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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

Signed by candidate

## 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 of 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

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## **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

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## 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 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.

### III

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 spice 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

on our skins.

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 flittering 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,  
present

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 than 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 mellow 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  
searing 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 choose 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 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*<sup>1</sup> with sorghum beer  
under a morula tree

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<sup>1</sup> *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

University of Cape Town

## **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!

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## **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 sikel' iAfrika*<sup>1</sup> 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

---

<sup>1</sup> *Nkosi sikel' 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

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## 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.

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## **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?

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## **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

University of Cape Town

## 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

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## **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...

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## **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

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## **Ode to a pilgrimage**

*(For Keorapetse Kgositsile)*

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,

<sup>1</sup>*Tshwene e e leriba...*

For Africa is right here

For you

For all of us!

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<sup>1</sup> 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?

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## 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 *imbongi*<sup>1</sup>,  
brittle as dew between my lips and tongue  
could fly through those iron bars and wire-meshes  
to your ears with ease:  
Freedom!

---

<sup>1</sup> *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 ghettos

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

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## **A healing song**

*(for Julian Bahula, while in Pretoria Academic hospital- January 1997)*

Bra<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> Bra – township slang for brother

<sup>2</sup> *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 a 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

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## **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!

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## **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!

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## **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?

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## **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!

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## **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.

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## **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<sup>1</sup>,  
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

---

<sup>1</sup> Mwanamutapa Ruins – Zimbabwe Ruins

as I wake up to a new day to live my life  
minute by minute

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## 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 Uhuru<sup>1</sup>  
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 KNEE<sup>2</sup> of America

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<sup>1</sup> Uhuru – freedom in Swahili

<sup>2</sup> 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

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## 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<sup>1</sup> where they are  
cramped together like sardines in poverty and  
frustrations with other people of colour

It was outside at the foyer of kultuurhussen<sup>2</sup>  
where I once met Maria, an Angolan expatriate

---

<sup>1</sup>Rinkeyby – slum area in Stolkhom

<sup>2</sup> *Kultuurhasen* – a cultural centre in Stolkhom

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<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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*<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup>!”

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!

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<sup>1</sup> *Policia* – Spanish word for police

<sup>2</sup> *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 flutter 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*<sup>1</sup> when I am told of a neighbour,  
a lonely greying old man who poisons birds for leisure

---

<sup>1</sup> *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*<sup>2</sup> with a few dead birds  
strewn around his feet

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

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<sup>2</sup> *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.

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## **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?

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## 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*<sup>1</sup>  
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*<sup>2</sup>  
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-dispossessed 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

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<sup>1</sup> *Tierberg* - name of a mountain in Afrikaans

<sup>2</sup> *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

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## **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:

*<sup>1</sup>O 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

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<sup>1</sup> *O 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 excrement 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...

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## **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

University of Cape Town

## **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?

University of Cape Town

## 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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Necklace – township slang for a burning tyre put around a person's neck