

A poem (sort of) from Burundi

by Joe Lapp

There are no tractors in Burundi, the countryside instead be full of people hoeing, hoeing, hoeing, the rise and fall of metal and wood a kind of hypnosis, and then the soothing swish on dirt or the clunk on striking rock. Only once I saw a motor tiller, in a photo of a field I took at very long range, and I could only see the tiller later, looking at the pic on my computer as I blew it up and leered, of all things, at a white man (where did *he* come from) guiding a roto-tiller through that field while women all around him hoed the dirt to keep away the hunger.

They don't even got no oxen, here, workin' the ground, pullin' those wooden plows like I just saw in rural Ethiopia, a forked tree limb with a tip of metal on the point, like something out the middle ages. No, here it's more like prehistoric times, just human flesh and strength and bone to turn that dirt, too many hills too steep for oxen, and besides a normal bloke can barely buy the metal hoe, the wood for the handle. They make gravel here *by hand*, for pete's sake, women squatting at the edge of a road, beside a pile of rocks, hammers swingin', breaking those rocks for all they're worth, their worth not more than a few pennies for a day's full work in equatorial sun.

And if you're thinkin' this poem don't sound like a poem much at all, well, you're right, absolutely, and that's because there ain't much poetry here, what with the broken guvment and the need to hoe your fields twice a year no one can find much time for poesy. It's hard even for me to get much beauty, sometimes, despite the lovely green of the hills and the wind-whipped blue of that crazy deep and wide lake, because ever since I met a man in northern Leone who said, no my country isn't beautiful can't you see my guvment don't work and we got no roads, then I've begun to define beauty too as a well functioning state and a life without too much without, and since nearly half the population of here is undernourished then this state has high without.

And how can I be writing this poem anyway on a sunny day in Bujumbura during the first fall rains when somewhere close by someone is hungry, but I have a good quick answer for that: I like my comforts. You see, at 35 I'm on my way to being dead at 55, the average in Burundi, but not even half my life is over by the standards of America, and I'd like to die an American. I'm not saying I want to die *in* America, something about the land of SUVs and rolling grain that I both love and loathe... but wait, why is this poem suddenly all about me, when it's supposed to be about the lack of tractors in Burundi? I guess me is what I know best. Or maybe I'm just covering for my ego, hiding the fact that in this place I'm only still a traveler, outsider, a looker-in-at-the-window, pining for technology and the familiarity of oil when all they want here is peace, peace, peace.