

Mango Tshabangu: Thoughts in a Train (excerpt from the short story, 1980)

When we ride these things which cannot take us all, there is no doubt as to our inventiveness. We stand inside in grotesque positions – one foot in the air, our bodies twisted away from arms squeezing through other twisted bodies to find support somewhere. Sometimes it is on another person's shoulder, but it is stupid to complain so nobody does. It's as if some invisible sardine packer has been at work.

5 We remain in that position for forty minutes or forty days. How far is Soweto¹ from Johannesburg? It is forty minutes or forty days. No one knows exactly. [...]

We move parallel to or hurtle past their trains². Most often my impression is that it is they who cruise past our hurtling train. Theirs is always almost empty. They'll sit comfortably on seats made for that purpose and keep their windows shut, even on hot days. And they sit there in their train watching us as
10 one watches a play from a private box. We also stare back at them, but the sullen faces don't interest us much. Only the shut windows move our thinking.

On this day it was Msongi and Gezani who were most interested in the shut windows. You see, ever since they'd discovered Houghton³ golf course to be offering better tips in the caddy business, Msongi and Gezani found themselves walking through the rich suburbs of Johannesburg. Their experience was
15 a strange one. There was something eerie in the surroundings. They always had fear, the like of which they'd never known. Surely it was not because of the numerous policemen who patrolled the streets and snarled in unison with their dogs at black boys moving through those gracious thoroughfares. Msongi and Gezani were young no doubt, but bravery born of suffering knows no age nor danger nor pattern. Fear of snarling policemen was out for these two young black boys. Nevertheless, this
20 overwhelming fear the like of which they'd never known was always all around them whenever they walked through the rich suburbs of Johannesburg. They could not even talk about it. Somehow, they were sure they both had this strange fear.

There was a time when they impulsively stood right in the middle of a street. They had hoped to break this fear the like of which they'd never known. But the attempt only lasted a few seconds and that was
25 too short to be of any help. They both scurried off, hating themselves for lack of courage. They never spoke of it.

In search of the truth, Msongi became very observant. He'd been noticing the shut windows of their train every time he and Gezani happened to be in ours. On this day, it was a week since Msongi had decided to break the silence. Msongi's argument was that the fear was in the surroundings and not in
30 them. The place was full of fear. Vicious fear which, although imprisoned in stone walls and electrified fences, swelled over and poured into the streets to oppress even the occasional passer-by. Msongi and Gezani were merely walking through this fear. It was like walking in darkness and feeling the darkness all around you. That does not mean you are darkness yourself. As soon as you come to a lit spot, the feeling of darkness dies. Why, as soon as they hit town proper, and mixed with the people,
35 the fear the like of which they'd never known disappeared. No, Msongi was convinced it was not they who had fear. Fear flowed from somewhere, besmirching every part of them, leaving their souls trembling; but it was not they who were afraid.

They did not have stone walls or electrified fences in Soweto. They were not scared of their gold rings

40 being snatched for they had none. They were not worried about their sisters being peeped at for their
 sisters could look after themselves. Oh, those diamond toothpicks could disappear you know ... Those
 too, they did not have. They were not afraid of bleeding, for their streets ran red already. On this day
 Msongi stared at the shut windows. He looked at the pale sullen white faces and he knew why.
 He felt tempted to throw something at them. Anything ... an empty cigarette box, an orange peel, even
 a piece of paper; just to prove a point. At that moment, and as if instructed by Msongi himself,
 someone threw an empty beer bottle at the other train.
 45 The confusion: they ran around climbing on to seats. They jumped into the air. They knocked against
 one another as they scrambled for the doors and windows. The already pale faces had no colour to
 change into. They could only be distorted as fear is capable of doing that as well. The shut windows
 were shattered wide open, as if to say danger cannot be imprisoned. The train passed swiftly by,
 disappearing with the drama of the fear the like of which Msongi and Gezani had never known.

(830 Wörter)

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- 1** Soweto – short for South Western Townships; a union of former separate townships located 12 km from the city center of Johannesburg
- 2** their trains – refers to the trains of the white population
- 3** Houghton – wealthy suburb of Johannesburg