

## Shacklands

If time's an arrow, that never doubles back on itself,  
then shacklands, their origins, have always been with us –  
the turf-roofed hut, the patch of leeks at Eden's gate,  
the hovels round Babylon hinting at their larger progeny:

a sprawl of scrap-iron sheets, motor-car packing cases,  
mud-blocks and cast-off timber, centred on a metropolis  
and crowding its horizons, a habitat for the hungered,  
the jobless, the footloose drifting in from rural slums;

an eco-niche as Gothic as the trays of sheep heads  
arrayed on candle-lit tables in a taxi-rank at dusk,  
as labyrinthine as the twists of its multiple alleyways,  
its musk of paraffin, wood-smoke, sewage and spices;

the terminus of a rapid migration, an exodus dragged  
by fierce centripetal marketplaces away from the clan,  
from nagging bonds of kinship, from gerontocracies  
and monotonous porridge in villages with muddy wells;

a future sparked by ads on TVs in bushveld shebeens  
and anecdotes told by miners back home for Christmas  
of football heroes in huge arenas, drugs and erotica,  
of glass-cased shopping malls, airports and jazz in bars;

the locus of a quest for a shifting mirage, a chimera  
of laptops, hospitals, fast cars, good jobs and shiny shoes,  
all kept at a distance by arcane passwords of knowledge,  
by esoteric dialects, security guards and gated villages;

its kids that survive as alert and resilient as starlings,  
barefoot dancing a tennis-ball around a broken bottle,  
each crackling out of a laugh like a sudden rainbow  
because of the spring-shot car-seat that's at their door;

the drinkers, preachers, thieves and bus-queue gossips,  
the rhymes and quarrels, the Babel din of the radios,  
transposing languages, inter-bursting syntax and idiom,  
melding new metaphors, baroque lingua francas in flux;

its denizens pioneers, discovering as they settle its hills  
their own terra incognita, new pastures and Jerusalem,  
like a hawker unwrapping an orange from a broken box,  
like the lovers in the riot-scarred shell of a burnt-out bus.

Oh! Shacklands, if time's an arrow, that pulls life onward  
in the turbulence of its wake, you're a frontier, a solution,  
a hospice of hopes, a judgement on modernity, a wound.  
You're delectable as the juice of pilchards found in a tin

on the meadows of a city's trash-dump by a starving child,  
as beautiful as the newly washed sky-blue football jerseys  
spread on the bushes of a soiled and littered stream to dry.  
You're paradise delayed, mothering a child in a cardboard box.