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Biltong by James Twala

(See pp. 90–91 in *Vistas of Poems*)

Title:	The poet uses biltong in a particular scene to describe abject poverty.
Theme:	What poverty and hunger are like.
Mood:	Desperate

Discussion

Four starving children wait for their mother to bring them a piece of biltong to eat with their porridge. The way the poet describes the scene and the biltong depicts the desperation in the situation. The biltong is not described as appetising, and the children are described as if they are animals, and later cows. The whole picture created is dismal.

The way the poet chooses words, the images and comparisons that he uses to describe what is contained in this first paragraph above are what makes this poetry.

Analysis

Stanza		Comment
1	The biltong is referred to as lean strips (until line 3) hanging on a washing line and compared to “dead faceless serpents”. The sun dries the biltong, “parches” it over time, while flies buzz about the meat and its “dark fat”.	The comparison does not make the biltong something one would look forward to eating and yet the children are, which reveals how hungry they are. The comparison of the sun with a patient housewife is linked to the woman who has hung the biltong out to dry. Singing is normally something positive, but here it describes the noise made by flies’ wings, which makes the biltong even less appetising.
2	In the evening a woman described as large-mouthed (is she also hungry or does she complain a lot?) “stomps”, walks with heavy tread (as if angry), and “snaps and jerks” at the biltong as she takes it down to take inside.	“[B]ait” is put out to trap something, such as a fish. The biltong is compared to bait and the woman then to some prey snapping at it hungrily. Her actions are also compared to those of taking dry washing down from the line.
3	This stanza describes the four children, inside the house, thin, staring hungrily at the biltong, their porridge ready and waiting.	“Inside the house” contrasts with “emerges/from the house” (line 9). Notice the simile (one thing described in terms of another) “squatting like sleepy frogs”. Also the mother has not served porridge for herself (“four mounds” – “four ... children”). Perhaps there isn’t enough. “[S]quatting” suggests that the four are sitting on the floor, ready to devour the biltong, as they stare fixedly at it. This is a picture of extreme hunger.

	Stanza	Comment
4	This stanza describes the children eating the biltong and the way they do so, their faces "twisted", the way they attack the biltong ("grip and tear"), and their rotten teeth, uncared for and decaying from their bad diet. The last five lines likens them to cows (chewing the cud).	The picture of hunger is continued. Notice the verbs "gnaw", "grip and tear", likening the way they eat to that of animals. The last five lines imply that they cannot afford to waste any of the meat, and that they will chew it "a second time" in the night, like a cow. Their hunger makes them less than human. This is a comment on a society and country that tolerates such poverty.

Contextual questions

1. What do you understand by "lean strips" in line 1, given that the speaker says they are "streaked with dark fat"? (3)

2. Quote the words used that tell us what the biltong is like. What is the effect of all these words? (5)

3. In what way is the biltong "like/dry washing"? (2)

4. Why do you think the woman is described as "large-mouthed"? Give a reason for your answer. (3)

5. Why would the biltong not be "ground well"? (2)

[15]

A Sleeping Black Boy by Mongane Wally Serote

(See pp. 101–103 in *Vistas of Poems*)

Title:	The title is descriptive, but does not contain the intention of the poet or the condemnation of society, which the poem does.
Theme:	The abandonment of children that society should look after.
Mood:	Pitying, condemnatory, despairing.

Discussion

This short twelve-line poem is written in free verse, with lines of differing lengths, emphasising their meaning and the weight they bear. It describes a black boy sleeping face down on the grass, a jacket covering him, at the side of a busy road, near a pond. He is dirty and smells. The speaker predicts that he will die one day from the glue he smokes. People walk past trying not to see him.

The poet seems to be predicting the boy's death, unless people, society, realise such lost children are their responsibility and do something about them.

Analysis

	Lines	Comment
Lines 1–3	The first three lines describe what the speaker sees. They are in the past tense. The boy seems to be asleep, lying face down, using a jacket as cover.	The “jacket” must be a piece of clothing (“huge ... covered”) that someone gave him, it is much too big to fit him.
Lines 4–8	The next five lines are in the present tense, giving more specific details of the boy's condition. No one helps him, they walk past.	The dirt and smell “screams” as if the boy's condition is obvious, he needs help, and yet no one stops. Perhaps he has a “throbbing” headache from smoking glue. A child to whom a lullaby is sung is cared for and loved by a mother, but this boy only has the sound of water and traffic as he sleeps.
Lines 9–10	The next two lines, in the present tense still, focus on the adults who avoid him.	It is “adults” (who should take responsibility for children) who walk past the boy. The poet describes their eyes with a simile (saying something is like something else) to help us picture the rapid movement with which they look everywhere except at the boy. The implication is that they know he is there, but don't want to do anything about it, to become involved, to take up the responsibility.
Lines 11–12	The last two lines are a grim prediction of the fate of the boy.	The use of “this” small boy underlines and makes particular the child's plight. It's not just “children like this will die”, but this boy here in front of us who will die. It is a plea with the unspoken “unless ... ” calling on society to do the right thing.



Contextual questions

1. Have you ever come across a street child? What was or would be your reaction? (3)

2. Identify the alliteration in line 3 and explain its effect. (2)

3. What figure of speech is "the dirt screams"? Why do you say so? (2)

4. What is being compared to what in "the/roaring steel river"? Explain why you say so. (2)

5. What meanings do you interpret from the expression "his lips stuck together"? (2)

6. Give an explanation of why the poet thinks the boy will end up dying from smoking glue. (4)

[15]

