Shootback Nairobi

Lana Wong ’91, who arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, with her British husband in 1996, cannot forget the smell of her first walk through Mathare, Nairobi’s largest and poorest slum: a “dense mingling of exhaust fumes, burning rubbish, sweat, sewage, and roasting corn,” as she writes in Shootback: Photos by Kids from the Nairobi Slums (Booth-Clibborn Editions, London, 1999). Wong, a fine-art photographer trained at both Harvard and London’s Royal College of Art (lanawong@yahoo.com), got Ford Foundation support to give $30 plastic cameras to 31 Mathare teenagers aged 12 to 17. The boys and girls, all players in a youth soccer league, had never held a camera. Each got one roll of film weekly, and on Saturday mornings the group critiqued their photographs with Wong. Their visually arresting, often heart-wrenching pictures are now on view in a traveling exhibition as well as in the book. Photographers have often documented the developing world, but as its name implies, the “Shootback” project turns the lens around. Many of these photographers live in one-room shacks near open sewers, without running water or electricity, on family incomes of about $1 per day. Yet their images are powerfully moving, and sometimes shimmer with beauty. Amid desperate conditions, they can be doggedly philosophical, as in one 17-year-old’s cartoon man, who speaks three words: “Laugh when alive.”

~Craig Lambert

Above: A view of Mathare in the wake of the torrential El Niño rains of 1997. Left: A youth with a glue bottle. “They sniff glue so that they cannot feel ashamed when they are begging for money.”—Serah Waithera, 15. Below: A man intoxicated on chang’aa sleeps on trash. Chang’aa is a cheap, sweet, and illegal brew made in Mathare, dangerous because its ingredients include contaminated water, mortuary preservatives, and washing detergents. “They know it is harmful to their body, but they ignore this and drink it anyway. And that’s why others sleep anywhere because they can’t move anymore.”—James Njuguna, 15, and Maureen Atieno, 15.

All photographs from the book
Left: “When you wake up in the morning the important thing to do first is to find out where are your shoes so that you can do the rest of your work. Why shoes are useful: when you walk without them your legs can get injured by anything dangerous like bones, thorns, and many others. So I will suggest that shoes are the most useful objects in our home.”—Serah Waithera, 15. Below: Lana Wong ‘91.

Above: Street boys searching in water for nails and waste metal. Above right: Soccer-playing boys, some in uniform, line up during team practice. The Mathare Youth Sports Association is Africa’s largest youth football league. Poor boys and girls, eager to “play their way out” of the slum, sometimes make soccer balls from plastic bags, waste paper, and string. Right: Rubbish being burned at roadside.