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Desert Rain

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TYFDAV001

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Creative Writing (Poetry)

Faculty of the Humanities

University of Cape Town

2012

Due thanks go to the National Research Foundation, whose generous support made this work possible.

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: _____

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Desert Rain

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Dedicated to Mom, Dad and Sue.

And, of course,

To Claire.

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Chapter One

Desert Rain

(For Vetkat, Don and Stephen)

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And I who am here dissembled

Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love

To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.

“Ash-Wednesday” – T.S. Eliot

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Prologue

I know it must have been hours ago
that I watched the sun come over that dune.
We drank tea
and discussed the folly of hunting korhaan.

Now the corners of my eyes are cut in razor slits,
as I look out into the heat
for someone to whom I can tell my story.
The track stretching to the north
calls my imagination toward this phantom creature,
this ear that I can slip my story into
and watch as it dissolves
and emerges as something miraculous and new.

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Another Myself

One night my sleep was interrupted
by the sound of something moving over the sand,
so that I did not know if I was awake
or still dreaming.

Even now,
as it moves quietly into another ear,
I could not tell you
if it was perhaps a steenbokkie
or a ghost
or me.

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The Stranger

It was at first light
I found him like that,
kneeling there in the sand.

At first I was oblivious;
I carried on as usual, cooking water for tea.
Then, as the line of dunes to the east
began to emerge below the stars,
his rounded shoulders
betrayed his human presence
among the drie-doring bushes.
Startled,
I had to stand up and peer at him
to convince myself
that he was more than just a product
of the changing light.

So far I have not dared disturb him –
I don't know why.
The sun is right above us now
and still he has not moved at all.

Apologia

I could take you by the hand
and walk you through this place,
but I do not know what you would see –
perhaps sand, trees,
maybe a small red antelope.

I could point to the places
where I once thought that I had found
or lost something
and I could say –

There! That is where it happened.

As the sun settles over the dunes

I could say –

Isn't it beautiful?

As the moon rises

and this place transforms again

I could say –

Look how the light changes everything.

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Alphabet (For Vetkat)

I came to hear you speak,
but I could not understand you,
because you spoke the language of sand,
of sunlight, of the smell of evening,
of steenbok spoor and bits of grass.

To understand you I must learn
how not to understand,
learn the sun and the bark of trees,
learn the smell of evening.
To understand you I must learn
how to write your name on a grain of sand.

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Form

The desert evaporates
on investigation.
My words have no use here.
There is nothing here
to throw myself against
and say – This is me!
There is no tree
that does not dissolve
as I come close,
no dune that does not shift under my feet on approach.
Sometimes I must quickly check my shadow
to see if I am still here.

The crows fly away with my names
and I am left standing alone.

I must die in the desert
too many times.
I try to reshape myself,
but the sand is too fine
and refuses to contain form.
So I must content myself with temporary homes,
burrows and tree trunks,
until mourning has run its course
and I am free as the day before I had a name.

Author

Forgive me
if I say too often –
under that tree, or –
on this dune.

That is how these things have occurred
to me.

And now I cannot avoid being borne away
by the breath of that moment
when the clear sky breaks upon me.

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Grains of Sand

In my dream, I am trying to remember something
so I can write it down.

Like in the dream where I have to leave,
but can't get my suitcase packed,
I sense some looming incompleteness.

There is an image, always off-screen,
that I have been walking over these dunes to recuperate.

My spoor speaks plainly
about this journey, saying –

He was here
and then he went there.

But it does not tell what I saw,
or who I was because of it.

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Desert Father

His sound and the desert's sound
were indistinguishable
even before he died.

Both utterly indecipherable.

I see him sitting under a witgat tree,
waving and smoking,
the tree enfolding him,
and there is only the song
and the sunlight on the back of a black beetle,
running across this sand dune.

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Desert Heart

Today we are going out,
out walking,
going out into the sands.
I follow him closely,
follow the back of his head,
follow his convinced footing
over the dune-crests.

Today we rest on this dune
and he teaches me
how to find the softness
inside the tsamma melon –
how to drink the desert.

Today he tells me –
This is how we can live here
in the desert. The desert gives us all that we need:
a little water
and you feel strong,
like you can walk over the dunes all day.

Singing (ForVetkat)

Every night for a week
we watched the flashing clouds in the distance,
dreaming up stories of migratory storks
and mirror lakes.

You'd play your guitar
and I would listen,
the sound flowing over us
into the darkness.

When I sit on this dune
I hear the blood in my veins,
the wind in the grass
for hundreds of kilometers
in every direction.

The desert cracks
and expels my heart,
raw against the earth,
the scorching sun.

The desert wind carries
the sound of your singing.

Clues

I remember
in the afternoon
two men came by, riding a donkey-cart,
past the place where I was lying in the sand.
They were collecting fire-wood
and it seemed that they had mistaken me for some or other object.

These things make little difference;
tomorrow this place will be gone again.
My toes probing the sand for clues
and the sun –
only echoes,
a thought passing through a desert.

I remember,
as they rode away,
I heard one of the men singing
and I shifted I little
to avoid a root
that had been pushing into the back of my skull.

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Reference

I woke up with blood in my hair
and when I turned to find out
everything was gone:

the trees, the grass, the dune,
even the sound of his voice
telling me –

this is s-a-n-d

that is the s-u-n

this is the w-i-n-d.

I looked for my hands, my face,
the back of my head,

I looked for him everywhere,

I tried to remember our language,

to call out to him,

to reach *something*.

But who I had imagined myself to be
was gone.

And who he was back then

who knows now?

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Desert Child

Last night,
after the evening had burnt out,
I was kneeling in the sand,
just over there,
trying not to puke and piss
at the same time.
It seems strange now,
but I drew comfort
from imagining
the porcupine's young,
buried under the desert night,
incubating new dreams –
They are the desert's true children
I thought
and buckled
under the weight
of so many stars.

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Call for Rain

I

For years we have stood out on this dune,
open-mouthed,
holding our hearts out like urns.
The dust turns around our ankles,
settles,
is picked up again.

II

I know it must have been you I saw,
standing out on that dune all of yesterday,
with your hands outstretched,
praying for rain,
as the massive blue pressed upon you from above.

I know it was you,
because there is no-one else.

Counterpoint

I

Now I rest my head
on morning's shoulder.

Now I am a cloud –
breaking up with the weight of me.

II

Now I re-invent myself
on a curved blue horizon.

Now I feel my skin
holding a red pulse inside me.

III

Now dreamtime stretches
behind and before me.

Now I cling to the morning
with worn-out fingers.

Dust

In February, in the desert,
the wind blows all day,
the dust gets into everything,
there is nowhere to hide.
You tell yourself stories
about how you would like to
go for a walk
or read a book,
but you always end up watching the sand
as it dances over the dunes in waves,
wondering why it is that you stay,
and then you notice the tibia sticking through,
the whiteness under the massive sky.
You long to go home,
but you have forgotten where that is.

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Waiting

A black lizard stands on a fence post,
suspended between red and blue,
gaping at the stillness,
its rigid vigil
punctuated by an inflective bob of the head.
The desert contracts and expands, centered
around the sudden movement.

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Wind-Made

Lying face-down
on this red shelf
the wind carries me like smoke
across the desert.

Breathing out
I come to rest –
This dune is the wind itself.

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Now this light

She enters me like a whisper
and my legs, long buried in sand,
begin to move forward,
like sinking shadows.

By the time this effort has exhausted me
I notice she is gone –
I re-secure myself,
a desert anemone,
and dream, re-dream,
trying to push light from shadows.

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Dreaming

I have been trying to write poems
like this place –
quiet, clean (*clean?*),
uninterrupted. But
I stare out into the heat most days,
dreaming of her breasts,
smells now gone to another place.
I am so fucking lonely here.
I throw another cigarette butt into the coals.

*“But this dream
is only a dream.”*

When I woke up under the juniper tree
she was already straddling me,
sweating into me –
in that moment
I was convinced that I was dead.

In my dream
I startle myself awake
by burying my face in her hair
and then just screaming.
When I awake
she is still holding me
like that –
her hair full of stars,
my eyes clean.

Redness

I couldn't imagine
imagining her breasts,
imagining
between her loving thighs,
without the red dust between
between our bodies.

I couldn't imagine
being human,
having a human heart,
without the redness
covering our skin,
forcing itself into us,
discovering our hidden openings,
devouring us
like this white jaw-bone in the dust,
jutting into the light.

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Blood

I attempted to create something
that would not resemble myself.

I tried to find something
that I did not depend upon.

I dug all day;

I scoured my fingers
until they bled into the red dust
and my shadow nodded
against the slope
of a hill of sand.

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Irrelevant

As the years empty out
and I become native to this place
I begin to discern,
like the sun throwing its rocks on me from above,
the stark ordinariness of my despair.
My visions are whitewashed,
threaded through with faded images –
an old photograph of a gull against the sky.
I stand out naked in the sun,
mortified by the quiet
that meets my desperation.

But the moment that someone points out to you
that you have been digging in the wrong place
everything changes –
despair becomes irrelevant.

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Steenbok

All my life

I have been following your spoor
through the seasons of this place.

All because of those mornings
when, as I round the crest of a dune,

I am surprised by your eyes
that reflect my dream back to me.

If only I could realise

that in every instant

my mind is as fresh

as when I first saw you –

red and naked.

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Leaving

For weeks the desert birds have been lining up
on the dunes behind my house.

And I, too, have been packing
and re-packing
and planning to pack.

But today was so quiet –
I sat all day to listen.

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Why come out to the desert to write poems?

In the heat of this place
you remember to check yourself;
the quiet patience reminds you
that in every moment
you have all the time in the world
to find love.

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Samsara

In the desert

I am a child,

dreaming he has lost his mother,

desperately wandering,

athirst in the red sand,

digging, sleeping in tree trunks,

befriending strange creatures, asking everywhere –

Have you seen my mother?

I grow old –

I die –

I grow old –

I die –

asleep in my mother's arms.

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They are leaving

This morning, as I was boiling water,
three black birds came circling overhead –
they took off into the west, cawing and tumbling.
As I watched them disappear,
over that dune with the two witgat trees,
I noticed that my campfire had long since burnt out.
There was only a bit of ash,
left there by the wind
to circle over this dune in shifts and starts.

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Departure (For Stephen)

I should not have been surprised.
Twice a day
the pied crows fly past this place.

Even in my dreams
a porcupine will disappear
behind a bush or dune,
secretive, a night-time herbalist,
mixing tinctures in its stomach,
desert medicine, dream medicine.

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Desert Sage (a necessary failure)

Eventually

I stood up,

defeated,

pressed my palms

to the side of that dune,

and left them there,

like love.

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After-Image

The old tree in the desert,
shaped against stars that blink
like ancient cats,
dreams the slow dreams of watertight thorns,
expecting the morning verses to rise
out of the quiet dust again.

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Beyond Me

I read and re-read
these words about sand,
about the sun and the stars
and a steenbok on a red dune,
always trying to get back
to that moment of clarity
when I saw that it was inevitable –
my desert life, my life outside of time.

I have never seen the desert,
as I have never seen my own eyes.
Reflections are all I have to work with –
shadows thrown against a wall of sand:
dreams of water
and candle-flames illuminating my mind.

All these broken concepts,
stuttering in my head,
draw themselves tight
around their own ignorance,
veil in confusion
mind's stark clarity.

That is why
I must keep going back –
to uncradle myself,
unleash myself,
to throw myself like a thought into the air.

I must keep going back
until something happens that I cannot expect,
because, thankfully, it is beyond me.

I must keep going back
until my body turns to sand
and my eyes melt into light
and my ears fly with the korhaan
over the driedoring and witgat
and my mind becomes the sun, illuminating.

I must keep coming back to myself –
there is no other way:
the desert neither asserts, nor denies its own existence.
Likewise, no-one can tell me
in which moment I am myself.

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Slower

Coming home from digging for medicine,
red knees and arms
from those minutes
shoulder deep in the earth –
I am lifted
and walk slower
slower,
back through the dune-streets,
following well-known landmarks
of trees,
holes in the red earth,
white bones.

Nearly home,
I halve my footsteps.

Hearing the sound of human voices,
I halve my footsteps –

walking again past the same bush

walking again past the same bush

This image repeats like a lullaby:

a steenbok, red,

standing on a red dune,

unmoving, head bowed

in the rain.

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Afterword

“...[S]ome of us are still functioning, though still shaking, telling stories about desertification. We were the ones who never understood – the quiet of quiet, the fire of fire. And so there was never any way of telling if we had arrived (except, of course, for the desolation, which was, in any case, most likely imported).

After a few days my skin seemed to be turning red – I thought that I might have been becoming a part of this place. But how could I know that except from the outside? I am always at risk of stumbling into my pocket of ideas. I might end up shaken around in there for years, telling stories I have no idea about, losing touch with the pain I turned away from in those first moments, until, trembling, with shifting eyes, I will mention a desert I have never seen.”

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Chapter Two

Salt

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Salt

I

She is walking along the shoreline,
examining bits of debris
washed up at high tide.

It is an overcast, still day
and she is wearing a yellow dress,
slip-slops dangling from her hand.

She lifts a small, white conch from the sand
and holds it to her ear –
she wonders if she could draw herself
into the shell she is holding
without breaking it.

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II

She is lying on her bed,
gazing at the conch
next to her on a low table,
trying to transport herself to the day last autumn
when she found it on the beach.

The day returns in fragments,
but what she is hoping for does not come.

She picks up the shell
and rests it on her stomach,
bending her chin to watch,
as it rises and falls
with the rhythm of her breath.

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III

She hurls the shell
back into the ocean.
Dry hair.
Dry clothes.
But water dripping from her chin.
She glances behind her
at the worn white cliffs,
a seagull navigating against the wind.
She looks back at the dark ocean,
her breath calmer,
her body quieting,
the white shell slowly sinking.

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IV

It is raining and raining.

The streetlamps and headlights
make the windscreen full of stars,
which are wiped away and replaced rhythmically
as she turns the corner into her street.

She takes off her shoes,
makes a cup of tea
and sits with her feet tucked in under her
on the new-smelling couch.

As she is about to open her book
she looks out into the night
and sees a small white conch
gently rocking on the ocean floor,
a corner of her heart collapsing.

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V

She does not understand
why sometimes he hardly seems to move his hands
while he is talking,
or why he always seems
to be trying to overcome
some wild thing in his mind.
She looks into his eyes
as he pauses
in the middle of a sentence,
and has a vision of him
on a long white beach,
blue sky around his shoulders
and sand between his toes,
gently uncovering something
buried there
near the water.

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The Blue Door

(For Don)

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The Blue Door (For Don)

I imagine you
as a mad magician,
bushy eyebrows
standing on end,
throwing together
stars and bread
for us to marvel at,
taking out your heart and gently holding it to your ear:
the air up on Kompasberg,
the smell of wood-smoke –
a mad magician,
urging us to love each other,
beyond the blue door.

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A year on

Reading your poems now
I can feel my life
tearing away from me,
like old paint from the wall
of some abandoned farmhouse.
Your words of longing
are the blue sky
uncurling from my brain.

I feel the years stripped away by rain,
so that my memories emerge in flashes
that I know are suffused with an unrealistic
nostalgia.
Those first crisp April mornings
are only so caught
upon the fingers of my flailing mind,
because I know now what I did not know then:
that I missed it all,
that I did not love it,
that I was cruel to so many.

The only hope that I can see
is a growing, but reluctant
generosity.
And if that becomes something beautiful and
alive,
you will be its grandfather,
with your great kind eyes
and your words
always.

Don

To bring you to life again
I need only to stretch out my hand
and feel the texture of this table,
or watch two women talking at a coffee shop,
moving their hands
in flashes of meaning,
or simply listen
to the darkness growing outside my window,
the wind.

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Anniversary Letter

(For Claire)

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With you here

I wake from my siesta
and sit by the front door,
smoking a cigarette,
watching the clouds build,
as they did last summer.

I turn to look
at the gentle curve of your shoulder,
contemplating the weight of this year's easiness.

Looking outside again
I see the branches on the tree
hang lower during summertime.

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Streets of Grahamstown

You were on your bed
and I was a visitor, looking in.
I felt you through wrapping then.

Now I walk down streets,
past the homes we have shared –
all barred against my enquiries.
Our names are written on every wall.
They fade like ghosts
as I walk on.

You are lying on your bed
and I am here, writing these words,
losing you
again and again,
losing every name I had for you,
because we are not houses for each other,
though
I do not know what we are.

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Anniversary Letter

You are lying in an autumn field,
looking up at the sky –
the trees framing blue space.

You turn your head
to look at me,
without saying a word,
as the wind rattles the dry leaves
above us.

You look up into the trees again –
they bend in the wind,
nodding their approval.

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Emblems

In my dream-diary
you have become just 'C'.

"C is calling me."

"I am walking with C."

We are leaving eddies and echoes
forever in that lake of dreams,
like the smell of ancient places.

Things that have become the emblems of a life:
a tree that you've driven past a thousand times;
the schoolyard you visit out of nostalgia
and remember, with a pulse of certainty,
a gouged-out piece of cement,
or a pattern in the tiles.

One day you decide to climb the tree you always drive past.
Its caverns smell like sap.
You look down and see yourself driving past,
day after day,
knowing, but not knowing,
this place of birds
thirty feet above your life.

Again and again
I look at you
and meet that pure vertigo,
like the flight of a dove into a shade of trees, untraceable.

Hill Street

Remember that first autumn,
walking down Hill Street –
you were worried,
talking about the future?
I said what you needed to hear,
changed the subject.

Looking back now, tasting again
your image,
the smell of winter approaching, I know
we will always be walking down Hill Street,
brown leaves blowing about our feet,
convincing each other,
soaring.

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New Love

I reach out to touch your face,
but you laugh
and turn away.

You're wearing a white dress,
like on our wedding day,
but no-one else is there
and our feet aren't on the ground.

I try to swim after you,
through the thickness of my mind.

But you are moving
again just beyond me, becoming more
like lying in an open field
and looking into the sky.

And so I let you
float away,
your wake in the air
describing new love.

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Chapter Three

Poetry of Influence

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As a student I have been very lucky. I have, at the age of thirty, already had two mentors, both of whom I consider to be poetically gifted. As the world of South African poetry would have it, they were not strangers to each other either. When I was studying at Rhodes University I met Professor Don Maclennan and struck up an immediate friendship with him. He asked me to give him some of my writing and for four years he fine-tuned my language. If there is anything going right in my poems, it is mainly due to his influence. Then, I applied to do a Masters in creative writing at UCT and I met Professor Stephen Watson, who became my supervisor. Tragically, my friendship with him would only last a year. All the same, I know that his immense talent and love for poetry have been invaluable to me as a writer in the same way that his generosity of spirit is to me as a person.

As much as we three respected and had affection for each other and loved appreciating poetry together, we certainly did not always agree. Stephen once told me that right until Don's death in 2009 he and Don were writing to each other, disagreeing. Apparently, Stephen would suggest that Don needed to fatten up his sentences and Don would reply, suggesting that Stephen should do the opposite. And when I visited Shirley Maclennan, Don's wife, in 2011 and we trespassed onto the topic of Stephen's recent death, she said "he and Don never agreed". There is a Tibetan saying: "If two philosophers agree, one of them is not a philosopher". I think one could say the same of poets. Every poet will have his or her own relationship to language and will see the function of language differently. That is what makes them poetic. If all poets shared the same language, there would be no room for poetry. Writing poetry is inhabiting language; it is allowing language to seep into one's pores and emerge onto the page as a new creature, having been cast within the kiln of the writer's body. How could this process not be deeply personal?

This dynamic and exigent trio of teacher, teacher and student has naturally prompted me to ask some challenging questions. What, for instance, at the aesthetic level, are the differences? And what do these aesthetic differences point to in the *function* (in the narrow, more technical sense) of different poet's poems. And finally, what do these differing poetics suggest about our different philosophical views? If we take a look at Watson and Maclennan's poems we will see that each has a style that betrays a personal understanding of language. There are also other, more surprising, discoveries and questions to be made by such a comparison. Was Maclennan to have written in Watson's Cape Town, would his poems have possessed the same starkness? If Watson had lived in Grahamstown and been a Professor at Rhodes, would he have written such packed and rich sentences? The influences

on our writing are endless. For me this investigation carries on forever. For instance: if I had met Stephen first, would I have been shaped very differently as a writer? How has Don's relationship with the Eastern Cape landscape come to affect *my* writing?

To clarify some of these contrasts, I would like to take a close look at a poem from each writer and point out some characteristic features. In "Kromdraai", MacLennan writes:

Kromdraai limestone
dissolves in water,
forms underground chambers
as secret as the human personality.
The water is cold,
its measure close to silence. (63)

These two sentences are typical of a MacLennan-style poem. The actual structure and content of the sentences is tight and simple. Yet, underneath the surface, as if the words were imitating the spring water that betrays the presence of the spring beneath, there runs a subterranean wealth of meaning. By keeping the style of his sentences uncomplicated, the language of the poem allows meaning to emerge for the reader in a natural way: the sound of the spring sings about the water beneath. The influence of Chinese poetry comes through strongly from this quotation also. When I first started to get tutelage from Don, he gave me a booklet written by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, called *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which strongly influenced my own writing. The booklet examined the way in which all language streams from verbs. Nouns, according to the argument, are secondary to the language of verbs. Pound writes that, "[l]ike nature, the Chinese words are alive and plastic, because *thing* and *action* are not formally separated" (17) and "[t]he true formula for thought is this: The cherry tree is all that it does" (28). One can see that MacLennan observes this by avoiding the possibility of weighing his poems down with description. A little goes a long way in a MacLennan poem. If an image or thing is described it will almost invariably have enough weight behind it to carry itself, without bogging down the poem. For instance, the water in "Kromdraai" is described simply as "cold". But then, that adjective is carried forward, by adding that "its measure [is] close to silence". In this way the image of cold water is allowed to reverberate meaning in the poem and carries the poem in the same way that Haiku carries: that is, indefinitely, if the writer is good. With this nine-word and twelve-syllable sentence, the poem is opened up to the silence of the place it

describes without much ado, but with great confidence. The five syllable line, followed by seven syllables is, also, typical of Haiku, even if Don would have discouraged claims that he wrote Haiku poetry.

By comparison, in “The Wind Chime”, Watson writes these lines:

. . . the music of a wind chime
scattering in sunlight, in one backyard above the sea.

Lost and found, and lost again, the bay behind it
stretching, faded, its blue indifference in the wind –
but this is my philosophy, my poetry, my poverty.
I can offer no more than one chance day
loosened by the weather – the moment of a wind chime
as it comes and goes, swaying in a random air,
its three notes intimate with their own oblivion,
shadowed, even as they shower, by their evanescence. (109)

At first glance, one can see that the structure of this stanza is very different to anything one will find in a MacLennan poem. The sentences themselves carry more weight to them. But, strangely, they also have the effect of emptying themselves out, if in a different way to MacLennan’s poetry. Living on the South Peninsula of Cape Town, Watson wrote poems that carried with them an echo of that emptiness that is the thinness of a windy day over False Bay, which is exemplified in this stanza. Watson aligns his poetry and his poverty, giving us a good indication of the direction of this poem. It is a longing and an absence. The nostalgia of an afternoon spent in the disconcerting south-easter of St James becomes a borderless image of the sentiment that gives life to Watson’s poetry. Those three notes of the wind chime become emblematic of the absence that is central to Watson’s poetic work. In “The Wind Chime”, Watson points to the richness offered to life if one is able to accept spiritual sustenance from unlikely sources, if one is willing to appreciate longing for its qualities and see the urgency and life behind it. And this wealth may not have been rendered without his ability to cut to the central image of a poem and bring it out without betraying its essence, without saying the words. The structure of his sentences and his paragraphs allows for a surge of emotion and, in the end, an emptying out, like rain loosened from clouds.

It is obvious that each of these two poets is biased towards his own vision of poetry and the style that he feels best presents this. Perhaps it is the dust and the hardy, sparse flora of the Eastern Cape that prompt MacLennan to write in such an uncorrupted and imagistic style. Maybe it is a more internal vision, a lifelong search for simplicity. I would suggest that it is both of these and much more. Watson spent almost his entire life within the folds of the Cape sandstone mountains. To what extent do the visions of his early life, of the Cederburg and Table Mountains, shape his writing style? How much of his eloquent and rich style comes from his seemingly inborn richness of spirit? As I practice more as a writer, it becomes clearer to me that the influences that make our poetry what it is come together in ways that could never be unpacked or understood. What I come to understand is that a poetic style is not something that *we*, as writers, develop. It is something that is developed within us, as we meander through all the unpredictable and varied experiences that life has to offer, and through the effort we expend in reading and writing and reviewing and re-reviewing. That is why I would argue that it is at least very difficult, maybe impossible, to become a rounded and self-aware poet without the influence of other, more mature poets, who can find the kernel of a personal and self-assured style among all the trying that marks an immature writer.

The logical progression of this essay is for me to go on to say something about my own work in relation to my above comments. I have always been reluctant to write about my own poems. But, I will say one or two things about my overall view of poetry that may shed some light on the function of the poetic choices I have made in this collection. As one will notice, and as I have suggested above, Don's influence was very strong from an early stage. He was the one who showed me what could go right in my poems and what was, at that stage, going terribly wrong at times. Once, when he was going through a batch of poems that he had marked up for me, he got to one poem and simply said, "Don't do this," before turning it over and moving on. I knew exactly what he meant. His effortless ruthlessness was just what I needed. Eventually, I came to realise that what I was interested in were images. I came to love the way a raw and uncomplicated image could speak in ways that complicated essays and theoretical treatises could not. Certainly, there is an amount of Jungian influence here, but I would not like to take this too far. This quote from Anthony Stevens adequately highlights any Jungian, Hillmanian, influence in my work:

Though he devoted over half a century to the study of archetypes, Jung concluded that they defeat all attempts to grasp them academically. If you try to define the archetype objectively and fail to give its 'feeling tone' due recognition, then you 'end with nothing more than a jumble of mythological concepts, which can be strung together to show that everything means anything – or nothing at all'. Archetypes 'gain life and meaning only when you take into account their numinosity – i.e. their relation to the individual'. Ultimately you cannot define an archetype, any more than you can define meaning. You can only experience it. (67)

These comments may suggest to the reader that I consciously create archetypal language in my work. This could not be farther from the truth. Ideally, I think that a poem should find its way onto the paper with the least possible influence from the writer. The writer must be brave enough to allow him or herself to be lucky, to allow him or herself to be *influenced*, rather than forcing their will onto the process. Then we shape, cut, use all the tools we have developed by the effort we have given to learning our craft. These poems are like little orchestrated accidents. One cannot *make* an accident happen. But one *can* leave a banana peel on the floor and turn off the lights. Then, if one is able to forget that it is there, one might trip on it, if one is lucky. Similarly, one cannot *write* poetry. One can do all the things that inspire poetry, like reading good poetry, going for long walks (Stephen Watson's advice to me), exploring the textures of our nostalgia. But then the poems *must* be allowed to ignite by themselves. Then, once the raw material is there already, one takes a red pen to them, shapes them into something "civilized".

Since I have found this way of relating to the image, writing has become a matter of waiting for the images to present themselves and then making them come alive through language. I feel that in order to allow the images to speak for themselves, that is, for them to have any voice at all, the best use of language I can make is one that is as "empty" as possible. It is something I took up after reading the above-mentioned booklet by Pound and Fenellosa. I like to shape just enough meaning to create a context from which the reading of the poems can take on its own life, its own life of influence. The images, once passed through my body and onto the page, are combed for any added feature, anything that may add my own influence to the meaning – any trying at all, especially trying to be poetic – which is cut out, so that the raw experience of the images can speak from its own place. Luckily, this process seems to have worked for me in the *Desert Rain* sequence. Almost of its own accord, over the years that I wrote it, a mythology took shape, one which I could never have predicted. This journey to the centre of isolation reveals, in the end, a surprising discovery for the narrator.

Writing poetry is allowing oneself to be influenced. It is a brave undertaking and one that, in order to be what it is, must take one unexpectedly. Like Orpheus, while writing poetry one must hold the tension of moving forward, of putting the images on the page, without giving in to the temptation of looking back, of taking control. There is a certain amount of trust that one must develop, trust in the process, trust in one's mentors, and trust in the word itself and the ability of language to speak beyond its words.

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Reading Stephen Watson's "The Mountain"

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The poem, "The Mountain", represents a quintessential note struck within Stephen Watson's body of work, highlighting, at an early phase of his writing career, a vision that would stay with him his whole life. By telling the story of a day in the life of Table Mountain, he unveils the profound effect that living in the presence of such an entity had on his consciousness and gestures to an experience that those living in Cape Town, those with any sensitivity at all, would certainly be aware of, but which, most likely, they could never quite put their finger on. At the same time, the poem's key note, that of the profound absence that overshadows our lives, is readily accessible to all, whether they live in Cape Town or not. In a style typical of much of Watson's work, but particularly of his early writing, the stanzas of the poem are made up of one, or a few, extended sentences. The sentences are packed and seem to build on themselves and each other in such a way that they come to resemble the mountain itself, as it rises into the poem as a living entity. But in the fabric of this textured writing is a longing that speaks more of the act of writing about the mountain than it does about the mountain itself.

The first stanza is one extended sentence. It begins by describing, not the mountain, but something that seems to be quite the antithesis thereof: that is, light – depicting the time when the darkness of night becomes the light of morning. In this way, it is not the mountain itself that emerges from the "darkening in the fading air", but light, revealing the mountain in the same way that the mountain comes to life from the words of the poem (1). As the mountain emerges in this way, the language in the poem makes it clear that it is still a thing "coming into being". The poem is not yet concerned with the thing itself, but with the impression of the thing. It is not a "mirror of the world", as Borges wrote in "The Yellow Rose", "but rather one thing more added to the world" (38). And so, in the first stanza, packed as it is with descriptive and substantive clauses, we are introduced to this central figure of the poem as something expressed, rather than existing, something appearing out of the "dark that's porous now" (1). Even this description of the dark being porous highlights the quality of weightlessness in this stanza. Then, by the end of the stanza, the mountain takes on a clear authority out of this abstract beginning, "blocking out the sky, blacking out all else / as day breaks, the light impacted on its amphitheatre" (1). Again, our attention is brought to the light, but now it is more intense, more assuming. The word "amphitheatre" quietly brings the connotation of a performance, as the mountain finally appears, gargantuan, though still dependent upon the prevailing conditions of light.

The first stanza is concerned with light and shade and the appearance of the mountain first as an impression; the second introduces "weight" and shows us the physical life of the

mountain. This stanza is made up of two sentences. The first, making up the first two lines of the stanza, introduces these new notes of physicality and assuming presence: “All day above the city, two seas, the far sand-flats / where Africa begins in earnest, the mountain overshadows” (1). After the quiet introduction, these lines clearly change the tone of the poem. By way of their making up a sentence much shorter than the previous one, they stand out as a clear message that this stanza will be introducing another mountain, the mountain of the day, which is already attributed the qualities of being more “weighty” than the emerging mountain of dawn light. As for the actual description in this sentence, the mountain does not only “overshadow” the “city”, but two vast “seas” on either side. And, by bringing our attention to the “far sand flats / where Africa begins in earnest”, these lines give the impression that the mountain “overshadows” in a colossal way. It does not overshadow the way a building overshadows the lives of those living nearby; it comes to overshadow an entire region. As this poem was written in South Africa in the early 1980s, this prompts us to ask whether Watson may have intended to make a vague political statement in this poem. For the purposes of this analysis, I will venture to assume that if he did it was secondary to his overall tone, which is, typical of much of his writing, concerned with the human – and especially the poetic – response to absence. In his essay, “Poetry & Absence: One Writer’s Account,” he writes that “few writers can escape the awareness that compels them to be the special intimates of absence. The blank page that they must face again and again is, after all, one of the forms that the void can assume” (34). And so, I would suggest that in this poem the mountain does not represent any political or otherwise economic entity; Watson uses this image of the mountain to highlight the “void” at the centre of our lives, poets or not. The mountain stands out of the page as a monument to the poetic endeavor. The words that he uses to speak about the mountain, Watson knows, can never stand in for the mountain. And so the poem becomes spectral, the epitome of his relationship with words. He clearly feels the need to speak about this massive, physical entity that has “overshadowed” him his whole life; but, in the rendering, the poem comes to speak more about this project than about his relationship to the actual mountain. In a way his life comes to be “overshadowed” by his inability to write adequately about his experience and, by extension, the human inability to really “marry” with our world, in the linguistic sense. Thus, in writing about the mountain, he is writing about writing, about filling “the blank page”. The poem is beginning to overshadow the way a ghost would.

In the third stanza the spectral aspect of the mountain is portrayed more overtly. Again, this stanza contains very full sentences – two long sentences, one of which is broken by a semi-colon. This stanza begins by describing the night, when “the mountain darkens to a shadow, the shadow, huge, / of something else, beyond itself, beyond the earth, / unearthly as the moon itself dragging at the blood” (1). This strange body “masses far beneath these gas-blue skies, / revolving like some planet, deep into another dawn” (1). Clearly, strangely, the image of the mountain being portrayed here seems to be allowed to detach from the physical mountain. As “a shadow” it is no longer a physical entity and so no longer needs to be dealt with on those terms. It has become “something else”, “revolving into . . . another dawn”. What this “something else” and this “[other] dawn” are is not made clear, but the way is now opened completely for the spectre of the mountain to emerge. Eventually, the poem ends after the breaking of this “[other] dawn”, when the mountain “lifts high above again, deep into the lives below, / it overshadows all that is, forever rising in the mind” (2). This final image of the mountain, now made “alien”, “forever rising in the mind,” gives a rather disconcerting and, at the same time, one could say uplifting, or cathartic final note to the poem. This statement begs the question: how can something be at the same time both disconcerting and cathartic? My answer is as follows: the paradoxical experience that the poem portrays by the end enacts the way in which, as disconcerting as the absence, or lack of linguistic certainty and control that overshadows our lives may be, it also allows for a sense of freedom. This freedom emerges in the poem as the way in which our experience can seem to speak beyond our experience. That is, through metaphor the poem identifies the dual meaning taking place in our lives. In this way the mountain “forever rising in the mind” is a mountain free of being a mountain. Not despite, but *through* the ontological uncertainty brought about by an absence that the mountain comes to represent, meaning is freed. It is only through the experience of absence itself that there can be anything at all. The mountain “forever rising in the mind” is the very image of coming to terms with this paradox. It is both the tension and the relief of realising the distance between our experience and our linguistic models thereof.

This day in the life of the mountain, it becomes clear, does not represent *a* day, but rather a sketch of the vastness of time and space. As the mountain “[revolves] like some planet, deep into another dawn, deep into this primal hour”, there is a sense of something almost pre-linguistic taking place (1). The word “primal” points quite directly to this quality in the poem of developing a sort of myth around the mountain. By coming full-circle, from pre-dawn to the next dawn, this cyclical portrayal of the mountain is allowed to carry on indefinitely,

echoing and reverberating in consciousness. In Watson's own words: "So much is immediately clear: we speak because we desire; and we desire because we lack" (36). The revolutions of this spectral mountain speak about this lack and our inability to come to terms with it. Watson seems to be implying that it is absence that drives our creativity and absence that makes possible any creativity at all. And so we are left with the spectre of the mountain, "revolving", "forever rising in the mind", and whatever it is, whatever it represents, it goes free. Once again, through poetry, language is allowed to do the impossible, to gesture beyond itself, toward absence.

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“a few clean statements on love and death”:
Reviewing Don MacLennan’s *Dress Rehearsal*

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It is most likely due to its poetics that one finds such difficulty in articulating what it is about Don MacLennan's poetry that throws the world into question. What is the active ingredient that takes one unawares? Some people may read these poems and question the validity of a style that seems at first glance to fail to push language in any poetical direction. But, if one considers the way in which one of MacLennan's collections, or sequences, of poems operates, one will get a more realistic view of his poems than if they are looked at in isolation. Often these collections read like myths, which is no surprise if one looks at the subject matter of many of the poems and sequences themselves. In "Dress Rehearsal" MacLennan gives us what could be a summary of the myth that he is creating: ". . . the story they said would lift you into being / . . . [is] love / that washed me like the sea / and left a shining pebble on my palm"¹. Perhaps one of his most striking collections is this posthumously published work, *Dress Rehearsal*.

Dress Rehearsal seems an apt finalé for Don MacLennan. As I read it I was reminded of a conversation I had with him outside the Rhodes English Department a few years before he died. I said that I was sorry not to have visited him for so long a period and that I would definitely see him as soon as I got back from the vac. Don said, "Good. I'm sure I'll still be alive by then". The incident relates to *Dress Rehearsal* in that Don never romanticised his death and he never allowed those around him to shirk their discomfort around it. He had too good a sense of humour to let this subject of his death go to waste without teasing someone about it. Thankfully, he did not allow one to pretend and this made life alive around him. *Dress Rehearsal* continues in this vein. It was the ephemerality of Don's life that made it extraordinary and precious to him. It was the loss of every moment that made life valuable and full. As he writes in "Manifesto":

The spring moon rising
fills my heart with pain
because I know it will come again.
Someone not me
will see the moon reach
through burnt pines
a yellow pearl
on a black beach. (40)

¹ The book, *Dress Rehearsal*, does not include page numbers. Therefore, all quotations from this text will be without page references.

This poem was written long before the poems in *Dress Rehearsal*, but it sheds light on the importance of the collection's seemingly innocuous opening poem, "In the beginning":

Everything was in place:
body, mind,
character and temperament,
the mild guilt
of shitting in my pants.
I already knew the scent
of honeysuckle and privet,
the kettle's smell
when first put on the gas,
and opposites, hot and cold,
sickness and health,
sawn timber, creosote,
my father's pipe,
my mother's skin,
his voice and hers
and the sounds of language
I did not invent.
In the beginning there were words.
Everything was in place.

Maclennan's ability to remember details from his very early childhood, especially smells, has made rich subject matter for his poems. But, more than that, in this poem we get the sense that an event which was once only an experience and which contained little or no meaning, except for being itself, can, in retrospect, become threaded through with meaning in every part. It is these traces of meaning that this collection seems to be building on. They imbue life with meaning that can never be completely uncovered.

The collection is divided into four parts, which (the photographs say it clearly enough) are meant to be taken as relating to the four main seasons of life. But this is not to be taken literally at all, as the narrator is always speaking from a present position, in which he is aware of any one moment, or incident's implications for the whole of a life. The text seems to be a retrospective glance at a life and an excavation of the meaning of a life, not just any life, but a life dedicated to art and poetry. In the first section, poems like "Arbor scientiae" and "The

view from upstairs” outline an ironic distance between the beginning of the journey into “knowledge” and the end of a life dedicated to that journey. In the end we also understand MacLennan’s father’s “sigh / as he removed his glasses / and said that he was tired”. The last poem and, in fact, the last lines of the last poem in this section reveal the effect that love can have on our lives with MacLennan’s usual uncomplicated syntax and clarity of vision. The poem is called “The story”:

What of the story
they said would lift you into being,
angels of infinite present
that sustain and sing?
The story’s what I glean
from my own past.
I was shaped
by an inheritance of genes,
my family, weather, school,
music that transformed me,
songs I learned by heart,
and painting, that astounding art,
language, thought, and love
that washed me like the sea
and left a shining pebble on my palm.

Many writers might be bogged down by sentimentality when trying to speak of the meaning that only love can offer their lives. MacLennan simply gives us, with utter clarity, this “shining pebble on [his] palm”. Like many of MacLennan’s best poems, “The story” demonstrates the richness of an aesthetic unburdened by affectation. The uncomplicated syntax complements the poem’s capacity to arouse awe without straying from a convention grounded in everyday imagery. MacLennan is able to reveal a glimpse of that which goes beyond us, by leading us with clean images and cadence into an experience of simplicity that is exemplified by his pared-down sentences. The wonder of this particular poem is that in the last line we are “lifted into being”, as promised in the opening sentence. Poems like this, through an almost anti-poetical poetic, give us back the every-day in a way that makes it become, like the poem in “The Poetry Lesson”, “astonishing and strange” (71).

The two middle sections of the work draw on experience, rather than the innocence of the first. A poem like “Resurrection” reminds us of an important aspect of MacLennan’s body

of work – his “letter” poems – poems that are addressed to particular individuals. Often these poems evoke the sense that he is looking at people’s lives in a way that brings their personal tragedies into relief. At other times, in poems like “Spring,” his work enacts his own statement that “[Poems] . . . bring the world closer / so you can live in it again” (120):

Today is clean
as the washing on the line.
Warm wind and sailing clouds.
It’s spring, the air
tickling with syllables.
Not only spring, but you
wearing that full white dress,
a meadow of minute red flowers
linked with pale tendrils.
You dressed for this spring day
amazing me with how
you still can be
so generous, so new.

Poems like “Spring” *can* “bring the world closer”, but I cannot help feeling the ghost lingering beyond its borders. Perhaps by bringing the world closer, a poem such as this overstimulates the loss receptors in our minds and sets off a warning-bell saying: *Now is all you have!* And, maybe more pertinently, it is also all we *do not* have.

The spectral is not unfamiliar in Don Maclennan’s work and it is a central component of *Dress Rehearsal*. Indeed, it cannot be overstated that the relationship between life and death serves as the fulcrum of this collection – that relationship which contains traces of the urgency that only death can offer life and the currency that life gives to death. Perhaps nowhere in *Dress Rehearsal* is this more painfully and intimately rendered than in “The gold earring”, a poem in the fourth and last section of *Dress Rehearsal*. It is the spectral aspect in the poem – a mood that dominates much of Maclennan’s poetry – which emphasizes this relationship. The poem’s final sentence – “Why didn’t I talk us / through our lives / instead of letting you go / into oblivion / taking our meaning with you?” – intimates an unfathomable longing that we are allowed to taste with the narrator. Our connection to those who have gone beyond cannot be recuperated (except, maybe for an instant, through art), yet they call back to us and their call contains in it everything that we think we are missing. They are the best at

reminding us to take stock and often cause us to repent our lack of connection and recognise our longing for it. In “Letter in a bottle” MacLennan writes: “all I’ve ever wanted to make ~ / a few clean statements / on love and death, / things you cannot fake” (66). “The gold earring” is certainly one such statement. To me, “The gold earring” is like that note in a song that breaks your heart without any warning. The spectre is one’s life, always slipping; one wants to pull one’s history together, gather all the threads of oneself and those one has loved. We feel we cannot move on until we have reconciled. And yet, reconciliation is always deferred, as the time we spend together is lost to “oblivion”. In MacLennan’s largely autobiographical work, the moments breathed to life by poems like this stand out as cairns on the path to love. This is quite clearly stated in “What was he saying?”, where MacLennan quotes this sentence from Freud: ““People must learn to love / before they die”” (2).

The first time I visited Don at his home we went out into his garden and he got me to fetch him a pile of sticks that was collected in a corner. He then stacked them in a place that was apparently set aside for this purpose and set fire to them. We watched the flames in silence and smoked our cigarettes. Afterwards, we went back inside. Now, it may have been that he needed to mask the smell of the cigarettes from his wife, Shirley, but I have always remembered the incident as if it were a clue to Don’s enigmatic nature, and maybe mine too. Why make a fire just to watch it burn? I think an answer can be found in the collection’s title poem – “Dress rehearsal”. As the peacocks scream at the end of this haunting poem, we are sure of one thing: Don wants us to bear witness to the passing away of our lives, to mourn each moment as it passes. By mourning the moment we recognize its holiness. In this way life becomes holy.

It is not within the scope of this short review to go into the complex and illuminating subject of Don’s seemingly paradoxical spirituality (I think all useful spirituality must contain its share of the paradoxical). It will suffice to say that he hopes in some way to move us toward a more sensitive way of viewing our lives. In the end he gives us no clear solutions, but he is a master diagnostician. Don looks again and again into the “whirlpool” of suffering’s eyes and sees the light there, the light of compassion that illuminates the world of suffering and reveals a surprising quality of openness and gentleness at the heart of it.

Although I have attempted to articulate some partial understanding of it, the poetic art work in MacLennan’s poetry remains a mystery to me. It is a similar mystery to the mystery of why a crisp morning fills my lungs in an unusual way that seems to lift my being into a sense of purpose, or why the light just before the sun sets contains in it a reassuring warmth,

even as night is hard upon me. Ultimately, what his poems are doing, I think, is giving the world back to us and giving his life back to him. It is perhaps this familiarity that drives his poetry and breathes such vitality and humour into his poems.

I know that anyone who was lucky enough to have crammed into the Rhodes English Department common room to hear Don read from one of his collections will recognise the sadness I feel in not being able to hear him read from *Dress Rehearsal*. Fortunately, the cadence of the poems carries with it the gentleness and intensity of his voice. As we all move into a life that no longer contains Don's body, we know that his words contain some part of him and that, as we read them, they can change us. In this way, Don will be a part of us. Reading the last two poems of *Dress Rehearsal*, "It's time" and "Finale", we know that his career could not have ended in more apt a way. The epigraph to the collection quotes Odysseus Elytis, saying that "[Poetry is] the art of leading you toward what goes beyond you". In a sense, Don is no more beyond me now than anyone else, or than he ever was before. Our lives are marked by the traces of what we do not know and of the love we are yet to realise. *Dress Rehearsal* asks that we take a step beyond ourselves and touch something unseen, something always going beyond itself.

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