

Maphiri Daphne Masekela

Jo-Anne Green, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992

She was smaller than I remembered her. Newspapers have a way of enlarging a woman's physical size or, often, the opposite depending on what brought her to the front page of the Boston Globe. Thus, I had seen her black-and-white portrait before I met her on the stairway in our apartment building, I had not put two-and-two together: Maphiri is a black South African who works in a soup kitchen for the homeless. She would rather be a sculptor. She has just received political asylum because she was tortured in detention. This was the Maphiri to whom I was introduced. It is not so hard to believe, therefore, that my memory of her was larger-than-life. In fact, there was not enough room for me to hold all of who Maphiri *was* when I had her over for tea on Sunday.

When we went to sit down, I offered her the 'guest's' chair, thinking it would be the most comfortable for her. Not realizing it was a rocking chair caused her to exclaim -- rather frightfully -- "So fancy!" and within seconds she was squatting on the small wooden foot-stool which Mela had made in art school. Before I could adjust, she was leaning toward me, her penetrating eyes focused on mine and, magically, she held my gaze for the next hour.

I had anticipated having old, painful feelings rush in upon meeting such a person, having recently grown tired of other peoples' pain disappearing my own; Maphiri was a dose of reality I did not want to welcome. Nevertheless, there she sat.

What shocked me was the wave of memories of home she delivered, like a jester or a mime. It was just that, that gesturing, those soft clicking sounds she made with her tongue, the shshshs and ay,ay,ays she uttered as completions of her thoughts, the endless facial contortions she exacted to suit so persuasively her descriptions of her life as to have me feel like I was a part of a drama. Mela hung on the periphery of my vision, straining to comprehend the pictorial images Maphiri's words restored to my memory, that of another place, another country, another world.

I could never pretend to have entered that world, but I certainly *had* witnessed it: it was a world of poverty and destitution, yet those who peopled it often appeared to me as if in ecstasy; words were few, unless they were accompaniment to music, which always caused bodies to sway, twist, turn and gyrate, transform and transcend. It is this looseness, fluidity and mobility, this comfort with one's own body which *I* so desperately lack. What is it that makes us privileged ones so incomplete, so miserable in our comfort?

Suddenly, she cut away. Her eyes moved about the apartment, drinking in all of its lusciousness, and loveliness. Moving very slowly and deliberately from one beautiful object to the next, she periodically broke away from the perimeter to perform quick sketches of herself collecting objects of value from the trash of the wealthy -- or the naive. I tried to interject little bits of information, about art and about me, but she seemed not to hear or care. And then she was gone.