

Steve Cartwright

South Africa



In the Bantustan
Joggie Steelman rises up at 4am
Aching and exhausted
Back into the day which he had surely prayed
Would never come so soon again.
Rising, silent as the dead
From that sad pile on which he's laid his aged and stupefying head
And stripping off his vest down to the waist
He cups an icy shower from the metal casket
Up onto his face and grimy arms
And shivers in the darkness while his wife
And children, mercifully snatch the last few hours of sleep
Before they too awake.
Bewildered and bemused
Back into the stench and stinking grind
That they have learned to call South Africa.

Joggie dresses standing.
Around him in that shanty house
He sees the children he has fathered
Gathered in a room so tiny
Gathered in a room so poor and flimsy
Lay the children of his marriage
Sweet Theresa, Ndelene, Makwzyana, Ramashola, Steven, David
And the baby Albertina
He will only see them sleeping
He will not share their joys, their weeping
He will not hear their chitter chatter
See them teasing one another
See them growing
See them learning
No -
He will only see them dreaming.
And so, he tiptoes from the shanty
Out to where the other fathers group together
Cold and sullen
Shoulders hunched against the weather
Sleep still yearning, still demanding
Bones so weary, muscles aching
Brain so wretched, so decrepit
Carted off four in the morning
All to travel to the regions
Where they dig for gold and diamonds
Deep inside the filthy entrails of the white man's stinking cities
All day long till eight they labour
Tear and strain against the rock unyielding
Battered sweating bodies, knuckles bleeding
Gas and water rank and stinking.
Then the men go home again
On the creaking, leaping buses.
Darkness woke them, darkness worked them
Now the darkness lures them homewards
Where at midnight they arrive
To see their huddled families sleeping.
Last year

Joggie ran a tiny patch of land upon the farm of Mr Rose
The lord and mighty master of that manor
And kept together
Albeit in a sort of struggling stifled way
The soul and battered body of what he had known for centuries
As their family home.
This was their pay
Their only pay
No other pay
This plot of land which they could call their own
And which supplied their every need
Bursting from its fertile tilth
With plum and pear, sweet scented grape
A rash of ripe tomatoes, spilling in their heaps
The strawberry and the orange trees
The melon and the mulberry
The turnip and the lowly swede
Dripped blessings
Onto those whose very seeds
Were near as deep within the land
That they had learned to love
And tended
Sweet South Africa.

But Mr Rose, that gold provincial boer
Who paid this Joggie nothing
For the work his family kissed upon his land
Said
Here's your marching orders, you
And sent bulldozers down to rattle through this house
That generations of the Steelmans knew and loved as theirs
Who'd tilled the land with tools they'd loved and made
And built their house
And dug a family of graves within that soil
And worked for Mr Rose for nothing more
Than just the chance
To farm that tiny bit of land
And eat the goodness that it gave
But Mr Rose
White farmer Rose
He's heedless to the pain and cries
Of generations of the slaves who've lived and died upon this land
No black can tell him what to do
He's bought this land
It's his
He says
"Get off you bastard blacks
I'm done with you
Go out and farm the Bantustan
That's where you Bantus all belong
You've no rights here
Get off
Or else I'll shoot the legs out from your feet
And call the dogs to snap your heels
And rip the backsides from your pants
Get out, I've work to do
Get out".
And so the Steelmans in their desperation go
There is no way within the white man's law
For them
To snatch back what the generations knew by right
Was theirs
Their hearts are troubled, racked with pain

They cannot fight.
The white man's law has banished them out to the Bantustan
The poorest of those lush and fertile lands
Now plundered by the hoards who spill out
From the mountain and the mighty plain
But even here was beauty once
And fertile tilth that would support
All that was good for life to spit and burst in satisfaction from that land
But now
No more
The millions that have all been squeezed
Now devastate the earth
So that
The rains
When ere they come
Strip all the soil off from the top
And carry it away and rolling off
Into the gullies
Deep and wide
And ravage through the countryside.
The trees have gone
For firewood and for home
And so no more they fight the wind and rain
And stop them stripping earth of all the vital elements for food to come
The soil is barren now
And sparse
And people sit and watch it die
And in the townships and the factories
They dump the toxic waste
The lead
The mercury
And children breathe the fragments of asbestos brick
That they are forced to use to build the schools within the Bantustan
Because
Building materials are so scarce
And children play
Their football and their tick
On slag heaps of asbestos waste
That in year's gone by have made
Great lumps of cancer in the chests
Of those black bodies
Born to feed
Apartheid's great and filthy greed
But wait
A day will dawn
When Africa, that dark and perfect jewel within the crown
Will raise its proud and stupefying horn
And blast across the world
A mighty sound
A scream
That rips that white and putrifying dream
And suddenly a sullen limping gait
Will trip and run
And tear into a monstrous leap
That overtakes
With perfect ease
That white and rarely interrupted
Fat and snoring
Self indulgent
Golden dream
South Africa.