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Through the eye of a needle

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THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE

A collection of 50 poems by

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Dissertation / thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Arts (Creative Writing)

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Declaration by author: This work has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own original work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed:  Date: 02 May 2003
Abstract

*Through the eye of a needle* is a collection of fifty poems, reflecting a highly eclectic mix of styles with idiomatic interplay of English and African languages. Eight of the poems have been previously published in literary journals and anthologies such as *Southern African Review of Books, New Coin,* and *Essential Things.* From these, two have won the annual *Sanlam/Tribute Poetry Award Competition* for 1995 & 1997, respectively, co-judged by Prof E’skia Mphahlele as one the panellists. A third one, from the eight, has been turned into a song by the internationally acclaimed South African musician, Vusi Mahlasela, and has featured in one of his popular albums, *Miyela Afrika.*

Spanning fifteen years, the collection reflects different developmental and stylistic patterns drawn from various influences of South African experience; from the type of education undergone to political awareness of the 1970s to date. In each poem, the poet assumes a central role as either an active or passive participant (observer). Each poem resonates with a distinct voice commentating on what is being experienced.
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Cover illustration: layout and photograph by the author.
Introduction

A mere mention of the name of any Black South African poet writing in English invariably provokes this question: to what extent did a myriad of South African experiences influence the work at hand and how? This prompts yet another question: what is South African poetry?

An attempt at answering these questions may perhaps be best drawn from a quick snapshot of my own socialization.

I was born and bred in a community wherein I encountered poetry at a very early age at communal gatherings such as ploughing and harvesting ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and inaugurations of Magoši (kings and chiefs). In fact, members of each family were expected to, at one stage in their lives, not only know and memorize their own individual family and clan praise poems, but also to compose their own personal praise-poems, particularly during rites of passage.

This significant process was sadly interrupted by the introduction of a Bophuthatswana Government, under the then apartheid homeland policy. The new government imposed Setswana in schools and public services as an official “mother tongue,” replacing Sepedi, my home language. The community grudgingly accepted the situation, yet privately still continued with its cultural practices. This act planted a seed of curiosity and exploration - if not subtle defiance - in my own mind.

Meanwhile, English continued to reserve its status as one of the official languages in many schools in the wake of national revolts against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. This brought about confusion in the language framework through which I perceived life. The situation was compounded further in high school where I was taught English literature by an English national imported directly from England. Of note here is that the teacher aggressively, if not violently, insisted that we had to think and dream in English. To that end, we were subjected only to writings of English poets such as Shakespeare, Auden, Yeats, Keats and Wordsworth.
The situation continued through to university where I majored in English literature, save that it was there that I was also exposed, for the first time ever, to works of South African poets such as Mongane Wally Serote and many others.

My horizon was broadened further when I took membership of the Congress of South African Writers (Cosaw) where I came across concepts such as *proemdra* coined by Mothobi Mutloatse, as best captured in the book, *Forced landing*. It was from this Black Consciousness inspired attitude to literature that I began consciously and deliberately to break established conventions, stylistically and otherwise, of literature. It is against this background that I sought to discover my own poetic voice rooted in both the African and European traditions.

The creative, rather than didactic, supervision of my work by Prof Geoffrey Haresnape, in preparation for the collection, has hopefully enhanced what I think, or hope, is a unique voice that could well be placed amongst those poets whose works continue to give insights in debates about what constitutes South African literature.
Walking in my heart

I am walking in my heart
with footsteps of the past
searching, searching in the rain
of memories for your face, my face

Yet I know the futility of the mission
as we lived and loved in days of darkness
and madness during which we even competed
with chameleons in changing colours

As I take one step at a time,
changing from one road to the next,
trying to trace and adapt to their spines,
water turns into ink and gun powder
which squeezes through the holes
in the soles of my shoes

Life then becomes a public scandal
as a poet and a soldier become one
One foot scrawls love poems
whereas the other spews dirges

Now, which of the two would you like
to welcome at the end of the journey?

A soldier who cries in the rain
so as to camouflage pains and tears
or a poet who smiles like lightning
and moves like a river under the cover of rain?

I am now tripping in my heart
for I do not know one foot from the other
There are no spoors here,
only broken mirages in puddles

Yet I am still walking
marching in my heart
with footsteps of the past
and eyes of the future
Soya beans en masse

When names are called, where I live,
there are no angels on white clouds
or St Peter with a Father Christmas’s beard
but a government official
with a black book in front of a black gate
where people gather en-masse -
for their daily rations of soya-beans
Rains in a village

I

In my village, Marokolong,
Hammanskraal, rains have usurped the role
of trench diggers

Every time it falls, soil is washed away
from the roads you and I,
animals and machine alike, ought to travel on:
gaping trenches are left, separating neighbours
from each other and the outside world

It is at times like these that roots
from a variety of plants, particularly huge trees
lining the sides of the roads become octopuses
fighting fiercely for soil particles that are
burrowed away from their grasp

At the end, when water has ploughed
down the hill at typhoon speed, cutting corners
to the local river these roots lie suspended
hopelessly like umbilical cords hankering
for solace inside a womb but find comfort
only in the wind and the rock-hard
spine of the earth

Should you wish to visit me one day
hoping to get to know me better
stand there on the other side of the donga

Let my words build you a bridge
ushering you into my past and path
which leads to this village

II

Ride on the wings of my memory
to the months I spent in the cradle
of my mother’s womb as a wet globule
swirling and spinning around and kicking
at the walls to announce my readiness
to enter the outside world

There
at the mouth of my birth
white hands waited luminously to catch me
as I glided into sight of white faces
white linen
and white walls
of ward 16 and bed no. 38
in the Roman Catholic nursing home
called Little Flower in Lady Selbourne

I was still steadying my footsteps
in 1980 3rd Avenue a street in Walmansthal
where my family lived at the time of my birth
when they together with many others
were summoned to a local church one day
for a sermon never to be forgotten
from collective memory

A government official, an Afrikaner it was said,
took the place of the missionary priest at the pulpit

He removed his hat and placed it neatly
in the middle of a lily-white table cloth

which leads to this village
which had served countless communions

“What is it that you see in front of me?”
The official asked a rhetorical question
while wiping off sweat from his bald head

“A black hat on a white cloth”
they chorused in response

“Correct!” said the man authoritatively
“This black hat symbolises a black spot
on a white land
a black pimple on a white skin.

You people are a black spot
which must be removed immediately
and permanently from the white cloth!”

And so the congregation exploded into tears
and mournful hymns whose refrains
echo throughout history

People scurried in different directions
to gather their belongings,
hoes and livestock en masse.

They were then cramped together like sardines
into government trucks which drove
and dumped them on barren lands
now known as Hammanskraal
Mabopane
Soshanguve
and many others
The land left behind
became a breeding ground for soldiers

where white youths were taught
how to drill and exercise.

For generations
their marches and manoeuvres
took place on top of my ancestors’ graves

The ruins of our houses became snipers’
hide-outs during hide and seek exercises.

I

I am now here where the earth tasted
the first semen from my loins
when I laid a girl,
who was growing into a young woman,
while playing house amidst tall maize stalks.

Seedlings from such encounters shall sprout here
as one has already done.

Other seeds shall also be spread,
back to where I was dislocated and
all over the African continent
all over the world,
by the rains
when they fall in my village,
Marokolong
Through the eye of a needle

The life we travel is not ours alone.

The spirits,
from which we are all created,
guide us through this land
vast as time.

As time would tell,
through the lips of those who mould words
into immortal artefacts,
we begin to die the moment we are born
for each day that we live
is a day less
as if in a ring circle of a mubhuyo (baobab) tree.

Life becomes a long funeral procession
marked by interludes
for raps on the knuckles for wrong doings,
a smile and a hug for good deeds
and a party there
for each year that passes by.

A film of tears is reserved for the final day
when we shall all be singing last tunes,
as life-long mourners,
for someone whose body would be lowered
into a dark hole for his or her chest
to carry countless spades of gravel
while his or her closed eyes’ vision
remains undimmed.

As we turn our backs against a grave
decorated with flowers
that had their own lifespan snipped
as a homage
to what was once life,
we wonder what images of us
the dead had carried into the grave,
thus each one of us died a bit
while
the buried live in our memories.

We trudge on with the image of the grave
etched in our memory and the character
of the departed alive and kicking at the tip
of our tongues.

So we ask ourselves a question:
who is dead or alive
at this point
between
the living
and
the dead?

If indeed we do get senile
in our golden years
and begin to behave like babies
by throwing our toys out of the cot of life
in preparation of our day of reckoning,
wouldn’t it be exciting
if we were to wind back the clock
and die
the way we were born
during conception
through orgasm?
We would be buried
separately
not in a womb
but as an ovum in a fallopian tube
and sperm in a scrotum.

Later
much later
after the funeral
which does not involve sperm and egg
but sand and tears
we hurry back to our homes
to reproduce ourselves
by giving birth to more mourners,
each of whom with both male and female genes.

We wrap them in napkins
of fake labels
such as gardener, blacksmith, teacher, reader ... 

These children are soon taught the art of deception,
that of prolonging the inevitability
of their real profession
of being lifetime mourners.

People of today have seen this point,
though through cocked-eyes.
They seize the moment
and live for today
by bringing along salt and pepper
to spic e up food at funerals.

They later wash down their shame
with beverages at “after-tears parties”
where
young women flaunt voluptuous body parts.

There is a whiff of irresponsible sex in the air
at which young men also sniff
with their mouths open like animals
on heat.

They flash their plastic money
as some form of weird ritual of seduction
and spin flashy cars
to their own graves.

The world is round
so say the trees
as they experience the aftermath of the frolics
by sipping
stale and yet still strong
alcoholic fumes from deserted glasses
stained with red lipsticks
and the smell of death
from perforated condoms abandoned
on damp soil
and grass
flattened by the weight of bodies
right underneath
their shade.

Semen no longer creates life
these days, but grows wings of vampires
which thrive in our bloodstreams
by sapping away every ounce of strength
we have, leaving marks of death
Condoms are not helpful either
for they used to prevent birth
and now they prevent death.
So, we are all going to drown
in our slime of love!

Do not overact traveller
and think that the road,
erect and loaded with hot slimy bitumen,
will visit you during the lonely wee hours of morning
before the cock crows -
when the only options you have for suitable partners
are your horny self, fetish sex toys
and darkness -
and drill itself between your thighs
or buttocks
(whatever the case may be),
and squirt into your womb
or through your buttocks
into your anus
(whatever the case may be).

Do not be afraid, I say.
It is these serial delinquents
this poem is addressing itself to,
at least for now.

As we were saying…
tree branches begin to swirl around,
hiss
and howl
at us,
lifting up unsuspecting skirts
to perverse eyes.

We are all dizzy and blind here
and we try to steady our steps
by leaning against rickety walls.

Hills turn their back on us.
They offer no resistance
to whirlwinds
and tornadoes
blowing them away
from sight
like a child demolishing sand castles.

Be advised, traveller with a soft skull,
not to waddle under coconut trees
for you may have your head pulverised
into putty.

Meanwhile,
street-wise entrepreneurs will sell you
helmets for walking
as they would claim
that paw-paws,
or even grapes,
are as hard as granite stones.

Religion says the evil will not make it to heaven.
But the road to heaven looks both ways:
to heaven and
to earth.

It is on this earth
that religious leaders must teach us
to uphold morality,
yet some of them may be children
of parents who steal collection fees
from the congregation
to buy opium and
sell to the suffering masses.

Evil people also do have followers.
Stories continue to be told of cult figures
who mesmerise people to kill the good
within themselves through mass suicide
after sermons of righteousness
and/or promises
of some undisclosed inheritance
in the unknown hereafter.

So,
where do we begin the journey
and with whom do we travel seeing that
there are people
within our midst
who would rather pray for us
than with us?

The beginning
of the beginning
is where the moon meets the sun,
where the only difference between yourself
and the next person
is silhouettes sketched against the horizon.

Skin has no colour
nor distinguishing marks
or blemishes
at this point.
The only colour visible
is that of the purpose of dawn
when the sun would reveal your intentions
in your eyes.
You will then know that
you are because I am.

Do not cap your hand
over your eyebrows
squint your eyes
and see me emerging as a dwarf
or midget
against the very bright sun
and ask me where I have been.

Rather ask me where we are going
for the past is not an antiquity
which must be recollected
and kept as a souvenir in our memories.

The future
and its challenges
lying spread-eagled in front of us
do not take kindly to blind spots in your vision.

There is strength in numbers
as my people accommodate all in this journey
of our land,
but the country belongs to them
alone
even though some may argue that
the earth does not belong to us,
but that we belong to the earth.

There is strength in numbers of our hands
linking each other into a chain between
the past,
present
and future.
The present is a dangerous place we live in.
Its weakest link will break
and throw us into confusion and anarchy.

We must learn,
like chicks flitting and flapping their wings
to the wind,
that the problem about the future
is not how to get there,
but how to deal with the past.

You traveller with the past
like the behind of a skunk,
do not even attempt to convince me
how sweet red roses smell of love
when my elders taught me
that they symbolise bloodshed
and death.

Do not graft some uncultured culture,
picked up somewhere along the road,
into
my universal African family tree
of bow-legged ancestors
to dilute the source of its origins
and distort my history,
and future.

The handle of my heart opens
only from the inside.
So even if I open the door for you,
you still can’t help pumping blood.

There is strength and power in numbers.
Some marches continue
to be derailed by counter-marchers
who would rather tip over rubbish bins
and burn flags
of opposing parties or countries,
to whip up emotions
as diversion from real issues,
than to burn the rubber of the soles of their own shoes
against the friction of the road.

With bank notes clasped inside
their clenched fists, the counter-marchers
would step into the history books
shouting:
aluta continua!

Liberations are not won through revolutions.
It is the societal evolution
that pushes the masses to the street
to reclaim their time after their ideals for freedom
had reached maturity and mellowed like wine.
They exercise the power
of having seen and experienced it all
for power when not exercised is not power at all.

There is strength and safety in numbers,
yet a pride of lions would target a buck
isolate it
from a flock
chase it to exhaustion
and into sharp claws and fangs
while the whole cowardly tribe sprints itself
into the colour of dust
disappearing
from
sight.

There is strength and safety in numbers,
but a salmon out-smarts
the whole school of fish
by swimming against the stream
and still flows within
wandering tributaries
to a common estuary.

Water, like an idea, does not stand still.
The spot one swam in
and drank from
yesterday
may not be same
for today
and tomorrow.

Currents stream on to storm
castles
and monuments
and bury them deep down
where even a periscopic eye can’t see or
where no fish would like to spawn.
Sharks do not usually swim in fresh waters whereas crocodiles are not prone to wade in salty waters. Let us meet as treasure-hunters at a point where the water is neither too fresh nor too salty for us to travel together, explore and discover those ancient cities of the heart buried beneath the waterbed.

If indeed roads follow intentions, then how do travellers rediscover the roads not taken when footprints initially engraved on them are now covered by dry leaves blown by wind after compasses had accumulated rust from dust.

Such roads will only lead to relics of vehicles turned into hermits’ shrines or wild-fowl runs after their metallic engines had succumbed to the harshness of the softness of the earth.

These roads will also propel travellers to the ruins of homes of people who have outlived their biological torches or may have even been driven by some forces to other roads far beyond sight.

There are already ruins of some houses over there; rubbles of bricks that crumbled like a house of cards
under the winds of change
carrying and blowing millions of revolutionary voices.
Their authority now lay,
not only like dry pimples on the landscape,
but also as crumbled statues of deposed despots.
The gates, that used to shut out some people
and animals alike, from the homesteads,
are now bent and unlatched,
facing some humble graves in the distance.
Each time the wind hisses at them,
they swing backwards and forwards
as if beckoning and commanding the restless spirits
float right their tattered mesh and rest
under trees wild with undisturbed nests and fruits.

Elders say all roads are equally worthy
as each one of them lives in people’s mouths;
which mouths can even cross over flooded rivers
through echoes of their voices.
If lost, they would advise, just stop anyone
and ask for direction for their eyes could visualise
what seems to be invisible at that point.

Owls’ eyes can see beyond darkness
whereas people’s eyes are windows of the soul
which can see beyond lightness
and between words
and silence.

These words,
and the silence
between them,
roll out a red carpet
that leads to mountains
each of which sings its own song of ancient people
who peep at visitors
through cracks and crevices in the cave.

Their palms stretch out
not as warning gestures
nor begging bowls
but welcoming waves
brimming with blessings
not even the wealthy can ever possess.

The poor no longer gather around
houses of mercy anywhere in the world
nowadays
for aeroplanes
now drop
bags of grains of wheat
with needles,
bombs
and bullets
inside.

They daringly stare at
and crawl past
tombstones' snarling ghoulish teeth,
on their marrowless knees,
to take refuge around statues
for there
they may sift fertilised seeds
from pigeon droppings
and plant crops of hope.

Wars are always waged in the name of the poor
yet their lives are mowed down
by expensive weaponry,
after which parliaments are built
on skulls and bones
while soldiers collect
their own broken teeth
as medals.

The souls of the poor cannot be broken.
Their chipped teeth and smiles from cracked lips
always remind us how to be human.

The face of politics wears different masks.
Politics are the most complex and heightened
manifestations of human relations,
yet may also be the most vulgar
and incestuous venereal intercourse of sick minds
bent on the destruction of the essence of life.

The best leader is one who is capable
of converting followers into other leaders,
a person whom the masses believe in
for his or her second skin
is imbued with the experiences of the poor.
Such a skin breathes
the air of hope;
tastes the sweetness of tears;
hears the melody of laughter and cries;
brings clarity and not confusion
to the dreams,
aspirations, expectations and
revolutionary intentions
of the masses and then inspire
and mobilise them
into collective action.
Human beings do not hop around
even when excited.
A cool head is essential
for the coordination of their movement.
It instructs
one leg to stride past
the other
one arm to swing past
the other
in a sheer balance of nature.

Away from the ever demanding masses,
leaders switch off their lights in their rooms
not for romance
but for security reasons,
yet birds of the night crash to death
against
the armoured windowpanes
in sinister flight.

For that reason,
cannibals begin to level
a litany of all imaginable accusations,
against the leader
such as
witchcraft, promiscuity, cruelty and corruption...

They promptly call for the head of the leader
while beating the drums of genocide
with forks and knives bigger that those of Satan.

The leader comes out of home to be roasted
and chewed in harness
of his own convictions
and self-preservation for, it seems,
he came ahead of his time at the right time.

The world needs another leader!
Vampires roar out with the leader’s head
impaled
on a flagpole.

Things ought to die for others to be born.
Like a seed that must dry up
before it is planted
for the production of multiple seeds
around a single cob,
a leader’s death conceives many an evangelist
and baptises them
in one pool of wisdom.

But beware, politicians,
that in any protracted struggle or dispute
no single party involved emerges
altogether right or altogether wrong.

Clouds are gathering in the blue sky.
Children look at the fleeced white clouds,
collect their dry plates
and shout:
‘Pula! Pula! Rain! Rain!
Manna is going to fall from heaven!’
Elders dismiss their naivety
for they know
that it is from the black clouds
that rain is generated
before the sluices of heaven
are opened wide.

And when the rain indeed falls, it does not spray the entire territory all at once as it moves from one cardinal point to the other, skipping, in the process, certain areas just outside its range.

Everyone aspires to be more equal than the other in this world.

A twin that first slipped through the passage of birth persistently claims seniority whereas it is culturally known that the eldest is the last one to leave the mother’s womb.

A farmer can trace the development of the content of the character or mindset of a person, any personality - if you wish - by tracing the layout of the earth and watching the work ethic of a cattle-span.

The first layer of the earth, the one that this journey is leaving its prints on, often produces appealing, bright, tender and succulent plants - populists, in the case of people. This is an impressionable layer that is vulnerable to all sorts of internal and external forces.
such as weeds heat winds and flood.

This is followed by a much firmer layer which houses shrubs and offers some resistance to erosion; a homestead for mellower people.

The deeper the earth goes according to layers, the harder it becomes. This is where slow growing and tougher plants like thorn trees - which can spike off unwanted debris - anchor their roots so deep that they would be difficult to unearth with bare hands, and even tools. This is an ideal natural habitat for reliable, consistent, tenacious, tried and tested personalities.

The most industrious ox in a column that is intimidated by the weight of the yoke is the one that gets most lashes from a whip to haul a blunt plough-blade through the soil baked
into rock-hard slate
by the scorching sun.

A prolific bull cannot be blamed
and castrated for its spots
as reflected in the calves’ skins
if it had been deployed inside a kraal
to populate the herd.

People who totemize a hedgehog
cannot be
the interpreters
of life from the tilling of the soil
for they may be inherent doomsayers
who would curl up
inside their spike skins,
close their eyes
to reality,
and deny
that ploughing is taking place
even when bellows of a cattle-span
or drones of tractors
could be heard
from
the distance
still
far
from
sight.

Farms are sapped fallow
by your intestines
to pump crops into the mill
of your stomach
in which energy is to be generated
for
the
journey.

Yet do not wallow in guilt
by counting
the number of tons of seeds you have gobbled up
and gallons of water you have gulped
in your life-time
to sustain your small body.

You
are
a
soil
particle
in
the
universal
tapestry
of
sand
sea
and

space.

Replenish your travelling bag
by replacing
its seams of doubt
with strong nerves
for,
you see,
the journey does not stop
for anyone.
Where the journey stops,
other ones are undertaken and continue back
to the future
with cardinals of the present.

Scientists argue that it is time we walk into
and not space nor distance
as would be the case with chickens
when they scratch the ground forward
to scoop seeds, though the sand is pulled and
dumped backwards.
But our character in this journey
should be such that we can even
walk down mountains in reverse,
carrying African Commandments:

thou shall respect and pray to God through ancestors
thou shall be a member of the human race and animal kingdom
thou shall recognise family/clan totem as own mark of identity
thou shall regard any elder as own parent
thou shall regard any child as own child
thou shall not be a sibling’s keeper but own keeper
thou shall not declare a friend’s enemies as own enemies
thou shall live for collective good
thou shall share with the less fortunate
thou shall pass on this world to guide the living left behind

What does the poet do with this feeling
which suggests that you may be lost
somewhere along the way?
If you are,
is the heat of the language
of this loud sermon
emitted from the burning tar
scaring and tearing your eardrums
and failing to glue
together
all jig-saw puzzles
of our societal divisions?

Or is it the idiom of this poem
treading and balancing
dangerously
on a fine trapeze line
between
different types and levels of consciousness?

If indeed words, from different languages with
different numbers of alphabets on the vocabularies
of their tongues do paint similar and at times
different images, create atmosphere and evoke emotions,
then there is no need for one to get lost.
What about the blind, deaf and dumb, you ask.
They do not need eyes, ears and tongues
to know the essence of being human, do they?

Gloves are off now!
The hands moulding this poem
must
strike
punch
scratch
pinch
bludgeon
and rip apart
all sacred cows
made of chauvinistic lies
before they settle in and crystallise themselves
on the road of your mind.

The carcasses must be left to rot in the sun
for vultures to ravage with their sharp beaks
and butcherbirds to scoop worms
amid the festival of all sorts of creepy-crawlies
and droning huge green flies.
Bones left behind shall fertilise the earth.

This poetic finger
wears no thimble
as it squeezes this journey
through the eye of a needle
for it to stitch our festering wounds of the soul,
to weave and sew a beautiful tapestry of life,
through bumpy and smooth plains
rural and urban landscapes
dry sands and wet lands
fertile and barren fields
churches and jails
maternity wards and mortuaries
cradles and graves
wombs and tombs.

A needle can only have one hole
through which a thread must pass.
Should it otherwise mutate and develop
an extra hole, it is then doomed
to thread a freaky entangled web
from which even a spider cannot manoeuvre.
It is essential for you to equip yourself with knowledge of your surroundings and, over and above that, that of your next of kin and neighbours for you may need them for the journey that is apparently turning out to be a horror movie of your own soul.

You will definitely need them soon very soon to massage your bruised ego as you are about to slip on a banana peel and fall flat on your face.

You can’t chose your family here for you are not a self-made entity.

You are a member of this dynasty in which raising a child is not a competency of a mother and/or father only but that of the whole clan.

Here you remain a child to your parent regardless of how old you become at any point in time or how embarrassing they seem to your friends
especially when horses have galloped
over
the stables of their minds
afterlife had frustrated and brushed them
aside
go topa dipampiri
(to pick up papers)
along the road turning into their
cemetery of the mind.

The sick cannot cure themselves, you know.
And lack of shame does not generate fame.
Kneel down!
We must do right things here
and not do things right
even if it is only the loving thing to be done
for the only one thing certain about the future is change
while at the same time the most difficult thing
to do in life is to change your own character.
Kneel down, the poet says.
Kneel down to your mother
so that she can to spit
in your face
a concoction of water
saliva
beer
snuff
and maize meal
for you to survive this journey...
and please do not talk of the house.

Hei?!
What are you doing?!
No, no, no…
Wait!
Hokaai!
Stop!
Where do you think you are going?
Come back here!
Kom terug!
Vhuya!
Vuya!
Buya!
Boa!
Bowa!
Oa/khi!

You must perform this ritual!
You must know the ways of your people
otherwise your imagination will run amok
with you
along the road.

You will begin to hallucinate
and see them like a tree
that moves at night
when you move
and stops
when you stop.
Or you will think that you see them
emerging from a mirage
of the burning road
like scarecrows turned demons with scythes
that will chase you
around corners,
evacuate you from tents and mkhukhus (shacks)
you have erected on every piece
of land you had invaded
and demolished them promptly
when you could no longer stand
the overcrowded smell of your ilk.

These demons will continue
to chase you barefooted on water
across oceans and seas
where you were chained as a slave;
chase you
into the trees
up and down the hills
round and round anthills
until you get to the desert
where vultures will soon hover
over you
as you dehydrate to death
due to your paranoia.

You have an option here,
in case you are shameful
of your own mother!
Sies!

Your father
or uncle, for that matter,
can sprinkle the same muti
over your stubborn head
with a whisk of a black horse.

Or a sangoma can burn incense
around your body
and cut you with a razor blade
to squeeze out cowardice from your veins.
Or a priest can still burn incense
and anoint you with holy water
from a chalice
and perhaps
even offer you wine to steady your nerves.

Do not fear, child.
This initiation rite is not painful...

Ekee...!
Good...
Very good...
See... I told you there is no harm here...

Let us now continue with the journey
and please do not walk back this way again
for you are not allowed to tread on your footprints.

Are you ready?
Are you?

If you are,
please bring along your raincoat
for clouds of words are gathering
and are about to fall
very hard over our heads.

Some words will ululate
some words will eulogise
some words will spur us on
some words will howl at us
some words will criticise us
some words will condemn us...
Whatever happens,
let us not allow these words to
inflict pain to our joints
by saturating themselves into our marrow
to a point where we would be unable
to take the first
step.

We must take the car, you say?

No, we can’t
for it is suspected that you are prone
to applying imaginary brakes
from the passenger seat
in the face of perceived eminent danger
in front of the vehicle
even though you know fully well
that you are not in control
(whatever happens)
as the steering wheel would be
firmly in the hands of the driver.

A train, you say?
Trains are notorious.
They are known to have caused a lot of grief
to many orphans
when it drove their fathers to the mines
which it buried them deep in the belly of the earth
among diamonds and gold.

An aeroplane, you say?
Would it accommodate
those with fear of heights? I ask you.
Do you want them to puke on us?
I thought as much.

What about a bicycle, you insist?
A certain late Cuban revolutionary once said:
‘...Revolution is like a bicycle,
once its stops, it falls.’
It seems, therefore, that we are compelled to pedal
this particular one at our disposal,
even though it is the one we have inherited
from our abnormal past,
and that its chain keeps on slipping
over
the cog.

A ship! you then change your mind.
This journey is not a romantic cruise.
Besides, we do not want to resemble
homesick and seasick sailors
who feed the fish with vomit.

Please, do not be unreasonable...
No more questions or requests now...

Let us walk
so that we can accommodate everyone
for
the life we travel is not ours alone.
Repeat after me:
the life we travel is not ours alone...
Revolution of a gentle kind

She had just finished washing dishes, stepped out of the kitchen and threw out water from a basin with a single swing.

Moments later, a revolution of a gentle kind announces itself through a drawing on the spot where the water landed.

It is a figure of a Rubenesque woman, arms akimbo and chin up as if scolding the men folk of the family washing down *pap en half skop* with sorghum beer under a morula tree.

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1 *Pap en half skop* – porridge and sheep head’s meat in township lingo
Lessons of life

In the mornings she walks the road
to and from a communal tap pushing
a wheelbarrow carrying both the sun and water

With her body tilted forward over the wheelbarrow
her pubescent breasts point the way
while her buttocks shuffle up and down
as she tries to balance the squeaky and rickety wheel

Leering eyes and wolf whistles
are dragged into her shanty house
as if by a sledge carrying a mattress

It is said she left school at grade 2
for she did not have money
for transport and this and that

At night she takes the same road
in cars driven by a men old enough
to be her teachers or preachers

Moments later, heavy breathing from back seats
of cars create a room of ecstasy
with curtains of steam hanging against windscreens
as she takes lessons of life lying on her back

Months later, she now walks the same road
every morning with heavy legs
pushing a wheelbarrow and an ill-fated foetus
growing into the grave of her cursed womb
Virgin against the wall

There is a virgin pinned against a wall
at home. Her slender figure announced itself
the moment wet mortar was squeezed through
a crack opening between bricks and plastered over

Now she stands tall and brown after drying up,
holding above her head a flag of unknown designs
and sentiments as if she intends to cover
her naked body or to celebrate life

Had it not been for her though, stars could still
be winking incessantly at my sleeping family through
that crack stretching from the roof. Or the wind
whispering tales of a pregnant girl who has just
taken an overdose of tablets and other fatal stuff
Exclamation over T(h)emba

I watched the setting sun write
its reflection across the dam:
it looked like a huge upside-down exclamation mark
against a polluted horizon
of Themba township,
and life in general!
A child is the seed

You, child of every mother and father,
your chest became a fountain of blood
when bullets ripped into your flesh

Many thought your eyes to have frozen
with death, but we knew they were just
staring beyond a stretch of sea water
to a tiny island where Mandela
and other fathers of time
were busy crushing fear with hammers
and growing crops with their sweat, blood and tears

Your pouted lips stretched out to jailed
and banished mothers whose breasts
were taut with milk of the struggle

A seed of liberation was planted
into the womb of the earth
as we lay you in your grave,
brave child of the soil,
and watered it with tears

Samora Machel felt strength
as your fibres spread throughout
Mozambique, hectare by hectare,
and exploded in the faces
of the Portuguese dogs of war

Across the sea Mandela was slowly ageing
but still growing his plants
It was then Mugabe's turn to dance
the Chimurenga as you whipped
the Queen's aids and servants across
their living bodies and great ruins of the rock

Through the iron bars and foreign lands
milk from age-defying breasts
was flowing like the great river noka

Across the sea of sand of Kgalagadi
Nujoma and Castro shared a cigar
over captured angels of hell
and Nkosi sikele 'iAfrika ¹ echoed
through the caves with rock paintings

And across the sea, our fathers
were now harvesting their crops
and gathering their road signs
into card-boxes

Still young, your roots carried
them over and throned Mandela
on top of your tombstone from where
he guided the nation
with the ancestors by his side

Meanwhile, you child, a point
where generations meet,
your roots are still growing
far deeper to where the earth begins

¹ Nkosi sikele 'iAfrika – God, bless Africa: the South African national anthem
Rabbit man at a shopping mall

Blazing sun rays hammer spring
into the baking earth as excited children
jump up and down, clinging around
legs of a man in a fur costume,
with requests:

*Rabbit man, rabbit man, dance for us
Rabbit man, rabbit man, smile for us!*

He obliges but fails to see their faces
nor THE bright-red lollipop smudges left
on his white costume as if they were tears
and the mask he is wearing blocks his sight

He can visualise clearly, however,
his child donning a graduation gown,
at a university.
A gown bought from his work antics

He then rings his bell vigorously and yells out:

sweets, children, sweets,
come and have sweets, children!
**The earth I know is a woman**

Woman, the fertile earth I know
and run through my fingers
is your body that gives birth to life
and sustains it to its full cycle

Now, there is this poet-woman
from Ghana who feels a man
as hard when soft, and soft when hard

True, I may not, as a man-poet
have the tenderness of flower petals
and aroma which drives the bees and birds
crazy with the urge of perpetuating life

But I certainly do have a heart
that can plant love in your body
with these long gentle fingers
born of a mother
Perfect love

I dip my feet into the sea of imagination
after a long walk on the beach, at sunset.

As I twiddle my toes,
a shoal of small fish gather around
and nibble at them, triggering an imagination
of a loved one standing at the other end
of the sea.

I scribble your name, and a message of love,
on a piece of paper, roll it into a neat scroll
and press it into a bottle which I toss
onto the waves.

It bobs around until it comes back
and crashes against sharp rocks
and it breaks into many splinters which sink
to the bottom of the sea and mould themselves
into a glass carpet.

I yell out your name
above the towering waves, but my voice is snatched
by sea gulls which fly away while dropping
each letter of the alphabet until they form part
of the foam seething over the waves.

I look at the rising moon
with the hope of seeing your figure
etched in its circumference.
But dark clouds cover it
with a fleeced drape.
I try to count the stars
but they each fall down like javelins
thrown during the Olympic games.

The tumbling stars begin to resemble
kings who have drowned in seas, together
with their armies, in their quests to capture such love
and bring it back to their royal chambers.

As a result, you remain, therefore, whoever you are,
wherever you are, only as a perfect mannequin
or a mermaid, in every man’s imagination.
Jungle of questions

Flowers of love are blossoming in my heart
but not everyone can see their beauty or their beholder.

This land in which these flowers are growing
now belongs to no one but myself.

Still, lovers turned into con artists with fingers
green with agendas of sorts try
to draw their own borders around it
and grow secret gardens
which even the sun, as time, cannot reach.

I try to pull off veils
from my eyes slowly and gingerly,
as if peeling layers of an onion,
to see whomever is knocking
at the door of my heart in exile.

Tears clog my eyes from the vegetable’s sting.
I now only see a wicked collage of colours
unfolding into a jungle of questions
which fall to the ground as petals
pulled from a flower in a ritual of a love serenade:
   she loves me?
   she loves me not?

I stumble around the heap,
trying to sort out one petal from the other
from a potpourri but meet unborn babies walking
and chewing flowers as if sucking dummies
Flowers of love will continue to bloom in my heart.
But not every one can see them
for the door of my heart now remains locked for
those who once trampled on the garden...

Now they scramble hopelessly in front of the door
with faces brighter than the moon
and perfumes smelling sweeter than the air we breathe.

The door has a new handle
which can only open from the inside.

So, the beauty of my garden can now only be seen
once I open the door myself...
Oops, is it you knocking?
Pretoria 1994

Tshwane, the city of melodies,
I bow my head to you
for carrying over my seed from iKapa
on wings of love
and placing it on your purple bed
of Jacarandas: with midwifery hands of liberation
to give birth to our first child
in front of the eyes of
our new country's first President
Music from the rain

She went out to buy milk under the stars
and came back with her hands pale from winter

She touched my cheeks, leaving behind
on my face stinging memories of the place
I grew up in to permeate my life
like water on dry soil

I then recalled one summer afternoon
strolling down the river with she whose birth
- and that of some of my family members -
were seen as blots on guinea-fowls

Yet we walked with pride, knowing that a day
will come when a rainbow flag would unfurl
humanity into a single golden pot

With that we nestled ourselves along the banks
of the river and pulled out a few grass blades
from their stems and slowly began chewing
at their tender bottoms

My eyes fell on a bush on thorns, bringing
to life my childhood person trying to retrieve
a ball that had bounced away into some thickets

I knew then as I do now that beautiful ones
had long been born, save that I first have to
release them from the barbs around my heart
for me to hold and the world to see

Within it, two of them are fighting fiercely
against each other like identical twins in a womb -
yet only one ought to survive the blades of love

She, whose toes were by then searching for my ankles,
as we lay on our stomachs, cast her eyes at a rock
inside the river, oblivious of tides gushing
against its shiny armour

Down from the sky fell an unannounced shower
in concerto with sunrays, prompting us to take cover
in each other's arms

Yes, the beautiful ones had long been born
yet only the one who has heard and felt
the music of the rain can crawl with me
like rain flies after they've shed their wings
Blown away

It has become almost customary
that people are identified by their name tags
at conferences

And there she came strutting elegance
more beautiful than any flower
ever seen with a naked eye

The poet's eyelids flap like wings
of a butterfly, hoping to land on the tag
hanging around her neck and bouncing
majestically to the rhythm of her breasts

Just then, that very moment
when the butterfly could have tasted nectar,
and perhaps created a lifetime
honey-pot conference of two hearts in love,
the wind blew away her name...
The ruins of our hearts

The silence between us stretches across our memories like this blackness of the landscape after flames had brushed it with the soot of winter

Now left exposed on the belly of this earth, which used to be a village where we once lived before forced removals, are footpaths resembling stretch-marks after the pains of birth

I was born in a small hut cowering slightly away from sight, from this side of the river

And you emerged from that splendid mansion perched on the hill where owls watch the moon dragging its reflection along the back of the mid-night river

But as it is said that the moon has nothing to do with the barking of the dog, so do our footpaths, from our separate homes, still converge somewhere with the sun rays, right there under a huge tree where we ought to meet and revive our memories as equals in love

Once there, we would not be able to retrace our footsteps back to our huts as our soles would be as black as the sand, making us look like we once lived in a fairy-tale

For now, there is no place to hide
over here.
Ant-hills, behind which we used
to watch each other as if we were strangers
when we were children,
are now standing exposed

But soon this place will be white
with hail just before the grass sprout green
with spring, and then our footpaths of memories
will disappear into the meadows

Before this happens, we must rummage
through these ruins of our huts
for grinding stones left behind as our
birth-marks and grains of wheat which
we must grind into fine powder of love
Ode to a pilgrimage  
(For Keorapetse Kgotsitsile)

Just the other day
I always accused you of being vulgar
when you uttered some phrase in Setswana which,
when translated into the Queen’s language,
would refer to her Royal private parts.

Little did I know
that you were simply trying to direct my attention
to the grey rings around the pupils of your eyes
which seemed to suggest that

a flower, as a symbol of love in her empire,
could represent death in our continent; that
white is at times a colour of widowhood
in the land of Ghandi.

These circles, the mirror of your soul,
are indeed cycles of your pilgrimage in this
dangerous present, this world we live in.

They clearly depict your movements around
the globe. Within them is a priest in a war dance:
evoking images of exploding landscapes, quick sands
and leeches - but most of all,
Arum lilies growing in mud when the clouds clear

Some fellow dancers joined the quest
with the obsession of holding on to the past.
Thus they danced and tripped over their heels
like dogs chasing their tails.
Others, like balloons inflated with blind fury
and self-importance, grew bigger and bigger
until they popped into oblivion.

Yet you trudged on with your tiny footsteps,
Sidestepping landmines and graves scrambling for corpses. In particular, one in Mozambique whose tombstone, as bra Chris van Wyk graffiti, was hopelessly pre-empting your premature meeting with the creator.

But you moved the full circle
to a point where you began the journey
and ‘knew the place for the first time...’
Here
are streets that could never claim you
again as much as you them. It is here
where your drunken vomit dumped
your betrayal and loneliness behind
your words at a certain conference.

And I
your starry-eyed protégé, was summoned
to transcend human weakness and pathetic sight
by sorting out nourishing metaphors from what
you had ploughed back into the earth and join the
    circles cycles circles cycles circles cycles...
The never-ending formations presenting
a pilgrimage into African kraals.

Through these, I see the pebbles of Diaspora
raising their chins higher than the towering sea waves.
In you they appear first-hand like a man
I once met on the shores of Chicago
      (a point you’re now and then drawn back to)
muttering to a shoal of fish he had just hooked out:
‘Africa can sure provide for her children...’

Look no further than your brow,
"Tshwene e e leriba..."

For Africa is right here
For you
For all of us!

---

1 Tshwene e e leriba – Baboon (with a protruding forehead) used as a totem for family of the person to whom the poem is dedicated.
Mending Mark Espin’s soul

To walk barefoot on shards of desire
could, as you say in your poetry,
mark the perforation of one’s soul.

Dear poet, for whom would you like to walk
on roads paved with spikes and not words?

Is desire not weighed against the reality
that one loves the one who loves back?
People’s poet in prison  
(for Mzwakhe Mbuli)

Poet, you asked me to send you  
a leopard skin and a wooden spear  
for performances in that maximum security prison  
you were confined in for offences  
you did not disclose to me

I doubt whether even a living leopard with claws  
tougher than nails could prowl and survive  
that concrete jungle without losing its spots  
nor could the sharpest and toughest of spears  
pierce and undo those countless key-locks  
of those black iron doors without breaking  
into many splinters

Only a single word, dear imbongi¹,  
brittle as dew between my lips and tongue  
could fly through those iron bars and wire-meshes  
to your ears with ease:  
Freedom!

¹ Imbongi – praise poet
Sower of words, reaper of silence
(for Ingoapele Madingoane)

The last time we heard about you
it was said that you were often seen crawling
from one shebeen to the next in the ghettos,
searching for pieces of poetry in the eyes
of foul-mouthed people who gurgle swear words
with beer and spit at places of worship

Then it was said you later lay alone
in Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital,
counting your last words on earth

You were so alone that the only company
by your bedside was the whiteness of death

So alone, brother of black-kind,
for in that house of mercy nurses would
clean up the dead rather than the living

Now here you are, child of ba-Madingoane,
sower of words, reaper of silence
sower of comradeship, reaper of hypocrites
at a point where your living image
is about to be moulded into a coffin cushioned
with a poetry of flowers

Tell me
in what realm of Africa are you at this point:
Africa the beginning or Africa the ending?

And what about those people?
the very esteemed poets who are about to
fill your graves with words?

Are they not the ones who would have rather kissed a skunk’s arse a few days ago, when you were still alive, than to be seen with you on a tv documentary, let alone to have their names spoken of in the same breath as yours?

Were they also not part of the very society they claimed had shunned you, seeing you as a corpse even when you were still on your feet?

Now, with what memory of them do you depart: that of fellow-artists with whom you carried treacherous nights on your heads in search of Africa’s beginning? Or that of them laying their heads on satin pillows, dreaming about Africa’s ending?

Only you, the one who now resides above two realms of life two realms of our continent know for sure what has become of us
For the devil and the saint
(Lesego Rampolokeng and Vusi Mahlasela)

You who shower listeners with lovelorn
and grotesque metaphors during poetry-readings
in wine-popping, cosy venues, in suburbs,
often get anxious when rain begins to fall
outside for you know, as we know how
dependent death is on birth, that you will be left
alone to find your way back home to the ghettoes

With no transport in sight, you would
be forced to turn dark alleys and pavements
into homes and blankets until the following
morning when you will follow the raising sun
back home like drunkards who slept over bottles of beer
A healing song
(for Julian Bahula, while in Pretoria Academic hospital- January 1997)

Bra Julian

How do you justify your presence here?
There is no music in this place
but only people with funeral processions
in their eyes and sad notes
glued to their lips

This place is for the living dead,
not you, brother of song
Here musicians cannot even distinguish
one instrument from the other and
poets cannot see beyond images of
masked faces and gloved hands

Listen here, Sebothane sa ga Bahula,
Nare ya go hula ka hlako tsa ko pele
You have seen your death many a times
when you left this country
many years ago, making us exiles in
our own mothers' wombs

You are here now
among your people and ancestors -
an artistic lot

Look at your sides, Bra Julian
They are all drumming you a healing song
from a cowhide

---

1 Bra – township slang for brother
2 Sebothane sa ga Bahula,
Nare ya go hula ka hlako tsa ko pele – lines from a praise poem from Bahula clan which, when roughly translated, means the cow that pulls with its frontal legs
your birth-mark
your childhood shawl
your cloth of manhood
your tongue through which many nations
hear and know you

Stand up
and dance to the music of the living
We want to remember you as a full note of life
and not a putty of silence moulded into death

Join us, Bahula
take your place by your drums
There is life to be played for here
among the healthy
Power to the poets!

If human beings are indeed created
in the image of God, as one Holy Book claims,
then human beings have the creative power
to make anything happen

May poets wear halos around their brains
and plant seeds of words which shall germinate
into various organisms and teachings of life

And if indeed their voices
are said to be musical instruments
then words must be the roots of their voices

It is these roots that must provide a generic stage
of literature where languages intercourse
to produce a hybrid through which the entire universe
can speak and hear itself!
The African dancer

She may have given birth to one child
or perhaps two at the most
but the stretch marks on her stomach
remind me of a memory of an African elephant’s skin
— the African dancer.

Now look at the mark on her left side,
the one just shorter than an inch, as the stage light
catches her belly in motion.

It tells of days when her breasts were still as taut
as proudest palms when she used to dance alone
to the moon on a sparkling shore.

Now dirty hands from strange lands have groped
her thighs and violated her pelvis.

Look at her,
look at the scars defining her body,
look at the long one running across her midriff
as if trying to separate her heart and brains from her legs.

Yes, look at her now, the African dancer.
Look at how the navel is holding together the whole
like a tight knot.

Watch her beginning to wiggle seductively to the music,
increasing her gyration to a passionate horn.
Watch how the spotlight is following her shadow
across the stage.
Look at her whipping all the stretch-marks
into her navel until the whole world
starts to melt into a single globe as round
and round she goes, the African dancer.

Join her on the dance floor – if you got rhythm!
South African road  
*(during apartheid)*

It is quiet the way it has to be;  
it is black, it is wide  
it twists, twirls  
ascends, descends.

Tyres screech on it.  
Nations travel on it;  
white, black, yellow, pink,  
all like ants, go to  
and fro  
east and west  
west and east  
north and south  
south and north.

Some slow  
some fast...  
They all enjoy its  
smooth concrete carpet.

It is a mid-wife,  
a doctor, labourer, a killer,  
and all.

It is a bond;  
it links countries and its citizens.

It is a nuisance;  
it demands mountains to be bisected.

It overrides rivers.
It is rich; state revenues, labourers’ sweat, taxes, neon robots, time bow their heads to it.

Oh, but it is invaded; disunited whites stride in the middle. They take control; classify its citizens, give orders to stop, turn left or right or to overtake?

It is South African; it induces people to keep left. We are left. What now?
Avocados for soldiers

These avocados glistening tantalizingly
from tree branches now resemble
green hand-grenades.

In townships, we used to hurl them
into mobile casspirs with comic effects.
It was the occupants exploding into the sky
and landing on the ground like pulverised fruit!
Nation at dawn

The sight of activities of struggle wears owls down until they shut their eyes, and the long night goes to sleep.

A cock blows a kudu horn as the morning unfurls a scarlet canvas over the horizon, against which silhouettes of freedom fighters are etched as mobile heroic statues.

Tadpoles wiggle their weight around pools as if they were already frogs. Yet the only sound to be heard is the popping of air-bubbles in the water.

As the morning warms the sun, stretching and brightening its rays across the landscape, bushes are separated from thickets.

Lice and ticks spring away from bodies of those whose camouflage uniforms are made of warts.

With sleep wax still glued to their eyes, these people would, sooner or later, claim skinning tigers in the dark, in Africa.

But what does the nation expect of itself when it meets at the dawn of a new day?

Here, every person is expected to be recognised by their own contributions.

When the nation meets at dawn it would, as it did before, still listen to speeches.
But this time voices are expected to be poetry
marking progress and not amplifiers
of empty promises and cries from hungry children
and bartered women.

Ears would be stretched to hear sounds of hands
ripping the earth apart, not for building of war trenches,
but for laying of foundations for new houses,
pipes for water and electricity, and bridges
for linking the nation with other nations
around the globe.
**Dream song**

A song played in my dream
A universal song played in my dream
with beats of the night and sights of day

The song had no lyrics
The lyrics are all mine
written in images of human activities
complementing musical instruments

The song had no name
The name is all mine
baptised in aspirations for the creation
of a universal family of human kind

In the song of my dream
a ballerina girl tiptoed her way across the finest scale
of a piano against a fairy-tale backdrop
like morning dew gliding down a succulent leaf

The song played so softly and softly
to a point where violins began to echo
desperate and panicky moaning and wailing of sirens
from ambulances and hearses ferrying
the living and the dead

The song played on and on
gaining momentum as a trumpet infused energy
into legs of a lazy boy on a bicycle encouraging him
to peddle faster and faster in his messenger errands
as assigned by parents
A subdued saxophone rifted a sight of a lazy old man
resting his elbows over the tips of a hoe’s handle
while women were vigorously toiling on like trombones

A concertina stretched and compacted a scene
of former enemies locking their arms in a circular dance
around the world as they celebrated
a new era of togetherness

A guitar strummed an overdue recognition
of unsung architects of icons of civilization
such as Mwanamutapa Ruins,  
Egyptian Pyramids
and the Great Wall of China

A happy song played in my dream
until it was interrupted by the rumbling of drums
and cymbals in collaboration with explosions
of bombs and human bodies in wars declared in blood
by some politicians
over definitions of nationhood and borders

The song tried to revive itself
note by note
image by image
but morning stealthily crept in strongly
and nudged off sleep, as the conductor of the song,
from the stage

But the song still lingers in my mind
playing a message of hope
mutely and mutely

---

1 Mwanamutapa Ruins - Zimbabwe Ruins
as I wake up to a new day to live my life
minute by minute
Revolutionary eclipse

Transition is an eclipse
whereby revolutionaries walk
through a tunnel of fire and ice
leading to a chamber of history

Those who trudge the long road
of struggle over hot coals, one by one,
not flinching an inch, look at the moon
and get transformed into stars lightening
the sky as fluorescent flags of hope

Those who skate their way
on thin ice with spike shoes
and claims of easy and temporary victories
sink to the bottom of the sea
and freeze into salty relics of unfulfilled ambitions

The masses are the chamber rotating
around an axis made of principles
Hands for sale

Some time ago, I watched a TV programme
telling a story of people whose hands were chopped
by child-soldiers, somewhere in Africa,
in a scramble for diamonds whiter than some
politicians’ false teeth and their masters’ faces
behind black masks

Those hands were left to rot in the sun so as not
to make crosses and put them inside ballot boxes

In winding up the report, the presenter was captured
drawing a map of Africa,
in the sand along the beach, with a long stick

He had barely walked away from the scene
when a wave rolled over the drawing and erased it

Hopefully, the map of the continent did remain
permanently engraved in the viewers’ minds
African leaders

You know you have arrived
the moment your faces are printed on cloths
with national colours which women
wrap around their bodies

Uuuuu... what a kinky sight it is
when your faces are rubbed
against voluptuous buttocks and breasts
as the women do the wiggle wiggle
in a seductive dance!

But, do you derive any pleasure when they sit
on your faces wrapped around their bums?
Do you?

And what about your faces
wrapped around their heads
as flamboyant heard-gears...
Does that mean you think with their brains?
Fire in the neighbourhood

When fire interacts with grass in the neighbourhood
the debate gets hot, red-hot to a point where it glows
in the eyes of the mesmerised onlookers
as a spectacular show

When fire argues with grass
flames leap and dance in the air, sparks flash around
like fire-flies, whereas breaking dry grass blades
fall on children’s feet with a sting

When fire consumes grass
and then advances towards thatch roof huts
people panic and turn into instant fire-eaters

When fire explodes into an inferno
all and sundry dip tree branches and dry sags
into water containers and then swat at the flames
in desperation

When the flames feel the pinch of damp …
they turn to sooth and spit at anyone in sight,
painting them black
very black…
Steps of freedom

They now walk free

For the liberated, there are no longer
landmines lurking in treacherous roads
away from oppression

Yet they walk with a slouch
for their hearts are overburdened
with immoderate desires of a new life

The liberated now step gingerly,
mistaking their shadows for ghosts
of lives snuffed behind battle lines

Yet they all walk free

They now all walk free
together with former oppressors
side by side
over martyrs' graves
taking one step at a time
measuring the distance their hearts
can take while carrying
a yoke of fears and desires
Behind curtains of my eyes
(For Francis Yellow: Chicago, 1991)

My eyes are not about to shut completely
with the hoisting of the last flag of Uhuru¹
South of Africa.

Here are stars behind the curtains of my soul
which twinkle into life -
they are images of those long displaced,
of lynched jewels of the Nile,
and your Lakota people
scalped at the WOUNDED KNEE² of America

¹ Uhuru – freedom in Swahili
² WOUNDED KNEE – one of the battles waged by the indigenous people of America against imperialism
Disruptions

A boy with a catapult misses a bird in a tree
and hits a fugitive's eye

Now he is afraid to look at himself
in a broken mirror back home
after he had just learnt, from TV news,
that a freedom fighter was found in a bush
blinded in one eye by a stone
from an unknown source
Swedish tales

I come back to you, Sweden,
not as a starry-eyed first-time tourist
with a camera hanging around my neck
and a map glued to my eyes

I fly back to you on wings of memory
not merely to pose in front of August Strindberg’s
statue, as I did before, but to share with his fellow-writers
my experiences of life and their country
as captured in words and deeds

I come back here
to trace footprints left on snow
during my first visit of March 1998

I walk your streets
hoping to lift the white veil
of snow that hid away from sight the flora
and fauna and the contours of your landscape

I come back
to find that summer has melted
the veil and its prints into streams flowing
to the beginning of time

Ulf Karlsson, a taxi driver I previously made acquaintance
with, drives me around to the affluent
northern parts of the city of Stockholm

There, I am shown streets named after
Viking battles of early centuries
I hear too the story of Balt,
a certain Viking king who ordered his troops
to cross a frozen lake on horse-back to attack the Danes

Surely the thunderous echoes from these hooves
must have shattered the tranquillity of the place
for a generation to come more than did the stones
that I threw in curiosity at the frozen lake
forming a border between Sweden and Denmark,
on the outskirts of Stromstad

If some streets named after Olof Palme
could be renamed after his recent untimely death,
why are we then in Africa still holding on to ancient ones
chaining people’s memories to slavery?

This time I now roam the streets of Stockholm
alone with my memories,
meeting and passing black people
who do not acknowledge each other with a nod
or stolen glance, as they often do in some other parts
of the world as recognition of historical times
when their skins chained them to Africa like an umbilical cord

I wonder if some of them would not even acknowledge
each other’s experiences of Rinkeyby where they are
crammed together like sardines in poverty and
frustrations with other people of colour

It was outside at the foyer of kultuurhusen
where I once met Maria, an Angolan expatriate

---

1 Rinkeyby – slum area in Stockholm
2 Kultuurhusen – a cultural centre in Stockholm
whose surname has faded from my memory

There, this orphan of the earth portrayed
her black experience by staging
an hour-long demonstration in freezing weather

She held in one hand a torch from which black smoke
roared against the wind which fought with snow flakes
to touch her face while she distributed pamphlets
with the other hand

The pamphlet alleged that the government
of the day took the children from her because
she was financially incapable of raising them
as she was unemployed

At the entrance of Central Railway Station
stood people dislocated from reality
with their knees buckling under the weight of drugs
they had probably taken underground

I stand on my toes
in a puddle of urine and excrement,
human or animal, at the bottom of a stairway
not far from them, trying to catch details of a poster
advertising some poetry-reading somewhere in town

And so I burrow my way through the belly of the earth
in a train to a café named after an artist, Augeli

There, I shared a stage with a woman poet,
Marie Lindquist, who hears strange music in poetry
read in languages other than Swedish
Would it be strange therefore if I were to request to listen to Lapis\(^3\) tales sometimes in the future when I come back to you once more, Sweden?

I would also hope to find, next time around when I come back to you, footprints of the one who wrapped my blackheart with a warm white veil of love, when we first met, years ago, back home in South Africa.

---

\(^3\) Lapis – ancient language once spoken in Sweden
A poem in grace
(for Korkoi Nkrumah)

You asked me to write you a poem

But how do I write you a poem
when you are a poem itself?

It is not poetry that the sun sees as it follows
your shadow around and around as you traverse
the world to talk about our folklores?

It is not poetry when the moon
which is said to be the same all over the world
the same therefore in Ghana
and in South Africa
dances to your rhythm as you
come back to your land with
new knowledge from other nations?

You say your name means
the first daughter of the Black Stars
on your country’s flag

You are indeed the first child
of these words
beauty in grace
and pleasure is knowing you

They say poets fall in love
with poems they write

I love this poem
Weapons of revolution

Bantu education taught generations of Black South Africans that maize can only be grown around the Vaal triangle in the country.

Gullible as they were and faster than a snake would shed its skin, my people surrendered their hoes and ploughshares to dust and rust.

They hurried to factories for 8 to 4pm clock-card jobs from which they had hoped to buy their staple diet while their implements had assumed the status of new symbols of poverty and misery kept in museums.

Here in the People’s Republic of China workers still till every piece of land available and spread maize cobs, grains of wheat, rice, groundnuts, and so forth, along alleys, doorsteps and roof tops to dry up in the sun for preservation.

When the need arises the people even turn their tools of farming into weapons of revolution and/or of personal self-defence coined martial arts/kung fu!
African dynasty

I traverse the streets of Barcelona,
viewing with awe the magnificent
architectural buildings of the Holy family,
Royal family, this family and that family

Yet I seem not to have any family
at this point for all dark skins I meet -
as I try to negotiate my way through the streets
forking away from each other in diagonal
and parallel patterns - seem to be just costumes
clothing various colonial masters

Take for example this one in a uniform
with a badge inscribed *policia*1 who,
when approached for direction from a map
flapping like a desperate windswept galleon's jib
in my hands, just throws her arms
in the air and says, in resignation:
“*No, Señor, no entiendo*2!”

As I watch her buttocks shuffling away
from me with a contemptuous taunt
I wish I had a militant temper
to match her adopted Spanish drill

Perhaps then, only then
would she understand what it is
to be born from and into this African dynasty
no word can ever articulate!

---

1 *Policia* — Spanish word for police
2 *No, Señor, no entiendo* — No, sir, I don’t understand
Flight to freedom

From my car's rear-view mirror hangs a nest
I plucked from a tree: a weaver's nest
abandoned during seasonal migration

Now the nest swings and sings with the rhythm
of my journeys through life as I drive from one home
to the next, listening to each family's
animated chats and silent cries

From a mulberry tree at one home, in the village,
hangs an empty bird cage previously occupied
by a pair of lovebirds I bought for my niece
on her fourth birthday

Two years later, I opened the cage for them
to roam the yard and the sky freely

One of them, the female I think, appeared to have lost
its flight from captivity as it only managed
to flitter into a cat's paws

For days, the bereaved one stayed behind in the tree,
repeatedly flying back into the open cage for food
until it flexed its wings into an open sky, forever

Miles away, on a visit in suburbia,
I sat with some Afrikaner literati discussing
latest literary trends and the sculpting of pipes
from yster-hout when I am told of a neighbour,
a lonely greying old man who poisons birds for leisure

Yster-hout — name of a certain tough wood in Afrikaans
At that point I recall seeing another old man sitting on a wheelchair by a *lapa*\(^2\) with a few dead birds strewn around his feet.

He picks them up one by one, stretches their wings and preserve them in flight.

\(^2\) *Lapa* – verandah in SePedi
Classified love

My heart beats with thoughts of you.
I yearn to come to you herding my father’s cattle.

And my knees buckle under the yoke of love,
so I stagger uncontrollably in the streets.

I still want to come to you.
So who else do I then send to you?

My uncles are reluctant to twist their tongues
in case your parents’ language
could be different from theirs.

My aunts suspect that they could get squeamish
from strange food they may be offered.

My heart beats with thought of you
as I yearn to come to you.
But my love for you runs in my veins
to my brain, making me dizzy.

So I can’t see clearly now:
my sight is filled with fuzzy images
of what your face may look like.

How do I then send my love to you?
Should I now whisper your nameless name
to the wind for it to flight the message to you?

But where would the wind begin
among a vast nationhood of womanhood?
Perhaps I should just sit at home and wait, hoping that you are also looking for me.

You will recognise me by lyrics of love hanging from my dry tongue.

My ancestors decree you to come to me. They say that milk of kindness and love is swelling the udders of my father’s cows here at home.

Come, come, come... Come home, sweet love
Cupid will beat drums for us at your arrival.
Black grapes in town

For a moment, a certain bunch of grapes
quivering on a pavement stall
seemed to me like kidneys.
Its glistening blackness reminded me of a people
once squashed out of their skins by police boots.

Soiled footprints lead towards bedrooms,
in the same town, where what was once forbidden fruit
is now eaten with champagne and caviar.

Care for a grape, honey?
Keimoes
(for the late A. Ballakistan, family & friends)

The night is long
and so is the memory of my friends in Keimoes
as I lie on my back on top of Tierberg
and count countless stars perched
in the dark dome above my head

Each one of them tells of tributaries flowing vigorously
along the main stream of the Orange River
like veins around a spine

Here people carry nights on their feet
to meet each other at dawn across eilande
between tributaries where they would glisten together
in shades of the earth like precious stones
only found in these surroundings

In sounds of waterfalls, and that of Nama caves
from which they originated, they speak of how
political greed, the kind many land-disposessed people
have witnessed, compete with floods in washing away
their soil, live-stock and personal belongings,
into the river crawling like a python to Augrabies Falls

Left behind in a barren land, they are now forced
to eke out a living among carcasses and rocks

And there, in a corner too dark for an eye,
a maiden waits like a firefly for a truck to ferry her
to a winery where she will trample her sobriety

---

1 Tierberg - name of a mountain in Afrikaans
2 Eilande – meaning, islands, in Afrikaans
and virginity away, barefoot, on over-ripe grapes
for the brewing of wine for which only a gallon
would be her wages

But still the voices are hospitable to visitors:

Come, come, welcome our friend, come
and share with us bread we have baked
over burning coals

Come, come, welcome our comrade, come and fish
with us the history behind rock paintings from our rivers

Come, welcome stranger, come and sleep with us
under the stars, without fear of stings from daggers
and reptiles alike, after the day’s scorching sun
had turned houses into gas chambers

Such nights are, you will see friend, great equalizers
between the stars and the moon, man and animal,
poverty and wealth

Such nights are, you will learn comrade, our womb
of a tapestry of proud African people
A normal day in Pretoria

In this city
where new laws are enforced
a man and a woman stroll into a deserted alley
and lean against a wall

The man turns his back against the street
to shield the woman
who promptly lifts up her skirt
to retrieve stolen items tucked inside her panties
and put them inside a bag

They then casually step back
among unsuspecting eyes
of the city
A pilgrimage continued
(For my son, Lekae)

For you, son, there are no lines of poetry
other than those on our people’s faces
when they stare longingly at plates of food;
plates which pass remotely from east to west
as if on top of fleeced clouds

Or, if there are lines for you
they are footprints of your mother and father
cris-crossing the length and breadth of this country
searching for the missing links
in their respective histories.
In this process they uplift those whom they find
rapped in muds of many origins along the way

Son,
you must look into the depth behind their movements,
witnessing that their lives are a perpetuation
of this question: WHAT IS LIFE?

There is yet another question you ought to ponder
as you begin this journey:
WHY IS IT THAT WOUNDED AFRICAN ELEPHANTS
DIE ON THEIR FEET ONCE THEY HAVE RETURNED
TO THEIR PLACE OF BIRTH?

Remember, son,
as you attempt to unravel mysteries
that you should not start out on this pilgrimage
to the end of this rainbow (icon of our newly-born society)
with people who are as blindness itself.
Remember also, son – and this is most important –
not to walk in this misty rain wind of life
with those who are incapable of feeling
the sensation of water against their skins
for not even ticks can depend on them for survival

Remember once more and always that you, like all of us,
are born of a mother: therefore, the sun shall always ensure
that your shadow follows you like a true friend
as you move on and on

When the time comes for communicating
with your ancestors, do not babble at the moon
and stars, for you are not a wolf that would howl
at things it cannot understand with a severed tongue.

As you cross this deep river on your way back home,
sit along its bank and remove thorns
from the soles of your feet.
But do not try to throw them to the bottom
of its mystery for you may need to come back
to the source of life one day in the future.
More exactly:

\[ O \text{ seke wa nyela madiba, mareledi a sa le pele } \]

Rather throw your thorns into the gaping mouths
of crocodiles, thereby prompting them to remove
themselves with haste from this crossing-place

-----

\[ O \text{ se ke wa nyela madiba, mareledi a sa le pele } \]

An English equivalent of this would mean “do not burn your bridges.” However,
when put in its poetic form in Sepedi, the statement would literally mean that one
should not leave own excretement in drinking wells for one may want to drink the
water one day...
where the fish ought to hatch in which you and all of us
need to find food for our empty stomachs
near which we also need to rest our aching bodies
before we continue with this cycle of life
to the beginning of time...
Aerial view of Cape Town

From above
Cape Town resembles heaps
of chocolate and mints
melting into parliament
while rivers run dry
in front of hungry masses
God, save the queen!

She feels the coldness of snow
glowing bright and white in his black hand
and whisper into his ears that the flakes
turn her on, real hot, when they fall
on her like confetti on a bride

So they tiptoe away from curious eyes
and lie down behind the bushes
with the weight of their bodies casting
a mould of ecstasy into the snow

As his erect thermometer penetrates
into her pale carnal glory,
driving their temperature to a breaking point,
vapour from her nostrils and mouth
drifts out into small clouds.
And then she coos blissfully:
"God, save the queen!"

Then the heat from their burning skins
slowly chips at the mould, creating cracks
which soon turn into rivers and streams
melting into the streets of London...
Living between times

It is claimed that the best watches in the world are made in Switzerland.

One leaves home this evening, from this continent, and arrives there, at the other continent the same evening, the same time of the same day of the calendar year.

So, what happened to time and one’s life between two roving arms of the best clocks?
On reading Sandile Dikeni

I always wanted to travel to inner city Africa
where I would leech my mind to a Baobab and suck
your youthful poetic juice from its ancient roots,
save that I’ve already found your picture crumbled
inside a wastepaper basket in a dark alley.
It was creased with fish & chips oil.
Speckles of fresh blood from a menstrual pad
also stained your spectacles
and smiling dread-locked face.

No. It was not in Victoria-West where most youths
scrambled for the comrade part, the only part you say,
in putting a burning necklace\(^1\) around your grandmother.
Nor was it in the western Cape where, as you once wrote,
people die softly in mud during hard times.

It was right here in Scandalo,
a restaurant in the bohemian Yeoville,
where I saw you the other night whispering
some intellectual noises, in Afrikaans,
to a group of blonde young ladies while at the same time
sucking cocktails and guava-juices with a straw.

Meanwhile, your people are dying softly and proudly
in Xhosa during hard times,
at a certain village with your surname,
Dikeni.

\(^1\) Necklace – township slang for a burning tyre put around a person’s neck