

# **The Hoof-Printed Rock**

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by

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# **The Hoof-Printed Rock**

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## **Abstract**

Many of these poems, although written in English, are inspired by Sepedi idioms and proverbs. Some invoke township and village life, others the observations and questions that come from writing poetry and experiences of travelling to different countries to read my poems. Others dwell on the political transformation in South Africa, or its absence, and on my own spiritual transformation.

For  
**Malekgwere Matlou**  
*Lehu le mateledi, le re apotše borutho ra šala re ponoka*

*We smile, but O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile  
But let the world dream otherwise  
We wear the mask*

Paul Laurence Dunbar

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I

## autobiography

*after Nazim Hikmet*

I was born in 1984  
in a village not shown  
on the map of my country.

at ten my parents divorced,  
I quickly learnt to wear long pants,  
slept at the orphanage and police station,  
slept with street kids on cardboards,  
survived bottomless gorges of misery.

poetry ambushed me at fourteen  
though I did not know how to worship it  
in the way it demanded.

at sixteen I matriculated,  
E symbol as my highest,  
confirming my teachers' curse:  
*your skull roofs a large room  
that has no furniture*  
a year later I fought with lizards for sunrays  
while my friends were in university.

I was a peddler and a gardener  
before I allowed de beers and anglo platinum  
to mine minerals with my nails,  
a small torch of resistance showered my eyes,  
I organised a protest march,  
resigned so as to save others' jobs,  
none was prepared to save mine.

death came for me three times,  
my ancestors told it: go to hell!  
piety possessed me  
after my everything was repossessed,  
I learnt to pray in hair-bristling caves,  
bathe in sacred waterfalls  
and hold talks with mountains,  
only one mountain answered me.

I have been loved forever so many times,  
but all my forevers have ended before the end.  
I have never cast a vote in my life,  
never believed in voting against rather for,  
I refuse to be anyone's spanner or hammer;  
I enjoy biting the hand that feeds me

especially when it feeds me poison.  
people say I'm lucky  
not knowing the wars my roots fought  
for every drop of water.

mine is a cast-iron heart  
annealed by the furnace of turmoil and turbulence,  
I have seen the unseen,  
grown a third ear to hear the unsaid,  
learnt to make love to gales.

## red rural soil

I grew up a silent hermit,  
legs clothed in pantyhose of red dust,  
bare sole conversing with the earth,  
secrets concealed between caves of my heels.  
way back when the soil used to speak  
and the feet used to listen.

I jumped fences to the city  
to find soil louder than village soil.  
these cement pavements have no lips.  
I'm hungry for the village aroma of *botho*  
permeating every household, telling me  
a single foot-bracelet does not jingle.

## **prickly pears**

my village, this brown forgotten ruin,  
sees things your page will never stand,  
eye-cremating scenes of survival.  
we remain tortoises without carapaces,  
swallowing prickly pears unpeeled.  
we bleed each time we smile  
because our smiles sold us to the holy devils.

every morning we mount bums on the hilltop  
hoping to see a peacock of power  
parading his long radiant tail to this village.  
but butter-leaders do not convoy on hot dusty roads  
unless in winter, hunting for votes.  
we only taste freedom in our nocturnal snores,  
our lives wilt like twigs, seas drink our rivers dry.

## **My mother's words**

*This is not a bedroom, my mother said  
when we were driving my new car to Moria  
to be sprinkled with holy water.  
Holy water and dirt do not mix.*

Afterwards she went home, and me to Musina,  
I couldn't bring girls into my brother's house  
the only house I owned was this car,  
it transported me to places unknown to my flesh.

Today it is on bricks, chicken hatch their eggs in it,  
while the bank is still draining my account.  
My mother's words yell and wound me now,  
they burn me, her eyes burn me too.

## **I've seen my father**

I've seen my father  
biting my sister's thighs  
with long-nose pliers  
for coming back home late.

I've seen my father  
beating my mother  
with a sjambok, a cane  
he named *Somlandela*.

I've seen my father  
coming home with young girls  
instructing my mother  
to sleep in the dining room.

I've seen my father  
holding up a nylon rope  
to hang my mother  
on a *mohlanare* tree –

I'm taking an oath  
never to lay a hand on a woman  
never to see the long nails of her tears  
piercing like my mother's and sister's bruises.

## **I see**

Even without looking, I see  
your ear swallowed by the phone  
I see the person on the other side  
and the one on your tongue, I see.

I see what he does in the wink of the sun  
lowering his pants on the street,  
I see you jumping with banana leaves  
to cover the moon so that the earth cannot see him.

I see leaves dropping like the limp of a dying man,  
I see the earth killing and interring him in darkness,  
chirping birds composing dirges for the living,  
I see your mole fingers digging him out of the grave.

### **a poem to my poems**

editors and critics speak no sympathy,  
they will put a sparkling blade to your throats  
and drink your hot blood alive,  
still, no matter how loud death roars  
always face it with your mane bristling.  
only you and I know the good in you,  
it's not the colour of words that defines you  
but the weight of memories you carry,  
and if you were to be amputated,  
I would limp painfully throughout my life.

### **a poem to my rejected poems**

even if you were stillborn,  
know, you too were conceived with love,  
I could have not climbed trees of creation  
had I not believed you had wings.

I finally swallowed the pebble of acceptance:  
poets are but airports where poetry lands  
before it catches the next flight  
to its destination, the reader.

my rejected poems, don't erupt  
and vent fumes out of your nostrils –  
perhaps one day you'll be reborn  
and make it into another poet's book.

## **death and the young man**

how can death intimidate me  
except to say it will kill me  
which it will anyway  
whether I clench my fists or lick its feet.

it better come for me at night,  
creep into my sleep when my eyes  
are taken by the darkness,  
let it bite me like a rat.

because if it could meet me  
at the cattlepost for a fair bout  
no grass will ever grow again  
on that field of our dust.

## **Grandmother's hearth**

He who says grandmother is dead and gone  
has never entered her hearth  
to dig from the ashes of her hands.

He cannot hear silent echoes of her voice  
from these three stones which used to carry her pots,  
pots which named each one of us.

These three stones that carry all the ancient chants  
sang by the ancestors' blue-snake flame  
filling our mother's arms in her sleep.

Grandmother is not dead and gone,  
she dwells somewhere in this thatched hut,  
somewhere between these cowdung-plastered walls.

## **the distance of the dead**

each time i go abroad, i first pass this way  
to ask the dead to put their arms around me.  
do their arms cross the sea with me  
or do i walk in foreign lands in cardboard armour?  
if i die in paris like vallejo wrote  
will my spirit rest in a foreign heaven  
or will it make its own way home?

my mother says she wants to be buried here  
in bolobedu ga-modjadji,  
she wants to sleep in the embrace of her mother  
grandmother matšie maria makgopa  
koko matšie *lenaila letlopinya la metse yešo*.  
do the dead know any distance?

# II

## tonight

the sky has stripped all its clouds  
the moon looks tired of our long nights  
the stars are low and pure  
the wind sings with a deep voice  
of a seasoned jazzman  
autumn is wagging its tail  
undressing withered leaves  
and like these trees  
our bare branches caress,  
hear me my love  
tonight is our night  
hear me now, hear me forever  
hear me even though I cannot hear myself  
and when I am lost inside you  
take advantage of me  
take me to places foreign and wild  
let the cold breeze taste our sweat,  
to die in your arms is a gift of life,  
tonight our hungry souls will be fed  
patience will pay its dues  
I waited for this night, waited and waited,  
when the world swung its blades  
I shielded myself with memories of us,  
when we merge tonight  
I will shamelessly  
reveal my scars to love  
and let my touch speak of uncountable days  
of solitary confinement and famine,  
let's make distance understand  
that not even the thinnest blade  
of a feeler-gauge could enter between us,  
we've been through 'I need you'  
and 'I don't need you'  
it has chiselled and sculpted the best in us  
and tonight passion will flow in us  
like a river at the beginning of the sea  
who can stop us?  
unlike the sea that forgets the clouds  
I won't stop thanking the heavens  
for planting you and me on the same soil.

## **ecuadorian princess**

to love you is to love pain,  
it is to jump onto the palm of fire  
hoping the sky will weep for me.  
seagulls wake me every dawn  
to meet your faraway face  
your face that sends me back to dreams.  
to love you is to love all what is sweet  
so sweet that I will lose my teeth  
but still I want to love you,  
though your earth is planted with thorns,  
I want to love you like there is no pain,  
like a river that feeds the sea  
without expecting the sea to feed it back,  
like you were the only thing to be loved.  
but sometimes I am aloe smeared  
to prevent a child from suckling its thumb.  
*make me drunk with your kisses, you said,*  
*untie the makich anklet*  
*and remove the shakap belt from my hips;*  
I want to intoxicate you with love  
even if you do not take me to ecuador  
to your amazon rainforest,  
even if I do not cross the marañón river.

## Poet and interpreter

The way you pillow your head on my chest  
in front of the photographer  
and the way my arm belts around your waist  
has nothing to do with anything.  
This twilight that leaks from our lips  
as if we are hiding galaxies in our cavities  
speaks nothing beyond nothing.

We remain intertwined after the photographer left  
like we are surrounded by a circle of landmines  
and the slightest move would cost us our lives.  
I've been to many countries  
and have left little coffins of bliss.  
It's easy to lie without blinking an eye.  
It's easy to flirt with death  
especially for a honey-spread body like yours.

I'm here in your country for only a week  
and we are just a poet and an interpreter.  
I don't know why you are in my arms outside the hotel  
at this time of the night.  
I don't know why you are crying in this drizzle  
leaving me wondering if I am wiping from your face  
your tears or the raindrops.  
I don't know why our legs are dragging us to my hotel room.

## **your breasts**

we met where busy roads  
meet

your skin's fluorescence brightened  
streetlights

I recognized you under the linen  
of shadows

your alcohol-sprinkled brain transparent  
in your walk

and before the lonely moon you gave me  
your breasts

warm breasts that sank  
into my chest.

## **birthday gift**

in the study      my little chapel  
I pull    down your pants  
make a promise not to go    beyond  
I place you on    a cold leather chair  
each thigh on    its armrest  
like a bible    about to be read  
I kiss the floor    with my knees  
as if    my ancestors are  
somewhere between    your holiness  
books    on the shelves stop winking  
they all wish they were    wording our scene  
I bow my head to taste    your freshness  
and when all is a ripe    melon  
I say: happy    birthday  
and drive    you home.

## **the way she left**

the night she left  
I slept with the door unlocked,  
woke up at dawn  
to greet, by my side,  
her sleeping absence.

I opened the door  
as if she was at the veranda  
and she would at once  
remove this block brick  
from my heart.

love is a stepmother, they say,  
expect no justice or mercy from her;  
but even a hairy-hearted stepmother  
would have shed a tear  
if she saw how she left me.

## **the bed's chant**

for the past two months  
death has invaded this room,  
this new bed has never chanted to the rocking rhythm  
of an erotic orchestra,  
it's never heard sweet heavenly hymns –  
just me and my lonely baritone farts.

I wish I could take this bed for a walk  
just a couple of miles into the past  
then it would understand the music of my silence  
for I have been a dung-beetle for years,  
restlessly rolling promiscuous manure.

I was once a servant of thighs  
but in this age of infections  
that pink spread pouch  
can be a gaping venus-flytrap,  
snap trap that swallows its guests.

every dusk  
my baleful bed stares at me  
as if to say:  
I can't believe  
you have returned  
alone again!

## **Patched-up heart**

My heart is heavy with patchworks,  
it is scrapped beyond recycling  
it won't take any more stitches,  
so if you say you love me  
here is a mallet and chisel,  
sculpt me a new heart  
cushion it with cockatoo feathers  
so that when you decide to break it  
you would break the work of your own hands.

## **unloneliness**

now that you are with me  
I miss this house's echo  
I miss talking to myself,  
parading around this house naked  
hearing walls giggling at my shrunk thing,  
having supper straight from the fridge  
not wasting the dishwashing soap,  
I miss my disordered papers on the table  
I miss the order of their disorder.  
now that you're here  
I miss missing you.

**to you i return**

to you i return  
with anthills of bags  
filled with faces i've picked up  
along the road  
and have been wearing  
throughout these years.

to you i return  
with my own face  
this wrinkled face  
of lines and deep scars  
that maps the paths  
you and i have travelled.

to you i return  
with the heart i always  
rented to the world  
a heart full of nothing  
the same nothing that  
has made me seek your face.

## **For Lehlomela**

In this world of seasonal angels  
that sing attention-deficit hymns,  
this world of pretentious prophets  
whose god only talks after a cow is slaughtered,  
you've poached my heart and de-horned its doubts  
you've taught me to taste sweetness  
in needles of winter raindrops.  
Why will I ever leave your kraal?

# III

## **distant lightning**

how can I write about distant lightning  
of silent thunder  
when the poor are marinated with lies,  
promised a fifth season  
where none will be sunbaked  
or tearflooded.

those without shadows are here again  
those who need to be reminded  
it's our votes that boat them  
to the golden shores,  
I won't write about distant lightning  
and ignore the lightning of their tongues.

## **those without shadows**

those without shadows talk of integrity  
let them first take off their sunglasses  
so we can see the colour of their irises  
then we would welcome their clouds like rain  
and place our buckets below gutters  
long before their first drop drips.

those without shadows talk of transparency  
though they stop the sun from climbing the sky  
they can't afford to strip off their coat of dew  
their truth is housed in fog,  
no matter how dark the night has been  
it will never be as obscure as their dawn.

those without shadows talk of being clean  
clean truths are content in their sourness  
clean words need not be dipped in caramel  
or garnished with spice like breyani,  
their words are always dressed to kill  
suffocated with bowties and velvet blazers.

## **the was and is of thabo mbeki**

lucifer used to envy you, I heard,  
you were the only vampire that could smile  
without exposing its pointed teeth,  
what was good for you was good for this country  
this spaza shop, a marble on your autocratic palm;  
your word was the last train of the night,  
citizens had to squeeze and stand on tiptoes  
or else they were to sleep under bridges.

today I hear, from the same lips  
that you were not building cities in your homestead;  
you were not boiling the muse of painters and cartoonists;  
your family never soaked hands in the gore of the miners;  
you never prostrated to words of any nursery league  
or contemplated soldering the lips of long-nosed media.  
it's only today I hear, every citizen is free to articulate  
yet in this chorus of voices no one can hear anyone.

## **Poem for Limpopo**

*for the Limpopo Department of Rats and Vulture*

I never wrote a poem for Limpopo,  
this silent river of modest waters  
that quenches not thirst of its own fish,  
this garden of Sodom marketed as Eden,  
glittering gold of the wasted Mapungubwe,  
river that makes love to every Shashe and Zambezi  
forgetting its own streams.

I never wrote a poem about Limpopo  
because it stole water in me  
and watched me wilt, leaf by leaf.

## **nicky oppenheimer on blood diamonds**

there is a difference between  
blood dripping on diamonds  
and blood diamonds.

blood diamonds are diamonds  
dipped in a bowl of blood.

blood diamonds are diamonds  
exchanged for guns and bombs.

the kimberley process is as clean  
as a stainless-steel butcher table.  
yes, blood drips there and there,  
a few are driven over by haulage trucks,  
a few are crushed by automatic machines,  
but the money made from these diamonds  
builds schools and clinics, not guns.

## **makana water diary**

compliments for the new year pump at the water dam has a minor problem it will be fixed soon just a broken vee-belt technical team is on it welcome rhodes students it is actually a leak on worn gland packings happy human rights day spring water on the port alfred road they are repacking no leak no drip happy easter holidays congratulations to all the graduates warm welcome to the parents ungreased bearings seized take advantage of rain water self-lubricating bearings to be bought all should be fine now electricity is eskom's baby welcome to the second term rapists should die of thirst in prison garbage to be removed after municipal strike happy freedom day experts identified a cracked impeller tender bidding for transportation of the new impeller free water at the port alfred road 11 days of amazing grahamstown the capital city of art burred shaft causes cavitation on the new impeller welcome to the third term eskom need to be called to order vice chancellor leads a water protest march fourth term merry christmas and happy new year don't forget to vote for us.

## **Bread**

He plants wheat but doesn't know what makes flour.  
He hates dough but can't live without baking.  
He kneads dough and bakes himself alive.  
He sells bread he cannot taste.  
He sells bread with no taste.  
He buys the price not the bread.  
He is bread but doesn't sell himself.  
He is a sold-bread but still advertises himself.  
He becomes the bread that sells.  
He can't associate himself with the breadless.  
He befriends every creature that can buy him bread.  
He doesn't wait for bread to say, 'I am bread'.  
He sees bread when he looks at the poor.  
He clenches his fist to hide in his palm a piece of bread.  
He never butters bread without seeing who eats it.  
He doesn't know that he shares bread with others.  
He is in that marriage because there is still bread.  
He has many loaves he just tastes and leaves.  
He is constipated from eating every kind of bread.  
He pegs himself onto the washing line for bread.  
He has all in life but lacks just a slice of bread.  
He can't make peace with his lack of bread.  
He begs for bread he can afford.  
He realises he is bread, not a breadwinner.  
He starves whilst there is a lot of bread.  
He dresses to hide the bread he doesn't have.  
He believes he will be buried with his bread.  
He thinks he will soon be bread to worms.

## **teachers**

some teachers are lightning  
expecting every student to be their  
thunder

some teachers are rivers, sources to thirsty streams  
but they do not want streams to become  
rivers

some teachers are humps protruding above camels' heads  
thinking height makes them the most important camel body  
parts

some teachers are bees  
warning wasps not to sting because to sting is to  
perish

some teachers are 1820 settlers  
engraving their signatures on the rock art of my  
forefathers

some teachers are echoes  
of long exploded dynamite a thousand meters  
underground

## **Meneer Swart**

Meneer Swart is a black man in a white skin  
he speaks Sepedi like it is Afrikaans  
and eats his porridge with *morogo* – that's all I was told  
about my college lecturer on my arrival.

I found nothing scientific about the engineering that he taught,  
for instance : power shedding is power outage due to  
unqualified blacks occupying top seats at Eskom causing  
the experienced whites to leave this country for Australia.

South Africa, he always told us, was sinking in muddy water  
because of black leaders and their corruption –  
some black students loved Meneer Swart's class  
because his engineering was so far from the textbook.

Not a single white lecturer spoke his mind like he did  
no matter how controversial their opinions  
they all squeezed their farts, released them behind closed doors  
not Meneer Swart, he'd blast them out to all of us.

## **the streets of calcutta**

on the suffocated streets of calcutta  
you have to negotiate a right of way  
no lanes, no side mirrors  
a chorus of horns does it all,  
the deaf will never drive on these streets.

a twinkle of yellow beetles,  
stuffing of bicycles, bikes, autos,  
rickshaws, taxis, buses and trams:  
an anthill is crushed  
and the ants run everywhere.

## **musina truck stop**

truck drivers take an overnight rest,  
wearing young girls as their blankets,  
prostitution turned to a baby-making institution,  
mbeki's child support grant is the target,  
hiv/aids is no nightmare to them,  
we watch the future dying  
in front of our eyes, stillborn.

# IV

## Poem in stone

There's a poem in my skull  
a poem I'll never ink  
until I have a rope in my hand  
and stand on the bridge's outskirts  
resting my head on the railway line

when I am gone that poem will  
sting with timeless agony.

## **darkness**

1.

dear inside, lately, i have been writing  
poems about the outside  
in order to distract my attention from you.

i didn't want them to see  
that you are torn apart,  
that things are not in their right places.

everything is dressed with dust,  
even the white linen you washed not long ago.

if you don't get yourself together soon,  
i am going to open the curtains  
and expose you.

2.

darkness helps me not to see my own face    shade shadow my day    don't ask me  
to open the curtains    this darkness and its coldness reminds me of my destiny  
the forever-winter grave my breathing corpse has become please don't ask me to  
open my curtains don't

3.

until when will I fear the light?  
wearing darkness and its shame will not darken blazing bones  
underneath my pain  
bones that live galaxy's dream.  
the gallons of tears and blood I've shed will never extinguish the fire of my heart,  
this smelter that steams hope into millions of other corpses.  
the sky longs to wrap me again like  
when love used to walk our streets naked  
when its yoke was mine  
and nothing was heavy for me.

4.

i am somewhere between the owl-eyes of the sky  
and the red teeth of the earth,  
in the grip of a vampire kiss.

i don't know how i got here,  
how i got my testicles  
between these burdizzo pinchers.

5.

my rivers run through people  
but i remain dry inside,  
not even a cactus can bud inside me,  
skeletons of old flowers fly out  
even in a gentle breeze, leaving my soil naked.

when i enter inside myself  
my thoughts and wishes gather clouds  
for yet another morning drought.

what can i tell this karoo sand  
that melts the steel of hope?  
my roots fight battles of loss,  
the misleading greenness of my outer leaves.

6.

in times of ashes and fractured bones,  
the marrow of their sorrow  
darkened my eyes with soot.

all those years of cold fires,  
of wet firewood smoking like a coal train,  
my dripping eyes remained open.

though my heart was full of worms  
i soaked theirs with love,  
killed myself for them to live.

they, the ones i died for  
are now nowhere  
to bury me.

## **Sunday night**

*after Raymond Carver*

Make use of the things around you:  
the noodles in the cracked bowl,  
frost, papers scattered on the table,  
the rusted hotplate turned into a heater,  
the smell of your shoes, your sugarless tea,  
the bed that yells each time you move,  
the brick-like cellphone that hardly rings,  
an anthill of laundry staring at you,  
the sound of your flatmate having sex,  
a picture of your spiritual leader on the wall,  
the starvation you carry in your pants.

## **supposed to**

it is supposed to be thursday,  
the church-bell is supposed to cough every hour,  
the crow is supposed to deliver god's greetings,  
the dairy van is supposed to bring calf's blood  
stolen from its mother's breast,  
and yes, the garbage truck...  
the garbage truck is supposed to be here by now  
our garbage bags are supposed to be outside in the street  
and i'm supposed to say: good morning, my love.

## **i cannot recall**

i cannot recall how many hearts i've broken  
how many wings of blind angels i've broken.

some people i've sold for a carton of sorghum beer  
some for a cup of cold shake-shake soup.

i used to go to the river of people's hearts  
just to cast my fishhook into their creels.

church was a ride on a half-tamed horse,  
a run on a treadmill with a broken stop button.

i have turned many hearts into dartboards,  
my parents' words tambourines to my ear.

god, hear and reassemble my mumbling strings  
so i can speak melodies of repentance.

hear the voice of my cracked harp,  
the hee-haw of a dying mule.

## **My God**

He is a calf that grew up in the same kraal as hyenas.  
He is a dehorned buffalo that defeats a pride of lions.  
He is in my backyard, a walking distance from home.  
He is the truck driver pulling trailers of Venda sugar cane.  
He does not bathe in public or say 'I am god' on television.  
He is the wealth hidden deep within a poverty stricken child.  
He sleeps with eyes open, knees earthed to the ground.  
He eats gravel-road dust in his caterpillar of eternity.  
He is a dwarf who sees what taller men cannot see climbing chairs.  
He is a father of spears, he commands spears to fight on their own.  
He is a black chameleon, a battalion of Mount Zion.  
He is a bible interpreted in many ways by many devils.  
He is a tongue that speaks with lips sealed and stitched.  
He is a tongue that utters words only I can hear and understand.  
He is a billion prophets prophesying in a million languages.  
He is a nameless green tea from a street vendor in Kolkata.  
He is all what people think God will never be.

## **The hoof-printed rock**

I carry the star on my chest,  
the warmth that winter night longs for  
is long embedded in me,  
peace is my new totem,  
frowns plead to finger my forehead,  
I teach the sun how to shine  
even when clouds have gathered.

I have walked on algae many times  
slipped, tipped, tripped and fell,  
I know the essence of wounds.  
I will grow to become one of those elders  
who have learnt to grasp time's tail  
and tell their children's children  
that this timeless rock is alive.

I have burnt many times  
but in your presence  
I never turned into soot and ashes,  
because your hoof-printed rock  
rock of Thabasionne  
promised me one thing:  
water from *mothopo wa bophelo*.

## **On the last day**

What will they say  
on the last day  
when they find you  
at the gate to the throne of light,  
the new dusty Jerusalem?

You, the worldly circus,  
river of blood,  
thief of human tongues,  
you, the nylon-wearing tokoloshi.

What will they say  
on the last day  
when they find out  
that you are Jesus himself?

# **Writing Portfolio**

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

of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

**Tebogo David Maahlamela**

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## Cloudy dawn

Here I am, 1500km away from home. I should be happy that I finally got a chance to do what I truly like. Being admitted to pursue an MA in Creative Writing as an *Ad Eundum Gradum* student is a treasurable opportunity. I don't know why I feel a slightly cold feather of uncertainty moving down my spine. It's hard to believe I took the drastic decision to resign from my fair-paying job in the mining industry for writing.

Today is our first day and I have just met the nine other students and the four Grahamstown-based lecturers. The programme coordinator, Robert Berold welcomed us and gave us a detailed introduction to Rhodes University's MA programme in Creative Writing. We were each given a chance to introduce ourselves. In his short introduction, Fundile Majola (a fellow student) told us he previously took a quit on three different MA programmes. Paul Mason (a lecturer) said he had also quit his first PhD attempt. Their stories reminded me that in April 2012 I too dropped out from a publishing school in Kolkata, India. I immediately said to myself, *There is no way you are going to quit this one, not at all.* Then Hazel Crampton introduced herself, she said, "I'm not a writer, I am a storyteller." *What's the distinction between the two, David? Welcome to this place where slightest difference matters!* Paul Wessels then took us to the library for induction.

Despite how sceptical I feel, there is a whispering voice from within that says, "you've took a right decision." Maybe it echoes from the first email I've received from Berold which had the sentence that fingered my heart, "We are looking for writers who have suffered from lack of critical feedback..." Lack of feedback is one of the reasons I haven't dared to publish a compendium of my English work in the past decade. My poems were published in more than forty literary journals but I still felt unsure about their quality.

## Autobiographical poem

Nazim Hitmet's poem, *Autobiography*, is a compressed and condensed account of this 1902 born Turkish poet. It explores his life from the age of three ("at three I served as a phasha's grandson in Aleppo") until sixty-one ("in '61 the tomb I visited is his books"), the age he died. Among other things, the poem talks about the poet's political involvement, his arrest, his writing, his relationships, his future, his failure and achievements. The poem moves from country to country, from one tone to the other. In its plain lyrical flow, the poem surprisingly slaps a reader with rich imagery such as, "some people know all about plants some about fish/I know separation/some people know the names of the stars by heart/I recite absence..." After such moment of despair, it switches to more positive and satirical lines. "I've ridden in trains planes and cars/most people don't get the chance/I went to opera/most people haven't even heard of the opera/and since '21 I haven't gone to the places most people visit/mosques churches temples synagogues sorcerers". Such twists are applied to the sequence of years but also for enthralling parallelism such as the one bellow:

At thirty they wanted to hang me  
At forty-eight to give me the Peace Prize

With such jump between years, it's clear that each line is accompanied by a long story which the poet does not include. Though I strongly believe that growth is not measured by or limited to a number of years but by events one has been through, but I have to admit that an attempt to write such poem will be challenging for a 29 year old poet like me. Nevertheless I will make my attempt.

\*

In my version of 'Autobiography', I've deliberately focused only on the hardship I've encountered, and narrowed it to a few personal events that honestly portray my half-lived life. I dealt with my confusions and frustrations without pretending that I have arrived or have a lesson to teach. I zoomed into specifics, using imagery as my main weapon. Humour, unlike in Hitmet's version, was going to work against the tone of my poem. Having said that, it still squeezed itself in through the words by the teacher who predicted my doom:

your skull is a large room  
that has no furniture

I brought in my mining industry experience and how my attempts to be a hero left me in despair, and how spirituality restored my centre. I speak of my childish irresponsibility, pain and endurance. On relationship, I wrote:

I have been loved forever so many times  
but all my forevers have ended before the end.

The ending of Hikmet's poem is as if he knew he was going to die that same year. It brings a sense of fulfilment with what he made out of his life:

in short comrades  
even if today in Berlin I'm croaking of grief  
I can say I've lived like a human being  
and who knows  
how much longer I'll live

I wanted my conclusion to sound incomplete to suggest that, unlike Hikmet, I'm not at the end yet. So my penultimate stanza sounds like the end yet it continues, producing an 'open' end.

people say I'm lucky  
not knowing the wars my roots fought  
for every drop of water.

mine is a cast-iron heart  
annealed by the furnace of turmoil and turbulence,  
I have seen the unseen,  
grown a third ear to hear the unsaid,  
learnt to make love to gales.

This poem was published in the June 2013 edition of *New Coin*; it has also been translated into French by and been included in two anthologies compiled by Denis Hirson, those are "Anthologie de la poésie contemporaine d'Afrique du Sud" (Paris) and its English version, "An anthology of South African Poetry 1996-2013" (Deep South, South Africa).

## Barefoot

Brian Walter read two sonnets and tasked us to write a poem from there. The thought of writing a formal sonnet just created barbed wire around my mind. Though it was a freewriting exercise, it felt like the entire roof had fallen on my skull and cracked every bone. After five minutes of writing I could not bear to read what I'd written. Fortunately, he did not instruct us to share.

He then asked us to take off our shoes and go outside St Peters building, and walk around for five minutes. It was not long ago that I'd washed my shoes, so I undressed them with confidence; something I couldn't have done two weeks before. We walked on the soil, on the grass and on the pavement. I was immediately seized by nostalgia for my childhood and the village of my birth. I could feel lines of poetry descending and landing on my mind. All I wanted was a pen and a piece of paper. Back in the class, I wrote the following poem:

### red rural soil

I grew up a silent hermit,  
legs clothed in pantyhose of red dust,  
sole-free feet conversing with the earth,  
secrets concealed between cracked heels' caves,  
way back when the soil used to speak  
and the feet used to listen.

never bathe at the seashore;  
red gravelly land whispered;  
envious seagulls are in patrol along the coast.  
parents' little streams  
suffocated my river to the banks,  
parents who kept on assuring:  
the stomach is a tinted window,  
friends will never peep through.

a partridge jumped fences to the city  
to hunt for soil louder than village soil.  
these cement pavements have no lips.  
I'm hungry for the village aroma of *botho*  
permeating every household, telling me  
a single foot-bracelet does not jingle.

Paul advised me to try and risk NOT being understood by the reader. He pointed out that in the line "secrets concealed between cracked heels' caves," the phrase *heels' caves* is actually referring to the cracks, yet I use both which spoils the imagery. I looked at

some of my old poems and realised that 'over-explanation' has been one of my weaknesses. Mxolisi suggested I remove the entire second stanza as it distracts the centre of the poem. I admitted that the poem is about the relationship between me and the village of my birth not lessons from my parents. Robert suggested that I make it more personal, use 'I' instead of 'a partridge' and not to include translation of *botho* (humaneness), it should be a reader's task to find out. After considering these editing suggestions, the poem became:

### **red rural soil**

I grew up a silent hermit,  
legs clothed in pantyhose of red dust,  
bare sole conversing with the earth,  
secrets concealed between caves of my heels.  
way back when the soil used to speak  
and the feet used to listen.

I jumped fences to the city  
to find soil louder than village soil.  
these cement pavements have no lips.  
I'm hungry for the village aroma of *botho*  
permeating every household, telling me  
a single foot-bracelet does not jingle.

I deliberately preferred the word 'foot-bracelet' than 'anklet', perhaps for its musicality. Freewriting is a good technique when one is experiencing writer's block. It works well with a stimulating activity like dipping one's hands in water or to lying flat on a cold floor – something to lead you into a particular memory.

## Planting wheat, not knowing what makes flour

Kobus Moolman gave us an assignment based on a poem by Inger Christensen. The assignment was to write a three-page poem under the three following guidelines:

- Each line should start with 'Someone...'
- Each line should end with a full stop
- Each line should be a grammatically complete sentence

The form looked restricting and I had doubts if I could manage to write a mere page. I tried several images but my attempts led to nowhere. The images just did not allow me to be as creative as I wanted. For days, I kept changing until I found the image that picked up my heart, **Bread**. I kept on flowing and the next thing I was on the third page. After submitting, Kobus tasked me to trim it from three pages to a page and a half. Later on Robert suggested I make it more concrete by replacing 'someone' with a pronoun. I then consciously rearranged the sequence and cut out lines which were not telling the story that the entire poem is telling. Some of the lines I removed were good ones, but they were working against the poem. Below is what I finally created out of this exercise:

He plants wheat but doesn't know what makes flour.  
He hates dough but can't live without baking.  
He kneads dough and bakes himself alive.  
He sells bread he cannot taste.  
He sells bread with no taste.  
He buys the price not the bread.  
He is bread but doesn't sell himself.  
He is a sold-bread but still advertises himself.  
He becomes the bread that sells.  
He can't associate himself with the breadless.  
He befriends every creature that can buy him bread.  
He doesn't wait for bread to say, 'I am bread'.  
He sees bread when he looks at the poor.  
He clenches his fist to hide in his palm a piece of bread.  
He never butters bread without seeing who eats it.  
He doesn't know that he shares bread with others.  
He is in that marriage because there is still bread.  
He has many loaves he just tastes and leaves.  
He is constipated from eating every kind of bread.  
He pegs himself onto the washing line for bread.  
He has all in life but lacks just a slice of bread.  
He can't make peace with his lack of bread.  
He begs for bread he can afford.  
He realises he is bread, not a breadwinner.  
He starves whilst there is a lot of bread.  
He dresses to hide the bread he doesn't have.  
He believes he will be buried with his bread.  
He thinks he will soon be bread to worms.

## **Jol'iinkomo! The herder has been forgotten**

*A book review on the work and life of Mafika Gwala.*

A man who does not appreciate beauty will soon become poor. If South Africa continues ignoring a literary genius like Mafika Gwala – or worse, mourns him while he is still alive – then poverty will soon knock at our door. This almost forgotten 1946-born poet is, to me, one of the important South African poets of the seventies, and one of most important poets, period. My initial intention was to review Gwala's debut poetry volume, *Jol'iinkomo* (Ad Donker, 1977), but it became a much bigger assignment.

Though he is known as a foremost advocate of Black Consciousness, Gwala's poetry was not limited to race or protest. It dwells on a story for what it is, not for what it stands for. It then becomes a reader's responsibility to decide what to make out of that story. A poem such as "The shebeen queen" elaborates this vividly:

She stood at the factory gate  
as she watched  
her last debtor approached,  
vooping his oversized overall.  
Her last Friday's collector  
at the firm. Fifteen of them all  
'Come boetie shine up'.  
The man pulled out the bank notes  
– with a quivering smile.  
'Gosh, more than half his wages;  
I didn't force it  
on him.'  
She zipped her fat purse and  
they walked across the crowded street  
into a butchery.  
When they whisked out  
he had, tucked under his arm,  
a plastic bag: fowl heads and feet.  
And she – exposed out  
of her tight shopper: a broiled.

In the 60s – and to an extent today – literature and politics were inseparable. Gwala explained it as "a period of anger and much misunderstanding between the races..." In her book, *Black Writers from South Africa*, Jane Watts wrote: "So black writers in South Africa have taken on a double task: to break through the existing ideological framework as part of the liberation struggle, and to undermine the power of western critical discourse: to put a stop, within their own environment, to the policing of language, to the ideological support system provided to the power structure by the literary institution."

Though Gwala responded to this collective obligation of that time, he did not – as protest poetry was often criticised for – compromise quality because of an ideological framework. His poetry answers the question asked by Nadine Gordimer about black writers in her book, *The Black Interpreters*: “Are they writing good poetry?” As much as he was promoting Black Consciousness, Gwala did not try to justify the shortcomings of his fellow blacks, especially the affluent few. He acted like an *imbongi* in his original duty: praising and criticizing simultaneously. As Cherry Clayton explained: “Gwala is not really a protest poet in the usual sense; his protests are directed against the ‘middle class bantu blacks’ or the ‘Black Status Seekers’ more than against the white man. It is the blacks who ape whites who are the targets of his satire and venom, for they have betrayed the vision of Black Consciousness that Gwala’s poetry heralds.”

Musicality was very important for Gwala, as was a poetry of Being. As Michael Chapman wrote: “He attempts to capture, by means of a mixture of praise song and rhythm of jive, a dependency on tone rather than phonetic elements.” He added: “And Gwala’s intention — as I have argued — may be described as a rediscovery of words of Being. Recalled details and perceptions of black life...” Chapman’s terminology does not do Gwala justice. “Praise song” suggests something traditional, to do with an *imbongi*, which is often translated as a “praise singer”. “Jive”, an American term, is equally an inadequate expression to represent Gwala’s musicality. In his book, *Soweto Poetry*, Chapman wrote: “Soweto poets do not, of course, all necessarily live in Soweto.” Soweto, then, is used by critics as a symbol of race. Let us rather speak plainly of race. Gwala is a black poet and proud of it. “How can black writers currently be otherwise,” he wrote, “when we are aware of those writers before us who have fallen into the trash-bin of a capitalist-imperialist culture? Also, we are aware of those writers who classify Negritude and Black Consciousness as being racist.” In his second volume, *No More Lullabies*, Gwala wrote:

Mother,  
poets won’t have to write of hate  
Neither will there be tree and flower poems;  
No, poets will add or delete  
Whatever is of a people’s wish  
In concert with the people’s will.

What I find fascinating is his unpredictable approach to stories, his ability to unwrap an old or familiar story in a compelling way. This is well demonstrated in a poem such as “The bangalala”:

Calm was all he wanted  
(so he told his wife,  
And the people who questioned him).  
Shifty-shafty he trudged  
The township night  
To curb the rising tsotsi crime  
With his beer-swelled stomach that bulged.

It continued  
Until a sixteen-year-old girl  
Came and abandoned a small baby  
On the sofa in his house  
Telling the shocked wife:  
'A parcel for your husband!'  
And she walked out.  
That evening he came home staggering drunk.

Interestingly, even in his "political" poems, it is the narrative image that stands out rather than the politics. This can be seen in poems such as "No mirth for Bantus", "We move on...", "From the outside", and "Gumba, Gumba, Gumba":

Struggle is when  
You have to lower your eyes  
And steer time  
With your bent voice.  
When you drag along –  
Mechanically.

Your shoulder refusing;  
Refusing like a young bull  
Not wanting to dive  
Into the dipping tank  
Struggle is keying your tune  
To harmonize with your inside.

He wrote about timeless issues of human behaviour. Most of these things are more vivid today than I could imagine them to be in 1977 when *Jol'iinkomo* was published. Thirty six years later, I read and find them reflecting what's happening today:

Many a thing has changed now  
Many a tree has stopped bearing fruit  
Many a face has wrinkled  
Many a smile has died;  
Beauty we still have plenty though,  
Excepted that we no more look  
At the beauty of flowers.  
Brother, the flowers are killing us!

I was also moved by many poems from his second collection, *No more lullabies*. "The cement smile/Of the teller at the bank/Adopted as symbol of courtesy" he wrote in *Bonk'abajahile*. Remarkably, in this book he included two IsiZulu poems. He also collaborated with Liz Gunner in editing *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises* (1991).

In an open letter to Richard Rive, Gwala wrote: "Death does not begin with the last pulse of the heartbeat. Neither does it end with the doctor's certificate." It seems as if Gwala

too has died before the last pulse. He once wrote about Can Themba: “He died in exile. Gutted down by liquor and women (if women do wear men out – a doubtful case); he died almost a pauper. That is all one was able to gather from the flimsy reports. But it would be wrong to think that Can Themba defiled his talents – and end it there.”

Gwala is still here, forgotten while right in front of our noses. His fellow poets, now on well-cushioned seats, seem to have forgotten about him, including established writers he mentored. Today’s banning orders are simple: you get ignored. Then they watch you battling with frustration, drinking yourself to the grave. In the poem, *Words to a mother*, he wrote:

How can I say I’m one of your sons?  
Your sons who sink themselves  
Into the comforts of lounge furniture  
In posh shebeens  
– and drown  
Your sons smiting themselves with dagga  
Behind toilets in Warwick Avenue.

How will we, in his death, honour and claim him as one of our literary legends, if we failed to do it while he was still alive?

## **Black hole in a Poem**

During his seminar, Rian Malan introduced us to the idea of ‘a black hole in a story’ which he explained as ‘telling a story without telling it’ – meaning to leave a part of it untold. This is to withdraw certain information with trust that the reader will be able to complete it. John Giorno would call it ‘keeping your mouth shut while talking’. When I wrote the poem, *Poet and interpreter* that concept came in mind. My attempt was to create a poem where I will leave out a few lines to be completed in a reader’s mind.

### **Poet and interpreter**

The way you pillow your head on my chest  
in front of the photographer  
and the way my arm belts around your waist  
has nothing to do with anything.  
This twilight that leaks from our lips  
as if we are hiding galaxies in our cavities  
speaks nothing beyond nothing.

We remain intertwined after the photographer left  
like we are surrounded by a circle of landmines  
and the slightest move would cost us our lives.  
I’ve been to many countries  
and have left little coffins of bliss.  
It’s easy to lie without blinking an eye.  
It’s easy to flirt with death  
especially for a honey-spread body like yours.

I’m here in your country for only a week  
and we are just a poet and an interpreter.  
I don’t know why you are in my arms outside the hotel  
at this time of the night.  
I don’t know why you are crying in this drizzle  
leaving me wondering if I am wiping from your face  
your tears or the raindrops.  
I don’t know why our legs are dragging us to my hotel room.

## **The unbearable lightness of death**

Mxolisi Nyezwa tasked us to write a poem to or about death and this is what I wrote:

### **death and the young man**

how can death intimidate me  
except to say it will kill me  
which it will anyway  
whether I clench my fists or lick its feet.

it better come for me at night,  
creep into my sleep when my eyes  
are taken by the darkness,  
let it bite me like a rat.

because if it could meet me  
at the cattlepost for a fair bout  
no grass will ever grow again  
on that field of our dust.

It seemed like Mxolisi expected something deep from that exercise, as he later told me that he was disappointed that I did not immerse myself in it to his expectation. But what could I do – how I felt about the subject and how my lecturer was expecting me to feel were different. Obviously, a 29 year old single man will view death differently from someone who is older with a wife and children. If I am not yet worried about death and its implications, why am I supposed to pretend otherwise? Fortunately, Robert and Kobus liked it. Robert commented, “I like it for what it is, it’s a young-man poem”. That’s how the title became, *death and the young man*.

In the poem, the line, “no grass will ever grow” is inspired by the Sepedi saying: *Mo re kopanago gona bjang bo ka se mele* (Where we will meet, no grass will ever grow). My approach in this poem, using a Sepedi proverb, opened up a rich field of possibilities for other poems. G.A. Heron in “Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*”, mentions that every language has its own stock of common images expressing people’s way of looking at things. He adds, “Every language has its own set of literary forms which limit a writer’s manner of expression.” Therefore, in preparation for my poetry project for this MA programme, I decided I would try crossing between two languages in search of inspiration in their ‘stock of common images’.

Lefifi Tladi, in his article, ‘*Aesthetics from an Afrocentric Perspective*’ explains the term *eclecticism* as borrowing ideas to enhance and enrich aesthetics of a given concept or the nature of a thing. But most importantly, he adds, that particular thing should not lose its original characteristics and become something that lacks authenticity in the context of its tradition and dynamics. This is something I kept in mind in quite a number of poems I wrote this year.

## Transformative translation

Most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century poets I have been reading this year are translated. Sometimes, even when the poem is not ‘working’, I feel the need to reserve my comments until I learn the language of the original version by the poet. In South Africa, unfortunately, we find too many scholars getting someone to translate a poem from Sepedi or any other African language and then using the translation to generally analyse poetry in that particular African language.

In the foreword of the English version of her poetry collection translated from Bengali, Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes that, “just as translation can work wonders in opening up a whole new world in front of us, it can also play tricks. Especially with poetry. Sometimes the nature of the target language demands a few changes.” The same sentiment is expressed by Mazisi Kunene in writing about his epic poem *Anthem of the Decades*: “There are, therefore, some slight differences between the original Zulu epic and its translation in English. In some cases, I was forced to cut out some of the stanzas. Sometimes I had to elaborate.”

I wanted to explore this ‘whole new world’ of original language and translation by writing poems in Sepedi then translating them into English, but my MA schedule was tight and limited. For the purpose of my thesis, I only drew from Sepedi. In the poem *the distance of the dead* I’ve employed the Sepedi tradition of accompanying the name of the dead with their personal praise poem, in this case my grandmother’s praise poem.

### the distance of the dead

each time i go abroad, i first pass this way  
to ask the dead to put their arms around me.  
do their arms cross the sea with me  
or do i walk in foreign lands in cardboard armour?  
if i die in paris like vallejo wrote  
will my spirit rest in a foreign heaven  
or will it make its own way home?

my mother says she wants to be buried here  
in bolobedu ga-modjadji,  
she wants to sleep in the embrace of her mother  
grandmother matšie maria makgopa  
koko matšie *lenaila letlopinya la metse yešo*.  
do the dead know any distance?

On the third last line, all the words after ‘grandmother’ are my grandmother’s names. In Sepedi, it’s disrespectful to refer to an elder by a name without establishing the distinction of age through a prefix before the name, like brother so-and-so, uncle so-and-so, or grandfather so-and-so.

Therefore, in the penultimate line, *koko* is 'grandmother' in Sepedi. *Lenaila, letlopinya la metse yešo* roughly means 'the taste bud of our family'. This means that when anyone in the family has plans or receives complicated news from elsewhere, they first bring them to this person so she can 'taste' on behalf of the family. This person's analytic gift is respected by the rest, she is the judge and approver of ideas. Translating such a line can require one to compromise the richness of the metaphor or its meaning, although interestingly, this does not happen for this line.

## Nothing which is something

Kobus Moolman gave us an exercise: listen to someone's conversation, transcribe it and create something out of it – basically spying. Of course, being in the Eastern Cape, nobody spoke my mother tongue. Most of the people I could overhear were IsiXhosa speakers - a language I am not fluent in. I thought I should give up and listen only to English speakers. After criss-crossing the one-street CBD of Grahamstown for hours, I felt like a thief in a mission to rob a bank or something. I then decided to enter a restaurant. I took a seat and ordered a soft drink when a cellphone of a woman who was sitting alone rang. At that moment a thought whispered silently: what about this woman speaking on the phone? Perfect! I realized that though the exercise asked for two people in a conversation, I could also do it through transcribing only one person's side.

I carefully listened to her. Oops! IsiXhosa again!

“Even though you don't understand IsiXhosa that much,” a thought advised, “just listen, make something out of what you *think* she is saying.” Below is what I made out of that ‘nothing’:

### I see

Even without looking, I see  
your ear swallowed by the phone  
I see the person on the other side  
and the one on your tongue, I see.

I see what he does in the wink of the sun  
lowering his pants on the street,  
I see you jumping with banana leaves  
to cover the moon so that the earth cannot see him.

I see leaves dropping like the limp of a dying man,  
I see the earth killing and interring him in darkness,  
chirping birds composing dirges for the living,  
I see your mole fingers digging him out of the grave.

In *The World of Can Temba*, Stan Motjuwadi wrote, “Can [Themba] could write about nothing and anything and make it pleasant reading” After this exercise, I learnt that one doesn't always have to ‘have something to say’ or start from the point of knowing in order to write, writing can come from not-knowing, wrong-translation/transcription, misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Examples that come to mind are Karen Press's poem, *Tokoloshi* and Kenneth Koch's *One Train May Hide Another*.

## **Dance of a Poem**

Last year I had the opportunity to attend a poetry festival in Medellín, Colombia. One thing that stroke me about Latin American poetry is its musicality. Even without understanding Spanish, I could feel the melody of heavy rhythm in Spanish poems being read. This year I've also read the poetry of Gabriela Mistral, Rafael Alberti, Miguel Hernandez, Pablo Neruda, Vicente Aleixandre, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Emilio Prados and Federico Garcia Lorca. What I found fascinating is that musicality was generally outstanding in the translations too. Philo Ikonya wrote in Marjorie O Macgoye's *Make It Sing & other poems* that a poet is many things at the same time: creator, teacher, historian, geographer and musician. It is somehow hard to distinguish poetry from music in Spanish. I then got inspired to write the following poem:

### **tonight**

the sky has stripped all its clouds  
the moon looks tired of our long nights  
the stars are low and pure  
the wind sings with a deep voice  
of a seasoned jazzman  
autumn is wagging its tail  
undressing withered leaves  
and like these trees  
our bare branches caress,  
hear me my love  
tonight is our night  
hear me now, hear me forever  
hear me even though I cannot hear myself...

I always have pleasure reading the entire poem. Somehow it makes me to believe in love again.

## South African literary journals post-1994

### *The state of literary journals in the country*

[In this assignment we were asked to do a research project of our choice, using the resources of the National English Literary Museum, NELM, located in Grahamstown]

In the review published in the December 1994 issue of *New Coin* journal, poet Karen Press was optimistic about the state of contemporary journals across the country, especially poetry publications. "South African poetry publishing is in a healthier state now than it has been for years," she affirmed. During that year and the previous year, new journals sprang to life: *Imprint*, *Blêk-sem*, *Something Quarterly*, *Footprints pamphlet series*, *Imbongi* and *Writer's World*. Independent publishers such as Dye Hard Press were active. There was a lot to write about. Older journals such as *New Coin* and *New Contrast* were still there, and had to make way for the new. It was time of hope for South African writers.

And as if to answer to Press' question ("What are the writers in Upington and Elim and Beaufort West up to, and will we ever find out?"); the journals *Botsotso*, *Fidelities*, *Carapace*, *Herstoria* and *Atio* all emerged in 1995, while small press Deep South was formed that year, publishing the notable *Earthstepper/The Ocean is very Shallow* by Seithlamo Motsapi. In the June 1999 issue of *New Coin* a notice was published announcing the birth of *Kotaz* (published from New Brighton Township in the Eastern Cape, 1998) and *Timbila* (published from Elim Village in Limpopo, 2000). The new millennium saw new journals such as *Green Dragon*, *Donga*, *Echoes*, *So Much to Tell*, *Itch*, *Sweet*, *Chimurenga*, *Turfwrite* and other academic literary and language journals.

Six years later, however, Gary Cummiskey wrote an article titled '*Contemporary South African Poetry: at risk of being silenced*'. This article was a review of a panel discussion that took place during the first Cape Town Book Fair in 2006, a year after the change in direction of the political graph. If you recall, 2005 was the year Schabir Shaik was sentenced; Jacob Zuma was relieved of his post as Deputy President of South Africa; the Koeberg nuclear power station disconnected; the Jacob Zuma was in court on rape charges; protest marches experienced a revival. Poems such as Vonani Bila's 'Mr President, Let the Babies Die' and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers' 'Tea for Thabo' inspired many other poems, criticising the then president and his regime.

We started witnessing a gradual disappearance of literary journals. Quarterly journals became annual. Annual journals became "I don't know, ask the editor!" In the editorial of *Green Dragon 5*, Cummiskey wrote, "Welcome to the fifth- and last-issue of *Green Dragon*." He confessed that editing of a literary journal is a time-consuming exercise and it drains one's energy. Some editors say they always take time off from writing immediately after editing, so to purge their brains to avoid unintended plagiarism.

“When I asked the editors about the future of these journals, the response was generally negative, mainly for the reasons given above, as well as funding problems.” Cummiskey added. Mxolisi Nyezwa’s *Kotaz ’04* editorial states: “I asked the people to give money to produce literature, African literature. And they refused.” Luckily, these editors are driven by passion, and one way or the other, they soldier on. As the result, Cummiskey managed to produce *Green Dragon 6* in 2009 and *Kotaz* has been limping on, sometimes with whole years off.

Hugh Hodge, who edited the 53 year-old literary journal, *New Contrast*, resigned after the magazine could no longer pay him a monthly stipend. Hodge, who edited this journal for over 5 years, was confronted by the same beast Cummiskey mentioned: energy, time and funds. In an attempt to save this journal, a lot has been compromised in the recent *New Contrast* editions, including its appealing design. It now looks like a museum. *Blék-sem*, *Donga*, *Fidelities*, *Turfwrite*, *So Much to Tell* and *Sweetmagazine* – all fell silent.

Funding seems to be the major challenge. Most of the literary journals in this country depend on funding, from the National Arts Council (NAC), Arts & Culture Trust (ACT), Business & Arts South Africa (BASA), Department of Arts & Culture (DAC) or the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF). Funding criteria do not work in favour of new and experimental journals. Some funders require formally audited accounts of projects or programmes. The editorial of *New Contrast* vol. 40, no.1 explains it clearly. “A significant number of challenges still face the South African literary journals. First we have to bring our legal status into line with the new Companies Act (which is going to cost us more money), and secondly, we need to find ways of having our books audited (so that we can approach funding agencies).”

The same lament is echoed in the editorial of the recent issue of *Botsotso* (14), “Yes, *Botsotso* in ‘hard cover’ is back! For the past three years, due to a lack of funds, we have had to restrict publishing to the website.” This is what Cummiskey predicted three years earlier, stating that, “Perhaps, through sheer necessity, the time for South African literary journals to follow international trends and shift online is no too far.” Well, the advantages of online publishing are vast. It eradicates the costs involved in printing, distribution and booksellers, and has the further advantage of cheaper publicity and easy exposure to international readership. After visiting places such as India and Colombia, I can safely confirm that internet access in South Africa is ridiculously expensive. Again, as stated in the *Botsotso* editorial, low literacy levels are a mountainous challenge facing our country. Thus internet penetration is still below 15% of the population. So at this stage internet journals are nothing close to a solution.

Sometimes I ask myself: Does this country value literature? Looking at the previous recipients of the National Orders, the country’s highest honour, one notices that the *Order of Ikhamanga* has been bestowed to many athletes and sportsmen at their 30s,

but exceptional writers or artists of the same age are overlooked. The criterion for artists and writers seems to be death or grey hair. I believe a posthumous award is nothing but a country's guilt on failing to honour their best when they were still alive. For instance, a 35 year old Sifiso Mozobe's debut novel, *Young Blood*, won the Herman Charles Bosman Award, the Sunday Times Literary Award, the South African Literary Award and the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa. What more do we need to honour him? How many Sello Duikers do we want to lose before we treasure our writers?

The last issue of *Timbila*, the most radical poetry journal in the country, was in 2008. The 50 year-old poetry journal, *New Coin*, is a year behind with its 2012 issues. Literary events are also covered by this dark cloud. On its fifth year (2011), the annual Cape Town Book Fair was forced by financial constraints to turn bi-annual. North West's *Sol Plaatje Literary Festival* perished in 2011, its second year. In 2012, the Eastern Cape's *Wordfest* withdrew its 13th year participation in the *National Arts Festival* due to lack of funding. A few weeks ago, the cancellation of the 4 year-old *Northern Cape Writer's Festival* was announced. Peter Rorvik has concluded his term as the head of the University of KwaZulu Natal's Centre for Creative Arts, which runs two most successful and consistent literary festivals in the country, *Poetry Africa* and *Time of the Writer*. He had been the director of this dynamic centre since 1999. We hope the new director will continue steering this ship away from icebergs.

On a positive note, three new festivals were conceived in the past year: the *Mandela Bay Book Fair* (Eastern Cape), the *Polokwane Literary Festival* (Limpopo) and the *Melville Poetry Festival* (Gauteng). Is there any measure in place to prevent premature death of any of these new initiatives? Attending a literary event or contributing to a literary journal is like starting a new love affair; you just don't want to invest your emotion in a relationship that won't go anywhere.

## Silence is sound

Reading poems of poets as diverse as Miklós Radnóti, Ezra Pound, Ted Berrigan, Marike Beyers and Lesego Rampolokeng, I realise how gaps and open spaces can be used effectively in poetry. They work as punctuation marks, as guides on how to read a poem and as separators of smaller poems within one poem. They can demonstrate particular word or action, for instance: 'I paused [gap] then left' – the gap illustrating the pausing. John Cage in *Poetry in Motion* says that silence is sound. "Sounds we hear are merely bubbles in the surface of silence that burst."

I wrote a poem which felt active and alive in its present tense version. I then explored magic created by open spaces. Below is the first version without gaps.

### birthday gift

in the study my little chapel  
I pull down your pants  
make a promise not to go beyond  
I place you on a cold leather chair  
each thigh on its armrest  
like a bible about to be read  
I kiss the floor with my knees  
as if my ancestors are  
somewhere between your holiness  
books on the shelves stop winking  
they all wish they were wording our scene  
I bow my head to taste your freshness  
and when all is a ripe melon  
I say: happy birthday  
and drive you home.

Then I slowly read it out to hear where in each line I can insert a gap. This is how I read it:

### birthday gift

in the study      my little chapel  
I pull      down your pants  
make a promise not to go      beyond  
I place you on      a cold leather chair  
each thigh on      its armrest  
like a bible      about to be read  
I kiss the floor      with my knees  
as if      my ancestors are  
somewhere between      your holiness  
books      on the shelves stop winking

they all wish they were    wording our scene  
I bow my head to taste    your freshness  
and when all is a ripe    melon  
I say: happy    birthday  
and drive    you home.

There are now three poems in one poem: the complete poem and the following two:

**birthday gift**

in the study  
I pull  
make a promise not to go  
I place you on  
each thigh on  
like a bible  
I kiss the floor  
as if  
somewhere between  
books  
they all wish they were  
I bow my head to taste  
and when all is a ripe  
I say: happy  
and drive

my little chapel  
down your pants  
beyond  
a cold leather chair  
its armrest  
about to be read  
with my knees  
my ancestors are  
your holiness  
on the shelves stop winking  
wording our scene  
your freshness  
melon  
birthday  
you home.

### **The poem that gave birth to a short story**

In his short seminar, Rian Malan tasked us to write a poem inspired by a true story. He also wanted us to apply his 'black hole in a story' technique – a chunk of the story had to be missing. I wrote the following poem:

#### **death I never wrote about**

he was there for bread and milk  
thunder cracked from a grocery store  
curiosity shoved him in  
fear overthrown and lost its crown  
saw two men who saw him too  
in their hands were irons of death  
the shopkeeper in a lake of gore  
these men live in his neighbourhood  
two days later he was found cold  
his lonely room witnessed his end.

He liked this poem and in his main seminar he said it was a perfect example of a 'black hole in a story'. Well, I personally did not like it, it was one of the few poems I liked nothing about except their rhythm and musicality. It did not make it into my thesis collection. For me, sound alone cannot carry a poem, I want more.

Rian asked me to develop it into a short story. I can understand making a poem from a short story, but the other way around sounded more difficult. But as soon as I started writing it, it just went on and on by itself. Though it was inspired by a true story, there were many details that I had to supply and in a way I created a new story out of that old story.

The lesson for me was that I should not restrict myself to a particular genre. Something that does not work well as a poem can make a perfect short story, or vice versa. The same applies in prose: changing perspective from third person to the first can do wonders to a story. The best way to find out is to rewrite the same scene in different forms. It is time consuming yet it worth it. Here is the story that came out of this poem:

## **The right thing**

As he approaches the grocery store, Matome hears an ear-splitting bang. A man with a smaller heart might have turned away, because the sound was almost certainly a gunshot. And getting involved with gunfire is never wise, not in South Africa. But Matome always does the right thing, so he steels his nerves and walks into the store. A stream of blood marks the floor, and in it a body lay sprawled, facing the entrance. The eyes are not moving. It is like looking at a statue. A statue of Morena Mothapo, the shopkeeper. And standing over him, two muscular guys who live two blocks from Matome's place, the irons of death still in their hands. Matome pulls back into the shadows. The killers don't react. It would seem they haven't seen him. He spins around and walks home. When he gets there, he locks himself inside, and sits for a while with his head in his hands. A man with a smaller heart might say, forget it, don't get involved, it's too dangerous. But Matome Bopape is not such a man. He sighs, picks up the telephone and does his duty. "Police?" he says. "I witnessed a murder five minutes ago."

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Matome was a Bopape from the farm Waterpoort. His grandfather lay buried there. His father too. The Bopapes had worked for those Boers for nearly sixty years. They had no home other than that farm. When farmworkers elsewhere were on strike, these farmworkers could not afford that risk. The rule at the farm was simple and clear: You behave yourself *or else*...! The '*or else*' part meant many possibilities which included beating and even killing, as happened with the alleged trespasser, Tshepo Matloga. But the most feared possibility was being chased off the farm. Where would they go? Perhaps this environment contributed a lot to Bopape's discipline.

His first job after school was working as a security guard at Mankweng Spar grocery store. His job was to patrol the back of the store, where hungry kids would rip open packets of chocolates or Simba chips, wolf down their contents and leave without paying. The store manager often threatened to deduct the value of goods lost in this way from the security guards' salaries. Matome didn't mind. As he saw it, if he did the right thing, these kinds of theft would never happen, so he wouldn't lose anything.

One Saturday afternoon, Matome heard the noise of an entrance door banging, followed by a growling voice instructing everyone to lie on the floor. He knew immediately that something bad was about to happen. He quickly ran to the storeroom, locked himself in and called the police. Luckily, there was a police van driving past this shopping complex at that very time. It was instructed to investigate right away. The van arrived while the thieves armed with rifles were still emptying the tills. The policemen ordered them to drop their guns and open the door to the grocery store. Without any fuss, they complied, without firing a single bullet or holding the consumers hostage. It seemed like they were amateur thieves on their first rehearsal.

In their statement, the policemen acknowledged that Matome's mobile number was the one that reported the robbery. "Thank you" was the only token of appreciation he received from the manager, who claimed that it was his duty to save the store from robbery. His colleague, who sometimes took bribes from thieves who wanted to steal from the store, mocked Matome that his loyalty paid him *fokol*. He was not even reimbursed for the airtime he used to call the police station. "God is the one who will reward me," Matome told himself.

Two years later, Matome resigned, and enrolled for Civil Engineering at the Capricorn FET College's Seshego campus, specialising in bricklaying. He remained focused and dedicated, just he was at his security guard job. At the end of that year, he passed his Level 3 with flying colours. The following year, he got employed at Kopano Construction, a building company based in Polokwane. His salary was three times what he used to earn as a security guard, yet he continued staying in a backyard room at Mamotintane squatter camp adjacent to Mankweng township. This was the only way he could save some money to build a house for his parents and siblings. With his two-year security guard peanuts, he had managed to buy them a site and built temporary toilet-like two-rooms in Bochum, a village near Dendron.

Matome disliked Mamotintane squatter camp. It was the most undisciplined place, a hooligans' den. A place where almost in every street there is at least one person who sells marijuana. Ironically, Mamotintane is opposite the University of Limpopo. Most of the youth around Mamotintane never made it to matric, and a few are university dropouts. Matome would often be heard when parting ways with his friends who stayed in the township, saying, "*Eish*, it's time to return to Sodom and Gomorrah." It was the most notorious place around Mankweng, perhaps in the entire South Africa. But again, it was the only place you could rent a room for R200. Taking into consideration the house he was planning to build in Bochum, low rent accommodation was part of his strategy to save money. Being a qualified bricklayer, he didn't want a house unless it had all its specifications made on the basis of durability.

Mamotintane, his Sodom and Gomorrah, was popular for having many bottle stores and taverns. Situated on the left of Mankweng hospital, it is the place that caused many nurses to hate their weekend night shifts. Every weekend fights would erupt, resulting in either stabbings or fatal shootings. The injured would be pushed to the hospital in a wheelbarrow, because if an ambulance was called, the police would also be notified. That meant a case would have to be launched and someone would be arrested. No one was prepared to be a witness. This was a small community where everyone knew every cow and goat that lived there. Not even the bar owner was ready to testify. The tale was always the same when they arrived at the hospital: "We found this person lying at the roadside. We don't know what happened to him."

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And yes, today Matome has done the right thing again. It is a small contribution that could clean this Sodom and Gomorrah, and the rest of the country. At 7pm he receives a mysterious call. The voice sounds deep and intimidating. The caller does not say much. He does not even say who he is. He only asks one question. "*Luister hier, jy het niks gesien, right?*" he says, asking a question which was more of a command. "Right," Matome responds, agreeing that he saw nothing. Matome hears a beeping sound and realises that the caller has hung up.

He places the phone on the drawer next to the bed. His hands are trembling. After a minute, as if someone has whispered something into his ear, he quickly switches off the light and gets under his blankets. The darkness scares him even more. Insomnia is corroding his sleep. He reaches for his phone and calls the Mankweng Police Station, requesting to be taken into a place of safety until the guys are arrested. A policeman tells him not to worry because there is a police van patrolling around Mamotintane every night; Matome's address will be given to the driver so he can keep an eye on his place throughout the night. Furthermore, he assures him that the two guys will be arrested before the end of the next day. "Relax, we know our job," the policeman concludes. After a couple of hours, Matome texts his friend and pastor, and explains his situation. His worry is that for hours he has not heard any sound of a passing vehicle in his street. It was hard to rely on this patrol van for safety. He had no choice but to push the clock's arm with his eyes until it fell on the morning hours.

At 6am, Sunday, Matome is already dressed-up for the church service. Holy intervention is all he needs. After all, he has to act normally, like nothing has happened, like he did not inform the police and that there is nothing to fear. This means he has to go to the church, like he does every Sunday morning. Before leaving the room, he kneels on the cold floor, whispers for almost ten minutes then says Amen. He then wipes off tear-streams from his cheeks and walks out. Matome avoids talking to any of the police, and proceeds to the church.

After the church service, he walks straight back to his room, locks himself in and calls the police station. The policeman who answers the phone tells him not to stress, the information gathered so far is going to lead to arrests. He then calls his friend, and shares his frustration and fear. At 8pm, when he is about to sleep, his phone rings. It is a private number and he doesn't know what to do. Some landlines appear as private number, he recalls, it might be from the police station. He then answers. "*Jy dink jy is 'n slimmetjie, ne? Ek gaan jou wys wie die regte mafia is,*" the caller says, before he hangs up. Matome's eyes inflate like a balloon, as if a ghost is before him. He calls Mankweng Police Station with fingers trembling like a jack hammer. They promise to send a van straightaway, but he has to call several times before they finally send the van.

On their arrival, the two policemen searched all over the yard and find nothing. They tell him to call them should he experience anything unusual. They then leave. Matome calls a couple of friends to come pick him up so he can sleep at one of their places. Unfortunately, those who answer their phones are either out of town or have no transport to fetch him.

Monday morning, his fellow tenants are surprised to see that he has not left for work at 7am. One tenant goes to knock at his open door, just to discover through the gap between the door and door frame that Matome's body is laying on his single bed. The police confirm that the wooden door had been broken with something sharp. The forensic announced that 21 knife wounds were discovered on his body and the neck showed that he had been throttled with something thin, like wire.

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## **The dead do not die**

In her seminar, visiting UK teacher Jean McNeil explored a drawing technique. In this technique you are required to draw or sketch a photographic representation of what you want to write about. Unlike in freewriting, one has to know in advance exactly what one wants to write about. Then you choose a specific scene and draw it with details on it. This exercise helps to bring an old scene or setting back to life. It makes one remember small details of an old scene.

I decided to write a poem about my grandmother with a focus on her hearth. I first drew the inside of the hearth which I had not entered in a long time now. With my limited drawing skills I just made lines, squares and cycles. I had to name everything because nothing on that paper looked similar to what it was meant to represent. By the time I wrote the poem, I felt *physically* in my grandmother's hearth. Though I did not use any linguistic features of Sepedi, I had to switch my mind into Sepedi cosmological belief, and use the mythic tools to relate to her death.

### **Grandmother's hearth**

He who says grandmother is dead and gone  
has never entered her hearth  
to dig from the ashes of her hands.

He cannot hear silent echoes of her voice  
from these three stones which used to carry her pots,  
pots which named each one of us.

These three stones that carry all the ancient chants  
sang by the ancestors' blue-snake flame  
filling our mother's arms in her sleep.

Grandmother is not dead and gone,  
she dwells somewhere in this thatched hut,  
somewhere between these cowdung-plastered walls.

In Sepedi mythology, death is viewed as a mere change of form rather than a disappearance. It is believed that an elder, especially a grandmother, changes form into a pot, or a stone that supports the pot, or roof or walls. That's where I drew my inspiration. They continue telling tales in the hearth but in a spiritual voice.

## **The National Arts Festival**

It was my first time to attend the National Arts Festival. I was selected to be one of the reviewers for the festival's daily newspaper, *CUE*. As interesting as it sounded, what it actually meant was that for the eleven days of the festival, I was going to watch an average of 6 shows per day, and write a 50-word review of each show for the next day's edition. Furthermore I was also requested to write an article on the MA programme, translate one of my Sepedi poems and send both versions to the Wordfest newspaper, *WordStock*.

What I forgot was that for five days, we were having daily lunchtime readings at the St Peters Building as part of the MA in Creative Writing's festival programme. My reading was on Friday at 13:00, at 11:00 I was to be on the Wordfest programme, sharing a panel discussion on 'new South African writing'. After all these, I had to drive to the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University to attend the Neville Alexander Commemoration Conference.

My priority was the MA programme reading because we had spent days and days preparing for it. We watched video recording of poets including *Jikeleza Train*, *Poetry 99* and *Poetry in Motion*. The latter was fascinating because it featured American whose work I had read but never knew what they looked like. Among them were Gary Snyder, Michael Ondaatje, William S. Burroughs, Anne Waldman, Amiri Baraka and Allen Ginsberg. Before I started the MA programme, I had done and seen a lot of oral performances as opposed to readings – in other words 'reading' from memory than from a text. I had gradually improved my reading skill from our feedback sessions where we had all read out our assignments.

The line-up was our poetry students and teachers: myself, Marike Beyers, Mishka Hoosen, Mangaliso Buzani, Mxoliso Nyezwa, Kobus Moolman and Robert Berold. I read 'the bed's chant', 'the was and is of thabo mbeki' and other poems. All went quite well.

Afterwards, Robert invited me to watch the play *Cadre*, by Omphile Molutsi – it reminded me why I prefer stage plays over movies.

### **The first isiXhosa poem**

IsiXhosa speaking students had their own creative writing group where they met with Mxolisi Nyezwa. I decided to join the group, though my isiXhosa is not that good. It was fruitful because it fuelled my love for African languages.

In her seminar Joan Meterlerkamp got us to recite any of the poems or nursery rhymes we've learnt when we were young. After that exercise, we had a discussion and Mangaliso raised his concern that in isiXhosa the culture of nursery rhymes was fading. Immediately I was reminded that I help isiXhosa-speaking Sunday school children and I needed to write them a poem for the Sunday school competitions which were to be held in a month's time. I went home and attempted to write the following isiXhosa nursery rhyme.

#### **Iintaba zakwaMamabolo**

LoTata usithandile  
usikhuphile emlilweni,  
ilifa silibambile  
siphumile ezonweni,

wena langa, nawe nyanga  
bonani inkwenkwezi yeminyaka,

uThixo ohleli phezulu  
kweentaba zakwaMamabolo,  
owethu uThixo omkhulu  
usinika uxolo nenjabulo,

andisokoyika 'Nkosi yamabandla,  
undithamsanzele undiphe amandla.

In the next feedback session, I showed it to Mxolisi, the only isiXhosa speaking lecturer. His response was "This is the type of thing even my mother can write." He said nothing more. I did not know what to say...

## **The Polokwane Literary Fair**

I am part of the organising team for the Polokwane Literary Fair, which is sponsored by the Polokwane Municipality. The previous year, we hosted over 30 writers from all over the country. This year, though I am based in Grahamstown, I was tasked to put up a line-up of 7 male poets, which included Lesego Rampolokeng, Dashen Naicker, Vonani Bila, Mak Manaka, Robert Berold, Chisomo Nyamalikiti (Malawi) and myself. Most of the members of the organising team are only exposed to performance poetry and that is all they have in mind. In the initial proposed line-up, I had names such as Lebogang Lance Nawa and he was rejected simply because they know that he is not a performance poet. I took my chances with Robert Berold: my plan was to expose the Polokwane audience to something different from what they had seen last year. Luckily, he managed to make an impression.

On Mandela Day, we drove to Ga-Mothapo village where Robert, with assistance of my interpretation, facilitated a workshop to little primary pupils. I was *literally* melted by the work they produced, both in English and Sepedi by these kids, especially with the exercise made famous by Kenneth Koch, in which children are asked to write a 'lie' poem, a poem about something which is not true. They wrote the most touching work, which I would never have expected from children not exposed to books and a reading culture.

In the two years we have been hosting this literary fair from the municipality, the Limpopo Department of Arts and Culture has never showed any interest to come on board. We have invited them to the inaugural opening ceremony but no partnership was developed. Perhaps this is because they have their own annual festival, the 'Mapungubwe Music Festival' which they actually call the 'Mapungubwe Arts Festival'. Enraged by this, I wrote the following poem:

### **Poem for Limpopo**

*for the Limpopo Department of Rats and Vulture*

I never wrote a poem for Limpopo,  
this silent river of modest waters  
that quenches not thirst of its own fish,  
this garden of Sodom marketed as Eden,  
glittering gold of the wasted Mapungubwe,  
river that makes love to every Shashe and Zambezi  
forgetting its own streams.  
I never wrote a poem about Limpopo  
because it stole water in me  
and watched me wilt, leaf by leaf.

## Silent Protest

In a country which is still navigating and negotiating its way from a cobweb of a political history, one will never undermine the role of political poetry. Without doubt, radical or dissident poets such as James Matthews, Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, Don Mattera, Oswald Mtshali, Sipho Sipamla, Mandla Langa and Ingoapele Madingoane held the torch of hope in the days of apartheid. With South Africa divided into black and white, poetry too was divided into 'public' and 'personal'. Just by the virtue of being of a particular pigment, one was clustered in a particular group of writers by default. Michael Chapman says in his book, *The Soweto Poets*, that not all 'these' Soweto poets are from Soweto. So one did not physically have to reside in Soweto to be labelled a Soweto Poet! Soweto, a name of a place, seems to be more about the pigment of the poet and the political themes one writes about.

Nadine Gordimer in her book, *The Black Interpreters* slam James Matthews for being "anything but not a poet". Subsequently, names such as *sloganiterians*, *pamphleterians* and *toyi-toyi* poets emerged and most poets felt the need to distance themselves from politics so to avoid these labels, as they were seen as somewhat less than a poet. The 'public' and 'personal' debate was seen by most blacks as pure racism. They, then, defended themselves with what Jean-Paul Sartre calls "anti-racist racism".

In the COSAW anthology, *Essential Things*, the editor Andries Walter Oliphant pointed out that South African literature has a legacy of clashing exchanges. He observed how the articulations of private, personal and subjective themes are complacently equated with excellence by those inclined to a conservative outlook. He pointed out that on the other side, and equally debilitating, there have been calls by radical poets and critics for social and political relevance at the expense of formal and technical accomplishment. Unfortunately, as his observation goes, some new poets are still caught in these conflicts.

I believe poetry should primarily be judged on its 'literary' rather than its 'sociological' merits. On the other hand poetry should never be condemned simply because it is political. Unfortunately, in South Africa, the political/protest/radical poetry debates always stray into the area of racial conflict – which suggests that race is probably the actual core of these debates. Perhaps to some extent it is because this type of poetry was, in South Africa, written by the 'oppressed' who were mainly blacks. This is unlike the European and American situation where it is simply a conflict between doctrines: the Romantic and the Classics.

"Where black writing is concerned," Jane Watts argued in *Black Writers from South Africa*, "the material conditions of its making and consumption are crucial to an understanding of what it is all about. No critical account can be rendered without talking these into consideration." This might obviously be confused for a plea for a

special case approach to analysing black writing, especially poetry. What it suggests to me is that (1) in times of oppression, the oppressed writes with one mission in mind: to eradicate oppression; (2) If the work is aimed at the common man, especially the not-that-literate, one has to use language that will cater or be understandable to the readers.

Goodenough Mashego wrote in *Timbila 3*, “...poetry in the context of protest poetry is indeed dead.” He added that “[t]he challenge is for poets to position themselves to a point where they cannot be black/white/coloured or Indian but poets.” On a different tone, Mbongeni Khumalo (*Kotaz 2004*) wrote, “It saddens me much to see fellow black writers hoodwinked by the propaganda of their white “friends” into believing that ‘political’ literature is actually not literature but propaganda canvassing support for a tendentious cause.”

The question might be: if protest poetry is truly dead, is it as the result of the dismantling of the apartheid system? Does it then mean the conditions that stimulated protest poetry are eliminated? In *Kotaz 2004*, Mxolisi Nyezwa also wrote, “For me there is absolutely no hope, no freedom. I don’t think I will ever recover from the madness.//I am constantly petrified and amazed by the false complicity of some of our patrons and the gullibility of fellow writers.” This, for me, suggests that some of the conditions still exist, is just the form of addressing them that need to be reviewed.

The question I always asked myself when writing politically-themed poems, is: how can I say this in an individual voice that will echo strikingly to the reader? My answer has been a quote from the poem, *The Condemned Men*, by Nyezwa, (which inspired the title of COSAW anthology, *Essential Things*):

A new way of expression  
Saying the same essential thing  
In a new way...

With all these, I decided to address political issues in a slightly different approach from the political poems I have read so far. My poems such as “*the was and is of thabo Mbeki*” and “*Meneer Swart*” are attempts to write political poems in a fresh, individual way. I wanted to do what Dambudzo Marechera calls: to ‘choose the private voice when writing about a public theme’. I “wrote *the was and is of thabo Mbeki*” after reading Tanure Ojaide’s lines, “Very soon those who cry for the tree to be downed/will weep that the cut is too deep”. As one of our visiting teacher, US writer Lance Olsen put it, when you read you are actually rewriting the text you are reading. Ojaide’s lines reminded me of comments I have heard lately about our former president, Thabo Mbeki. I then wrote the following poem:

**the was and is of thabo mbeki**

lucifer used to envy you, I heard,  
you were the only vampire that could smile  
without exposing its pointed teeth,  
what was good for you was good for this country  
this spaza shop, a marble on your autocratic palm;  
your word was the last train of the night,  
citizens had to squeeze and stand on tiptoes  
or else they were to sleep under bridges.

today I hear, from the same lips  
that you were not building cities in your homestead;  
you were not boiling the muse of painters and cartoonists;  
your family never soaked hands in the gore of the miners;  
you never prostrated to words of any nursery league  
or contemplated soldering the lips of long-nosed media.  
it's only today I hear, every citizen is free to articulate  
yet in this chorus of voices no one can hear anyone.

Again I found myself in a crossroad with responses to this. Robert and I liked the title, and Kobus said it is clumsy. Perhaps he is right, and it is actually its clumsiness that will make the poem unique, unlike all the typical I-am-the-voice-of-reason kind of political poems. I kept the title. In the poem, *makana water diary*, I wanted to just paint a politically-charged picture without interpreting it. I completely disengaged my view and let the reader interpret the situation themselves.

### **makana water diary**

compliments for the new year    pump at the water dam has a minor problem    it will be  
fixed soon    just a broken vee-belt    technical team is on it    welcome rhodes students  
it is actually a leak on worn gland packings    happy human rights day    spring water  
on the port alfred road    they are repacking    no leak no drip    happy easter holidays  
congratulations to all the graduates    warm welcome to the parents    ungreased  
bearings seized    take advantage of rain water    self-lubricating bearings to be bought  
all should be fine now    electricity is eskom's baby    welcome to the second term  
rapists should die of thirst in prison    garbage to be removed after municipal strike  
happy freedom day    experts identified a cracked impeller    tender bidding  
for transportation of the new impeller    free water at the port alfred road  
11 days of amazing    grahamstown the capital city of art    burred shaft  
causes cavitation on the new impeller    welcome to the third term    eskom need to be  
called to order    vice chancellor leads a water protest march    fourth term  
merry christmas and happy new-year    don't forget to vote for us.

## **Reflections on the MA programme**

I have never encountered an intense and liberated programme as the Rhodes University's MA programme in Creative Writing. It's hard to believe – but it's a fact – the programme consists of ten fulltime students and thirteen lecturers. Thirteen lecturers? Yes: 13! The unique side of it is that every lecturer brings his/her unique understanding and approach, which leaves students with vast experience. Our four poetry lecturers were Robert Berold, Joan Metelerkamp, Mxolisi Nyezwa and Brian Walter. We had guest poetry lecturers, Carole Langille (Dalhousie University, Nova Scotia), Kobus Moolman (University of KwaZulu Natal) and Soga Mlandu.

Having this approach means that you get contradictory suggestions on how to improve your work. For instance, Brian was sensitive on grammatical rules; Joan was fascinated with syllabic and rhythmic forms, Robert liked the specificity and musical flow, Mxolisi was moved by emotional intensity and Kobus was allergic to adjectives and conversational forms. When they gave suggestions on the same poem, you had to realize that one of them might get offended if you decide to reject his/her suggestion. Some of them didn't like a rejection of their suggestion by a student in favour of another lecturer's suggestion.

Some of the lecturers contradicted themselves. This is a point which was also noticed by Ingrid Winterbach in our intensive week programme, and I heard she got into trouble because of articulating it. Observing different conflicts between students and lecturers during the programme, I was inspired to write the following poem:

### **teachers**

some teachers are lightning  
expecting every student to be their  
thunder

some teachers are rivers, sources to thirsty streams  
but they do not want streams to become  
rivers

some teachers are humps protruding above camels' heads  
thinking height makes them the most important camel body  
parts

some teachers are bees  
warning wasps not to sting because to sting is to  
perish

some teachers are echoes  
of long exploded dynamite a thousand meters  
underground

## **Depression**

In the second part of the year my mood changed. My supervisor thought I was depressed, and so did some of my classmates – but I was not, or at least I think I was not. I knew a lot had changed in the way I behaved though I don't think it was anything close to depression. I have seen a friend who was undergoing depression. She would struggle to construct a sentence, that's how terrible depression can become. I had no sign that I was heading in that direction.

I know I went through spiritual adjustment. I came to Grahamstown with a full understanding that my primary duty was to my MA studies. After a couple of months I began to realize that I was here for spiritual reasons, that my studies were but the vehicle that transported me here to perform my spiritual obligations. There was a war that the God of Mount Zion had to fight and he used me as his fists. The complicated part is that I had to first connect with Him spiritually before he could start having a direct communication with me. For this to occur, I needed to first kill the world outside me so I could be left with nothing else to worry about. I had to get rid of anything that could distract my attention: I deactivated my social network accounts, I stopped checking my email regularly, my cellphone number would be off most of the time (if not on silence mode), I avoided crowds and 'friends', I reduced my speaking in favour of listening. I was on strict celibacy, and meditation became my new way of life – a complete hermit.

This new 'life' surely interfered with my studies, therefore I had to go all out when I got a chance for studies. Once the spirit invaded me, I had no control over my life. As the result, I had to turn down some big opportunities. For instance, I was offered work to translate two of Gcina Mhlophe's English novels into Sepedi. There was the final stages to an anthology of 202 Sepedi poems I had compiled and edited. I had two festival invitations to India and Beijing. I was invited to attend book launches of a poetry anthology that featured my work, including *Marikana: A Moment in Time*. I had to free myself completely from all these.

Initially, I did not understand what was going on, so it was even worse to attempt to explain this process to anyone else. No wonder some were convinced that it was depression. Fortunately, I managed to translate my denial, confusion and acceptance of this complicated spiritual voyage into poetry.

The following poem came from this place. It felt like I had just taken out my heart and placed it on a piece of paper.

### **darkness**

1.  
dear inside, lately, i have been writing  
poems about the outside  
in order to distract my attention from you.

i didn't want them to see  
that you are torn apart,  
that things are not in their right places.

everything is dressed with dust,  
even the white linen you washed not long ago.

if you don't get yourself together soon,  
i am going to open the curtains  
and expose you.

2.  
darkness helps me not to see my own face    shade shadow my day    don't ask me  
to open the curtains    this darkness and its coldness reminds me of my destiny  
the forever-winter grave    my breathing corpse has become    please don't ask me to  
open my curtains    don't

3.  
until when will I fear the light?  
wearing darkness and its shame will not darken blazing bones  
underneath my pain  
bones that live galaxy's dream.  
the gallons of tears and blood I've shed will never extinguish the fire of my heart,  
this smelter that steams hope into millions of other corpses.  
the sky longs to wrap me again like  
when love used to walk our streets naked  
when its yoke was mine  
and nothing was heavy for me.

4.  
i am somewhere between the owl-eyes of the sky  
and the red teeth of the earth,  
in the grip of a vampire kiss.

i don't know how i got here,  
how i got my testicles  
between these burdizzo pinchers.

5.  
my rivers run through people  
but i remain dry inside,  
not even a cactus can bud inside me,  
skeletons of old flowers fly out  
even in a gentle breeze, leaving my soil naked.

when i enter inside myself  
my thoughts and wishes gather clouds  
for yet another morning drought.

what can i tell this karoo sand  
that melts the steel of hope?  
my roots fight battles of loss,  
the misleading greenness of my outer leaves.

6.  
in times of ashes and fractured bones,  
the marrow of their sorrow  
darkened my eyes with soot.

all those years of cold fires,  
of wet firewood smoking like a coal train,  
my dripping eyes remained open.

though my heart was full of worms  
i soaked theirs with love,  
killed myself for them to live.

they, the ones i died for  
are now nowhere  
to bury me.

\*

All these parts were written separately, in their different feelings. The combination of all these moods in one poem made something unique and complex. Due to their intensity, I decided to put each part on a new page in my thesis collection, so to let the reader digest one at a time.

Now I understand what Kobus Moolman meant during the 15<sup>th</sup> *Poetry Africa festival* when he said, "For poetry to matter, it should cost something to the poet, it should extract something out of the poet".

## **Making of thesis manuscript**

Robert Berold guided me on a strategic sequencing of poems in a book form. We printed preliminary poems out of poems I've written since the beginning of the programme and we made a long train of papers on the table. He explained to me that there were different ways of doing it, for example grouping the poems by theme, or grouping them based on varieties of tone. I chose the latter, because I felt that they had scattered themes. We together selected the first ten, creating a variety of tone by mixing the heavy and the light/soft and hard. It took us almost two hours to complete the entire sequence. What delayed us is that sometime we had to reread the poem to hear/feel where it belonged. We finally had three sections, arranged roughly into (a) the self and political poems; (b) the outside, relationships and travelling; and (c) and the rest.

I went home and read the entire manuscript as a unit. I brutally detached my emotions and began chopping down the not-good-enough poems. Poems have no visible blood, but it felt like genocide. I was left with around 70 poems.

In the next meeting with Robert, I brought a printed version of that sequence. We went through the 70, checking the 'life' in the poems. There are poems which when I read them the first time, I thought they were great poems, but after reading them more than 6 times, I felt their energy vanishing. Such poems had to go.

In this elimination process, something started dawning. I realized that I actually had four sections not three. The challenge was that for some sections, I did not have sufficient poems. I decided to pause with this process and write new poems, this time around with a clear intention on their place in the book. It was not easy because submission date was approaching. I would sometimes read two lines of another poet's work and get triggered to write.

I literally did not sleep for several nights. I would pillow my head on books and when I woke up after two to three hours, and return to the writing. My literary muscles were at this point worked out to withstand any kind of fatigue. Robert liked most of the newly written poems. One thing which fulfilled me was that he had to do less editing on most of the newly written poems, testifying to my own growth in editing my own work.

Robert suggested that it is better to have a collection of 40 poems which are all strong, than to have 70 with some not-so-good poems. We then decided to separately write our own shortlists. Surprisingly, we come up with almost the same list, they only differed by two poems. At this point we were left with 43 poems. The manuscript was now divided into four sections roughly: autobiographical, romantic, political and transcendental poems. Nevertheless, I avoided naming them as themes: I wanted them to speak for themselves. Of course some of them could not be categorised. One poem *prickly pears*

had a political angle to it, but I placed it on the autobiographical section because its tone was more about where I come from, than about confronting the socio-political.

The poem, *I've seen my father* was driven by memories I never thought I will ever revisit. When I wrote it, it was as if I was possessed by some spirit or something. It just came out as it is. After writing it I had to put it away for days so I could release the pressure first. When I returned to it, there was absolutely no editing necessary – it felt complete as it was.

There were two poems I nearly excluded in the collection simply because none of the four sections represented them. The poems, *a poem to my poems* and *a poem to my rejected poems* are the only poems about poems in the collection. I then realized that the image I used was that of children. I address my poems as my children – they are part of my family: the autobiographical section.

Robert requested our Thursday Poetry Reading group in our last meeting of the year, to listen to me reading my entire thesis. After listening, they suggested elimination of two poems. I finally felt confident that the collection was complete. I knew it was chiselled to the core.

We still hadn't found a title for the collection. I initially suggested *Distant lightning*. Robert felt that it didn't reflect the sense and mood of the entire collection. I then suggested *Swallowing prickly pears unpeeled* which our poetry group members felt it was too long. Robert suggested *On the last day* but I felt it was too religious and too dramatic. It didn't seem to cover the mood of the collection as a whole. I made a long list of possible title:

- Those without shadows*
- Making love to gales*
- Wars my roots fought*
- The sea drinks our rivers dry*
- Limp of a dying man*
- A single foot-bracelet*
- *Swallowing prickly pears*
- Cowdung-plastered walls*

*Swallowing prickly pears* seemed closest to what the entire collection was all about. The phrase appealed to me for three reasons:

- 1) Prickly pears are a symbol of rural life, I associate them with place of my birth and my upbringing.
- 2) In each of the four sections, there is a sense of the pain of 'thorns' from eating or attempting to eat whatever 'prickly pear' it may be.

- 3) There's also some sort of constipation and sense of regret after 'swallowing' whatever 'prickly pear' each section is all about.

On the submission day of the thesis, a new suggestion came: The Hoof-Printed Rock. Without any need to justify it, it felt perfect. Or perhaps, my justification has to be: I chose it because I chose it, therefore, I chose it. (Neruda will forgive me, his reasoning feels so perfect for my decision.) Only he who has read the entire compendium, will understand my motive.

So here then is my manuscript: sweet tears blood flesh bone and spirit.