

THE COALRACE



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(Above) Fourteen-year-old Nyoni, whose name means "bird", peers through the window of his home - a shack among the coal yard debris. (Opposite) Sunset over the coal yard: another working day over for (l to r) Rooi, Nge, Bayibayi and Nhlanhla.

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Soweto's coal-children, living by lugging 40 kg sacks of coal around the township on ramshackle carts, shun family, school and childhood.

For R35 a week, six days out of seven, boys aged 8–15 drive skeletal horses through gouged streets. It is a transient business: boys disappear from one yard to the next after a few months, seeking better wages or anonymity.

In the early morning in the Kola coalyard, all is saturated black: air, earth, people's faces, bodies, clothes. Among piles of coal, boys and older veterans hitch horses to carts made of planks and rusted wheels. One boy gallops through the debris like an apocalyptic horseman.

Strewn everywhere are carcasses of old cars and bakkies; in

(Opposite) Back to work: bags of coal are lined up for a newly-shod horse.

(Below) First aid: Makhalenpongwe cleans the sores on his horse's leg.



this “chop shop”, vehicles are appropriated as the coal vendors’ homes.

On this day there is cause for celebration: one of the draft horses has foaled, and her wobbly offspring dozes in a bakkie “stall” (on the back of a bakkie). One of the 10 bosses of the coalyard lifts the foal gingerly from the truck. The foal clenches its feet like a spitted lamb while the coalboy Nhlanhla nurses it from a baby bottle.

Nhlanhla, 14, a coalboy for two years, cups his hand around the foal’s chin to catch droplets of milk. Guzzling, the foal is well cared for. Nhlanhla himself refuses to nurse his left foot, punctured by a nail the day before and still swelling.



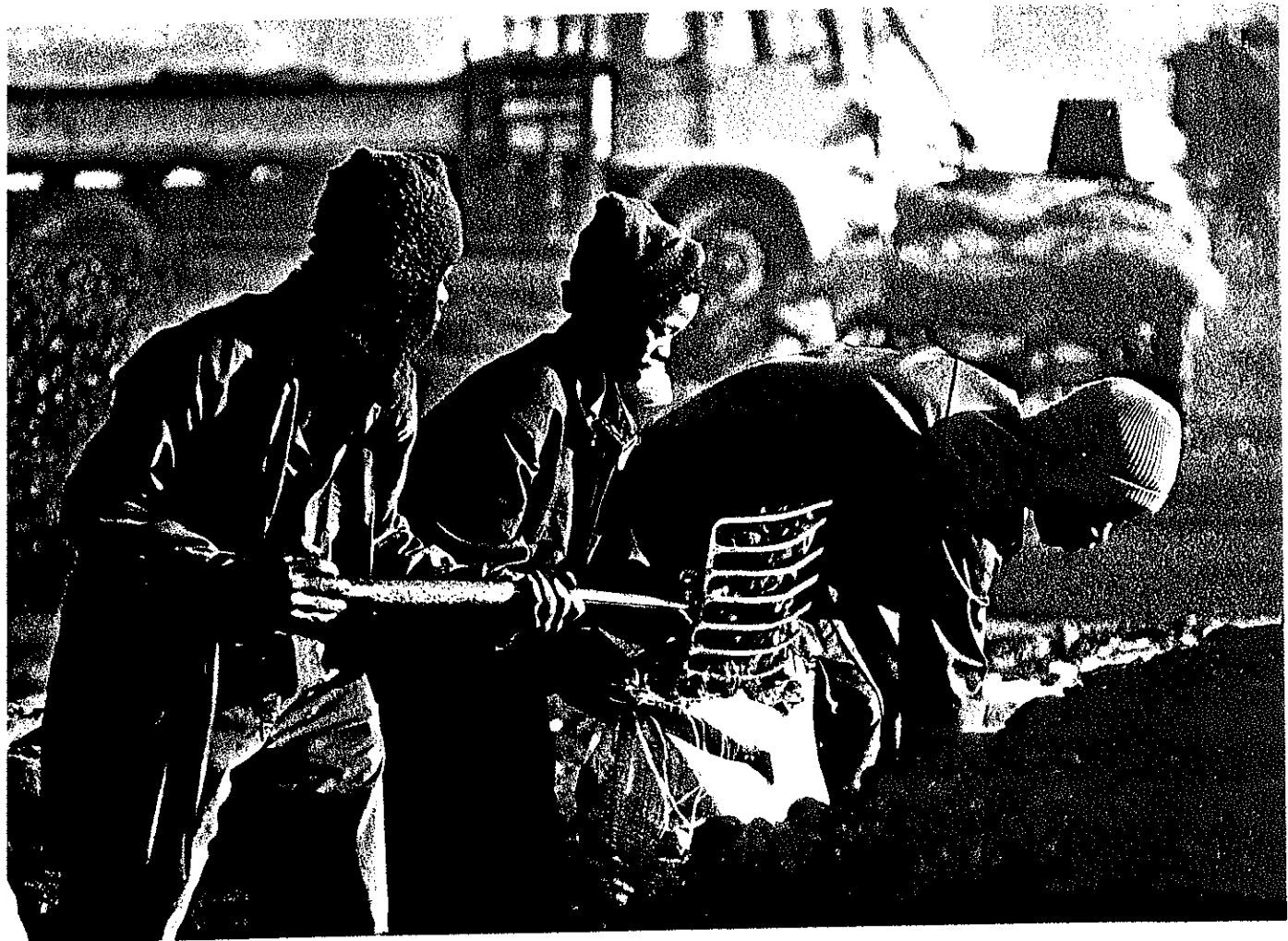
"Nail's out" is all he can say, resigned to limping around the coalyard today while the others are out "rounding" (selling). He's a clever child, says his grandmother with whom he lives – this deepening her disappointment at his refusal to go to school.

The boys are out on the streets by 7 am. Tsidiso and Sipiwe are a practised team, at 14 each having two years' experience behind them. Tsidiso drives, a lean, tall, elegant child whose ridiculously short overalls fail to compromise his grace. Sipiwe, small for his age like most other coalboys, sits among silvery sacks of coal in the back, his face sweaty and smudged, spitting.

"*Malahla*" (coal) rings through the drowsiness of the

(Opposite) Nyoni bows under a bag of coal. His horse waits patiently to make the next delivery.

(Below) Pitchfork blues: Pat shovels coal to fill the bags – his friends help with the daily chore.



township, summoning an occasional customer, still in night-clothes, onto a front patch of dirt supporting a few cabbages.

Business is slow when summer approaches, and people need coal just for cooking, not heat. Or the R6 for this week's single sack has not been set aside.

"This is terrible, these children in this business, but what can I do?" wonders a customer, Angeline. In her apricot robe, scuffs and maroon wool hat, she negotiates a sack of coal on credit. "I have R100 a week for seven children.

"I am just a customer to them, but I ask them, where are your parents? Why aren't you in school? And they just smile at me."

"*Asihambe*, let's go," the boys shout, and rumble along to



the next stop, past shacks and trash and chickens and children and walls scrawled with “Welcome to Beirut” and “ANC kills”.

At the next house, the horse Darwat – “it doesn’t mean anything,” Tsidiso says – grazes while the boys offload the coal. Tsidiso stands on the back, lowering a sack onto Sipiwe’s small frame; in a quick flip the sack moves from shoulders to head. Out of sight, the coal thunders into a bin.

“They can’t put their minds to the books; time is wasted,” observes the house’s owner, standing shirtless and barefoot in his driveway. “They say they don’t go to school because they worry about the police. But it isn’t right. They shouldn’t be doing this work.

(Opposite) An evening chill descends: Nyoni's place is with his charges.

(Below) Loaded up, Nyoni and a friend make their rounds down familiar roads.



“But, you see, parents here like having lots of children, but they can’t take care of them. They’re extra. Other kids feel sorry for them; we don’t hate them. We give them what we can give them, but we have nothing.”

“I’m big, I’m working,” is all Tsidiso says as he climbs back into the driver’s seat. Sipwe chucks a few blocks of coal at the cart’s wheels. Soon they are under way, and will be for another eight hours, six days, countless months.

Glue-sniffing gets them high, keeps them going through the days. The supply comes cheap – mostly from their own yardbosses.

Tonight they will return to the yard for white bread, mealie meal and coffee with lots of sugar, unless a passing visitor



takes them on an anticipated trip to Chicken Lickin'. "We're hungry, *baba*," they say, insisting the chicken must be had today.

Darwat's hooves clack; piles of garbage lie around the streets even though the strike by municipal workers is long over.

Almost a nostalgic image, boys, cart and horse clatter past suicidal taxis keeping today's frenzied pace, oblivious of a roadside sign: "Please drive carefully. We love our children."