

For Nat Nakasa

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Nat Nakasa, South African journalist, worked on Post and Drum, Johannesburg and was founding editor of The Classic. He went to Harvard University in 1964 on a Nieman Fellowship for Journalism. In terms of the South African exit permit which enabled him to take up the fellowship, he was forbidden to return to South Africa. He was supporting himself by free-lance journalism in New York when he committed suicide there in July 1965. We reprint with grateful acknowledgment Kathleen Conwell's letter to The Harvard Crimson, 11th October 1965.

THIS IS A LETTER for and to Nathaniel Nakasa from a friend who perhaps knew him very well in some ways and not well at all in others. That is not important. What is important is that his death, his decision at some point to take his own life, be understood.

Nat Nakasa came to America with a dream. All that he had learned about this country while in South Africa had given him the hope of freedom here. He knew about the problems of the American Negro, but what he had read and heard about had made him believe that the American government was in all sincerity and honesty attempting to redress these grievances. He once said to me that when he came to America, for the first time in his life he could let himself dream things he had never even dared to think about while he was in South Africa. He said he was like a child when he first came here, full of the excitement of being able to walk freely, stay out as late as he wanted—simple things that we take for granted were all adventures for him.

And then the dream broke, crumbled, really, in the subtle way that America has of letting things, crumble for the sensitive. He always had several speaking engagements: social clubs, churches; everyone wanted to know about South Africa. He once said that he felt like a puppet dangling from a string—he was invited to speak so that people could hear horror stories, the ugliness of South Africa: "What do the white people there do to Africans?" It was always the same question: "Tell us what it feels like to be South African." For we Americans like to assuage our guilt by having listened to the horror of another's existence. We like to think that we have really contributed something if we have listened to all the gruesome details; it is a kind of flagellation. It is what sends some of us to the Selmas and Albany, Georgias of our own country: it enables us to refuse to look inside—to refuse that realisation that when we ask a Nat Nakasa to recount the horror of South Africa we have made him into an object.

We have said, we will invite you to study at Harvard, or we will invite you to speak at our social hour and in that way we will have fulfilled our responsibility to all blackness.

AND NAT NAKASA KNEW THIS, and it killed him. When he came back from the South, something had broken inside him. I saw him constantly for two or three days after his return, and he was in great pain. He tried, tried so hard to write an honest story about the South, because he had perceived there the real tragedy of the American Negro. He knew that no magazine would touch what he had to write. He knew that

what this society has done to the American Negro was far more terrible than what South Africa was doing to the Black South African. Late one night during these days immediately following his return he said to me: "Kathy, when I was there, there were moments when I wanted to bow to a tenant farmer in Alabama, because I understood the miracle of his survival. They took away his identity and yet he has survived. In South Africa we have a culture that has lasted for generations; we have a language; we are a people; we are grounded in something solid. But they took everything away from you, everything, and yet that tenant farmer still gets up in the morning, the black man in Harlem still rides the subway."

Perhaps few of us, I know it is difficult for me, can understand what it is to be without a country: to perceive and struggle for the simple truths that most of us never allow to exist within us, and be strangled by a society that cannot stand truth. Perhaps we can never fully sympathise with his decision, because we have never gone that far down in our own souls. But Nat Nakasa wanted to give something to the world, wanted desperately to give Black people a sense of their value, and not in the service of any doctrine of Black Supremacy, but because he knew that if people were to relate honestly, each person in the relationship must have a sense of his own worth, of the value of the way he has used his life. Without that, there is always a master-slave mentality—the kind of master-slave mentality that unconsciously rules all the relationships between black and white in this Society. He once said he wanted to make a movie, and he described it thus: "I want to make a movie so powerful that a black man will come in slumped down, the way he has been taught to live slumped over, but midway he will begin to sit up straight, and by the time he leaves he will be walking with his head high."

I salute you Nat Nakasa, because I believe you lived bravely. I ask, too, that the world mourn your dying, and if it cannot seek its own soul far enough to mourn you, that it respect the effort of your living. If we can do that for you, Nat, then perhaps we can begin the kind of honest inquiry into our own lives that must precede any true communion between the races. ●