

The Zulu Girl and other Poems

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of English poems that converse with Mazisi Kunene's literary corpus. I draw from both Kunene's early works, which followed the pioneering work of the Zulu poet BW Vilakazi, and his socio-political later work, which is at once Pan African in scope and intent yet deeply rooted in a Zulu socio-linguistic milieu. Like Kunene, I aim to create a poetics of exile by working between languages, writing in Zulu and then translating into English to express my alienation in South Africa and what it means to be exiled from language and culture and speak a foreign language with your mother tongue. Here, I also take influence from the rich, evocative imagery in Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's poetry of exile and the quest for a lost homeland, as well as Brazilian poet Adela Prado's wit and direct speech. I also engage popular contemporary forms of expression and use poetry to question some themes in the popular music genre maskandi, especially its rhetoric on identity, class and gender politics.

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The Zulu Girl

She catches her wave at Durban's Dairy Beach
shares the ocean with Jordy Smith, Heather Clark, Shaun Tomson.
The Zulu girl hits bomb waves in Vic Bay and Stilbaai.

The day she is born her father slaughters a goat,
rubs meat on coarse salt on a wooden board.
He swears by God and his ancestors
his daughter will never fling a hoe for crumbs.

He frees her from the torment of flies,
towards the crest of a wave, ever clean ever charging.
The Zulu girl is a fresh harvest of agile legs,
a big south breaking the sandbars of history.

Hung on her shoulders is a surfboard,
her child ready to be flung at sea for fun.
She is ready to seize the tide,
paddles into the glassy green skidding around the foam.

Her father is adamant
she will never fling a hoe for crumbs.
The day she is born he slaughters a goat,
rubs meat on coarse salt on a wooden board.

Hatred

This is our inheritance
the language of the present and a poisoned future.

Not because it is hard to break bread
or remove shrapnel in each other's eyes.

When we enter the furnace, we shall burn bound hands and feet;
our price for refusing to see ourselves in the other.

Seasons

The maize seeds are drying,
ear husks are turning warm-brown.
Like a special guest is about to arrive.

The ears are pulled from the plants,
some husks bunch the plant.
We have survived the elements.

When tilling the ground begins,
questions abound:
Are my parents nourishing the soil - my soul?

Seeing the seeds drying excites me.
I mulch carrot seeds in shallow furrows in February.
Like a special guest is about to arrive.

With every birthday questions still arise.
As life spins me like a coin, turning my sugars into starch.
Am I an old corn that has lost its natural sweetness?

Between this season and the last,
rainwater washed the thin topsoil of my youth.
The erosion of the soil and soul - scary, cancerous.

The lost sheep is crying in the wilderness.
Maize seeds are turning warm-brown.
Sheep bleat for a special guest who may or may not arrive.

Farewell Hornman

(for Bra Hugh)

To be black & beautiful.
Oh what an elegant song!
A place of dogged desire.
Stimela!
Our dear freedom gong is forever.
Clickety-clack!
Our angry migrant's song ain't gone.
Choo! Tjoe!
The uhuru train still grazes.
Malibuye!
Sister Cortez, our train endures.
Bra Hugh still sings his blue notes.
He's our bold & black rock.
He stokes the boilers. Fire!
Just like Trane's blue dream-train.
Stimela!

Boyhood

Games with other village boys.
Crickets chirp & goats bleat.

The red hen runs with a dead rat in her beak.
We boys slide on grass with torn pants.

Mom cooks phuthu and spinach.
A boy farts & laughs aloud.

White boys bundu-bash our village at will.
We cheer them & their bright-coloured bikes.
They invade our villages without visas.
They spoon on fine food in the local towns.
Sleep on full & fluffy plush pillows.

The family dog shits and drifts.
I pick a stone shouting empty stupidities.
Young rural women are red-happy
ready to feed their dry skins red ochre
nourish their dreamt-beauty, dazzle their suitors.

Bra Bheka mows lawns in white Scottburgh
the sun dances on his forehead day-long
He can't holler even when his back hurts.

freedom

weave a word my love
a warm and tender word
to bear the burden of our forbidden love
no question marks
hyphens and pauses needed
no long-winded sentences
no painful paragraphs
no stressful and sunless stanzas

weave a word my love
celebrate our grand embrace
with crazy, jazzy capital and small letters
snake and ladder-sentences
say it with fearless fire, daring fury

Migrants

When you arrive at Park Station, you tremble
like yellowed aspen leaves,
then quickly compose yourself.
The trick is not to look lost,
scared or without valid papers.

Street vendors shout on top of their voices.
At the taxi rank, a tsotsi is running:
a woman cries out for help a - her handbag is gone.
Too late to call the police.
To escape is to score.

I am about to board a Greyhound.
Going home for Christmas.
I open a packet of peanuts.
A maskandi guitarist tickles the crowd.
Salutes someone he calls a lion, his king.
Moistening the soil somewhere far away
Preparing his tomato bed back home.
We are all tomato plants, tied to stakes.
Geraniums that can't bloom to their fullest.

Knynsa Blue

It is cold, your heart is warm
spacious and well.

Your heart is the lap of waves
natural light dancing all-day long
my heart's shaman.

Let's go to Knynsa now
for sea and sunshine treats
the Knynsa Lourie – dreams.

I will bake you scones
soft like my mother's
then improve this poem.

day of the tulip

i smile as you arise radiant from the long grass
i am a clean vase full of fresh water
your soft subtle scent warms my heart
growing spring bulbs in our garden
today my search ends
let me harvest you like a flower
save you from sun stress my tulip

Umkhomazi

This river sings to my enchantment
She sings in my mother tongue
Her spirit is forever.

Umkhomazi has heavenly eyes.
She winks but never weeps.
Her presence is live-giving.

The sea lies like a lover in the distance.
I have not brought any picnic basket along.
Joy is my river singing in the tongue of home.

Streets are not for Children

We are your children.
Our birth was not the rotting of intestines.
That is why we search for your love in the dark forest.
Hear our cries, heal our gaping wounds.

Wash our tiny feet in warm water.
Break bread and take us home.
The streets of this city have bruised us.
They even refuse to remember our names.
In the streets every night is winter.
Yet we continue dreaming the dance of the red moon.

Izinkabi

We now laugh even when someone has died.
The TV weatherman is a clown for all seasons.
Not just a fair-weather friend.

We wait for him as we pick our teeth,
waiting for another TV soapie.
Enjoying his jokes, terrified by the news bulletin.

A hysterical woman shows reporters traces of no-name blood.
Unknown gunmen broke open the hostel door,
killing three men - vanishing.
Mauling night owls or daring delivery boys?

Gogo Wethu

(for, my beloved grandmother Clara Mavundla)

Your strength dried like a potsherd when you left Ngunjini,
severing your marital knot
alone fleeing into the wilderness.

You walked away alone, alone you walked
words meaningless, dead like dust
censored emotions - betrayal.

Your departure failed to cast a lasting shadow,
over the future of your children,
and their children.

Your love keeps us alive.
You lead an ancestral army at the right hour,
wondrous rosary woman, warm as toast.

Your heart carried your children,
lost little girls Thembi and Dumazile
waking up to a cold motherless world – betrayal.

Towards the Mountain

Mist shrouds the mountain at her summit,
like waltzing snow.
Doves dance over the Mphambanyoni valley.
Birds at ease in the forest of fat leaves.
I am ready for treasures that await me.
Twilight tells the tales of my village, to young and old.
These memories are dearer than a lover's farewell kiss.
The misty mountains are calling.
I would be foolish not to return the friendship.

Mpondo Blues

My teacher says poor soil kills sugarcane,
recommends humid soils as a cure.

She says salt assaults this sweet coastal plant
yet she refuses to sing me the Mpondo blues.

Silences the saga of indentured Indians & Africans
sees light in the dark sugar-cane slave trade.

My teacher does n't know the SS Truro;
that shameful 1860 Indian slave ship.

She bans the cries of the children of Calcutta,
Delhi & Madras.

Yet jazzman Nomvete sings the song.
I too now hum the banned Mpondo blues.

Nkuzemdaka strums the illicit song.
He gripes, jives & smiles for miles.

Nkunzi stirs the meadows of Mbizana,
a great teacher of bondage as history.

premonition

yesterday's dream left her sack of stones
nightmares hardly make sense
a gunshot in an empty room
screams of terror in the dark

someone offers African brew, i spill it at once
lightning entered our house once, left us shaken
a gunshot in an empty room
screams of terror in the dark

ICU

Vultures plot their dance in the sky,
Nurses rearrange your bedside.
A storm is approaching.

Wires on your body scare me.
Mother now answers your phone,
with reluctance – dread.

You have been stripped of your personal belongings,
your face towel, tooth brush and books.
The owl hoots tonight.

I don't have an ICU father,
dressed in catheters, cardiac and heart monitors.
Chest tubes suck your blood.
Monitors whisper the song of the owl.

Spring Songs

I

One Spring day you crossed the wild sea.
Circling stars so bright so warm.
It is well with my soul.
I will sing your song every Spring.

When your lifework ended I cleared the ground,
got rid of the sod, dug your grave.
We began at midnight,
eager to catch the ancestral chariot.

In Summer I will water the flowers,
prune the twigs - give them shape,
watch tender plants grow strong.
Gardening cheering me back to hope.

Rest at the family garden beloved father,
on the hill overlooking the Indian Ocean.
See to your bruising family's safety,
revive the pollination season, fresh petal.

We promise endless rains.
Our blood in the earth,
forever singing with the elements.
Your blessings endless springs.

II

I will remember your laughter
hold back my tears.
Not because death is funny.
Because your laughter lives forever.

Laughter will always be a dear friend,
a couple returning home,
holding hands in drunken joy.
A fireplace warming our hearts.

If it thunders, and the ceiling falls,
laughter will still be a dear friend.
Even tears will remember your laughter
hold back their rain of thunder.

III

It is done, you are gone.
You too have set out for Intshangwe.
May your journey be beautiful,

healing.

Swing low, sweet chariot.
Go rest on a tiny hill beloved father.
The banana leaves are humming a sweet song.

I pray for a peaceful rest father,
a carnival at the Intshangwe of our ancestors.
Banana leaves humming a joyful song.

Swing low, sweet chariot.
Intshangwe's spirits will carry you home.
Your duty is done.

You may be gone, yet your love is not spent.
One day we too will join you,
at our ancestral Intshangwe and Ndonyane.

We will turn Ithaka into an epic reunion song.
Love is a stubborn bird, she flies as she pleases.
Go shake Mahlephula's hands - sharpen his pencils.

Twiddle Little Man

Twiddle twiddle little man.

Trump is still a reptile
a fat whale crying out for 911
Mr President can't chew properly,
his foul nostrils disturb his mouth top
his mouth cavity troubles his breathing.

Twiddle twiddle little man.

Do those feeding his mud dump realise,
the turtle is dweeting for dear life,
that it smells like rotten eggs
snaps to survive?

Cape Minstrels

Stop singing your blues poor child.
Without our ancestors,
you would still be in darkness.

Your brothers are spilling blood for Luthuli house,
stripping the capsizing cargo
for white silver and gold.

History is eternal, forever present.
My ancestors braved the seas,
crossed the Equator for a noble cause.

Egypt of yore was saved from herself.
Piye amassed the best horses from Thebes,
bathed in blood down River Nile
fought till none could stand the raging fire
but surrendered their finest jewellery
embracing shameful defeat.

Herewith my anchor, a brave blue ship
tacking my way against black storms.
Stuffing heavy salvation freight,
uncertain if the gales that blow me
will end, letting me go - save you.

Go tell your lies to the marines.
I am the most able-bodied seaman in town,
your home port in the heart of darkness
Odysseus braving the maddened sea.

Scottburgh Beach

Seashells strut their stuff in the sand garden
exquisite and exhilarating
happy on the serene southern seashore
I knew these were shores of my childhood.

I craved to lie next to them,
like an old friend,
hungry for welcome treats
eager they delight and spoil me
tell tales that dazzle like the blood moon.

For Kossola Cudo Lewis

water breaks
the slave is human again
a child of the harmattan
the dark raging seas
heat strokes in cotton fields.

yours shall be told till the end of the earth
Kossola Cudo Lewis
captured son of Africa
like goods aboard the Clotilda
shipped
Kazoola (nobody cared about his real name)
chained
beaten
chained again.

yours shall be told
till the end of the earth
even by venomous seas
who sucked your tears
when you cowed killer waves
with your imposing trouper eyes.

yours shall be told
till the end of the earth
hymns beyond the hurricane
warm breasts of memory
the itch of the eye
black tears on white pages
plantation songs composed in blood
the lynching bigotry mobs
a sky crying in tongues.

yours shall be told
till the end of the earth
in the telling
the shedding of fresh tears
the removal of thorns in our thumbs
your story is ours too
our Kossola Cudo Lewis,
the sun is history
son of Africa.

vagabonds

since i took ill i smell bad
i smell a drunkard's vomit
the vomit of the garbage raider
his vintage vomit
a rat poo-gavini blend
putrid when i hand him pap
a hungry homeless drunk

my habit to feed him on Mondays
my guilt after missing church
when he smells my gate
delivers his repulsive smell

my whole body smells shit
i have also left home
for a toilet deep in the forest
am sick ready to die alone
i miss the garbage raider
i too smell like vomit
our nomadic bond is tight
vagabonds sharing a special bond.
Esteemed poets of shit and nothingness.
Vomit-happy warriors of Madness Street.

Childhood Memoir

I

We hatched dreams at Amahlongwa
our mud nest.
Bananas battling the dry earth
praying for muddy soils,
pleading for the fortune of good food
mocking the master's lunacy
dancing to daylight.

MaNyambo swore at us, yet she cared.
To be barren and black was her pain,
the daily itch of words falling like rain
wombs either kissed or cursed.
Kgositsile says our past is glorious
that gory load burdens memory
the present is dangerous too many.
I swear by your words African sage,
Rest, your work is done.

MaThabethe's rondavel was God's
fighting Tarzan & Satan
a mud church house miles away
litanies, saints sinners & sacraments
the cursing of mad lust & desires of the flesh,
fear of God a parental mantra.

II

School was hell
i craved the sun all day-long
ran in the yard like fowls
picked the fattest worms at will
danced with the stars at dawn
to molo the morning with a kiss
eat for a day like a fish.

Mhluzini forest is now a fable
like the tales grandma told me,
ah, murdered memories.
Where are the crocodiles
the jig& fly monkeys
Noni the mad village jazz man,
the sweet blackness of umdoni berries?

They bulldozed Mhluzini without warning,
today rains beat her broken body without pity
the umdoni tree is dead,
the once-lush earth is barren

the crowned hornbill cries for food,
crooner kindly crisscross my river in song
bring back the lost map of my childhood.

III

Snot-nosed
i tried bunking school to play frog,
mom smacked me well
dangled around her waist, dazed to sanity.
Hearing the tweeting sparrow in flight
i could not hate, despite the pain
that's why her name brings joy.

In my youth I heard the forest calling,
inviting me to the restless rituals of songs.
To be alive, poet dream & brew storms.
Verse for verse I harvested sweet-corn,
mulching melancholy with wood shavings,
picking poems in every garden,
fighting weeded words like a beast.

IV

Ancestral dances fill the air,
mom's brew whispers in codes.
I clean the grass sieve,
enjoying the pungent smell.
Dad pours froth into the ground
feeds the ancestors first
unlocks the GPS, raising the dead.

Mathananazana the zombie is stuck
her dark tricks are defeated.
Clear skies.
The sun slowly walks away.
Sweet rains kiss the earth,
the peacock flashes her finest feathers.

Regret

I wear my teen-daughter's handkerchief
like a talismanic neck-tie
the rapist spared it.
It was her bandage,
covering scars of a prior assault.

Had I known he would return,
i would have stayed home
confessed my love for him
- the bastard was my flesh and blood,
my son stung me with death.

He returned a wild beast.
I did not desire their death,
but have now lost them both.
Who is the real bastard now?

Family Feast

Sunset on the Umkhomazi estuary,
plaiting dreams facing the stars
for the sacred ancestral banquet.
Family poets sharpen their spears
bulls lock horns, shoot bold stars into the air.

Whistles slice the skies wide open,
village criers at work.
Boys are now men,
women turn sorghum into malt.
The fattest bull has fallen,
today is a big feast.

Joy chokes strife into silence,
confused witches empty their bags
blurred by the mystic eastern stars.
Ancestral fires cheer the embers
kiss the morning star,
take her to the family byre
whispering a cosmic song.

Heavenly Eyes

(for Bheki Mseleku)

Jazz improvisation is a kind of symmetry,
free soul soundscapes, smooth gardens,
graceful songs, the elasticity of spirit.
So much to sing still, our kind of jazz.

He's with the ancestors on the piano,
on the guitar, saxophone and voice.
Trimming the edges, resonant prayers.
So much to sing still, our kind of jazz.

Jazz improvisation is a meditative jig,
the grass mat moves, whispers.
A water feature cools the garden's air.
So much to sing still, our kind of jazz.

Betrayal

(inspired by the music of the maskandi musician Mfanzomnyama)

The sun rises, nourishes the earth.
The baby sucks her mother's breast,
her puppy ears wiggling with bliss.

The eagle whips the wind,
shaming the sparrow as it soars.
The caterpillar becomes a butterfly,
lands on my hand.

I cry for the elusive emerald,
tears wish to kiss the earth
rest in the sea - their cemetery.

When the knives shimmered,
straw friends stamped on my body.
In the name of OR & other souls,
hungry knives bayed for my blood.
the sun said never trust sunrise again son,
await your final hour at a corner only fafi man knows.

eThekwini

The city gives me an angry gaze.
Streets are grey
Lights are dim.
Days are full of haze,
Nights are nightmarish.

The sky wears a black & blue plumage
Its neck is dark, sad.
Tight-fisted when it slaps.
Feathers do a tick-dance song.

Light blinds me.
Hope is eclipsed, caged.
A cobra-like eye of random fire,
a riot police order
- fuck-off at once.

No spatula to scrape blend dreams.
No cows for milk and parmesan.
See the sea there,
spilling children's grief into the city.

Children of the Waterfalls

We always toyi-toyi
no matter the load.

Broad-shouldered soldiers,
children of the waterfalls.

Crazy in the muddy sands
fearless in the scorching heat.

Singing rain songs for our fallen.
Bullets feast on lives with clan names.

A dog hustles for bones.
Wunga's children hustle for coins.

We plant flowers,
blow kisses at the friendless skies,
hungry for bread everlasting.

Maye!
Maye!
Maye Babo!

Suddenly

Santu Mofokeng comes alive,
sees life amidst death.
the vast plains of the Transkei,
recite sad farewell rites.
the photographer sees life moving like a bus,
mourners singing happy-blue songs.
the camera is life born of death,
a chapter in black history.

I was liberated

(for Gabi Nkosi, a murdered artist & dear friend)

When last night you returned joyful
smiled & danced -
erasing bloody memories,
the killer's semen in the washbasin
the trauma of your violated body.

Last night you wore a vanilla almond dress,
whiffs of jasmine in your perfumed smile
a lighthouse for navigating the long night without maps.

Death as Life

Death
is a date with the shrink—
after tears,
after panic,
in the midst of a thunderstorm,
after a cruel winter.
Somehow death reminds us of life,
that we must live after the death of our beloved ones.

Do not blame me for singing the songs of my father.
I sing because even his death is a healer.
I am that peasant farmer singing in the rain, in the sun.
Feel my brash timpani and the softness of my songs.
Music is my shrink amidst the raging storms.
Amidst the gloom, memory brews choral ecstasy.