

In Praise of the Shades

Hitching across a dusty plain one June,
down one of those dead-straight platteland roads,
I met a man with rolled-up khaki sleeves
who told me his faults and then his beliefs.
It's amazing, some people discuss more
with hitch-hikers than even their friends.

His bakkie rattled a lot on the ruts
so I'm not exactly sure what he said.
Anyway, when he'd talked about his church
and when the world had changed from mealie-stalks
to sunflowers, which still looked green and firm,
he lowered his voice, and spoke about his shades.

This meant respect, I think, not secrecy.
He said he'd always asked them to guide him,
and that, even in the city, they did.
He seemed to me a gentle, balanced man,
and I was sorry to stick my kit-bag
onto the road again and say goodbye.

When you are alone and brooding deeply,
do all your teachers and loved ones desert you?
Stand on a road when the fence is whistling.
You say, *It's the wind*, and if the dust swirls,
Wind again, although you never see it.
The shades work like the wind, invisibly.

And they have always been our companions,
dressed in the flesh of the children they reared,
gossiping away from the books they wrote,
a throng who even in the strongest light
are whispering, *You are not what you are,*
remember us, then try to understand.

platteland - literally 'flat land' (Afrikaans), the sparsely inhabited
interior

bakkie - a pick-up truck (Afrikaans)

They come like pilgrims from the hazy seas
that shimmer at the borders of a dream,
not such spirits that they can't be scolded
not such mortals that they can be profaned,
for scolding them, we honour each other,
and honouring them, we perceive ourselves.

When all I seem to hear about these days
is violence, injustice and despair,
or humourless theories, from cynical hearts,
to rescue us all from our human plight,
those moments in a bakkie on a plain
make sunflowers from a waterless world.

