

**how to open the door**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

**Marike Beyers**

November 2013



## **Abstract**

A collection of mostly lyrical poems. The poems explore moments of experience and thought relating to longing and belonging, in terms of relations, memory and place.

The poems are mostly short and intense. Silence and implied meanings are often as important as what is said; shadows are evoked to recall substance. Though short, the poems are not tightly closed – on the contrary, meanings proliferate in the process of exploration.



# Contents

## I

word hunt	9
Joburg	10
childhood travels	11
oupa	12
writer of days	13
passer-by	14
old wives' tale	15
severance	16
they asked	17
the world	18
to have and to hold	19
inside	20
breathing	21
the hills continue	22

## II

winter's throat	25
sister	26
brother	27
weekend pass	28
night out	29
Pretoria	30
office block	31
map	32
brother	33

surely	34
you came back	35
you cannot rip it out	36
in a strange land	37

### **III**

back to before	41
the quiet child	42
church camp	43
body story	44
gravestones	45
voice	46
nothing looked back	47
the door	48
independence	49
to my parquet floor	50
1 am	51
home	52
twilight	53
lesson	54
birthday litany	55

**I**



## **word hunt**

found it! found it!  
the child of me running to Grandma  
bird's nest of beads books  
little red seeds  
raining leaves  
patterns of letters  
running blurred at the edges

Be clear  
she says

anchored like a balloon  
I hover at the window

## Joburg

we went to Joburg  
with our granddad  
and he wore his hat  
as he always did

it was a long way  
and the grass was burnt  
we had fizzers & cool drinks  
and held onto his hands

we went up a high building  
and down a hill  
the sky rose  
over the traffic  
and graffiti walls  
I thought we were lost

he worked here once  
taking a slow train  
sleeping far away  
*such a dark place*  
*when he frowned*

but this day  
this day shone  
right past the grit on the windows

## **childhood travels**

under miles and miles of cloudless skies  
fields passing by        zirrers we called them  
running counter to the road  
as if we could put out our arms  
and stroke the green stalks like a cat

untold from the corner of my eye  
a silver shimmer followed the car  
keeping pace        balancing the road  
what would happen if we left it behind  
slipping into that edge it measured

## **oupa**

he'd hold us at arm's length  
as if to study us  
kiss us goodbye on the head  
*oumenskieme* he said  
not to catch them  
as if we could forever run  
escape into trees barefoot

## **writer of days**

starting with the weather  
his father wrote up each day  
- my grandfather told me this -  
after the death of his daughter  
stillborn he marked each day  
with a thick black line

what about him  
the child living  
- I thought -  
but it slipped  
into his open smile  
room for the world

## **passer-by**

old man in a hat -  
fist in my chest  
it cannot be him

was he ever that old -  
when I think of his voice  
I hear a boy on a bike

see his smile bending  
over a piece of wood  
the sweetness of a day

I walk with his hands  
unfolding puppets  
as if that could recall him

the unbending thumb  
the cracks across knuckles  
no winter could reach

## **old wives' tale**

charmer  
dreamer  
day-time tinker

dancer  
swinger  
night-time drinker

sweet man  
glass man  
all-time fine man

bold man  
bouncer  
broken brother

left man  
lover  
last man    lost

## **severance**

waking, expecting window,  
he stared at a wall in Hillbrow  
folded inside his banishment

but maybe it was weekends home,  
her silence boarding windows  
where true exile took

## **they asked**

he asked of her  
what she could not open  
like a fern's inner green  
curled

she lived this  
like swallowing  
boiling soup  
the peeling  
insides of the mouth  
standing straight  
balancing books  
all those words  
that did not help  
like drinking milk  
and not crying  
when the door was closed

she asked of him  
what he could not contain  
like summer rushing by  
outside

## **The world**

The one room I ever saw them together.  
She'd come to watch the news  
or the *World at War*. Too grim  
he'd say and leave to make tea  
and find some biscuits, sweets.  
Peace offerings or bribes.

Holding on to my knees, watching bodies  
flung across time with the reasonable  
voice of fact. The world. I always  
accepted the tea, keeping perfectly still.  
I don't know what I thought. Next week  
would repeat the news. She always refused.

## **to have and to hold**

having tea I'd look at my hands  
taking sugar from one and milk from the other  
waiting until one left before moving my cup  
he was clever he said  
for marrying a wife more clever than he  
what kind of point was that  
she said few people even tried  
to write a totally good man in books  
he was he was but he was not at all wise  
how cold the floor always seemed to be  
I thought how hard it must have been  
to live with him and how soft  
how with herself in herself she could be

## **inside**

I don't know how  
my grandmother spoke that way  
as if all her words  
were already recorded  
inside her. my own sentences  
that couldn't be like that.  
it was worst with her.  
I'd watch myself as if.  
but couldn't line them up  
properly. did it matter.  
she never mentioned it  
and so I kept on  
talking to her  
in my head

## **breathing**

one time when I sent myself to watch her breathing in those last years when she thought she would die and didn't, she wasn't. I mean, I intended the barefoot tiptoe to her bed, scarcely breathing myself so as not to wake her, to comfort myself with the lift and fall of her breath until the cold of the floor shook to my shoulders. instead I found her crying. soundless. hopeless. helped onto the commode, held, hurt. she did not see me. thrown against the railings.

## **the hills continue**

go tell her, he said, before she dies,  
and leaves so much unsaid through time  
but so wordless was that waiting  
with remorse as little as the breath  
she wished to hold       and could not  
what was to say       everything  
the endless words       the silence of the years  
the loneliness       that the hills continue  
and, for now, the cycad's seeds break open  
into sun       what is to say  
I never understood       yet  
if I were to stand beside her now  
I'd leave us still in the unsaid

**II**



## **winter's throat**

this night pours from winter's throat  
the horizon to my door  
a blade of cold    a fist of fear  
as I walk in the dread of my brother's death

the streets in my city are ash  
the cathedral tower obscured in darkness  
buses rumble by more gently  
than dry leaves on concrete

these are the streets I know  
the trees shudder in the wind  
folded inside I only find  
these two suitcases and such heavy feet

**sister**

outside  
the geese  
and the child's voice  
demanding

centrifugal forces  
curve your bones  
cell by cell  
to this calling

## **brother**

the crying for a brother  
it never ends  
running into drink  
into hills  
into rocks  
harder  
so much harder  
than the soft beating  
of hurts  
the quiet voices  
he cannot hear himself  
his crying  
he turns the ignition key  
he gets onto a plane  
he misses the lightning  
the hope of a mother  
unshaking like flowers  
every spring  
her soft hands in windows  
almost safe  
brother  
not quite here  
he walks out of words  
no holding-place

## **weekend pass**

it's four in midcity's Sunday  
the bus is late to camp  
another week closed in  
where the phones are broke  
the water some days cut  
counting salutes as a name

it's four-thirty and no-one else to wait  
his hands slip inside his sleeves  
nights of beers and bravado  
listing bad luck and injustice  
the mountains of it and the dust  
as medals            as proof of life

it's past five in the grey  
his luggage lumped at his feet  
he can't show his hands  
tastes the mud in his throat  
as the bus pulls in  
out of nowhere the others appear

## **night out**

the dust and the yellow grass  
the uniformity of brick  
no matter how fast you drive the other way  
you always end up at the guard's post  
the slow grins and sudden pacing  
you know the wail to keep you in  
is lodged inside your throat

## Pretoria

new junction at Wonderboom  
pretends to look at the mountain  
polished uniform concrete  
pedestrian bridge smashed  
no entering on foot  
or leaving  
past the waterfall  
pumped in habitual hope  
cars cars cars

\*\*\*

at Sterland we're the only whiteys  
way underdressed  
at this old teen hangout  
all funky family fun  
half-moon stairs  
and glitzy carpets  
rising in flashback sweetness  
it used to be so tatty  
when I lived here

\*\*\*

the city is lost to me  
midcity Sunnyside  
the old way home  
I no longer know the buses  
when they pass  
just the old hearsay  
how dangerous  
how unreliable  
*you don't want to go there*

## **office block**

the mysteriousness of buildings  
how they swallow people  
inside all that business like chewing  
and you cannot call out  
doors open like smiles  
that ask but cannot hear

## **map**

the earth turns under my feet  
as I look for familiar places -  
a friend's house the wild fig tree  
a café on that corner

the map in my head is outdated  
step by step doorways turn to parking lots

## **brother**

from turpentine to TB  
the boy who would not breathe  
who bawled smoked boozed  
wrecked other people's cars  
crawled out black-and-blue

who fell  
out of a tree  
right onto stone  
hobbled on  
then disappeared

**surely**

you knelt there  
it seemed forever

there should be flowers

one could not be this cold  
and live

I should be the one  
walking towards you

## **you came back**

here I am all razor blades  
and concrete rubble  
all corners sharp

    I thought  
you came back

    I thought  
you called

        it was such a thin-legged walk  
        all the green inside  
        and the hands slipping through

and there you stood  
your mouth of broken birds

    I thought  
the plain could be crossed

    I thought  
your shadow would fall on the sand

**you cannot rip it out**

you cannot rip it out  
so you just stand there  
your hand inside your chest  
feeling its horrible wetness  
falling with each breath  
you just stand there  
as if your shoes  
were the centre of the world

## **in a strange land**

as strange as anyone  
looking for a sprig of green

the city rises        rises here  
the country of everywhere  
ten million feet from platform to platform  
the days at 4 o'clock the windows shut

I see the walls        I hope  
I step out        it's not falling

every day is the death of first rain  
and flowers        rows and rows  
as the guards come on  
count the boots the coins  
the trains rushing by

if the world had hands  
could I have been a person

the if of life and I hold it in my mouth  
the I – I unreturned  
a small stone held in the hand  
I cannot keep it myself  
but who else



**III**



## **back to before**

first the voice inside her head broke up -

like the noise of birds  
shrieking at an owl in a daylight tree

she could not find her way back to before

it had the clarity of cages  
when the sky was locked

and she could not sing

## **the quiet child**

you never saw her  
because she didn't speak  
at school she hid  
behind the loos at break  
she mouthed the times tables

you never heard her  
because she stood that still  
she never showed her hands  
stared through her books  
word by word to want

## Church camp

This was her first camp.  
She was afraid of the adults,  
Of missing the cues,  
Not knowing the rules.  
I was afraid of the other children.

I'd already learnt to be invisible.  
It was much harder with her wanting.  
It weighed on my chest,  
Pulled at my hands,  
To keep her safe.

We slept outside,  
Smuggling sleeping bags from the rooms,  
Trooping off in small groups under the stars -  
Girls in the clearing to the East,  
Boys on the edge of the lawn to the South.  
We found a spot higher up, us two,  
Away from the clustered campers,  
Curled up in the whispers of the night.

Relief seeped from my bones and let the music in.

Shrieks from the lower lawn -  
Boys raiding, pirate nights  
Whoops disaster downhill yells  
Torch beams flung into the sky.

*Should we go down there?* she whispered.

## **body story**

the fingers with no memory of their hurt.  
the shoulder turned sideways.  
the knuckles leaning towards walls.  
the nails that love new scars,  
fretting crusted red at the tips.  
the wrists pushing away.  
the elbows that want.  
the palms in their closing.  
the hands in their gentleness.

## **gravestones**

the leaves rustle and we do not count them  
one by one the moss grows into words  
William Lucas died aged three  
is this stone more of him by now  
than the child crying a mother stoneless  
folding herself out like a cloth  
this is what mothers do  
the weepful chanting may he be  
not a soldier not that William  
from a far-off land died twenty-one  
does it matter on sea or on foot

## **voice**

it slips down your throat  
making home inside your chest  
you cannot cough it up

it rushes from you  
when you reach for it  
you can only wait

you get up one day  
and find this rock on it  
your breath seeps out

you cannot move it  
or step around it  
you do not know the weight

## **nothing looked back**

from the window  
she could not remember  
the name of the street  
or the smell of flowers  
she had lived here for months  
this morning the walls tilted  
the ceiling pushed at her ears  
how to open the door

## **the door**

face  
the wall  
with every breath  
the room  
edges in  
another inch

the door  
is to the back  
you must  
believe this  
even  
if it's shut

## **independence**

does it matter if he yelled at her  
pushed her into corners  
drew small and smaller circles  
for her to dance in them  
does it matter if he pushed her deeper  
would not call her name  
does it matter if he lied about the laughter

## **to my parquet floor**

your three-by-three pattern consoles me  
holding me home in the night  
when I glide on that road without gates

you are my ground up in the sky  
you cannot see how my heels hear you  
whispering rhymes to remind me

when I leave you hold up the walls  
tell me, do you long for the voices  
of the people I don't bring to greet you

**1 am**

in the dark of town  
my room four flimsy walls

I miss that almost home  
from a winter ages ago

my brothers are so far away  
will the candle last the night

## **home**

the weekend slumps from my shoulders  
swings me straight back here  
a road along the sea  
and the aloes burning in my breath  
- each time it is like this -  
the horizon clipped just around the corner  
the days rolled tightly into home

## **twilight**

the curtain partly drawn  
the computer humming  
humming the hours  
into windows and pages  
just closed           with papers  
papers scattered on the floor  
waiting – but not quite – for the phone  
will it be the good sad news

## lesson

that time  
when my life  
fell into corners

that time  
my father sat me down  
he poured me wine  
there in the kitchen  
and showed me  
step by step  
how to make ratatouille

each vegetable  
    laid out  
            prepared  
with a hint of cinnamon  
at the end

## **birthday litany**

rain in your garden missing the highveld  
the thunder also and far-off mountains  
or dreams of heights here the ridges  
and the spring of jacarandas with oupa's  
jovial reprimand a wish clear flowing pipes  
of purple flowers and the barefeet bravado  
of red-stained bougainvillea bushes  
the innocence of earthworms somewhere  
a bucketful of shine and splashing the glimmer  
of a moon green star rooms steps to somewhere  
without falling in falling over falling away horizons  
close to a foot shifting from there to here  
resting in the hand resting warm and soft  
as soaped skin and midnight feasts  
wine under a tree the thin veins of leaves  
touching the net between remembering  
and a bird calling the always high  
of trees rustling secret games hide & seek  
and flying down steep streets in joy  
and may there always be other people  
and movement moments revolving all  
is not blue music's soft beat in the chest  
like tears the white face of the street  
the knock-knock of hope turning the page  
to tomorrow and an eye that looks  
and rests in silence the openness of halfway