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NAT NAKASA, the founding editor of Classic, was born in Durban. The major part of his adult working life was spent as a journalist in Johannesburg. He wrote chiefly for Drum, the Golden City Post and the Rand Daily Mail. In 1964 he was granted a Niemann Scholarship for study at Harvard University, but his passport was withheld. He left South Africa toward the end of 1964 on an exit permit which prohibited his return to this country. He was 28 years old when he died on the 14th of July, 1965, after a fall from the seventh storey of a building in New York.

Nineteen of the pieces in this fifth issue of Classic were selected from Nat's regular Saturday column in the Rand Daily Mail. 'Johannesburg, Johannesburg' appeared in the third issue of Classic. William Plomer's poem was originally printed in the London Times Literary Supplement, and Can Themba's tribute in the Golden City Post.
THE TASTE OF THE FRUIT

(In memory of the poet Ingrid Jonker, who drowned herself by night at Sea Point, Cape Town, in July, 1965; and of Nathaniel Nakasa, the South African writer, who died by suicide in the United States in the same month.)

WHERE a dry tide of sheep
Ebbs between rocks
In a miasma of dust,
Where time is wool;
He is not there.

Where towers of green water
Crash, re-shaping
White contours of sand,
Velvet to a bare foot;
She is not there.

Where pride in modesty,
Grace, neatness,
Glorify the slum shack
Of one pensive woman;
He is not there.

Where one fatherly man
Waited with absolute
Understanding, undemanding
Hands full of comfort;
She is not there.

Where sour beer and thick smoke,
Lewdness and loud
Laughter half disguise
Hope dying of wounds;
He is not there.
He, who loved learning,
Nimbly stood up to
The heavyweight truth;
For long years in training
He is not there.

Where she was thought childlike
She carried the iron
Seeds of knowledge and wisdom;
Where they now flower,
She is not there.

A man with no passport,
He had leave to exile
Himself from the natural
Soil of his being,
But none to return.

She, with a passport,
Turned great eyes on Europe,
What did she return to?
She found, back home, that
She was not there.

Where meat-fed men are idling
On a deep stoep,
Voicing disapproval
Of those who have “views”; She is not there.

Where with hands tied
Some wrestle for freedom;
Where with mouth stopped
Some ripen a loud cry; He is not there.

Where intellectuals
Bunch together to follow
Fashions that allow for
No private exceptions; She is not there.

Now he is free in
A state with no frontiers,
But where men are working
To undermine frontiers, He is not there.
Owing to the banning of Can Themba we have been forced to remove his tribute to Nat Nakasa. This affects the closing verses of William Pomer's poem, which we repeat on this page. We apologise for any inconvenience to the reader.

"My people", in anguish
She cried, "from me have rotted
Utterly away." Everywhere
She felt rejected;
Now she is nowhere.

Where men waste in prison
For trying to be fruitful,
The first fruit is setting
Themselves dug for;
He will not taste it.

Her blood and his
Fed the slow, tormented
Tree that is destined
To bear what will be
Bough-bending plenty.

Let those who will savour
Ripeness and sweetness,
Let them taste and remember
Him, her and all others
Secreted in the juices.

William Pomer
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WILLIAM PLOMER
SOMEONE had passed the buck to me. The story went out that a razor-sharp journalist from Durban was coming to Johannesburg to work in our main office. The editor had told someone to find accommodation for him, and that someone had decided that his initiation was best in my hands. Those days handing an other-town boy into my hands for initiation was subtlest excrutiation. Not that we would persecute him. We only sought to divest him of the naivetes and extraneous moralities with which we knew he would be encumbered.

He came, I remember, in the morning with a suitcase and a tennis racquet — ye gods! a tennis racquet. We stared at him. The chaps on Drum at that time had fancied themselves to be poised on a dramatic, implacable kind of life. Journalism was still new to most of us and we saw it in the light of the heroics of Henry Nxumalo, decidedly not in the light of tennis, which we classed with draughts.

He had a puckish, a boyish face, and a name something like Nathaniel Nakasa. We soon made it Nat. I took him to Sophiatown. I showed him the room where he would stay, what was it? three minutes, five minutes? Then I took him to my shebeen in Edith Street.

There was a beautiful girl there, and I hoped Nat would make her. As a matter of cold fact, as he declined drink after drink, I decided that he was interested. She was Tswana and he Zulu, but they got on swimmingly, love being polyglot. Honest, I don’t know how it happened, but I left him there. He told me later, that a few tsotsis came in and he approached them with trepidated terror. He asked them if they knew where Can Themba lived. They immediately looked hostile. (At first, they thought he contemplated some harm to the revered Can
Themba.) But when Mpho, the girl, explained that this was really a friend of the chap, who had deserted him there in one of his drunken impulses, they said: “O.K. Durban-boy, hang around and we’ll take you there.”

This is a measure of Nat’s character. He was in a new situation. He knew about Jo’burg tsotsis, the country’s worst. He was scared — he told me later he was. But he went with them, chatted with them, wanted to know what type of character this his host was. Though he got only grunts, it was the journalist in action, not the terrified fish out of water.

He found me at home, out of this world’s concerns. Later, he found out about Jo’burg without the aid of my derelictions. He quickly learned about the united nations of Fordsburg and Malay Camp; about the liberal enclaves in Hillbrow; about the cosmopolitanism of Johannesburg. And about the genuine values, in those people who were not trying to prove or protest anything: God knows South Africa begs any stranger to want to prove or protest something, and Johannesburg is its Mecca.

But Nat sought for something inside himself that would make language with the confused environment in which he found himself. He sought, fought, struggled, argued, posed — but I doubt if he found it. The South African stubbornacy was too much for him, and he had to go into exile.

The bitterest commentary on South Africa is typified by Nat. All those Africans who wanted to be loyal, hard-working, intelligent citizens of the country are crowded out. They don’t want to bleach themselves, but they want to participate and contribute to the wonder that that country can become. They don’t want to be fossilised into tribal inventions that are no more real to them than they would have been real to their forefathers.

Nat’s was such a voice. Sobukwe’s is that of protest and resistance. Casey Motsisi’s that of derisive laughter. Bloke Modisane’s that of implacable hatred. Ezekiel Mphahlele’s that of intellectual contempt. Nimrod Mkele’s that of patient explanation to be patient. Mine, that of self-corrosive cynicism. But Nat told us: “There must be humans on the other side of the fence; it’s only we haven’t learned how to talk.”

We replied: “Humans? Not enough.”

One day, we met at a dry cleaners called the “Classic.” Nat bought the drinks and said he had an idea. Ideas were sprouting all over the place, but any excuse for a drink was good enough.

After the ninth we got around to discussing the idea. Nat
proposed starting a really good, artistic magazine. He wanted all of us — I don’t mean just those Non-White journalists present — but all of us: Black, White, Coloured, Indian. For want of superior inspiration we decided to call the damned thing “The Classic” — the place where it was conceived, born and most of the time bred. Most of us got stinkingly drunk, but Nat captained the boat with a level head and saw to it that we met dead-line.

He slipped into the artistic-intellectual set of Hillbrow and I had to go to Hillbrow. In between he met a girl who seemed to match the accomplishments he sought. She was African (that would vindicate him from the slur that any White woman was better than every Black woman, though I think Nat would have thought with contempt of this); she was educated and intelligent (though I think Nat was no snob); she was lively and interesting (though I think Nat would have none of a floozie); she could mix with the High, the Middle and the Low (Nat chose what he wanted from High, Middle and Low). Eventually, she eclipsed herself and went to marry someone in Europe.

Nat has a brother here in Swaziland. Joe Nakasa. One day Joe took me to Chesterville in Durban to meet his family. There is a father, a sister and a brother. Another brother is in England studying at Cambridge. Their mother is in Sterkfontein Mental Hospital, unable to recognise even her sons. Nat talked little about his mother, but once when I had gone there with him, he broke out into bitter, scalding tears. I had not been there when he saw his mother, but I guessed that it was a gruelling, cruel experience.

Then he went to America. We thought this was the big break.

At the time of his death, Nat was planning interesting things, journalistically speaking, interesting things . . . .

Quo Vadis.
ONE MAN LIVING THROUGH IT

NADINE GORDIMER

MY MEMORY for the sequence of events in getting to know people is bad — the preliminaries tend to run together into the colour and quality of the relationship that develops. But I do remember clearly the first time I met Nat Nakasa. It was perhaps seven years ago and I was expecting Lewis Nkosi. He brought with him that day a round-faced boy who, faced with the prospect of being left alone to amuse himself while Lewis and I went off for a private talk, said, just as if there were not plenty of books and papers in the room — "Haven't you got any records I can play?" He was not ill-at-ease, but carried the youthful confidence in his own interests that marks the city-bred. Here was someone who would skid through the conventions of white houses as nippily as, a few years earlier, he would weave a bicycle in and out of the big cars.

I knew he must mean jazz records, and felt he would find mine meagre and "commercial", but I gave them to him. And when Lewis and I came back to the room he was stretched full-length in a chair, attentive to the music and inoffensively indifferent to both our absence and return.

That was Nat, newly arrived in Johannesburg. That was Nat at the beginning of the period he describes in the essay "Johannesburg, Johannesburg". That was the period of no fixed abode. And yet he was going somewhere, by the very nature of the way he was living, he was set upon the only course that was valid for him: the course of independent self-realisation. Although I barely recognise that boy sitting in the chair stirring his toes inside his shoes, to the beat, just as I barely recognise the man who ended his own life early one summer morning in New York, both were part of the young man who became my close friend. So do the limits of human
relationships constantly fling us back; so do one’s hands fall, helpless, before the quintessential loneliness of each human being. It is keeping this in mind that I write of him, respecting the ultimate despair that took him beyond the understanding of friends, aware that what each of us knows of him was only part of what he was, and lived, and suffered, and that even when we have put it all together there will always be something — perhaps the unbearable sum of the total in itself? — that he kept to himself and died of.

I saw quite a lot of Nat at parties or when friends simply gravitated together to talk, but it was when he launched out into the founding of *The Classic*, and I became a member of the small committee formed to help him run it, that he was drawn into the working life of our house. He heard squabbles and learnt private jokes. He lost his fear of the bulldog and endured its smelly presence at his feet; he was asked to pick up a schoolboy from the bus-stop or to buy a pint of milk while on the way from town. The process is known as becoming one of the family and it implies chores as well as privileges. He and I found that one of the times that suited both of us best, if we had *Classic* matters to work on, was about two o’clock in the afternoon. Very often he would rush in then, carrying his bulging attache case, and we would eat bread and cheese on the verandah in the sun, laughing a lot (he was a brilliant mimic) and getting on with the work at the same time. His social instincts were sure, and even in easy friendship he never lost his precise judgment of exactly the time to get up and go. He always seemed to sense when you had work or some other preoccupation that you must get back to. This leads me, only now, while writing, to realise that I never ever remember him being a bore. He didn’t even have those moments of recurring tediousness on pet subjects that most of us have. Sensitivity is a term whose mention may itself cause a suppressed yawn, but the fact is that he was too sensitive to be a bore. Too conscious, in the best and most open way, of the feelings of other people. And this reminds one how, on the last evening of his life, when in all his final anguish of mind he talked until late with his friend Jack Thomson and his wife, he had still some instinct that made him shrink from burdening them with the mention of his impulse to suicide.

Nat’s approach to *The Classic* was serious and yet light-handed, gay; candid and unflustered. He was a clever young newspaperman but had no literary background or experience — yes. There was not enough money for the venture and there were endless practical difficulties — yes. But he felt that day-to-day journalism floated, like oil indicating the presence
of a submarine, on the surface of African life, and he wanted to make soundings of his own. He asked for help, and what’s more, he did so aware that help more often than not must take the form of criticism, and in the self-knowledge that he could take that, too. As for the money, he managed as best he could with what there was; and as for the other difficulties, he dealt with them with what I am prepared to say is a particularly African resilience, vigorously born of harsh necessity, early on.

One of the practical difficulties was that it was hard to get white printers (our first one, certainly) to accept that this black man was the editor and not a white editor’s office boy. Nat’s manner with the man was amusing and highly successful — he treated him kindly but firmly as someone who has had a nasty shock, but really not so bad, after all, and wasn’t he getting used to it, wasn’t he feeling better already? Nat did not do as well with the wife, an ink-haired, flour-faced lady sitting up among her invoices on a high stool, like a grim madame in a late nineteenth century French painting, but he had the husband confiding his business troubles to him, and almost calling him “Mr. Nakasa”...

He would bring to me a manuscript that he liked particularly, to share the pleasure of it, and he brought me those whose interest or quality he felt uncertain about. If he was strongly in favour of something, he would publish it anyway, no matter what anyone thought of it. He had read no poetry outside a school primer and I often told him that some poems he considered publishing in the magazine were rubbish. He would say, “Oh. Well, why?” And would force me to state the grounds of my attack, line by line. Sometimes he would come back days later — scratching down through the nest of dog-eared manuscripts in the attaché case — and dig out one of the same poems over again. “What about this line here? — you said it was meaningless but I think what he’s getting at here —” And so he sometimes caught me out.

Once he planked down a poem — “Now that’s really got something!” I read it over; “Yes, but what it’s got is not its own,” and I fetched down the Lorca and showed him the poem from which the other had borrowed the form and imagery that distinguished it. He was not at all touchy about gaps in his knowledge and experience; he had none of the limitations of false pride. He sat down to Lorca with the pleasure of discovery. One of the reasons why he hoped to go to Harvard was because he wanted time to read the great poets and imaginative writers; he felt strongly that he needed a wider intellectual context than the day-to-day, politically-orientated, Africa-centred one in which he had become a
thinking person, and on which, so far, even his artistic judgments must be empirically based. I wonder if he ever found that time to read; somehow, I don’t think he did. Too many well-meant invitations to speak here and there about Africa, too many well-meant requests to appear on television programmes about Africa, too many requests to write articles about how an African looks at American this and that. Nat remained trapped in the preoccupations of his time — the time measured by those multiple clocks on airports, showing simultaneously what hour it is at Karachi, Vladivostock, Nairobi and New York, and not the dimension in which one can sit down and read. There seems to be no scholarship that provides for that.

Nat was a good talker and had the unusual ability to tell an anecdote in such a way that he himself was presented as the “feed”, and the bright lights illuminated the character of someone else. The oblique picture that emerged of him was one of wit and calm, sometimes in bizarre situations. He was given to analysis — of himself and others — rather than accusations and self-pity, and so did not react with self-dramatisation to the daily encounters with white laws and prejudices. White people used to say of him that he, unlike others, was not “bitter”; I don’t know quite what they meant by this — because he was as bitterly hurt by the colour bar as the next man — unless they mistook for resignation the fact that he managed to keep his self-respect intact.

In the years I knew him, fragments and segments of his life came out in talk, without chronology, as these things do between friends; he was telling me, one Sunday, how as a small boy he used to be up at four in the morning to be first on the streets with the newspapers. He was not telling me about his hardships as a poor black child, but of how mysterious and exciting Durban was at that hour, for a little boy — the deserted city coming up with the sun out of the mist from the sea. Then, last year while I was in London, I met his younger brother, who was about to go up to Oxford. When I told Nat — who had helped to pay for the boy’s schooling — how impressed I had been by his brother’s keen mind, he told me how he had been in the room when the boy was born, and how, since the mother became ill soon after and was never again able to look after her children, he had simply “taken the baby around with me until he could walk”. Again, it was the quality of the experience he was conveying, not a hard-luck story presenting himself as a victim. Of course, he was a victim of this country; but never accepted the character of the victimised in himself.
I always hoped that one day he would write about these things — the child in Durban, the life he and Lewis Nkosi shared, homeless and yet, curiously, more at home in Johannesburg than those behind their suburban front doors. I think that the writing reproduced in this Classic from his weekly column in the Johannesburg Rand Daily Mail was a beginning, and is the best writing he did. It was journalism, yes, but journalism of a highly personal kind; all the news came from inside Nat. He dredged into his mind and feelings as he had never done before, he wrote only of what was real to him, throwing away all the labels conveniently provided by both protest writing and government handouts, accepting without embarrassment all the apparent contradictions in the complexity of his reactions to his situation — and ours, black and white. (He didn't even balk at coming out with the pronouncement that he felt sorry for young Afrikaners!) “Bitterness”; “resentment”; “prejudice”; these terms are as easy to use as the airmail stickers free for the taking in post offices. Nat presented the reality, in daily life and thought, from which these abstractions are run off. He showed us what it was all about, for one man living through it.

This writing — reflecting the gaiety of a serious person — came from his central personality, and in giving himself the fullest expression he had yet known, during the year that he was writing his column and concurrently running Classic he developed amazingly. It was a strange time, that last year in South Africa: on the one hand, he was making a name for himself in a small but special way that no African had done before, his opinions and ideas were being considered seriously by white newspaper-readers whose dialogue across the colour line had never exceeded the command, do-this-or-that, and the response, yes-baas. On the other hand, he had been awarded a scholarship to Harvard and was involved in the process of trying to get a passport — for an African, a year-long game in which the sporting element seems to be that the applicant is never told what you have to do to win, or what it was he did that made him lose. Knowing the nature of the game, Nat had to consider from the start how the refusal of a passport would affect his life. He had to decide whether the place he had made for himself, astride the colour bar, merited electing to stay, should the passport be refused; or whether he should, like others, accept exile as the price of a breath of the open world. It was not a decision to be dictated only by personal ambition; part of his development was that he had come to the stage, now, when he had to weigh up the possible usefulness to his people of the position he had gained. It was not, of course, a political position, and its value was
not something that could easily be measured; there is no scale for the intangibles of the human spirit.

Quite suddenly, he made the decision to go, although he had been refused a passport. He took what every other young man of outstanding ability — but of a different colour — takes for granted, and gets without the necessity of an agonising decision to exile himself from home, country, friends and family — a chance to travel and seek education. I saw him off at the airport — twice. The first time he missed the plane (no, it was not what white people call African time; it was a hitch over the issue of traveller's cheques) and the crowd of friends who had come to say goodbye dispersed rather flatly. Not all could come back again next day; but this time it went without a hitch, weigh-in, customs, finally passport control and the exit permit open on the counter. I looked at it: it was valid for one exit only, and the undersigned, Nathaniel Nakasa, was debarred from entering the Republic of South Africa or South West Africa again. There was the printed admonition, "This is a valuable document. Keep it in a safe place."

Nat was gone. He never came back. But he was the beginning, not the end of something. In so many ways he was starting where others left off. I have heard that shortly before his death he made an impassioned anti-white speech before a Washington audience; but the report comes third-hand and I do not know whether this interpretation of his address is a true one. Similarly, if in direct contradiction, I have heard it said that through his association with white friends he had become a "white" black man. The truth is that he was a new kind of man in South Africa — he accepted without question and with easy dignity and natural pride his Africanness, and he took equally for granted that his identity as a man among men, a human among fellow humans, could not be legislated out of existence even by all the apartheid laws in the statute book, or all the racial prejudice in this country. He did not calculate the population as thirteen million or three million, but as sixteen. He belonged not between two worlds, but to both. And in him one could see the hope of one world. He has left that hope behind; there will be others to take it up.
ART SECTION

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JOHANNESBURG, JOHANNESBURG

NATHANIEL NAKASA

PEOPLE who have the best time in Johannesburg are the visitors. People who stay in town for a month or two and then fly out to their homes across the seas, with memories as their only link with Johannesburg. I've seen them sniff and stare at the city's narrow lanes where men smoke dagga. I've watched them enchanted by the opulence of the northern suburbs where whites live. These men, usually foreign correspondents from newspapers abroad, even find warmth in the squalor of the black slums. They look at Johannesburg from all angles, in much the same way as they would besiege a celebrated statesman at a press conference. They ask crucial questions without getting emotionally involved with the town's preoccupations.

I have often tried to put myself in this position, to approach Johannesburg with the attitude of a disengaged visitor. Unfortunately for me, I cannot succeed in doing this. I am a part of Johannesburg. The most I can do is regard myself as someone who has, unwittingly, volunteered to become the guinea pig in some incredible experiment by a quack scientist.

That's how I felt during my first few years in Johannesburg. I had travelled from Durban, over four hundred miles by train, to start working as a journalist. After work I often slept on a desk at the office or stayed overnight when friends invited me to dinner in their homes.

This was not because of a Bohemian bent in me. Far from it. According to the law, "native" bachelors are supposed to live in hostels in Johannesburg. I should have shared a dormitory with ten or more strange men. Some could have been office clerks, messengers, night watchmen, road diggers, school teachers or witchdoctors. We would each be at liberty to play
our concertinas or strum guitars while others read books or brewed beer in the dormitory.

Instead of this, I chose to be a wanderer. It would have been too difficult to get a hostel bed anyway. I remember trying once, just for the hell of it. I picked up the telephone and spoke in a faked Oxford accent.

"My name is Brokenshaw," I said, "is there a vacant bed in your hostel by any chance?"

"Yes, we have some beds," the voice at the other end answered. It must have been the white superintendent. "But I must explain to you that we are only taking special boys now," he added.

"What sort of boys are those?" I asked.

"Special boys," he repeated, "boys employed in the essential services: milk delivery boys, sanitation boys, and so on. Boys who have to be in town very early in the morning or till late at night."

"Jolly good," I said, "my boy is actually quite special. He has to remain in town till quite late from time to time. He is a journalist."

"Well, Mr. Brokenshaw, I can't promise anything. You can send him along if you like. We'll have to deal with every case according to its merits."

I didn't go to see the superintendent. I didn't really want a hostel bed. Neither did I wish to switch from journalism to the essential services. Thus, for roughly eighteen months, on and off, I wandered about without a fixed home address. I determined to make the best of it. The idea was to regard complications of my relationship with Johannesburg as part of the incredible experiment. That way I could get on with the business of living without getting too depressed.

Fortunately, like most young men from the smaller towns in South Africa, I was thrilled by simply being in Johannesburg. While others made for their homes hurriedly at the end of the day, I took long leisurely walks from one end of the city to another. On some nights I spent long hours reading London papers in the "Rand Daily Mail" library. Friends who invited me to their flats soon got used to me turning up for a bath in addition to dinner and a drink.

At times I slept in the night watchman's room at the top of our office block. The night watchman was a tall, very dark man, always in blue overalls, and Zulu-speaking. He seemed
to welcome my appearance and spoke a lot of politics with me. How long, he wanted to know once, did I think the white man would remain on top of us? Did I think the time would ever come when we would be on top? Bathin' abelungu manje? What are the whites saying now?

Answering these questions made me feel I was earning the watchman's hospitality. He saw me as an interpreter of the white man's ways because some of my friends were white. In the suburbs, over a drink, people plied me with questions about Africans. These conversations often developed into dull tales about the effects of apartheid on Africans, with me giving a rather false picture of the “latest developments”. I knew very little about the African townships. Like many other people, I could have lived illegally in the townships, but I wanted to be in town, not five or fifteen miles outside.

I WAS especially fascinated with Johannesburg by night. Because of the curfew regulations, most Africans rushed out of town at the end of the day. Dozens of long brown trains whined out of town carrying thousands of Africans to their homes. By eleven o'clock, when the curfew regulations came into operation, almost all the faces in town would be white.

By day, the city became a depressing mess. There were too many Africans sweating away on company bicycles or lingering on pavements in search of work. More depressing would be the newly-recruited “mine boys”, scores of black men from all over Africa. They walked through town with blankets on their shoulders and loaves of bread under their armpits, to be housed in the hostels of the gold mines. They looked like prisoners to me. Some had blank, innocent faces and gazed openly, longingly at women passing by. Most of them, if not all, were illiterate and doomed to stay that way for the rest of their lives. I resented them because I felt a responsibility towards them and I was doing nothing about it. They spoiled my image of Johannesburg as the throbbing giant which threw up sophisticated gangsters, brave politicians and intellectuals who challenged white authority.

This image of Johannesburg survived best at night. I shared a theory with a friend who also spent much of his time about town because of the housing problem. We believed that the best way to live with the colour bar in Johannesburg was to ignore it.

The theory worked remarkably well at times. I remember one night when we went to drink coffee at the Texan, a coffee
bar reserved for whites in Commissioner Street. The place was run by an American from Texas. He had the American flag in the bar as well as a portrait of President Eisenhower, wearing his famous grin.

My friend and I perched on two stools at the counter and placed our order for two coffees. The Texan’s son went to fetch the coffee, obviously expecting us to drink it on the pavement, anywhere outside the bar. Meanwhile, my friend and I began to talk loudly about President Eisenhower’s portrait. “Look at the bum,” my friend started, looking at the President’s portrait, “there is something seriously wrong with America’s choice of its heroes. Imagine the millions of American children whose ambition is to grow into the grinning emptiness which Ike symbolises! To think that there are eggheads who could be built up instead of fellows like this.”

By the time the Texan’s son brought our coffee, his father was embroiled in violent argument with us, all about Ike. The Texan confessed that he didn’t know much about politics but he knew a man of God when he saw one. The argument was still raging when we finished drinking the coffee and left. Nobody seemed to remember the colour bar.

PART from Cape Town, Johannesburg has what must be the largest number of whites who don’t want the colour bar. Some people say this is because of the degree of industrial and commercial development which the city has achieved. Whatever the explanation may be, there can be no doubt that the University of the Witwatersrand is leaving its own marks on the city’s racial attitudes.

Wits. has never been as “open” as its Public Relations Office may suggest. It is predominantly white, taking a limited number of black students. Nevertheless, its non-racial character has facilitated a profound social intercourse between black and white men, people who might otherwise not have met except as master and servant or deadly enemies.

As a journalist, I was granted permission to borrow books from the university’s library. To me, the opportunity to browse in that library, among students of all races, to go through any number of the books which line all the walls, transformed theories about the universality of education into a living reality.

Because of their common background of racial segregation, the students were intrigued with their discovery of an area of life relatively free from the colour bar. There was a general eagerness, often clearly pretentious, to rush into each other’s
arms. But those who transcended the superficiality of this backslapping brotherhood managed to establish warm, unaffected relationships.

It was students like these who descended on Uncle Joe's restaurant in Fordsburg, the predominantly Indian quarter at the west end of town. They came to eat Indian curry and listen to jazz in what was the only restaurant that allowed jam sessions before mixed audiences.

Although there was a police station nearby, nothing was done to stop the sessions at Uncle Joe's restaurant. We concluded that the police refrained from interfering because Uncle Joe gave them take-away food on credit.

People who speak of the decline of conversation in Europe and America ought to come to Johannesburg for their research on the subject. For what one finds here is worse than a decline — it is a paralysis of conversation. The colour bar which dominates the lives of all South Africans, haunts and plagues the dinner tables monotonously all over town. I've often thought how irritating this must be to people who are sufficiently resourceful to make good conversation without dragging the business of segregation into it. I can survive because I am not one of them.

My conversations in Johannesburg have always centred around colour. Fortunately, some of this talk can be both meaningful and warm. I remember having dinner with a friend in one of the less prosperous white suburbs. One of the guests that night was a talented Afrikaner painter. He had a hungry, lean face which reminded me of pictures of Arthur Miller. He even wore glasses to complete the image. My host had hinted earlier that the painter was a Nationalist, a supporter of Dr. Verwoerd's apartheid policy. The same man had spent much of his afternoon trying to keep alive a newborn African baby which had been abandoned on a pavement. He had taken the child in his arms, found warm clothes for it and phoned hospitals and the police.

Having talked about his paintings and jazz, we gravitated inevitably to the colour question. I wanted to know if he really was a Nationalist, and he said yes. We had, by now, warmed to each other, lighting cigarettes for one and all, sharing the same concern about the food which seemed to take a long time getting ready.

"But what kind of a Nationalist are you?" I asked.
"But why?"

"How can you vote for apartheid and then come and drink brandy with me?"

"But there's nothing wrong in drinking with you. I would like to drink with you anywhere. At my place or yours, for that matter."

"What if I told you that I have no place?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. I have no place and that's because of the laws you vote for."

"What? Where are you going to sleep tonight, for instance?"

"I don't know. I may sleep here; wherever I can find a bed tonight."

The painter was moved. I liked seeing his puzzled face.

"Well, if . . . if you mean what you've just said, you can come and live with me. We have a whole empty room in that house."

Now I stopped being amused. Something was wrong somewhere.

"But the party you vote for has passed laws which say that's illegal, too," I said.

Now the painter was blushing. He looked the other way and picked up his glass. I was becoming more and more irritated.

"Why are you a Nationalist if you are willing to stay with me? Don't you want the races to be separated?"

Suddenly, the painter took off his glasses and looked at me appealingly: "You see," he said, "I am an Afrikaner. The National Party is my people's party. That's why I vote for it."
Johannesburg appears to be getting bogged down in a labour crisis. Only this week, a report from the Chamber of Industries said there was a “surprisingly high demand” for African skilled workers.

Meanwhile, the City Council has decided to employ White women bus conductors to relieve its manpower problems.

One would have thought the shortage of workers would induce the Government to scrap its absurd work-preservation laws. For there are scores of young African men, trained as builders and carpenters, who are not allowed to work outside the townships.

Many are employed by the council at rates which are pathetically low compared with what their skills could command in the open market.

These laws are of use to nobody. The White workers do not need them because there is full employment among Whites. Industry has repeatedly rejected them, and the Government itself is steadily giving “White” jobs to Africans.

The only purpose they serve is to confuse and embitter a lot of people. I know of several young men who qualified at the City Council’s Vocational Training School for Africans in Soweto, and who went to work as labourers instead of artisans.

I also know of at least one who settled for the business of robbing banks after leaving school.

* * *

It happened in Durban. I telephoned a booking office for a train ticket to Johannesburg.
“Could you please reserve a seat for me on the Wednesday night train to Johannesburg?” I asked.

Booking Clerk: Certainly, sir, will you hold the line a minute?

Me: Yes.

B.C. (After a while): Are you there, sir? I’m afraid the Wednesday train is fully booked, sir.

Me: What about Thursday morning?

B.C.: I’ll go and see, sir. Will you hold on again?

Me: Yes.

B.C.: Are you there, sir? Yes, I can put you on the Thursday morning train. What is the name, sir?

Me: Nathaniel Nakasa.

B.C.: Did you say MacArthur, sir? Could you spell it please?


B.C.: What nationality would that be?

Me: African.

B.C.: Damn it! Why the hell didn’t you tell me in the beginning that you are a Native?

Me: I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t . . .

B.C.: Shut up! Jy lieg!

*THERE* is obviously some difference between railway booking clerks and garage owners. I say this because, last week, I went to buy a tyre for my car near the Magistrate’s Court and something unusual happened.

The White man at the garage did not lift his eyes from the invoice book he was scribbling on. Quite matter-of-factly he said: “What can I do for you, sir?” I told him I needed a new tyre and he advised me to get a retread.

Then he called to his African assistant: “George, please go with this boss to his car and bring his old tyre from the boot.”

I looked around to see if a White customer had perhaps appeared behind me. There was nobody else in the place. This was it! For once in my life, I was being elevated to the status of a boss.

I heard later that this garage is doing a roaring business with Africans, especially taxi-drivers, who call regularly for their soothing ration of “sir” and “boss.”
LAST week, after months of building castles in the air, I was awarded a scholarship to study in America for a year.

Normally, I should be giving interviews to newspapers now. I should be saying: "This is the happiest moment of my life" ... like those misguided bridegrooms you find on the social pages of the newspapers.

At the very least, I should be looking like a cat that has just swallowed a whole lot of cream.

But I dare not — I cannot. For I have just been to the Bantu Affairs Commissioner's Office to apply for a passport. And that was enough to wipe off any smile that might have been developing on my face.

The young White clerk stared through me and said: "What do you want?" I told him I wanted passport application forms.

"What?"

"The passport forms. I want to go to America."

"Where?"

"America."

After this conversation the clerk fished out two forms and warned me to fill in and return them as soon as possible. "You people like to come here at the last minute and expect everything to be done for you quickly," he said.

I mumbled some protest and walked out. It seemed odd that I should be accused of wanting to have things done quickly when in fact there are still three months between now and the day I leave in July.