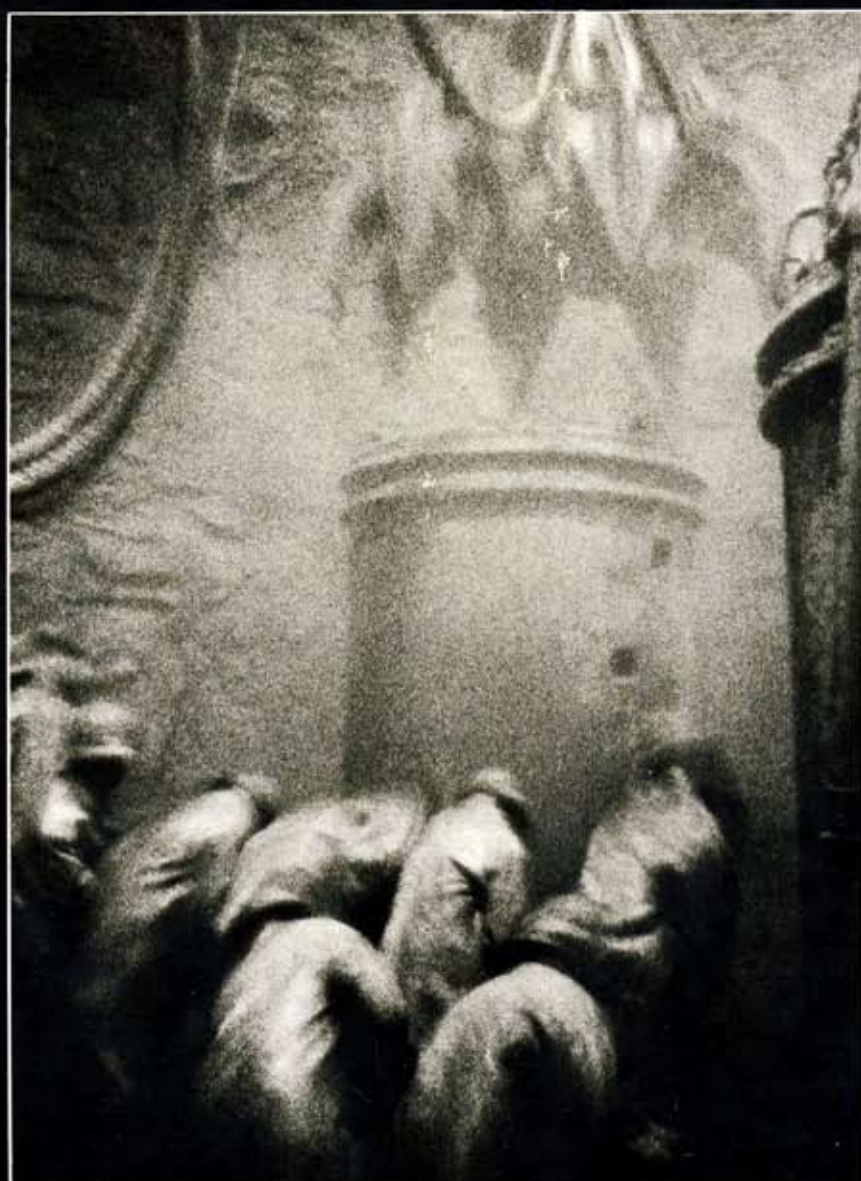


ON THE MINES

David Goldblatt
Nadine Gordimer



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"This people, plunged wholly in the present,
lives with neither myths nor consolation."

Albert Camus



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nadine Gordimer had a part in the making of my Witwatersrand photographs long before I met her. Her first book, Face to Face, which I read in 1950, made explicit for me, to the point of pungency, my own then vague awareness of our milieu. And over the years, as I sought expression in photography, her writing came to be peculiarly relevant: challenging, affirming, always extending my understanding of what we both so often seemed to find significant.

I started photographing the Witwatersrand in 1965 and by 1967 had done sufficient to feel that there was the possibility here of a worthwhile essay. In some trepidation I showed the photographs to Nadine Gordimer, with the suggestion that we might collaborate in exploring afresh our deep and abiding early impressions. To my delight she responded warmly, feeling that we shared a certain vision that, in my pictures and her words, might attain a new dimension for both. Charles Eglington, poet and literary critic, then editor of Optima, commissioned the essay we envisaged and published it in 1968; it is now expanded in this book, to which, therefore, his enthusiasm as a sensitive and creative editor has also contributed.

Through the help of Charles Eglington and Errol Fyfe, I photographed "sinking" for Optima at Welkom in 1969. In 1970 I went underground again to complete the series which here forms the second essay.

For their help and encouragement, I am grateful to Lionel Abrahams, Emil Brune, Alan and Marikje Bunton, Inez Cohen, Thelma Gutsche, Norman Hall, Sam and Alida Haskins, Barry Mortimer, David North, Allan Porter, Barney Simon, Olga, Nick, Lily, Steven, Brenda and Ron Goldblatt. I should also like to thank the many mining men who offered me kindly tolerance and sometimes very active assistance.

The photographs in this book owe much to my father, Eli Goldblatt, who never saw them. From his regard and love for the place in which we lived and its people, I learned.

D. G.

THE WITWATERSRAND:

a time and
tailings

On nine farms in Africa in 1886 there began gold mining operations that were to produce great riches and political and economic power that would outlive the deposit of ore and the individual lives of successive generations of men who mined it. There also began a way of life shaped by the nature of the work to be done, the relationship of the strangers who came together to do it, and the blankness of the place on earth where they found themselves.

It had a name, of course: the highveld, part of the Transvaal, a rural republic; later the Union and then the Republic of South Africa. Names of farms became names of mines – simple designations, characterless as an X in place of a signature, identifying emptiness by its few natural features, a spring, a stream, a rise in the ground. Some Africans of the Ndebele and Sotho-Tswana peoples and about six hundred white farmers and their families had lived there; the farmers only seasonally, leaving the cold plateau for the lowveld, in the winters. Skirmishes between men, black and white, tribal wars, had blown across as the wind did. There were no monuments; no ruins.

The Witwatersrand created its own landscape out of waste and water brought from underground in the process of deep-level mining, and created its own style of living, inevitably following the social pattern of the colonial era of which it was a phenomenon, but driven by imperatives even deeper than the historical one. The social pattern was, literally and figuratively, on the surface; the human imperative, like the economic one, came from what went on below ground. Perhaps it always remained “below ground”; in men’s minds, too. It belongs to the subconscious, from where what matters most in human affairs often never comes up to light, or does so disguised as coarse sentiment or expedience, patronage or indifference. Above, there were the neat standard houses and the recreation club of the white men, the compound and concession stores of the black men. The colour bar kept them separated. Below, at work, there was life-and-death dependency between them. It was codified in something called Safety Regulations. Such a code is the recognition of a final faith necessary between man and man, for survival.

The deep-level mines of the Witwatersrand, throwing up a trail of human habitation for more than sixty miles between Springs and Randfontein, never had about them the raffish atmosphere of the early diggers’ camps and their mining village, Johannesburg. The day of the digger-adventurer ended there: the picks and shovels of nomads could not get at the Main Reef – only capital and technical resources had the right reach. The big mining companies put down upon the veld,

men, machinery and money. Complete equipment for mining gold; raw materials for a settled human society. Cornish miners, and engineers, technicians, geologists and administrators with university degrees came from Britain and Europe. The eruption of gold through a static agricultural economy brought the sons of white farmers to the barracks of small rooms behind a wood-and-iron verandah – the Single Quarters built on “The Property” – and the uniform houses permanently darkened by wire-netting against flies – the Married Quarters. The pressures of a colonial money-economy brought young black men as migrant labour from tribes all over the country, and beyond, to the inward-facing Compounds on “The Property”.

It was a company of strangers in a place without a past, with nothing to quiet that certain spiritual hunger whose bread is memory. This is a hunger common to men whether they have just emerged from an Iron Age, a semi-feudal agronomy, or are the educated products of modern capitalism. On the veld there were built the billiard-rooms of the General Manager’s fretted wood-and-iron Residence, the squalid concrete bunks of the Compound. Both were thought apposite to needs – of whom? For what? A wood-and-iron version of the facilities of a Victorian country house party; a cross between a military barracks, a prison, and a boys’ school. Within each, men put up a spider-web (tenacious, resilient) of a new personality, compounded of a tradition apparently impossible to share and a manner of dealing with the strange elements of the present.

In a curious way, the landscape came to express this just as it did the demands of the work that was being done. We who were born into it in the Twenties and Thirties opened our eyes not so much on God’s creation as on our fathers’ bold rearrangement of it. This was very different from the hedgerows and fields that domesticate the earth. This was a making of mountains and waters. There was even a smell to it all, a subterranean pollen-scent of chemicals, as of the minerals flowering underground. The forms were as austere as Egypt’s; but these pyramids of tailings entombed no lost civilisation. It was ugly. Rusted iron, a three-day beard of prickly khaki-weed, the veld burned off and the sand blowing in the season that passes for spring, in Africa. But sometimes it became perversely, suddenly, the parody of picture-postcard beauty. The dust put a red filter over the suspended sun; the step-pyramids and cones were repeated, upside down, in the lakes of dead water. Where the water was shallow it shone mother-of-pearl in its impurity or left a brilliant verdigris on the sand. Every horizon bore the seal of a shaft-head, stamped black.

The style of the mines was a New Brutalism. Galvanised iron was its material. Confronted with one of the old steam hoists, or a vast pump all tentacles, to be housed, the mine draughtsman was driven to a solution by the purest principles of functional design. The building blocked out the space necessary for the efficient working of the machine, and its shape followed – of necessity abstracted

into the sharp planes and angles natural to sheets of galvanised iron – the machine's contour: the *appearance* of a building came about. And it was no more than that: to read the meaning of these structures, you must go inside and see what piece of work is performed there.

There are quite a few left, on the properties which are being or about to be demolished. Galvanised iron – the stuff of makeshift – has lasted the lifetime of the Witwatersrand mines. Studded together like wings of an aircraft, curling loose here and there at the corners but holding – these facades whose texture, when they were new, came only from the stripe of light and shadow on their corrugations, are mossed with rust, tarnish, faded paint and dirt. Each sheet of iron weathers differently, as if they never really belonged together any more than they can be made out to once they are piled as scrap.

Where they still stand these tin halls hold the marvellous machines for which they were made. There is a steam-powered hoist, vast as a dinosaur skeleton, but still in the full, shiny, steel-black, coal-black flesh of use. You have to walk around it to take it in; it is inert; a bell rings signalling that the load of men or ore is ready to come up from the mine, and then, set in motion and controlled by hand, there slides into vigour the huge rhythm and counter-rhythm of richly-oiled cogs and bobbing, interlocking components, gnashing behind japanned guard-pieces as twirly and a thousand times as grand as an old Singer.

Lugged and rocked across seas and veld from Europe fifty or sixty years ago, the machine age was unloaded on a place that had missed it out, like so much else. The machines were of a time when power was manifest in the mechanistic equivalent of a man's sweating and grunting in labour; the steam hoist, at only one remove from the effort of muscle, is controlled by fist and judgment of the winding-engine driver, who sits above it all in a wooden cabin or a chair home-made in the mine carpenters' shop. His face has the coarse-grained pallor and alertness of men who work with machines stronger than themselves and more deafening than men's voices. He is perhaps the last of his line; the last on whose steadiness of grip on a lever could depend the lives of a cage full of men hung in the depths of the earth. High upon the winding gear that guides a steel cable thick as Rapunzel's hair out near the roof to the shaft headgear and thence underground, and receives another threaded in from the opposite end of the process, a second man climbs about. Single light-bulbs like drops of yellow oil float on the dimness; his bare black legs take a shine. As the cable plays out past a measure on which the levels are shown, he daubs it with white paint to mark the point at which, on the return journey from the earth, it must be stopped. The cable comes up, the driver brings the hoist to a standstill with its great dragon's sigh, the man is busy wiping paint off as he has done an uncountable number of times.

When this mine closes, as it will soon, the men may continue their working lives in the new mines of the Far West or the Orange Free State. But now electric

power is unseen and unheard – perhaps a faint hum, hardly more than the sound of one's blood in one's ears. The steam-powered hoist will be scrap at R20 a ton. Yet these were the real beauties, on the Property: the great machines, the huge, hell's oven boilers, the bright locomotives with their policeman's helmet cowls and gilt-on-green decorative scrolls. Theirs was an aesthetic expressing the reality of the place, the work, the daily human experience. It was to be found; but not in the chemically-coloured reflections of sunsets.

Between two and three hundred thousand black men a year have worked the mines of the Witwatersrand. They always far outnumbered the twenty to forty-two thousand white miners, technicians, and administrators. They came from Tanzania, Rhodesia, Mozambique, Malawi, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana – almost everywhere south of the Sahara – as well as the Transkei and Zululand. Migratory labour: the official term takes its metaphor from birds in their seasonal exodus in search of the means of life. But in South Africa it is also used of men who seek the means of life within their own country yet whose right to settle and bring their families to the region where they work is not recognised. The men have come and gone over more than half a century. They left behind them their great part in the complex of men and machinery whose momentum has powered the most diversified industrial state on the African continent. They took away a pittance in money and possessions. The things that black miners coveted, the gramophones, flower-papered trunks, watches and cheap suits were the least of it; what the experience has meant to them is difficult to trace, since most are not literate, and they speak with a variety of Africa's seven hundred tongues.

The black man came to the mines to earn bride-price and taxes and acquired new skills as he did so. As for his social and spiritual needs, in some tribes, in territories far distant from the Witwatersrand, the six- to twenty-month spell of labour in the gold mines became one of the trials attesting to the attainment of full adulthood. Once back from the mines, you are a man. Most white people accept this as the sum of the experience for black miners.

Emancipated blacks and both black and white spokesmen for the African personality see the black man's experience of the mines as a traumatic one. Labour underground epitomises the black man's baptism by darkness and dust into Western civilisation. Tribesman comes to Jo'burg – the obsessive theme of African writing from Vilikazi's poem *IN THE MINES* to Peter Abraham's *MINE BOY* – is the twentieth century myth of Africa, gathering to itself round one simple story all the harsh and bewildering experience of a forced rebirth from one age to the unknown of another.

Which interpretation comes nearest the reality? One thing is certain. Man comes naked into the world again when he is industrialised. The price is higher than bride-price. And if those in command of the process are white and he is black

and seen as a unit of labour rather than a man, rags and shoddy are what he will get for a long, long time. The wage-gap between black and white mine-workers was twelve to one in 1911. It had increased to more than twenty to one by 1969. It was not until 1973 that the miners' trade unions, whose membership continues, by law, to be confined to whites, agreed that certain strictly limited categories of skilled jobs would be opened to black miners. Black wages have been raised; white artisans have had to be "compensated" for this concession of white privilege by "responsibility" allowances. The gap between white earnings and black has come nowhere near being closed. The mining industry was the basis of South Africa's industrial wealth and long ago set the pattern for the exploitation of blacks by whites. Much has changed; not this. Weighed against gold, the white man's sweat is still considered of greater worth than the black man's.

Early on Sunday mornings, not many hours after the dance band had played "Goodnight Sweetheart" to the whites in the Recreation Hall, the drums began to sound for the dancing at the Compound, on the properties of the Witwatersrand. Not only the people of The Property, but the whole population of the mining towns woke to the beat of drums; it was as unremarkable to us as church bells. Into the new rhythm of working by shift down the mine instead of by season on the land, the black miners brought the familiar rhythms of tribal dances. The dances lacked the context of occasion that belonged to them, at home. They became adapted to, expressive of the new situation, just as the traditional seed-pod rattles worn round the dancers' ankles became bottle-caps. Among the stock-in-trade characters of the dancing mimes, the white Shift Boss appeared. Few white people were aware of their image, integrated into the black man's new world: yet it was there to be seen, in the things that made us smile or that we found incomprehensible – the trousers tied with string beneath the knee, for example, which were not recognized as representing the high boots worn by the heroes of the Westerns shown at Compound cinema shows, and the busy arrangement of the paraphernalia of watches, badges, cline rules, pens and pencils worn by Boss Boys, caricature and apotheosis of white red tape. Sometimes a white miner would bring one of his gang of "boys" home to his house on the Property to perform some odd job. I remember going with a small friend, who had been detailed to take one of these men a mug of tea: we two children, carefully carrying it across the garden to where the black man was helping to lay a brick path. "Go on, take it," my friend's father said. The black man stood up and wiped his hands on his trousers; in the light of day, above ground, the two men smiled at the children. "That's my son" said the white man; it was a kind of hospitality. But the black miner could only smile. The two men could communicate only in the patois of work. Their relationship was defined in phrases from the MINER'S COMPANION – IN ENGLISH, AFRIKAANS, SESUTO AND MINE KAFFIR: *Come here.*

Go there. What is your name? To what tribe do you belong? Do you understand mines? I don't want a loafer. I cannot afford to feed and pay loafers.

The white people on the mines of the Witwatersrand began their life together lost in many kinds of isolation; yet, speaking of the past, anyone who lived there will give the strongest impression of security. Mining people not only worked together; they lived close in Company houses along Company streets, tended by a mine doctor in the mine hospital, meeting at the mine Recreation Club for their entertainment, playing tennis and soccer on the mine's courts and fields with the mine teams. One could go from christening to old age pension within the shelter of the Company plantations of blue gums that surrounded The Property. One need never be aware of the threatening space of the veld without. Inside the magic circle of blue gums everything was decided for one, from annual leave to social status; a cosy society, with every draughty gap where loneliness might blow in stopped by the immediate availability of a talk over the fence or a game of billiards down at the Rec, where all faces were as familiar as one's wife's. *We were just like one big family in those days.* What other way could there have been of making a community in that emptiness, that memoryless place? It was an autocratic family, of course, and the social hierarchy, based on the hierarchy of working importance, provided the sense of order. The General Manager's in his residence; all's well with the world. Like all family systems, this one exacted unquestioning conformation, admitted no possibilities of doubt about its mores, gave little access to the world of ideas; and offered in return a sense of belonging whose time, like that of the mines themselves, has now run out.

There is still more than half as much known gold in the ground of South Africa as has been taken out of it since 1886. Most of it is in the new mines, under the dusty Brasilias of the Far West and the Free State. Some of it is still in the rock of the mines of the Witwatersrand; in the mountains of waste; swept into the very crevices of the old buildings on the Properties; even in the dust that grits between your teeth as you follow the Main Reef Road East to West. A deposit of ore is finite; and so people talk of the "dying" mines as if these were living organisms with a natural span. But a mine does not last as long as the veins of ore last, as a man lives while he has blood flowing in his veins. Somewhere the word is pronounced: "Given an unchanged gold price and the present rate of erosion of values, the Chamber calculates that R2 000 million worth of gold will have to be abandoned." A mine lives only so long as the percentage of gold recovered from it is payable in relation to the price of gold and the great, spangled juggling act of the country's economy. All along the Witwatersrand now, the bulldozers advance, the winches stop turning. Those single unshaded light bulbs which burned everywhere in the prodigality of "mine" electricity, making the mine's own daylight in sheds and offices and fly-screened Quarters of the Property, go out – following economic decrees as apparently immutable as natural laws. The towns that grew up like camp followers to live

off the spending of the mining communities are taking The Properties into urban anonymity without a trace. Here a Recreation Club has been bought and painted a fashionable pink by a local immigrant community, for their Sunday gatherings – the false gable above the verandah lettered ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΣ ΣΥΝΔΕΣΜΟΣ ΣΠΡΙΝΓΚΣ. A mine golf course is taken over by a municipality. An engineering firm moves into the old Time offices, with their pergola of dead roses and empty fishpond, where in the gaunt presence of the shafthead and the sizzling of the cooling system nearby, some Time Officer saw to it that a gang of “boys” kept the place “nice”.

The landscape that was made is being dismantled. A composite of men and machinery that industrialized a white rural community and tens of thousands of tribal black people is being disengaged. Once, long ago, white-tailed Gnu, Blesbok, Springbok, Hartebeest, Eland and Quagga roamed there. There was no one to remember. Once, not long ago, these Properties were strongly-characterized human units, homogeneous in their labour and in the solutions they found to their needs, whether these were fulfilled by amateur barbers among the black miners, setting up soap-box, scissors and mirror under the Compound pepper trees, or by members of the white Christmas Party Committee, considering wholesalers’ lists of toys. Everyone is forgetting fast. The money, technological advance and economic power the Witwatersrand mines brought up from the darkness flows into human activities removed from them in nature and time. The children and grandchildren of the black miners who came from neighbouring territories are the M.P.s and executives as well as the clerks and labourers of independent black states. The children and grandchildren of South African black miners provide for secondary industry at home, as they did for the mines, the overwhelming majority of the labour force in exchange for the smallest share of the returns. The children and grandchildren of the white miners sell real estate, run businesses and industries, work in factories, and live in industrial towns which bear the names of those farms on which the auriferous conglomerates were found. All are faces among faces, interchangeable as those of city dwellers everywhere, recognizing no familial likeness of dependency.

The shaftheads are the totem objects of the extinct frontier society. There are no ghosts where the price of ground is measured per square foot. Already the model township covers the General Manager’s garden and the Compound, giant shadows prance on the screen of the drive-in cinema built on a mine dump. Everywhere the mountains of past endeavour are being grassed over, like so many suburban parks.

Nadine Gordimer

This unusual and lavish book represents a rare combination of the work of a writer and a photographer both born and bred on the Witwatersrand – the famous Reef of Gold in South Africa. In their unique yet complementary ways, they interpret its present paradox of death and renewed life.

Nadine Gordimer, writer of novels and short stories, spent her childhood in a pioneering Reef town. With great perception and sensitivity, she describes an extraordinary social scene now fast disappearing. She writes at first hand of the mining community, where black men put gold and power into the hands of white men.

David Goldblatt, photographer, grew up in a mining town at the other end of the Reef. To the visual exploration of men and power, their grotesque beauty when at work and the strange environment they have created, he brings scrupulous objectivity and poetic vision. In the brutal yet beautiful realism of his portraits, humanity stands revealed.

This book is an essay in the understanding of men and the style, grace and significance which inhabits their most mundane activities.

ON THE MINES is a book in three parts:

I. THE WITWATERSRAND: *a time and tailings*. Nadine Gordimer and David Goldblatt explore, in words and photographs, the world of the gold mines among which they grew up.

II. SHAFTSINKING. A series of photographs, with an explanatory text by the photographer, of a Dantesque world which, because of its inaccessibility and dangers, is seldom seen by outsiders.

III. MINING MEN. A collection of portraits, mostly of those whose life and work forms the substance of the first two parts of the book.

NADINE GORDIMER

Born and brought up in the East Rand mining town of Springs. Author of five novels and five short story collections. Awarded the W.H. Smith Award for the most outstanding contribution to Commonwealth literature the last year South Africa was part of the Commonwealth, and, for her most recent novel, *A Guest of Honour*, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Her books have been translated into eight languages and her stories appear in numerous anthologies, in addition to *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, *Encounter*, *London Magazine*, etcetera. Has lectured on African literature at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia universities.

DAVID GOLDBLATT

Born and brought up in the West Rand mining town of Randfontein. Degree of Bachelor of Commerce at Witwatersrand University; worked in a family business for some years but decided in 1963 to devote all his time to photography. Work has appeared in *New York Times Magazine*, *London Sunday Times*, *Town*, *Management Today*, *Vogue*, *Paris Match*, *Camera*, *Photography*, *Photography Year Book*, *Optima*, etcetera. Contributed to the Expo 67 exhibition, "The Camera as Witness." One-man show at The Space, Cape Town, and The Arena, Johannesburg. His second photographic essay in book form, this time a study of Afrikaners, is in preparation.

