

IN MEMORIAM: SOLOMON MAHLANGU

Hanged by the Apartheid Government, Pretoria

Dawn, April 6, 1979

- i. Singing
- ii. There was sunlit
- iii. One simply poses
- iv. The body buried secretly
- v. (Eschel Rhoodie's father)
- vi. In the dimly lit
- vii. Blue spruce
- viii. On the road
- ix. All night
- x. Singing

By Dennis Brutus

I. Singing
he went to war
and singing
he went to his death

II. There was sunlit
Goch Street
and the clear
pale blue sunlight
of the Highveld

and the sunlit bustle
of Edgar's Store
and the goodly things
money might buy
for the rich and white

and the overalled workers
delivery "boys"
messenger "boys"
sitting on curbs
with nowhere to rest

and the sharp crack
of gunfire
and screams of pain
and barked commands
the thud of falling bodies

Afterwards
there was the long grey corridor
the rattling salute on metal bars
the stark shape of the gallows
the defiant shouts of "Amandla"

Singing he went to war
and singing he went to his death

III. One simply poses
one's life
against another's
one's death
against another's death:

but the sides are different:
ours is life
joyous life
a free life, for the free
and theirs
is the monstrous life of a monstrous thing
who lives on the death of others
on our deaths

IV. The body buried secretly
and friends excluded;
thousands of mourners barred

At the cemetery,
in Mamelodi
Mahlangu's mother
and thousands of friends
wait

The thousands waiting
weeping, angry
are told to disperse

The police announce
"The corpse you are waiting for
will not be delivered."

In the center of Mamelodi
the police
swinging heavy rubber clubs
disperse 200 students
gathered to protest

Mahlangu knew
he might have to die:
he gave his life
for liberty

V. (Eschel Rhoodie's father
was a hangman

the South African Secret Police
prowl the U.S. Campuses

their agents
function as academics

they hire mercenaries
as their hitmen

Mr. and Mrs. Smith lie bullet-riddled
beside their family hearth--

their ruthless desperation
has no limit on criminality

their's
and their corporate bosses.)

VI. In the dimly-lit
mostly empty auditorium

the curious nervous
attentive crowd

the careful welcomes
focus mainly on me

there are complaints
of college harassment

the Dean of Spies
is falsely cordial

I pour scorn on stooge Mobutu
challenge Uncle Tom Sullivan

I evoke Mandela, Biko
Sharpeville and Soweto

a shooting in Johannesburg
stone-breaking on Robben Island

Solomon
Mahlangu

His gallant life
his gallant death

VII. Blue spruce
White pine
Yellow poplars

a weak dawn
seeps red
over the Appalachian foothills

here
blacks and slaves were brought
as strikebreakers

now
the subdued miners
can oppress minorities

ahead
red-raw lumber
scattered on the road

an overturned trailer
wheels in the air
like a docile beagle's paws

a driver
his head severed;
a death in the dawn

VIII. On the road
to the airport
I search the news
till I find the dread item:
He was hanged at dawn

IX. All night
his name
his face
his body
his fate
the cell
the gallows
pressed on my awareness
like a nail
hammered in my brain

Solomon
Mahlangu

till dawn
till the time
till the news
the newspaper report

he had been hanged

then the nail
was pulled from my brain
and the drip
of tears inside my skull
began.

X. Singing
he went
to war
and singing
he went
to his death