

Settling

Jenna Mervis MRVJEN001

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree
of Master of Creative Writing.

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2006

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

Signature:

Date: _____

Abstract

Settling is a collection of poems that interrogates the location of self in the physical, personal and metaphorical worlds. There are thirty poems that explore different aspects of ‘settling’ from a woman’s perspective. Drawing on a variety of poetic forms, including the sonnet, haiku and free verse, the poems highlight the tenuous relationship of person and place with regard to all forms of relocation – travelling, immigration, moving home, emotional displacement, death and birth. Whether ‘settling’ refers to the flux of human interaction or to natural occurrence, it implies a questioning of belonging, of rooting oneself and examines traditional notions of place. This is a familiar trope in post-colonial literature. *Settling*, however, enters into these discussions at a time when South Africa has come of age globally and the movement of its people in and out of its borders is increasing. The boundaries of ‘home’ have become blurred, yet the necessity of identifying with a specific place is still of paramount importance. Just as South Africa as a country is exploring its place on the continent, in the Commonwealth and in the world, so the individual in South Africa must begin to question her place in relation to the personal and physical spaces in which she chooses to move.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Geoffrey Haresnape, for his dedicated guidance; and my family, without whose support this collection would not have reached fruition. Throughout my reading, several fine poets have been an inspiration to me, particularly Anna Akhmatova, Ruth Miller, Ingrid de Kok and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Contents

	<i>pg</i>
Unravelling	4
We went back to her house	5
Shedding skin	6
Lament of a dying man's wife	7
Good boy	8
Sea	9
Exodus	10
Another shore	11
In England	12
Coat	13
The globe	14
Letters to my country	15
Home	16
Settling	17
Compare and contrast	19
Ten points on housing	20
Bus	21
Kingfisher	22
Sleeping sonnet	23
Waking sonnet	24
Waiting	25
Poems are daughter too	26
Blood	27
The Rape of the Clivia	28
Amidst the Lavender	29
African Violets	30
Another go at settling	31
Pandora	32
Birth	34
Hope haiku	35

Unravelling

After my grandmother's funeral, I sit cross-legged
on a Persian rug with her sewing tin in front of me:
a large decagonal tin covered in a creeping green vine.

Inside, I find a poem unravelling as a spool of cotton
wanton threads weaving through generations of women
looping through hooks and eyes tangled on wrist pins
pearlised head pins embroidering the anatomy of a country
inside the years are measured chalked pinned cut sewn
loves unpicked and darned world war plotted patterned
on a husband in desert heat squinting for the enemy
or tailored to a lover scrubbing decks to Italy
a billow of parachute petticoats following the fall of time
accommodating its stretch and bias brandishing booklets of needles
the *Lucky Speed Needle Book* the *Army and Navy Needle Book*
a march of women armed to the teeth with pins and needles
tapestry needle embroidery crewel needle chenille needle knitters needle lampshade
needle circular mattress needle sewing needle sail makers' needle carpet needle upholstery needle
packing needle
the strands unravel eras – unstitching, coming free, fraying
at the edges of households searching for a different needle
with a wide open eye for a new woman to thread through.

We went back to her house

Her absence screamed,
wept, stamped its feet
beat its breast with frustrated fists.
We couldn't help but notice –
like a toddler,
we weren't accustomed
to its constant presence
in our lives.
Learning the ropes of mourning
we walked through the door
as new parents.

Her house was full.

Ours to take
tip the piggy bank trotters up
to shake out every coin.
We'd felt richer before.
Her absence guided us through our inheritance
leaving tear stains and sticky trails of snot.
This was where she slept
this was where she dressed
this was where she read
this was where we sat for tea
where we laughed.
this was...
was.

Her kettle water was still warm.

We went back to her house,
three pillars of salt.

Shedding skin

There are degrees of loss.
Mostly the loss of oneself in another:
the loss of appellation.
The moulting of relationships
shaking off the last traces
in the wind of a last breath.
An epithelial loss.
One catches oneself gripping
for the next skin.

Life begins swaddled in belonging –
one's life in relation to.
This dermal drapery of possession claims
one as granddaughter, daughter, sister,
then gradually shrinks, peels off.

Standing over this grave now
granddaughter is brittle and splitting down
my spine. The fissure gapes
as cracks vein across my shoulders.
I wriggle free through the curled edges
of dead skin, shedding it on the soil.
My translucent smaller old self, imprinted
with the signatures of granddaughter,
rises and falls as a breath,
then quietly disintegrates into dust.

I walk away pink and raw.

Lament of the dying man's wife

Let me lie starched over your limp body,
and smother your sickness. Slip my puffed concern
as a cushion into the sinking arc of your neck.
Prop your back against my downy despair.

Let me drip through the doorway of your hand,
clean through cobwebbed corridors of your blood
down dusty passages. Polish beneath my fingers
the way to your hurt without waking you.

Let me thread through the plastic tube winding
through the eye of your nose, throat, lungs. I want
to find the tear. Pin the black hole into which
you are collapsing. Let me stitch the hole.

I have mended all your socks
for when you find your feet again.

Good boy

We climb quietly into the night, begin
our padding along the hot grey tar. You move
sideways with difficulty, pulling towards the grass
hesitating at familiar gates. I pause to breathe, sponge
the moist Durban air. The sea rolls against my palate.
There was a time when we would run on the beach
as the waves rearranged the dunes in plankton light.
Now we shift together, alone, a poet and her dog –
a parched story-teller and a veteran dragging an injury
of over-breeding and genetic wars. I am used to
the irregular cricket clicking of your nails, the scraping
effort of keeping your body in pace with your spirit.
Dogs fall like dominoes into barking and braying
at our odorous intrusion through their snouts. You stop
at every tree as if it were your last. Urine still comes
when called, but dribbles down your legs onto your paws.

When we get home I kneel down, wash each foot and leg,
you lean into my shoulder, heavy, exhausted, curious.
I run fingers through the coarse hair of your mane
thinning, greying down your spine into patches of broken
barren skin. Touch cuts the tension cords keeping you up
your marionette back legs fold at the joints, collapse.
sorry boy. You unfold awkwardly, not noticing the irregular
twist of your body, the shivering of atrophied muscle. *good boy*.

Later, alone, you climb quietly into the night carried by a final breath
hands holding your face, your paws, your great sagging body.

Sea

So many poems about the sea.
Poems of stick-mouthed galloping dogs,
of kite flying, castle building, bucket and spade
wielding toddlers, seasoned with salt and sand.

Poems of whale tails and dolphin snouts,
of fin smacking and blow hole kisses;
of mermaids oozing amongst mussels
shimmering in nautical day-dreams.
Poems of sailing ships and sinking ships,
of time and tides and hope and eternity.
Of infinity. Of divinity. Of virility.

So many poems sealed in glass bottles
hanging in the vast currents, unfound, unread
or washed up on endless shores, smashed, abandoned.

So many bottled messages from the sea
yet none of the crash and spray of my heart
against rock, or the ebb and flow of aloneness
eroding the sand beneath my feet.

Exodus

Struggling to keep our finger-stretch
distance, joints aching and arthritic.
Time slipping by like whizzing
inches of mud and termite mounds.
We live hand to mouth,
breast to mouth, womb to mouth
your energy spent, mine still humming,
blood-drumming its existence.

My exodus, mother,
like the departure of dew,
came sunrise, sunbeat early.
A shadowless, careless day,
the fruit pickers already bumble-beeing
the trees with their hum-ha laughter,
the sawmills churning wood,
burning since dawn.

An ordinary day like any other
an unnoticed leaving but for your body
hipping the door, wedged ship
run aground, infinite fingers
for keeping hold. I stood in your wake
fear tiptoeing around us, a fear of forgetting.
My exodus, mother, like the departure
of dew, came too early.

Another shore

*I am a substitute. My life has flowed
Into another channel
And I do not recognize my shores.*

from Anna Akhmatova 'Northern Elegies'

This body
is without mind
which is
elsewhere, harboured
dry docked,
tipping
effentjies
to the side
as if the vessel
holds
memory of
gently slanting
swells
or diagonal gulls
diving
on a fine day.

This body, without
mind,
is two feet two legs
beached, flailing
one vagina one stomach
a solitary churning
below
two propeller breasts,
arms,
hands
one drawbridge mouth
dropped shut
and bowed
the rest – nose, eyes, ears
barnacles suctioned
to skin.

This body,
without mind,
does not recognise
its shore
because it is
without
mind
And I do not recognise my shores.

In England

When I look out over the green grass of this country
I know it is not mine.
The grass grows foreign
the accent of the hills and slopes,
the lilt of the rivers
is all different.
Other.
Even the houses seem altered
quite a contrary tone.

So, if this is not Africa,
and Africa is mine
(like my hair and my nose are mine)
why, then, on this train,
do I feel at home
watching a landscape unfold in colours
yellow sweeping into green,
brown into blue
giant swishes of an expressionist brush?
Why am I so calm?
where is that exiled voice screaming
HOME! where?

Take a knife, slice down
through skin, muscle, bone, marrow
At the core is Africa.
Carved, salted, spiced,
hung on strange hooks
it is still Africa.
Staring out of this window at the skies of this country,
I am not sitting in Coach E seat 56 facing backwards.
I am standing
arms stretched in fields of sugarcane
and Africa surrounds me
whooshing, shooshing, hushing around me
whispering
you are home.

Coat

I'm standing with my nose to a coat.
Fake fur edges the cinnamon suede drop –
a waft of clear conscience, laced with plush boasts
poor beast, I imagine, suffered his skin to be scraped
and smoothed and used, but not his fur softly
thrown aside, (if only, she sighs, it were humane).

As I said, I'm breathing in winter through my coat
hanging open on a rack to catch me when coldness comes
the soft dark buttons perching like mahogany moths.
Its early but I'm lonely and yearning to be wrapped
in his arms, warmed by the smell of memory
Sometimes I need a lover.

The coat absorbs the pressure of my resting head.
Whispers winter tales of a home I once knew, once new
but one hour behind and past winter, while we're only starting.
My coat is exhaling London – I can't get enough.
I would strip, let the lining tease my breasts,
feel the soft snowfall of fabric brush my thighs.

Sometimes I need a lover.
Particularly on autumn days when I'm falling.

The Globe

The world has shrunk to a litchi in my fist.
Steeped in sticky juice, unable to resist
the urge to crack and peel, disarm, disrobe
once more to feel the sweet translucent globe
my fingers spoon the flesh, bring it to my lip
I curl my tongue around its polished pip.

If only home were as easy to locate
to peel off paint and plaster, tear the slate
tile by tile, and find beneath the roof
a marrow of belonging, ample proof –
a blood type match for a habitat infusion
of bed and bath. A domicile illusion.

letters to my country

1

I was born with a caul of veld, ocean, accent covering me –
African placenta shielding me, umbilical Africa feeding me.
I miss you mother, ma Africa. Do you forget me?

2

I haven't fought for you – do you mind? I came later,
afterwards. I was foetal waiting, knees to chin, translucent
skin tracked with mother blood, while you bled. Do you mind?

3

I haven't forgotten, but I cannot remember you before now,
I was swallowing fists of sand, grinding grains between molars,
screaming at the injustice, while you wept. Do you understand?

4

How do I say goodbye when I am not ready to leave,
when there is no goodness in the flying away.
Ma where are swallows when they are home?

5

Today on my back, mouth ajar, you flew in and out, bee-eater
picking off my thoughts bee by bee. I don't mean to sting,
but I feel so alone in all this post-hive sweetness.

6

Yesterday I defended us. They flicked numbers like knives, sharp,
cold. I said it happens in other countries too, that you'd protect me.
I couldn't sleep last night, there were noises. I have inherited your fear.

7

I never chose you Ma Africa, before I left. There were voters
swarming like the wildebeest migrating to drink your freedom
but I was too young. Do you count my absence a betrayal?

8

I have been away too long. Always walking, but feet leave no marks here.
Are my prints where I left them – that place above the ribbon water mark,
my soles impressed in sand? Trace them, photograph them. Send them to me.

9

I love a stranger. His tongue moves over my skin injecting dialect
like diabetic serum. Sharp, unavoidable. My lips have rearranged
in phrases of odd-shaped words. Will you understand me now?

10

I hate you, mother, for always being. Because of you I am migratory, never home
your geography sunk into the skin, spreading in sun spots on my hands, the tan line
washed up on my breasts. I am alone ma Africa, trapped like a bird in a house.

11

Ma Africa, I am coming home. Will you take me back?

Home

Your body is my country.
Your body unfolds before me as a map.
In the familiar feel of your provinces
navigating roads across your contours
I know I am home.

Run my face over your karoo-flat back
fine fynbos hairs break the surface
on my cheek.
I inhale dust and dry riverbeds:
the ground is covered in prints.
A lonely korhaan stands *stokstil*
tongue clicking then rhythmic shrilling
head thrown back, bill wide as Africa
a vocal orgasm that splits the stillness.

Your spine is a windmill
(I finger each rivet)
trek across each vertebra searching
for your source.
At the base skin pools, collects
languid lagoon spills
into sand dunes.
I survey the horizon.

Two roads stretch out
spun veins connecting familiar places
scars signpost the way.

South below your stomach
so many paths
Drakensberg paths thick and forested.
I track your caves, your mountains
lose myself in the peaks,
marble baths of your skin.

Your skin is a night sky
I follow the stars to your face.

Settling

I

se'ttle² v. **1.** v.t. & i. ~ **(down)**, establish or become established in more or less permanent abode or place or way of life

after moving (around so much) it becomes difficult to settle
walking with armfuls of roots clutched to the breast, tripping
over tubers, rhizomes, compelled to take our taproots with us
like a tangled mass of entrails not our own; we are uprooted

[*shall settle in London, Australia; settle feet in stirrups; plant's roots
well down in ground; invalid among pillows; oneself in chair*]

dislodged, shrivelling at the tips yet somehow still increasing;
untangled we find (for example) Lithuania, Germany, Wales,
Israel, Australia, London, South Africa – an umbilical diaspora
clinging to the self, it's difficult to know exactly where we are
or who we are (should be? want to be?) yet we're steeped in
centuries of settling, of sweeping ourselves from place to place

we rip out roots, replant, transplant and implant until they
forget the feeling of sitting deep in earth, latching, locking
onto wet sand, turgid and expanding, forget how to settle

II

settle? [do you mean *arrange, terminate, prevail, place
oneself, dwell, seat, travel, descend, weigh, murder, answer,
make certain, judge, defeat, contract, appropriate or punish?*]

Ah, schizophrenic settle! you are neither coming or going,
you are movement and stasis; you launch ships to this Cape
of Storms, drive ox wagons through the interior, peg down
tents, lay foundations, balance houses of cardboard cards,
you take off, you land, you juggle us from hand to hand

III

They climbed a pimple of a hill, erupting from the flat Makana
landscape one dry Eastern Cape day, to see where the settlers
went. As advertised, 360 degrees of promised land rose and
fell below – they perched on the head as eagles, swivelled
their gaze from sea to veld, to the pale haze of distant dunes

this is where the settlers went, and there, and there – guided
by an engraved compass they followed their hard, slow trek
through the interior, watched bodies waste away, luggage
off-loaded and left, oxen crumble beneath wagon wheels
tiny lines of ants touching feelers with the past, moving on.

Two families from this ship went north, the others east, west
and northwest, differences settled by degrees. Yet they see
nothing but veld. And south, a sprawling mass of shacks –
'informal' settlement. No pointer marks this place.
Where is the map to pin these pioneers to their land below?

IV

settle ~ **(down)** (cause to) cease from wandering or motion or change or disturbance or turbidity (*things will soon settle into shape; marry and settle down; settle down to married life;*)

where is the map to mark the man-made marriages of our past – our women shipped to foreign shores and stripped on make-shift bridal beds, settled into free state silence, where have you brought us? words settling like dust on tongues, unspoken; settling down to life of wandering minds, muddy fingers of children taking root at the feet.

V

Oh ironic, schizophrenic settle do you know the quality of your soil? You ask us to settle, yet you cannot settle yourself on one stem, obese rhizome! Sending up multiple meanings, conflicting demands, undermining our steps;

VI

yet we will settle. We
are settling.

VII

se'ttling^l finding space, planting oneself, waiting for the roots to take.

Compare and contrast

You see I'm new to the Cape.
(They say which place do you prefer?
Compare and contrast, giving reasons.)

Durban always welcomes me home
with a full-mouthed kiss of heat.
Wrapped in his humid embrace
I succumb in sweaty silence, lulled
by the rolling apathy of palm trees.

Cape Town's welcome is hurried,
a gushing Cape Doctor opens the door,
clears a path in gracious gusts, eagerly
ushers me inside; I think how gentlemanly
until he pushes past, slamming the door behind.

Coasts are strung together for different outfits
like necklaces or flies for fishing.
Warm, golden, wild; or cold, white, calm.
I'd dangle one foot in each if I could
wiggle my toes, wait for a first bite.

They said home is where the dog is.
Guarding the door with heavy breath,
ears twitching (running home on sleep paws
down the yellow brick carpet stitching
yelp yelp there's no place like home!)

or perhaps home is where the cat is –
roof-leaping her territory with butter paws,
pausing to bristle an arch backed rival,
spitting a warning smile, then through
the door with a chirrup and a purr?

Boeinged across a sky of white rabbit clouds
I just think abra cadabra where shall I land?
The world is a magician's hat. Not oyster,
not the palm of my hand, but a magic show
of wand tricks until the curtain falls
and I could be
really
anywhere.

Ten points on Housing

I
they've laid and left unfinished, without guilt
ticked the box for another box built.

II
over there in that place before the bulldozers shook
was a double storey shack with a stoep.

III
if its four walls joined at the edges,
it's a house
if its four joined walls with a window,
it's a mansion

IV
the architecture of population expansion

V
a four bedroom house, jacuzzi and a garden
is a 2 million plot of levelled land

VI
a homeless person for every rand.

VII
there are lonely houses empty and forgotten
they're clothed in foreign stuff

VIII
we have 11 destitute languages
isn't that enough?

IX
we will sleep better now
our people are safe as houses?

X
place your bed on bricks mr president
at night the tokoloshe visits –
his penis is long and cunning like your tongue.

Bus

It has all been described.
Even the twist of metal around flesh
the bent burst of a bus
the perfect curve of skid marks arcing off the road.
Police find themselves in a macabre game
bloody hopscotch on the tar,
body to body, each space marked
and further from the line. Each more difficult,
more distantly dead.
Somewhere in the mangle a suitcase stares open mouthed.
three folded dresses, a pair of socks nodding on the edge,
a sandal, an unwrapped gift.
More that can't be seen.
A dog barks and bolts
wet grass parts, hisses around the fleeing fur.
It stops, turns back, sits.
Then begins to howl.
And above the line of swifts and swallows,

screaming.

Kingfisher (remembering Hopkins)

Masked samurai poised on an invisible pillar of wind
follows the falling of his black-beaked sword
cuts air, incises the water skin. Ripples peel away.
Beneath the gash, the heart of a fish. Hovering, hoovering
the meniscus platter clean. Solitary fish. White flesh
trapped in tidal stupor, swashing with the sway
of weed, with the ebb and flow of plastic and polystyrene
sucking bubbles in slip streams of refuse.
Suffocating fish, skewered and in flight,
feathered with a pied cape, catching new currents.
Immigrant fish, carried to an overhanging perch,
plunges head first, head only, back into its source.
Sinking fish. Eyes bulbed and blackened, severed
stump trails blood, scales dulled and torn.

A fish head accidently dropped.
A kingfisher airborne, hunting.
A river-sewer spewing evidence of man's grandeur.

Sleeping sonnet

The sun's betrayed its frame and left the sky
to moonlit pallor, and flames of tiny pricks
whose light exposes seams of clouds that fly
above the trees, the rows of spindly wicks.
This bed is cold, awash in halide glimmer
that catapults my face onto the wall,
shadow puppet deformed and grimmer
blurred beneath the filter of night's caul.
Enclosed within the wrap of sheets my skin
unfolds, recalls the way your body fills
my gaps, how curves describe a nose, a chin,
a knee – your negative. A sleep of stills.
And on my lips an album of our night
each word an image captured without light.

Waking sonnet

Alone, a peacock's woeful wails lament
this early dawn. As mist slips and a dim
nimbus seals the sky like thick cement,
a donkey starts his husky mourning hymn.
The valley falls away from me, expands
yet shrinks to miniature. Unreachable
like memory, lost, when moonless night disbands
its stars, and dreams become unspeakable.
A hooded gloom embalms the forest floor;
the felled stumps, the bristling alien timber
entombed in sombre haze, appear to draw
away from light exposing their lost limber.
Oh, old wood grown from immigrant pine,
if this is not your place, then where lies mine?

Waiting

for computer to process and print
and purge itself of one more
job. Watching the small bars
measure patience. Somewhere
there is something better to do.

Waiting.
Safely, with precision. Actions logged
numerically, in zeros and ones,
calculated, translated, filed.
Usually between process and print
there is enough time for coffee.

Waiting.
Elsewhere, there are others waiting.
Perhaps, transfixed by an hourglass, a woman
measures her husband's last breaths,
installing death into her heart-drive
ten, thirty, fifty, eighty percent complete.

Waiting.
Perhaps, in the never-ending night, a girl
counts clicks as her clock breathes
seconds in and out, inhales minutes, exhales
hours, hands shivering with anticipation
of gifts and cake. She blinks till birthdaybreak.

Waiting.
Perhaps, in a white-faced ward, a mother
frozen. Shutting down with the pulse
of her child whose life has unexpectedly closed.
She watches mouths move in mourning, feels
her lips for life. She must restart, she knows.

Waiting.
In the background trying to forget the life
being waited out and the others waiting.

Poems are daughters too

You say it so politely
gently turn the page: *please take off your clothes*

I accompany my poem on her first visit
into the consultation room, hold her hand
while you feel for lumps in her text.
You push and prod her inherited breasts
for unusual swellings
count her ova as syllables –
find the rhythm disturbed and irregular
in the polycystic verse.
I hate that you know her secrets.

I want to comfort my poem –
say *everything is going to be all right*.
She turns to me, on her back, legs bent and spread,
and stares screams into my eyes - *mother it hurts*
inside. You ease cold hard reason
into her body, scrape words off her lines
test them for weakness, analyse the meaning.

I sit dumb through the interrogation:
Are you regular (no)
Is your flow heavy (yes when it comes)
Is there pain (there's always pain)
Beneath the questions is another narrative.
I watch you scrawl a prescription

I hold her hand while you finish. Help
her reshape, reform her clothes when you step out.
For some reason,
I feel violated, for some reason
I feel responsible.

Blood

They leeches four vials
of blood. You drove home
on empty with the clutch
in – free wheeling and heady.

The colour of blood behind
glass changes in the light:
a string of garnets in a drawer
or against the skin glittering.

You accept your paleness
as an offering. Mirrored lips let
words slip past: I have nothing
left to give. You brake gently.

The taste of blood is wine gums –
tubes of sweet swollen cells
too thick to inject or transfuse.
You suck the juice of red ones.

You cannot spin the wheel
into the driveway. Your muscles
have forgotten their grip. In the pit
of your elbow, your parked car throbs.

The smell of blood hovers
over the skin, an aura of ether
and latex gloves, the pungent clatter
of needles in a metal tray.

There are four steps to the door,
slowly. Already you miss
your blood – listen for footsteps
following or trailing behind.

The sound of blood is silence.
Or, later, the sharp ringing of a phone
and a woman's voice with results.
Or the sigh of good news, or of bad.

The Rape of the Clivia

In the cool shade, her flaming breasts and pollen-dusted nipples
plunging to the dark crevice of her thighs where water drips,
drips down in ripples of narcoleptic pleasure, innocent clivia sleeps.

In the hot shade, watching, hard armoured, horned shell
of a hunter inches forward joint by joint, twitching with hunger,
waiting. He feelers the air for interruption, finds none, begins

to mount her long waxen legs, pin her shivering petals. An arsenal
of legs and arms, he raises his cracked red body in excitement,
falls back on her amber crown. Pressing her down, begins

to ravage her delicate skin. Suffocates her. Severs her tongue.
Shifts his mandible to consume more. Masticates her ample bloom.
Lets her fall pruned to the floor, blossoming sister, daughter, clivia.

And afterwards, he rests on her, strokes the amputated beauty
with his claws. Then dismounts, moves unseen into the shadow
to pick his armour clean and dream of her seasonal flowering.

Amidst the Lavender

Little beating ship has dropped anchor
legs hanging down, lavender loaded, high
on pollen stockings and fragrant melody
wafting from the sirens' meadow. She has
forgotten her hively home, her queen's hungry
wait as she skims each purple tipped finger
of the sirens' hands. Buoyed by vaporous honey
voices, she hovers on the breath of an ecstatic wind.

African Violets

Amidst the soft furnishings, in a boudoir of delicate elegant duvets, leaves of sheets peel away, reveal soft green cushions, woven quilts, the violets rising.

Bodies unbend, uncurl, burst open, reveal private violet places, purring from velvet pillows: *we are, we are...* flash pollinating smiles, *we are the waking women of...*

whispering through concentric claustrophobic arms *we are the sprouting, flaunting, reproducing, juicing seducing violets of, we are the women of Africa. Make way.*

Another go at settling

What is an African poem bobbing uncertainly on the diaspora?
Examine the words, the prepositions, the grammar
the metaphor, simile, what joins this and that
(is there such a thing as an African conjunction?)
This poem, bending over backwards to conform
the flattened back of the mountain, must restate,
rephrase the south, must help language to its feet,
stand up, stand up if you speak *my* speak.

Poem from Africa? Or poem of Africa? Perhaps, African poem?
Then you must read it in the accent it was written
which means you must ask: what of the poet? What if
she were African too? Or he. Because even between
these lines there is colour and sex and religion
and you will see a white man with a shrivelled penis
or a black woman with bountiful breasts, or a Jew
imploding or a Muslim exploding ...
and you'll think you've settled the meaning (example:
here is the guilt of a white woman Jew) when,
between the lines, it is talking, simply, about you.

A poem is foreign soil, an unmapped island before
your eyes meet the lines. A xenophobic community –
apologies to Milton to Hopkins to Poe, but really
if you aren't a white Christian man how would you know?
You hover on the margin, reading in.

Until a word extends
its hand, a line opens its arms and suddenly you're let through.

So stand up (if you speak my speak) and keep
moving, line to line. A poem is not a conference
of bored words or opinionated phrases, where you
get to sit and listen, between tea-time stanzas debate
(and even if it were you would not participate
because you already have the meaning in your head)
And when the last punctuation mark tolls, return home
empty your pocketed mind and answer this question:
is an African poem born and bred
or is it African only once it is read?

Pandora

'But the woman removed the great cover of the jar with her hands and scattered the evils within and for men devised sorrowful troubles. And Hope alone remained within there in the unbreakable home under the edge of the jar and did not fly out of doors.'

from Hesiod 'Works and Days'

the place –

It grows dark late in this place,
as if the gods wanted to beat
landscape into memory,
as if it were not there already.
I watch the sun flood mountains of smoke,
turn the sky crimson, watch it bubble in the heat.
Across the country, night has risen earlier,
light forced to ground by driving rain.
There are floods, drownings, darkness.
Still the sun will not go down on this day.
Wind currents catch the great ball,
hurl it upwards – up, up.
Eucalyptus forests bend in supplication.
The mountain burns. There is fire,
fear in this evening's prolonged daylight.
Flames peck and claw the hunchbacked giant,
bound in rock and stone, monumental
Prometheus ripe for another burning.
Prodigal children swarm at his feet,
battling the blaze.

the myth –

man's punishment for Prometheus's gift – a woman.
Pandora. Born of sweet revenge.
We come upon the scene too late, the action
already played out, the lid opened and shut, Pandora,
beautiful Pandora already resigned to resentment
beneath the battling egos of gods. Prometheus
already bound to rock, a bleeding sacrifice for man.

The room is deserted, the door ajar. Epimetheus
fled to the dark interior, bent against a column,
hands tearing his temples with images of disease,
silence, evils of earth and sea, torture, death.

A screen of light filters through palm fronds
something moves in shadow
an arm
a sweep of fabric
then into the rays a kaleidoscope woman
covered in flowers and gold.
She cradles a jar in both hands, presses the cool glass
against her lips, rolls it across her cheek,
down her sloping neck over her chest.

She pauses.
Holds the jar to the light,
edges blur, contort, meet in unfamiliar places.
She shakes the room, turns it gently clockwise,
mesmerised by the power of her glass gift.
Setting the jar back on the table,
she opens her hands –
broad, new hands
but already Fate has begun to trace her suffering.

Inside, Hope is witness to the curious beginning of Woman.
She hovers beneath the lid, arms beating the glass, struggling
to get out. Perhaps, the world's first gesture of hope.
Perhaps its last.

the truth –

Both hands are burnt, palm lines scorched off.
A yellow blistering surface conforms to shapes
reminiscent of fingers, thumbs, palms
yet remarkably inhuman, impersonal.
It is strange to think these hands were held once.
These are not my hands.

Then the dressings, the layers of bandage:
I present two mummified stumps
or two porcelain jars concealing revenge.
Still, these are not my hands.

Now peel off strips of gauze and skin,
uncurl Pandora's clasp and curses
burst out in gasps of pain.

Technically it is the contorted tendons,
the inelastic scar tissues which cup these hands
permanently curled around a trapped fluttering
moth. I keep returning to this notion of hope
caught in the bars of these folded fingers, protected.

I keep returning to this. To Pandora, to Prometheus,
to myth. That there is hope only because there is despair.

Birth

We came bearing gifts:
floral frankincense
chocolate cake myrrh
baby-grow gold
to welcome your arrival.

You won't remember
our faces
intent on waking you up.

You won't remember
being cupped head in palm
against our chests –
like dew on a leaf,
self contained perfection
delicate as water.

You won't remember
our eyes
lasering love
on your swaddled body.
Or that we passed your name around
mouth to mouth
biting into the first fruit of your season
tucking its flavour under our tongues
for future reference.

Or that from under our breaths
words crept out of tradition
touch wood, kain ein hora
a whispering audience
to your mewling matinee.

One day when you cradle
your child
or lean over its sleeping cocoon form,
you won't remember
your miracle play.

But you will
finally
understand.

Hope haiku

Oh!
Cock-a-doodle-doo
plumed Janus on a tin roof
wakes hope and despair

deep downy sleepers
tucked snug in tight lipped estates
panic in their palms

informal sleepers
pre-packed and rattled to rest
head to toe to head.

There's that cock again
garrulous township treble
to shake us all up

and into the street
to work to save to live to
die on soul Sunday

swept with leaves that
dance in gusts of changing wind
dead, yes, but alive too.

Hout Bay harbour hope
sails before that rooster wakes
nets the pre-dawn sea

snoek, tuna, sardine
sweetheart come closer to touch
the catch of the day

there again that bird
deep in shrill courtship with light
ever-hopeful cock.

This is no love poem
because there is no lover
just eternal hope

so up, up, yawn stretch
swing out of my dreaming bed
wash dress eat brush drive

watch the horizon
because words that set must rise
with this cock-crow dawn.