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## The Art and Poetry of Andres Walter Oliphant

Andries Walter Oliphant

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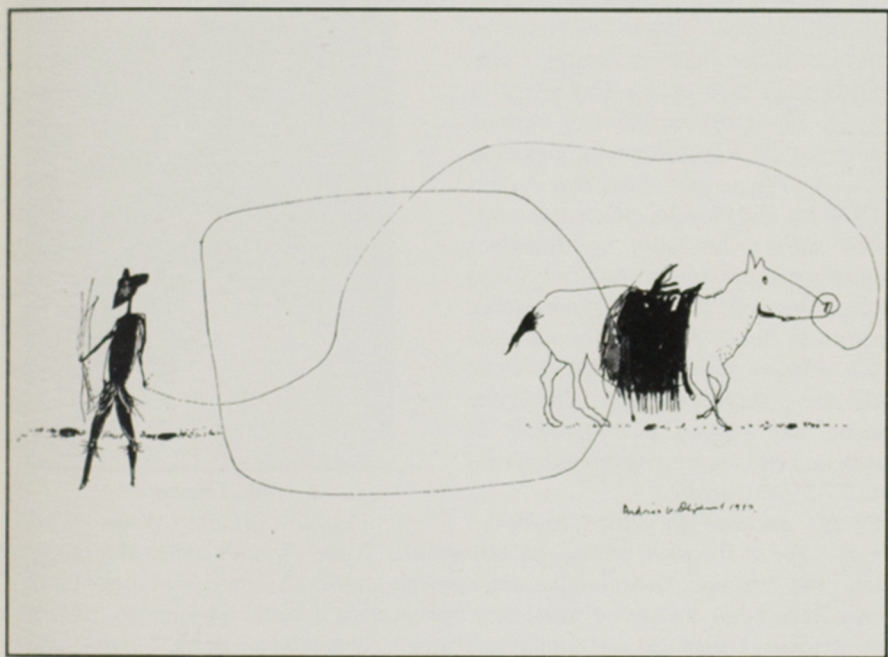
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# The Art & Poetry of



Andries Walter Oliphant

## *Between Cultures: Andries W. Oliphant South African Poet, Dramatist and Visual Artist*

Andries Oliphant, a black South African poet, dramatist and visual artist, returned to South Africa in December of 1986 after a year-and-a-half stay in Eugene, Oregon, where he used a Fulbright Scholarship to study Comparative Literature at the University of Oregon. He is the recipient of various awards for his dramatic works, including the Amstel Playwright of the Year Award in 1979 for *The Bicycle*, which was completed during his stay as Resident Playwright at the Space Theatre in Cape Town. One of the first professional theatres in South Africa to oppose the South African government's policies of social and cultural segregation, The Space Theatre has played a major role in developing and supporting contemporary South African theatre.

Of his decision to return to South Africa to live in Transkei, one of the "homelands" there, Andries writes in a recent letter, "Yes, it was quite an adjustment returning to South Africa. At times I think I must have been crazy to come back. Fortunately, I know the country; this is after all where I grew up, and with a bit of luck I will probably get by. My teaching [at the University of Transkei] has not been as rewarding as I had hoped. I have been offered the position of editor-with Ravan Press, which publishes the magazine *Staff Rider*, and I will be moving to Johannesburg in January [of 1988].

"Although I look forward to the opportunity of working with a large number of South African writers, I am a bit apprehensive of Johannesburg. I was born in that area but left it after high school. For the past 10 years I have been avoiding it. It is a harsh place, and as you know, it is also the crucible of apartheid. I plan to spend about two years on the magazine and then I will try to get abroad. Perhaps I will return to America for another study period. That is, if the powers that be permit it."

State censorship is a major obstacle for black writers and artists in South Africa. In 1976, during the time in which political activist Steven Biko was assassinated, Andries was involved in organizing a campus cultural week of plays, poetry and visual art at the University of Western Cape. As a result of the role he played in organizing this event, and the subsequent performances of his plays, the South African Security Police charged him with inciting "animosity between the races" and seized four of his one-act plays. These charges were eventually dropped, but



Andries Oliphant  
Photo by Elaine Weiss

only with the help of some progressive white South African writers. Andries says that most black South African writers learn, by necessity, a form of "self censorship," in which they conceal political messages by expressing them in universal terms—terms not likely to be understood by the Security Police.

Despite these serious problems with censorship, there are a few small publishing companies, such as Raven Press, which print indigenous literature. Staff Rider, a magazine published by this press, is named for the black youths who ride the overcrowded trains to the urban centers where they work. As Andries puts it, the publishing business in South Africa, like the ride, is a very precarious one. Andries sees his fellow black South Africans as the audience for his own poems, plays and "socially expressionistic" paintings, drawings and prints. "But," he adds, "culture is, by nature, something you share . . . with anyone that wants to relate to it."

Lee Evans

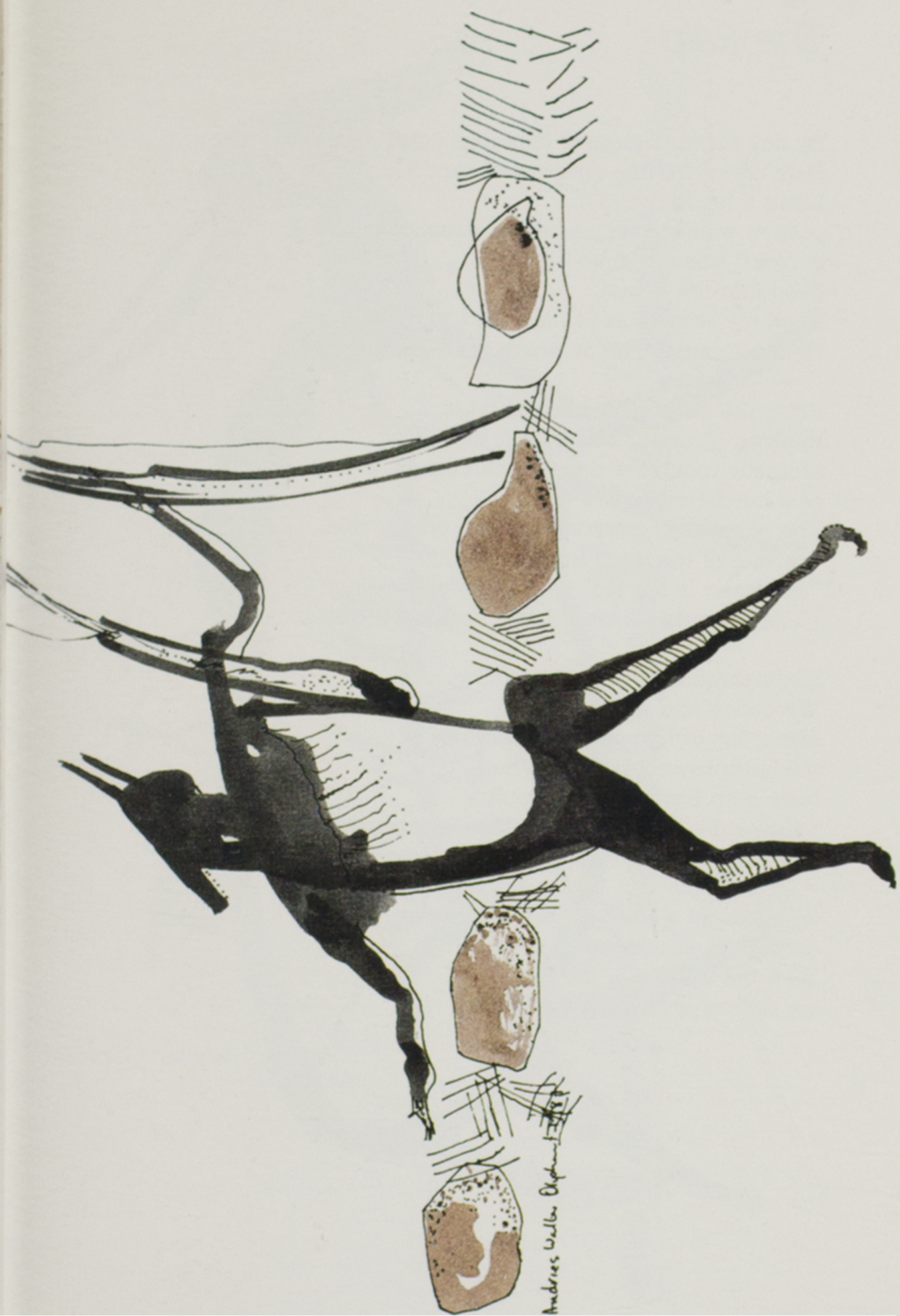
*Moist Bread*

I go across the whispering earth  
soaked in water from the blue beyond.  
I remember the banners of fire and the cruel flags.  
In the heart's dark funeral  
I go in the procession of the mad.  
How reticent I am  
to this communion of moist bread.

The hills are green buffaloes  
on the backs of which women go with the sky  
suspended from branches.  
On savannas  
the regiments of famine pause.  
How reticent I am  
to think starvation will be driven off the land.

It is claimed that a storm rages  
in the smallest stone.  
What omens are there in the sorrow of axes  
and the pale plumage of predatory birds?  
A circle is the road.  
How reticent am I  
to pack my bags and go.

*Andries Walter Oliphant*



## *The Raid*

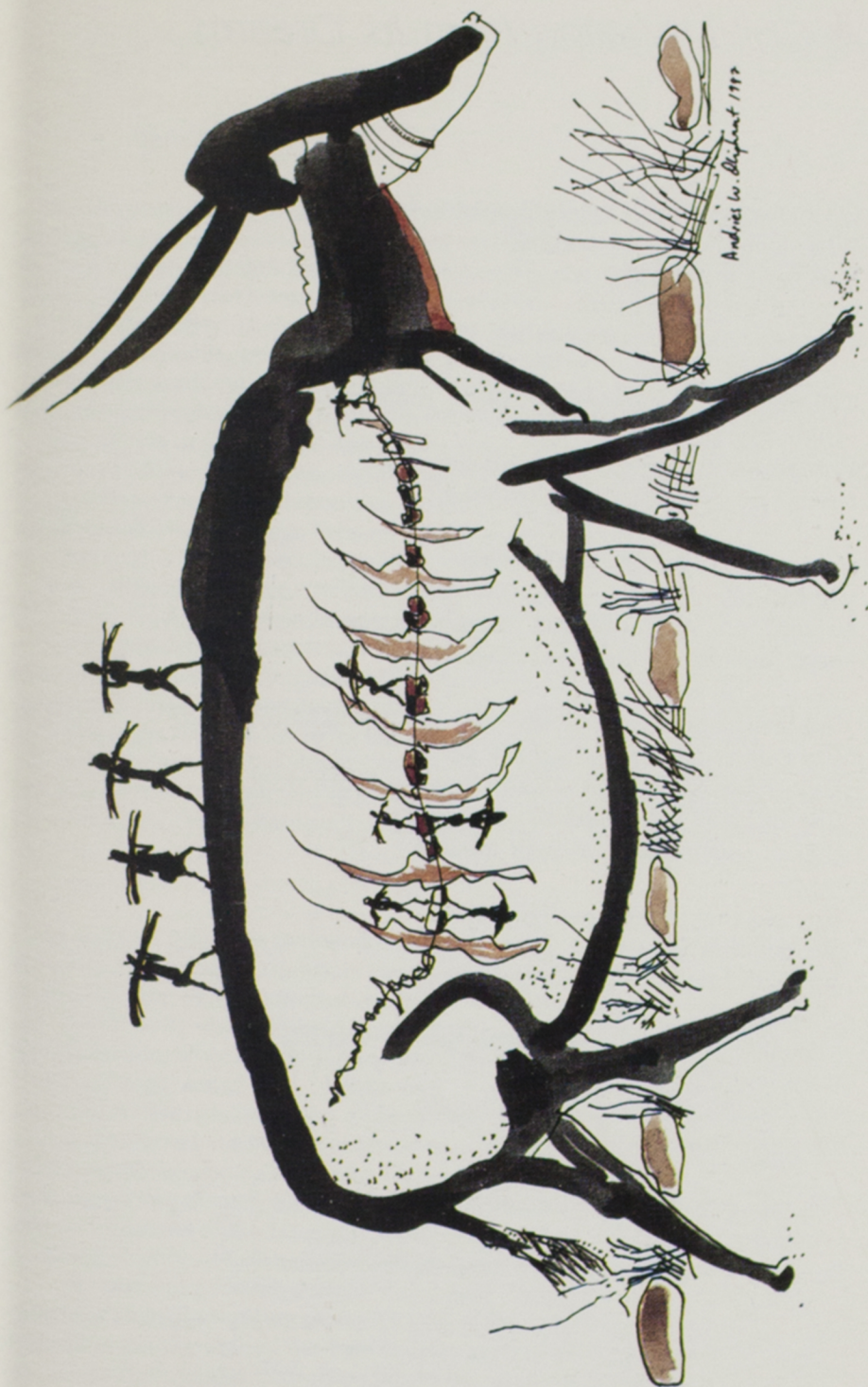
By day the landscape is luminous polychrome.  
Here rocks are fine particles of sand.  
I lead a horse  
packed with chunks of freshly slaughtered meat.  
A blood stained horse I lead  
deep into the desert.  
Look my shadow is as black as I.  
Here we camp. This is where we feast.

From the back of a stallion I take,  
thinking of cinnamon, ginger, and other  
aromatic roots, the dripping carcass  
of a butchered beast.  
The afternoon's green flies settle on my skin.  
We sing of trampled fences.  
The desert is the hide of an antelope extinct.  
I love this pristine land. I, the vegetable it eats.

Night shrouds us all in smoke.  
We dance and drink  
conscious of flames licking lustfully at  
the succulence of meat. When  
stars burn holes into the vault,  
I stroke my horse's scarlet mane and murmur:  
This bitter war of revanchism. I am out of season.

At midnight we will drive the cattle on,  
across the desert to our caves.  
With the waning of the moon  
we will come to execute the final raid.

*Andries Walter Oliphant*



Andries W. Blijm 1972



## *A Child Waking from Its Dreams*

*For Oswald Mtshali*

Oh mamma, why is the light shining in my eyes?  
 Why does the night tremble?  
 This revolting stench,  
 is it the smell of death?  
 Why am I shaking with terror?

Tell me, what happened last night, mamma.  
 I think I heard gunfire.  
 I dreamt of a man lying on the side walk.  
 I saw blood running from his head.

Mamma, why is the road running  
 through my sleep  
 so dark red. Why, mamma, does everyone I meet  
 seem touched by the hand of death?

And last night, mamma, why was our home surrounded?  
 Was I dreaming, or did I really see  
 men in strange clothes who kicked down our door?  
 Why did they burst into our bedroom  
 where I was sleeping at your breast?

Why did they poke their flashlights  
 into our faces?  
 Why did they drag us from our bed?

Through the glaring light I saw them scratching  
 in our cupboards. The man  
 with bloodshot eyes, why did he slit  
 my ragdoll open with his knife?

Tell me, mamma, was I dreaming, tell me?  
 Was I dreaming?  
 If so, tell me why do I have such terrible dreams?

*Andries Walter Oliphant*