

I am the face ...

I am the Solomon Mahlangu
you won't recognise
when you emerge from the KLM plane
and walk down the stairs
onto the tarmac at Jan Smuts
dreaming — perhaps of your safari holiday
so gorgeously described in the brochures
which you found in Amsterdam

You won't see me as you put on
your safari suit, ready for
the 'trip of your lifetime'
in sunny South Africa.

Yet I am the boy in the blue overalls
walking next to you in the hall,
I shall be picking up the cigarette stubs
strewn on the floor by the likes of you.
And, when you use the toilet,
know it was my hands who washed it clean.

I am the black man
you won't recognise
as you are whisked off
to your Holiday Inn
somewhere in e-Gawutini.
I am the Solomon Mahlangu
you don't know.

I am the Benjamin Moloise
who dangled at the end of their rope
at the crack of dawn,
now, safely with the Izinyanya,
you won't notice me when you step off
your KLM plane ready for your 'Bushveld' holiday.

I am the man who filled your newspapers
only a few months ago,
when you made your first enquiries
about this holiday in the sun.
I am the Benjamin Moloise
you won't recognise.

I am the man called Ahmed Timol
who they said jumped from John Vorster Square
you won't see me as you shop around
in the curio shop
in this city of gold
built by the sweat
of my black brothers.

I am the man whose blood was shed on this very spot
where your wife now poses for her picture
in this land of death.

I am the Ahmed Timol
whose shadow you'll never feel.

I am the Hector Peterson
whose life was cut short by a bullet
when he was only eleven years of age.
You won't hear my child's voice
as you watch the Zulu
and the Gumboot dances
arranged especially for tourists like you,
'primitive Africa' as part of sunny South Africa,
better than the brochures in your land.
I am the boy whose limp body
was seen in every picture in the world.

We are the ghosts
who will accompany you
on your trip
through the majestic Drakensburg
the scenic Garden route
the Kruger National Park.

I am the man
who was at the Cape
when you came in your three ships
'De Reiger', 'De Dromedaris' and 'De Goede Hoop' *

I am the corpse
the mutilated body
the Imbongi
the Izinyanya
the angry mob
the freedom fighter
whose face you'll never find
in the brochures luring you
to sunny South Africa.

I am the face
you can never ignore.

Vernie February
Amsterdam, 21 February, 1986

* The Heron, the Dromedary and the Good Hope