

Hearing Things

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by

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Abstract

William Carlos Williams wrote: "It isn't what the poet says that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of purpose that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity." I would like to think that my poems only borrow life from my pen, taking on an identity and music of their own with the help of some 'making' on my part. My poems embrace a continuum of human experience from the intrapersonal to the societal. Using imagistic and cinematic forms, they preserve the vitality of their sources, from the music of cityscapes, to the texture of emotions, to the narratives of particular characters.

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I

Corner of Ameshoff & Melle

You make me stop
Magwinya packets in my hands
on the street
I must look like I'm mad
but I can't keep on walking
my legs won't let me try

At first a glimmer of you appears
more like rustling
a whisper and a wind
winding down from top branches
swaying heavily pressed down
and under the homily of foliage
my rushing heart is converted

There is no smell in the air
no smell in that air
of that moment
no trace of sewerage stroompie
no burnt hair from a sidewalk salon
or chesanyama sizzle from a pool shop saloon

There is no memory
this is not déjà vu
and because I do not know
if again will find me here
tomorrow
finding you in Braamfontein
on the corner of Ameshoff & Melle

I breathe you in now
with both my boesman nostrils
I pull you deep
like BB twak through virgin lungs
and when I cough
a bit more of the old me dies

Flamingo Casino

crish crush

crish crush

Nailing these dress shoes

into gravel

metal detector

car keys

cell phone

wallet

crish crush

crish

A Mandoza song

bleeding from the jangled speaker system

backed by whirring slot machines

and flashing lights

a sight for bored eyes

out on this strip of raped land

straddling the N12 treasure route

crish crush

crish crush

Two cokes a burger

some slap chips for lovie

this flamingo don't have

more than one working speed point

a live band starts at 21:00

crish crush

crish

By the time I see the room again

lovie's doexing disnis

laptop open on the pedestal

Big Bang Theory playing season 3

So I wake her for chips

crish crush

crish crush

Push the two single beds together
lam in the crack
between them all night
and tomorrow after breakfast
we'll bury Aunty Valerie
then gooi out on Transvaal Road
until Potchefstroom's poephol shoots us out
like a warme drol
into the waiting arms of
Jo'burg's south
crish crush
crish

Mark Groenewaldt's brother

Midnight swerving into Reigerpark
off Rondebult Road from Springs' side
the GTI flying like bullets
bullets walking like legs
legs kicking like shot gun butts through doors
at Dogan headquarters
mercy has left these streets
in the cold vice grip of Terror
who'll go to sleep tonight
with one eye open
and jump soon as dawn disembowels the horizon

Mark "Terror" Groenewaldt's brother
waits to see his name in the paper
while the Dochs and Serpents lurk for revenge,
they will help Kerr's fill their next coffin
cause it's boxing day
and though it's summer
winter is about to set in
and everything
every thing
will freeze
to death
starting with the saliva
in the watering mouths of boys
on an early morning koe'sister run
who might have studied dentistry
or physics
or fatherhood one day
but will major in gangsterism
as they trip over Shelton's shin
sticking out of the long grass
and shout "Yeh, go sleep at home man!"

but Shelton Groenewaldt won't hear them
his stare will be dull and unflinching
like the lead pages
of the last magazine he'd ever read
he will just lie there
while Hope like an ant
crawls through his exit wounds
dropping its prized morsel
among the jagged foothills
of brain and bone

Corner Rivonia and West

A whirlwind of stairwells
thunderous peals of
closing doors
ringing bells
Wi-Fi log-ons
a slow lounge monsoon

The lightning of lobby lighting
belies each austere floor
hanging like a grey cloud
over weary heads

I evaporate up through the mezzanine
and the fresh clean
smell of newly washed earth
welcomes me
and offers to carry my bags

Streets of Eldoraigne

457 First Avenue Ennerdale
watched the last embers
of De Klerk's South Africa
smoulder at arm's length
petrol bombs
zinging klippe
Casspir tanks
No need for the Kruger Park
we had Hippos in the townships
swallowing freedom and fighters
ferrying them off
to undisclosed indecencies
sometimes teargas was the rain
sometimes thirsts were quenched by water cannons
at least that's what they tell me
(I was only born in '84)

We were family there in the 'Dale
Aunt Freda and her daughter Elaine and *her* daughter Lee
lived behind
and every Friday house bash
beats blasted till 4am
ripped the moon from the sky
taught us to sleep through raucous
gunshots sirens
Extension 9 drags
I was 10 before countless
careless Januaries saw
gunpowder and sulphur burn the sky
like hot liquor blazing in the chests
of middle-aged fathers

Only the grave was quieter
civilisation was Pizza Hut in Lenz
or Grasmere Plaza
or Chicken Licken by the Shoprite
so quiet you could phone the flying squad
and wait three hours
and forget why you phoned
and go home like it never happened

After '94
Dad's job laid us a pipeline into
Verwoerdburg's finest:
Rooihuiskraal
Wierdapark
Hennops Park
Raslouw and finally
Eldoraigue
where da boere showed up
in almost 2 minutes
scaling the back gate
sending seismic steps
like sledge-hammers into the soil
for a cat or something wat geroer het

And now, on these
streets of Eldoraigue
life is quiet too
not like Ennerdale
little moves here except the wagging tongues
and ubiquitous narcotics
like cars the prices of houses
on Old Johannesburg Road
where divorce is the poacher
and marriage the endangered species
and silly high-school children think
it's lank to be gangsters
with a bad rep

On my streets of Eldoraigue
the neighbours meet us
the day we're moving out
or the morning after burglars hit two houses down
a cocktail of affluence and bankruptcy
leads the souls of the feet
that venture these suburb gauntlets
with listless desperation
with bridled anger
and a Spar or some convenient promenade
on every other corner
and schools so near
with security estates and residential developments

sprung up fungal like mushroom invaders
financially loaded like tax-evaders

I grew up in Ennerdale
but now I am the shape of
these streets of Eldoraigue
everybody still goes through pain
except that over here
only God hears
only His eyes see or care to look
only His hands still hold them
after they've pulled up to their motorised gates
behind their anti-smash 'n grab windows
to go get mind-raped nightly by their DStv
and lock the doors
and wake up the next morning
to find I've done the same

On a hillside in Newlands

East

and the sun that rises from it
creep over the tops of the stones
standing silently
soldiers on attention

and I think to myself

as I ask Heaven's Lord
which of these mornings
will be the last to rise over
graves
on a hillside
in Newlands

Like this

My grandfather
had his tea like this
rooibos black two bags left in
the sun used to go down as he sipped
or come up or just
hang hot and heavy
in the middle of the sky

My grandmother
brought the family together
every January the 1st her birthday
the world would not exist
time would stand at the snacks table next to her
watching us live forever on the stoep
watermelon juice dripping from our mouths

My uncle died
slowly a little every day
to outlive his pain he had to be sober
so he made sure he never was
he found joy in cooking
emancipation in writing
and in his coffin, peace

Kempton Park Hospital

I am those empty hallways
scattered and strewn around
I am those pieces of paper paving the ground
I am that flickering theatre light
shorting out
shrouding old blood stains in darkness
I am stacked up and dusty
that room full of chairs
piled up to the ceiling
I am the overgrown parking lot
bushes big and small are my hair
pushing up through my concrete scalp
I am haunted and sinister at night
apparitions visit voyeurs violently
as their lusting eyes
draw them down my passages
I am the swinging refrigerator doors
in the desolate mortuary
where even death has deserted

The struggle years

Noordgesig and Oudtshoorn
of the mid to late '50s
waged war in the house
day and night
things were said
tempers flared
emotional Apartheid
was the order of the day

Normal was combat
constant combat
reconnaissance
counter-intelligence
more combat

Joy was the health inspector
or the census taker
coming always as a surprise

Other children were
wasting their lives playing
I was trying to get free

The family

The mother swabs their fresh wounds
and stacks them up in their archive of scars
before she checks the mirror for her own bruises
They sit in the house all day
They don't go to McDonalds or Milky Lane
for a lekker Saturday night treat
They don't go to Gold Reef to ride the Golden Loop
or watch the 4D show
They don't see the daylight

The son has decided to rescue them
he will run to the neighbours tomorrow

The world is busy getting old
all around outside
while inside with fists bloodied
and winded from beating
the father watches over

The house

The windows went first
Then came the cracks
creeping one by one
their insect army spreading
over the walls from the floor up
like a massive tattoo

Next the roof fell in slowly
I thought I was at Umhlanga
watching the tide come in
except the tide was mortar dust
and wave on wave of crumbling tiles
deepened the room

Just before we drowned
I grabbed your hand
made for the door

Outside just in time
we watched the rest of it collapse
and nothing hold it up any more

Notes on grieving

Morning will come
the sun will rise
birds will
hold their spring eisteddfod
leaves will brown
trees will go bare
your hair will grey
and one day you too
will know
where I've gone

Do one thing at a time
make the bed
mow the lawn
check the mail
read the mail
read it again
open the fridge
water
fruit
air

The men on the street

What street is this
outside the window
the one with Legit at its corner
that catches the laboured breaths of
passing workers on lunch?

There's a man in a purple hoodie
with a beard to warm his chin

There's another man passing behind him
in a khaki pair of chinos
bending like a piece of wire
to check how the ground
looks on his shoes

Now there's another man
crossing the path where earlier
the man in chinos passed
behind the man in purple
This man all in black and spectacles
paces silently through the gate
flanked by luscious gardens

And now two men the size of boys
bounce along with the verve of boys
lunch bags dangling
a few meters left of where
the all in black man crossed the path of
chino man who passed behind
purple man who puts his cigarette in an early grave
so the last minute of break time
can chaperone him back to his desk

From behind the thick plate glass of the lunch room
I asked each of them
what the name of this street was
but none of them knew
All they know is it takes their best years
and gives them money in return

||

Hearing things

Hearing things is a tricky business
you hear them only once
and if you're willing to listen
you must decide right away
if you're going to write them down now
or trust your memory
to recall them later
because even if you recapture the words
you will never hear the music again

Hearing things is for obedient scribes
because you have to write down
only what you hear
you must not throw in extra stuff
to embellish the things
you must not try to be smart
because unless they stand alone on the page
unwilling to exist outside their own skins
they will only sound like a poem

Things can sound like violent peals of thunder
or like the whisper of Karoo skies at evening
things never book a convenient time
they don't check if you're awake yet
or if you've brushed your teeth
or had a chance to get to the shops
they do not wait until
you have your notepad ready
Things make their sound just
whenever they please
and if you hear them
you must give them all your time
until they are finished with you
for now

The singer

I do not sing to hear my voice
I sing to lose myself
on the wind the music makes

they say I must be happy
they can't imagine why else I would sing

when I sing
lightness enters their realms
on the hairy back of each uncoached note

but I force the music out
I sing to grab at the light

The quiet

I've lived many places
travelled not only roads
down to the coast
passed through ghost towns
that were not haunted
before or after I passed through

I've given my tired head shelter at many addresses
soothed it with knowledge at various schools
I have lived in the hostile stench
of torn up pictures
no frame could hold together

I've had my private parts invaded
violated, caught while launching
bludgeoned to submission
those close, only true parts

I've heard resilience thank
the mercy of the heavens
that it could walk away
dragging hope by the hand
finally done with me

I've spent many moments everywhere
but these are my first in the quiet

Winter dawning

Overhead the bending wind
forces browning leaves
from grieving trees
into their graves on the street

Everything is dying
summer's pretty fleeting things
are gaunt and half-grown

The daisies are a requiem
for their former selves
The jasmine bush has hidden
all but a few of its fragrant white trumpets

Against the pre-cast fence
a fern takes shelter
under a low-growing conifer-looking thing
which bears no signs of dying

The lonely

They make a sound
a visible aching sound
they holler into chasms
waiting for an echo

They are tired
a special kind of haggard
whose jangled tune
only the rejected know to sing

They stare at themselves
in the mirror of passing faces
stare like a blowtorch stares
at a locked steel gate

In the stillness that always follows
they spatter their guts
in a pattern of half-digested bits
where I make out the picture of my face

The crow

He's watching
a balustrade seats him
hunched over scouting
for the bodies of the dead
the few with eyes fresh enough
for plucking out

His feather jacket
shimmers burnished iron
his shoulders shimmy
to the beat of
a carrion feast

Why does he fly away
from the balustrade
and back
away
and back
away
back

His eyes are lasers
his neck a jack-hammer
stewing in his shrewdness
and he's watching
watching me

The power

I was a thing, a creature
patience, understanding –
such things were for humans

I was bruised and later
bloody and tear-dimmed
and later hard and barnacled
sharpened on razor-tipped words

Rage had four chambers
an aorta and a carotid
beating in my chest
pumping brokenness
for nourishment

The power was on
the pump was working
but the lights
the lights were off

Work

It crept up behind me
I panned my gaze to try to catch it
but it was faster than my neck muscles
it moved like it was hurrying somewhere

It was green in its feet
it drained the heat from the room
its shadow put out the lights

It didn't try to talk to me
it just wanted me to know it was near

It was green in its black trousers and blue shirt
its yellow and blue striped tie
green down to its white underclothes
and black leather slip-ons

Too scared to follow
I decided to get back to work
and when I reached my desk
it was waiting in my chair

These days

I am finding myself (these days)
herded to the corner
of Sandton and load shedding

Thick traffic fights
to burn out its tracks
amid the swelling frenzy
of cranes and cement trucks
and crews whose calloused palms
bring buildings to life

I am searching for a shelf
where I can leave this book of anxiety
and watch it gather dust
and never pull it down to read

Blue bird on a stone eagle

I was alone on Melville Street
where Atholhurst, Inanda and Illovo
melt into a vortex of late people
in tired cars

I sang myself along
at the speed of a stroll
the treetops were yellow metal
hoisting loads of concrete
and the crane arms were green foliage
swaying to the wind's beat

I stabbed my gaze into the sky
at the bend toward St David's Marist
when a small blue bird on a stone eagle
pulled me back to earth

It flew away while I agonised
about whether to take a photo
and took my worries with it

Pigeons on a roof

They sat on the apex
two or three meters apart
taking a morning bath
in the sunlight
then one flew away
maybe she was clean enough
I didn't know why

the other sat a bit longer
his feathers already wrinkling
from his bath
sparrows passed
weavers no doubt
everyone was up and about
but he sat there
I wonder what for

in the few minutes I had left
I watched him hunker down
refusing to move
waiting for another wash
he must've really liked getting clean
but I didn't know why

Dance of the amoebas

People are single cells
 walking around
from their desks to the canteen
from their private hells to the church house
from boredom to the malls

They envelope themselves
around the objects of their nourishment
who are themselves single cells
 commuting daily
between home and the happiness outside it

They feed other single cells
 who look to them
for nourishment
a warm bed
a safe embrace

Every day a world of single cells
 bears down
on earth's bald head
some are the glint in her dying eyes
others are the cancer that's killing her

The cut

went deep
climbed down the stairs
of his epidermis
into the basement of his veins
it kept moving
without remorse
did not stop
until it had severed
his neck from his head
it put him away from himself
so that his eyes
could look at themselves
thinking only cursed eyes
could view such horror

Relieve

I've been finding relieve
in the strangest places
corners of old USB drives
where the grit settles
like dirt under fingernails

in quiet cul de sacs
where houses beg buyers to ignore
murderous servitudes on their shoulders
and the R59 at their backs

between rounds of laughter
where throat-caught pauses like buckets
catch the drops falling
from misery's leaky ceiling

Traffic

At rush hour
I can leave Standard Bank
at the bottom of Simmonds Street
and make it to Klipriver by the Virgin Active
in 10 minutes

in Sandton I would have spent 10 minutes
just getting out of the parking garage
then 15 to move five hundred metres

my mind was busy then
in Sandton
like the N3 just before Heidelberg
as you come in from a long weekend to Margate
thoughts packed bumper to bumper
flavouring the atmosphere with emissions

the roads are quiet now
I don't even switch on the radio
to pump my riding tunes
I just put down the window
let the cool air guide me
knowing home
has never been this close

I cannot see the days

I walked away from them
yet not far enough
that they can't claw still at me
even today

their hammer hands beat me
right up against the gates of hell
I saw souls grey
like winter morning weather
they were being force-fed
the sour porridge of brokenness
they looked like me

pain was punctual then
like a bank teller
or a teacher
they crushed my song

they stole the parts of me
where truth had lived
but I can't see them any more
I cannot see the days

The crack of dawn

The sun is a plumber
one of those carpenters
or electricians you call out
to quote on a new kitchen
or to rewire the fish tank

bent over or crouching
at his toolbox
his taut beltline
presses a slit
of light into the room

as it touches the skin of
my mind
not one aching inch
escapes its healing reach

Falling apart

No-one is there to catch you
you must do it by yourself
and you must not make a mess
you must be placid as a lake

Your life is a boat
and no-one wants to know
that you are sailing on a rough sea

No-one wants to be the one
to sew you back together
at all times
you must appear to be perfectly whole

You don't even want to be there for yourself –
it's easier to walk away into the night
the night that sounds
more like the inside of a drum
the further from home you go

Coming home

Riding into the sunrise
morning wakes me up
as if from duty
too tired to write
I recline in its warmth
to let it write me

a thin line of orange
bleeds into the sky
where God has stuck in His can opener
to dump a tin of light on our heads

it wants to ride home with me
to watch morning
pen its next stanza
it wants to help me with my bags
when I get off at Park Station
and greet the sunshine of my wife

Shaking the shadow bush

They are all drummed together
huddled in a tight pack
thinking they can live this way
but I must disturb them
I will have to

They must scatter now
while it is not yet night
perhaps they'll put up a fight
who knows or perhaps
they'll just die of thirst
out here in this hot dry arena
I must make them scatter it seems
I cannot escape the task

They have been gentle to me over the years
at times they dressed my wounds
dripped medicine into my soul
but they have caused more harm than good
and now they must go
to make way for the fragile plant of love

I am the one who must tell them to leave
no-one else has been asked

Making headway

It will be like the Outeniqua pass on a rainy night
in a rickety one-eyed Datsun
with more or less working brakes
It will be like that at first

Until morning finds you
peering over the dashboard
as your opening eyelids
scoop in the first glint of day