

*Larry A. Swatuk*

## **Images From Southern Africa**

These poems were largely conceived and written when the author was in Southern Africa as a volunteer with Canadian Crossroads International. Under their auspices, and in cooperation with College authorities, one semester was spent teaching Political Science and English at the Lesotho Agricultural College in Lesotho's capital city of Maseru.

### **Making a Political Statement When All I Wanted to do was Run**

the road,  
private, asphalt, quiet,  
except the ocean,  
incessant, lap, slap, lapping,  
and the sky,  
heavy with cumulus,  
rain,  
in the forecast,  
visible now,  
far out at sea,  
an advancing, unbroken  
battalion in gray.  
my lungs,  
strong, silent, working  
effortlessly at sea level,  
tho they rasped  
full of gravel  
at 6000 feet.  
feet,  
pad lightly,

an unbroken attempt at  
innocuous progression,  
yet each footfall  
echoes  
as a thunderclap,  
in land too new  
for the arrogance  
of long-distance running.  
i pass her, bathed,  
in a blue and white *kanga*,<sup>1</sup>  
head laden with laundry, heaped  
high, in a worn wicker basket  
held,  
deftly aloft with one arm,  
outstretched, copper bracelets  
slid to the elbow,  
the other arm,  
limp, swinging, jingling softly,  
her face,  
shiny and black as pitch,  
prominent cheek bones and a  
strong masculine jaw highlight  
soft and fully feminine lips,  
and eyes, unswerving, almond shaped,  
and as dark as her face.  
salt-water washed shells hang  
in a queue  
from each ear,  
their ivory and cream and rough-  
ridged surfaces  
stand,  
in stark contrast  
to her skin smooth and pitch  
as black licorice.  
her feet,  
are bare, their pink-padded  
soles flash,  
briefly,  
as she walks  
in a genderless gait  
toward me.



**Reaching Logical Conclusions****SINCE!**

i've heard it said  
that creative genius  
is spawned  
from great misfortune  
and

**SINCE!**

i've also heard it said  
that misery  
loves  
company

**THEN!**

one might deduce  
there to be  
two million poets  
living in Soweto.

**They Stand Accused**

they stand accused of crimes  
of culture and birth.

where to poke  
your slick, unwary head  
out,  
from the blackened  
solace of the womb,  
is an affront to those  
who make the laws,  
and may result  
in the forceful entry  
of a fouling angry arm.

with shirt sleeve peeled  
to elbow length,  
the probing hand  
reaches  
for the child's pass,<sup>2</sup>  
and drags the blinking  
afterbirth  
startled out, into the  
white unending light,  
amid the virile, unbending  
threats  
of a charge  
of resisting arrest.

**Etiquette**

her eyes traced the pavement  
in  
unquestioning subjugation,  
and seemed to settle,  
like an Anglo-American endeavour,  
somewhere deep  
within the ground.

- a mineshaft gaze  
bereft of diamonds,  
sparkling  
nonetheless,  
with a lucrative spur  
of tears -

(or so i imagine)

i stroke her cheek  
with over-measured cheer.

- tho i wish  
i had some pockets  
for my eyes -

i long to hold her  
with my smile,  
and to greet her  
in an independent way,  
but her eyes  
have settled  
with oaken roots behind  
my boots

- and have been there  
for centuries -

so  
who am i to think  
my voice  
will make a friendly sound?

**Measured Drinks and Mirrored Images**

no one should speak  
of South Africa  
until they've drunk  
their fill  
in the coarse naked light  
of a sweltering *shebeen*,<sup>3</sup>  
shared serious talk  
and brandy and coke,  
slapped blanketed backs,  
and laughed with the old,  
withered faces evoking  
gap-toothed grins,  
looked beyond the fact  
that this  
is someone's home,  
gutted,  
to make room for people with money,  
stood blind to the mattress  
as bare as the room,  
to the child, naked and hiding  
within the towering,  
pantalooned, mid-night forest,  
to the nicotine yellowed  
poster of Al Jarreau  
that hangs,  
like the acrid smell of urine,  
above the open hole  
where the toilet used  
to be,  
and seen the indomitable spirit,  
that resides like King Moshoeshoe,  
who held the mountain in  
pitched-battle with the Boers,  
in the hearts of all Basotho.<sup>4</sup>

no one should speak  
of South Africa  
until they've drunk  
their fill  
in the whorish red light  
of the Maseru Casino Hotel,<sup>5</sup>  
swallowed pompous talk,  
and scotch neat,  
been slapped on the back  
and stung with coarse laughter  
spewn, from corrupt cunning faces  
of political survivors,  
looked beyond the fact  
that out in the hall  
men in rags plunge beggars scraps  
into the growling bellies  
of slot machines,  
stood blind to the  
Afrikaner and the Mosotho girl  
- barely a woman,  
really a child -  
lying bare on the mattress,  
to his nicotine yellowed fingers,  
that probe her for damages,  
and too soon give way,  
to the rakish thrust  
of bitter history,  
and seen an equally indomitable  
spirit,  
that resides like a cancer,  
in the malignant hearts  
of white South Africa.



**Dancing the Night Away**

“Yoo! Hoo! It’s Laaadies’ Night!”

Mametena exclaims,  
her voice an echo  
in porcelain,  
as she bathes herself  
in preparation  
for an evening at Studio One.  
i laugh.

“Yoo! Hoo! every night is  
ladies’ night - with  
your men  
in row housing  
at Carletonville,<sup>6</sup>  
and not expected  
until Easter!”

**Resettlement<sup>7</sup>**

like ants  
we move in perfect unison,  
contract, expand,  
across the endless  
ripple  
of mountain into plain.  
and tho the world  
is far  
from correlated harmony,  
we tend to ourselves  
in quiet rhyme,  
and bear  
the gravelled rasp  
of ignorance  
that sweeps aside  
our homes.

**Perils of Shy**

i ride the bus from Maseru  
to Mohales Hoek,  
and cause quite a stir  
among the regulars.

i hope they won't  
mistake  
my shyness  
for

separate development.

**Fences**

your station in life  
is measured  
in barbed wire.

the more you have,  
the richer  
you are.

like most Basotho,  
Mojalefa has three strands  
strung, like  
chickens' necks,  
stretched  
from pole to pole  
to pole.

the American Embassy  
has it strewn,  
like tumbleweeds,  
across the high expanse  
of a concrete desert.

## NOTES

1. A traditional form of clothing throughout Southern Africa, it is a single piece of cloth wrapped around the body so that it resembles a dress.
2. In reference to the hated pass book, an identity document all blacks were required to carry so as to facilitate white regime control over their movement throughout the country, particularly to limit their influx into urban areas. The race-specific pass has been eliminated, only to be replaced by another identity document required of all South Africans and which serves the same general purpose.
3. A family's house or a small general store by day, an illegal drinking establishment by night.
4. *Boers*: an Afrikaans word meaning "farmers" and commonly used to denote those South Africans, farmers and otherwise, of Afrikaner ancestry. *Basotho*: the plural of *Mosotho*, denoting those people who populate the tiny "Mountain Kingdom" of Lesotho which is totally surrounded by South Africa.
5. A South African-owned hotel located in the Lesotho capital of Maseru. Because of the austere, neo-Calvinism, of white South African society, gambling and its attenuated vices are prohibited within South Africa's borders. They are instead conveniently located in nearby Lesotho and Swaziland, as well as in the ostensibly "independent" homelands.
6. The site of one of South Africa's biggest gold mines. An estimated 50 per cent of Lesotho's working-age males (18-60) work as migrant labourers in South Africa's mines, the majority of whom make it home to their families but once or twice a year.
7. Under the laws of apartheid - literally, "apartness" - many indigenous African settlements have been bulldozed, and their inhabitants forcibly removed, and relocated to what are ostensibly their "tribal homelands," even though many of these settlements have existed for hundreds of years.