

Jacqueline Lyons

## ARBITER OF TWILIGHT

The indoors lost its light long before the sky did. The dark inside seemed thorough—in another setting I would have flipped switches to summon watts. But there, *here* (Lesotho is so present it must always be *here*), when light drained from the house, I followed it. Outside, I thought I could see all there was to see: angles of bent weeds, striations of soil where rain had slid down my dirt yard in thin sheets, juniper berries glowing chalky-white. The last students to leave school half-trotted home, turning mid-stride to wave and yell, “Good-night! *Roballa hantle!*” Their teeth and uniform collars flashed white, flickered in the thinning light, then dimmed.

In the two lights of twilight, during vague, calm dusk, light and dark separated: oil and water. Golden light buoyed up: sunflower, olive; and purple dark swam the ground around tree trunks, pooling in ruts and crevices. No longer full day, not yet full night, dusk has a double nature. My eyes widened, dazzled by upper atmosphere pinks and oranges, while I stumbled over amorphous bumps on the earth. Looking far across the fields and paths, I saw bodies stop plodding and appear, like water bugs, to float and scoot, their feet merging with dark, their faces golden.

Lesotho made me—let me—adjust to dusk. Next time you’re at a gathering in late day, notice when people turn on lights. Or maybe the lights stay on all day, because you’re deep indoors. If you’re in public, forget it—the lights are on, or will come on at the sky’s first dimming. Shadows’ passage is ruined by streetlights; it can’t be helped. Before Lesotho, twilight was absorbed into day or night; time split into being able to see and not being able to see. In Lesotho, dusk constitutes its own time. Dusk, not night, is the end of the day. Evening doesn’t continue for four or five hours after dark: no telephones, televisions, movie theaters, clubs, or malls. What shops there are close at dusk, nothing but one-room *shebeens* (bars) open after dark, so most nights I sat on the still-warm stoop, watching the light in the sky.

Two shades, two moods. Orange spreads thickly over the setting sun, while the last rays cut loose in the east appear pink and lavender. Turn your face toward the color you like. I never felt homesick during those three years. I leaned into Lesotho and toward who I was there. Who was I? Someone who liked to watch night settle, now in a place where it was not only fine but common to sit with a neighbor when you had finished your work for the day, and stare for an hour or two.

January 1993. I arrived at Holy Cross Mission, a triangle of convent, high school, and church, at the tail end of dusk. Through the van window, I saw dirt and one row of trees lining the gravel road we crunched over. The engine worked to carry us up the hill and I was pressed into my seat by the incline and the oncoming night’s largesse, pressed on one side by the driver, Ntate Makhala, and by Sister Anna on the other. When we stopped, I squinted at my new home through the windshield. The darkness made it hard to see beyond where the headlights’ spray of light dropped off. Lean dogs milled around the edge of light. I was glad not to be the first to extend a leg from the van—too much like an offer. The dogs turned out to be a reason to fear dusk. They came on duty with sunset. You could pass by them in the day as they snoozed and lolled, but they growled as the sky grew dim and chased you after dark.

Not an auspicious introduction to my new home, yet it was my arrival, and I will always have arrived at twilight. It became the time of day during which I took account of myself; it was during the dusk-inspired suspension of activity that I lay across my bed, facing the lavender sky, and thought. Sometimes I made great plans, to travel in Botswana or write a book, and sometimes I sustained a wordless reflection. I tried to pay attention to what was happening before my eyes, thinking that if I could be aware of the subtle, moment-by-moment change, maybe I could train myself to see in the dark.

I was aware of my own twin/split status in Lesotho: more than a traveler but not a citizen, colleague but foreign, woman but not married, Sesotho-speaker but not Mosotho. It was a compliment as a foreigner to be called Mosotho. I received that compliment sometimes and was always surprised by how grateful I felt, how much I wanted it. This may sound overly simple: I wanted people to like me, because I liked them. When I wore a *tuku* (headscarf) or cooked *papa* (maize meal) or did a traditional *jaefa* (dance) that involved kneeling on the ground and gyrating the shoulders so vigorously as to shrug an entire waterfall over them, one of my Basotho friends would exclaim, “*Helang! You are a Mosotho!*” Hard to say when I stopped looking one way and started to look another.

The way I’d been installed at Holy Cross encouraged a double nature. The three teachers’ houses down the hill from school were duplexes: each small bedroom-bathroom-dining room-kitchen combination was a mirror image of what stood on the opposite side of the wall. ‘M’e Teresa, Mosotho ex-nun and current principal when I arrived, decided that the Canadians and I should share a duplex, the middle one. Because we were the only whites? It was the unspoken explanation. As it turned out, I became great friends with Barb and Peter. We would have become friends anywhere, but here our relationship was sped up, intensified. We provided for each other the function of cultural debriefing: the translation of what happened here into how we already understood human nature, and then the translation back again of how this meant we should behave.

Word of the day: *Twilight*. In the context of my students’ required reading from their British syllabus, this was the time of day when Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn readied themselves, groping for candles and coats, to take their last breaths in the light of day before diving under the hushed cover of darkness. This was the time when toads’ backs furred in the dim light, the coveted sugar sparkled in its glass pot, and Aunt Polly’s gray hairs floated like filaments, blazing thinly before flaring out. In the context of our own surroundings, this was when we leaned in closely as we talked, as if the dimming light affected our hearing, too, and we watched each other’s mouths, our brightening teeth. As the earth turned its back to the sun, the mostly unlit houses and buildings that hugged the ground during the day exhaled and withdrew into themselves. The gathering smoke from dinnertime wood and dung fires trapped the exiting light, and the illuminated smoke floated in ghostly lassos over the villages and hills.

This was the time of final clanging bells and hurried steps as herder and herded hooped it home. We separated from school or work and drifted toward different destinations. Away from the comfort of light and company, I’d eye people warily, wondering if I knew them or not, if I could trust them, and if I could assess the latter correctly even with the benefit of light. Sometimes I’d presume the best and extend the more formal, polite greeting. Other times, depending upon the slump of the shoulder, or eyes hidden beneath a hat, I’d use the more clipped, casual “*O kae?*” literally, “Where are you?” to be answered, “*Ke teng*” (“I’m here”). Attempting a street-smart greeting on a dim gravel path, I must have believed in the potential power of that exchange’s peculiar literalness to make those who spoke it reveal their essential nature.

*Twilight* seemed like an easy word, basic vocabulary. I’d chosen it partly on that fact and partly on whim—I liked its sound. My students, who accepted so many of the definitions I gave them as part of the necessary struggle toward mastering the many-exceptioned rules of English, pressed this one. “How is the light?” they asked me any time between 4 p.m. and 8 a.m. “Is it twilight now?” It wasn’t my concept, only my language, but I briefly became arbiter of twilight.

My students exclaimed, “‘M’e Jacque!” making large gestures. “Do you see this light?” as if they’d conjured it themselves, to prove they’d learned their vocabulary. “Is this not twilight?” Maybe they liked the sound of it, too, and created occasions to invoke its *t*’s and *i*’s. And because twilight lives in an indefinite time, no single contained moment or hour, changing its arrival and departure according to the turn of the earth, the essence of twilight became elusive, and we

chased it with discussion and definition. The word, and occasion, became part of our shared culture, an inside joke between me and 250 kids. Like chanting a word until it's reduced to meaningless sounds and the chanter reduced to helpless laughter, we so untiringly repeated *twilight* that when it did show up unexpectedly in our reading, it sounded loudly above the other words, making us titter. For the next three years, during the review session before every exam, some student asked, "Will we have to know *twilight*?"

I was born in the evening. What a confusion: pushed out of the dark, at night, but into a falsely and overly bright hospital room. Born in evening means that my mother's brief labor (I was a second child) happened during dusk. As my dark, soon-to-be-expelling-me surroundings contracted and dilated, outside the light was withdrawing and darkness spilling in. When I was growing up, my parents called me a "night owl"—which now strikes me as redundant—for my love of those later waking hours. In part, I liked night for its expansiveness—lines seemed less clearly drawn—as well as its focus. You had to work at seeing, at cutting a swath through the darkness. Twilight, then, was the magical transformation: changing of clothes, either to pajamas or evening wear; changing of rules, like leaving the parks and pools and playing closer to home; and changing of senses. Without light, sight gives up its reign and you sniff the air, drag your fingertips over increasingly textured surfaces, perk your ears and hear your way through the dark.

If I was in my house at dusk in Lesotho, cooking dinner or cleaning up after it, I'd wait to light a candle or to turn on the lightbulb (if there was current running through the house's old veins, which happened about half of the time). It pained me to turn on a light after swimming through dusk. I hated the change from saturated, diffuse blue to cold, white centralized electric light. Instead, I felt my way around as long as possible, switching to the rare awareness of what my body had memorized. I could dip a pitcher into a bucket of water, guessing at its fullness by its heft. Though I might miss a spot, I could sweep the floor, methodically raking the linoleum for dust and crumbs, leaving the rift of grayish brown treasure under the mat until morning, like the old women advised. What collected during the day might be protection for the night, and after dusk one should keep everything close.

I'd always thought of twilight as the end of the day, but when I looked up the definition for my students I was reminded that it describes the half-light at sunrise as well as at sunset. Twilight challenges the notion of a beginning and an end: early morning and early evening light appear the same. Conventional speech describes rather violent interruptions: day *breaks*, and night *falls*. But twilight repairs, knits together day and night, weaves their edges into an inseparable time and light.

A handful of times in my life—usually during extended travel or after the first sleep in a new house—I've woken up and not known where I was. The bed and room are always strange, and the light is always twilight. I don't know where I am, or when I am. Impossible to tell which "end" of day or night I occupy. Twilight may be made from heavy curtains against a full sun, or no curtains and a bright moon, or dark night and a lightbulb in the adjacent room, or a sun about to rise or set. But I don't know any of this. Suspended, I hold my breath. Without the scaffolding of day/night, I wonder who I am. Then a sense or memory is triggered, a synapse fires, and I'm back on the ground, grounded in time and place, naming the light as morning or night.

Twilight's split status means that along with its peaceful suspension, it also conveys an urgency. Dusk signals the time to hurry home. Once the sun touches the horizon, you can count your breaths and see the sun sink until it slips behind the earth's curve altogether. Why fear the end of full daylight? Night, in a country with little electricity, means no streetlights or yard lights, no bright squares of windows radiating a path for you to follow home. No romantic nocturne. Bad things happen at night, a murky time belonging to thieves, troublemakers, *thokolosi*, and worse. You wait out the night at home, inside, hopefully sleeping through it.

If I was out walking, not yet home and the fine light quickly sifting away, I sped up my steps. This triggered adrenaline, which felt like fear, and my heart would beat harder. My pulse pounded everywhere, in my face, stomach, hands, until the dimming light began to throb, too. Dusk is the last call, the warning bell, red lights flashing, the countdown, last sands rushing through the hourglass's thin waist.

What holds you safe in the daytime is that everyone sees. Your presence is affirmed with each person's passing and greeting, "Hello" and "How are you?" The full greeting that includes "Where from?" and "Where to?" gives you a past and a future. Once, on my way to the post office, I passed a student waiting for the bus. He decided to accompany me, but left his bag sitting on the side of the road. I wondered aloud if someone might steal it. "They can't," he explained, "they have all seen it's mine." But after dark, you and your possessions are on your own. No flashlight or candle can illuminate it all, no one light enough to return to full lightness. Your single beam or flame means only that whatever is coming for you can find you more easily. Even if there's no danger, your false light shrinks your pupils, and when they aim into the much bigger dark, they're constricted and lost, too tiny to find what light there is.

In October 1993, the students of Holy Cross High School went on strike. Student strikes are not uncommon in Lesotho; strikes are students' one recourse. When the chanting, stone throwing and window breaking began, I, along with two Ghanaian teachers and a fleeing nun, escaped with the Canadians, who had a van. They drove us all to the provincial house, nun headquarters, in our district of Mohale's Hoek. We waited for news, for instructions—stalling really—trying to decide what to do, what was safe.

Pre-dusk, with no real sense of what we were returning to, other than that the police had been summoned, we returned to our houses, pulling in slowly as if cruising infested waters. We stood looking up the hill toward school and heard a gunshot from that direction. A few students milled about in street clothes. The air was so charged it seemed that we'd spark if we bumped elbows or grazed the houses' brick walls or brushed the peeling bark of slim trees. Veteran teachers assured us that there would be no school tomorrow. Since it was possible that students, though angry with the administration, may not exempt the teachers in an after-dark rampage, our colleagues advised us to go, if we had somewhere to go. Our Basotho neighbors would stay in their home villages, up in the mountains or down the road; the Ugandans insisted they would remain and be fine; the Ghanaians had stayed back in Mohale's Hoek to take a bus to a friend's place in another district. I could go to the Peace Corps transit house in Maseru, the capital, about 150 kilometers away; the Canadians had their own version of the transit house. If I had lived there longer, would I have run? Now I can say no, because later I didn't run. But this was my first strike experience. Who knows what to do the first time you have to choose?

It was getting dark; we had to decide. Barb and Peter and I each packed a bag and left again. I had never been in a vehicle after dark in Lesotho: everyone advised against it. If you broke down, you were committed to sleeping in your wounded vehicle on the side of the road, dangerous if someone saw you stop. You couldn't phone anyone or hope for a patrol to find you. Heading somewhere on foot was dangerous, too, since you might not arrive at a good place. If you felt your way to a good place, the good villagers, long since asleep, would be afraid to meet you in the dark. The pressure of the falling night forced us to choose, to lock in or flee, and we fled, light dropping from the van windows like melting crystals of ice.

When I returned four days later, I found my house untouched, but there was a jagged hole in 'M'e Teresa's window, where one well-aimed rock entered her living room sometime during the night.

Before we learned this wasn't safe, the Canadians and I cultivated a twilight ritual. Sometime after dinner we opened our doors and wandered in and out to check the garden for ripe tomatoes, take in laundry from the clothesline, carry out the garbage, and start a fire in the rusted barrel. We

made coffee and then dragged kitchen chairs onto our shared dirt yard. Our dog, preferring the outdoors anyway, was glad to have us with him at this unexpected hour. I sat down and drew in the dust with my toes. I tipped my chair back at an angle and the unstoppered metal chair legs cut patterns in the dirt.

Difficult to remember that the moon only reflects. The first thing lit in early twilight, it cuts a clear sickle or almost *O* in the blue-black sky, its waxy light spreading over stones and metal, rubbing them until they gleam. The brick of our houses glowed as it spent the day's heat. The corrugated metal roof reflected an unexpectedly bright plane of silver. Our drought flowers' clenched buds and foreshortened stems looked less severely thwarted in the delicate light, which gave them fluffed shadows and dappled surfaces. The blunt-featured dog threw wolf-shadows, muscles rippling and fur gleaming.

Twilight makes for a different kind of conversation. Through shawls of dusk, our eyes widened, vision became a lazy swim, and we abandoned linearity. We watched the air, the float of light and dark particles between words and sounds. Time, like light, felt suspended—neither held to the demands of day, nor yet to the constraints of night. Many of our sentences began with “I was thinking . . .” or “Have you noticed . . .” or “I remember . . .” sometimes with long pauses before finishing the sentence, which was okay; we'd wait.

A main topic of our twilight talks concerned what we perceived as our ever-changing status of belonging. “I figured out that . . .” or “M'e Mabakoena told me . . .” or “So I went to town today and . . .” realizing that what we wanted to know would be revealed slowly, one speck of understanding at a time.

We floated, detoured, zigzagged, and figure-eighted, our glances trailing meteoric streaks of light. In the grainy half-light, electrons mingled visibly. The aura of milling light and dark blurred arms into wings; we waved and light trailed our skin. Grains of light clung to us, a fine sand, and our gestures burnished the air.

We lived completely in Lesotho during the day, but for a few hours most evenings we occupied the straddling space of talking *about* Lesotho—unless the dog barked at something rustling in the field, or we caught a whiff of dung smoke, or a neighbor passed by and wished us to sleep well, “*Roballa hantle!*” and then we were where we were.

Ask me a favor, or to answer a question I've avoided, and during twilight I'll probably comply, dreamily. Twilight favors the introvert; it cushions you from scrutinizing gazes, keeps some secret of your outline by graying and bluing you. You keep your angles, the direction of your own glance, your real colors to yourself. Twilight is contentment: we let go of one day and make hopeful projections for the next turn into full light. There, at my house at Holy Cross, there was nowhere to go at night anyway. Nothing needed, no one driving home, nowhere else I wanted to be.

During these twilight debriefings and stretches of silence, I watched the far-flung, late-day shadows elongate, thin to breaking, then suddenly disintegrate into barely perceptible shadows, no concentrated source of light to cast them, and creep slowly back to their shapes—shapes whose edges' clarity crumbled like sand beneath the incoming tide of darkness, smudging then sliding away. Could I see or only remember the swell of hills, furrowed field, rough gravel of road, and clean edges of my neighbors' houses (Ntate Makhakhe's, M'e Mathetso's, Ntate Lipholo's)? The tangled mop of eucalyptus branches from the tree in the gully, always leaning into the muddy side as if there were something it wanted there, appeared to finally reach it, give itself over, lie down for the night.

Twilight's watery light plays with perspective, interrupts depth perception, so that you reach past, or not far enough. I reached for a stone, and it was mine before I touched it, our shadows fuzzed and fused. Or it wasn't mine at all, my hand swimming shy of it in the silty dark.