



# IMAGES OF AFRICA

H. S. Toshack

# *Images of Africa*

H. S. Toshack

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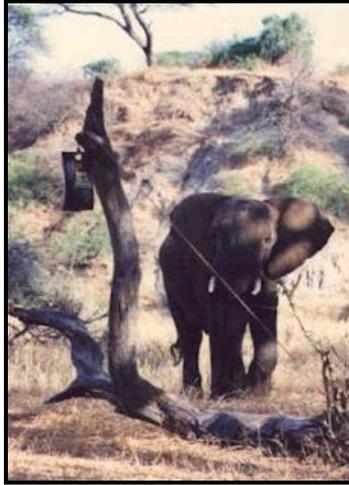
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### Rufiji Sunset

If I'd etched it myself  
This silhouette  
I could hardly have achieved  
Such a symmetry of leaves,  
So clear an antithesis of line;  
If it had been a hedge  
Or a head of hair  
And I'd clipped it  
I'd have been happy with my handiwork.

Now with the sun balanced on the fine night edge of the world  
(Soon it will have tipped and slid out of sight)  
I steal the tree's shape  
And claim it as mine.



### The Elephant at Leopard Campsite

If I could get him to stay for the rest of the week,  
Or at least come back here at the end of each day,  
If I could speak cajolingly,  
Make him our guest,  
Calm his fears and give him cause  
(Bananas, say, or a couple of beers),  
I could perhaps unhitch the shower  
That has given him fright,  
Made him pause and peer and shake his head,  
And place a bucket there instead  
Into which, at the evening hour,  
He might reach and draw water  
And at our behest spray us down for the night  
And flap us dry with his ears.



### Bread-Seller on the Beach

I wish I could use what she has to sell,  
But I've only just fed,  
And short of employing some lame ruse  
(Buy the bread,  
And instead of eating it toy with it,  
Pretend to taste it,  
Move my jaw but keep the roll in my hand,  
Then when she's gone dig it into the sand where I sit:  
The waste would shame me,  
But no more than the pretence –  
And what if she saw?)  
I can find no way to call her forward  
From behind my fence  
And her wall.

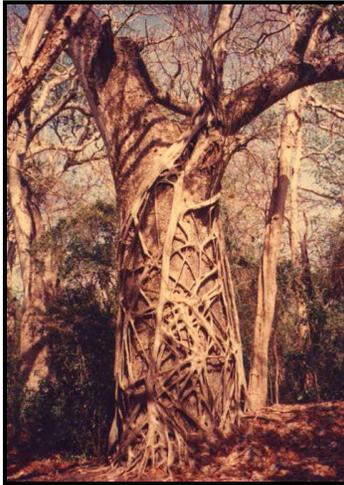
## Burundi Bananas

(Recipe from The Two Thousand Horsemen Restaurant, Monomatapa Hotel, Harare, 8th April 1994)

Take the smooth curves of two peeled bananas  
Yellow as a crocodile's throat,  
Sliced along their length  
And soothed a long while in honey  
Drained from hollow logs  
Hung in the trees.  
Heat an ounce of butter to the edge of burning.  
Scour the smoke from the pan  
With half a sharp orange.  
Lay the bananas side by side  
And brown them in the juice,  
Turning them only once.  
Pour on brandy  
Then pour it on again  
Until the air wavers with ready fumes.  
Then stand back,  
Touch the heady cloud with a lit taper  
And watch the burst of blue flame.  
When the flame dies,  
Serve.

Take two presidents  
And slice them along their length.  
Add the yellow slyness of crocodiles  
The dangerous sweetness of African bees  
And citrus bite.  
Pour on hate until the air wavers  
With heady fumes  
And pour it on again.  
Then touch a taper to the ready cloud  
And wait as the burst of flame climbs ever higher  
Over the place where they are left lying.  
But first of all note that this fire,  
Once alight,  
Will be long in the dying.





### Before it Falls

I've forgotten where this tree is,  
And I don't want to moralise about the picture's deeper meaning –  
How we strangle, when we cling too tightly,  
The things that support us  
(Who's holding who up anyway, I'd like to know:  
Seems to me that the tree's dead and bare  
And would rightly have gone long ago  
If it weren't for the creeper),  
That sort of thing.

It matters not at all where it is  
Or what it means:  
I care only that I've seen it  
Before it leans, and falls.



### Dik-Dik

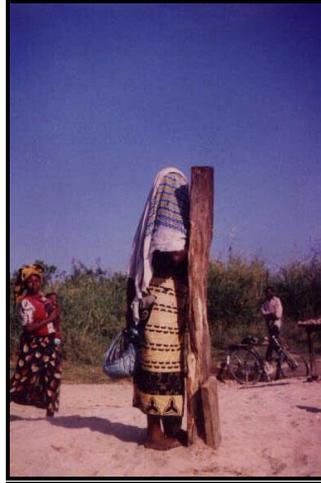
I ate one, once,  
For lunch,  
Or a part of one, rather,  
And now I'd rather I hadn't  
(Although I said thanks at the time).  
Look at the sheer size of it, for a start –  
What sort of heartless fellow could munch on a deer  
No bigger than a dog?

The steak was prime,  
The taste delicate as a gourmet might say,  
But not as delicate as the dik-dik's quivering thighs,  
Not as delicate as the dry summer brown of its flanks,  
Less delicate by far than the fey dark amber of its eyes.



#### A Mud-Birth

Elephants are made of mud,  
Warmed in a clay womb  
And born not mucused but mired.  
I always thought it,  
And now I've caught one at it,  
Lumbering out tall onto firm ground  
Fully formed,  
Ears, tusks and all,  
To stand in the sun and be fired,  
Dry from black to grey, then wrinkle and crack,  
And pretend he's been around for years.



### Half a Plank

On a day like today  
Any shade is better than none;  
Half a plank is better than no tree  
With the sun so strong;  
And there are no trees along the road I have walked to the ferry.

All the trees have been burned  
Or turned into planks,  
So I must give thanks for this piece of wood planted in the sand,  
This rough-hewn remainder,  
This lone reminder of the trees that once stood  
Along the ferry road.



### Dead Zebra in the Sand

I think of you making a gutsy run for it,  
Young one:  
You must have jinked and swerved on your thin and lanky legs  
As the lions closed in,  
Doing your best to stay alive  
With the rest of the herd wheeling and squealing around you  
In clouds of dust.

But now your guts have gone,  
Most of the mess has gone,  
Nuzzled and slurped by the cats that killed you.  
By tomorrow morning the only thing left will be your hide,  
And my lingering guess as to how you died.



### Sinking in a Green Sea

Only last week we watched *Titanic*,  
And now here's another ship about to go down  
Under a weight of green water.

Young swells will roll in through its sides  
To fill the state-rooms with sea-talk.  
Gentleman tides will stroll this balcony of a bridge,  
Mer-brides will sing in the honeymoon suites  
And dowager waves will climb the wide stair  
Arm in arm in all their foamy finery,  
Coming up to walk on deck.

What caused this wreck?  
A slow collision with a time-berg  
And a steady seep.  
No panic here,  
Just a calm slide  
Into the deep.



### I See You, You See Me

You've caught me in mid-chomp  
In and of the rough grass  
And captured my attention  
(I thought you would simply pass;  
Otherwise we'd have romped off)  
By driving too near.  
I noticed you first,  
But you could see us clearly from afar –  
Wasn't that enough?

I must also mention your smelly exhaust:  
Won't you please switch off the engine in your car?

You'll want to know perhaps why we,  
Twitch-tail, barrel-belly and bump-ass,  
Stand like this, rubbing rumps,

With our bums together  
And our noses to the four points of the compass.  
Can't you tell?  
It's so that we can see you come wherever from  
And prance off out of reach.

But we should have been more wary:  
Here you are, too close,  
With your thrumming and your smell:  
You'll be asking to ride us next  
As if we were donkeys on a beach.

Fat chance.  
Before that happens  
We'll lead you a merry dance.



Lake Tanganyika, Sunset

This is the deepest lake in the world bar one  
And towards it is dropping the smallest sun I have seen in the sky,  
A sun shrinking to a point of light  
Before it drops behind the sweet green water  
And night seeps up through the coarse dry sand  
Beneath my bare and cooling feet.

This place is distant from everywhere  
And even the sun now is going away,  
Drifting off into space,  
Its heat with it,  
And beneath my bare and sinking feet  
The coarse dry sand begins to shift.



### Hunting Dogs in the Shade

We nearly missed seeing them:  
If they had cared whether we did or not,  
If they had thought us worth more than a look,  
We wouldn't have,  
Lounging as they were among scorched and blackened branches,  
Their thin legs like burned and blackened branches  
And their flanks the colour of torched earth.

It was no thanks to their coats that we saw them,  
And their movement wasn't much either,  
Just enough to draw our eyes from the dusty track ahead.

If we had been gazelle  
Drifting slowly by like wind-stirred russet leaves  
And the dogs had cared not to be seen,  
Had lain low beneath the tree  
And not bared their fell teeth until it was time to bite,  
By now we might have been dead.

### The Deterioration of a Man who Acquired a Servant

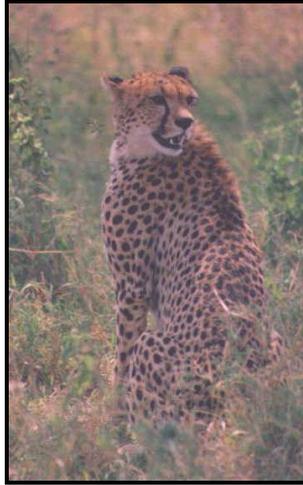
He used to throw his balled-up, ballsed-up sheets of paper  
Into the waste basket,  
Or at it, at least –  
Some fell short, some went past.  
Having missed a shot he would push back his chair,  
Rise,  
Walk over,  
Pick up the crumpled page,  
Walk back,  
Sit down,  
And cast again with greater care.  
If then it landed wide he would try once more.  
You could tell he took some pride in each one that went home at last.

When, later, he acquired a servant –  
Well, he stopped retrieving the screwed-up sheets  
To throw again:  
He took to leaving them where they fell.

When there was no basket  
Where one should have been  
He crumpled the paper in his fist  
And threw it anyway,  
And it lay till the servant picked it up.

Then he threw at the servant things harder and heavier than paper  
Because there was no basket  
Where one should have been.

Soon, having thrown things at the servant  
And missed,  
He will not leave them there on the floor:  
He will pick them up  
And throw again,  
With more care.



### The Lady Is For Turning

The lady can turn, and turn, and turn again,  
Her body motionless in the mild sun of early day,  
Her head revolving loose and slow  
Like that of a toy twisted  
Two-fisted  
By a wayward child.

But there's no abuse, no cruelty here,  
She's doing it at will,  
It's what she's a mind to do;  
There's no cruelty here,  
And hardly any cunning:  
This is what she was designed to do –  
Turn, and turn, and turn again  
Until she sights in the morning grass  
And she is facing in the bright morning grass  
A prey worth the running;  
Then what now is loose will tighten,  
What now is still, spring forth,  
And she will run, and run, and run again,  
Racing to the kill.



In The Slave House, Pangani

I rode here in fine fettle,  
Bouncing through the door  
With an open throttle and a roar  
And sliding to a halt.

It's not my fault I'm still around,  
Slowly settling into the ground  
In this derelict room.  
I don't like the gloom inside,  
Nor the stench of decay;  
I didn't intend to stay:  
I was tricked into what was a trap  
And is becoming a tomb.

First they took my front tyre  
(You can see the bared metal at that end)  
Then my rear wheel –  
For spares or maybe scrap.  
My petrol cap was the next thing to go –  
For fuel, what need?  
What need for fuel has a bike with no wheels?

(Oh, reason not the need!  
What use are appeals  
Against a man with a wrench  
Bent on dark deeds in a dark cell?)

I can't tell now the order exactly  
In which the other things went  
(My plugs, my chain, my coil):  
I have been lying too long on this crumbling floor.  
My grease is drying and cracked,  
I've stopped bleeding oil  
And my bit-by-bit dying never ceases:  
They are killing me matter-of-factly.

I do not think I will ever be freed,  
Or ever leave this ghostly place  
Except in pieces, dismembered,  
Like some of those not now remembered  
Who came here before.  
I might as well be shackled to the whipping-post  
That still stands in that corner,  
Between shadowed walls.

Rust gathers and falls  
And my crippled haunches sink  
In the rising dust of these haunted halls.



### Looking at the Horizon

I do the same as him when someone has framed me,  
Without declaring an intention,  
And have focused their lens (or their eyes) on my face –  
I pay no attention, pretend they aren't there  
Or that I'm just unaware  
And stare at the horizon  
As if I see things on it that they can't.

I might pat down my hair first, though,  
Surreptitiously,  
So that at least it's tidily flat;  
And he, obviously,  
Hasn't bothered to do that.

Another thought comes to me:  
If this great beast turned his head  
And looked my way  
He would see right through me.

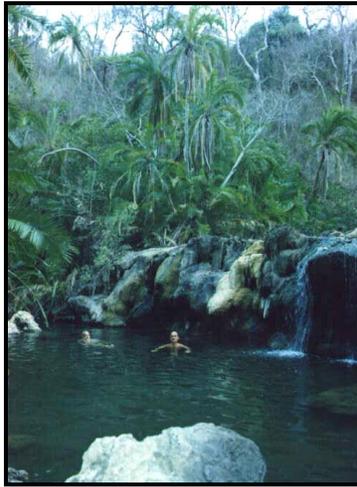


### A Garden in the Sand

Screen off the sea,  
Shade out the sun,  
Plant a stand of casuarinas in between the palms  
And build a fence for flowers to grow against  
Where till now there has been only sand.

When I have travelled hence, and in twenty years return,  
These girls will have gone,  
But there will be a garden here to rest in  
To hide in from the heat of the sun  
And the pull of the sea;  
I will be lulled for a while,  
May even sleep to recover from my journey,  
To recover from twenty years' journeying in a dry world.

But when I have lain for a while  
And become still,  
Through the gaps  
Through the leaves  
Through the lines of cane  
The strong blue water will seep  
Will lift me and carry me into the hot sun,  
Over the sand and down to the sea,  
Where I will drift,  
Until I have washed away the dust of my long journey in a dry land.



Maji Moto (The Hot Springs of the Selous)

He's standing upright.  
He feels he ought to be at attention  
Since he's having his photo taken  
(He's a soldier, you see  
And they get uptight about things like that:  
You can see his frown of concentration).  
But, foiled by the upwards push of the soda-strong water  
Against his palms,  
He's failed to hold down his arms.

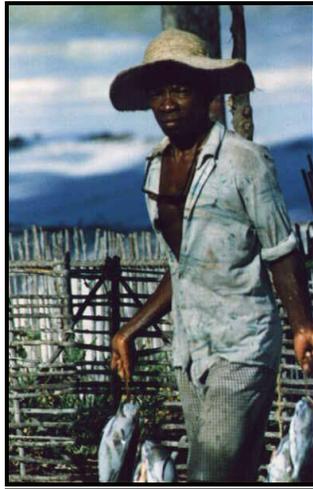
And me?  
I'm paddling along from the gush of the fall  
To the cooler edge  
Leaving him alone in the middle of the pool:  
Maybe I'm planning to despoil this idyll  
With a little underwater piddle  
Which I shall fail to mention.

When we were here four years ago,  
Janet (who took this photo) and I,

She clambered naked to the rocks above  
And stunned some baboons  
Who'd not seen anything quite like her buns before.  
They seemed somewhat to mind –  
Glared, then bundled their youngsters off behind.  
Her tush may now be part of baboon lore.

Last year when we came again  
We scared a hippo who then scared us  
As he trundled off into the bush.

This place is best  
When there's no-one here to stand to attention  
In the middle of the pool  
Be stared at bare  
Piddle  
Scare or be scared.



### A Day's Work

Those sunshades on a cord around his neck  
Are not worn for the sake of style:  
Who can afford style when all a day's work in the hot sun  
(Aboard a hollowed-out boat on the heaving sea)  
Will do

Is keep you alive for a while,  
Keep you afloat  
For another day's work in the hot sun  
On the heaving sea?

No, they are there, is all,  
So the wearer can look down into the heaving sea  
And judge whether his day's work is nearly done,  
Whether, yet,  
There are enough fish in the net to make it worth the haul,  
Whether or not there are enough fish in the net  
To keep him alive  
For another day's work in the hot sun  
On the heaving sea.



Christmas in the Serengeti  
(or more precisely just outside it)

I didn't take this photo as you can see:  
That's me trying to get to sleep  
Because I'll need to be up at the oriole's cheep of dawn  
To watch Janet open her present.

In this parcel-strewn tent we're between two worlds,  
Our feet in the snow and our faces in the sun  
(Or to be precise once more the crescent just-outside-the-Serengeti moon  
Silvering the acacias  
Of which this sapling covered in streamers was one  
Until I dug it up I only borrowed it honest and I'll plant it again when I'm done).

Earlier today we were in only one place,  
And deep in it, too,  
Mired beyond the axles and still sinking  
In the middle of a crusty lake bed  
That had tricked us with a dull and dusty lie  
Into thinking it was dry.  
We spent five full hours digging a way out of the goo.  
By then I was lacquered in thick black clay  
And, baked in the sun, had lost my sheen,  
Was caked and cracked like a badly fired figurine.

That's another reason why I need to sleep: I'm tired.  
No (to be precise one last time), I'm knackered.



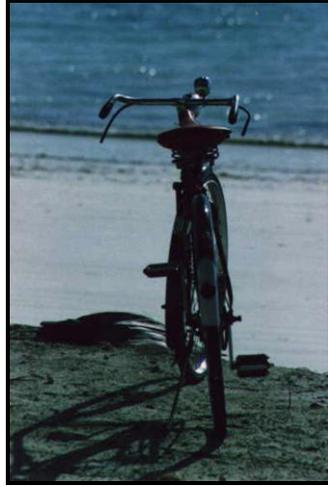
### The Great Magician

Not practised in such things,  
I under-judged his size  
And crept to the base of the tree,  
Too close for the camera's aim  
So that when the stork left the branch  
In this evil-smelling place  
He overfilled the frame  
And darkened the skies with the heavy flap of his velvet wings,  
Beating down waves of stench  
Onto my upturned face.

We'd smelt the carcass from the track  
And recalled the elephant from the day before  
Standing a long while at the edge of our camp  
As if he wondered which way to go  
And feared them all.

So this was where he'd gone  
In the end  
Falling at the end by this bend in the dry river bed,  
With the vultures and the storks turning overhead.

Soon, at dusk, this stork will be back,  
Will land,  
And fold the dead beast in his dusty black cloak.  
When the lights come up again at dawn  
The elephant will have disappeared.



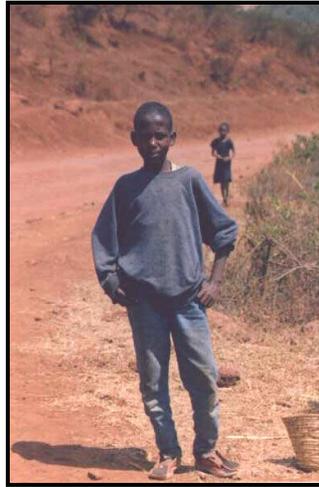
### Snorkelling Trip

Sun's up and tide's out.  
Soon I'll be riding this old hack of a bike  
On that long flat beach  
With the hot sand melting my tyres  
And the sun bleaching the shirt on my bending back.

When I've reached where I'm going  
And done what I'm intending to do

(sink into the twilight blue cool of the soothing sea among hanging drifts  
of bright fish like coloured stars in an evening sky)

I must turn and ride home  
With the wind's wide hand against my chest,  
The churn of my wheels sand-slowed  
And sharp light in my eyes from that beach of a road.



### The Boy on the Ngorongoro Road

I don't recall his name, now.  
We had stopped  
(Hearing a racket from below the truck)  
To secure a shock absorber that had dropped from its bracket.  
He would have helped if he had known how,  
I am sure.

I can't tell you his name  
But my sister-in-law elected to adopt him.  
She was out of luck:  
We reconnected everything  
Before she could effect the arrangements,  
And thereby wrecked her scheme.

It's just as well:  
He wouldn't have absorbed the shock of that  
I aver  
(No disrespect  
Of course  
To her).

## The Brass Lamp

We bought the lamp in a dusty Zanzibar shop.  
It was far from the best of deals,  
But we hoped when we got it home and fixed it up  
It would tell us a story of long ago,  
Of Sinbad and the sea.  
When we unpacked it and looked more closely, though,  
It had 'Made in England' stamped on the little wheels  
You use to turn the wicks up,  
And when I rubbed it nothing happened.

The lower part was dented on one side,  
The whole thing leant somewhat,  
And that told us...well, not a lot.

When I prised off the base  
Sand poured out  
(Ballast, no doubt) –  
Fine sand,  
Black sand,  
Not English sand,  
With the smell of some musty place  
In the musty past:  
We'd bought something old after all.

In the sand I found a nail,  
Slightly bent, rusty and square-ended.  
The lamp must have been opened and mended in some dark Eastern room  
And refilled from some dark beach.  
And the nail –  
Who knows about the nail?  
I suppose if I'd tried hard when I held it in my hand  
I might have seen a dhow's white sail  
Tacking through the glory of a rainbow's arch  
Off the Prison Island shore;  
But instead I poured the sand back in,  
Packed it tight,  
And hammered the base back on once more.

I made the mistake,  
Before doing that,  
Of tapping out the dents  
Straightening the lean,  
And unwriting part of its tale.

But I replaced the nail.



### Zambezi Falls

Dawn comes.  
The trees and I  
(Unwillingly awake this early in the day)  
Are soaked as we cling tight to the cliffs  
And are drawn to let go,  
Fling ourselves out on the spray  
Which is like wet smoke  
Into which we will dissolve  
And be hurled not down but up high  
To meet the eye of the morn  
Struggling free of damp white sheets  
And ready to glare at the world.



### The Blue of the Sea

The sea has shrunk back down the sloping beach  
And sunk away through the burning sand  
But has left its salty blueness lying in the sun;  
And a man may pick up a patch of it  
As his rear wheel revolves,  
A cycling man may carry a patch of it the length of the bay  
Then lay it down free in some new place  
Where it will stay until the tide comes in again  
And it dissolves  
Once more  
In the sea.

The Grass on the High Stanners

(Dar es Salaam, 15th March 1995)

'They've cut the grass on the High Stanners!'

When the word passed round my English school  
We did not go directly home,  
Racing instead to be the first to roll  
In the heaps of sweet sharp hay in the making,  
Then raking up with our feet what we had just scattered  
To roll in it again.

It was better yet  
When the grass had been cut  
Because the circus was coming to town,  
And we knew that early next day  
Burly hands in tattered vests  
Would drive in stakes where the grass had been mown  
(And flung aside to save for fodder),  
And haul up a thrumming grey tent to hold a hotter world,  
And our curled nostrils would take in a different scent,  
Not of English grass but African grasslands  
And the dung of strange beasts.

I walked home last night  
Over the playing field of an African school.  
The grass had just been cut  
And the smell that hung close to me  
Was as it used to be on the High Stanners  
Forty years ago and four thousand miles away.  
The hay had not been left to lie, though,  
So there were no children playing there,  
And no circus would come:  
But I knew when I reached my car  
I could start it up if I cared  
And drive on rough roads till morning  
And arrive at dawn under a grey savannah awning taut as a drum,  
With the smell of strange animals in the air.



### Matembwe

The date in the shadows of the bay  
(Though I don't like it there, tagging the scene)  
Tells me when this must have been;  
And the long calm shadows of the trees above  
Reaching out to touch the reef  
Remind me of why we went back after a year  
And after our marriage  
Which (lagging behind our love)  
Was like this easy sweep of waves up the beach,  
Smoothing the sand at the end of the day  
But changing nothing much.

### We Had Heard of Such Deaths

We had heard of such deaths  
But thought them rare and had not looked to see one.  
It happened on the airport road  
And stayed with us as we stowed our bags  
And settled into our seats  
Between the plane's broad wings  
On our way elsewhere.

We tucked the memory in the seat pocket  
With the in-flight mags.  
It was right that we should keep it for a while  
After our leaving.  
Before we came we had been vaccinated against all manner of things,  
But not such a sight.

A man lay on the ground where he had been felled.  
No such things as a trial.  
He was not yet dead, but was held down,  
Wide open as if on a rack,  
By two who had chased him from his thieving.  
A third stood astride his chest  
With a boulder hoisted overhead.  
I did not see it fall – our car moved on and I did not look back.

I recall nothing of the one who died;  
But the look on the executioner's face was one of civic pride,  
A certain smugness,  
And a sense of something being done.



### The Turtles of Prison Island

'Come in, Number Seven,' (they're all numbered)  
'Your time is up.'  
But Number Seven has been up  
To his tricks all night  
And has already come,  
In Numbers One through Six.  
He's humped in his helmet from dusk to dawn  
Without surcease,  
Lumbered up their buttresses,  
Scaled their heights,  
Fired his fusillade  
Shot his shells;  
And now morning too has come  
And a certain peace.

They're all numbered,  
We surmise,  
So he can keep count of his conquests  
(The consorts he's mounted with a sigh and a snort),  
The females he's bested,  
And at sunrise can rest  
From a battle well fought.



### Thoughts Rise

From time to time new thoughts rise  
In the thick dark pool of my mind  
And jut through the slickness for a while with dull eyes;  
But their heavy square feet are stuck in the slime  
And in time the suck takes them back below  
So I never quite see the full size of them,  
Never quite know how they're shaped,  
And can only surmise what they would have been like  
If they had freed themselves of the mud  
Lumbered out onto dry land  
And shaken their bodies clear of the weed  
With which they were draped.



### Where We Are Now

Are those the hills where we walked two days ago  
And were lost in a maze of elephant grass  
Among rivers of sand?  
Was that the horizon we stumbled towards  
With the sun overhead,  
Our hopes dwindling with our water  
And dread rising from the tight black shadows beneath our burning feet?  
Would the hot dry river-bed we trudged across  
(If we had turned and followed it, bend after bend)  
Have led in the end to where we are now?

In the end we came at last to where we are now  
By a different route and having learned new things.

Where we are now is an easy seat on a grassy bank.  
We hear the chink of ice behind us  
As the barman refills our glasses;  
And soon he will bring our drinks  
(Will he remember the lime?)  
To where we sit in the stillness  
Thinking of the time two days past  
When we walked in fear toward what may have been those hills.

Here where we are now the sun has gone and night is near;  
And the sand rivers  
Have become rivers of light.

The Six O'Clock Muse  
(April 27th 1995: Massacre in Rwanda as seen on Tanzanian TV)

The bodies are heaved into an open pit,  
And roll and tumble to the bottom of it.  
They seem, with their bent arms stiffened and legs braced apart,  
Like the defaced and toppled statues of an old regime.

I have unloaded from a butcher's cart  
Sides of beef covered in sacks,  
And sense these bodies' weight,  
The awkwardness of the lift and swing;  
And I remember as in a dream the cold cling of my grandmother's flesh  
When I climbed on a chair and leaned in the coffin for a final kiss.  
So I know what their clammy hands and calves feel like,  
I know what it feels like to throw these corpses into this hole.

These dead like tight and gleaming water-skins  
Which lurch, gurgle and hiss as they fall  
Were grandmothers too,  
And wives and sons;  
And the ones who did the killing  
Did not beget themselves.

Yet they will kill others  
And believe they are doing right.  
I might deter them,  
Save them,  
If I were there to remind them that they too are grandsons,  
Husbands and fathers;  
And it is only two days' drive on dirt roads  
To where those who are left are filling this grave.

But I do not stir:  
I look on instead  
As these bodies are tossed,  
Feeling with my shoulders their leaden weight,  
And their coldness with my hands,  
Knowing the heft of lives lost.  
The older regime of hate and revenge survives,  
And I speak the horror only in weak words,  
We the watchers do not stir  
But look on instead,  
And speak the horror in hollow words,  
Follow the new fashion,  
And cry Tragedy until Passion is dead.



A Lilac-Breasted Roller

This is the ghost  
(Lit from within like a Chinese lantern)  
Of a tie-dyed bird that's flitted to another tree  
With no sound,  
Leaving only an image at the back of my eye  
And a tinted feather drifting to the ground.