Part A: Thesis

a sea is brewing

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Sibongakonke Mama

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of poems that draws on the complexity of not belonging in places, with people, or within families. I engage my own alienation as well as that of my parents, black people generally, and women in particular. I take inspiration from Uruguayan poet Fabián Severo's autobiographical long poem, *Night in the North*, which chronicles the poet's experience of growing up in linguistic and cultural borderlands. I am also influenced by Chilean poet Carmen García's ability to move between the concrete and the abstract in translations of her poems from the collection *Gotas sobre loza fría*. As much as my poems traverse a metaphysical space, they are also set in concrete places – Tutura, Gcuwa, Johannesburg, and Cape Town. Like Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña's *Spit Temple*, I move between the physical and spiritual realms for a better understanding of my estrangement. I also draw on South African poet Mangaliso Buzani's book, *a naked bone*, for its fluid combination of line and prose poetry. I write in isiXhosa and English as a reflection of my mixed cultural and linguistic existence. I seek to harness rhythm and harmony, as well as the quiet, between words.

Contents

Maybe

When your father disappears
and your mother fades away
and your breath –

maybe children
will hide planets
in your heart,

when snow colonises your tongue
a lake will swell in your gut,
your voice will drink dark flowers
and when they sprout
from your ribs

when your father doesn't return
and your mother forgets to –

when all the homes are taken
and your spine lays bare,
close your throat,

falling beads will call from the street
singing your granny's arms.

She'll wash the longing off your feet
in liquorice root and elderflower
and call your lost laugh with blackberry baths.
Dreams will give you a purple sunset
under aisles of orange trees

and when your bones break when your song comes on and your veins burst when your heart shrinks and a bomb ticks in your ear and your brain forgets –

a wind will nest you.

Or maybe
you'll fall –

and a wind will burn
when a lover comes too close
water will burn, like rocks in your shoulders

When your grandfather
gifts you a white blanket
and your granny unozitholana,
and you make yourself
a green and white noose

a stone in my throat

My mickey mouse towel
I've had for 15 years
has a hood
I want it to hang proud
wherever I am

her cheekbones
and the corners of her eyes
carry too much
of yesterday's heaviness

my mickey mouse towel
makes a stone in my throat

for the first time my mother looks free
away from me in her eyes
plump dreams
tiptoe to the centre
the taste of possibility
makes a small fire

my mother
hands in her pockets
her short hair - we started
our dreadlocks together
head tilted to the right
a shy, tired smile

she is guilty of wanting
a full smile away
her breaking children

I want to tell her
a smile is also humble
joy is responsible
letting go is resilient

I want to tell her
to stay there
with the towel
a warm bowl
of self
in a storm of empty

haunt your gods

this lesson came from that sky and those roads. not the sky with the animals and dancers. not the roads littered with yesterday and just now. this lesson came from another sky. the one singing a blue that won't leave children alone. like a bitter stepmother. it came from the roads with mango and litchi trees holding dirty secrets in their bellies.

bother your gods for rain

wash your children in peace. without tears within tears. pray for roads that lead to shebeens. names like Xilinxa and Skiet so you can hear them when they come. english words hide things. they smile with the front and grind you with the back. tell your gods. to give you gravel and potholes. rocks and cow shit and goats and broken glass.

haunt your gods

until they give rain. cover your children. blue skies pierce through school walls. blue skies hear the secrets between best friends. take no less than clouds. keep your children against your breast. cover all the children and their tears. take no less than clouds. betray the smile of blue-sky swings.

flood the houses, burn the pools, the en suites, the guest rooms, the gardens. burn the churches and hear the secrets god keeps under the wishes of children. find a servants' quarters find a shack find a bachelor flat find a hut.

flood the quiet roads with light. tell your gods to write you on a rainy day. before they come. blue skies can hear secrets between best friends. tell your gods. to tell you. before they strike. tell them. to tell you. where the tall woman will hit. write your own letters. tell them there's bread and tea under the bed. tell them on which road the rot is hidden. put lights where the mangoes are. show your gods where it's sore. beg your gods for wind. carry your seeds across borders, shield your children's spines. blow where it burns.

when your gods give you sunshine and beautiful roads, run

in the sunshine good adventists also want to show some skin. when there's no rain, when the roads are clean, little girls hear the wails of a blessed and favoured woman. beg your gods for thunder and lightning and wind and rain. little girls become men when the sky's blue stares like that and the ground listens so carefully. men who can't stay. who won't stay. little girls become women who don't know their place. they read too much. perfect roads and clear skies pummel and pummel and pummel and pummel and pummel and pummel questions on the small shells of girls who talk too much. beg your gods for thunder and lightning and wind and rain.

people don't believe little girls on a beautiful day.

to fight

see another darkness. parents underneath ears. hold tears with breath. open quietly. don’t spill in the toilet. stutter. hold tears with bath water. stutter. caress him. carry him. stutter. don’t hold him too tight. don’t cry. run from a tall woman’s voice. help him. stutter. help him. suffocate in his tears. bleed. ndifun’umama. hold tears with breath. be mama. mama’s coming. i’m also a child. don’t let her hear. bathe him in tears. dress him in tears. a brave four-year-old. mama. wait for mama.

i am always eight

there's a way my mother's voice
scratches the walls,
that –
no matter how old i am
scrapes the skin off my ears
and i hear
my great grandmother's dying
and her father's silence
beating, inside
        i am always eight

Go there

do not go to the romance
of fresh cow dung and fat sunrises
at your doorstep walk

through silence and find her
right against your arm. and stay
and stay.

another way is to swim
in betrayal.
overstay.

fall into tears
and crumbling walls.
black.

and small.
like the dignity of a homeless woman
run

towards potbellied smiles
and gap-toothed eyes
run

into the soft and wet
of well-meaning shit-cooking.

the wide-mouthed pink of sparberry
and the close-eyed fizz of tinkies.

like the empty and towering of the jungle.
sit a little.
steal roses

and peaches
and apples and oranges
bake chocolate cake

and go to jimmy mngwandi
and take your clothes

off
inside the empty
and make a fire.

Kowenu

i leave too soon

arrive too late

all I know is burnt books

homes that just stop

kowenu is a –

other place

a slur

i’ve been here three decades

all i have is dead people

adjusting their bones in my head

Portrait of Gcuwa

I.

There were factories eGcuwa – one made my school uniform. There were good schools. And dancing competitions at the town hall. People went out in the evenings and listened to choristers. There was a river running under the bridge. A bridge to a street where a mad man danced in white. There was a railway along the river. The Phelophepha train stopped just below our flats. There was also a dam. A road with one bicycle. There was a pool. My father taught children how to swim there. Somewhere in an old album – a photo of kids hanging off him in a pool. There was a house always waiting like an open mouth – a woman rehearsing “no”. There used to be water.

II.

Sometimes my father walked home from town with children that were homeless. I forget their names. I only remember eating lunch with them. Hunting Hollyburn Flats for cardboard boxes. We ran with them to the back of the flats. Took turns sliding down a grassy hill. I wished they would remember how much we laughed. I hoped the sunshine, the hill, laughing made them forget. But a few months ago I was walking past a smiling house at sunset when something closed my ears like stunted flowers. Another day, a friend and I were laughing at our lives over a meal in a busy restaurant and homelessness came to sit quietly next to me.

28 Hollyburn Flats

I grew up on top of a hill with marbles, bicycles and boys, my fists and my mouth. I watched Indian movies on SABC 3 and made myself saris with bed sheets. I pressed against Mrs Thamburaj's third eye with my thumb and transferred the red dot to my forehead. She said it was called a bottu. I climbed fences and trees, and stole flowers for my mom's aunt from a house with dogs and bougainvilleas in extension seven. Sindile and I made up Afrikaans words to talk to each other like Leazonia's family at number 8. Leazonia's mother sold fudge namalophisi nomwangalala, she pulled Leazonia's eyes shut when she was combing her hair. I ran. Sindile taught me to play three sisters nobhadi nodushe. I played cricket, sometimes tennis, with the Pakistani men from number 26. They called me bhuti. Every other weekend my aunty Faye had a big dead fish next to uncle Hector's car tools on her dining table next to the lounge with a double bed mattress in the middle. I panted my way through the jollof aunt Leah made for me and Kobina. My lunchbox had a jam sandwich, a polony sandwich, a triangle of Melrose my mother snuck in, and provitas with marmite that year I had to live with Mrs Burger. I didn't have dresses. When I wrote I tried to make my fingers fat like Mrs Leppan's. I hit a tennis ball against the wall near number 24 when I thought the boy there had finished his homework – I didn't knock, his mother was very Indian. I knocked on Yvonne's door every other day to play Tetris on her TV Game, her mother was very Ghanaian Christian. I tiptoed through the cigar smoke at number 7 to feel what it was like to be in the middle of the Cubans' laughter, to watch how they moved their tongues when they spoke their language and hear up close the sounds it made.

Venus and Serena

Before she died, my grandmother worked at Johnson & Johnson. Our family always had toiletries. So when the diaspora dined on white tears in 1998, Hlumisa and I were playing tennis with our hands and roll-on deodorant balls on my grandmother's stoep in NU 15.

Getting ready

This morning in the shower I was wearing my school bag. The water was the back of Ms Mbeki's duster on my fingertips in winter. I set down the soap like my Top Achiever trophy. Like the marbles I'd seized from love-sick boys. My life orientation egg.

Tender kumquats hid in my chest. The tiles were a new blazer at a new school. I found a gold star and a sticker. Ms Lebenya's lazy smile. Pinky-Pinky peeped and I showed him a zap sign. My hair made Qaqamba's handwriting on the floor.

The drain clogged and threw up gold-inked cursive letters. It sounded like a gift I was ashamed to want. Like the back of my head hearing my father's footsteps. My nimble body and my mother's legs. The little kid running up and down our ceiling. Our quiet street. Me my brother my mother in her bed.

Change

The first time I tried

I asked my mother to change

my surname to my father’s

and nothing changed

A wind

I’m a wind that neither spread

good seeds nor ate

homes but I remember –

their house numbers my blood

remembers their laughter especially

when I hear a 90s groove

with a torn name

from the caves
of his tongue
i –

inhaled
your names
all after
noon –

trying to sew

young grass, cloudless sky
and slow sunrise
back
into your bones.

at night –
i released
your names –

Only women

murmurs buzzing behind a wall. a dark room coloured with smoke. only women. the youngest legs stretched out on the floor. chewing on the left. dishes and pots clanking on the right. noses sniffle. cupboard hinges squeak, a cursive voice looking for beer. uzawutsh'utyebe, a vintage voice, a rod. an old smoked voice going and coming back. we want cows. they won't come. ask for money to fix this home. a barefoot voice. a smiling voice. a sea is brewing and no man can hear.

when i became myself

mam’bhele’s daughter came home wet. he grabbed her by the vagina in the middle of the road. and he raped a church elder. she was praying for him. mam’bhele’s son dragged me into the forest and shoved a bottle inside me. mam’bhele’s son said it’s me who cries at the court when they catch him. i am a mother. i was praying this afternoon. he threatened to knife a small boy. and he asked the small boy. and he laughed. and he asked him. if the small boy remembered him with the small boy’s sister. and he laughed. and i called mam’bhele’s son. and i asked mam’bhele’s son to take my son’s heart so i can bury him.

two suitcases

the body in two

suitcases in his apartment

stuffed inside the cupboard

Nosicelo’s head, hands fight

inside his room

gloves clean a hand saw

a chopped up body

roaming the street

cheating

his family did not send that boy

under a bathtub

Noluvuyo lays a caregiver

for bathers

in Zingqayi

who search and leave

her dismembered body opens

the village losing a path

home comes reeling saying

it has been robbed

under a bathtub, home remains

heavy

three toilets

a toilet stopped
the village sun
Propser Chipungare
returned home
through excrement
and dirt
a shovel
a hammer
a skull
and bones
missing the money
his home
a room possessed
by her ugly
answers in pieces
waiting
a spirit in three toilets

gathered in wombs

no woman left her house

and every woman left her father's eyes
every woman left her mother's hands

and wombs gathered,
watching

yesterday one of my favourite women passed away. sunbathing on her veranda. she tripped and fell. too hard a fall for a 92-year-old. i was relieved that she didn’t die like other grandmothers – begging a boy’s raging homelessness for forgiveness.

Falling on a Sunday

Imthande found his mother

blessed one

searching for the lord

on Facebook

residents repeatedly requested

fix the broken

fell

overflowing loss

sent out its poor

water to fix the broken children

hearing children die

in this city little

brothers age

protecting a home

another child fallen

each month broken

stolen, left

no scrap value

removed

condemned

Khayelitsha is a problem

They must also be killed

Matlhomola
with a broken
father and mother
loaded with sunflowers
cut his throat

the back of his neck
sparked blood
in his mouth
and killed two people

he jumped out of the bakkie
he fell off the bakkie
torching three houses
three trucks
a church

two farmers dumped him
two farmers found him
two farmers left

he does not eat sunflower seeds

when they came

softer than the preying hands of women.
white stretches over long fingers,
and whites out a million killings with its peace,
white is wider than fields
of grapes and oranges and sunflowers
and grapes and oranges and sunflowers.
white is deeper than black
in the belly of the earth and out shines
gold and diamond and platinum
and gold and diamond and platinum,
and white whites out an ocean dark with skin
and lulls the blood and breath
raging beneath.
and europeans –
when they came
peeled the skin off the night sky.

In The Blue of Your Heaven

I am bones and air.
I have grated my breasts,
served my brain to wasps,
and chewed my teeth
for an uninterrupted smile
when he said qi qu xo ca
for Sibongakonke
I cut
every bowel loose,

and made a long brown
necklace, for an oppenheimer

I made every one
a dress, from my nails,
shat out my spine,
scrubbed noord streets clean
with my vagina, cried
every water out of me,
tore this black skin
and hanged from it
on that bridge that belongs
to van staden
I wrote
this on a tar road
with the points of my ribs
for white people to leave us alone.

Uyangcolisa

You enter me in the mouth

with your muddy feet

you stand on my tongue

eat my words

and close my voice.

uyangcolisa.

this i don’t know how to tell you

without my tongue

Nom'ungang'bulala ngek'uwathol'amandl'ami[1]

I've tried to do things like a lady – close my legs and cover my mouth when my body uses me – but fuck – if that man doesn't see my throat open – my breath coming back and coming back and coming back – if he doesn't hear the countries – histories – of women I start with my pelvis when I laugh – he won't know that nom'ungang'bulala ngek'uwathol'amandl'aaaami – he won't learn to fear my whole body – my feet galloping into white ears the sun shining in them – she is stretching my mouth like legs at labour – so the people in my blood can get some air – ushering a visitor into my tongue – with some brandy, grass and sea – an old man left in my voice – my stomach is belching a drum pattern to show me everywhere is mine – the old man is dancing – everywhere is my voice.

[1] Named after a line in Busi Mhlongo's song, *Ukuthula*.

a blood is burning in my stomach

i am scared
i will forget to wake
a blood is burning
in my stomach
and no spirit can catch it
in my ears
i cannot run fast enough
on the same spot
i almost wake
from men who
want to drown me
every refuge
kicks me in my uterus
i don’t remember
what the old man said
i am afraid of waking
again, i will be
a loud mistake
here

a place i can’t reach

this loneliness in my hips .
won’t sit still

it drinks my bones
hollow

i am bloated
with echoes
of a place,
people
i can’t reach
a self

wherever i go
foreign waters
settle in my bones.

i swallowed something

i swallowed something
that tastes like a wound I had

under the palm of my foot
something that sounds

no room no food just noise
now my intestines wring each other

like towels drenched
in water

like my mother's mother
things march on my pelvis

something heavy like
tired arms

tired breasts
tired eyes

tired breath
fixing petrol bombs and tyres

now my gut is boiling a river
and plant and red earth and

long crossings
before I can run

a word
jolts out of my mouth

then another
and another

and another
and another

and a liquid sentence says
it has come

Teeth Brushing War

I've seen black boys playing test cricket in the spaces between my teeth. Once, they each wore part of my tongue. Every day they hide their brittle dreams in it. I've found dead girls lounging in a cave of a tooth, waiting for Bebopers and Bikoists, Willy Wonkas and weirdos. When I brush my teeth, dead girls get everything they want - a messy bed just like in a movie hotel scene, with music bouncing off the window, falling onto the linen and into the cave. The dead girls have learned to stay, the threat of life is always looming. Every other tooth keeps a bit of history. When I brush my teeth happy girls sit on my uvula and scream. I found one wiping the smile off my teeth out of spite. There's a group that always makes chocolate milk – a trauma response.

My gum bleeds when my brush sweeps my ancestors away. I always think of people with gingivitis and halitosis when that happens. Are their ancestors causing a scene, so that nobody comes near them? A protest? Are their ancestors refusing to die?

When I brush harder the happy girls' screams disappear and get louder at the same time. For years I've been trying to find that one whose voice sounds like my mother’s. She hides well, and the water doesn't seem to faze her. One day, I brushed so hard I saw the black cricket boys surfing on my breath for survival. Today a few of them were on my tongue testing their spin. They bowled so long, or I brushed so hard, they became white. The happy girls found the dead girl's cave under a molar and colonised her. They ate her with their happiness. When they came back from their feast, they drowned in a sea of white.

my belly

i am almost a woman,
but this dark in my belly.
makes stones that can't build a home.
these stones. they don't know
how to come and go in silence.
their cold is loud like aunties' eyes.
children have been warned
against bellies like mine.

i am almost a pear,
but my tender parts.
the juices in my tender parts
taste like falling buildings
and raging voices.

i am almost a woman,
but my arms.
they are made of shovels.
can't play with every woman's child.
can't cushion men.
these arms. this belly.
can only hold stones.

they are gone

and i don’t want to sleep
in my dreams
i am left out of my past
no matter how many times
i die
at the side of a dry river
inside of an anthill
my grandfather is forgetting me

The sea

The sea comes yesterday to live inside me. Calves come to bathe errant children. The children say the sea makes their mouths delicious. Their voices sound like the raspy songs of ageless women. The sea offers me a drink, and a breeze to brush the spine off me when things get heavy.

I’m making umqombothi

my body is busy

i can’t borrow it

it’s in the field gathering lives

it is in wombs

of grandmothers and grandmothers

gathering fight and laughter

it is sitting

in ears and noses

of grandfathers and grandfathers

listening to the hairs and the empty

it is chasing possessed blood

and running skin

it has gone home

to talk to the river –

will ta’mkhulu say Bayethe Mzukulwana?

zolisa needs an axe

fiki needs a storm

tata needs to laugh

i am looking for a sound

my body is busy –

Emanzini

My grandfather is sitting in the water, waiting for me to talk. He's been waiting for decades, I've only been here for three. He won't open his mouth.

He harasses my water.

Says he won't grow until I talk to him. How much growing can a 100-year-old do? He says I won't use my hands. My feet won't move. Says I will remain naked until I talk to him. He holds me by my father's feet. He occupies me like land.

:::

The other day I went to a park where the water sang. It said it had come to fetch me. But I was told many years ago never to enter a river. But I love the water. Once I had the gall to swim in the ocean. I saw a sea horse and star fish. I felt at home. I knew I couldn't stay.

My hands breathed like water does. I saw dolphins and whales under the water, and two flip-flops floating on the surface. I saw a shooting star. There were massive maternal trees, and someone gave me a bowl from a kitchen window.

Izilimela

There’s a house burning in my ears

drums menacing

whistles wailing like dismothered women

voices charging under water every winter.

They won’t stop until I go.

Leave of absence application

Date absent:

andizilawuli

Reason for absence:

her beauty is longer than her body needs a home a
chest, her house is drowning her children inside a
wound blood heals music in the water we are quiet
witnesses, listening and obeying one word finds a
place to belong

Details of coursework missed:

god before her sleep gave her flowers and
songs, healing futures made for family names
she forgot to write down under graves
howling for a song, bodies ears tongues to lull
sad men speak their words through heavy feet

Address at Rhodes:

she comes and goes as she pleases
the water begging swallows to come
close and hear the water making
paths for small feet that fill old
shoes to remember we are gods old
children even in drowning houses,
making mountains pulsating long
names that trouble the ground

Application supported by:

water cows and cloud crossing the ocean, swallows wide-
winged cover the river under the soil, and homes of black
blood, mountains, dry under a sun carrying heavy names
and long deeds don’t die

Xhentsa

I come from myself –

beat the ground with my feet

singing

ebusuku andilali ndizingelwa zizilo

mama asks where I learned to do that

beat the ground with my feet

I didn't learn I just know

And now I've twisted my ankle –

Did you do that to remind mama she comes from you?

it is me

before i began reasoning i knew
my mother played with me
in her childhood
we picked guavas
and the ends of our hair
were golded by the same sun that
she hid maSinyanya's wallet in
my chest stretched my mouth
when she smiled
it is me
in the polaroid picture
of my grandfather's wedding
i am the flower girl
my eyes
my mouth
my forehead
my nose
i don't know what time
i began

*

my body carries tears for my mother

the tear under my left breast –

for things her mother said to her –

bleeds sometimes when I look at her

this perfect song

for Mandy

and it seems she hid it there
with trinkets from dead dreams
to be remembered on days like this
and now this song tastes familiar
in my sleep

before she left
she put her voice in my right breast
and she sings

or maybe

she put her voice in my womb
because there's a sea in my pelvis
cleaning, folding, hushing –

i cannot move without her blessing

my breath wants to know

i want to stand on your feet and listen
to where they go

bring your ear a blink from my mouth
and feel my breath leave

let me smear my arm against yours
and hear your blood

rest your head on my pelvis like a black cloud
and improvise a story

sit right here
watch my hair

my words are missing from me
here language is not mine

blood for my voice

i am loving you
i am loving you
with sun
and clouded breath
i am loving you
waiting in your eyes
in forgetting,
removing
with heavy arms
i am loving you
alone
i am loving you
remembering
in a sip
in a song
beneath exiled cries
i am loving you
i am

this death
dances blood
for my voice
to get to the water

Part B: Portfolio

a sea is brewing

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Table of contents

Introduction

This portfolio is a collection of writing that speaks to who I am as a writer, as well as the various texts, seminars and conversations that have influenced my thesis over the past ten months. It starts with my poetics about writing and is then followed by a reflective section on my writing, its key influences and development, my approach to feedback and editing the thesis, as well as the process of writing book reviews. This is followed by four book reviews and, lastly, a reflection on a series of writing workshops I attended.

Poetics Essay: Listening for writing

It seems I do not like talking about writing and reading a lot. It feels too foolish to wax lyrical about these things – as if to claim that I know what I am doing, whereas I am only doing that which I *can* do. I have very little control over anything when reading and writing. It is like when my late grandmother tells me what to do or walks me to my car; or when my late grandfather tells me how to heal my uncle. It is a difficult thing to explain. But reading the writings of Lu Ji, Amina Cain, Mxolisi Nyezwa, Jackie Wang, Marina Tsvetaeva, George Quasha, Federico Garcia Lorca, Bell Hooks, Cristina Rivera Garza, Vincente Huidobro and others has made me realise that writing about writing might possibly help me understand (better) what I am doing. All I know, for now, is that I move between worlds – unconscious and conscious, the physical/material and another world I do not (yet) have a name for. Maybe I am Huidobro's poet; "¾ innate personality plus ¼ acquired personality" (2020:51). This essay is written towards the endeavour of *trying* to understand this movement between wor(l)ds – how I arrive at these wor(l)ds. It is also written towards the endeavour of adding to what writing means.

The body, breath, mind, and soul/spirit are good entry points into the movement between wor(l)ds. After all, these entities are all we have to experience and witness our existence. It is no wonder, then, that in *The Art of Writing*, Lu Ji speaks about closing his eyes, hearing nothing, and searching everywhere in "interior space"; ideas that coalesce; drinking "the wine of words"; chewing "flowers from the six classics"; and swimming "freely in the celestial river" (1996:n.p.). What Ji describes is not unrelated to Gary Snyder's sentiments about language being biological (1996:n.p.); Cain's "slowness in literature" (2015:30); things choosing Tsvetaeva by "the mark of my power" (2010:173); or George Quasha's axial drawing "perform(ing) itself" (2019:62). So, what are they talking about?

They are talking about a way of listening for writing. It is a way of writing through listening to the wor(l)ds of our blood, breath and minds, the "interior spaces" and "celestial rivers" of our bodies and spirits. It is a listening to the energies of these wor(l)ds, and where they take one to. This means listening to one's biological language, as referred to by Snyder (1996:n.p.) – biological because it is that which is already happening to/in us. This kind of listening means to surrender into going into these wor(l)ds without question – what Tsvetaeva refers to when she writes "…having given in – sometimes seeingly sometimes blindly – I would obey, seek out with my ear some assigned aural lesson" (2010:173). A writer goes there because s/he/they trust(s) the energies that have travelled to transport her/him/them to those wor(l)ds just as Cain starts from "an open place and trust[s] that the elements that need to be in the story will find their way" (2015:31). *I* go there also because my choice, opinion and my puny knowledge are hardly a dust particle in importance, just as an axial drawing has "little directly to do" with Quasha, how he feels, his mood or "emotional set" (2019:63). The listening wor(l)d – this way of arriving at writing – is not about the writer; what is important is what has come to the writer to take her/him/them to where s/he/they must go. What is important are the words to which the writer is being taken. *This* is why we are here, *this* is what we have come to honour. The writer is subject and object to the work; hers/his/theirs is to be owned and presided over. This is what serves the writing; to be as nothing of an entity as possible.

By stripping ourselves of everything but what has come to take us to wor(l)ds, we get what speaks to me most in writing and reading; slowness, stillness, quiet. This is found in works like Mxolisi Nyezwa's "I cannot think of all the pains", Karen Press's "Heart's Hunger", Marina Tsvetaeva's "Poems for Blok"; in

the writings of Vincente Aleixandre and Miguel Hernandez, as well as in those of a host of classical Chinese poets which include Lu Ji, Li Bai, Tu Fu and Chu Shu Chen. I adore slowness, stillness and quiet in the spirit of a piece of writing because of the kinds of things, images, worlds, feelings it asks the reader to imagine and/or not imagine. It allows more considered, if not more visceral, meaning-making for reader and writer precisely because of the space it creates (on both ends) for listening to something other than ourselves. Yet, this other-than-ourselves thing we are listening to is quite possibly *in* ourselves. Cain explains beautifully what happens (2015:30):

> *(When I write) I follow the mind of the text I'm working on, which makes it hard for me to connect to the idea that literature/fiction should or shouldn't do anything*.

As such, in slow and quiet writing, all that we are concerned with – as readers and writers – is that which we come to literature for: the splendour of language in all its forms.

Listening requires Cain not to think "especially about accessibility or audience" and accept her inability to control the accessibility of her work. Dare I say; in my listening *I* have very little desire to control "accessibility" to my work, and the extent to which I think about audience is limited. Again, I move between unconscious and conscious, the physical/material and another world I do not (yet) have a name for. As such, I care and do not care about accessibility and audience. I strongly disagree with Jackie Wang's consideration of "forms that might be legible to an-other" (2013:325). The listening wor(l)d is for writers like Nyezwa's Maskandi artist who "doesn't seek to make peace with the world" and "doesn't aim to please anyone" (2015:3). Yes, there is a need for the energy of knowing that, as a writer, one is communing/conversing with something that exists. But this "something" is not necessarily a reader or an audience – it is more likely an energy itself. Like Quasha's axial drawing, this kind of writer's writing happens with or without a reader; "it is not essentially altered by being done publically" (2019:63). This, however, must not be equated with a complete disregard or disrespect of the reader and/or audience. The reader is respected as much as the writer respects her/himself/themselves; enough to be honest to both and be absolutely clear that – though both may be vehicles or conduits – the process of writing and what it births is not about either one.

But at the same time, colonisation as well as racist, sexist, classist and patriarchal capitalism have politicised our lives immensely. So I am, or have to be, pulled to a conscious/physical world where I am aware of audience, and advocate for the existence of Hooks's critical fiction writer concerned with "using languages in ways that open up a text to multiple audiences" (1991:56). But the existence of this writer described by Hooks needs to be related to Craig Santos Perez's questioning of the (kind of) access certain people have to their "native [presents], pasts and futures" (2015:254); and Tim Seibles's prompt to consider a writer's voice being representative of different kinds of communities (2019:n.p.). I advocate for the existence of this kind of critical fiction writer, in myself and other writers, because of the many ways in which colonisation and a racist, sexist, classist, patriarchal capitalism – and the realities they have engendered – continue to exist. Hooks writes (1991:54):

> *The production of terror, unmediated dread, in the minds and hearts of the exploited and oppressed, binds us to a politics of domination, keeps us in place, unable to resist. On all levels, confronting this dread, breaking its hold on our lives, is a joyous gesture of resistance*.

This confrontation and resistance need to happen in all areas of life where the exploited and oppressed find themselves, and (especially) where they are marginalised and excluded. Literature is not exempt.

Like Hooks, I believe in the power of literature in helping one to "overcome the estrangement that domination breeds between psyche and self" (1991:54); and that "in oppressive settings the ability to construct images imaginatively of a reality not present to the sense or perceived may be the only means to hope" (1991:55). So – as much as the work is not about me or the reader – it is not honest or free if it speaks in an exotic, stereotypical, anomalistic, caricaturistic and simplistic way about the lives of Africans, women, LGBTIQ+ people, differently-abled, rural, black people, and those of us who struggle and suffer. It is important to have writing that speaks to these groups, and their lives, as lived by them – as a norm. While a consequence of this kind of writing is an undoing of privilege and its accessories, this is not the focus here. The fundamental principle is that of writing a life from its own gaze – as commonplace, a norm – with all its nuances and complexities. The real concern is doing away with othering, marginalisation and alienation. Doing so means, thus, rightfully assuming – and taking for granted that a reader knows (that there is) – a world where there is nuanced and complex African, woman, LGBTIQ+, differently-abled, rural and black living. This is why it is important for those belonging to these groups to write as they speak and live, to write life and the places they live in and where they come from as they are. As Njabulo Ndebele has argued (2006), literature gives more justice and empathy to these lives when the work is grounded in the everyday and not (only) in the spectacular. In the same breath, it is important for the people belonging to these groups to rage against explanation when doing this writing.

Do not give reasons why the character's father calls her Tshawe instead of her name Sibongakonke. Do not explain what Centane looks like or why it looks like that. Do not say how many kilometers separate Lusikisiki from Durban. Mix isiXhosa, English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Arabic, seTswana, French and Spanish, if you want to, without batting an eyelid. Do not italicise isiXhosa words, do not provide pronunciations either, and do not translate them. As Velimir Khlebnikov writes; "…the magic in a word remains magic even if it is not understood, and loses none of its power" (1985:153). And, here, I would like to point out that translation is also explanation. If you have assumed a world in which people like you exist, and the existence of readers who live in and/or know this world, why translate the work or certain words? Why add English translations in brackets? At the very least, we should assume readers who *want* to know a different world and are willing to do their part of the labour towards that. Have you not been explaining yourself your whole life? Are you not tired? The only explanation necessary is that which serves the work. Also, think of yourself somewhat as Huidobro's creationist (2020). You are creating the existence of <u>your</u> worlds, places, languages, characters, experiences, rituals, histories, presents, futures and ethe in literature. Of course, one must bear in mind that explaining and translating – or choosing not to or how one chooses to do so – have access implications for (other) marginalised groups. And, as Perez says, "access is power" (2015:257).

My position above is not to be misconstrued with ideas of literature that is anything "enough". I am not demanding literature that is anything "enough" or literature that is "genuinely" anything; e.g. literature that is "African enough" or that which does not "perform Africa", as Taiye Selasi says NoViolet Bulawayo was once accused of doing (2019:49). I do not even know what makes something "African enough". To be

frank, and possibly premature in my expression, I am not concerned with these standards of being something "enough" – which are usually informed by a racist, sexist, classist, patriarchal and capitalist gaze. Whenever I write – even about things (regarded) African, woman, LGBTIQ+, differently-abled, rural and black – I am not wanting to be those things "enough" nor am I "performing" those things. I am merely writing about life and experiences I know. I am, in Linh Dinh's language (2010:252), being as "peculiarly" me as I can be. The experiences of these lives are not homogenous – one experience cannot be invalid simply because it is not the same as another. To be concerned with writing that is anything "enough" is to be coopted into a project of domination that propagates a caricaturistic understanding of marginalised groups. A project that, for example, might claim that "true" literature of marginalised groups is about struggle. Whereas love, beauty, desire, fun are also things that marginalised people, like all other humans, are capable of experiencing; and they *have* experienced them. Marginalised writers and readers deserve to write and read about these themes (too). They deserve to (be able to) imagine and see love, beauty, nature, desire and fun in their pasts, presents and futures. Writing about these themes from a marginalised perspective is as revolutionary as writing candidly about oppression and survival; or writing critical fiction as described by Hooks (1991) in *Narratives of Struggle*. Writing about these themes from a marginalised perspective can also be thought of as creationism. Through and in literature, such writers are creating and validating the existence – and/or at least the possibility – of love, beauty, desire and fun within the contexts of marginalised people. But I must clarify that this creationist understanding of literature and marginalised people is less concerned with centring the writer, and more concerned with honesty. To borrow from Huidobro: "the only thing that should interest poets[writers] is 'the act of creation'" (2020:40), but only insofar as listening honestly to that which needs creation, existence, is concerned; and conveying it, representing it, honestly.

As a proponent of the ideology that writing is a result of listening to one's biology, I am not sold on the idea that the things a creationist's writing makes real do not exist, that a creationist's writing "creates" them. These images, situations, worlds and concepts *do* exist in the wor(l)d (and) somewhere in us. We (writers) do not *create* them. We *find* them when we listen honestly for them, and they exist (become real) *in literature* through our honest conveyance of what we hear, see and feel in the listening wor(l)d. This is why these allegedly non-existent images, situations, worlds and concepts stir so much in a variety of readers and "acquire international proportions" (2020:49). They are "accessible to all peoples and races just as much as painting, music or sculpture" (ibid.), even though they have never physically seen some of them, because they exist somewhere in us. Putting this differently, Khlebnikov writes (1985:153):

> *The speech of higher intelligence, even when not understandable, falls like seed into the fertile soil of the soul and only much later, in mysterious ways, does it bring forth its shoots.*

For example, even those of us who know absolutely nothing about music-making lose our minds at a certain point in a bass solo. It is not that we are necessarily recognising some technical/writing element. We *know* that what that part of the music is saying, doing, is special. We know it in us as much as we do not know chords, keys, or arpeggios. This knowing we have of things we "do not know" was articulated so well by my friend, and pianist, Thandi Ntuli during a conversation we had about art-making, from a music and writing perspective (2021):

> *[The current] model of performance is actually alien to us. In the western classical setup composers were commissioned by monarchs to write whatever and perform. It was that thing of "entertain me", and now we live in a world that is governed by those values. The way we consume music now is very much like "entertain me". As much as we've been given that "entertain us" thing, our (South African) audiences are obviously still very much part of the performance. You'll be at Joy of Jazz and you'll see an uncle who stands up and starts dancing and people are shouting; you'll be at a club and you can almost feel someone breathing over you, or you can feel people's eyes on you or their energy just feels so close. I think that also resembles the fact that in the African context, art is for culture preservation, for storytelling, remembrance. So the elements of ourselves that are still in our DNA show up even if we live in this whitewashed world.*

Ntuli and I agree that musicians and writers – most, if not all, artists – are not creators of ideas or phenomena, but conveyors of these things that already live in (all of) us. Our "creational" role is only in the "physical" – literary and musical – existence of the thing. Yes, we are in charge when guarding against an "overgroomed poem", in the words of Lara Glenum (2010:253), for example. But even in that case, if we are committed to conveying things with honesty, we measure the "overgroomedness" of a poem against the sincerity of what we observed in the listening wor(l)d. For this reason Ntuli and I also agree that, as is the case for Cain (2015:30), it is very difficult for us to say "music and literature should do this", or "this is what I want to do with my music and literature". And so I am not in full agreement with the prescriptive nature of expressions such as Brian Evenson's that writing is "meant to disrupt the smooth surface of things" (2002:6), or Dinh's demand that "poetry should astound and frighten, not make you giggle for two seconds" (2010:252), or Nyezwa's assertion that "poetry that is not restless, that doesn't reflect the streets and the urban poor, poetry that has no time for rural settlements and the youth must be strung of air, and must suffocate" (2014:n.p.).

The art must, first and foremost, do what *it* wants to do. If we have writing/poetry produced from different people all over the world, and if this global and diverse writing/poetry is honest, some of it will, no doubt, do what Evenson, Dinh and Nyezwa want from poetry/writing. What the work, the writing, wants to do has very little to do with *my* opinions. I come to it with very little agency but that of surrendering to its will – the intention to let go of all my agency, and to listen with sincerity and convey what I heard with sincerity. This is one of the only two things I am "intending to do" when I write. Even so, I only "intend" to do this because it is all I know to do. I am doing only that which I know to do, only that which I *can* do. My body, brain, spirit, energy, breath and soul know nothing else but to surrender and listen to these wor(l)ds, and to convey what I hear. This is how I know to live – which is my second "intention" in writing – I do not have within me another choice. I write because that is how I find ease of breath, like Ntuli makes music because she *needs* to (2021):

> *I can feel that something is not in tune with me. Over the years I've always had this love-hate relationship with playing the piano. I remember in high school I'd have these moments where I didn't want to see a piano, I didn't want to hear music – nothing. And then I would feel that I'm not okay. When I played again I could feel that "whoo! That's what that was".*

Tsvetaeva describes this too (2010:173);

> *…obeying an unknown necessity, you set fire to a house or push your friend off a mountain-top…An act of yourself without conscience, yourself as nature.*

This is Lorca's duende (2007), or Simphiwe Nolutshungu's nkenkqe in Nyezwa (2015:4). Nyezwa rightly describes inkenkqe as a "strange force and inexplicable behaviour" (ibid.) and Lorca agrees, describing duende as "the spirit of the earth" (2007:1). Thus, for a writer driven by inkenkqe or the listening wor(l)d, to say one's writing "should do this" – or to claim to know the purpose of writing – is to be disingenuous and take ownership of what is not yours. Writing must do what it wants to do. Barring the knowledge of the fact that I am constantly struggling, searching for expression that is as honest as possible, I only know what I am doing after it is done. The most a writer driven by inkenkqe can honestly know about the purpose of a piece of writing, before it is written, is that the purpose is to come out.

It is this need – from inkenkqe and the writer – for something to *come out* that has me unable to divorce why I write (inkenkqe yam) from my ancestors. Lorca says (2007:2):

> *…duende has to be roused from the furthest habitations of the blood…we only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand.*

My mother asked a medium why I lock myself up in the dark for weeks, months even; why I cry and sleep so much. The medium told her that my great grandmother said I must use my voice; "its's all stuck here, in her chest, it must come out" (2021). After I stopped trying to be formally and permanently employed like everyone else and started this Masters in Creative Writing (MACW) degree, there came out of me an unbelievable amount and quality of things that I never knew or thought were in me. My classmates and teachers have often spoken to me as if I know what I am doing in my work, and I have always called my friends to laugh about this because I could not "know" less what I am doing. When I "knew" what I was doing, and formally and permanently employed as we are told we are supposed to, every single thing was a struggle, a fight. I was constantly angry and aggrieved. Now, with considerably less worldly value than I had before, I have never been as joyful, free, at home and alive as I am now. My psychologist looked at me one day and said, "you are thriving". Inkenkqe revels in struggle only with those unwilling, not ready, or unable to listen. How could I not agree with Nolutshungu's "explanation" of inkenkqe in Nyezwa (2015:4):

> *A power that lives in a person in a form of a spirit that is reflected through a person's actions and communication. If you do not have inkenkqe you can't make it as a musician or a poet, and duende or inkenkqe cannot be avoided or ignored, it must be embraced by the artist, who must let it take charge of his or her creative life.*

Just as inkenkqe more commonly bothers iimbongi zomthonyama when they are around people – as opposed to when they are alone – some are compelled to write publicly. There are artists who would be content with producing, and privately enjoying their art – I have been contently "writing for myself" since I was a child – but inkenkqe says "it must come out". We *must* share. So, dare I say, inkenkqe – **not** the artist who is its conduit – is concerned with self and community care. By virtue of being, in Tsvetaeva terms, "yourself without conscience, yourself as nature" (2010:173), inkenkqe makes you, and others, see

and hear yourself more meaningfully. By demanding to *come out* inkenkqe demands communing. In seeing and hearing you more meaningfully, others see and hear themselves and others more meaningfully. Is this not one of the most basic human needs; to be seen and heard, to connect?

Speaking of singing with a group of people, as opposed to singing alone, Ntuli says (2021):

> *Man, there's no feeling like it. You can't explain that feeling. When people are chanting, the thing that you're chanting brings a certain energy into a space. I think that's what happens when people sing together.*

Elsewhere, Wang says (2013:325):

> *For me, the art is always in what happens during the encounter, for writing is first and foremost ENERGY and CONNECTIVE TISSUE – a relation. It's not the textual objects but the bonds that matter.*

Garza makes my point(s), and then some, even better (2018:2):

> *Writing is a community-making practice. If we write, we write with others. Inescapably. If we write, we write about others, even when we write about ourselves in small diaries that remain hidden in locked drawers. Constantly borrowing from the language we share with entire and varied communities at once, when we write we acquire a debt – a real, material debt – with the practitioners of such languages. It's an immense debt. It is, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney argued in The Undercommons, a debt that is or will become unpayable. We cannot hide it or deny it. The only thing left to do is increase it. We should render it visible, in any case. Palpable. Far from notions of social responsibility – which are often depicted as optional decisions depending on the ideology of each author – the debt I am talking about here is both undeniable and inescapable.*

By drawing attention to the relation of writing with my ancestors and inkenkqe, thus community, I am unambiguously speaking to, and agreeing with, R.M. Berry's proclamation that "literary forms don't cause actions, literary forms are actions, but for that reason they can function as inescapably as fate" (2008:2). For me writing *is* hearing, seeing. It *is* love, desire, breathing. It *is* revolution. It *is* surviving life. By allowing me to be myself "without conscience, as nature", writing is *making* for myself a place to belong.

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Reflections on my writing

My thesis chronicles my ongoing journey in grappling with my unbelonging. I chose the title – *a sea is brewing* – and ordered the thesis as I have so as to gently carry this theme, as well as the yearning and movement in me and in my journey. This section offers slightly more detail on this, as it reflects on the choices and influences – artistic and intellectual – that informed the content and nature of the poems in my thesis. It engages the seminars I participated in and how they shaped my thinking, as well as the reading that inspired and informed my work. I have ordered my reflections around what emerged as my main stylistic approaches and the central themes of my work. I first focus on aspects of craft – including punctuation and language – and then move to thematic trajectories. My first theme is location – of myself, other people, and the poems themselves. I then move on to discuss the presence of quiet, and those texts that have influenced this, as well as the body and embodied writing, desire and short expression. Last, I speak to the role of feedback in shaping my thesis.

Language

The language in my thesis is specific to my body, the wor(l)ds it travels to, and its experiences thereof. This approach to language is also influenced by a Robert Creeley essay – titled "To Define" – that I read during MACW lecturer, Marike Beyers's seminar, *Wording the unworded*. In the essay Creeley writes:

> *A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader*

I try to steer away from speaking generally or using language and imagery that is burdened by general societal understandings of it; but I also go towards language that is practical. The focus of this pragmatics is not necessarily to be literal or plain, but to arrive at expression that is as closest to the feeling, energy, or thing being conveyed. MACW lecturer Nathan Trantraal's seminar, *How one should read a book*, and MACW lecturer Mxolisi Nyezwa's general teachings also drilled this into me. I try my best to live by Nyezwa's advice: "the language of poetry is simple, fundamental". I am pulled to certain words by the feel of them in my inner ear; on my tongue, teeth and lips, on my chest and breath; by the feel of the words on history and on my mind. Of course, similar to Kenneth Koch in *Making Your Own Days*, I am pulled to words by how they sound – especially in relation to the music of a poem.

Lydia Yuknavitch's *The Chronology of Water* has really motivated me to search for simplicity in language. The book is such a joyous reading experience because even though its language is loaded with intensity, emotion, and image, it is simple. The language is unpretentious, and this is what makes everything Yuknavitch is saying real – even if it were not, it would be thanks to the simple language. The simplicity of the language and/or expression also allows for the weight of things to be felt that much more. Yuknavitch writes:

> *…we do performance art in Eugene him naked on stage with a bloody pig's head me naked on stage wrapped in Saran Wrap we perform on stage we perform at school we perform life his long black hair my long blonde hair attractive dramatic people dramatically drinking we have our first yell fight me on one side of the bathroom door with a Swiss Army knife him on the other side of...*

In that litany of performances, she casually includes a loaded line, "we perform life", and this works so well. When the line sits amongst the many other things, it is so sincere, it is not necessarily asking to be profound – as it probably would were it a standalone sentence. That line sitting there, in the middle of a litany of things without punctuation, paints so truly what happens between two people trying to have the kind of life that society has said these kinds of two people should have. It would have been too instructional to the reader if this line stood alone instead of being lodged into the list of everything else.

Yuknavitch's style in this book as well as in the short story "Daguerreotype of a Girl" have also inspired me to truly push myself as far as I can to find expression for experiences that are difficult to word. I love the precision and craft of this line from *The Chronology of water*: "I like to run my tongue along them like mouth Braille." The lines that challenged me to find my own expression were the following from "Daguerreotype of a Girl":

- "…She will transform unbearable pain into artistic production – exactly like how women take what turns out to be a life and live with it...". What a way to write suppression of desire! And "turns out to be" is where the real meaning of suppression, and the magic of the sentence, lies.
- "…She is older than a child who would chase the moon, so when she decides to follow it, it is with the sure-footedness of the in-between girlhood of things...". This stage in inbetweenness is difficult to articulate, but being literal and wordy like this conveys the sentiment exactly!
- "…the house not hers…"; "…a girl not her…"; "…a girl not ravaged…"; "…the camera she does not know is capturing the image of her destiny..." I love these lines. Often, we pack so much (word) into conveying alienation, isolation, marginalisation, but how amazingly does a deliberate and empathetic use of negation work instead?
- "…a sound closing hearing…" This is a great sentence for how well it captures the sensory experience. It is something a child could have said, and it shows how well allowing oneself to completely feel, and being literal, can serve one's writing.

<u>Punctuation</u>

Before this MACW I felt that focusing on punctuation was a cop out and/or too gimmicky or performative. I was also cautious about overusing punctuation that I like. But MACW lecturer Stacy Hardy's seminar, *Politics and Poetics of Punctuation*, and the accompanying reading material liberated me from these fears. The following were most eye-opening and inspiring for me:

- How the em dashes and the double en dash control the tempo in an excerpt from Danielle Collobert's *Notebooks*. They felt like a gentler controlling than that of commas and full stops. The double en dash being less solid made my eyes feel it (the double en dash) less in my chest, so I did not stop for as long when I came upon it. I did not think for as long. The double en dash felt more Morse code-y, that is where my shorter interpretation of it came from. Yet, when the same dash was at the end of a sentence – as in "…country -- breaking all bonds – or whatever -- …" – it felt more silent, and slower.
- The gaps in Carmen Giménez Smith's "ARS POETICA" (from *Be Recorder*). They made me move through the piece with ease and slowness – they felt like a very slow, very fluid, waltz. They also

brought a lot of silence to the piece, which I always enjoy. The difference in the size of the spaces kept the piece alive by making sure it was not monotonous and the tempo changed. The piece felt alive.

- The movement between bigger-than-usual gaps in an excerpt from *Intervenir/Intervene* by Dolores Dorantes. I read certain lines as if I had moved elsewhere because of the gaps between lines. My reading was as if reaching a different point in a speech. Gaps between words in a single line made me read as if I were thinking carefully about what I was about to say, and not as if the sentence was already in front of me. Gaps between letters in a single word made me spend more time on saying the word. Reading the work then felt like speaking.

In my thesis you will see deliberate work with punctuation. You will see that my punctuation language is dominated by em dashes. I love the quiet way in which they demand whatever kind of attention they want. My most explicit punctuation work in my thesis is with em dashes, en dashes, full stops, spaces, and at times commas. All the poems in my thesis are punctuated by my breath. This is something I have always done instinctively; and a similar position by Lydia Davis validated this approach to punctuation and encouraged me to continue in this way:

> *I punctuated my writing instinctively, not deliberately or consciously, as I always do. If I 'feel' a comma or semi-colon or dash is called for, I put it down on the page, though I may well change it later. If I 'feel' that a lot of punctuation is called for, or very little, I act on those feelings…*

It is my breath – in how it moves during the coming out of words; in its lightness, heaviness and neutrality – that decides on a comma, full stop, or an em dash. It decides on line and stanza breaks.

Documentary and observation

In MACW lecturer Kerry Hammerton's *Fierce Writing* seminar, I was especially struck by Charles Reznikoff's "Invasion". In Reznikoff's book, *Holocaust*, Geroge Szirtes describes him as "an objectivist who does not write directly about his feelings but what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject matter and, if he writes in verse, by its music". The poems in *Holocaust*, including "Invasion", contain none of Reznikoff's own words and are instead made up of words from the American government's record of Nazi crime trials and transcripts of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

The former journalist in me was intrigued by this because during my time as a journalist, I felt unbearably suppressed and suffocated by the emotionless and musicless way in which I was required to write people's lives. A number of my poems – such as "two suitcases", "under a bathtub", and "three toilets" to name a few – are thus, a reimagination of news writing with the personness of victims inserted into those stories. The poems are also an imagination of what South African news media would look like if it stood for something – the truth. Using words from news articles – except for "when i became myself", "gathered in wombs" and "(untitled)" which use my words – these poems speak to how maddening and, of course, deathly violent it is to be a black person in South Africa. As such, the poems slip in and out of logic and/or "real" things, and they play with the truth. Playing with the truth is very much inspired by Chris Van Wyk's

"In Detention", and the slippage in logic and/or "reality" is influenced by Lily Hoang's *Invisible Women*. I love the ethos of what most of Hoang's book is doing; just painting pictures of women – pictures that may or may not provoke something, anything, in the reader. These seem to be pictures that Hoang feels must be painted regardless. I support this fully, this way of speaking; to say "I may or may not have a way that this goes that is going to do something or other to you, dear reader. Regardless, what matters is that I have got something to say. Of course, it could be great if you hear me, if you feel me. Nonetheless, (I hope you) see me." Somehow, I guess that is what many of us are saying in doing the writing and sharing it.

In my poems, I dance between the slowness of trying to make sense of a narrative written through lines bleeding into each other; and the fastness created by the combination of minimal to no punctuation, the shortness of the lines and their bleeding into each other. The former is sombre, the latter is maddening – silence and "irrationality" in the poems facilitate both. The suspects/perpetrators in these poems are absent somewhat because they are not the guests of honour; and because speaking about them also being victims of this country would take space away from the victims. I say the suspects/perpetrators are *somewhat* absent because they still exist in pronouns; and because all of us in this society are "the suspect". So the poems must confront the reader too: the silence in the poems puts the deed at our feet. The poems are dedicated to victims of violence: Nosicelo Mtebeni ("two suitcases"), Noluvuyo Ndema-Nonkwelo ("under a bathtub"), Propser Chipungare ("three toilets"), Imthande Swartbooi ("Falling on a Sunday"), Matlhomola Maswetu ("They must also be killed"), and girls and women – especially elderly women – all over rural South Africa ("when i became myself", "gathered in wombs", and "(untitled)").

Still within the reimagination of news, "when i became myself" is an imagination of a letter to the newspaper free from the prescripts and suppression of English grammar, editors and newspaper style guides. It is a letter written by one of the characters in the story, and it is also a claiming of one's right to violence. In a slightly similar vein "gathered in wombs" imagines a countrywide protest by women, and the poem is a report on the protest. Its quiet manner of protest is inspired by South Africa's one-in-nine silent protest, and Takako Arai and Isabella Motadinyane's quiet expressions of women's power in "Bed and Looms" and "Thigh of the new mother" respectively. The brevity, silence, and inactivity of the poem is deliberate subversion of news media, state, and society's expectations of violence. The poem works against a public exhibition of suffering for the satisfaction of the privileged, who in fact know the suffering they cause or are complicit in. The untitled poem on page 25 is the final story in the newspaper. It is heavily influenced by Eduardo Galeano's expression in *Days and Nights of Love and War*.

<u>Location and/or time</u>

Because I have several people living in and through me, even the poems that are **not** centred in news are not necessarily about me alone. It follows then that, in my grappling with not belonging, my poetry moves between the physical and "other" realms, and between concrete and abstract things. This movement is both inherent to me and also influenced by Cecilia Vicuña's *Spit Temple* and translations of poems in Carmen García's *Gotas sobre loza fría*. Taking inspiration from South African writer and MACW lecturer Mangaliso Buzani's vulnerability in his poetry collection, *a naked bone*; the grappling in my poems contains all the things, forms and people I am, and that live in and through me. As such, my poems are situated a

lot in timeless place – for the most part, there is no real distinction between now, yesterday or tomorrow. The poems are also situated in memory. This has a lot to do with how I experience life; but it also has a lot to do with Nyezwa's seminar, *Writing from small memories*, and Galeano's *Days and Nights of Love and War*.

In his seminar Nyezwa told us "the world wants to kill off memories [and the music of our lives] so we can become better slaves." On the other hand Galeano, in his politically charged book, is clearly working from memory and history. But he says what he wants to say not by banging his hand on the table, but with expression that (necessarily) blurs the borders between times and bleeds times into each other. This leaves space for the stories, the memories, to live now. Nyezwa's seminar and Galeano's book freed me from thinking I cannot write something from memory if I do not have all the detail and "story". And Gabeba Baderoon's "Old Photographs" showed me how to find my voice in these circumstances. I was inspired by the way she reads and writes story, history, into the photograph. I like the emotional investment in the poet's gaze, which the poem demonstrates with the revelation of things that are not physically seen in the photograph. I was pulled by this honesty of showing how we look at photographs of people we love through what we already know about them, as well as our own thoughts and/or desires. Baderoon, Galeano and Nyezwa are how I came to work with history, memory and nostalgia, and grasping the energy of these, in poems such as "a stone in my throat" and "it is me". For these poems I took motivation to embrace struggling to holding onto detail, and to relinquish control, from Andrew Hewitt's analysis of the jazz jitterbug in his essay "Stumbling Into Modernity: Body and Soma in Adorno":

> *So what does one do when one stumbles? Well, of course, one fails – one fails to walk. Something doesn't work. Something doesn't work – and yet work is being done. Something is "belaboring" us so that we become not the subject, but the object of a certain social labor.*

And so, the poems stumble in their expression. Baderoon, Galeano and Nyezwa also prompted me to write towards a knowing against violence rooted in memory with "haunt your gods" and "Emanzini" – validating experience against erasure; and honouring lineage, and another self, against western capitalist culture.

Memory was also explored in Hardy's seminar, *Autofiction*, which inspired me to write "Go there", "Portrait of Gcuwa", "28 Hollyburn Flats" and "Venus and Serena". Again, Galeano's approach to story helped me find my voice for these, as well as Vicuña's *Spit Temple*. Galeano and Vicuña's spirit of being rooted in reality, but letting the expression sing or sit heavy in a faraway/isolated gaze, resonates with me. I like how Vicuña moves between worlds and slightly blurs the borders between emotions. And I enjoy Galeano's humour, literal reference to history, and non-explanation. For me these approaches leave space for the reader to find her/himself in the activity, place, energy and people of the stories. And they work for me because, much like Fabián Severo's poems in *Night in the North*, my poems open questions up more than they answer them. Because of this, and to do this, they live a lot in quiet.

Quiet

My gravitation to this quality in poetry comes from the quiet – sometimes quiet disquiet – of not belonging, but it is also significantly influenced by Nyezwa's *Song Trials*, Marina Tsvetaeva's *Selected Poems* and classical Chinese poetry. From poems such as "I cannot think of all the pains", "quiet place", "sea", and "gathering" by Nyezwa, I learnt immensely about how well quiet makes space for emotion in poetry. Marina Tsvetaeva's *Selected Poems*, especially in "Poems for Blok", was integral in teaching me to be consistently intentional throughout a poem about understanding and prioritising the energy and spirit of the piece. I was mesmerised by how she creates quiet through the senses. She writes about what a name does to her without even once using the verbs "does" and "makes". She uses soft images to convey silence and make the poem feel as such. This, coupled with the warmth of the repetition of "Your name", give the piece a neutral tension. Tsvataeva's decision to dedicate an idea to each stanza and her choice of images and sense to communicate these ideas – arrest (first stanza), awakening (second stanza) and calm (third stanza) – are genius for me. The classical Chinese poets' collaboration with nature in *The New Directions Anthology of Classical Chinese Poetry* emphasised to me how quiet allows one clear expression regardless of what it is about, even if it is about the joys of drinking rice whisky.

Quiet is a way of hearing/listening – how words come. It is a way of containing myself and the reader in only the words on the page and locking us out of everything else that may surround us. And, so, you will experience quiet through images, in the content and slowness of actions and, at times, in tense. The quiet in my poems also happens in how the poems are punctuated, as well as through the existence of space – something I picked up from Giménez Smith's *Be Recorder* as mentioned above, and the layout of Lily Hoang's *A Bestiary*. For example my poem "Maybe" maps a meeting with words while working with uncertainty. And so the poem itself struggles through its maybes, its quiet and gaps, and its fragmentedness. In this poem I am also working with intensity of atmosphere – as does Adonis (Ali Ahmed Said) does in "Concerto for the road to Dante's church" – even with/amid moments of relief. The poem's music lives in this world it creates with quiet and intensity of atmosphere.

The importance of quiet to me was confirmed and enhanced by another of Beyers' seminars, *Making poems from poems*. Before the seminar Beyers had asked that we choose three of our favourite poems from a reading pack, or three of our favourite parts from certain poems. I was naturally drawn to quiet, and chose these lines from Nazim Hikmet's "Autobiography": "some people know all about plants some about fish/ I know separation/ some people know the names of the stars by heart/ I recite absences". These lines drew me because of how hauntingly intimate it is to refer to oneself as a separation/absence fundi. This made me want to write in a similar way about alienation – as a knowledge base – and so my poem "Kowenu" was born. "Xhentsa" was inspired by the following lines from Frederico Garcia Lorca's "Sleepless City": "There is a corpse in the farthest graveyard/ complaining for three years/ because of an arid landscape in his knee;/ and a boy who was buried this morning cried so much/ they had to call the dogs to quiet him". Because of my relationship with my ancestors, this poem's belief in the agency and responsiveness of dead people resonates with me. The last of my favourite lines came from Nina Cassian's "Letters": "Your silence was so compact that I could build a city on it./ Nothing actually moved, I was building in a void." I enjoy the paradox in the illustration of an absence (of words) – silence – as something

that is so palpable that one can build a city on it, but it still remains an absence. It reminded me of my own paradoxical relationship and experiences with my body, and so "I'm making umqombothi" came out.

Body

I think and feel through my body and, as such, almost every poem in my thesis is written through, with, and by my body. I have never been able to see the body as "something that we can put aside in order to write", as lamented by Hardy in her *Writing the Body* seminar. My body decides on words, images and scenes. It is it that speaks these things. The worlds in the poems are the worlds my body lives in. My body decides which parts of itself to put in poems. It is through its happening and/or collaboration through, with, and by my body that my writing *is resistance* against the many violences of the western capitalist system. By happening through, with, and by my *rested* body; my writing *is* a listening to only my body and my innermost needs. My writing *is* time and space to listen, hear, remember, understand and meet these needs. My writing *insists* on my humanity. Hardy's seminar enhanced this relationship between my body and my writing.

And during this seminar, it was Félix Guattari (in "Have Done with the Massacre of the Body") that most stirred me:

> *No matter how much it proclaims its pseudo-tolerance, the Western capitalist system in all its forms (family, school, factories, army, codes, discourse…) continues to subjugate all desires, sexuality, and affects to the dictatorship of its totalitarian organization, founded on exploitation, property, male power, productivity… Tirelessly it continues its dirty work of castrating, suppressing, torturing, and dividing our bodies in order to inscribe its laws on our flesh, in order to rivet to our subconscious its mechanisms for reproducing this system of enslavement. … Using every available access route into our organisms, it insinuates into the depths of our insides its roots of death. It usurps our organs, disrupts our vital functions, mutilates our pleasure, subjugates all lived experience to the control of its condemning judgments. It makes of each individual a cripple, cut off from his or her body, a stranger to his or her own desires.*

Thus, I began to explore writing centred in (troubling or liberating) restlessness, and in resisting the "norm" and searching towards the alternative(s). My poem "Only women" is inspired by women's ability to create worlds, sometimes with just their voices and the things they say – isiXhosa says "umlomo uyadala". While the poem does look to other parts of the body, it is more concerned with writing a body part that we do not see – the voice. It is concerned with living in the life of voice (and sound). "Nom'ungang'bulala ngek'uwathol'amandl'ami" is the body in joyful protest against all forms of conformity, domination and erasure. This is a confluence of the political and spiritual. The poem is taking up space through small bodily functions and pleasures. "my belly" and "Getting ready" are concerned with the body's capacity to store history. "Getting ready" looks to school objects, and uses notions of fairytale to expel something difficult to say – as learned from Kate Bernheimer's "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale". "my belly" grapples with being an other woman – emotionally, physically, and ideologically.

Along with Guattari, the following lines from Nina Cassian's "Temptation" inspired the expression in "i swallowed something", "my breath wants to know" and "a blood is burning in my stomach":

> *Call yourself alive? Look, I promise you/ that for the first time you'll fell your pores opening/ like fish mouths, and you'll actually be able to hear/ your blood surging through all those lanes,/ and you'll fell light gliding across the cornea/ like the train of a dress. …/ Call yourself alive? I promise you/ you'll be deafened by dust falling on the furniture,/ you'll feel your eyebrows turning to two gashes,*

"i swallowed something" is interested in the physical palpability/tangibility of emotions or emotional sensation. "my breath wants to know" is concerned with innate – or "other" (in a world where western capitalist culture is the norm) – ways of knowing and hearing. "a blood is burning in my stomach" is a report from dreamland, inspired by MACW lecturer Vangile Gantsho's seminar *A language for dreams*. The poem traps torment mainly in the stomach. Working on this poem was pivotal for working through the relationship between my writing and my dreams. Because most of my dreams are communication with/from my ancestors, I have always revered them and not wanted to exploit the worlds they bring. And as a professional, I have not wanted to rely on my dreams as a crutch and/or gimmick for my creative writing. This poem allowed me to see the ways in which I can navigate, with authenticity, a world made up of creative writing and my dreams.

Desire

MACW lecturer Mishka Hoosen's seminar, *Desire and Derangement* moved me to think about desire as complex, instead of a one-dimensional conceptualisation of it as a mere noble want for goodness. And this drove me to reread a catalogue for South Africa's exhibition at the 54th Venice Biennale, curated by Thembinkosi Goniwe, titled *Desire: Ideal Narratives in Contemporary South African Art*. In his curator's note Goniwe writes:

> *…Here, desire is taken to mean yearning and need, recognizing what individuals do not have, but long for. The notion of desire suggests both a lack as well as alluding to the simple motivation behind many human actions and deeds. Desire speaks to crisis and determination. It is an unrelenting force. Nothing is inert, complete and fixed about desire. Neither is desire tangible. It is rather a mystical force that exists in the form of imagination, the aspiring agent inherent with the power to dream… Whether working within or outside South Africa, our artists explore conditions that give rise to lack of and longing for person societal change: to desire… It is not always possible to achieve these… desires; they often remain elusive. Such is desire. It is a force inherent in the creations of many visual artists around the world: the process and experience of becoming, of attaining, of acquiring, of searching, of looking, of discovering… Desire is journey, voyage, plight and passage.*

In this same catalogue Andrea Wiarda, writing about South African visual artist Mary Sibande's art, works with the notion of the work as a "fantasy space". "In The Blue of Your Heaven" and "blood for my voice" are informed by this notion of Wiarda's and Goniwe's instructive argument that desire is first and

foremost a recognition of what one does not have. The poems are also influenced by a rereading of Eva Illouz's text, "Against Desire: A Manifesto for Charles Bovary?", in the Irish Museum of Modern Art's catalogue for the 2015/16 exhibition *What We Call Love: From Surrealism to Now*. In the text, Illouz advances the idea of desire as paradoxical: that if fulfilled, it "will leave us hungry". My poem "In The Blue of Your Heaven" is a fantasy space that allows the "I" uninhibited pursuit of freedom and exclusive and complete autonomy over self by giving away every bit of herself. Somewhat similarly, "blood for my voice" works with the tensions of desiring another. "blood for my voice" was inspired by Toshiko Hirata's "Man without arms" – whereas Hirata is working with the limitations of taking away/deprivation where the fulfilment of her character's desire is concerned, I was more curious about working with the limitations of giving.

Thinking and writing desire through the body, and its viscerality, led me to the complex relation between the word and the body, and so between the word/page and performance. Here I was inspired by Vicuña's approach to some of her poetry, as related by the editor and translator of *Spit Temple*, Rosa Alcalá, when reflecting on Vicuña's performances:

> *It is through the performance that the idea or poem on paper becomes what Vicuña calls a "quasar," "an about to happen." Vicuña writes that her quasar looks "for a form before the form," adding, "A poem only becomes poetry when its structure / is made not of words but forces." The quasar is not a tangible thing – a poem or story to be told – but a process of discovery that allows the evolving elements of the performance to manifest. Vicuña has also referred to the quasars as "not-yet-poems" or "quasi poem," which suggests that what manifests in these oral performances reveals a result, the poem sometimes moves from performance to page, rather than the conventional movement from page to performance. Performance, in other words, provides the warp and weft upon which any text may – or may not – be woven; and at the same time in performance, all texts are subject to change, all are precarious and "about to happen," all are threads to be spun into a large, continual textile, which is the interconnected worlds we inhabit.*

My poem "Teeth Brushing war" takes its lead from this. It is an "about to happen" performance in perpetual progress, as well as a poem perpetually in progress – as such, it is incomplete. This poem is a performance art piece I conceptualised but have not yet had the bravery and resources to perform. On both a literary and performance level, "Teeth Brushing War" is concerned with desire in politicised life.

Less is more

My expression is more rooted in texture than it is in saying and/or explaining a lot. Not belonging has made my life rather fragmented – my experiences, and the things inside me that need to come out are brief and urgent more than they are elaborate. The poems in my thesis illustrate this. This style of expression has been affirmed and encouraged by the way Galeano and Severo successfully tell complex stories in short pieces. These books, and MACW lecturer Hleze Kunju's seminar *Less is more*, validated the fact that there are many ways to express things, and that it is the writing that dictates what this expression looks like. My writing mostly chooses to say more with less. After Kunju's seminar I began to think about how to maintain meaning in a poem even if it is small. In many of my poems I am working with freezing a

moment within a tight frame, and working against embellishing or overstating. So, much of the story and meaning in these poems is loaded in energy, and select words and/or images.

Nolwazi Machi's poem, "Liyikho Konke", read during the seminar inspired my poem, "when they came". In the poem, written in isiZulu, Machi plays with the phrase "your future is in your hands" by taking it literally and working with the resultant image or idea of (a) future literally being in one's hands. In my poem I am working with the many conceptions of the word "white". Poems however follow the open path and while "when they came" started small, it refused to be contained, so I had to release it from smallness. In order to say what it is saying, it required to live the expanse of the white it speaks of.

Ayanda Billie's poem "Intsomi", from this same seminar, spoke beautifully with Beyers's seminar *Wording the unworded*, which was aimed at giving space to the struggle of articulation and expression *within* poetry. As Beyers said; "I'm finding what I need to say via the writing". Beyers addressed a number of strategies towards "wording the unworded", but I was most drawn to the encouragement for us to allow for slippage between language. Billie's poem was a big inspiration in exploring this. The English translation of the title of the poem is "folktale", and the poem starts as all isiXhosa folktales start - with a "once upon a time" of some sort. The reader expects a tale, one longer than four lines at least. The actual telling of the tale is only two lines – "the day we take the nation/the people shall govern". What makes this poem particularly masterful is the nature of isiXhosa semantics – it can be read in future and past tense. The past tense reading would be "the day we took the nation/the people governed". Either reading clearly carries a tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic and humorous attitude. The poem speaks of a tragicomedy (I laughed before I even finished reading) and is also an indictment of the current ruling class – the folktale ends as soon as it starts. The past tense reading is more scathing because it has already happened and so the element of hopefulness/faith in the future is absent. The bitter(sweet) lesson has already been learned. There is no promise of victory for the underdog, or a happy ending in a good lesson learned that we traditionally get from our isiXhosa folktales. In using brevity and playing with language, Billie's poem does what it does not appear to be doing. My poem "Uyangcolisa" is concerned with slippage between languages in a similar manner. I am working with three isiXhosa ideas and/or sayings that I just cannot seem to translate adequately or efficiently into English. These are "uyangcolisa"/"ukungcolisa", "ukungena emlonyeni", and "ukulumeza". The first term is the title of the poem – the one that refuses translation. The English translation of the second phrase is flat and too simplistic in meaning. The third term is most difficult to translate because the word itself is poetic.

Feedback

My thesis is not only informed by the books I read and seminars I attended, but it has also been shaped by very generous feedback and my responses thereto. During the past ten months my classmates, lecturers and I met every Friday to discuss each other's writing. I made a point to listen not only to feedback directed at my work, but also to that directed to my classmates' writing. These meetings showed me how invaluable feedback is. They became my space to grapple with writing challenges.

Instead of killing my work in a pursuit for perfection or "rightness", I was able to put my uncertainties on the page because I knew that the interactions during feedback groups would help me answer all the

questions I had. These interactions also helped me concretise in my mind things I, or people, generally say through seeing them in action. For example, the matter of how it is that language is flat, and how this affects a piece of writing, only truly crystalised when I told my classmate, Nelia Cunningham, that some rhetorical questions in one of her pieces "felt flat and let down the brilliance of the work". I suggested that she only include them "if they did something for the story". I finally had an opportunity to arrive at a practical understanding of the makings of "flat language". I was then able to better understand and follow this advice myself.

Being on the receiving end of feedback affirmed me and my voice. This was especially crucial on occasions when I was weighed down by doubt. As someone who always wants to learn more about how to be a better writer, I tried to run away from getting lost in the praise or criticism during feedback. Instead, I preferred zoning in on the lessons from various approaches. Editing my writing with this openness to feedback taught me that what is most important when implementing suggestions is to listen honestly to the piece of writing itself over everything and everyone else. This means to prioritise the voice and spirit of the work, and what these things require, over what a lecturer, classmate or reader wants. As the writing directs what it wants in its inception, it also directs how to edit it. This is the attitude with which I read and responded to my reader report. This report, written by an external reader, in response to my final thesis, was an opportunity to get an outside eye and fresh response to my writing, before my final submission.

Describing my thesis as "startling, fresh, and poignant" with a tone that "moves effortlessly from elegiac to urgent", the reader's response was that my poems are remarkably strong. They said they were "deeply impressed by the fine-tuned ear for poetry the writer has, and the strong instinct for imagery and description". The reader continued:

> *There are many arresting, mysterious lines —too many to quote here—but a few stand out, such as in "Portrait of Gcuwa": "There was a house always waiting like an open mouth — a woman rehearsing "no."" There are also moments of moving poignancy, such as, in the same poem: "A friend and I were laughing at our lives over a meal in a busy restaurant and homelessness came to sit quietly next to me." These are the moments when the writing sings and transcends itself, showing a strongly developed and profound voice.*
>
> *The writer has a clear and piercing eye for the details that make writing live and breathe, and a finely-tuned ear for lyricism. Where the poems are a little weaker is where that lyricism runs away with itself, with some fine-tuning and an extension of the many admirable qualities most of the poems have into the poems that require more work, however, I think this could make a memorable and arresting collection.*

I was very pleased that the reader did not request translations of isiXhosa words and phrases in the poems, nor in a section for notes. During feedback sessions, translation was suggested to me by a classmate for every single poem that had isiXhosa in it. I refused every time. Initially the reason was my politics and artistic principle, but one time I wanted to interrogate why he always insisted on translation and I tried it. The writing refused, and the matter was settled. What, for me, is important about the reader not even mentioning translation is that it confirms one or all of these things: a) English and isiXhosa readers exist;

b) readers who care enough to do their own (Googling) work exist; c) "…the magic in a word remains magic even if it is not understood, and loses none of its power", as Khlebnikov wrote.

Areas needing improvement that the reader did point to in some of my poems were a tone that tended to be too "doleful and sentimental"; lyricism that was a little obtuse; cliché descriptions, and endings that "fall flat". I appreciated that the reader's feedback was so wonderfully instructive. After reading their report I went back to my thesis and interrogated all the poems – not only those the reader used as examples – with these four points in mind. I agreed with the reader on all the four points, they made complete sense – especially with the examples they provided. I am very grateful to them. I love the things another's mind can show me about where I can do better. After reading this feedback, I was able to review the poems with calm and clarity. I improved the expression in "a stone in my throat" and I changed the ending of "Go there". In "with a torn name" I tightened the form and improved the punctuation and language – all these changes, and a title change, fixed the disturbing sweetness that the reader had rightly pointed out. I identified the people in "two suitcases", "under a bathtub", "three toilets", and "Falling on a Sunday", and added some clues (or entry points) for the reader with hints of narrative. The latter revision was also done for and "Leave of absence application". It was also the intention for "They must also be killed", but the poem absolutely refused any additions besides Matlhomola's name. I respected that. With "when they came" and "i swallowed something" I improved the endings and easy or cliché language. The latter was also done in "my belly", "I'm making umqombothi" and "blood for my voice". Though the initial ending of "Izilimela" was not weak or flat, I made it stronger.

The reader's report also provoked improvements that were not mentioned by them. It resurrected the old saying "kill your darlings" with which I then read the thesis with, and was able to resolve previously unnoticed overuse of a word. I also tightened punctuation and phrasing to give the music in the poems more space. I even tried to lengthen some poems but they refused, and I remembered what a silly exercise it is to make a poem long for the sake of making it long. The reader report – particularly the comment about the need for the poems to be "a little less doleful and sentimental" – resuscitated previous lessons that informed my cutting out and/or re-editing of some phrases and words, as well as how I retitled some poems. During the course of this MACW I was generally horrible at titling my poems, I hated it. I would have preferred not to have to title them. But then I showed my work to a poet I respect, and he taught me that the title is "part of the poem". He described titles as "a light that can carry the reader through the poem". He said:

> *In a poem that wants to declare something, you can have a blunt title: "Autumn"/ "My grandmother"/ "The children of Nonti". Other titles might only make sense at the end of the poem, or become clear as the reader reads. Good titles capture the tone of the poem rather than what the poem is "about". If a poem has subtlety and nuance, it usually needs a title which is itself subtle and nuanced: a small poem in itself, even if it's only two words.*

Trantraal said something similar. In a feedback group, he also told us to find the heart of a story instead of its meaning; that "when you put onions in a meal you're not supposed to taste them, but they give flavour to everything"; and that we should always return to the first paragraph of our work after writing to see if we still need it. In a different feedback group with Hardy, she told me to remember to bring the reader into, or give them a sense of, the "world" in which my poems happen even when they deal with

the abstract. These lessons speak to the causes of some of the weaknesses identified by my reader. And they not only helped me address the reader's concerns, but they also helped me return to the entire thesis with a slightly sharper eye to improve it. I would not have thought to do so had my reader not flagged the sometimes doleful tone and obtuse lyricism. I am thankful for everything.

Book reviews

It is not only my poems that were influenced by the texts, seminars and conversations I engaged in the past ten months. My understanding of book reviewing, and the book reviews I wrote this year, were also shaped by this material.

I have generally always been on the fence about the necessity – or, more precisely, the usefulness of reviewing something as subjective as art. A constant question a friend and I have been asking ourselves when talking about criticism is "who am I to call any expression of thought, feelings, perceptions that are not my own, 'good' or 'bad?'" The logic is that only the owner of these thoughts, feelings and perceptions can truly gauge whether or not they have been expressed well enough. Digging deep into the makings of literature this year has impressed upon me that art creation is longstanding human culture and tradition. Therefore, art (books) can be critiqued against the norms and/or anomalies of the culture, lineage, tradition it aligns itself with. We can judge a book according to its consistency with(in) the world it creates, and this allows literary criticism to move beyond the simplistic ideas of "good" or "bad" and more towards how the mechanisms of the writing contribute towards the reading experience.

Yet, there are many ways of reflecting on a reading experience – and I did not know which best spoke to the kind of reader I am and the things I enjoy about reading and writing. So, I read some book reviews to build an approach to reviewing books that works for me. I realised that I like a book review that is an intimate reading of a book but also does not neglect raising the more technical points. It is equally important for me to get a sense of the energy of a book (how it moves) as it is to get a feel for how it generally reads (its language). This kind of review gives me a fuller idea of what I am getting myself into. However, I prefer not to know too much about the actual content, or story, of a book. This, I want to read for myself. I want to know how reading the book made the reviewer feel, and why or how it achieved this, without too much of the content being given away. I am also interested in how a book relates to society – what does the book do, if anything, in the cultural, literary, political space? And, so, the book reviews below were informed by these ideas and questions, with a strong focus on what, in the books, I thought was worth talking about.

Book Review: The voices of *a naked bone*

For the most part, I feel trapped by my aliveness. I lack the high pain threshold to withstand the suffering of being alive here. I do not know how to be here but, somehow, reading Mangaliso Buzani's *a naked bone* makes me feel like it is possible.

Divided into four parts – faith, darkness, dream space, and the critical people and things that make Buzani – the poetry collection opens space for me to be on this earth *with* my feelings. Buzani invites the reader – particularly in parts one and two of the book – to sit with things, but also to divest of the exceptionalism of the human experience on this earth, by doing so himself. But this book is not an intellectual lecture on speciesism or a hippy worship of nature. It is zooming in on the everyday objects around us (including nature) and attributing human traits and physicality to these things and abstractions. In this way Buzani mutes the human experience and opens a path to see himself and others better – more empathetically. And so, the reader does the same.

Through his fascination with the small things around us; simple language; and the tag team of a child voice and adult voice, Buzani's writing has the uncanny ability to create the distance needed to allow us more compassion for ourselves. At the same time, he brings us right into the thick emotion of things. He achieves this through his willingness to be vulnerable. He allows himself to be all the people he is – an eternal optimist and idealist, a jealous lover, a romantic, a struggling and hurting person and poet, and he allows himself to be a child. The partnership between the child and adult voices creates wonder for the things around us, and our relations to them, while curbing naivety at the same time. In one poem, he is both an adult and a giggling little girl:

> There are children between our legs, some are soft, some are hard, depending on how God designed them. When we open our legs they fall. We smile, feeling like mother and fathers.
>
> ("It is Thursday", p.79)

Even when the poems convey difficulty or darkness he does not load his language with expressions of frustration or sorrow, nor does he analyse, intellectualise or give any answers. He simply opens up the problem and/or himself in it:

> Far from the love of god
> children armed with stones
> surround me
>
> ("My daily bread, p.20)

Buzani's small images, and his childlike wonder, also allow him to expresses faith amidst dimness as he navigates his relationship with god in part one. There are still kisses to get, wine to drink, and a chuckle to let out about god's insatiable thirst for worship. In "Imbawula" he writes: "I want to feed your tongue with words so that when you open your mouth you will spread the music of poems" (p.15).

The evolution of Buzani's voices sucks you into his world. In part two Buzani is jaded and open about that fact. He is gripped by the heavier things of life, and he bears his sores. He is clearly disillusioned with himself, his life, god, society, with writing, and he contemplates his death (which is sometimes by suicide). Still, he sits. "I want to walk like nobody in the wind/ bend to the left/ bend to the right" ("Rain", p.40)). In this second section of the book, the child voice has been infiltrated by the adultness of things. The adult voice does not rage loudly, it is insidious – as in "Sick words" (p.32): "sick words are renting/ the inside of my head/ my soul has become a rude landlord". Though it tries, the child voice struggles to remain faithful. In "Dear doctor" (p.33) Buzani's child voice no longer has the wondrous world of words at the tip of his tongue. He struggles to give language to experience. Here, the struggle happens on the page – with a changed voice.

The drastic shifts create a narrative with voice(s) that the reader is invested in because, even with all your life experience and contempt for being alive, you root for the child voice though you know the comeback will never be the same as the arrival. Inhabiting a dream space of some sort in part three – a long poem after which the collection is named – Buzani seeks out balms for his wounds while trying to reimagine or recreate reality. These balms come in the form of the domestic space – family and lovers – and a stronger presence of nature, which help him refind his voice. But it is visibly scarred. While the adult and child coexisted in part one; part three sees faithfulness and playfulness replaced by, and/or only making brief appearances for, intimacy and nostalgia. Buzani is reworking his relationship with god, reminding himself of his loving mother and his lover(s); but he is also mourning his childhood and lost lovers. He wants more accountability from life, his father, and society, and (his) death continues to loom. Pablo Neruda's influence on Buzani lives in both how he works with objects; and in the sensitivity-driven tension between dark and light in subject matter, voice, emotion, and self-perception in part three. However, this long poem is also where Buzani's strength – avoiding lyrical gymnastics – becomes a slight hazard. At times, the simplicity of the language disrupts the music of some poems such that they veer towards the prosaic.

> In the dark hole of the house the rat has become a landlord. I'm not ready to make you quiet with my howling stomach which sounds like a dying dog. I'm not ready to let your tongue taste the wine which is made of teardrops and sweat. I'm not ready to throw two crumbs of bread on a broken piece of a plate…
>
> ("a naked bone", p.59)

Buzani's writing could have benefited more from a fluent isiXhosa-speaking editor. While at times the collection displays beautiful isiXhosa-to-English play – "You told me I eat words when I speak:" ("a naked bone", p.54) – there are words and parts where the translation of Buzani's heart language (isiXhosa) was

lacking or should not have been done at all. This is more the case in part four of the book. Marked by the women in his life – most heartbreakingly his mother and grandmother and their illnesses – here Buzani finds resolve in the people, things and experiences that make him Mangaliso Buzani. He expresses these in seven longish poems. He explores heartbreak and finding love again; the aloneness of motherlessness; and the mundaneness of life. His friend-at-a-bar tone and humble dramatisation place the reader right in the middle of his poems and makes the scenes and characters personal to the reader. Cesar Vallejo's influence on Buzani is clear in this last part of his collection. But, tightly in the grip of English, we also find Buzani explaining unnecessarily here – translation is (also) explanation. As such, sections of part four read too prosaic in that the full power of the music feels repressed. "Mbizo Square" (p.68) and "Sign Language" (p.70) betray the absence of cultural (and, of course, linguistic) familiarity between poet and editor or, at the very least, wanting translation. "At school I was always wanted by the girls. It made me scared because I didn't know what attracted butterflies to a flower" ("Mbizo Square", p.68). "It was very difficult to cross the doorframe of the room with your grandma" ("Sign Language", p.70). As with some words and phrases in this collection, these two poems should have been written in isiXhosa.

Nonetheless, this linguistic stumble does not take away from the important work that Buzani does with *a naked bone*. He has given us a collection in which he refuses to centre his masculinity – or, rather, he centres a more vulnerable and space-creating masculinity – while explicitly locating himself and his poetry in South Africa, and the township of New Brighton to be specific. His poetry is not burdened with ideas of what or who he is "supposed to be", he is just a person. Where he is very clearly a heterosexual man – in sex, for example – he does not distance himself from sweetness and tenderness. He is explicit and unguarded about the fact that he is the kind of man that blushes and enjoys being umenziwa. He abandons control in sex as he does in his associative writing.

> kiss me
> touch my neck
> go down to my sacred stick
> which once moses used to hit the rock
> pick the salt off my body with your tongue
> our fire will cook love
> and both of us will enjoy
> god's special recipe
>
> ("Kiss me", p.19)

Buzani's sexual experiences are not limited to longing or craving, nor are they confined in ideas of dominance. His tender moments are not downplayed by brevity – they are the centre, the event, of his poems. In his slight abstraction of sexual vulnerability, he does not create distance from himself, everyone is brought right into the moment.

> To feel you in me is to touch this world with my hand. Once more under a leaking roof that keeps my mouth open as long as the rain is falling. This drop, that drop: each drop that I catch with my mouth keep my tongue tasting your soul.
>
> ("a naked bone", p.52)

It is of no small significance for a black heterosexual man from New Brighton to release such writing in a time of heightened fear over the caliber of boys and men in South Africa. In so doing, Buzani has opened up (more) space in literature and the collective imaginary – particularly that of heterosexual black boys and men from the township – for the existence of a more vulnerable masculinity.

Book Review: Mthunzikazi Mbungwana's quiet

To read Mthunzikazi Mbungwana's second poetry collection, *Unam Wena*, is to live in the disquiet of the many characters she has known in her father, mother, lover(s), a childhood friend and herself. But it is almost always empty, because she does not belong. This unbelonging is the central theme of the book. And so, she takes the reader on a lonely, maddening and, sometimes, hopeful four-part search for belonging, or home, while navigating homophobia, misogyny, love, poverty and sickness in family, community and religion. She always returns to her family – what is and was her centre – and it is their dynamic and lineage of not speaking that inspires what is most outstanding about Mbungwana's writing: quiet.

> ndogquma ubuze bukaMama
> UMama wogquma ubuze bukaMakhulu
> bandithwesa ubugqi bokuchopha phezu kwameva angcuthayo
> uMakhulu akophi naye wafundiswa nguMakhulu kaMakhulu
> UTata usenkcochoyini
> uxhathise ngebhayibhile
> UTamkhulu zange abekho
> naleyo ayithethwa.
>
> ("Ameva", p.60)

Throughout the collection, her voice finds strength in quiet. In the first part of the book her unbelonging is new, or arriving. In grappling with homophobia and misogyny, she also tackles the hypocritical terms of (un)desirability concerning black people, women, and her body. She also makes an attempt towards holding her community and family accountable. In the face of this fresh othering and/or rejection, Mbungwana attacks, she laments, and she goes a little insane. Hers is a cunning attack. Heartbreaking images and scenes, and pejoratives in the first person, seem like an acceptance of her alienation; but a stinging quiet between images and lines confronts the world with its own ugly by spewing it back. In "Ndicholwe ndifile" (p.16) she writes: "Ukundinyhala umthondo/ ukundihlohla iimpuku ekukwini/ kuza kundinyanga ndiyagula" (p.16). Her lamentations, in "Umanono" (p.22) for example, are felt less in the words on the page and more in the quiet between (the reader's/her) inaction and the injustice or sorrow she makes the reader watch. In this poem she is particularly deliberate about making the reader watch as she uses a period at the end of each line to make sure you stop.

> UVentere umungunya ubisi lukaManono emabeleni kaEsther.
> UManono ufike uEsther ebeleke uVentere.
> Ibhulukhwe emfutshane kaVentere iwele emaqatheni.

UManono uncanca emabeleni am.
Andiyikhumbuli incasa yobisi lukamama.

("Umanono", p.22)

When insanity comes, like in "Ihlwili" (p.20), her lines trap the reader in the loud quiet of the combination of unrelenting bodily grotesqueness and haunting suggestions of the emotional state of things:

Umqala ugcwele amahlwili
amehlo avalwe bubulembu
ndiyaziqengqa ukusondela ekukhanyeni
ndithembele ngothixo katata ongenadilesi

("Ihlwili", p.20)

In what looks like an attempt to soothe her alienation, and maybe prove it untrue, Mbungwana tries to find belonging and herself in her family in part two of the collection. With poems whose expression and understanding of (her) pain and sorrow is anchored in the *collective* gaze, she very clearly identifies herself as part of the family. In "Ikhaya" (p.39) she proclaims "Ikhaya likhaya", and the volume of her confrontation seems somewhat toned down. It is as if she wants to say – to the unbelonging and loneliness – "look: here I am in this moment, and I am there too, I do belong – here, with these people", but it is not to be. She finds everyone else in her family and the stabbing silence between her, her mother, her grandmother and amongst the whole family. The only suggestions of *her* presence are emptiness and a lack of safety, salvation, and release; prejudicial language and religion; and her inaudible cries: "Isithunzi sam siyagoqoza/ nakulo umfanekiso / andikafiki ekhaya." ("Isithunzi", p.38). And it is with this insertion of her absence, or her absent presence, that Mbungwana weaves a more silent quiet that haunts and hovers throughout this second part. It hovers over her reader, her ancestors, her community, and over and in between her family. The haunting of her absence is enhanced by a reduction of the audible and/or loud action(s) of part one. Instead, she directs the reader more to quiet places like phantsi kwebhedi, estupini esipolishiweyo; and to quiet scenes and images like ukuqaba ilongwe amafutha ehagu, ukufulathelwa, nokulawula amaphupha phezu kwamangcwaba ezinyanya zeminye imizi.

Ixhegwazana lisemva kocango lobomi bam
liphethe intshontsho ledada elimhlophe.

Lihelli ndawonye
lombethe ingxowa.

Ubuso buqatywe udongwe olumnyama
amehlo akude.

("Ixhegwazana", p.41)

One can sense a repressed voice in this part of the collection as Mbungwana loads it with mystery through nameless women who are not even referred to as umakhulu, umama, or herself; a lover who is only *almost* referred to by her clan name; and unexplained bizarre scenes like ikati etya amntshotsho ayo.

The third part of *Unam Wena* sees her looking inward and trying to walk towards herself. It is as if she is seeking the source of her belonging and unbelonging. While trying to move towards, and receive, love; she navigates loneliness, feeling dehumanised by homophobia, and the madness and trauma of loss. She does not attack her unbelonging nor does she try to understand it in relation to her family's pain. She sits with her placelessness, and the reader sits with loneliness, loss (most notably of the author's father), madness and anxieties:

qho ekuzeni kusa umama uyafa
imini ibhace
ubulolo buzakhele ixhobongwana engqondweni
ndifumane ikhaya kwabo bandibona njengokhuko
umahambehlala wokulala imilwelwe.

("Iyabhadula", p.57)

Mbungwana continues to borrow from her family dynamic by not saying things but, in not saying them, she says them with poems strongly rooted in *her* gaze and experience. The quiet here has conviction. It is not so much an attack but a demand for listening and care from her reader, family, community and ancestors. She uses longer lines for madness, and packs sorrow, indictments, gruesome images, and hope in short lines:

ilokhwe yakhe ithinjwe ngamakhalane
iimpundu zixwantsukile
amabele ayaqhuqhumba
ndithethe ndithini.

("Isankxwe, p.53)

The last poem of the section, "Uvula zibhuqe" (p.67), feels like a little release for the reader as Mbungwana's various perspectives – present in this particular poem and this whole section – allow her to speak, more than unspeaking, in the middle of the quiet. While her ability to move her camera around – quickly at that – in a single piece makes her poems throughout the book feel alive, at times it also

sabotages her poems a little. Sometimes tense changes and camera movements that are too quick – between scenes, places and characters (her own and others') – can disrupt the grounding, music and basic coherence of her poems even if consecutive lines share association:

ecaleni kwebhokisi
inyama ebolileyo
ibhuzwa ziimpukane
umoya wam uphothene

* * * * * * * *

ivumba lakho lobuxoki
lindikruna umphefumlo
intliziyo ishiyeke ingumqwebedu
thando undigruzule
kwakhona

("Uvula zibhuqe", p.68)

Thankfully, the great opening of the floodgates that is the final section of the book – a long poem titled "Ihambo" (p.72) – does not fall victim to this. UMbungwana ugcwele indawo, uyabhodla, uyagabha, ugxwal'emswaneni – a moment to put aside holding on, searching and trying to understand. She paints a long and breathless picture of having no feet to go home; her repeated dying; the challenges, progress and relapses of healing; the madness of not being able to go fix things in their beginning; and the exhaustion of grappling with a wound that constantly births itself siblings. Here there is more space between scenes and Mbungwana's camera moves slower between them. No matter where she moves, there is a clear grounding in release and an interplay between the physical world and another. *You* are quiet witnessing this barrage of torment.

umlilo uyandigqwagqwa
ndiyatsha-ndiyakhwaza
ilizwi libizelwa lidangatya
izihlwele zakhe umkhanyo
umfazi ubeleke imbombozi

("Ihambo", p.73)

It would be disingenuous to read *Unam Wena* without mention of the critical role that joy and love play in Mbungwana's work. Part of looking for home through inserting herself where she cannot and/or does not find herself involves inserting beauty, love, hope, and love-making in the middle of the disquiet, loneliness and ugly. While she is very clearly an advocate for giving space to pain, it seems love and joy are her resistance:

> khawude uze wethu.
> uphendule incwadi yam yombane ngeenyawo
> izinkcwe zethu zibikelane ihambo
> sigudlane ngezifuba siqhuqhana inkwethu yeempoxeko zezolo
>
> ("lincwadi zikaMamthile", p.34)

When the quiet of this collection meets the juxtaposition of a poem about horrific homophobia with one about joyful love, it betrays the ridiculousness of homophobia. And this makes the reader wonder if Mbungwana is not only talking to the other, but also to herself – reminding herself of the beauty she is and the beauty she creates. At the Johannesburg launch of *Unam Wena*, Mbungwana was asked about her tendency to place beautiful consensual sex next to rape, or sex between people with a significantly imbalanced power dynamic. Mbungwana explained that it is all part of getting closer to herself: "Ukhona umntu othetha ngokuba sizalelwe kwifunk. Uthi uzalwa nje apha esibelekweni ibe ikhona ituwa kweli cala, libe likhona igazi ngapha, yindlela esizalwa ngayo. Nobomi ke bunjalo. Into ebengasoze ndiyenze ibikukuphinda ndibhale into ekude kunam xa bendihambe ndisithi ndenzela mna, ndiyokukhangela mna."

In this kind of poetry, Mbungwana is not only inserting herself and her experiences in the ideas of belonging, she is also inserting herself and her experiences in isiXhosa literature. In celebrated isiXhosa literature sex is rare, and sex between women is even more so if it exists at all. Erotica in isiXhosa literature yintsomi that will probably never be told. Lesbian erotica? Forget it. Whether she does so deliberately or not, Mbungwana is in conversation with and challenging the isiXhosa literary community and its ideas of what should be written. She has put lesbian sex and erotica at the centre of that conversation:

> ngomlomo wakho uvuma ngogcolodo
> kancinci ndikuphulula iimpundu
> imingxunya yonke ndiyindwendwela ngokuyikhotha
> incwina yethu yingoma yomngqungqo
>
> ("Unam Wena", p.26)

Book Review: Celebrating the poetry of everyday black expression

In her debut collection, *Yellow Shade*, Dimakatso Sedite's poems are clearly located in townships, specifically those in Mangaung. As such, the book feels like a kind of homage. But, despite the place these spaces occupy in her life and her heart, she does not throw around platitudes of love and loyalty, giving us a one-dimensional experience of township life. Instead her honesty, empathy and fire celebrate township life, and they open it up to the reader by asking questions of these townships and/or those who inhabit them. It feels as if she writes these places from the rib:

> Tell him I've gone to soften the hardness of words,
> there by the rust and second-hand tyres.
> I'm shreds; he'll have to be cloud to find me.
> I'm in pozzies like Four –and-Six and Waaihoek.
> My petticoat is shreds off rags. They lie on a sidewalk, defeated –
> That horizon across town is laced in my fragrance.
>
> ("One-way ticket", p.36)

Divided into four sections, the collection deals with feelings of home and growing up; the turbulence of (romantic) relationships; aloneness and surviving labour and township life; and writing life. Throughout the book, what is most arresting is how Sedite expresses energy and emotion in still and moving images. In part one, her poems breathe a breeze of aloneness that seems familiar and, strangely, warm to the poet as she navigates the nostalgia, (distant) warmth, and hurt attached to home and growing up.

> How is it possible to love someone
> whose fate is to leave her favourite skirt
> and me behind?
> My tears dot your skirt like rooibos tea.
> The silence of your presence is a radio
> of memories that will not switch off.
>
> ("My mother's skirt", p.13)

In part two, her images sew tension into the fabric of love:

> "your red bell of silk splashed sexiness
> to Tuku music stringing under a Baobab,

its shade lit by smiles of men with burdens
lost in the tunnels of their eyes,"

("Slipping from me", p.21)

And they propagate the realness – or, at least, the possibility – of the agency of women. Throughout the multiple chaotic love affairs enacted on these pages, agency is always present in Sedite's women. Where it is not explicit, the possibility of it hovers: "i'm a skeleton hanging on your washing line/ till it turns 100 & becomes a terrified stone of hell," ("Bone of beauty", p.25). The imagery in part three creates a devastating and engulfing energy of searching by looking, or trying to look, deeper into objects and situations. At times it seems the thing being searched for is the expression that can precisely articulate and carry the weight of black experience, specifically in the township: "When you lose your mother to death, you spend your life looking for her,/ amongst small stones, on corners of your dishcloth, behind broken cars." ("My mother's house", p.39). Or:

"Plans pour out of her bra, snuff, fahfee numbers, ten rand note, hope.
She unpegs words, as if from a washing line, her teeth mealies pieces
bitten off by a toothless man."

("Mamboshwa looking for work", p.45)

In the final part of the collection, Sedite moves more explicitly between concrete and abstract imagery – thus creating the strong presence of an "other" world.

"Fish slice through water, as shrubs shiver.
Talk overflows, whispering the spirits of //Hu!Gaeb
inside the chests of women whose skin is the shade of clay.
Like soil, scent of their names is everywhere."

("Yellow shade", p.61)

But, as powerful as the imagery is, it can be distracting. At times its lengthy expression overwhelms Sedite's short-lined poems. Put differently; Sedite tends to pack too much consecutive detail, or ideas, in her images and/or scenes without offering the reader a moment (through punctuation and/or line breaks) to digest the preceding detail. This is largely because much of her writing is anchored in metaphor or simile and, at times, this is done to an extent of overwriting. As such, the flow and music of the poems can be disrupted, and the expression in them might feel a bit too abstract/far removed (at least from me).

> “She braids a mosaic with this shock, a wafer cracking
> within a concert of rain, unpuddled, sloshing with lost
> cloths and branches under the waters off Port Alfred”

(“Ugly”, p.26)

But this does not occur so frequently as to spoil the reading experience. In the collection's most powerful moments, her images captivate because of how she paints them. Her phrasing is colloquial. Reading Sedite feels like an affirmation and celebration of the poetry of working class black colloquial imaginary and expression. With Yellow Shade, she has put this language in its rightful place – poetry.

> “Your heart is a red panty on that
> washing line, behind that boiling
> shack that packs us like tinned fish”

(“Don’t die like I did”, p.52)

Book Review: Athambile Masola's freedom in every woman

Ilifa, Athambile Masola's debut poetry collection is simultaneously a reading of freedom in South Africa, and a reflection on what it is to be(come) a black woman in patriarchal, racist, sexist, classist and capitalist freedom-day South Africa. It is a *search* for freedom. The book starts with a tone-setting poem, "Umyalelo wentombi", which is also the title of part one of the collection. This poem is a list of instructions to a girl or young woman. The absence of the girl or woman's voice, and the mostly single-phrase lines, create a cold silence that captures the unperson that the girl or woman is in the conversation. The centring of the other and his or her preference is unmissable:

> Ungabhentsi
> Ungathethi gqithi
> Ungabz'amehlo
> Ungakhwazi.
>
> ("Umyalelo wentombi", p.13)

And, with darkness and loneliness, the poems that follow lament the failure of the girl or young woman's relationship(s), despite the "tips" from the opening poem. The best moments here are in Masola's use of nature to illustrate a dishevelled life and the feelings of being left. In "Ngokwexesha" her character is literally a lone figure outside in the sun: "Kusehlotyeni/ Ndigcakamele ilanga." (p.19). In "Iinyawo zinodaka" it is water: "Yagaleleka imvula/ Enyuka amanzi/ Sangena isaqhwithi endlwini" (p.14). In the poems that follow, Masola's characters blatantly work against the self-sacrificing, and centring of the other, of "Umyalelo wentombi". Iintombi zilala emini, zizizifebe ezifumana loo nto ziyifunayo, and they are free of any illusions about (pleasing) men. Oomama bayathandaza ngapha, babhukuqa umbuso ngaphaya. Reading these different kinds of girls and women in one book is the highlight of this collection – it makes the world feel completely open. And it seems knowing these girls and women, possibly in herself too, allow Masola the freedom to centre herself and look for herself in her family lineage, and in women in literature and activism who remind her of who she wants to be.

> Zibhale ngesiqu sakho
> Abo banamehlo bakubone
>
> Zibhale ngelizwi lakho
> Abo baneendlebe bakuve
>
> Zibhale ngeenyawo zakho
> Abo bafunayo bakulandele
>
> ("Imbali", p.31)

The third and final part of the book, titled “Apha”, reveals more of the South Africa alluded to in part one, and all the poems here are an indictment on the country and all who benefit from its status quo. Masola deals with the seemingly endless Covid-19 life, homelessness, white people, an inept president and government, black people’s inhumane living conditions, and the country’s inherent violence. Against all of this, the book ends with Masola offering herself and the reader an inheritance, or legacy, of self-love – against self-muting and erasure – as a possible tonic towards surviving, living, and maybe even thriving in this heart-breaking country.

Igagu
Ukundweba
Ukuzigqatsa
Ukuzithanda
Ukuzidla

Andinamfuyo
Andinandlu
Andinamhlaba

(“Ilifa”, p.76)

Parts one and two mostly deal with themes that Masola is familiar with in her academic work – the erasure of black women in (intellectual and literary) history, and the many violences of South Africa. But it may be because of this that a number of the poems in these sections are not as strong as those in part two. Rooted in presenting an argument, and the facts, the poems in parts one and three tend to make the reader *listen* to what they are saying rather than locate one *in* what is happening. Though Masola makes good use of metaphor, irony and repetition; creatively, these poems are underwritten.

Ungqengqe ngomqolo, ugqitywe ziindywala
Akukhw’apho aya kona
Akukhw’apho asuka khona,
Umahamb’ehlala, umahla-ndinyuka.
Ngumhambi wohambo olungqunga nolungqisha ndawonye.

(“Ngoobani aba?”, p.67)

The poems would benefit from tighter and more creative editing, and possibly a more personal focus. In a number of them, Masola reads herself and society in one poem. But considering the collective deprives her the space to bring the reader closer to herself and her poems – as she does in part two; “Uthando”. Here healing, new romance, resistance and the joy thereof, a slowness facilitated by nature, and the love

the women in her life give to her and others, teach her to love herself. She learns this also through acknowledging her emotional exhaustion. All these things bring her closer to *her*. She is mostly writing from experiences specific to *her* and, so, she has freedom in expression. She gets more into "the thing" of things and offers the reader fresh(er) language. Masola finds freedom in love and in (love for) self, and gives us the best poetry of this collection. We get the things – the non-facts – we come to poetry to read – heat, tension, desire, breath, the feel of a hand:

> Izandla zakho ngamehlo abukayo
> Ukuqala ebunzi
> Uyo' phuma ngeenzwane
>
> Izandla zakho zindityhilela iimfihlelo zalo mzimba wam

("Izandla", p.56)

I look forward to more of Masola getting lost in poetry's freedom, the freedom to sometimes sidestep the facts and forgo explanation, as she brings every woman to literature and our collective imagination.

Writing In Community

In May 2021 I participated in the MACW's writing community project, called *Writing In Community*, through the Community Online International Learning (COIL) programme. My classmates and I were put into three groups of three and partnered up with second year creative writing students from the City University of New York's (CUNY) LaGuardia Community College. Our task was to create and conduct writing workshops, for the rest of the group, from which new writing would be produced for a chapbook. Below is a short report on the experience.

COIL Report: Opening space

Before being introduced to COIL, I had never been involved in any international learning programme. I had never heard of COIL, and I had no real expectations of it. I was just eager to see how it would turn out. The only thing that can be called an expectation – not mine, but one created by the pre-workshop questionnaire – is that I guessed there would be a lot of intercultural negotiation needed. While I had been looking forward to this too – because I enjoy the community and exchange that comes from such experiences – this was not the case. There was no negotiating to be done, we related to each other with ease.

Three groups of three from our MACW class were each required to curate a poetry/prose writing workshop about anything. Our workshops had to have sufficient reading material by African writers (including ourselves); discussion of the reading material; and an assignment that would be done by all writers in attendance barring those who had conducted the workshop. We would then have feedback sessions during which everyone would share work and receive feedback from each other. I immediately recognised this: the workshops were to be similar to our MACW seminar weeks. The only difference was that, instead of two to three hours, our workshops would be 45 minutes to an hour long. For the purpose of teamwork, the natural response was to partner up with whomever I got along with best in our class. But I abandoned that thought as quickly as I had thought it and I considered, instead, people whose writing is close to mine. My thinking was that we would likely want to discuss the same writing theme or that we would, at least, be able to identify strongly enough with whatever theme another wanted to discuss. This process was also driven by the fact that I already knew what theme I wanted to explore: *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* This is something that is important to me in my life and in my writing. It is my favourite thing to experience in others' art. I am intrigued by how it works in writing. I also thought this theme would be a powerful way to speak to and illustrate the idea of the CUNY LaGuardia course; "This is not a small voice". I recalled my classmates' work and felt this theme most in Gaireyah Fredericks and Nelia Cunningham's work. And so, our group was created.

What worked well for me, and the group, was that we are all massive fans of each other's work. So, during previous months, we had all paid particular attention to each other's writing. We knew the work well enough to cite a favourite piece by the other writer. Therefore, as the *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* campaigner, I was able to analyse how this theme functions in all our work and use this analysis to convince my group mates that this was what we should discuss in our workshop. *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* in Fredericks's writing works within and between characters; in Cunningham's writing it works in setting and/or scene,

mostly through nature. In my work it works at an energetic level – the energy of a piece; the unsaid and the how of things said. I presented this to Fredericks and Cunningham, referencing "Kinnes Vannie Jannat" by Fredericks, Cunningham's "The Foxglove of Denhoog", and "with a torn name" from my work. They agreed, and we used this very brief analysis to start a conversation towards the workshop notes/talking points. We decided the workshop would be a poetry and prose discussion of *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* from these three perspectives – each one would conduct a discussion from her perspective.

Because I knew very well what work gets me excited about *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* and why, it was easy for me to be absolutely clear about the reading material I wanted to contribute to the workshop; which work I definitely wanted to speak about during the workshop; and that which could be additional reading. For those really interested in the theme outside of COIL, I was also able to contribute some extra reading material. Fredericks, too, loves *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* so she had too much in-workshop material, but we were able to collectively agree on what to trim and what to transfer to additional reading. I was most happy about the fact that she clearly expressed complete comfort with this process. I was also grateful that she did the extra work of translating "Kinnes Vannie Jannat" to English – because she, Cunningham and I agreed that it spoke most poignantly to our theme – even though she had another piece already in English. I think Fredericks and I misinterpreted, or overestimated, the level of Cunningham's confidence about speaking to this theme through setting and/or scene. When she showed one of our lecturers, Hardy, the material she intended to contribute to the reading pack, Hardy suggested some changes. I think Cunningham needed more discussion and thinking space. I still wonder if Fredericks and I – we are very loquacious – had given Cunningham enough space to express her thinking (doubts included). Cunningham and I have not yet had a chance to have this conversation, but I have a feeling Fredericks and I did not give her enough space. Had we done this, we would have had a conversation that would have been more helpful to Cunningham and her selection of reading material <u>from the beginning</u>. My tone here might make one think that Cunningham's selection was disastrous – it was not. It just needed some seasoning and variety. In the end, Hardy's intervention was helpful and Cunningham discussed her selected material beautifully. She also put together a gorgeous PowerPoint presentation for our group.

I was very glad that Hardy, and lecturers Vangile Gantsho and Allia Abdullah-Matta took the time to talk through our workshops with all of us before we finalised them. Our group was so excited about discussing the reading material that, initially, we had not thought a lot about the assignment (to give to the writers) that would produce the writing for the chapbook. As such, when we were reminded to think about this, we had too many options when weighed against the duration of our workshop and the amount of information we would have just thrown at the writers. We shared our litany of assignment ideas with all three of our lecturers and their suggestions helped us arrive at a single assignment prompt for all three of our perspectives on *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* We asked the writers to choose one out of three photographs to respond to through a piece of creative writing in which *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* would be a central theme. They also had the option to respond to all three images, in different pieces or in a single piece.

I was sad that we did not have more time – say, two hours – for our workshops, so that there would be more interaction. I am a big believer that a learning experience is more enriching with more interaction from all in the room. Sometimes we are not aware of what we already know until we articulate it – interaction and expression is important. I wanted everyone to have enough space to hash out their

particular thoughts and feelings about *Quiet. Silence. Stillness.* in writing, so as to move towards their writing identity within this theme. So, during and after our workshop, I was uneasy about not knowing how the participants in the workshop truly felt about the theme. But it turned out that there was no need for this, and that our 40-odd-page reading pack was as helpful as we thought it would be in guiding everyone as they worked on their assignments. I was pleased to see that the writers' voices and stories were not silenced by our workshop and its theme, and that it allowed for impressive growth in relation to previous work submitted. In fact, as someone who ended up facilitating all our group's feedback sessions, I was very happy to observe that all the workshops were not restrictive to the writers. And this, for me, is one of the more important take-aways from this COIL programme: good writing opens up space for other good writing. Good "teaching" (conversations, rather) of writing should open up possibilities and space for writers – it certainly did so for me. I missed the first workshop, *Writing under harsh conditions*, because I had CoVid-19. But, from it, I was able to produce some of my more inspired writing because the workshop gave me space – even though I was not part of the actual workshop and watched the recording instead. This is something I want to hold onto – to give myself and other writers space, and to search for ways of giving the reader space. Another good "review" of our workshop came in the form of CUNY LaGuardia student Aidan Ling asking me, even though he was not in my feedback group, to give him feedback on a piece he wrote for a different assignment. He said a lot of what our workshop covered resonated. He and I spent almost two hours on Zoom, and about 45 minutes on WhatsApp, talking about his piece! It is clear to me now that I feel thoroughly enriched by seeing, and being part of, a writer coming into his/her voice.

Feedback (groups) also made up for the robbed feeling I had after the presentations. Because of the extremely limited interaction from the LaGuardia students during the presentations – and because I have interacted at length with my classmates on the subjects of their respective workshops – I left the presentations with almost exactly the same amount of knowledge I had. But in the feedback groups we got to have brief discussions, and we also discussed certain points more in depth. I facilitated the feedback groups exactly like our MACW feedback groups – the writer keeps quiet while receiving feedback from fellow writers. I wish that there had been more time to allow everyone to find their way and words towards giving feedback. Some comments emanating from CUNY LaGuardia students Jareth Roman and Vilsen Joseph's work really hammered in the importance of gaze/perspective in a piece of writing, and holding this gaze or knowing when and how to shift it. I also discovered something I had not known I know; that I like being drawn closer to the world of a piece of writing, be it through a character or setting. This drawing closer happens when the writer provides specifics. I learned this when giving Roman and Jospeh feedback (in some long voice notes I sent them) and found myself asking them for specifics. The understanding that teaching is learning rings true. Maybe, at its best and because of the exchanges, "teaching" helps all involved know themselves better.

I must say, though, it would have been nice to have been partnered up with writers with slightly more experience so as to have that much more to learn from them. Having said that, I must also probably contradict myself and say that this was not that big a gap because there was still Hardy, Gantsho and Abdullah-Matta. I got great feedback on my first assignment – great in the sense that it reminded me of the very first lesson I learnt in this MACW. That lesson was to be clear about my reader so that I am clear about whether or not to translate and, more importantly, to remember that explaining is also translation.

I remembered this when I was advised to remove certain phrases and (accompanying) words like “to”, “when”, “like” from my piece because they explained unnecessarily. Way to bring me back to myself!

Writing In Community with COIL was a wonderful experience for me. I am also very happy to have learned about the other collaborations (unrelated to writing) that COIL had, which I think so many of us could benefit from. I would have loved to have been physically at a conference of this nature.

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