



Dancing or dying

Dancing or dying,
Loving or lying,
Black man, you are on your own.

Clowning or crying,
Building, destroying,
Black man, you are on your own.

Laughing or loathing
Fearing or hoping,
Black man – you are on your own.

Weeping and working,
Doubting, believing,
Black man, you are on your own.

Though stars may change,
And the veld stay green,
Black man, black man,
Build no more white castles in the air;

Black man – you are on your own.

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THE MORNING AFTER APARTHEID



Poems on
South Africa's
Agony
by
Brian Frost

*Rev. Conway
June '87*

Contents

It could have been so beautiful	3
How can we paint the Hottentot crags?	4
White lament	5
They crucified a continent	6
August showers	7
She died apart	8
All in an Africa evening	9
South Africa is you	10
Everything's banned in Pretoria	11
In the valley of a thousand hills	12
Johannesburg is half a day from now	13
To a black South African	14
There is a terrible beauty	16
We will make you human again	17
Can you ban the rainbow after rain?	18
In this unknown beating heart	19
Soweto child	20
There will be laughter	21
God made the beauty	22
When morning comes . . .	23
Is there yet time . . . ?	24
Take the gold dust of the rand	26
The morning after apartheid	27

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It could have been so beautiful

It could have been so beautiful
The blue and white sea,
The barren crags;

It could have been so beautiful,
The mushroom clouds
Carpeting Table Bay;

It could have been so beautiful
The apple groves, the firs
Hugging the hills;

It could have been so beautiful
As fruit of vines in season,
Oranges grown on Transvaal farms,
Violins played at dawn
By sensitive coloured fingers
Tracing in their palms and bows
South Africa's history.

But how can we see sea-beauty
And the freshness of the mountains
When there are hovels of despair?
How can we pluck African violets,
Walk under firs in late-night heat
When poets wait for Chevrolet calls
Taking them to Robben Island silences?

And a lonely seagull cries in anguish
At the jaded beauty of disfigured
Children's bodies on the edges of the town?





How can we paint the Hottentot crags?

How can we paint the Hottentot crags
When there are people in despair?

How can we sculpt the eloping sea
When police parade for grotesque night raids?

How can we write of freedom
When daily Robben Island
Clasps in ferret fold
The beautiful, the brave, the bold?

How can we sing songs of tranquil love
When hate's fires warm
The hearts of racists
In their white tower of possession?

How can we long after beauty
When there is no hunger for acid truth?

But only droughts
And dustbrows where rivers once ran
In southern Africa's arson brutality?

White lament

Sing laments for the cars without compassion
Hurting across South Africa's veld;

Hear the blues of coloured children
Gazing at supermarket delicacies
When babies die malformed;

Efface from torturing memory
Sophiatown moods
And Sharpeville blood
With the gaiety of picnics on Sunday afternoons.

Cry Africa for the free snow of Kilimanjaro,
Weep, my Asian friends, for the Indian stuntedness,
Yearn for Mount Kenya stabbing the sky.

Pray for Christ's fire
To consume the rubbish,
And for healing and for light;
Pray, too, with fervour and with faith
For a new song to be sung, where
African drums beat at dawn in lamentation
— And in hope.



They crucified a continent

They crucified a continent
The glittering white men
Diamonds dripping from their brains;

The speckled rains of Africa
Now drench pavement squatters,
Obscene shop clothes cover
A city's naked shame.

Somewhere in this city
A man lies banned,
Driftwood on the tide of affluence,
Who saw the honey-garden sting,
Heard Damara Corner's din,
And the streets at night
Stolen back by Africa again.

Somewhere in this city
The dead drink gin,
Afrikaans soldiers play their games;
Somewhere in this city
Children cry for pity
From blondes who've now become
Admen women with no name.

They crucified a continent,
The glittering white men,
Diamonds dripping from their brains

And their hands,
Their hands drip Soweto blood,
Their lips sing Alexandra-Town blues
As the police move in
To ban these words –

For they are profane!



August showers

Though August showers
May strew your way
What do September buds bring
But a summer refusing to be born,
Winter scathing in cold treachery
And autumn banned as an African nationalist.

Bathe in your naked emotions, my friends,
Put fragrant perfume over your petted body,
Wash your feet in the dustbowl of economics,
Or vie with the stars in your vanity –
You will never compete with the flamingo
For beauty . . .

Or the pain of the black mother in KwaZulu
Crying for the fire of her husband
On dark, barren nights,
And her baby, dead,
Hugging the soil's breast in hunger.





She died apart

She died apart,
No whites, no coloureds,
In a black-black world;

The trumpets of her children
Blared out resurrection joy
For all Soweto ears;

We walked her funeral road
And climbed the liberty bus,
Singing, singing her Jesus-songs,
I the only Soweto white.

Oh, weep for her death,
Yet applaud her heart's love,
Yearn for an honesty
To banish all divides.

See her people's suffering eyes,
As, beasts of burden in Johannesburg's
Apostasy, they sing refugee blues.

Watch them, sisters, brothers,
Earth, cover her grave,
The community of love at work;
Hear their bodies' vital rhythms,
The swaying Zulu prayers.

Banished from Jerusalem's heart
In the city of God
She no longer camps without;
Can you not hear in her death
Their tears and grief – and jubilation?



All in an Africa evening

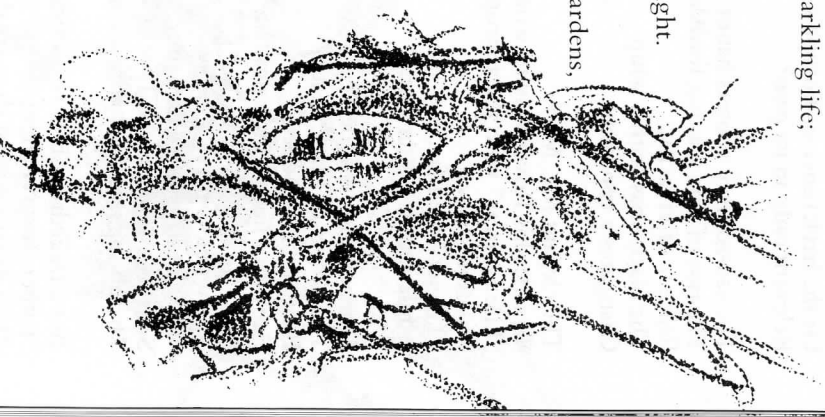
All in an Africa evening
– Drums and murder and body calling body;

All in an Africa evening
– The purple thunder and children sparkling life;

All in an Africa evening
– A homeland banishment,
The Voortrekker animal power
Lashing blacks with injustice and delight.

All in an Africa evening
– Marriages bomb-burst in spacious gardens,
Guns sought as pillows
And racists roaming like tigers.

Comfort yourselves, oh my people,
Comfort yourselves,
With the warm tears of God,
And yearn for the dawn
When your tears will be wiped away
Even from your eyes
And the blood clots in white hearts.



South Africa is you

Was it a military command
Or only an ad in Afrikaans?

Was it merely sweet breakfast music
Or the irrelevance of Europe's thirties,
Relevant only in its pain?

The sad-sombre waiters haunt my dreams,
The riot of hats waiting for Alexandra-Town buses
Rob me of vivacity,
The black boss with a whip
Castigates a continent.

The elegant Mr. Man
Whistles his Rover way to work;
"Life is Great" with the appropriate cigarettes.
The film shows
"The jet-speed farce –
A hilarious laughter riot."

The next riot will be
The power of black beauty
Bruised black bones
Baby-bawling at their new life.

The wireless plays
"Day by day, Love thee more nearly,
See thee more clearly, Day by day,"
Then brings an hour with a comedian.

But a tragedian on a cross cries:
"Father, forgive them,
They *do* know what they are doing."

10

Everything's banned in Pretoria

Everything's banned in Pretoria,
The justice of judges,
The wailing of innocents
Massacred by latter-day Herods.

Everything's banned in Pretoria,
The sighs of the lonely,
The despair of the maimed,
Hunger as crippled minds search for truth.

Everything's banned in Pretoria,
The firework blue of the jacaranda tree,
The delicacy of wild gooseberries,
The plategland lit by dawn's rays.

Everything's banned in Pretoria,
Stabbing light in a dark fear,
A whisper of beauty,
And a heart's anger.

Everything's banned in Pretoria,
Except guns of twisted law,
Jackboots morning marching
And electric currents of change
Torturing the white dispossessed.



In the valley of a thousand hills

In the valley of a thousand hills
There is a man
Upright in bearing,
Noble in demeanour;

In the valley of a thousand hills
There is a family
Firm as a rock,
Loyal as friends in prison;

In the valley of a thousand hills
There is a beauty
Dancing, sparkling light,
Life in black children's eyes.

In the valley of a thousand hills
There is green from nature's generosity
And dark, strange, all-pervasive fear
Exuding from informers of the police,
The polecats of South Africa's poverty.

In the valley of a thousand hills
Holiness is as squashed grapes
And spies hide under rich banana trees;
Even the haunting hibiscus
Cannot conceal the thunderdrums
And an old man's cracking bones
Magnificent in a century's work
As he cries a lament for his land.

Here barrenness yields fruit
From black stress and black distress
As the very hills cry rage
Letting loose anger on white hearts
Which even transplants cannot assuage
And bring love and pity-peace,
For mercy has been raped
And left the orphan of the century
In the valley of a thousand hills.



Johannesburg is half a day from now

Five miles from here
Lies the banished beauty of Soweto,
Law fodder for a lawlessness
Whose cunning makes victims
Raw as ravaged Vietnam plains –
Johannesburg is half a day from now –
And half a century.

Ten miles from here
The depressed coloured with no name,
Whose eyes plead colour-blindness,
Visit their city in the prison of sad hearts –
Johannesburg is half a world from now –
And half a century.

Fifty miles from here
The unhappy protestant
Who could not betray a friend
Languishes in a Bunyan jail,
A progressive pilgrim of white liberality –
Johannesburg is half a world from now –
And half a century.

In the world of now
There's a brooding feeling of the encircling thirties
Where wealth, wine, and music
Forget the black-white melancholy and the malignant pain.

In the world of now
Even gladioli are hunched
Like war prisoners thirsting for forgiveness-rain
And the dent in my friend's skull
Still needs raindrops of Afrikaner penitence
To make the perfume of Africa's conifers strong again.

Johannesburg is half a day from now –
And half a century;
The coming red rivers of remorse
Are half a century from here –
Or half a day from now?

To a black South African

I could not look into his face
For I saw hell;

I could not even try to trace
His pain, his mystery;

I could not stretch a mind
To embrace his rage,
Cosmic in dimension,
Slumbering till now.

I could not think of England
Without tears of bitterness,
Smug Brighton worlds,
The diabolic Stock Exchange.

Oh, my black brothers,
Weep for your daughters,
And for your sons,
Oh, my black sisters,
Chastise with the whips
Of your tongues,
Weep for us in our sin;

And when we have been
Scarred by penitence,
And expiated our guilt,
Will you then allow a return
To water the fields of your barrenness
And bathe those bleeding wounds
With a sacrificial love
Streaming from the blood of Christ?

Or will your weeping
Drown the power of a new kind of loving
In the grief of history's remorse?



There is a terrible beauty

There is a terrible beauty
In the heart of liberality
In Cape Town
This approaching winter
There is a numb terror
Dawning up brains
In gardens where people betray
Their longed-for spring;
There is a desperate treachery
As soldiers drill, civilians arm
And conspire to launch
The banning of the autumn.

There is a terrible beauty
In the heart of liberality
In Cape Town this approaching winter
It stifles the heat of a summer's growing,
Burns the leaves in autumn's browning,
It spills over into the hoped-for spring.



We will make you human again

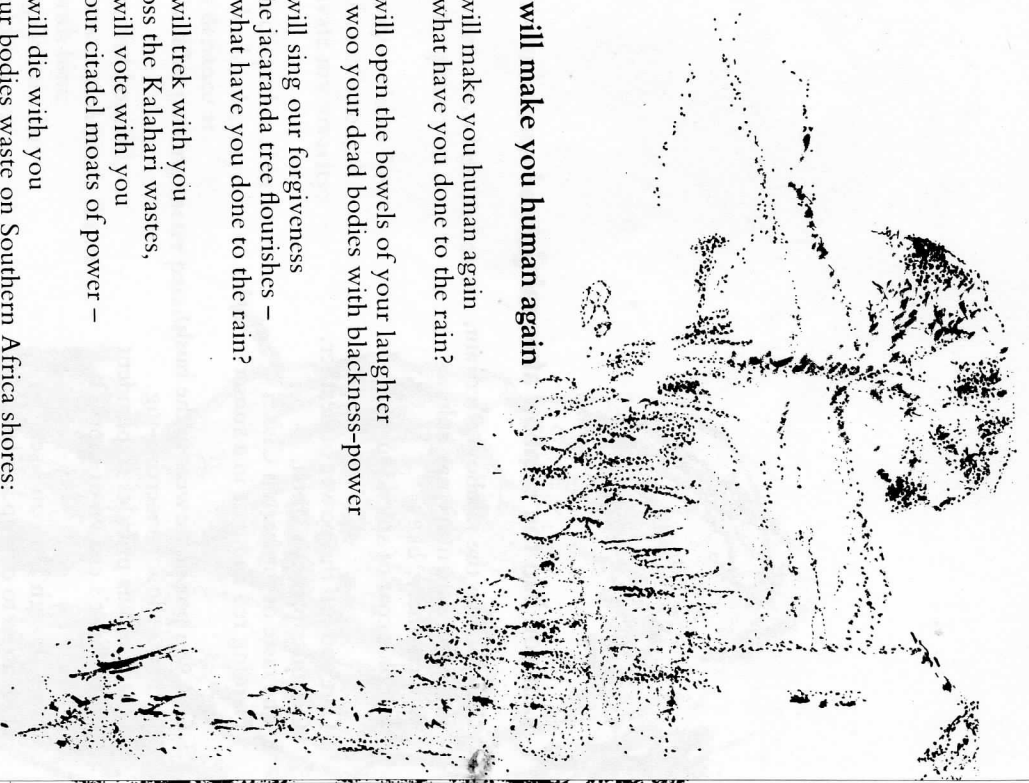
We will make you human again
But what have you done to the rain?

We will open the bowels of your laughter
And woo your dead bodies with blackness-power

We will sing our forgiveness
As the jacaranda tree flourishes –
But what have you done to the rain?

We will trek with you
Across the Kalahari wastes,
We will vote with you
In your citadel moats of power –

We will die with you
As our bodies waste on Southern Africa shores:
But what have you done with the rain?



Can you ban the rainbow after rain?

Can you ban the rainbow after rain,
Erase from memory gay colours
Woven finely, like
Joseph's coat of splendour?

Can you kill the power of heather,
Conquer protea's smell,
The taste of the barren Ciskei
Flaming red and true in a sunset's riot?

Can you poison flowers in the bush
In their yellow concertina-ing,
Or the cactus prickles resplendent
Like Christ's crown of thorns?

Even though Durban's sea
Threatens to dry up as plains,
Its aridity as a womb sucked dry
At a midnight's wooing,
You will never quench the thirst of hearts
Which hunger for the radiance of the dawn.

Suffering, lead-heavy, may weigh
On black faces as a Grecian tragedy,
Yet soon rainbow colours will filter
Into Cape Town bays
As Table Mountain refracts
The rays of hope in the swollen
Waters of freedom river.

In this unknown beating heart

In this unknown beating heart
I look for peace;

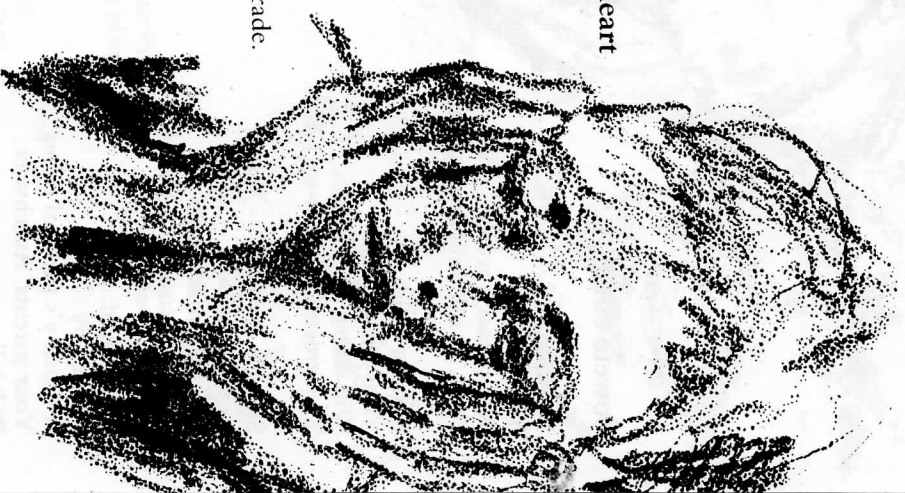
Those eyes, those feet,
That face of strength
Captivate my vivacity;

Hands clasped to chin
A Rodin-like beauty
Gazes defiance at
The Cadillac parking meter parade.

Young and hopeful,
The power of Africa's future
Lies with him;
Strong, yet tender,
His boldness will world-heal.

The dungarees of his slavery
Will become a Cyrene way to
Brotherhood as, in agony,
He embraces his watchdogs
As a friend.

Then Afrikaner self-love will fade,
English apartheid break,
As black vitality
Follows the stony path
To Golgotha where its rock
Will scald with the intensity
Of its forgiving heat.



Soweto child

Soweto child
Your laughter
Will release a world
From its solemnity and pomp;

Soweto child
Your dynamism
Will water
The streams of dried-up rivers.

Soweto child
Your applause
Will humanise, relax
A barren, computer world.

White child,
Hunted by
A century's parental ruling,
Your parents' Auschwitz
Will kill you.

Black child,
Prisoner of technocrats,
Your inquisitive eyes
Will make you as the gods.

White child,
Let her gaiety
And her anger
Fan the embers of that fire
With a flame of freedom beauty.



There will be laughter

There will be laughter
When resurrection rain comes to Pretoria,
There will be joy in KwaZulu's plains;

There will be singing
When the troubadours shout out
The friendship love of Africa again.

There will be doves
Sent from Santiago, Dar and London,
There will be peace through suffering,
Tennis applause in late afternoon games.

There will be laughing,
There will be singing,
The doves of peace will be startled, soaring,
As the clapping of the universe
Cancels out our pain.



God made the beauty

God made the beauty,
Not you, not I,
The patience in poverty,
Eyes seeking its prize.

God made the beauty,
Not you, not I,
Purity of mountains,
Politicians who vie;

God made the beauty,
Not you, not I,
Warns – danger
In the world's layby.

For banning of laughter,
Banishment of pain,
Brings aridity, sandstorms,
Hearts avid for gain.

God made the beauty,
Not you, not I,
Made us in his image,
The land and its skies.

You can savage these mountains,
Set light to the plains,
Hijack the cities,
Castrate human fame.

You will never outnumber
Diamonds sparking in spring,
You will never discover
Your neighbours who sing
God's jubilee songs every morning
As they joy-laugh in despair
Court suffering as pleasure
Make a carnival there

God made all the beauty,
Not you, not I,
Now sculpts his humanity
In the blood-sunset skies.



When morning comes . . .

When morning comes
Tongues will be converts to truth,
Eyes blazing fires lighting faces
Radiant as icons
Made from the tortured and grotesque.

When the midday sun
Cracks the merciless silences of warders
The hand-woven tapestry beauty
Of lives living a conscience style
Will highlight the friends and enemies
Of latter-day gestapo kings.

When an evening's cool
Brings refreshment for spirits
Broken on South Africa's pain
Only the horror of security hunters
Trapping deer as trained marksmen
Will remain . . .

When lilac-midnight
Seals on the cars of spics
Darkness will cease to be a cauldron
For devils, and perfume will become
Expensive as Kimberley diamonds
As millions buy to strew the paths,
The hills and valleys, with petal power –
Transfiguring by their love
The fragrance even crucifixion brings.



Is there yet time . . . ?

Is there yet time
For orange blossoms to bloom,
Is there yet time
For the blood-healing
Of victims peeled as fruit
Torn out of season
By raging political winds?

Is there yet time
For gold-beauty at sunset,
Is there yet time
To shade the broken paths
From demons who have made
Winter their friend,
Summer their sworn enemy?

Is there yet time
For Table Mountain loveliness
To draw people in their rugged fears
Enfolding all human power
In the granite of its years?

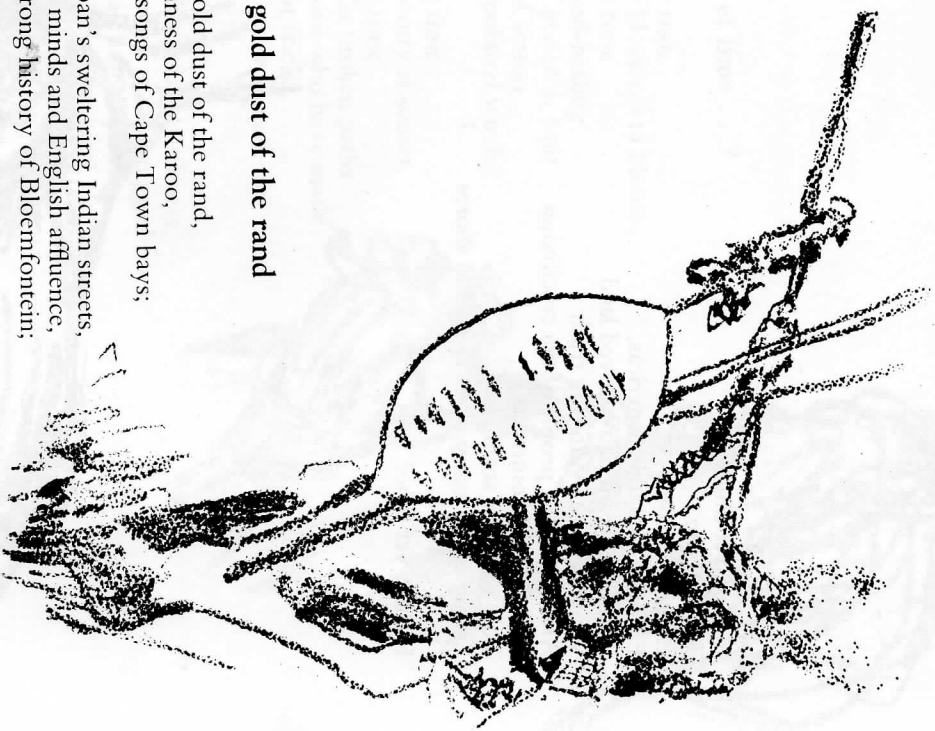
Is there yet time
For people of penitence
To tramp the African veld,
Kneel, wash, bathe the feet
Of the maimed, the scalded and the bruised?



Is there yet time
To cauterise,
Captivate, compel,
Europe, Asia, the Americas,
With the dream of a beloved land
Where those in suffering truth
Are named the people of the crucifixion
Who bring a resurrection
To a world of strangers
Living on so many other apartheid shores . . . ?

Is there yet time?





Take the gold dust of the rand

Take the gold dust of the rand,
The barrenness of the Karoo,
The silver songs of Cape Town bays;

Take Durban's sweltering Indian streets,
Motorway minds and English affluence,
And the strong history of Bloemfontein;

Take Langa anger and the black militants
Of Guguletu and New Brighton homes
And the suffering mothers of Mamelodi
And of the Cape Flats with their sandy wastes;

Take the laughter of Xhosas,
And Chaka virility,
And the faith, and fervour, of the farmers
In the Orange Free State and in the Transvaal;

In Grahamstown and George
And in Pietermaritzberg
Bid them quench their fear
And bind a cord as mountaineers
In the Drakensbergs –

And South Africa will be born.

The morning after apartheid

The morning after apartheid
History was let loose from its vice
As clasped hands
Winced in their pain
And minds
Tried to forget
Memory's ravages.

The seasons
Were fruitful;
Autumn did not age,
Winter was pure delight,
Warm as Gulf Stream waters.

Rage, anger, hate,
Powered electric love,
Strong and true.

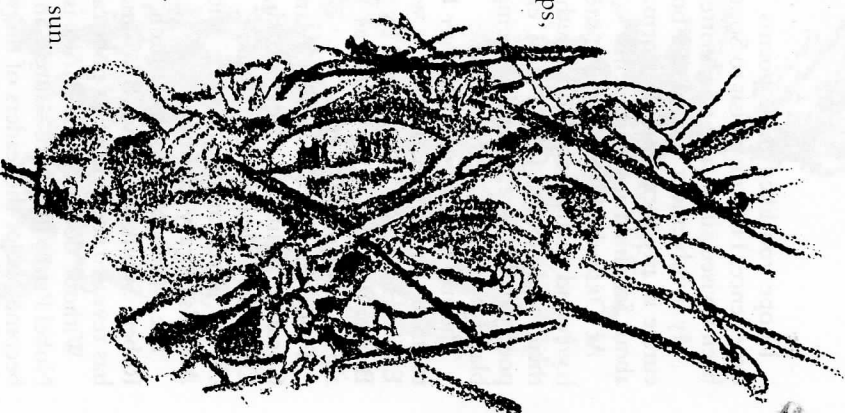
The morning after apartheid
Forgiveness danced in the townships,
The skies were rainbow hues
As scars of centuries healed
And there was ointment
For all the wounded.

Mercy cried;
Joy rampaged
In drab streets
And derelict hearts.

Saris were scattered
Weaving beauty into lives
Grown stale in a century's waiting.

The dead rose in applause
Over the Drakensbergs
And Table Mountain erupted with sun.

The morning after apartheid
There were drums and singing,
And loving and sweltering nights
And tender dawns.



I hope you liked these poems. They try to reflect some of the experiences I had on a visit to South Africa in the 1970s. Some have been revised since, and one written more recently.

My involvement started as a boy of seventeen when I heard the curate in my local church, normally reticent, preach passionately about South Africa's problems.

At Oxford University my interest continued and since then I have read many books on South Africa's political problems and their complexity. I have also enjoyed many novels and much poetry from there, as well as seeing some of the plays from the new black theatre.

Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* stands out for me as the way to understand the Afrikaners, a war from which only the name of Emily Hobhouse is honoured by them for her opposition to what Britain did, and from which, as William Plomer has written, "an alp of unforgiveness grew".

From the 1950s onwards Alan Paton, Adam Small, Nadine Gordimer, Breyten Breytenbach, J. M. Coetzee, Andre Brink, Oswald Mshali, Ingrid Jonker, Dennis Brutus, and W. A. de Clerk, have, among others, shown me the richness of South Africa's literary traditions.

The work of Albert Luthuli, Nelson and Winnie Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko and Desmond Tutu among others has revealed the skill of its political leaders.

Without doubt South Africa is unique in having received two Nobel Prizes for Peace – surely an augury for the time when it will become one of the leaders of the world, as it should be. When that day comes much forgiveness will be needed – and also sharp political skills and courage. May South Africa find both, soon.

Brian Frost

