipines, and the atrocious act of international bullying that the invasion of Grenada represented.

I knew that when you mentioned, almost casually, the possibility of the end of exile you had made me party to a secret, given me a glimpse of a wound that only the defeat of the fascist regime in South Africa could heal. It was a profound act of trust and I appreciated it. We never spoke about that longing to end your exile again. But, as soon as you had uttered the words, I saw vivid pictures which your marvellously evocative writing had conjured up - avenues of jacarandas and giant azaleas, wild flowers rainbowing mountainsides, parched landscapes and lush ones, black laughter, the voices of children

enlivening the gloaming with cries that sounded like the songs of sea birds, and long cool evenings on the Pondoland coast or stiflingly hot ones in the arid Karoo; these images flashed in a swift and passing kaleidoscope of colour and shape and motion. Having spoken about that persistent core of anguish once, there was no need to resurrect it from hidden casements in your heart again. But, you and I knew that it was there, beating like a persistent pulse under the surface of our conversation.

Alex, you will never return home in the flesh, but your indomitable spirit is rooted there. Its immortal longings so vividly expressed in your writings and the enviable example of your fight for the freedom of your people have seeded the hearts of thousands of young fighters. They will pick up the standard of liberation, that the premature death of a great fighter, a statesman, a distinguished writer and an ANC stalwart, had caused to dip momentarily; and men and women, boys and girls will wave the La Guma banner higher than the stars about Table Mountain.

You had, in the midst of our widely ranging talk, spoken with great warmth about the unstinting hospitality of the Cuban people who had gone out of the way to make their country a home away from home for you. "Somehow, Cuba showed me mirror images of my own folk, and it made the exile easier," you had said. We moved from one subject to the other with the ease that comes naturally when old friends are dallying away precious time in a park on a sun-splashed Autumn day. We lingered for a moment on the subject of how important it was to highlight the profound cultural and historical connections binding Afro-Asian peoples together. We agreed that it was crucial that the sons and daughters of the Afro-Asian diaspora in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas, should retain cultural contacts with the struggles

of artists, writers, and poets in those vast African-Asian twin continents of polyglot peoples, and endless land and seascapes. I shall work towards reaching these goals with greater zeal and dedication in your name. I promise.

Alex, seeing you at the foot of the stairs in the Ukraine with the crowd of guests milling around you, I realised once again that your face in repose with its high smooth forehead, tufted white hair flaring out at the sides, your seemingly gentle eyes that disguised a diamond-hard commitment, sometimes reminded me of a heraldic symbol. It is curious how when I think about our numerous encounters at conferences, I cannot remember having heard you raise your voice. It was a quiet voice, and accented as it was, it sometimes sounded musical. But, for you, it had become an instrument that you kept under an effortless control. It was as though your voice (and not the proverbial eyes) was the window to your African soul.

It was the same voice that spoke most eloquently and in unforgettable cadences in your writing; and what a stupendous talent you had! By sheer coincidence, the day before we met in the lobby of the Ukraine, I had bought a copy of your novella, *Time of the Butcherbird*, in the Rainbow Publisher's bookshop in Moscow. It was a paperback edition in English that was being used as a text for Soviet students studying English literature and philosophy. What a splendid idea! What a finer text could be found by a contemporary author writing in English!

Having bought *Time of the Butcherbird*, I sat up late into the night reading it. The silences that surrounded me as I read were occasionally punctuated by the furtive sounds one hears coming from hotel corridors - keys turning in doors, and whispered conversations. *Butcherbird* carried me away from my procrustean bed (it was six inches too short for my long frame) and took me into the very intestines

of a small town in South Africa. Your writing bequeathed to that microscopic and cruel arena of apartheid a certain lyrical balance. With your profound creative understanding of the essentials of a great drama, you transformed that small town on the edge of the Karoo into a setting where an epic struggle between good and evil would take place. No one had written more movingly about the collective anguish of the oppressed South African people, or shown us more unforgettable glimpses of their invincible courage and resolution than you have done. Fugard, for all his talent as a playwright, takes his characters to a thresh-



hold of revolt which they never somehow cross; they remain there, trapped and hopeless. Your genius was that you had an inner ear for the people's secret longings, and you articulated those longings through your literary alchemy.

You were, in a very sense, not a novelist writing about revolutionary situations, but a re-

volutionary writer. There was never any question about whose side you were on, but as a first-rate writer, you gave both protagonists and antagonists a human face. You showed how an unjust system often made human beasts of those upholding it, while it enobled those fighting against it. The sermon of Dominee Visser in the last chapter of *Butcherbird* revealed the spurious theological justification for apartheid - that racial separation was ordained by God. Visser seemed bent on justifying Voltaire's satirical remark that the first priest was the first knave to have met the first fool. Above

all, Alex, you used your writings like a gigantic mirror to show the downtrodden and the most despised, true and heroic images of themselves. In the *Butcherbird*, your subtle depiction of the awakening of Chief Hlangeni's people to a realisation of their collective power, lends grandeur to their resistance. And this was a prophetic reflection of the

awakening of the downtrodden millions in all of southern Africa. Chief Hlangeni's people were about to be moved to a Bantustan. The apartheid state, acting on behalf of powerful transnational mining interests, was ruthlessly dispossessing them of their ancestral lands. As this cruel drama unfolded, you showed very clearly how it had dawned slowly upon those threatened people that it was better to die resisting than to acquiesce to this act of certain ethnocide. But, inside of the larger struggle was the smaller one that you portrayed very skillfully - Shilling Murile, a young farm worker was about to take revenge on a big landowner who had murdered his innocent young brother. Mma-Tau, Chief Hlangeni's formidable sister, the one whom the people come to regard as the leader of their rebellion, tried to convince Murile that it was much better to become part of a movement against oppression than to lose one's life in an empty gesture of personal revenge. But, finally, it is Madonele, the aged shepherd

who persuaded Murile to join the people's movement. The old man was wiser than the impatient Mma-Tau. He knew that before Murile joined the movement, he first had to exorcise the memory of being a helpless witness to his brother's murder, and the eight years in prison that, he and not the murderers, was sentenced to serve. After Murile's act of expiation was carried out, the next step, that of loosing himself in the people as they struggled for land and life, became as natural as breathing. Besides, the eight years in prison had helped to steel him for that moment when he would join the liberation struggle. The seasoned political prisoners into whose midst he had been thrown, had turned prison into his University of Hunger. He had listened to them and learnt a great deal from their words and their example. With subtlety and skill, you made the reader understand that you were dealing with both individuals and archetypes; and those archetypes of a people awakening were symbols of the whole of southern

Africa rising up to stretch limbs stiff from too much kneeling. The scope and range of your other works like the collected stories in *A Walk in the Night and Other Stories*, the novel *In The Fog of the Season's End*, and that fine and harrowing account of prison and resistance in *The Stone Country*, is considerable, and leaves behind you an enduring heritage. Through your writings and your life, you made a mockery of that shallow claim that African writers should cloister themselves in ebony towers and leave the politics of liberation alone. For you, art and literature were lightning rods catching the incandescent glare of truth and transmitting it not only to your own people, but to people all over the world who are struggling to make the world a better place to live in.

The Carib Shamans in my country say that when great fighters like you breathe their last breath, they go to walk amongst the stars. Go well, Alex. We shall never forget you.

