



Poems by Ingrid de Kok, Nuala Dowling, Loren Anthony and Johannes van Jerusalem; short fiction by John Eppel

Ingrid de Kok , Nuala Dowling , Loren Anthony , Johannes van Jerusalem & John Eppel

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Spring custom

INGRID DE KOK

As is the custom,
all winter long the wild canary
in its cage inside the cellar
is fed and cared for.
It sings its buoyant song
as if still skybound,
till its notes quaver
and it sings no more
in the damp dark;
not even when the farmer
opens the wooden shutters
for a dose of daily cellular light.

Months later, before dawn,
an early stamp of boots
brings the man to his silent bird.
He lifts the cage, cloth still on top,
and walks towards the woods.
Shafts of moving light
and soil smells strong as coffee
slowly filter through the bars,
till, hooked high in a spreading chestnut
the uncovered cage sways like a lantern
among the buds and shoots
and blue sky feathering trees.

The bird hiccups, tests its unpadlocked voice,
and again, and then soars into song –
calling, we imagine, its lungs to free its wings.

And calling, as was planned, the new-born
and migrating birds of spring
to closer and exposed view.

In the chestnut, pert and curious,
a bird party sings
without shadow or memory,
perhaps exhorting the canary
to find a mate, or explain its habitat;
while it sings back,
a duet we project our longings into,
despite our forebodings
because: there, we say,
are the trees, spring, and the wild birds
and there, the caged one about to be freed
and the farmer sharing the sun beside it.

But the farmer lifts his gun
and shoots as many as he can,
their bodies mostly too small to eat
though large enough
to spasm in the sky
before they fall
and are collected in a bag
on this bright morning
when now we hear
other guns shooting other birds
across the glittering Tuscan hills.

The caged canary,
shocked rigid
by the sudden shots,
smelling its betrayal
in gunpowder,
stops singing
until the following spring.

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

The Archbishop chairs the first session

.....
THE TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION.
APRIL 1996. EAST LONDON, SOUTH AFRICA

INGRID DE KOK

On the first day
after a few hours of testimony
the Archbishop wept.
He put his grey head
on the long table
of papers and protocols
and he wept.

The national
and international cameramen
filmed his weeping,
his misted glasses,
his sobbing shoulders,
the call for a recess.

It doesn't matter what you thought
of the Archbishop before or after,
of the settlement, the commission,
or what the anthropologists flying in
from less studied crimes and sorrows
said about the discourse,
or how many doctorates,
books and installations followed,
or even if you think this poem
simplifies, lionizes
romanticizes, mystifies.

There was a long table, starched purple vestment
and after a few hours of testimony,
the Archbishop, chair of the commission,
laid down his head, and wept.

That's how it began.

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

Parts of speech

.....

INGRID DE KOK

Some stories don't want to be told.
They walk away, carrying their suitcases
held together with grey string.
Look at their disappearing curved spines.
Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls.

Some stories refuse to be danced or mimed,
drop their scuffed canes
and clattering tap-shoes,
erase their traces in nursery rhymes
or ancient games like blindman's buff.

And at this stained place words
are scraped from resinous tongues,
wrung like washing, hung on the lines
of courtroom and confessional,
transposed into the dialect of record.

Why still believe stories can rise
with wings, on currents, as silver flares,
levitate unweighted by stones,
begin in pain and move towards grace,
aerating history with recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:
the flame splutter of consonants,
deep sea anemone vowels,
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

The transcriber speaks

.....

INGRID DE KOK

I was the commission's own captive,
Its anonymous after-hours scribe,
Professional blank slate.
Word by word by word
From winding tape to hieroglyphic key,
From sign to sign, I listened and wrote.
Like bricks for a kiln or tiles for a roof
Or the sweeping of leaves into piles for burning:
I don't know which:
Word upon word upon word.
At first unpunctuated
Apart from quotations and full stops.
But how to transcribe silence from tape?
Is weeping a pause or a word?
What written sign for a strangled throat?
And a witness pointing? That I described,
When officials identified direction and name.
But what if she stared?
And if the silence seemed to stretch
Past the police guard, into the street,
Away to a door or a grave or a child,
Was it my job to conclude:
'The witness was silent. There was nothing left to say.'

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

The sound engineer

.....
Of the professionals engaged in Truth Commission
reporting, the highest turnover was apparently among
reporters editing sound for radio

INGRID DE KOK

From the speaker's mouth
through the engineer's ear,
sound waves of drought and flood
are edited for us to hear:
dunes filtering burnt desert sand,
corrupted wells, and shocks, shouts,
no longer muffled in the cochlea shell.

Listen, cut; comma, cut;
stammer, cut;
edit, pain; connect, pain; broadcast, pain;
listen, cut; comma, cut.
Bind grammar to horror,
blood heating the earphones,
beating the airwaves' wings.

For truth's sound bite
tape the teeth, mouth, jaw,
put hesitation in, take it out:
maybe the breath too.
Take away the lips.
Even the tongue.
Leave just sound's throat.

Keep your ear to the ground,
to pain's surfacing,
its gulp for air, its low ragged flight
over history's topography.
The instrumental ear
records the lesions of eroded land
while blood drums the vellum of the brain.

A stain hovers like a small red butterfly
over the studio recording table
where the wall is listening,
so the ear dares to rest.
Then nothing.
Nothing but static,
insects invading air.

The sound engineer hears
his own tympanic membrane tear.

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

Into the sun

.....

INGRID DE KOK

This is where landscape comes to die.
Where the forlorn wind
wails a little, sags a little,
brooding in the bluegum trees
just as it used to.
Where Sunday afternoons
threaten weekdays
with fitful narcotic sleep.
Where by day the hot sun is flat
and by night the cold moon is flat,
petrified in the stretched horizon
that the eyes inspect
on their level journey home.

Two verticals: industry's acropolis,
the mine's meccano headgear,
crow's nest over empty compounds;
and abandoned mine dump middens,
gold's necropolis.

As before the only colour
other than ash and rock
is the sunset pyre, its bloody ink
dust motes beaten by disc ploughs,
a Tretchikoff painting glaring you down.
And inside the stooped
and stubborn silence
a few men still walk miles
along the main road
to somewhere else
much the same,
straight into the sun
without blinking.

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

Compassionate leave

.....

INGRID DE KOK

Almost everyone's on leave
gone away

to the countryside,
in threadbare trucks

to pay respects
in rooms and huts,

to watch and pray for dying ones
shrunken under sheets,

to vigils through the night
in closed-off streets

where grandmothers prepare
small and smaller funeral feasts

after truncated prayers
chanted by tired priests

over cardboard caskets
in the deathwatch heat.

Gone to taxi ranks and stations
to wait for information

from billboards, radios,
word of mouth and trumpets in the sky

where ubiquitous hadedas,
unlike Auden's mute impervious birds

blast their high shofars
over each infected space.

(From *Terrestrial things* Kwela/Snailpress, 2002)

Shops of my mother's imagination

.....

NUALA DOWLING

It is better to shop in the shops
of my mother's imagination.
They stock things like Optrex
and Yardley's Misty Beige foundation
(discontinued) and long-handled
dustpans and a remedy called Lexan
and very lightweight parasols and a cut
of meat she swears is called a Boston butt
and plain white cartridge for writing real letters
and finger-small bananas which she still remembers
from a long lost love affair in Barbados, West Indies.

Cecil Beaton is not dead enough

.....

NUALA DOWLING

Our daughters they are dieting to death:
it is time someone paid for the privilege.
“Who?” they asked me. I listed narrow minds
who conceived the fashion channel, wasted
writers of get-thin manuals, New York agencies
of brain diminishment and blood deficiencies,
editors and trimmers of all that nourishes, whoever
sells and draws fat profits from cellulite gels,
pop idols crammed into hungry, crying lyrics,
boys with funless stickers saying “No fat chicks”
and all photographers and shadowy image men,
all the way back to Cecil Beaton. “Cecil Beaton
is dead,” said Sue. That may be, I said,
but Cecil Beaton is not dead enough:
he must die again.

It will be like this

.....

NUALA DOWLING

You will come down
in your dressing gown
and greet her, thinking
of your coffee, asking
“How are you?”
in a polite way
and she’ll say,
“It’s not good.
They shot him.”
“Who?”
“My grandson.”
And you will say,
“I am so, so sorry.”
And there will be
a gesture. And you’ll
give her money
towards the funeral, and say
“Take time off, have today.”
But she’ll smooth a faded
housecoat over her smart
city clothes and say,
“No, it’s better to work,”
and look at the floor,
as if she might hurl
and clean it up herself.

I have heard runts and gargoyles pontificate

.....

NUALA DOWLING

I have heard runts and gargoyles pontificate
and rate women on their busts and thighs
and outline precisely the shape which might
earn approval in their dull, impaired eyes;
and I have beheld brave women breasting
the waves graciously, figureheads of prize
ships, bringing gold coin for scurvy liars.

Straight men of Cape Town

.....

NUALA DOWLING

Though neither sheiks nor potentates
each straight man in Cape Town
has twenty wives: his own
his widowed mom
his wife's unmarried friends,
their single sisters
the spinsters and the divorcees

whose potential partners are
diving for doubloons off Cuba
trading bonds in Singapore
gathering meteorological data on Gough Island
attaching nodes to interfaces in Dublin
raising sheep in the Karoo
mining platinum in Rustenburg
running a kibbutz in Israel
or still here in Cape Town but
collecting porcelain and blow-drying hair.

So the straight man of Cape Town sighs
as he opens doors and walks behind
and pulls out chairs, listening with half an ear
to his wife's unmarried friends,
the spinsters and the divorcees

whose husbands left them
for a stripper or a teen

for a change of woman
or for a change, a man,

whose ghost lovers left
for Cuba or for Dublin,
for Rustenburg or Singapore,
to farm in Carnarvon
or on a kibbutz
and so on,
ensovoorts.

Death of my Father. August 18th 2002

.....

LOREN ANTHONY

Old pharoah face
Waxen shape withered
To purple claws, bevelled contours
But something in your eyes I can never say what
Pins you to that bed
Waverley blanketed blue seal of yourself.
My creased father remnant with beautiful hair.
I shaved you one day careful not to nick.
Eyes closed, you breathed in metal blade and foam
Loving my hands
Working swiftly over stubble
Skin dragging behind the blade
Begging more.
A month later, my good brown dress is mourning torn
And you are folded away in your prayer shawl
Stained satin over faded black, beneath the pine lid.
Old men offer kid leather gloves and Karee leaves
In a freemason's send-off
And the Mourner's Prayer veins solemn, low.
I have not seen you dead.
Only the remembrance of
A ritual between father and daughter
Drags me towards the hole
and birds skid fast in the wind.
I had not thought it so difficult to put you to earth.

Civilian tales – Part I

.....

LOREN ANTHONY

Chipped slave bells send
Sooty crows reeling into the air.
The pendulum taking its stupid route.
Then the magnificent hot press
Into
Red wax –
Wounding.
Out of scabbed black
Come blasts of a bugled tune
Old soldier notes from the last war.
Crows flying and flying and flying away
Finding bodies burst through
With earth.
On the sixth day treaties inked
Damply by clerical paws,
Some parts gilded like
Goldleaf.
No hardship there.

Winter

.....

LOREN ANTHONY

Webbed mornings
Ligaments of frost and
Cold dew
Dark evergreens stiffening.
It rained late this year.
On the crossbars of the washing line
Buffed pearls cling –
A necklace of weak light.
Frayed flannel whispers as she
Tries to coax heat
From glass-blue legs.
It is too dark in the house
The thin green smell of damp,
Soured incontinence.
Even now, a hot track veins her legs.
Mixed Fruit Jam and Bread and Trinco Tea
Fill her mouth. Jam on her shirt front.
Boxes of old letters
Preoccupy her – wasted stamps,
Looped cursive, nothing of
Consequence.
A pleating reflex makes her tug at the blanket fabric,
Smelling of mothballs.
She drifts off, warmed by the past.
Trees blacken; day is over.

Telkom laying pipes in the suburbs

.....

LOREN ANTHONY

Night the colour of liquorice
Charring brown to black.
Thick heat blurs the
Borders.
A brazier sweating late,
The chained rottweiler leaps to the green mesh
A shadow lynching itself perfectly.
The men are laying pipes.
For four months
They have lived behind the green mesh,
Corrugated plates sheilding
Them from curious suburban eyes.
In the morning
Before the bulbuls,
The lorries lead out of the
Compound in an orderly manner.
PVC pipes form pyramids
In blue
In white.
The children who've come to play tennis
Play instead between the pipes
Faces in the cones
Hidden from sight.
We do not know how long they
Will be here.
Theirs is a settlement
More solid than ours.

Love in this age

.....

JOHANNES VAN JERUSALEM

I do not
want to come
inside you
I just
want to kiss you
and touch
your secret parts.

This is called Love
in the Age of Disease.

We erect barricades
around our fleshiness
and feign
a new innocence
and breed guilt
and regret
over our hidden
unprotected encounters
with each other
and look at each other
shamefully
and sadly
in the daylight.
We keep
our distances.

Only this
remains to save ourselves:
Let's smash down
the walls
and make love
naked,
to the bone.
Let's bare even
the veins,
let blood
touch blood
and liver liver,
let the guts intermingle
until no one
can distinguish this Soul
from that Soul
and this Heart
from that Heart.

Let us scare away
all fear
of death
in this way,
and in this way
at last
enter
the great Age
of Ease.

The victim

.....

JOHN EPPPEL

The Officer in charge

After a tip-off by the public at large we proceeded to the bush there by Circular Drive. We found the body hanging from a tree. He was using a leather belt. Yes, he was naked, and it is true what you say, but those who laughed, they were seriously reprimanded.

We unhooked the belt, put the body in a plastic, and took it to the Mpilo mortuary for identification. Yes, too full. You wouldn't believe. We had to leave it there on the ground. Then we were looking for someone to identify the body. Ja. Terrible.

Constable M

We could not help it to laugh. His penis was erect. Like this.

Constable N

No, we didn't remove the belt. Because that is not our job. All we did is our job.

The victim's brother

When the police came and told me, I was very sad. My sister, she cried, but I did not cry. Only when I saw my brother – the oldest boy – lying there with no clothes and with his belt, which was my father's, who is now late ... his belt ...

Yes, my mother is also late. Now it is just me and my young sister. My uncle sends us money from South Africa. I change it with Vapastori ... is why my

brother went to jail. The police catch him changing forex with Vapastori. Fort Street.

I had to undo the belt. It was too tight. I could not look at him. I cried all the time. Yes, they did. They found his clothes in the bush and gave them to me.

The victim's sister

When they released him he looked terrible. His skin was like ash. He wouldn't look at us or even talk to us. Mostly he lay on his bed. He cried quietly, sometimes, all night. No, he wouldn't eat a thing. Not even chicken. He just lay there.

His girlfriend did not even know he was out of jail. His friends. Nobody.

Yes, he was in a lot of pain. I think his bottom was very sore. He wouldn't let us help him. He turned away from us. He used to be such a happy boy – always laughing and joking. Lots of girls.

The prison officer

Yes, it is officially forbidden to lock up children with adults, but we do it all the time. They pay us well and it makes them less aggressive. Sometimes it is very hard to control these people.

I do remember him, but it was not I who smuggled him from the juvenile block to the adult block. That was another officer. No, I can't do that. No, I don't feel bad. Why should I feel bad? He was exchanging

money on the parallel market. He was unpatriotic.
We are a sovereign country. We are tired ...

The rapist

I paid a lot of money for that “woman”. All my forex.
But I got it back in a few weeks by renting him out to

other prisoners. No, he was easy to hide in these
overcrowded cells. And he was very small.

That is not true. He screamed a lot because of the
sores, but how can you say he didn't like it when I can
bring you witnesses to prove that he sometimes got an
erection. Strewsgod. Like this.

