



newcontrast

VOL. 52 ISSUE 205



WHAT DOES A SUSTAINABLE BRAND LOOK LIKE TO YOU?



We believe sustainability has both an environmental and social agenda.



JOIN BRUCE JACK WINES ON OUR JOURNEY TO SOCIAL UPLIFTMENT

Not For Persons Under The Age Of 18



SOUTH AFRICAN LITERARY JOURNAL

Volume 52, Issue 205

EDITOR

Sindiswa Busuku

EDITORIAL STAFF

Managing Editor Robyn Paterson

Editorial Assistant Niamh Ahern

Business Managers Carol Goslar & Mark Crisp

Website Design Jennifer Pape

Production Design Stoep Collective

LITERARY PATRONS

**We thank the following Patrons for their continuing support of the South African
Literary Journal:**

J.M Coetzee, Geoff Haresnape, Zakes Mda, Zoë Wicomb and Keith Gottschalk

THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS AND PATRONS

Alistair McKay, Irene Bekker, Lukho Witbooi, Mauerberger Foundation Fund and
others who wish to remain anonymous

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The cover artwork is thanks to

Hakopike (Amy-Leigh Braaf)

New Contrast is published by the South African Literary Journal NPC

ISSN-8: 1017-5415

ISSN-13: 977-1017-54100-8

Printed and bound by Castle Graphics South (Pty) Ltd

CONTENTS

Editor's letter 6

Robyn Paterson in Conversation with Hakopike 11

POETRY

In Memoriam of Nancy Gordon 19

Keith Oliver Lewis "the sum of absence" 21

Phelelani Makhanya "A hanging dream" 23

Kerry Hammerton "Dancing" 25

Olwethu Mxoli "Blawa Weekend" 26

Olwethu Mxoli "Mother tongue" 28

Mangaliso Buzani "The dry tongue" 30

Sue Nyamnjoh "A pauper's burial" 32

Kobus Moolman "What He Wished For" 33

Kobus Moolman "Daily Duty" 35

Jacques Coetzee "Small Miracle" 39

Paul Kammies "The moon's reflection in a bucket of mop water" 40

Madeleine Bazil "Earthsong" 41

Stephen Symons "The Interview" 42

Alexander Murie "New Perspectives (after Mafika Gwala's 'Perspectives')" 50

Alexander Murie "Square on Loadshedding and the Moon" 52

Shane van der Hoven "i always wondered what white poets" 53

Zeenit Jacobs "The Traveller's Companion" 54

Rizwan Ahktar "Encounter" 55

Francesco Nassimbeni "Tenebris" 56

PROSE

Yewande Omotoso "Excerpt from *The Nine Lives of The General*" 59

Karen Jennings "Excerpt from *Crooked Seeds*" 64

Pravasan Pillay "A Fistful of Dhal" 67

Frankie Murrey "Unwrapping" 72

Hedley Twidle "The Best a Man Can Get" 75



Hakopike

CRITICISM

- Aika Swai "*Bibi Binti Been-tu Bantu's Appeal for Languaging*" **86**
Danyela Demir "*Breasts, etc* by Nthikeng Mohlele" **97**
Niamh Ahern "*The Near North* by Ivan Vladislavić" **102**
Allan Kolski Horwitz "*The Algebra of Insignificance* by Stephen Symons" **106**

Works Cited **112**

Contributor Bios **115**

Advertising Rates **122**

Subscriptions & Submissions **123**

NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

“Ideology crystallises itself like a map in memory. It legitimises itself by propagating the false idea that the world in which we live is the best possible world, or the system is the best system, regardless of its shortcomings.” These poignant words, penned by the great Chilean anarchist, Jesús Sepúlveda, in his philosophically profound book *The Garden of Peculiarities* (2002), have continued to stir deeply within me for many years. As I sit here, at the end of a long day, the air cold, the hour late, and my ginger cat asleep and curled around my feet, I find myself reflecting on the ideologies and conventions that persist in our world and within the realm of the creative imagination, despite their inherent flaws and biases.

Put plainly, I am contemplating *New Contrast*—its history as one of the first South African literary journals established in 1960, its legacy, and its ideological underpinnings. Most importantly, I feel compelled to “reopen a very old conversation about what kind of [future] we want to struggle for” at *New Contrast*, to quote Robin D. G. Kelly’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002).

Indeed, what kinds of futures and world-making practices could and should *New Contrast* dare to struggle for and insist on? I believe it is the creative force of the impressive works featured in this issue that points us towards horizons of possibility. Through their words and art, these contributors map new landscapes in contemporary writing from across South Africa and beyond.

In these pages, we navigate the labyrinth of human thought and feeling, and we are proud to share a wide range of voices with you. In this issue, we begin with an insightful conversation about the Divine, feminine power, identity, and artistic practice. Our very own Robyn Paterson sits down with our cover artist, Hakopike, to delve into these profound themes.

In our poetry section, we are thrilled to present recent work from both emerging and established voices, including contributions from Mangaliso Buzani, Olwethu Mxoli, Kobus Moolman, Paul Kammies, Shane van der Hoven, Sue Nyamnjoh, Jacque Coetzee, and many others.

In our prose section, we present two remarkable excerpts from esteemed writers. We are pleased to republish “The Nine Lives of The General” by Yewande Omotoso, offering a glimpse into her work-in-

progress fiction, and to showcase “Deidre” from Karen Jennings’ upcoming novel, *Crooked Seeds*. Additionally, we feature “Unwrapping” by Frankie Murrey and “The Best a Man Can Get” by Hedley Twidle. In the short story titled, “A Fistful of Dhal”, Pravasan Pillay takes us on a deliciously disturbing journey set against the vivid backdrop of Chatsworth.

In our criticism section, we open with “Bibi Binti Been-tu Bantu’s *Appeal for Languaging*,” by Aika Swai. Swai offers an urgent, vulnerable and poignant piece, inviting us into a deeply moving intergenerational dialogue—a triologue—that meditates on the extinction and preservation of language, the practice of languaging, as well as her personal connection to Kimachame. With a sense of urgency and vulnerability, she emphasizes the critical importance of every word in a language on the brink of extinction. “When a language faces extinction, every word becomes invaluable,” Swai asserts. “There is an urgent need to preserve words that embody grammars of animacy and possess the power to restore the sacred.”

We are immensely proud to have received such serious, insightful, and engaged book reviews from well-respected literary critics. Our very own Niamh Ahern offers a thought-provoking review of Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Near North*. Additionally, Danyela Demir contributes an attentive and exacting review of Nthikeng Mohlele’s latest novel, *Breasts etc*. In her review, Demir raises intriguing questions, writing “It is also not clear what exactly the purpose of this womanless post-apocalyptic world is, save for the fact that the protagonist, at the end of the novel, reveals himself to have been an archivist of sorts. Perhaps his photographs of so many nude women will save the men’s sanity during the apocalypse?”. Meanwhile, Allan Kolski Horwitz delivers a nuanced analysis of Stephen Symons’s recent poetry collection, *The Algebra of Insignificance*. Horwitz reflects, “Symons immediately thrusts us into the metaphysical plane. Though with the anchor of algebra, we descend to a more physical, human realm. For algebra, in this instance – stemming from its Arabic root – is intended to mean “the reunion of broken parts” or “bone-setting”, which begs many questions”.

Our heartfelt congratulations to Keith Oliver Lewis, the distinguished winner of the 2023 National Poetry Prize, for his exceptional work titled “the sum of absence”. Additionally, we celebrate Phelelani Makhanya for achieving second place with the evocative piece “A hanging dream”, and Kerry Hammerton for claiming the third position with the captivating poem “Dancing”. Many thanks to Bruce Jack Wines,

the generous sponsor of our prize.

Furthermore, I wish to express a profound sense of honour as I reflect on the collaborative efforts and discerning judgments rendered by my esteemed co-judges, Nondwe Mpuma and Sarah Lubala. Their dedication and expertise enriched the selection process and significantly contributed to the recognition of excellence within the realm of poetry.

This achievement stands as a testament to the enduring vitality and creativity inherent in the literary arts. We are deeply privileged to have played a role in acknowledging and celebrating such remarkable talent. Once again, we extend our sincerest congratulations to the winners and express our gratitude to all participants for their invaluable contributions to the literary landscape.

We are enthusiastic about our efforts to attract a more diverse range of contributors and readers, both locally and internationally. Furthermore, it is imperative that we uphold the significance of poems in isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Kaaps, isiZulu, Sesotho, and Setswana, with the same level of respect and care as submissions in English. To ensure this, I am committed to appointing respected editors for these roles as we grow our editorial team, and I invite our writers to submit writing that reflects the richness of these languages.

Additionally, I am proud to announce that moving forward, a significant portion of our contributors' works will be made Open Access to the public online. This decision reflects our commitment to promoting accessibility and inclusivity within the literary community.

While these steps may seem small, I consider them crucial. There



is much work to do. Where to begin? This is always the question. Honestly, that question can feel like a provocation, a confrontation or an invitation, depending on the time of the day and which direction the wind is blowing. I firmly believe we begin together. I do. Thinking back to the beginning, Jesús Sepúlveda, that ingenious Chilean anarchist, is right, the world in which we live is not the best possible world. There is more, and together, I believe we will continue imagining and creating the kinds of futures we dare to insist on at *New Contrast* and in our own lives.

SINDISWA BUSUKU

Editor

New Contrast

CONVERSATIONS



Robyn Paterson

in Conversation with

Hakopike

Hakopike (Amy-Leigh Braaf) is a South African artist born and raised in Johannesburg, and has been working as a painter, illustrator, and photographer for the last 8 years. Multidisciplinary by nature, Hakopike has worked with ceramics, textiles, video and photography, as well as illustration. She is currently specialising in acrylic paintings and digital pieces that explore her mixed heritage and family history.

As a South African woman of mixed heritage, Hakopike has always been searching, and speculating about her history/ies. This yearning drives her practice towards exploring oral stories and ancestry in her family.

Our managing editor, Robyn Paterson, sits down with Hakopike to discuss her inspiration for the cover artwork, why she feels drawn to travel, and how she navigates being a woman making art in South Africa.



R: Can you tell us a bit about your moniker – Hakopike?

H: I'd just finished my film degree and remember being on a layover in Hong Kong watching all of my friends celebrating graduation in Cape Town. Despite getting my degree, I definitely felt like I'd missed out on something. There was this feeling I was carrying around at that time, that made me want to lock down, or name, this ambiguous notion of wanting a different kind of life. I was almost chasing it, this future version of myself.

I couldn't describe what that was, or who that was, so I gave them a name, Hakopike. Naming this projection of myself was essentially me trying to navigate my past, who I am in this present moment and also, it serves as a future version of myself that I can constantly aspire towards.

R: I'm interested in the impetus of your practice. Who are you in conversation with when making art?

H: Out of all of the art forms and disciplines I've worked in—ceramics, filmmaking, photography, textiles—painting is definitely the most internal practice for me. When I'm painting, I'm not really in conversation with people in my real life. I think I definitely draw from real life experiences in the past, but on a deeper level, I'm navigating my ancestry and heritage. Within coloured communities, and mixed communities, I'm navigating that in-between world of oral histories and stories passed down. I grew up wondering about the mysticism in these stories, and, more specifically, about the gaping holes in them, which I often then filled with fantasy or magical elements. A lot of the time, I'm just trying to continue this practice of filling in the holes myself, through spiritual practices, and using painting as therapy and self-realisation.

R: I love how you describe this continual practice of filling in the gaps, as one built on the foundations of fantasy and magic. There's something in that, that speaks to a childlike sensibility that lives in artists to remake and reimagine stories. When spoken of in terms of oral histories, I think there's something quite radical in what you're doing. The cover art for this issue of *New Contrast* is so striking. What inspired you when making this piece? I am particularly drawn to the obvious

“Naming this projection of myself was essentially me trying to navigate my past, who I am in this present moment and also, it serves as a future version of myself that I can constantly aspire towards.”

symmetry in the piece—it speaks to the Divine in some way—as well as the yonic imagery in the being’s garment.

H: The artwork on the cover of *New Contrast* was inspired by a series of pieces I’ve been working on, and does in fact relate to the Divine. It’s Divine, in the sense of it being my own sort of Goddess, or guiding Deity that I’ve imagined. It’s myself, my

friends, the people around me. It speaks to a Divine femininity that exists beyond this physical realm, and is almost in touch with the cosmos, maybe even in the cosmos.

This series speaks to the Divine desire to make magical things happen through stream-of-consciousness by tapping into parts of our brains with no inhibition or fear, in order to create something that can connect with people around us.

When I learned that the *New Contrast* editorial team this year is all women, I wanted to create a piece that reflects that specific feminine power and energy. What came from that is something very bold and striking, but also mystical. I like creating art that allows the viewer to rest on it for a while, to come back to it and gain something new from it each time.

R: You’ve been involved in some art residencies quite recently. Can you tell us a bit about where those were and what your focus was in both?

H: I went to two artist’s residencies in 2023 - one Fukuoka in Japan, and another in Sukawati in Bali, Indonesia. In Bali, I was solo, and the residency culminated in an exhibition called *Celestial Deities*. In Japan, I worked amongst a group of artists from around the world. We all lived in a house together and worked in studios next to each other towards a group exhibition. My exhibition there was called “Bye Bye Bokkie” and it was an exploration of lost love and ancestry.

R: Your work seems to be in conversation with multiple ancestries and heritages in its imagery and symbolism. Can you tell us about how Indonesia and Japan, and the residencies, became part of your desire to understand and find out more about your own heritage, and how these trips impact your art today?

H: The art residencies in Indonesia and Japan were extremely enlightening for me. Mainly because my own family, on my father's side, had told me that my great-grandmother had Javanese heritage from Indonesia. Growing up, my family would always 'add in' different cultures they thought we might have in our bloodline, and one included Japanese, so both places were very active in my imagination.

Knowing this about my family and myself, really spoke to this notion that I had of leaning into the 'unknowable' parts of myself and my heritage. I grew up with the narrative of being so 'mixed' that I can't really pinpoint one specific culture as my own and this definitely set up a feeling of yearning in me that drove me to travel.

Growing up, I got really into Ukiyo-e, Japanese woodprints from the 17th century. I became very intrigued by the storytelling of these distant figures surrounded by these landscapes that seemed to hold them. Visiting Fukuoka in Japan allowed me to see the same places that inspired me as a young child. This felt more like a therapeutic process for me, more than a process of self-discovery. But, in Indonesia, I did feel a connection to my heritage. I could see people who looked like family members of mine, for example. I resonated with the fauna and flora in Indonesia as well, more than Japan. I think Japan was more of a final reflection of myself, in a space that was foreign to me. Even though I had visited Japan twice before, Fukuoka was a place I'd never been to.

Understanding myself in these places, and examining what I resonate with from these different cultures, informs my art in a pervasive, holistic way.

R: You seem to take a multi-disciplinary approach to your practice—can you speak more about that? I recently saw you customise a skateboard and a dress—what draws you to work with different objects and

how do you feel that speaks to your creative process?

H: I think one of the most interesting things about being an artist is being able to examine how we ‘start’ versus how we ‘end up’. When I was a young child, I used to paint on everything with my uncle when I was five to seven years old. Including table-tops and doors and walls. I remember painting little murals, before I even knew what a mural was. It was almost like I had these ideas in my head that I felt compelled to document. I liked the idea of using what was around me to tell a permanent story, and I think that’s followed me into adulthood.

When I was 18, I got a scholarship to study art and design, but I decided to say no and move to Cape Town by myself to study filmmaking and English Literature instead. That felt like an interesting choice for me, because I felt like I wanted to explore different art forms in one, which is why I chose filmmaking. After that, I decided to move to South Korea to teach English, and when I came back to South Africa, I was a photographer for years! Then, somehow, after ten years, I found myself moving back to painting.

“Every artist has the freedom to depict what they feel their calling is and I would never actually feel pressured to produce work that caters to a specific narrative.”

As you’ve said I’ve worked in multiple disciplines, and mediums, but painting felt like a platform where I could express the deepest parts of myself in a way I’d never been able to. It feels like when I was a child. I’m still doing the same thing, which is to try and tell stories, to communicate with people through imagery and colours. Other artforms I’ve worked in channel a different part of myself, and also elicit different reactions from people too, but painting feels more intimate and impactful with my audience.

R: As a woman in South Africa, have you felt pressured to make art that responds to the socio-political status of your personhood in this country?

H: This is a very powerful question, because South Africa is such a complex place to live in, let alone make art in. When I lived overseas, I'd bring up these topics and a lot of people wouldn't really have the tools or vocabulary, or even just the experience, to converse with me about it. However, I've never felt pressured to create anything specific, just because I'm a woman living in South Africa. I've had people ask me questions about my work, and they've definitely projected their own experiences onto it, but I've never let this influence me to the point where it affects what I create. I am open to interpretations and I do internalise them, but it doesn't stop me from creating work that comes solely from my world.

I've never felt like I've needed to 'take a position', because my work has always communicated what it means to be a woman, a Coloured woman, a South African Coloured woman, so I think in a way, my paintings navigate a softer side of that, which is more mystical.

Politically, working within the year of 2024, I think my work sort of feels ancient and navigates a time that we can't really pinpoint, or rather a time that eludes us. This is a 'safer' environment to paint in and it's harder to bring up 'modern' questions of 'who is this person' when I'm painting scenes and figures that aren't really documenting history, but rather an idea of who I am and what my history could be.

Every artist has the freedom to depict what they feel their calling is and I would never actually feel pressured to produce work that caters to a specific narrative. It would feel inauthentic and strained, and right now, my practice feels the exact opposite of that.

R: Thank you so much for this discussion, Amy. You speak about your practice, and the practice of making art in general, with such reverence and I can really tell that you feel both privileged and humbled to be contributing to people's lives, conversations and experiences in this way.

POETRY

IN MEMORIAM OF NANCY GORDON

*New Contrast pays tribute to Nancy Gordon, one of our
founding members, who passed away at 102 years old in 2023.*

Nancy at Clifton

Chris Chivers

In memoriam

Nancy Gordon (1921–2023)

Above the sea, a trail of torches
on Lion's head, heralds a path;
full moon appears, as breathing eases,
birds' night-time song, the gentlest laugh
gives way to memory's rich harvest:
poetic touches of an artist,
Still Point's repose, as music sounds
where dancing, softening love abounds.
Transformed by listening attentive,
tears halved, fine food, all simply shared,
a longed-for liberation dared
– a wide-eyed vision, so redemptive –
we glimpse life-lessons in your face,
your sparkling eyes, your wise embrace.

Seen through the window during a meeting ...

Nancy Gordon

Against dark-shadowed foliage
Pink hibiscus blossoms
Flutter, starlike,
Stirred by
Tiny hopping birds
Releasing
Holy sparks.

6.3.86

FIRST PRIZE OF THE 2023
NATIONAL POETRY PRIZE
COMPETITION

the sum of absence

Keith Oliver Lewis

for my little brother, Donatoo Clansen, murdered on 21 March 2023.

- bullet point. i have seen my mother search for a recent photograph of her dead son, at least one, in which his arms are not stretched out & fingers are not shaped in gang signs.
- bullet point. to calculate the absence, you need to add the boy to the *number*. then subtract the boy.
- bullet point. at the memorial service an elder spoke: *seums velaantie baamoeder & dit issie eeste gat wat hulle los*. meaning: giving birth to a son does not make us mothers, it makes us morticians.
- bullet point. bullet.
- bullet point. he & I renamed our first dog from blackie to shadow. bared teeth of fences snarling & yapping sidewalks. our palms filled with rocks the shape of begging for her to stop following us everywhere we went. my first lesson on grief.
- bullet point. again, my mother takes out a plate to dish for him like an amputee

- reaching to scratch an itch on a ghosted limb.
- bullet point. absence / noun /
 one. longing with his incessant reaching, even though the grasp is acheirous.
 only able to hold silence.
 two. love in a temper tantrum, refusing to depart.
 three. my brother's presence unfurled into ubiquity.
- bullet point. maybe it is consoling to pray to a god that requires a son sacrificed.
- bullet point. instead of you, my *broetjie*, there is no ram entangled in a bush &
 on the third day, there's no cross uprooted & no grave dug up
 to find a vacant coffin.

Notes & Acknowledgements

The line "giving birth to a son does not make us mothers, it makes us / morticians" is inspired by the opening line in Safia Elhillo's poem, *An Inheritance*. The line is "Did our mothers invent loneliness or did it make them our mothers?"

SECOND PRIZE OF THE 2023
NATIONAL POETRY PRIZE
COMPETITION

A hanging dream

Phelelani Makhanya

(Johannesburg, Marshalltown, 2023)

The tall building in
Johannesburg, Marshalltown smolders.
A potent smell of burned things:
paint, rubber, plastic, fabric, human flesh,
lingers on Albert Street.
Now the onlookers know,
how the burp of death smells like.

Somewhere inside the building,
by the rusty chain-locked emergency exit door,
burned bodies are scattered like casts of Pompei.
They say in the early hours of the morning,
the building was dropping bodies like a mulberry tree,
dropping mulberries on a blustery morning wind.

The Johannesburg sky
is hiding behind a plume of smoke.
Across the road, a woman in a blue gown
paces up and down.
The gown is the only surviving
smudge of the melted sky.
She wails; "Bashile! Bafile!"
(They burned! They died!)

On the shattered window of one apartment-
amid everything burned,
a small white school shirt is hanging,
as if the shirt was blocked by the bugler guards.

on its attempt to escape.
The shirt is neatly ironed,
with sword-edge crisis on its sleeves.

Amid ash and smoke,
The school shirt remains the brightest item,
as if a dream is fireproof.
The little boy who owned it,
burned into ashes, we are told.
Isn't death supposed to spare those,
whose dreams are on a hanger waiting for them?

A lazy wind blows.
The shirt flaps briefly.
Maybe the shirt is requesting
to be taken out of the building.
Maybe the shirt wants to be left alone,
hanging in a hijacked building,
where a dream has become null.

Blawa weekend

Olwethu Mxoli

On Saturday afternoon
after the washing has been hung
and our clothes damp-stained
with its constant carrying back and forth
we sit on grandmother's stoep
the sun warming my scalp
as my cousin cuts neat rows through my hair
with the tail of the comb
she lays a path for the hair food
and gossips about the neighbourhood

before us the street hums
with the business of the weekend
the girls play *uskodgi* in the road
the boys chase their soccer ball
the one they made with wet newspaper and old plastic bags
and *bhut'* Stera in his bare-chested glory
drags his large speakers
out onto the stoep as he sweeps the week
out of his backroom
and washes his white *All Stars*
for the evening's stroll into the midnight

uSdodo is already drunk
and speaks *George's English*
and the kids laugh and call him ugly
'*ingathi yinto yokoyikisa abantwana*' they yell at his back
and laugh when he curses them

it is a rite of passage to be chased by uSdodo
to steal unripe peaches from Mlungwana's trees
to get your ball gutted by Thulani's grandmother
or to sit on a stoep
calamine-faced in a political t-shirt
and gossip with your cousin

while she bases your hair
pulling tightly at the scalp
until your forehead gleams with her labour

it is Saturday
and the township is bathed in the soft gold of nostalgia

Mother tongue

Olwethu Mxoli

Sometimes when I speak isiXhosa
I skip and glitch
like a badly scratched record
and I feel my mother flinch.
She never says a word
just closes her eyes for a second
and I hear her think,
“What is so great about this future
I have sacrificed myself for
is she cannot speak to me?”

And I don't.

In the car, my father only plays isiXhosa talk radio
and I never touch the dial.
I know without being told
that I am not allowed to speak English in his car
and so, I do not say much.

In the kitchen my mother and I stand hip to hip.
I chop and chat while she stirs and flinches
before hesitantly handing me a broken plate of English
apologizing.
The heat in her cheeks does not come from the stew.
It is birthed from the coil of embarrassment in her belly.
And I hate it.
I hate how it infiltrates this moment
that is only ours
in our kitchen.

But I do not say anything.

Lately, my parents softly and painfully remind me
that I am not white
as if fearing one day I might forget what blackness means.

I want to tell them I know.
I want to tell them I wont.
I want to tell them about the pain
of quiet erasure.
The white cleanse of tongue
until I cannot recognise my own mother in it.

But I don't.
I don't say much anymore.

The dry tongue

Mangaliso Butzani

At the backyard of my home where the teardrops of sad angels have rusted the wires, I will make myself a car from old wires and drive it around new brighton. then I will lose the last teardrop that ever turned me into a sad cloud with grey cheeks, making a sunflower pregnant so that it can weep seeds for my pigeons.

+

My mother six feet under my feet will touch my sole, and in front of her I will smile, cracking the windows of the my pain until they fall on the ground and disappear before my eyes. Last night I cried so much I became the mud. Now frogs are croaking into my ears, fishes are blowing bubbles up to the sky, my soul in crutches is limping towards the door where the meat is skinned away from the bones. I come to meet mapule my grandmother behind the moon completely a thin air to talk about the thorns that holed my feet to be imbhawula.

+

There is a creaking sound inside myself like an old gate with rusted hinges being opened, maggie our late dog is here with white fur and barking 'I'm back'. I hear in my ears the noise of my empty stomach reaching the roof of my heart, the sound of my teardrops hitting the faces of my bones, last night I fell flat on my face and died. My grandmother woke me in settlers hospital with a drip in my arm. My soul came back and I started walking to my flat at number 76 jasbir.

+

The way towards you is full of holes, thirsty I sit on my haunches and drink some water from your

eye sockets. If you were not around I would be dead of dehydration. A fountain from your tombstone makes the papenkei graveyard green. I'm standing before the heap of soil that has hidden your bones for some time now. Talking quietly, a tall man with a grey suit takes off his jacket and starts shouting with Afrikaans with his hands raised up. I continue to talk quietly with the dead.

+

The sun strikes my head, the fire goes down my throat to turn my heart to ashes. I open my mouth, my tongue breaks and falls on the ground. Today I have totally lost my speech. Mother of birds teach me how to sing! I want to reach the sky and sing some poems to the stars, maybe god will throw back my tongue, so that when I open my mouth again, I can recite a poem for my deaf ears.

A pauper's burial

Sue Nyamnjoh

Flowers are always welcome at funerals
Yellow dahlias
In the midst of black mourners
White lilies
To adorn the grave
Fists full of earth
Connect to wooden boxes
Encasing swollen bodies
Fat and ripe with decay

Do paupers get flowers?

I met a woman once you see
With tight curls, dirty nails
And belongings stuffed in bright pink bags

She was going places
Bus card at the ready
Feet ready to prowl

I want to think that when she goes
Really goes
There will be flowers at her grave

What He Wished For

Kobus Moolman

Standing in a spotlight of black & white time.

In the branches of the old plum tree is a kite made out of cardboard and plastic hazard tape.

On the way back he smelt something and he stopped and he looked down and he saw that the past was leaking out of his shoes.

Underneath the old tyre-swing the ground is bare and hard and hollowed-out.

And it occurred to him that the reason he always felt as if he were walking uphill, without a railing, was because every surface in his life lead steeply away from him.

A black bird with a long beak caws and croaks.

So he withdrew his hand from his trouser pocket and the smell of creosote fell out onto the road.

The old wash-line has five wire strands strung between metal poles painted with silver rust-proof paint. The poles are concreted into the ground.

And he felt as if the eyes of everyone in the world, both below and above the ground, were burrowing into his thoughts.

The wind blows the dry leaves from the plane trees across the cement driveway until they build up against the rusted gate.

And suddenly he wanted to break something.

The sun sinks slowly behind the smell of cocoa beans from the factory two blocks away.

To smash something wide open. So that everything on the inside would be transformed instantly into the outside.

A cold afternoon. Late. And getting later.

Until there was nothing left underneath and behind and inside of him. And he was inside-out.

Unobserved and shameless for the first time.

Daily Duty

Kobus Moolman

With her head covered.

SHE says: I am blinded by
the glare of the white washing – the white sheets and the white
pillow cases, the white bedspread and my white underwear, my
camisole and my petticoat – on the line in the morning when I hang
it out.

Sometimes
you can see me in my straw hat and my dark Ray-ban glasses, in my
long-sleeved top, my arms uplifted in the air, my face upturned to
the sun.

SHE says: I am pierced by
the sharp, the long, the hard bristles of the grass broom, the long-
handled grass broom that I bought from the street seller, the broom
that descends upon the wooden floor, that comes down out of the
blue onto the stoep, the stone steps into the garden, like a wolf upon
the fold.

Sometimes

you might find me backed into a small corner of a room, or crouched at the bottom of a steep flight of stairs, fending off the fierce bristles of the broom with my bare skin, with my little brittle bones.

SHE says:

I am broken by

the old bodies, the dry and the hard bodies of the dead geckos and lizards that lie, crushed and dry, flat and dry as cardboard, crushed by a careless door, an accidental window, door-jamb or lock.

Sometimes

you might come upon me on my hands and knees checking the underneath of the front door, the inside jamb of the big bedroom window before I close them and lock them with my padlock and my big brass key.

SHE says:

I am scalded by

the steam from the iron that fills the kitchen every night after dinner, after homework, after story-time and prayers, hissing like an engine, like Thomas the Train, spitting in my eyes like his fat red snake.

Sometimes

you may think that these are tears, these sharp drops that pack my eyes, that I am unhappy, but actually it is just smoke, just steam from the fire he makes with his hands.

SHE says:

I am drowned by

the grey aquarium of the kitchen sink, with its long narrow knives, the spoons with one eye on top of their heads, the bulbous soup bowls and flat plates, a school of brightly-coloured cups that swarm all over my fingers and up my arms like greasy little tadpoles.

Sometimes

but only if you are lucky, you will find me on my back, with my goggles and my flippers and my plastic gloves, breathing through the hole between my legs.

SHE says:

I am choked by

the dust that clogs up the vacuum cleaner, that blocks the suction pipe and the filter with fluff and dog hair and flakes of human skin that slough off continually, renewing our shape, until one day we are unrecognisable.

Sometimes

you may happen to walk past and assume it is me because I look the same as the person you talk to on the telephone, but oh, oh, oh, on the inside, on the inside it's all stuffed pipes and tied tubes and pressure building up, and if you were to suddenly unstop me, why, like a pink balloon I'd fart my way around the room, and then Pssshhhht!
go flat.

SHIE says:

Plug me in.

There. Fill me up. Switch me on. Here. And I'll purr for you like an over-locker.

See how I run.

Small Miracle

(after Guy Davenport)

Jacques Coetzee

Some time in the 1950s,
during a visit from Tom Eliot
to St Elizabeth's Asylum
where he'd been confined instead of standing trial for treason,

Ezra Pound—who had sought to command
presidents, reform governments
in accordance with the dictates of his will,
ranting at the entire world, insisting it should change—

put up his feet on a table
in a small room in a long, dim corridor
(Tom Eliot did the same) so as to make enough room
for one of the inmates, his name lost to history,
to manoeuvre an imaginary
vacuum cleaner.

The moon's reflection in a bucket of mop water

Paul Kammies

while preparing to clean the anticipation hangs
— there's something for us.
when the store doors unfold
they close with brevity
the flat bleep signifying the end of the day, we mitigate the pain
of the day with
hi-hat laced trap, fresh vulgarities,
the shuddering of pregnant rail loaded and packed full of
clothing we revel in;
replens done without stress,
flaring clothing without interruption skinnel and
staff-purchases.
this is where we remind ourselves that we own this store
after sweeping through the departments
we mop
and in the early winter morning
the moon's light imbibed in mop water from the previous night
is thrown down the drain the next morning

Earthsong

Madeleine Bazil

What lies beyond indifference and care?
I used to misunderstand the texture of my own beloveds.

Now I grip them intimately—tenor of birds, silver trees
coruscating in lush breeze. Gravity's hard embrace.

Yet we never live in tandem. The heat of sandstone
becomes belligerent. When the burn ends,

I press my body against scorched soil—
shallow pine roots ripe with unbelonging.

See how I'm capable of falling my way forward.
We are quanta laughing in the dark. I need love that survives.

The Interview

Stephen Symons

Outskirts of Beirut, 6:30 pm, June 1974

I remember asking how he became a poet
and he replied, 'I was born a poet,
becoming a poet, for me at least,
was the sum of many chance events.'
He pursed his lips as if preparing
to kiss a child at bedtime,
a mannerism that I would come to learn
was an exclamation of sorts.

As the sun listed towards the beginning
of the summer holidays, I watched his thumb
hop across his fingertips, wondering if
he was playing a silent melody from memory,
or preparing a thought for voice.
Swells of grey hair were aflame
with dipping sunlight.
Everything was skimmed with gold –
the rims of his glasses,
even the moisture on his lips.

The moment coiled,
waiting to be sprung, as the story
he was about to tell anticipated itself.

Looking out,
the desert blurred into a haze of amber
and indigo; closer, a jumbled puzzle of rooftops,
strung with lattices of washing lines,
satellite dishes, aerials and a flagless flagpole
collaged to form a skyline ebbing away
from the heat and last edges of daylight.
This was a view made for storytelling,
the music of the village crowded about us:

the preparing of family suppers,
couples shifting their rooftop chairs
for a better view of the fired sky,
all scaffolding our conversation,
except perhaps for the far-off rumble
of three tangerine scratches across the sky.
The poet looked up and whispered, 'Ah, Israelis'.
He turned his chair towards me,
its steel legs shuddered in protest on the tiles
as he adjusted its foam cushions.
He smiled and stretched to reach for a glass of tea
that cupped the last of the sun's brilliance.

'You see,' he said, lips smacking, 'I was born in 1930.
I grew up with poetry; I didn't attend school until I was thirteen.'
Each slippage of visual detail directed me towards his voice,
its subtleties, frequencies and timbre.

'I did not see a car until I was thirteen years old,
There were no telephones, nothing, not even a school.'
The gesture of a flat hand accompanied his voice,
fingers outstretched, similar to those of a traffic warden
directing traffic at a bustling intersection.
'But my father was familiar with Arab culture,
and the soul of old Arab culture is poetry.
So I read all the traditional poets, stretching from
the pre-Islamic to the late Islamic period.
Among the poets, my father showed
great affection for was al-Mutanabbi,
Abu Nawwas and Imru' al-Qais.
I grew up with their voices. Poetry in my head. Poetry in my heart.
It was, therefore, a completely natural progression to begin
writing poems. It was to be.'

The sun's afterglow lingered.
The sky was a vignette of scarlet and cobalt.
Here and there, the first stars pricked at the beginnings of night.
Below the rooftops, the blue flicker of TVs
and far-off conversations. Sounds of crockery and laughter
tumbled into twilight. I was transfixed.

The poet smiled, took the slightest of breaths and continued,
'One day in 1945, when I was thirteen years old,
almost a young man, Syria had just gained its independence,
although the French did not leave until '46.
Shukri al-Quwatli was elected as the first president
and as a means to familiarise himself with his country
he decided to visit all the Syrian provinces.'

At this point, a woman joined us on the rooftop.
She was carrying a wicker tray with more tea, a plate of dates,
olives and flatbreads. A mustard shawl shadowed her face,
prompting me to look again and imagine. The poet smiled,
and I was uncertain if he was acknowledging
me staring at her beauty or simply thanking her
for her hospitality. I felt a warm rush of blood to my cheeks
and hoped the poor light would mask the obvious.

The brief silence gave way to his voice,
'We had heard of the president's visit to our village,
so I decided to write a poem in his honour to welcome him
and celebrate Syria's independence. I hoped that, in return
the president would ask me how he could assist me.
So I formed this conversation in my mind and wrote the poem.'
How do we sculpt the future from the present,
whether good or bad? Unwittingly, the present holds
an infinite number of permutations and delicate forks
to vastly different futures, but sometimes,
as was the case with the poet; a happy accident occurs.
I was more familiar with unhappy accidents.

'My father thought it was a lovely poem and wished me good luck
on my quest to gain the president's attention with my poem.
When I heard the president was paying a visit to a nearby town
I was lucky to get a lift on the back of a truck to the village.
I was wearing a traditional *gumbaz* and a jacket,
and by some strange coincidence, I read the poem to him.
The president was impressed by my poem and embraced me.
He asked how he could help me and
I explained a desperate need to go to school.

Later, the president used a line from my poem in a speech:
*For us, you are the sword, / for you, we are the sheath*¹.
So you could say I got to go to school with a poem, and that's why
I feel I was born for poetry.'

I smiled. The poet paused, folded his hands
and looked up at the charcoal sky.
Despite the glow of the town,
the multitudes of constellations above us
seemed like spilt sugar on dark cloth.
I remained silent as we inhaled
the brief silence and its beauty:
The night had now come into its own
above the lighted houses of the town.

I sipped the tea and asked, 'So how did you come to be known as
Adonis?'
'Ah,' he replied, 'the question on everyone's lips. At school, I wrote
poems and submitted them to magazines and newspapers, but they
were never published. I signed my poems Ali Ahmad Said Esbar, and
they went unnoticed. I became angry, and one night, I read the myth
of Adonis, where he goes out on a hunting trip, but the wild boar
becomes the hunter and eventually kills Adonis. And a flower called
the anemone grows out of Adonis' blood. I was deeply affected by
that myth. From that moment on, I signed my poems in the name of
Adonis. Those newspapers and magazines were like that wild boar.
So I sent a poem ...'

I took another sip of my tea, no more than a nervous reflex, and
thought of the woman who had served us – the profound mystery of
her eyes and how every aspect of clothing conspired to fire my imagi-
nation. Who was she, and what was her connection to the poet? Were
they lovers?

Night had taken the village hostage,
each house and building now dark paragraphs
punctuated by yellow windows and
their own stories of longing, hope and loss.
I thought of the poet's story.
I wondered what the woman's story was.

¹ From: *I Have Been Born Three Times: An Interview with Adonis*. (Source: <http://tiny.cc/ipasxz>)

Would I see her again?

The poet looked at me, his face made far younger
by the darkness. Only his features remained,
traced by threads of detail from a nearby rooftop fire.
He leaned forward. The glow of the paraffin lamp on
the table between us returned the decades to his face. He smiled.

'So, my friend, that's my story. And what is your story?
I've told this story too many times; it feels somewhat artificial,
even fraudulent when compared to the beauty of this evening.
Look at this sky; yes, this is not *New York, that city on four legs
heading for murder*². The insignificance of this village.
Its calligraphy of beauty is about to be overcome by war.
Christians and Muslims are constantly at war, yes?
But you seem distracted. What is it?'

I felt embarrassed. Was it that obvious?
I cleared my throat and took the last sip
of my tea. 'Distracted? I'm sorry, no, not at all.
It's just that ...'

He sat back in the camping chair and waved a mosquito away.
Once again, the chair moaned as he shifted his weight,
brought his hands together as if in prayer, and then chuckled:
'Don't worry, my friend; she has that effect on men.
Aiza, that is. Do you know what her name means in Arabic?'

'No,' I replied. I could feel my face blush with embarrassment.
My story seemed irrelevant now.
There was little point in answering the poet's question.

'Her name means eternal beauty, apt, isn't it?
She's a lot older than you think.
She's a widow, childless too.
Her husband was killed in '58. Malonite Christians, I think.
She never remarried. This is her house,
and I like to visit from time to time.
I think she studied at the Beirut College for Women.
Well, that's where she met Ghafran.

² From the poem *'The Funeral Of New York'* (1971) by Adonis. Translated by Khaled Mattawa.

He was a printer who happened to love poetry.
He used to print my poetry review *Shi'r'* at great risk.
Ah, such a sad story.'

Why was he telling me this?

I looked skywards; the night sky was cloudless, crisp,
and now bustling with the sharp glitter of stars.

Venus was unusually bright, or at least I thought it was.

The poet took a deep breath, leaned forward and whispered,
'You must meet Aziza. I will introduce you to her, yes?'

He lifted himself from the camping chair.

He gave an almost imperceptible sigh, walked to the tiled stairs
that descended from the roof and called,

'Aziza, do come and join us.'

The poet then pushed a wooden stool near the table
and turned the wick of the paraffin lamp up.

Not moments later, Aziza emerged from the bloom of the stairwell.

'Ah, welcome, Aziza. Let me introduce you to my interviewer.

He's flown all the way from London to listen to me ramble.'

I placed my hand across my chest and smiled.

She nodded and took a seat. I was transfixed.

We spoke of why I was visiting Lebanon,
of the poet and my work as a journalist.

Yet, this was merely a surface made of sound.

Small cracks of silence ran over our words,
from which another conversation was initiated between us.

Its words were small physical gestures –
the movement of a finger, the tilting of a head,
culminating in long moments of silence,
sentences of sorts, a meeting of our essence, perhaps.

A type of knowing where I became convinced
we had met before. For the first time in my life,

I felt an unfathomable connection

with another human being that seemed to
transcend time and space, even physical attraction.

Yes, Aziza was captivatingly beautiful, but this
magnetism was the stuff of fantasy.

I had a life far from this sky ...

The poet must have noticed our unspoken conversation

because he turned to me and said, 'It's been a delight, but my dreams are calling.' I apologised for keeping him from bed, gathered my satchel and bid him farewell. That would be the last time I would see Adonis. Aziza rose slowly from the stool and said, 'I will show you out.' As the poet took his leave, he looked back at me, nodded his grey head and smiled before the stairwell's light swallowed him. Aziza beckoned me to follow her.

It seemed cold outside the house, less unreal, as if a veil had been lifted to reality. We waited in near silence for my taxi. I tried to make small talk, but it seemed pointless. Headlights in the distance announced the taxi's arrival.

Shepherd's Bush, 7:20 pm, February 1995

And now, decades later, I am back in that taxi, thinking of the poet and Aziza, watching the headlights cast two milky beams that quiver over the gravel road back to Beirut. The last scene of the movie, *The Name of the Rose*, springs to mind. The apprentice monk, Adso, barely out of his teens, is leaving the monastery with his master, William of Baskerville. Low-slung smoke from the burning abbey mystifies the scene. A beautiful peasant girl, whom Adso's master saved from the Inquisition, waits at the roadside. Adso hesitates for a moment, faced with a life-altering choice, and looks at the girl longingly but then continues on his journey. As the movie concludes, Adso narrates, many years on:

*And yet, now that I am an old, old man,
I must confess that of all the faces that
appear to me out of the past ... the one I
see most clearly is that of the girl ...
of whom I've never ceased to dream these
many long years³.*

The interviewer wipes his breath from the window of the home-ward-bound cab. Outside, the London traffic is gridlocked as a fine rain falls. He is much older now. Yet, at moments like this, he cannot offer up that night to forgetting that infinite pin-pricked sky reflected

³ From the movie script of the *The Name of the Rose* (1986).

in the spectacles of the poet and, of course, Aziza. He thinks of how she let her headscarf slip to her shoulders, perhaps by accident, when she waved goodbye: her jet black hair, those eyes – an impossible possibility. And not a day passes without the memory of what may have been an invitation to a different future, of what could have been. But, again, it was dark, and he was young. It was no more than a small village on the outskirts of Beirut, insignificant yet forever welded to his future.

Outside, the heavens have opened; heavy rain raps on the taxi's roof. The driver slows to a stop at a pedestrian crossing. A woman hesitates before crossing and lifts her umbrella to get a better view of the traffic. The street is a shimmering river of reflected neon, cars and streetlights. The taxi's worn windscreen wipers strain, revealing more detail with each rubbery shudder across the glass. As she crosses, the interviewer leans forward and notices something. Something impossible.

clicks and killsong
 bmw and starvingwoman
electionposter and electionsmile
 load shed in the sun
 light
 dark
until
 until
 until.

Square on Loadshedding and the Moon

Alexander Murie

when Apollo 12 left the moon, a piece of it broke off and caused the moon to ring like a bell for about an hour. Load-shedding, an organized dark, echoes through a nation: drawers chatter, the old lighters grind their teeth, candles crack wax knuckles, someone faraway sighs the ends off their words, still haunting Area 12. To freeze time is to ring a bell that no one can hear. It is to go, to go in secret. To go like a slice of evening, time's thesaurus, empty as the chair of the first man to die on the moon, forgotten, after 6.8s of veiled silence. Bells do not ring (the groundskeeper said) without electricity. The rope was removed in 1969. Later, bulbs popped. Things don't last now, they pop like burnt teeth (he said, smiled). Now, the dark asks: what broke? rung suburbs like bells?

i always wondered what white poets

(and doctors, dancers, dieticians, etc.)
did during the mud
of Apartheid^{FM}
convinced myself
it could never be me
there's mos that moralistic rubber band
curled around my stomach
which makes me vomit bran
if something doesn't feel ethical
is not kosher;
of course one has to at least mention something
crackle a tongue
at minimum somewhere communicate an awareness;
i reassured myself
i would sit in prison next to breytenbach
happy as a pig in Palestine
one moment of amnesia
unbutchered at a time

Shane van der Hoven

The Traveller's Companion

Zeenit Jacobs

There is a lesson in stillness, –
when silence speaks, listen to its
sermon and you will hear in the
loudest voice from either friend or
foe because silence is a mirror.

There is a lesson in love, – he who
loves not his own soul knows not his
beloved, – the one who knows not the
measure or the drink within their cup
cannot quench the thirst of another.

There is a lesson in faith, – if you are
without, you have failed tomorrow,
because faith in the self is belief in
tomorrow's possibilities. No one walks
without faith knowing that their heel
fights with the earth to keep them up
while in the company of stones.

There is a lesson in loving the self, –
love sits in Today's presence, but
regret and despair invites Tomorrow's
nemesis, Yesterday, an old and bitter
hag. Yesterday will always try and
reason with Today on how to be
Tomorrow's enemy.

There is a lesson in humility, –
never let an enemy of success trick
you into telling on your own self in
a battle of the egos, – the penalty for
having a knife as a tongue severs
such a person from wisdom

Encounter

Rizwan Akhtar

I used the banister mounting the stairs,
creaking knees punctuated the mute
portico, each step separated like desires
yoked by words, but the body swerved
ridiculously until a bird squeaked inside
the spandrel, it was like a clause
alone and meaningless meanwhile
the janitor mopping the floor took out
ear pods, though his fingers carried
a sulking cigarette hurdling his job
we both met a stare like a stone unmoved
for ages, huffing and broken, the search
ended up agreeing to benefit from silence.

Tenebris

Francesco Nassimbeni

I don't know much
About foxes.

I saw four,
Though, in two
Fortnights

Sable rangers they seemed,
In the middle of the blurting
City's huff.

Their ears are pointed,
But blunted, like the
McDonalds arches -

Foxes don't mind being
Compared to fast-food,
They know that junk,
Lick chops.

Furtive, at first I thought they
Were cats – the same
Sly, almost not-there crackle
Of air.

But then they darted, dark
Arrows of non-light
Over the night field's green
And I knew their emergency,
The nocturnal quest

For whatever it is
The fox mind suggests.

Couples.
Both time couples.
Urchins work better
In twos.

I do not know
Much about foxes,
But I feel them, like shivers
On an arm, that shadow made
Form

PROSE & SHORT FICTION

Excerpt from *The Nine Lives of The General*

Yewande Omotoso

I only ever know one place. Born and died there which, with all the comings and goings, could be regarded an achievement if only I could point to something I did to accomplish it. I think it's just luck. Luck that I had Finta. Luck that she too somehow stayed on and that we love each other. After all isn't love the deepest widest kind of luck there is.

They say I was a scared child until about the age of eight. I find this easy to believe, when you think of the fact that I had no parents and when you consider the kind of place I'd got myself born into. All I had was Finta, ten years my senior and the palms of her hands already callous by the time my milk teeth fall.

Once I grow big people talked about me. Did you know, they'd say, Allero need only look and she call the date and time your child would born. They reckoned I must be the general of an army of unborn children, that I held some preternatural authority over them. Not counting the hard ones, in my fifty years I must have birthed hundreds and hundreds. Truth is it's not as if I knew anything special. It's more that my hands were correct and my tone of voice was always right for a woman in labour, always easy for her to hear, to heed. I could lay my hand and I swear the baby feel it, know it, says "okay I'm coming". No baby ever died with me. Not a one. Not a single one. And no mother. A father died once – white man. There and then had a heart-attack when him white wife push out a baby black as me. Whatever the gift I do think it helped me live, survive, kept me in one place that's for sure. I born black children just as much as I born the white and yellow. It wasn't supposed to be that I born the white children too but there was a time of death, many deaths, babies falling like rain. And people got scared, got desperate. Human beings are funny that way; the white people got real scared. They heard news of a black woman property of the M, heard she was good, almost like magic. They were scared enough not to care too much that my black hands and black eyes would touch them, scared enough to put their lives on my head, the lives of their children. By the time I born my first white child I'd already born almost a hundred black ones. I remember it so easy, in truth as if it happened an hour ago.

The first child I born my legs still swung free on the odd occasion I had reason to sit upon a chair. I was a skinny child, darkened by field sun which is a special kind of sun. If you haven't worked the field then

you would have no notion of field sun. Field sun is not something you can regard from afar and comprehend, you must stand still beneath it, bent over. Field sun will kill you slow. I don't know if it's even fair to say I born them. Wanting to live is the simplest desire. We walk out free. For sure the breaches I take credit for, the hard ones, the complications. But many many were just hell-bent on entering, all I had to do was catch them.

A small room. The floors made of tamped dirt, cool and strangely moist beneath my feet. It was past the middle of the night but not yet dawn. How I came to be in that room is worth telling because it wasn't my habit to pass the night in Nana's cabin. Finta, whom I would later discover had already been bleeding for two rainy seasons, had gone and done the unthinkable, she'd smiled twice at one of the men who worked the eastern fields, furthest from the big house and nearest the boarder fence. Those eastern fields men had a reputation for being a way with young ladies. Now as far as I was concerned Finta had never been a lady, even at eight I could discern that but nonetheless she'd got caught up in some man-lady foolishness and I found myself kicked out for the night. 'Go Nana,' Finta had suggested not caring much and keen to return to her guest. 'Return 'pon the sun.' Young as I was I understood what the hulk of a man and my sister would be up to. Living on the plant did not afford people the luxury of slowly breaking sex information to the pickneys. It's almost like us children came out the womb in full understanding of the act, as if we'd stood by while our parents made us. Anyhow our bondage as women was as much labour in the field as it was in the bed and there were enough stories told of twelve-year-olds summoned to the private rooms of the M. Finta had even taken the trouble one night to instruct me on what to do should I be called upon for service. It had happened to her several times already. I always knew when she was back from such because those are the only days the love between my sister and I stretched taut, close to snapping.

Any-so there I am wandering into Nana's cabin. Now when I say Nana's cabin I give the wrong suggestion. Of course Nana's cabin was as much hers as you could own a dew drop. But in my memory it's become Nana's cabin. A hut no bigger than a moment, slept normally by eight but emptied out on this night – Finta couldn't have known – for the purposes of childbirth. I wandered, sleepy-eyed, into the room and Granny Macah shout 'Pass the towel.' She shout like that as if she'd summoned me herself and in fact as if I'd taken longer than the situ-

ation called for, a little edge to her voice like I'd been annoying her for some time now. All the work was being done by kerosene lamp. Even with the sex I'd heard and witnessed I had never seen anything like this in my short life; I'd seen the act but never its consequence. 'The towel, the towel,' shout Granny Macah. 'Hurry pickney, newborn coming.' And I swear to you with that Granny Macah took one breath and died right there, rude death, caught her off-guard. Now I've seen many people die in my life and most not by nature, plus I too have died and not just once but plenty and yet Granny Macah's death remains the one that would populate my nightmares. I've seen grown men hacked to death by cutlass and women burnt alive, slow; I've seen a limbless baby snatched from him mother's teat and drowned in a bucket. Granny Macah's death remains the most violent. She died by no other hand but death's and in all the lives I've lived I've never witnessed anything more indifferent, more terrifying.

Everything moved quickly after that, after Granny Macah falls to the floor not like a fall but like she was pushed. Nana breathing fast and an occasional high-pitched moan. I walked up to where she lay, the kerosene lamp there but flickering to go out. Normally we slept on whatever leftover straw you can find but Granny Macah had put Nana up on boxes, where she'd found them I can't tell you. Standing, my head reached just above the boxes. I've always been a small person. I had to strain a bit to see past the belly and take note of the fear 'pon Nana's face. 'Where she be?' she asked between breaths. What with all the pain of labour she had noticed that Granny Macah was absent, but not that she was gone. If she'd been able to hoist herself up onto her elbows, instead of lying back in the position Granny had set her, she might have caught sight of the old woman's naked feet, gnarled, relieved of duty. 'Where Gram go, chile?' I couldn't get the words out but I was thinking "Heaven". I wasn't baptised or anything fancy like that and Finta didn't abide talk of divinity but I had quietly in myself been cultivating the notion that there was a better place and what I'd heard of Heaven – from those that believed – seemed as good a description as any. Just then Nana shout 'help muh' so I moved in closer. Over the years I would question the way in which Granny Macah had arranged Nana. Lord knows the old woman had born plenty, she may even have born me, I don't know, but still I surmised, through my own personal study, that laid back upon boxes was probably not the best method. It's unlikely that position was Granny Macah's usual mode,

maybe death had been settling on her for sometime already, messing and turning her mind, make her forget the best way to set a woman for child-bearing. Who can know. Any-so, since then I've explored other positions but really you ask the woman to choose. Of course I didn't know any of that yet. That day I just looked into Nana's face and somehow understood that there was nothing more for me to say. And then it got quiet. Not quiet to the ear, no for the ear it is rowdy and rough, the mother shouting or sighing or cussing. But I mean, when I say it gets quiet, is there comes a silence underneath that all even those long deaf can hear if they choose to. That's why I'm special maybe. Although it's not my way to boast. But that's where I do my work, in that silence. Even the mother hears it although the few times I've asked women, when the baby out and cleaned and sweet and the sweat dry on their brow, I ask if they heard it and they give me rough looks. I think they heard it and just can't remember. And of course the baby hears it too although there's no way to check. So there we all are, the three of us, in some kind of duppy space. In that space I ask the mother, although I'm not using words now, I ask her if she wants to bring this. And to the child I ask if it wants to be brought. Mostly the answers are yes. As on that day with Nana. You don't have to believe any of this if you don't want to. Although you are speaking to a dead person so maybe belief is not something we should bother with for the duration. You might say I was too young, how did I know to ask such things, where would the notion have come from. You might say what is this fantasy of a quiet still world beneath the noisy one we all know and labour through. You might say all that but I'm telling you. That day with Nana that's what I did. I asked those taking part if it was their wish to do so. I collected their desires like receipts for later, proof that we are in the world, that we choose. And once that's happened a small thing shifts, jus' a small thing, and the world pours in. My head was positioned right between Nana's legs which were flung apart and slick with sweat and juice. Her pussy stretched so broad I thought it might tear in half but it didn't. And the pickney slide right out, Nana screaming as if someone stabbing her repeatedly in the heart. 'Nough blood too. And me, right there, with my little hands, I reach out to grab the boy before he fall 'pon the ground and crack him skull. Samuel, she called him. Those who familiar turned it light and playful, turn into Sammy.

Five years pass before I born another baby. It perhaps if not okay,

then right by life, that in the same year my first blood drip (same year a man bring himself on me - with no invitation mind you) I start birthing children, this time on purpose and soon on demand. I developed a habit, start saying it, like a call, a herald, until it become a ritual and people knew me by it. Some making fun, others thinking unless I spoke the magic words nothing happen. I didn't mind their foolishness, I knew why I said it. Every time just after I collected the desires and just before I felt that tremor as life enters life, in honour of Granny Macah I repeat her last words – newborn incoming.

NOTES

A version of this piece was originally published in the *Johannesburg Review of Books* in 2022.

This piece is a work in progress and part of a larger ongoing project.

Deidre, Excerpt from *Crooked Seeds*

Karen Jennings

She woke with the thirst already upon her, still in her clothes, cold from having slept on top of the covers. Two days, three, since she had last changed; the smell of her overcast with sweat, fried food, cigarettes. Underwear's stink strong enough that it reached her even before she moved to squat over an old plastic mixing bowl that lived beside the bed. She steadied her weight on the bed frame with one hand, the other holding on to the seat of a wooden chair that creaked as she lowered herself. She didn't have to put the light on, knew by the burn and smell that the urine was dark, dark as cough syrup, as sickness.

There was no toilet paper, so she rose without wiping, pulling the underwear back into place, feeling it dampen a little. Usually she would reach across, open the window, empty the bowl over the rockery that lined that part of the building's wall, but there had been complaints, a warning. Instead, she took a T-shirt that was lying on the floor and covered the mouth of the bowl with it, before sitting down on the chair. In sleep, the plate of her top front teeth had come loose, protruding a little over her lips. Impossible with her dry mouth to push it back into place. She pulled, snagging it on cracked skin, causing her to switch on the lamp, to feel for blood with her fingertips. None. Then put the teeth on the bedside table next to a mug from which the tea had long since evaporated.

She shifted her leg, lazy to reach for crutches where she had dropped them the night before. It was no distance from the chair to the place described as a kitchen, with its bar fridge, sink, counter, and microwave. She took hold of the chairback, the chest of drawers, the TV stand, the various items that she had refused to give up and which she had crammed into this room, making her way slowly across to the fridge. She did not bother to move onwards to the sink, knowing that the taps would be empty. The microwave clock read 05:18. Forty minutes before the water truck came. Nothing until then.

Inside the fridge was a packet of discoloured Vienna sausages, opened a week ago; half a tub of margarine; a jar of gherkins. She unscrewed the lid of the jar, drank down the brine, closing her mouth against its solids, then reached for a Vienna to blunt the sting, its puckered ends like plastic. She spat out what couldn't be chewed, ate two more, spat again, then drew her forearm across her mouth, seeing after-

ward the smear of grit and slime, and flakes of hideous pink.

The morning's chill reached her as she approached the front entrance of the building. She thought about going back for a jacket, but went on, greeting the security guard as he came across from his hut to open the door for her. 'Hey, Winston, here we go again.'

'That's right, that's it. Same again.'

She could see the queue from where they stood. It ran three blocks deep, extended around the corner. Two armed guards patrolled the outer edges, one more stood near the water truck and collection point. Beyond the truck, a traffic officer had parked his car, the lights flashing hotly in the morning gloom. He had put out cones, was directing the few vehicles that passed by. Passengers and drivers looked out at the queue, at the people with their array of containers, in dressing gowns and slippers, wearing jackets and coats over their work clothes and school uniforms, a few wrapped in blankets against the cold. Someone was listening to the news on a cellphone, elsewhere music was playing. Most were using earphones though, intent on something beyond this slow, shifting wait. Few were interested in conversation.

'How's it looking today?' she said.

'Nothing special. Same as always. I didn't see you yesterday, you okay?'

'Ja, just wasn't in the mood for all this shit.'

He nodded. 'Ja, I know what you mean.'

She eyed the queue, saw a woman with a teenage daughter, the girl's arms crossed, the mother's too. They wore headscarves and long skirts. Behind them stood a man with his son and daughter. The man tapped his foot, leaned forward, and said something to the scarved woman. She shook her head, then took out her phone and showed him something on it, the light from the screen highlighting the darkness beneath her eyes. The man frowned, rubbed hard at his jaw in irritation.

Deidre had already taken a few steps toward the queue, but she came back now, said to Winston, 'Give us a ciggy, hey? I'll get you back later.'

'When's later? I'm still waiting from last week and last month. Eish man, I'm still waiting from last year.' But he took one from his pocket, lit it, handed it across.

She coughed wetly as she inhaled, then spat the wet out. 'Ag, man, don't be like that. One day I'm going to bring you a whole pack, okay? Like a whole pack, and not just any kind. It'll be the good kind, you'll

see.'

'Ja, I'm waiting ...'

She blew him a kiss, adjusted the backpack that she wore slung over one shoulder—an old thing from her daughter's high school years, tearing a little at the seams. 'Bye, darling, let me get this over and done with.'

A dull sunrise held back beyond the streetlamps and she crutched toward it, into the road, ignoring the cone markers so that cars had to stop for her, three in a row. She kept her eyes on the water truck, did not acknowledge the cars, did not look at the queue. She went deliberately slowly, pausing every few steps to remove the cigarette from her mouth, to exhale, inhale again. Before leaving her room she had brushed her hair; applied makeup over the previous day's smudges; sprayed her armpits, crotch, and hair; licked toothpaste from her finger; reinserted her plate. She wore now a skirt that came to mid-thigh, showing the blanched scar at her stump, and a T-shirt of cheap black lace that revealed a purple bra, her breasts high and hard.

She tossed the cigarette end at the gutter, moved toward the trestle table at the front of the queue, where two water monitors were taking turns to fill containers from a tap in the truck's side ...

A Fistful of Dhal

Pravasan Pillay

Like a lot of Chatsworth's service industry workers I ate many of my meals at Imperial Curry House. The takeaway was popular with us because it suited our odd working hours. It opened at noon each day of the week and only closed at two in the morning.

Cooks and waiters would usually start arriving at Imperial around eleven-thirty each night after having finished their shifts in the kitchens and dining rooms of Durban's hotels and restaurants.

The takeaway's menu consisted of a variety of meat and vegetable curries, served with rice, roti or puri; breyani; tripe – Imperial was one of the few spots in Chatsworth that still served offal; bunny chows; sweetmeats; soji; and snacks such as bhajis, puri pathas and samoosas.

The dish we almost always ordered though was dhal and rice. Rags, Imperial's owner, was known for the lentil curry and had been cooking it for late night customers for over twenty years. The dhal was made with cheap ingredients and sold at an affordable price. Customers paid fifty cents and received a polystyrene bowl filled with steaming rice, covered by several generous ladles of the curry.

Each night, after work, we would line up noisily inside Imperial. Rags always stood at the head of the line, behind the counter with his blackened pots of dhal and rice. An old ice cream container – which served as a cash box – also rested on the countertop.

Rags was in his mid-sixties and apart from a cleaner and a prep cook, who both worked the day shift, he ran Imperial on his own. He was short, bald, muscular and had a severe, pockmarked face. He always wore blue factory overalls rather than an apron and usually had on a red Liverpool F. C. peak cap. Like most cooks I knew, his arms were covered in burn scars and tattoos. He was a quiet man who rarely interacted with customers apart from asking them to repeat an order if he hadn't heard it the first time.

Once you got your bowl of dhal and rice from Rags, you dropped your fifty cents into the ice cream container and went into the small dining area located at the back of Imperial. There you could hang up your work uniform and your bag and eat, sitting at one of the tightly packed benches and trestle tables lined with old newspapers.

Imperial wasn't licensed but it still sold nips of cane spirit under the counter. Almost every other worker would down a few shots during

their meal. When everyone was finished all that remained in the bowls were curry leaves, mustard seeds and the occasional cassia bark.

The first time I ate at Imperial was in 1987. I had finished my first shift working as a busboy at the Maharani on the Durban beachfront. My father, who worked as a waiter at the nearby Blue Waters Hotel and who had arranged the job for me, finished his shift at the same time. We rode back together into Chatsworth on the packed eleven o'clock night bus. My father dressed in a black Adidas tracksuit, his waiter's uniform in a suit bag; and me, in my now messy, new kitchen coat.

The only thing my father said to me the entire trip was, "Do your graft, and two-three years you can be a waiter."

I remember feeling completely exhausted. The job, which was my first real one since I had finished high school the year before, was far more difficult than I had thought it would be. I had barely had a chance to rest the entire evening, running between the kitchen and the dining room, carrying dishes, smelly trash cans and heavy pots and pans.

I had also burned my hand on a pan about two hours into my shift. One of the cooks handed me a large tub of Vaseline and a few minutes later I was told to get back to work. Despite the hard work and injured hand, I enjoyed the company of the other busboys, the cooks, and the waiters. Everyone had an anecdote, joke or tip to share with me. I knew quickly that this was a place that I wanted to work in.

It felt strange riding into Chatsworth so late on a weeknight. I had never done it before. The streets were dark and still. Inside the bus, men talked loudly and played thunee in the dull light. Some drank. My father was one of them. He sipped brandy from a nip he kept stashed in his hip pocket. On his lap was a copy of *The Daily News* racing form.

When we reached Road 501, the men got off the bus. The majority of them headed off towards the shopping centre. I looked at the centre and saw the lights on at Imperial. All the lights from the other shops were switched off, and the fluorescent Coca Cola sign with "Imperial Curry House" on it floated in the darkness.

After a moment's hesitation, my father walked towards the Imperial. I followed him.

I ate my first bowl of Rags' dhal and rice with a lot of difficulty. Imperial didn't provide cutlery so everyone had to eat the piping hot food using their hands. Since my right hand was burned and bandaged, I had to awkwardly scoop up balls of rice and dhal with my left hand.

It was delicious, the best dhal I had ever eaten in my life. I ignored

the loud talking of the men around me, the stink of their sweat, and the pain in my hand, chewing slowly, enjoying the savoury taste.

The dhal was different from the kind my mother or aunts cooked. Rags' dhal was lighter, more a broth, and bright yellow in colour due to the manjal. It was milder and fresher – the main flavours were the lentils, mustard seeds and dhania. I could have eaten bowls of it.

Every serving was topped with half a teaspoon of Rama margarine, which made the rice softer, glossier and easier to digest. The takeaway offered vinegar chillies and a selection of mango, carrot, lime or vegetable pickles, but like most of the other men I ate the food without any sides or salad.

I was the last to finish amongst the men on my trestle table. My father sat beside me tapping his fingers impatiently on the table as I scraped the bottom of the polystyrene bowl.

When I was finally done and stood at the wash basin, one of the men, a tall, red-bearded Muslim cook who knew my father, asked, "What you think of the chow?"

"It's genuine," I replied, licking my fingers.

The man smiled through his thick beard.

Imperial Curry House closed its doors in October of 1992 after Rags was stabbed during a night serving. He was attacked by a nineteen-year-old prep cook, a newcomer who had just started out in the kitchen of The Balmoral Hotel. I hadn't noticed the boy until the night of the stabbing, but friends told me that he was at Imperial most nights since that July.

Kamal, a steward friend of mine who worked at The Balmoral, told me that in the five months that the boy had been at the hotel, he had developed a reputation for being hot-tempered. On his third week on the job, he had gotten into a fist fight with another cook over a small loan he had supposedly not paid back. And shortly before the stabbing he had been given a warning by management, this time for throwing a pan at a senior cook.

"Faulty lightie. Any other person, Chef should have fired him, but the lightie's a good cook. Chef wanted to train him up," Kamal said.

I never found out why the boy stabbed Rags. There was a lot of speculation amongst my friends. Many of the men I spoke to said that the boy attacked because Rags had caught him trying to steal money from the container on the counter.

The other explanation that had done the rounds was that Rags had seen the boy harassing a lady customer outside Imperial earlier that day and had ordered him not to come back to the takeaway. When the boy showed up that night Rags got angry and tried to throw him out. That's when the boy pulled the knife.

I heard a few other stories as well but these two seemed the most believable.

The night of the stabbing, and the last time I set foot in Imperial, I lined up like I always did for my bowl of dhal and rice. I had got there later than usual because I had lingered at the bus stop talking to a colleague who wasn't coming to the takeaway that evening. The line at Imperial was about twenty men deep and stretched outside the takeaway when I took my place in it.

The workers were loud, talking about the night's service and passing nips of cane and whiskey amongst themselves. There was also a lot of good-natured banter about English football and horse racing, which were the most popular topics of conversation at Imperial.

Then I heard the voices raised in anger come from the front of the line. It was difficult to hear what they were arguing about. As the voices grew louder, I picked up a few curse words. I didn't think too much of it at first. Fights were rare at Imperial but not unheard of – alcohol was usually the cause.

I heard a shout of pain, the clang of a pot crashing to the floor and of what I knew was dhal splashing everywhere. The line ahead of me immediately dissolved and the men surrounded the front counter. I was still at the back of the crowd struggling to get a look.

I heard the words drift through, "The lightie poked him. The pokes poked him."

I pushed through the crowd and at the front saw three men restraining the boy. One man was punching him in the face. Everything from the first raised voice to the stabbing had happened in the space of a minute and a half or so, and yet the boy's face was already a mess. His nose was broken and bloodied, his lips split. Another man was kicking him now. The boy's eyes were swollen and tearing. There was little fight left in him.

To the side, on the floor, propped up on someone's lap, I saw Rags. A paring knife, either the boy's or one belonging to Imperial, was stuck in the lower left-hand side of his back. He lay in his own blood, its redness heightened by the paleness of the yellow dhal that surrounded him.

Three days later, a few of us who were there that night tried to visit Rags at King Edward Hospital. His son, Devan, met us at the door of the general ward. He said that his father was asleep and wouldn't be taking any visitors, though he quickly added that the old man was okay and that he would recover. The doctors had said that the stab wound was deep but that the knife had fortunately not done any serious damage. Rags would still need a lot of rest before he could be back on his feet.

Devan thanked us for defending his father and told us that the boy was also admitted in hospital – a different one, R.K. Khan in Chatsworth. He would be arrested once he was discharged.

Before we left, Devan informed us that he was, with Rags' approval, closing down Imperial. He said that he had been trying to convince his father to retire for years and that this incident was the last straw. The premises would be rented out to the supermarket next door.

"He can't die for a few bowls of cheap curry," Devan had said, standing at the door of the ward, facing a semicircle of waiters and cooks.

None of us could argue with that.

I remember riding home on the eleven o'clock bus the night after the stabbing. There was a lot of talk about whether Rags was going to send someone else to run the night serving.

"Who knows, the ballie might even come dish the chow himself, wearing his hospital gown, drips and all," Ranga, a cook, had said.

The mood in the bus was low and the joke eased the tension a little. Everyone had a good laugh.

When the bus turned into Road 501, we all stared out the windows searching the shopping centre for the glowing Coca Cola sign. But there was nothing there. The shopping centre was dark and our stomachs were cold.

Unwrapping

Frankie Murrey

She has come to this place to find out how to breathe without crying. How to speak out loud. How to laugh without irony.

She signs in at reception, her name in return for a key. It's heavy in her hand and the metal warms almost immediately. The heat makes everything shimmer. The horizon is melted.

The room, when she unlocks it, is a shell. High-ceilinged. A place for shadows to collect. Textured darkness. She enjoys the smell of thatch until she thinks of it burning. Was she always so scared of fire? Wasn't there a time when her body thrilled with excitement? A time before understanding what fire takes.

There is a shower, but signs everywhere remind her of water restrictions. She will have to find another way to calm herself.

On the bedside table lies a pamphlet of things to do in the area. Places to eat. A map. Breakfast happens between seven and nine a.m. She wonders if there are other guests. Eating food amongst strangers. The sound of metal dragging over crockery. Discomfit spikes in her belly.

She chose this.

No. That's wrong.

She ran out of ways to live, and this felt like all that was left.

She drops the pamphlet to the floor and lies down on the bed. Unexpectedly, she falls asleep. In her dream the moon tears itself apart, and she screams until no air is left. She wakes and forces herself to breathe in. To restart. It is a routine. This constant terror.

Outside, the stars seem to sing at one another. It takes her some moments to realise the sounds come from insects. The city is far away. She wonders whether this place's silence happens during the day rather than at night.

She stands there for some time. The sound washes over her like water. The taste of dust and metal. Her skin wants to unwrap itself.

At breakfast she sits alone at a table under an awning. She watches a bird while her fingers break the remains of a slice of toast into smaller pieces. She has always watched birds in this way. A small delight in the mundane – the pigeon, the sparrow, the white-eye. Occasionally a raptor wheeling in the sky, a black shadow on the blue. People have given her the names of other birds, but they never stick. She is left with echoes of words mouthed silently before being swallowed. She does the same with people's names. Some part of her will not allow their importance.

Inside, others are scattered at different tables. Accents that don't match where she's from. She wonders how long they will stay. Surely they are on their way somewhere else. This cannot be their destination too.

That afternoon, her nose bleeds. She is alone, sitting under the eaves of her room. She watches it drip, its redness impossible to see against the soil. How much blood would there need to be before her eyes recognise the colour? That night she dreams of war. Buildings reduced to rubble, smoke in the air, gunfire and terror. She has lost someone. She lets go so briefly. Her fingers feel wet, and when she puts her hand against the wall of what was someone's home, she leaves a red mark. She doesn't understand how breathing is important anymore.

She wakes up. The routine continues.

The heat of this place shifts how she lives. She moves slowly. Only when she must. She falls from one nap into another like a cat. When she wakes, she moves to the sink and moves her hands through the water she has dammed. Afterwards, she runs her pruned fingers through her hair.

She makes her way to the river. It's the colour of instant coffee with milk. She can almost smell the sugar. The rivers she grew up with were different. She has no idea what the water in this one contains. She can't watch the light shifting through it. It refuses to give her what she has always taken for granted. Still, lying next to it is soothing. She drifts with the moving air. Whispers on her skin. Moments of quiet.

Later, she lies on the bed, staring at the thatch above her. Something

Frankie Murrey

about the texture of the day — the light and sound — has allowed a melancholy to surface. Ordinarily, she depends on speed to sidestep it.

She shifts her eyes quickly to make her tears slide back inside. Walks with purpose. Taps out ever faster rhythms. The heaviness of the heat has left her unable to do any of these things. Tears slide from her eyes into her ears. She can't imagine them ever stopping. She will drown in salt water. This is the last thought she has before she falls asleep.

She dreams of herself as a small stone. Very still. Very hard. Her thoughts are far away and time is meaningless. She has been, she is, and she will be. The world outside of this life happens at speeds she cannot comprehend. She breathes in, and the universe starts. Out, and it ends.

It is warmth that finally wakes her. She reaches for the edge of the dream. Holding on to the sensation of her stone body being held by a hand also her own. She breathes in and out and considers the possibility that she never let go of what matters.

The Best a Man Can Get

Hedley Twidle

Her younger brother was my high school science teacher, and it was through him that I met Nadira Guy when she came to address us at our annual prize giving. She had just published her fifth novel, *Ignominy* (always fond of one-word titles): the story of a businessman whose past is catching up with him. She was at her best when writing as a man, I think, especially an unpleasant one. But I didn't know any of this then. I only dimly recognised the name, filed in my mind as someone serious, 'political', probably quite boring. And I certainly didn't know what to say – 'Mrs Guy' sounded odd, 'Ms Guy' too stilted, 'Nadira' way too adult and out of my league – when she emerged from her brother's swimming pond one hot afternoon in the year 1996.

Mr Guy, on the other hand, was a name that came easily to us. At the time Julian Guy was younger than most other staff, a powerfully built man with hair tucked behind the ears and a face scored by laugh lines. Its most distinctive feature was a nose that I imagined had once been broken, until I saw it reappear – large, bony, slightly skew – in the face of his sister. He plainly seemed to enjoy his job, taking us through photosynthesis and the nitrogen cycle, the difference between sedimentary, igneous and metamorphic, ideally on location. Ox-bow lakes, anthills, fishing trips, lying in sleeping bags under the stars – all thanks to his belief that being outside was the best way to learn.

This was the eastern Transvaal when I started school and Mpumalanga by the time I finished. But on the map of southern Africa according to vegetation type in Mr Guy's Biology lab – a huge, colourful map in four panels – we remained a region where the dry highveld grassland biome was subsiding to hot lowveld savannah. St Saviour's was a small, eccentric and generally happy boarding school perched halfway down the great escarpment from Johannesburg to the coast, tucked away in a valley that most visitors sped past on the way to the famous game parks further east. Below us was the bushveld, humid and full of life; above us commercial pine plantations, vast and eerie. Underneath us, biding its time: coal.

Most male teachers with broad shoulders would coach rugby, but Mr Guy (or Gil as we called him amongst ourselves, with a soft 'G') was in charge of soccer, which drew smaller numbers. Sometimes he would join games to make up five-a-side, his multi-pocket fishing waistcoats

now exchanged for a smart Celtic strip: green and white. His father was Scottish, a mining engineer who'd gone to work on the copperbelt in Northern Rhodesia, later Zambia. Here he had met and married a woman from a Muslim family – a bit of family history Gil divulged to my friend and fellow midfielder Jake, who was from Lusaka.

The school had grown out of an Anglican mission, and church services in the red brick chapel were mandatory. There was an upstairs balcony at the back, like a dress circle in a small boxy theatre. And here Gil would sit during services, along with two or three other staff members, to signal that he was only there because he had to be. It was never spelled out explicitly, but gradually dawned on you that the small faction just under the rose window, as near as possible to the bell tower stairs, were not religious, were atheists. Out of sight, out of mind for most of the congregation; but as members of the choir, lurching from treble down to bass clef over the course of five years, Jake and I would be facing back across the chapel, noting those few figures under the stained glass: not standing up to sing, not kneeling down to pray, not learning the words.

The world was miraculous enough – this was his reply when we pressed him on it, this godlessness. He liked to quote Darwin about 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful'. And when one of us would nod and murmur 'survival of the fittest', he would shake his head and try to explain that this was exactly the wrong way to understand it. That there was no ranking, no hierarchy, just the tangled bush of life itself, branching through time – an idea you could only grasp in glimpses, for a second or two, before it degraded into something less than it was.

We couldn't always follow him; he was always straining at the leash of the syllabus. So it was no surprise to hear, in later years, that he had left school teaching to do a PhD in botany and then taken up a post in Cape Town. Nadira Guy was already ensconced there as a Professor of Contemporary Literatures (she always hated the plural), and this is where I would re-encounter them at a later stage in my life.

'Gentlemen, please', Gil would say, eyes rolling, if we asked whether all this Darwin stuff was going to be in the exam, 'Not that. Anything but that'.

It didn't matter though, since we were always doing something in his classroom, which was a place of thick teak benches, foetuses pickling in formaldehyde, terrariums of sweaty plants. We were burning

a peanut under a test tube to work out calorific content; or we were feeding mealie meal to snails in a glass tank to flush out their systems ahead of eating them. He brought in a wok, garlic, butter and sautéed them with tripod and Bunsen burner right there in double Biology. This, along with the Chicken Project, helped seal his reputation as (the greatest honour our all-male cohort could bestow) a legend.

One day we were divided into groups of four, with each given a dead chicken (which had died of natural causes, Gil assured the class vegetarians) and told to construct a perfectly intact and accurate model of its skeleton within a month. First gutting and skinning the fowl (ours had a rotting, semi-formed egg inside it); then cleaning its bones of flesh and tendons and gristle with scalpels, and scrubbing them from dirty yellow to bleached white with old toothbrushes and hydrogen peroxide. And finally supergluing it all together, the end result to be mounted on a wooden plinth. But some bones got lost along the way, and so, no matter how upset I got that things weren't working out, our chicken went awry. They all did – which seemed to be the true lesson here: that we couldn't replicate this natural architecture by human hands. When the class unveiled its skeletons, they were all deformed in some sublimely comic way (Jake simply presented a plinth with a heap of bones on it, then took a bow to wild cheering).

'I still dream of the Chicken Project', said Laurence as he drove us to Mpumalanga for our twenty-year reunion, not long ago. It was the first time any of us had been back to the area since leaving school.

'That egg.'

Four of us met at O. R. Tambo car rental for a trip down memory lane; but the highway east from Johannesburg was now a series of open-cast mines with coal trucks queuing at their gates, holding up traffic, clattering over the potholed roads. We were a foursome who had gone through puberty together, bleached bones together, who could make a joke of just about anything that had happened since: addiction, divorce, deaths, the end of the world. Yet moving through that landscape the mood in the hire car slowly changed, darkened. We didn't acknowledge it at first, we compensated by reaching deeper into our shared pool of stories.

Most of the teaching staff at St Saviour's lived on the hillside behind the main school buildings. But the Guys were in an old farmhouse on the far side of the grounds, outside the school gates and up against the

railway line. As carriages of pine lumber moved through the night, the sound rolled over the playing fields to edge our sleep in the boarding houses, strangely comforting. Someone swore he'd seen a dagga bush growing along the tracks when he reported for Early Rising, which was Gil's preferred form of punishment. It involved dressing up in your smartest school uniform and reporting to his gate at 6 a.m. And then the long walk back, all to yourself.

The house was screened off by poplar trees. But when fielding at fine leg or running cross country, we would hope for sightings of Mrs Guy. Or Elodie, as she insisted we call her – 'just say the letters L O D' – during the one unforgettable term in which she offered conversational French on the stoep to a select group of seniors, along with croissants and cardamom-scented tartes aux pommes. She was from the island of Réunion and he had met her while on a field trip there, monitoring frog populations for a Master's in Conservation Biology that he was doing part-time. The science was impossibly romantic: lying awake all night in hammocks strung between trees and counting calls, picking out different species from the electric fizz of a rainforest at full throttle.

Stories went round about how Mr Guy had gone through a transformation. How he had once been much thinner, and a chain smoker. How his class had left a packet of orange safety razors on his desk, since he never shaved quite up to the corners of his mouth, and so always had some hairs spiking out there, like little cat whiskers – very odd. This was the source of his nickname, Gil, now falling into disuse, but occasionally someone might open a window and sing (in the words of the shaving commercial) Gillette...the best a man can get! when he walked past doing his housemaster's rounds at night. Nervous, prone to obsessive behaviours and with a facial tic that would emerge when he was stressed – so they said; but it all changed when he got married.

With her long hair, French accent and chicly tailored slacks, Elodie Guy was, hands down, the hottest staff wife. In an era just prior to easily available pornography, she became an erotic obsession for the inmates of an isolated, all-boys boarding school.

'With *beaucoup*', she once explained, 'Your pronunciation is not right. Beau-cul – that's like: Nice' – and here she paused for the right word – 'bottom.'

'Oui.'

'It's beau-cou, like the bird says. Your throat is too tight'.

We started cooing to each other on the stoep – cul-coup, cou-cou –

me subtly adjusting my lips to mimic her and achieve that crucial distinction.

So here was the final thing that set the Guys a little apart. To the hormonally charged inmates who were getting all the wrong ideas about women, this couple beyond the school gates offered a working model of romantic love. There was a current running between them that was different to the more standard, weather-beaten marriages of the other staff. Even as he gave himself to his work and teaching, the core of Gil's life clearly lay elsewhere, with his wife and young daughter, who kept mostly out of the life of the school. So to be invited there, to that overgrown garden of creepers and buddleias, with a freshwater pool, compost heaps and bees, to drink real coffee and eat runny cheese while discussing Camus or Kieslowski in our pidgin French – was our first try-out at being adults, and it was delicious.

Jake Musonda arrived at St Saviour's in Standard Eight, halfway through my high school years, banished here by his father (so he told us) to the godforsaken bushveld, away from girls and out of trouble. At the beginning of each term, coaches would run from central Johannesburg to the school, a journey of three or four hours. Jake and I would sit together. Had I watched this movie? No. Or that new programme on SABC3? No. Or heard that new house track? No. He would smile and shake his head.

He had quite a big head, squareish and set on a short, stocky body, slightly bull-necked. On his cheeks and under his chin, stubble was always threatening – but he hated shaving since it brought out razor bumps and inflamed his acne (we bonded over this affliction). There were rumours that he had been expelled from a school in Pretoria, but I never found out why exactly, and somehow couldn't pin this backstory to him. Jake was quiet and measured, with a self-possession that made him seem older than us. To make him smile was a rare thing, despite my efforts.

One bus trip he got into an argument with Simon, a dead-eyed loner who was known for carrying a knife up his sleeve in the dining hall. They were arguing in Zulu, which I couldn't understand; but I recognised some of the things being lobbed across the bus, since the ability to insult someone's mother in different languages was a sought-after skill. As soon it left Simon's lips, Jake stood up and removed his silver watch, very deliberately, and handed it to me. He walked to the front and be-

gan punching downward into the stairwell until he was pulled off. His mother, he told me while refitting the clasp, had died when he was young. And that's why he had ended up here, 'in this killing country'.

I was a baritone, he had a beautiful tenor voice which could glide up into an eerie falsetto. We took music theory classes together in a cluster of prefab buildings on the far side of the playing fields – our sanctuary. He said the practice rooms with pianos were the best thing about the school and would spend whole afternoons locked up in them, playing too softly to be overheard.

'Enjoy the nature and all that stuff', he said as the rest of us set out on Sunday afternoons, 'I'll be right here'.

He had a little notebook, always with him, in which he wrote down ideas, secretive. I practised in the empty chapel, hoping for an audience.

'Watch your pedal', he once told me when I was keeping my foot down on the sustain, 'That's like too many sweets.'

One afternoon I walked into the chapel, intending to piece together little chorales for our harmony class. But Jake was already there in the empty choir, thinking out chords, improvising around the hymns we sang. I wanted to stride down the aisle and greet him, in the hearty, somewhat brittle way of our friendship. But I stopped myself and crept up to the balcony instead. He was humming the melody as he played it, and sometimes that strange falsetto would reach me. I listened for a long time, until the stained glass turned to shadow, slipping out after the last notes faded and he shut the lid.

Addressing a school prize-giving was clearly not something that Nadira Guy wanted to do. But our headmaster – a liberal, reformer type – must have prevailed on Julian, who must have prevailed on his older sister. An activist, a Communist, some of the ex-Rhodesian Geography teachers muttered. Someone who'd been in jail in the 80s and written poems about it. Who'd had affairs with Struggle leaders, Black radicals, now government ministers – all kinds of gossip.

The event was held in an outdoor amphitheatre set into a slope that could seat all pupils, staff and visiting parents. She stood there at the foot of the massed ranks, a tall woman with straight grey hair cut in a bob. Undaunted and seeming almost bored, she began speaking about her childhood, the books she had read when young, the dissonance between those classics of English and Russian literature and the red soil of the mining towns where she grew up. First north of Lusaka, on

the border with Congo; then the platinum belt west of Johannesburg, where the family moved when she was a teenager.

My attention normally wandered during these addresses, most often platitudes served up by some or other captain of industry. But she was not exhorting us to do anything. She was simply describing a particular world, one that I had been trying to shake off and disown, yet which I now saw being paid close attention: the company town with its slimes, dams and concrete headgears. The sinkholes and earth tremors when the underground blasting happened, just after lunch, shaking the paintings on our dining room wall. The barracks for migrant labourers, the 'married quarters', the Rec Club.

The second half of her speech was about the Truth Commission, which she had been covering at the time, and about which she would go on to publish an unpopular book about. Her argument worked up from the vast scale of the underground workings, the world that had produced this unconvincingly named country, 'South Africa': the diggings, the migrant labour, the ports, the trains. She talked about the railway line that President Kruger built from Pretoria to Delagoa Bay to throw off the British Empire's chokehold, and the generations of miners who had been transported right past our school gates. Could this all be so quickly undone, forgotten and forgiven – and wouldn't that polluted, acidic water be leaching out of the mines for generations to come?

It was the language of the Commission that betrayed it, she went on, speaking over the heads of the bemused parents and prefects and members of the board. She quoted from the testimony of a security policeman as an example of the 'extreme linguistic poverty' of the country – 'Unfortunately we kept hitting him until he died' – and ended her speech with the words: 'You can't apologise for the unforgivable'.

Looking back, it was prescient: the address, the book. But that day it struck a dissonant, ungrateful note. Nadira Guy, it was generally felt, had not been the best choice of speaker for a day of simple celebration: too arrogant and intellectual. The rest of the ceremony rang a little hollow, an odd vibration hovering over it all.

The next day I went with some of my classmates to the house behind the poplars. The famous writer had asked to speak to members of the Literature Club. Jake was invited too because of the Zambian connection; he was already close to the family somehow.

We arrived to find the women walking up from the pool at the bot-

tom of the garden.

‘So, you’re the boy who won all the prizes’, was the first thing our visiting author said to me.

Seeing Elodie Guy in a swimsuit, if only for those few seconds before she wrapped herself in a kikoi and disappeared inside for the afternoon – this was, we knew, going to make us legends when we returned to the dorm, where we would be debriefed on every detail. But it was Nadira Guy who transfixed me that afternoon: tall, so pale a brown, freckled, bony. She must have been just over 40 and stood in a rather ungainly way: feet splayed and hands on her hips, unaware or unperturbed by the strand of pubic hair that was escaping the elasticated fabric of her costume. She was eyeing me aduly, quizzically. I was not sure where to look and couldn’t stop my eyes flicking back to that single, strangely coarse hair making its bid for freedom in the crotch area – somehow linked, in my virgin brain, with the uncompromising prize-giving address.

Ridiculous what we remember, or where meaning congregates in the memory; but I was seventeen and used to being the intellectual mascot of our year – not often challenged on things. Her transition from public speaker to swimmer, her emergence from the greenish, non-chlorinated swimming pond, the different way her hair fell to the prize-giving parents, its wonderful greyness: all of these were giving strong signals that the world was full of things I had never been told about – lots of things.

After many messages back and forth on the WhatsApp group, the Chicken Lovers were finally in one car and en route to our twenty-year anniversary. Spirits were high at the Budget rental office: Laurence had flown in from London, Ben had wrangled some time away from his busy life in cold supply chain management; Zach was now into ultra-marathons – but the trip took an odd turn.

First, the drive through the coal belt, where eddies of black dust blew across the landscape. The scale of it. All this had happened while we’d been away, living through the prime of our lives? Then driving through the hills where we used to go on fishing trips, the whole region seemed to have become a touristic theme park – at every turn we were trapped in some copywriter’s idea of *The Angler’s Meander*. Had trout fishing always been this tacky, with all the wicker creels and faux-Scottish lodges that were basically gated communities built around lakes stocked full of fish in a barrel? Possibly, and we were just more jaded

now, more savvy. Or had the whole world changed, reached a tipping point, lost something, begun to fray? Also possible; or maybe all of the above, in ratios and combinations that were hard to separate out and put in their proper relation. Which was just the kind of thing making our late thirties (we agreed) such a pain in the cul, psychically speaking: just the strain of getting a basic working model of what the fuck was what – it applied across all sectors.

Ben had given up drinking but brought some hash brownies instead, which we ate without much thought. They were much too strong, and totally the wrong thing for a weekend catching up with old school-mates – something which requires social courage, after all. The anniversary was timed to coincide with a big rugby match, but the closest we got to it was skulking behind the trees on the other side of the field, watching the supporters do complex war cries and Mexican waves by opening and closing their blazers.

‘That’s new’, said Ben.

We didn’t make the memorial dinner either, and the story soon spread about the foursome who hadn’t even bothered to put in an appearance at the official programme. We tried a walk in the forests but they were full of rags and plastic bottles and a greyish-greenish light that Zach – who said he barely drank coffee these days since anything could throw off his mental equilibrium, so thanks Ben (recriminations were flying) – was finding really hard to deal with at this moment. Eventually we just holed up at our guesthouse in some depressing town far from the school because it was wedding season in the trout lands and we had booked too late. It was a Victorian cottage with a secluded garden and a swimming pool, but the surrounding landscape had been scraped and paved right up to the front gate. Just outside was a four-way stop where all the coal trucks turned at 90-degree angles. They woke us up all night: the exhaust brakes, the smashing sound of the wheels going over potholes.

It must be a pity, I said to the owners, this beautiful property now surrounded by all this.

‘No we’re doing well here. Lots of corporates. A few more years and we’ll retire to the coast’.

On the last evening we ordered takeaways and sat in the braai area, in the blue light of a pool clogged with leaves, and finally got down to what was really what: divorce (Zach), school fees (Ben, Laurence), job insecurity (Ben, Zach), ailing parents, inappropriate crushes, worsen-

ing eczema (all present). And then the question I knew had been coming ever since we signed the collision damage waiver.

What was the story with Julian Guy? And his sister, the writer? Because I had been involved somehow, hadn't I, and Jake? And was it true? That the one man who seemed to have it figured out, who we'd always held up as fortunate, content, unafraid, in possession of some quiet secret – that he'd killed himself?

So I told them, as the pool cleaner chugged away on dead leaves and the coal trucks clattered. It's the only time I told the story properly, because I was with old friends, because we'd all been properly humbled by the events of the weekend, and there was really nothing else to do.

CRITICISM

Bibi Binti Been-tu Bantu's Appeal for Languageing

Aika Swai

Dedicated to Mzee Onesimo,
who left us, with all his words, on 2 May 2024.

There's this thing we used to do, we still do it, and I don't really have a word for it except languageing. Language as verb, action, process, practice. I sort of made it up. I'm aware that it has all kinds of meanings in academic circles, but I appropriated it for my own purposes, to explain that thing we used to do.

I grew up on the periphery of a place that was too small to be a town but too vast to be a village. As in most African places, everyone is immersed in more than one language, everyone thinks bilingually, trilingually, always involved in intuitive translations of each other. There is the national language and there's the language from the village. Sometimes each village has its own language, only separated by a river or ridge. We say, nakusikia lakini siongei, I can hear you but I can't speak you, but we hear each other all the time. It was in that kind of context that I loved languageing as a child: being in the presence of grown-ups, discussing the origin of words, the value and relevance of proverbs, phrasings, aphorisms, the magical loss and gain of meanings once one shuttles back and forth between languages, synaptically so advanced, lexically infinite.

These days so many conversations moved to smart phones and social media outsmarted us into talking more, but dialoging less. There's also the diasporic reason, of course. These days, so many of us have our parents in another country or continent, all because we chased a dream, sometimes an education dream, sometimes a money dream, or perhaps because push and pull factors bulldozed a one-way-only sign into our life-paths. Our elders live in different villages, towns, cities; it is harder than ever before to gather around the fire and talk about all kinds of things, tell all kinds of stories and binding it all: languageing. Thinking about language together. Pouring out feelings about the quality of words, why a word is more precise than another, more beautiful when put next to this one, more powerful when said in this language, not English.

In my experience, literacy, education and gender barriers did not affect how languaging took place. To the contrary, sometimes it would be the illiterate participants of the conversation that truly knew the etymology of phrases and the many ways a word behaves over time. As a young adult, I used to think that my language barriers prevented me from fully participating in languaging-conversations, but with age one learns to enjoy the porosity of the language barrier, the little geezer moments of feeling a word without understanding it.

I do not speak Kimachame. My name means thank-you in Kimachame. Kimachame is spoken in Machame. I'm not sure if Kimachame is at the risk of dying out, but it might be because of people like me who never learned to speak it and pass it on to my children. I am one of those people who left the village, left the country, all via high SAT-scores in English. Off to America, then back again. Do we still use the term "been-to" for those of us who came back, trying to fit into bantu and binti again? I like it. Let my avatar be Bibi Binti Been-to Bantu. Before I went to America, I didn't really know words like feminism and patriarchy. I remember being startled about not being able to think of the Swahili words. What exactly happens when we import words from English to make sense of the villages we come from? I became obsessed with untranslatability. For a while, all I cared about was semantics – the act of looking for words, finding words, identifying absent words, creating new words or neologisms to refine language... and one day, I came across the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer, which reignited my commitment to preserving words.

Kimmerer's relationship to English is different from mine, but I can relate to how "powers of assimilation did their work" in the linguicide perpetrated by boarding schools and other governmental/religious institutions. "Had history been different, I would likely speak Bodewadmimwin, or Potowatomi, an Anishinaabe language. But, like many of the three hundred and fifty Indigenous languages of the Americas, Potowatomi is threatened, and I speak the language you read." (Kimmerer, 49) Kimmerer describes the enormous effort with which she taught herself Potowatomi, first simple nouns, then simple verbs. After months of language drills, her "kindergarten vocabulary" seemed only useful for the simplest of communications, like "pass the salt" at the dinner table. And then one day, when she was just about to cave in

to the frustration of only having her dog to speak to in Potawatomi, she came across the word 'wiikwegamaa', "to be a bay," in the dictionary. Her reaction to this one word fired up a process that reminds me of languaging and expands it from something I described earlier as communal and profoundly dialogic to a deeply personal practice of languaging mentally, internally, and intuitively. "And then I swear I heard the zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my finger, and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. [...] A bay is a noun only if water is dead. [...] To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive." (Kimmerer, 55) It is this pivotal experience that recharted Kimmerer's approach to learning Potawatomi and words from other threatened languages. She started to see her language acquisition journey as a process of learning "the grammar of animacy." It is indeed possible to salvage one word at a time and see a way of being within that word, so much so that even a continent away, it still feels like such an asset to learn about a word like "puhpowee", which translates as "the force which causes mushrooms to push from the earth overnight." (Kimmerer, 49)

Especially when a language is close to extinction, every word matters. N. Scott Momaday reminded us, "A song, or a prayer, or a story, is always but one generation removed from extinction. The risk of loss is constant, therefore, and language is never to be taken for granted." (Momaday, 28) There is an urgency about preserving words that carry grammars of animacy and that can restore the sacred. Momaday stated, "I believe that what most threatens the American Indian is sacrilege, the theft of the sacred." (Momaday 76) It is after encountering thinkers like Kimmerer and Momaday, and after learning about the language regeneration efforts in North America that I started worrying about African languages, especially the ones spoken by less than a couple of thousand people. Kimachame is one of several strands of Kichagga that is spoken by people living on all slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. Kichagga, as an umbrella term, is spoken by almost 1.5 million people, one of Tanzania's largest language groups. Around 300,000 people speak Kimachame, but I don't know if that number is growing. If not, I'm both victim and perpetrator of this glottophagy.

Maybe it was Ngugi wa Thiong'o who instilled this all-or-nothing pres-

sure for those of us who read *Decolonizing the Mind* as foundational text in high school or college. But now I understand that there is a case to be made for publishing entire novels in African languages, and there is a case for salvaging, preserving and cherishing singular words even if total fluency in the language becomes less and less likely as time moves on. Languaging about these words is a lovely way to preserve them.

There's the village and there is zoom. At the beginning of 2024, I asked my father and his brother to join me in trialogue about the nuances and differences between certain words in Kiswahili and Kimachame. The cluster of words I wanted to discuss all revolve around matter and non-matter, thus the pun that some words matter more than others was intended. I wanted to know about ancestor, spirit, ghost, spectre, apparition and other terminology we use to talk about life and death. At first, I simply read the list of words and asked my fathers to simply write down what words came to mind in Kiswahili and Kimachame. After that we went through one word at a time and compared notes. This is but a short excerpt of a long and priceless conversation, and it is also merely a glimpse into what I mean with languaging. Throughout the trialogue, we swerved and swayed in and out of three languages, often within a single sentence. Transcribing it to print (in English) of course robs it of much cultural capital and nuance. In my transcription and translation, I tried to stay true to the way we phrased everything, and I refrained from transadapting the trialogue to a mainstream English register. Zooming in from Cape Town and Vienna, during a time of widely exposed extreme brutality in Palestine, Yemen, the Congo, a time in which our daily vocabulary included words like genocide, mass starvation and ceasefire. Extinction was on our minds. Extinction of all kinds.

Aika: Can we go to the word 'ancestor.'

Salema: I had trouble with this one. "Wahenga walisema" is a phrase we use, the elders used to say, the ancestors used to say... so I first thought of that phrase and from there I reasoned that wahenga is the closest word I would use for 'ancestor' but I am not confident.

Aika: Interesting. It is a word we don't use much then?

CRITICISM

Swai: I had the same problem here. I could not quite find a perfect match in Swahili. I reverted to a phrase like “Wazazi wa kale” – that directly translates as “the parents from back in the day.” I must admit that the word ‘wahenga’ did not come immediately to me.

Salema: Bila shaka, without doubt, mhenga is the ancestor, wahenga are the ancestors – that is the correct translation.

Aika: What about Kimachame?

Salema: In Kimachame, the word that comes to me is “miku.” Miku is an old person. Wamiku are the old people.

Aika: Ok but if we take miku in Kimachame, it is bias towards men, it usually refers to men. But wahenga in Kiswahili includes women. If you say wamiku, it’s the male side, isn’t it? Maybe that is because in the past men were the decision-makers?

Salema: Sasa, this is very deep. Let us dwell on this a little bit. Let’s go back to wahenga. Wahenga represents men and women. It is in the heads of people that men were on the frontlines of talking, giving directions and advice. So because the domination of men in society, the connotation is now that a “mzee” is a man. And it is the same in Kimachame.

Swai: Yes, but I have to say that “mhenga” in Swahili is less discriminating than “miku.” There is no way we are speaking of a female entity when saying “miku.” So what does this mean? That women cannot become ancestors?

Salema: Well, let’s think. Look at the word “mzee.” We address elders like that. It is a term of respect, so Swai don’t you remember when you were a young man but you were directing the hospital, people called you “mzee” as a means of ...

Aika: ... respect.

Salema: Yes, respect. But would one address an older woman with the same term “mzee” to communicate respect? I don’t think so.

Swai: You say the truth. One would not do that.

Salema: There must be a word in Kimachame that functions like mhen-ga. Wahenga – the people who came before us, they were in front of us. I swear, I will look for that word.

Swai: You are right, we have to look and find the word. “Ora miku” is how you greet a male ancestor, but now we must look for the word they used for women. Now let me tell you, if you are quicker than us to get home, there is only one man left in the village who can help us now. We must go to Mzee Onesimo. Sadly, Erasto Kweka would have also helped us, but he is not with us anymore.

Salema: Truth.

Aika: Ok I am taking note. I’m writing down we must go see Mzee Onesimo.

Salema: Good. I will go.

Aika: Let’s go on to the next word: spirit. You both said that you had difficulties with it because it has several meanings in English. What did you write down for spirit?

Salema: The first spirit that came to me in Swahili is “roho,” a positive word. R-O-H-O. This is a difficult word, how do you define “roho” – you know when you say someone has a “roho nzuri” or “roho yake imetulia” we are talking about a beautiful spirit or energy. “Roho” is not tangible, it’s not like saying “heart,” the physical thing that beats.

Swai: I agree with what you say about “roho.” When we talk about the heart, we say “moyo” but if I say “moyoni” I am talking about inside the heart, isn’t it?

Salema: Eheeh. Now what is inside the heart, moyoni? I’m telling you it’s roho.

Swai: Yes, it is difficult to explain the relationship between roho and moyo.

CRITICISM

Salema: Moyo is the physical thing. Roho is the non-physical. If you go to the butcher and ask for the cow's heart, you use the word 'moyo.' But think about the phrase "Roho yangu imekataa." It means, my spirit refuses to do something. You would not say "moyo yangu imekataa."

Swai: True, but we say things like I love you with all my heart, naku-penda kwa moyo yote.

Aika: And when we say we're giving someone courage, we say "kumpa moyo."

Salema: Ah, yes, here we need a linguist to unravel that.

Swai: So let's talk about "nafsi". Nafsi is a strong word, it is like saying "my being."

Salema: I think nafsi is a possible translation, it is one of the meanings. I am following you.

Aika: In the dictionary, nafsi would usually be translated as "self" and that it was imported from Qur'anic Arabic where nafsi is also viewed as the soul. I wonder now what happened mentally when you were negotiating this – you were making sense between soul, spirit, self. How do these words behave in Kimachame?

Swai: Nrrima. If you translate "nrrima," it's really different from talking about the heart. Moyo in Kimachame is "ngoo." That's the physical one, but nrrima - eh, how can I explain that words?

Salema: Ah, that word is interesting. It changes when you combine it with other words.

[a minor argument ensues about the various phrases that use the word, consensus that people from Masama will say it differently from Machame people. Laughter when comparing who speaks Kimachame halisi vs a variation of Kimachame. Chuckle from my side because Kimachame itself is a variation of Kichagga, and there's a long history of trying to standardize Kilimanjaro's languages]

Aika: Ok, let's bring in another word then. You tell me that *nrrima* is what you would say for spirit in Kimachame. How does that compare to the word you would use to describe a ghost?

Salema: I found two words. *Pepo* and *Mzimu*. That's the ghost of a dead person. And in Kimachame, *irumu*. When we say someone has a dirty 'pepo,' in English we would translate that as 'bad sprit.'

Aika: aha, is there consensus?

Swai: Yes.

Salema: Wait, wait, now another word arrived. *Mzuka*.

Swai: *Mzuka*? Yes, you are right. That is commonly used. For example, when someone dies, and then suddenly he is seen somewhere. For example, it was once said that the *mzuka* of Sokoine was seen in parliament.

Salema: I remember. I think *mzuka* and *mzimu* are the words I would use for ghost.

Swai: So what is the difference between these words? Which word is more negative?

Salema: I think it has something to do with visibility. The *mzuka* is the one that is seen by people, a ghost that shows up. *Mzimu* is more like a presence or energy. So the people who have died, their ghosts are somewhere out there, but we don't see them.

Swai: I can follow. There is also something about time. The *mizimu* are from long ago. But when we use *mzuka* we are saying that the death occurred recently.

Aika: Ok, in this case I want to dialog this a little further. I want to see if the nuance in English matches the nuance in Kiswahili and Kimachame. In English, you have the word 'ghost' and you have the word 'spectre' – that has the same root as the word spectacles or spectator, so it has to do with visibility, looking at something, and expecting

CRITICISM

something. Now, there is no strict rule about this, but when I think of a spectre, I think of a very uncomfortable feeling because the spectre is looking at me, it is after me, it is not just passively present. Ghosts can do that too, but they are not always haunting. I want to know about this in Swahili and Kimachame.

Swai: Do you mean that ghosts are aggressive, others are not?

Salema: And how do we say haunting?

Swai: It's when something is following you, something is after you. If you think of it this way, we do have a similar nuance between mzuka and mzimu. A mzimu is not necessarily after you. See, you know, over there by Msieni, we have mizimu there. They just live in that cave, the valley, but they are not after anybody. But with a mzuka, heyyyy, remember that time when Sokoine was seen in parliament.

Salema: People were shaking!

Swai: Yes, because they were thinking he will come now and demand to know from everyone "who did this to me?"

Aika: So, a mzuka doesn't leave you in peace.

Swai: Eh, we have that. Don't you know there are some areas where everyone knows you cannot build a house. Those are places inhabited by mizuka. I'm even tempted to say that with mizimu, you can find ways to chase them away. But a mzuka stays.

Aika: You know what's interesting? When I told you my eight words earlier there was one word that you said you did not know in English, and therefore you could not translate it: apparition. But now after having this conversation, I see that you do know about the phenomenon the word describes even though you don't have the English word in your vocabulary. Apparition is when something or somebody appears who is not alive in the physical body. There are a couple of ways this can happen – in a dream, for example, or even in broad daylight. What are the words we use to describe that kind of experience?

Salema: Well, if it is in a dream, you would say “ndoto,” the dream, or “nimeota” – I dreamed... but you are reminding me of a very old memory. We were boys at Old Moshi Secondary school, and one day I dreamt I was walking at a very particular place in Machame when I encountered my father, who at that point had been dead several years. There he was, with his stick and blanket. And he told me in Kimachame, “go home mother is ill.” And indeed, when I made my way home, I found my mother in poor condition. Now, this is the sort of thing one does not talk about much, but if I did talk about it, I would say, “Baba yangu ameniotesha.... kuotesywa.”

Aika: That too is fascinating because if you say “kuotesywa,” all I hear is the verb for planting seeds. We use “kuotesha” to describe the process of putting seeds in the ground in anticipation of germination. “Kuotesywa” is the passive voice of the same verb, no?

Salema: Yes, yes – there is a connection. If I say I saw my father in a dream or apparition, I am also saying that he planted something within me, something that allowed me to see something. When we say “kuota,” we are simply saying we dreamed something, for example you can dream that you are flying like a bird. But when we say “kuotesywa,” it means you encountered someone or something in your dream. It is a dream you could not just have had by yourself. It is my father who put himself into my dream.

Swai: We have all had dreams like this. If you think about it, they have been around a long time. Didn't people come to Joseph in the Old Testament to tell him of the dreams that warned him of the drought? And what about the revelations at the end of the New Testament?

Salema: Truth. These things are old. And we still can't explain it.

There's this thing we used to do, we still do it, and I don't really have a word for it except languaging. Language as verb, action, process, practice. Languaging is the twin of remembering, the cousin of conscientization. The stories that poured forth during our dialogue are precious, so dear, so clear, too valuable to be squandered on ears that won't hear. These kinds of conversations are vulnerable once recorded, transcribed, released – out there now, for anyone to judge and diminish with

CRITICISM

words like superstition, blasphemy or unchristian. Vast reservoirs of philosophy are sitting on our tongues. When Kimmerer learned the word 'puhpowee', "the force which causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight," she was stunned because as a biologist, equipped with hundreds of technical terms, she was still lacking a term as effective as puhpowee to describe the life-force of the mushroom that shoots up just before dawn. "In the three syllables of this new word I could see an entire process of close observation in the damp morning woods, the formulation of a theory for which English has no equivalent. The makers of this word understood a world of being, full of unseen energies that animate everything." (Kimmerer, 49)

And my name means thank you.

***Breasts, etc* by Nthikeng Mohlele**

Danyela Demir

In his illuminating review of Nthikeng Mohlele's *The Discovery of Love*, a short story collection published by Jacana in 2022, Wamuwi Mbao states that: "Nthikeng Mohlele ought to be counted among the most interesting contemporary writers in South Africa. His novels, fervidly digressive works of fiction featuring Gainsbourgian protagonists, are very good when they are good, and a chore when they are not" (2023). This succinct summary of Mohlele's work has resonated with me. Particularly over the last 10 years or so, Mohlele's oeuvre has been imbalanced at best and in a qualitative decline at worst. Whereas I was captured by earlier works such as *Rustie Bell* (2014) and *Small Things* (2013) and drawn in by both the mysterious, somewhat unhinged protagonists, and their often unobtainable female counterparts, after *Pleasure* (2016), I have found myself increasingly exasperated by the repetitiveness of Mohlele's choice of themes and the constant need to tell the readers what fine connoisseurs of jazz and literature his "aloof" (Mbao 2023) protagonists are.

His most recent novel, *Breasts etc.* (Blank Page Books 2023), is hardly any different, though it does have a slight twist. Protagonist James Baldwin (a problematic choice of name which I shall discuss below), lives in two alternate worlds: present-day South Africa and a post-apocalyptic world which is only accessible to him in his dreams. In this dreamscape, women have disappeared from the face of the earth and men are left to fend for themselves – which has disastrous consequences, such as primordial fights between men and rodents and the "frontier" being ravaged by ash and filth. For James, the very heterosexual nude photographer and voiceover artist for commercial ads, this, of course, is a tragedy. Though I find the concept of imagining a world without women interesting, Mohlele's descriptions of that world often lack depth and richness. It is also not clear what exactly the purpose of this womanless post-apocalyptic world is, save for the fact that the protagonist, at the end of the novel, reveals himself to have been an archivist of sorts. Perhaps his photographs of so many nude women will save the men's sanity during the apocalypse?

In the present-day narrative, already familiar themes with no innova

CRITICISM

In his illuminating review of Nthikeng Mohlele's *The Discovery of Love*, a short story collection published by Jacana in 2022, Wamuwi Mbaao states that: "Nthikeng Mohlele ought to be counted among the most interesting contemporary writers in South Africa. His novels, fervidly digressive works of fiction featuring Gainsbourgian protagonists, are very good when they are good, and a chore when they are not" (2023). This succinct summary of Mohlele's work has resonated with me. Particularly over the last 10 years or so, Mohlele's oeuvre has been imbalanced at best and in a qualitative decline at worst. Whereas I was captured by earlier works such as *Rustie Bell* (2014) and *Small Things* (2013) and drawn in by both the mysterious, somewhat unhinged protagonists, and their often unobtainable female counterparts, after *Pleasure* (2016), I have found myself increasingly exasperated by the repetitiveness of Mohlele's choice of themes and the constant need to tell the readers what fine connoisseurs of jazz and literature his "aloof" (Mbaao 2023) protagonists are.

His most recent novel, *Breasts etc.* (Blank Page Books 2023), is hardly any different, though it does have a slight twist. Protagonist James Baldwin (a problematic choice of name which I shall discuss below), lives in two alternate worlds: present-day South Africa and a post-apocalyptic world which is only accessible to him in his dreams. In this dream-landscape, women have disappeared from the face of the earth and men are left to fend for themselves – which has disastrous consequences, such as primordial fights between men and rodents and the "frontier" being ravaged by ash and filth. For James, the very heterosexual nude photographer and voiceover artist for commercial ads, this, of course, is a tragedy. Though I find the concept of imagining a world without women interesting, Mohlele's descriptions of that world often lack depth and richness. It is also not clear what exactly the purpose of this womanless post-apocalyptic world is, save for the fact that the protagonist, at the end of the novel, reveals himself to have been an archivist of sorts. Perhaps his photographs of so many nude women will save the men's sanity during the apocalypse?

In the present-day narrative, already familiar themes with no innovative or remotely experimental twist feature: women and their physical form with which the male main character is obsessed, a somewhat conceited protagonist who likes the finer things in life such as expensive

wine and jazz, and the importance of a muse for the protagonist. The two women prominently featured are Esmeralda, a recovering drug addict turned saint who James photographs and subsequently falls for, and Winnie, a muse of sorts and the first woman whose breasts James sees when he is sixteen years old. The descriptions of both female characters are clichéd at the best of times and problematic at worst:

“Winnie was presentable, by which I mean you could marry her if you had no better or more promising alternative. Except she had a beautiful body, the loveliest skin, a smile that stretched for days and the most agreeable temperament” (2023).

Later, he describes Esmeralda in the following manner:

“Disrobed, there is only one word to describe Esmeralda Abedienne: Perfection. That shoulder line, the collarbones ... this woman’s navel is so perfectly perched on her belly that leads down to the loveliest hips that seem to radiate light” (2023).

I am aware, of course, that the narrator can be read as unreliable, and perhaps the reader should take these descriptions with a grain of salt and have a more critical attitude towards the narrator. The narrator’s unreliability is indicated by his professions both as photographer and voiceover artist: the former makes him see the world, especially women, through the filter of the camera only, and the latter ensures that we only hear the voice, but never actually see the man. Still, I find the characters, particularly women, underdeveloped and not particularly convincing. Besides, I agree with Mbao that “more troublingly, the thoughts of Mohlele’s various protagonists are often uninsightful: they do not suggest a deep understanding of dynamics between people beyond a recursive push-pull of heterosexual eroticism, or a man’s ideas of what that means” (2023). Sadly, James Baldwin is no exception here. In fact, given the choice of name, I find him somewhat more troubling than the previous characters that Mbao talks about.

What is the purpose of naming a straight character who has no ounce of creativity or writerly connection in his bones after James Baldwin? Is it not pretentious and violent “straightwashing” (that is to say, queer erasure) of Baldwin, a gay man? In my view, this belaboured intertextu-

CRITICISM

al reference does nothing to improve the text. On the contrary, it makes no sense and comes across as a distortion and caricature of Baldwin's memory.

Amidst this tedious read, however, are rare moments of shining prose and moving incidents. One such moment occurs when James tries to locate Winnie in Diepsloot after he hears from her colleague that she has fallen ill. Here, he makes a comparison between informal settlements and the narrator's post-apocalyptic dreams that I find compelling and haunting:

"Alexandra Township and Diepsloot and other places like them informal settlements are in strange ways reminiscent of the frontier, of the apocalypse, in the present time and not some unknown future. The only real difference is that they do not eat rodents here" (Mohlele 2023).

However, as James rightly points out, it is more complicated than that. In a possible evocation of Mafika Gwala's seminal poem "There is" (1982) and Saidiya Hartman's "The Terrible Beauty of the Slum", he emphasises that, contrary to his post-apocalyptic world, townships and informal settlements are, of course, also inhabited by women and that, despite Black people's precarious living conditions, there is also joy to be found:

"And yet there are, amid the gloom and strive, still oases of smiles, aspirant poets and composers, melodious tenors and those equipped with the spiritual and magnificent to connect with and represent god. There is, amid the squalor and whips of poverty, still laughter, faith in future liberations, a silent revolt against facelessness and a cultivation of the smallest fragments of human dignity" (Mohlele 2023).

I would have wished for more such beautiful moments, rather than having to wade through hair-raising descriptions of women and pseudo-intellectual enumerations of the jazz songs the protagonist listens to without there being any profound connection to the music within/for the text.

After finishing Mohlele's *Breasts, etc.*, I am slightly dismayed at the idea that the author has perhaps succumbed to what Perfect Hlongwane has called "production-line stories" (2023) in South African writing, or in other words, that Mohlele is fast becoming a one-trick pony.

The Near North by Ivan Vladislavić

Niamh Ahern

Aside from layovers, I have never really been to Johannesburg. Try as I may to shed my Capetonian tendencies towards (or against) local exploration, I have yet to traverse the streets of our city of gold outside of my wanderings through Ivan Vladislavić's oeuvre.

The Near North (Picador Africa, 2023), his latest book, sees Vladislavić grapple once again with the harshness and beauty of the urban wilderness he has called home for most of his life. Primarily set under the bell jar of COVID-19, it follows the writer rambling through memories, relationships, creative touchstones, and an ever-shifting, perpetually unequal South African landscape, partly exemplified by the Northern neighbourhoods (and their accompanying gentrification) that have now become 'his hinterland' (53).

Vladislavić is an expert in his segments of the cityscape, a flaneur against all odds. His astute observations on suburban development, social inequality, and urban decay take many forms, from chronicling a friend's transformation of overgrown public land into a garden to analysing the copy of gardener and domestic worker classifieds. He transforms the minutiae of his surroundings into field notes whose mundanity are illuminated by the sheen of his prose. Within such passages, the geographical is rendered both personal and socio-political:

These order-sustaining nails are scattered around the city. People hardly ever notice them, and even if they do, they never wonder what they're for. But they're keeping everything in place. Anyone who got sick of this dump could lay their hands on a hefty claw hammer or a crowbar and pull some of them out. Remove a few strategic pins and the whole sorry construct will fly apart. (110)

As is obvious to anyone vaguely familiar with the writer's work and confirmed on the book's blurb, *The Near North* is a companion piece to *Portrait with Keys* (Umuzi, 2006), a collation of nonfiction fragments that chronicles this city in flux or, in hindsight, the earlier stages of a downward trend. These numbered fragments are grouped together under broader 'itineraries' in the book's topography, amongst which

are 'Beggars and sellers', 'Home territory', 'Object lessons', 'Security', 'Street addresses, Johannesburg', and 'Walking'. Vladislavić returns to these themes and others in *North* from the vantage of someone who, due to the tragic murder of his housesitter and family friend, has necessarily retreated from the sharper edges of the terrain. He turns his gaze outward in search of 'houses with names', 'demolition notices taped to gates', 'defunct security company signs', 'handyman's fliers' (109). Simultaneously, he directs this same gaze inward, reflecting on the writing life lived alongside friends, lovers, and now-deceased loved ones. *Portrait* and *North* share the golden thread of the city portrayed within their pages, but are ultimately very different works. Their vantage points – the former rooted firmly in its present, the latter tending more heavily towards a backward glance – bookend a significant period in the author's writing life, and, more broadly, post-apartheid Johannesburg and South Africa. Whilst both books should be regarded and critiqued in their own right, it would be amiss to neglect the iterative reflections of the other's trajectory present in each volume.

With that said, it is difficult to abandon wishes and expectations when reading a follow-up to something that grabbed you from the first line and kept you wanting more of its beauty until its very end and beyond. I expected fresh insight, innovation, experimentation, and surprise, which, considering the author is covering old ground, is no easy feat. If I had to strip away the specifics of these hopes, I would say that at the heart of what I was seeking was the magic sprinkled upon the garden paths carved out betwixt and between *Portrait*'s passages. Throughout my reading of *North*, I did not often feel that magic. Rather, it was undercut by key issues in the book's construction and execution.

Vladislavić is a writer whose work is decidedly localised to South Africa and, more specifically, Johannesburg. Yet, he has been able to universalise that which lies inside his frame by holding the right references up to the light. In *Portrait* and, for instance, *The Distance* (Penguin Random House, 2019), he manages to familiarise the reader with steering wheel locks or the apartheid-era sports boycott without alienating his primarily local audience with prescriptive contextual background. In *North*, it seems that, by generalising for a broader readership, he loses the local reader along the way.

CRITICISM

Somehow, though engaged with specific periods in history, his books do not always date themselves as much as they could. There is something immersive about his use of imagery and social commentary that may ring true years into the future beyond the book's publication. The utilisation of the 2020–2021 time period as a major tenet of North's narrative breaks the immersion, and situates the book in a context both too specific and too generalised to be taken beyond its era. COVID-19 occupies an awkward position in that it is a point of reference recent enough to warrant inclusion in a conversation regarding, say, the slow uptake in event attendance, but far away enough that we can now reflect on it literarily beyond peri-COVID accounts. It is difficult to do without falling into the mere relaying of key collective memories from that period, which is what Vladislavić tends towards in North. Do we really need paragraphs dedicated to factual descriptions of South Africa's lockdown – our patient zeros, the various stages of restriction, the paradoxical nature of the 'exercise hour', homemade hand sanitiser, the wiping down of groceries – when we (the majority of readers) already hold that information fresh in our heads or in the pages of many other volumes about this recent shared history? Aside from this, it is within a COVID-oriented section that I found the best example of a fragment in which his often astute use of metaphor is absent, instead falling flat and veering into trite territory by way of a Haiku-esque cliché:

The pandemic makes our metaphors literal.
The virus goes viral.
The public space is toxic.
We are sick to death of one another. (29)

Vladislavić seems to have fallen into some well-established creative nonfiction traps. Namely, an overuse of intertextuality in instances wherein it is either unnecessary or a detraction, and a turn towards literary solipsism that does not always work.

Some references are well-integrated – such as his musings on works by Ed Ruscha and Georges Perec when exploring 'the urge to document' (98) – whilst others seem tacked on, as if included to hold space for further elaboration in an earlier draft and kept in the final proof. Leaving an Auden quote to hang in the white space after a paragraph about a Simon Stone painting that ends with a vaguely related sentence (they

both include mentions of keys) was not the best use of the material (46). With regards to the solipsism, I have chosen this word rather carefully given the nature of life writing and the necessary self-centredness of the subject. My issue is not with Vladislavić's excavations of his personal life, but rather the meta-nonfictional references to his own writing or writing process that, if they are to be included in a book at all, ought to be a part of a retrospective of an entire life's work – perhaps in the last book one ever writes – rather than something to be tackled by a writer who can be described as somewhere between mid- and later-career.

Whilst the decision to pull the reader's focus towards the back-end construction of the writer's work is in line with its meta-narrative tendencies, it does not strengthen it. Instead, story and storytelling are a recurring theme that, whilst sometimes aptly explored, hinder more interesting metaphorical explorations.

Perhaps the issue is that *The Near North* is trying to be too many things at once – a chronicle of mundane observations rendered allegorically or perceptibly meaningful by way of a sentence-level sleight of hand, an urban pastoral, a COVID-19 time capsule, an investigation into issues surrounding public space and mobility, a 'personal-is-political' commentary on contemporary South African life, a local narrative intentionally written to reach beyond its in-built audience. He has made the connections between these and other nodes visible to the reader, and is sometimes successful in bringing about a sense of profundity when discussing tree felling or tragedy in the heart-breaking account of the murder that occurred in his home. However, these glimmering shards are often obscured by the book's larger problems.

As with much of Vladislavić's work, it leaves you wanting more – though in this case, this desire is a question of fulfilment or a lack thereof, rather than one felt following the conclusion of a story so thoroughly engaging that you wish would extend into the stratosphere.

The Algebra of Insignificance by Stephen Symons

Allan Kolski Horwitz

The first sight of this new book of Stephen Symons's poetry is highly arresting: the cover depicts an eagle soaring against a backdrop of white-grey clouds set in turn against a blue-black sky. Then, the title strikes: for how significant, how critical, how necessary, how important can this speck of a bird – this living being thrust up from the earth by currents of solar wind – be in the “grand scale” of space and time?

The answer is probably that the eagle is minute, irrelevant, trite, of no value, wholly inconsequential, and yet, like every other manifestation of being, utterly complete and inevitable—akin to the grain of sand in Blake's poem, and so intrinsic to the very existence of the Multiverse. In this way, Symons immediately thrusts us into the metaphysical plane. Though with the anchor of algebra, we descend to a more physical, human realm. For algebra, in this instance – stemming from its Arabic root – is intended to mean “the reunion of broken parts” or “bone-setting”, which begs many questions. If the poet's words are being flung into the air for us to breathe, how significant an undertaking will this be? Will he deliver on his intention to heal us, to bring our broken parts together, through engaging them? Or will the eagle-poem be swept away by forces immeasurably more powerful and “significant” to the functioning of Creation? (Many poems wrestle prophet-like, with God, and bend a neck in prayer, wracked with doubt.)

The avian trope is carried further by having an owl perch above the word algebra on the frontispiece. In reinforcing the ancient and mythic connection – Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, was represented by the owl – the poet is inviting us to cement these images of flight and freedom from physical gravity with the spiritual and linguistic prowess of his poems. To round things off, the very last page also carries a magnified image of the owl, no doubt intending to convey that, though the poet is now bidding us farewell, it is only after having enlightened us with his vision of a precarious, corrupt, unstable human world whose only saving grace is being situated in a remarkable and sensorily-rich environment.

To make sure that this point is not lost, a second prominent graphic is

placed after the contents page: a double spread of the cloud motif but without the eagle. Instead, there is a quote from an A.R Ammons poem: "Sometimes I see / an enormous loveliness". In addition to the soaring eagle, we have words to reinforce that beauty, majesty, and wonder are present, but must be apprehended. However, is such reinforcement necessary? On the visual level, this black and white version of the cover image is not very striking (far more contrast is needed for it to have impact) and the blurb on the back cover says much the same thing.

The poet has inserted an image to introduce each of the six sections that make up the collection. These generally sombre emblems are very well chosen in terms of suggesting each section's subject matter and emotional content. The first is a lightbulb surrounded by moths - is there a deadlier symbol of self-immolation to introduce poems with the warning, "Everything is bracketed by the fragility of breath"?

After emphasising the brevity and disappointments that govern every life, Symons leads us to recognise and experience the "Silence (that) divides the notes / as we perform a dance / to a song of our own making". Though somewhat of a cliché, these opening lines point to the themes, tone, and type of language that characterise the collection as they are put to the service of expressing a deep alienation.

That is only half the story. This *weltschmerz* is countered by a continuing struggle to attain wholeness within the memory of parents and relations with his living family. This extends to his tapping into the seemingly atemporal and immutable nature of the cosmos in order to transfigure these human limitations. Of particular note are two very trenchant commentaries on the tortured nature of South African society; titles like "A perfectly burnt out shell of a country" and "This national accident" tell the story of "a nation addicted / to an impossible past as it ambles to an impossible future."

Returning to visual emblems, the second section replaces the eagle with a fighter jet and a quote from an Adonis poem that warns us "loss is waiting". This loss is expressed in several poems that show Symons to be politically conservative and pessimistic when it comes to reforming human behaviour. Whilst they capture the futility and devastation of war and the mendacity of politicians, they do not probe deep enough

CRITICISM

when taking sides. This is apparent in an otherwise strong poem, “Forgive me Babushka for I have sinned”, which is written in a folksy Slavic style, and depicts a simple soldier (Soldier Sweik?) who bemoans his answering “the call” to fight in the Ukraine war.

In his first three prayers/letters to Babushka, the soldier tries to atone for wreaking destruction and killing. The final two celebrate moments of grace – one when the war is inexplicably forgotten, and another when the writer escapes almost certain death and expresses gratitude to babushka for the blessings she kept sending him for protection. This climactic return to the “old ways” casts the Russian as a superstitious, backward pawn of the power-hungry. Though the tone of the poem is affectionate, given the historical context, the soldier could just as well have been a Ukrainian victim of conditioning by Ukrainian nationalists who were pushing for the total elimination of Russian influence in their multi-cultural society. As such, the poem would have greater effect by interposing two soldiers, with each trapped by his sides’ murderousness but still able to express ironic disgust.

The third section’s opening image looks like a shooting star, or a missile streaking through clusters of stars in a blackening sky (as with many of the images, the physical definition is vague). Is it on its way to a chance or planned encounter with a dubious deity? For these poems all address the question of God and do so with touching simplicity and earnestness. The poem “Prayer”, though based on a well-known conceit (prayer as a feather floating up to the heavens), takes us through the “draughts” of bad news that lead one to try and keep the feather floating high even as it naturally descends. The poem’s frustrated religiosity reaches no finality but climaxes with an ironic ending where we are still left pondering the efficacy of addressing pleas for help to an Almighty Power.

The fourth defining image is a full moon emerging from dark clouds that we later see forms a mournful counterpart to the prose-poem, “The Fridge Hums its Suburban Anthem”. A seminal piece, this poem contains a line that gives the collection its title (more on this a little later) and continues to underscore the mood of dread underlying the pedestrian rhythms of everyday, middle-class living. The faultlines of this lifestyle are well-examined, and the poem reaches its resolution in

the poet embracing his dreaming wife's warm body "knowing we all become children in sleep". This longing to be free of "the çat's paw of worry" dogs the poet, who is happy to return to the child's world of make-believe without material responsibility. Interestingly, this section carries two erotic poems that are presumably there to lighten the gloom of respectability!

The fifth image is of several seagulls hovering above dark clouds; like the first, a sight that provokes wonder and envy of the freedom and beauty of such a life. This section's prose-poems and a fable revolve around the ocean and beach and carry the scent of a futile nostalgia for youthful days. "Becoming both flesh and water" is filled with another contradiction - that all living bodies have a high composition rate of water and are thus organically, and in the human case, psychologically, divided.

The sixth section opens with a kite floating above the now well-entrenched mass of dark clouds. Its two opening poems are entitled "The library of forgotten memories", and recall children's laughter, the smell of medicine, and schoolboy preparation for rugby. Though one of the four stanzas is cleverly expressed (about a lover's perfume being detected on another woman's body), the first three trip too often into cliché and are too reminiscent of William Carlos Williams's poems about the tactile basis of memory. Is this because Symons's locus of reference is white suburbia and there is an automatic limitation to the range of experience being evoked? Or is it a failure of imagination in not finding fresher ways to bring out the still significant range of possible images and subjects?

In general, Symons has a tendency to use abstract nouns, make general statements, and repeat key words to drive his work. He states facts, joins or counterposes concepts ("immense probability", "a jigsaw of beauty", "an eternity of transfiguration") to signify and create impact while wrestling with grand theories or categories which include scientific terminology and knowledge in the style of Miroslav Holub (the Czech poet and immunologist). Does this work? Though the writing is dense and polished, the vagueness of such phrases often robs the poem of the richness of more tactile metaphors. The reader's imagination is left under-nourished, and those phrases left flat.

He rinses language thoroughly, although at times seems to try too hard to be original and fresh. One example being “glinted translucency”, which is awkward in that “glint” implies brightness - a sparkling - while “translucency” implies diffusion of light. A second example is “tongues of petroleum light”: beams of light can be likened to leaping tongues, but why qualify light with the word “petroleum”? What can be the connection?

This question of precision is important. Reacting to, and extracting meaning from a poem is a process that operates on many levels. In encountering an unexpected word (as with “petroleum”), I am challenged to expand my sense of its meaning and use. If I fail to establish a meaningful connection, then I will ask: why has the poet gambled on my understanding of their intentions by attaching such an unusual quality to light? Not having direct recourse to the poet for an answer, I must leave this question and move on. But when I reach the clause, “the wave feathers and detonates” – a phrase employing an unexpected verb – and I check, I find the following: “When feather is a verb, it usually means to turn or rotate an oar, paddle, or propeller so that it’s parallel to the surface of the water.” In this instance, where the use of the word is entirely appropriate, I find I have learnt something and must salute the poet for his creativity in expanding my vocabulary.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the effective use of the surreal to break through the prosaic. The sentence “who knows when or where the potholes collapsed to an abyss – some say men in black suits with glistening foreheads ate the map – the original sin of this national accident” is a good example. The poem about his dream of his mother driving a Volkswagen Beetle is similarly successful, although it ends with a conundrum: for how can the dream images evaporate into an eternity of transfiguration if they have evaporated?

In conclusion, this collection is the work of a mature man and word-smith who is weighed down by disillusionment with respect to humanity, and is very conscious of his mortality. As a result, he seeks to mitigate his pain and uncertainty by opening himself to other terrestrial and cosmic phenomena in the hope that they will provide transfiguration and redeem our brief and jagged lives with glimpses of eternity.

Philosophically, I am in sympathy with this Blakean perspective, given the current geo-political scene being so fraught with propaganda, violence, and hypocrisy. But the poet seems to lack a sense of history, and fails to provide a deep analysis of the reasons for this miasma of irrationality and greed. As a result, we are left with a sense of futility, of fatigue and inevitable disintegration, notwithstanding momentary flashes of illumination and beauty.

Reactions to art are, in the final analysis, subjective, despite being shaped by conventionally objective criteria. Stephen Symons's latest collection is worth reading, but, whilst polished and containing many memorable lines and stylistic shifts, is often too elusive in making a fully realised impact.

WORKS CITED

Bibi Binti Been-tu Bantu's *Appeal for Languaging* - Aika Swai

Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Momaday, N Scott. *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1997.

Wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. "Decolonising the Mind". *Diogenes*, 46(184), 101 - 104.

***Breasts, etc.* by Nthikeng Mohlele - Danyela Demir**

Gwala, Mafika. *No More Lullabies*. Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1982.

Hartman, Saidiya. "The Terrible Beauty of the Slum". *Brick Mag*, 99 (2017).

Mbao, Wamuwi. "Nthikeng Mohlele's *The Discovery of Love: a Bloodless Collection*". Herri (2023).

Mohlele, Nthikeng. *Breasts, etc.* Johannesburg: Blankpage Books, 2023.

Ibid. Pleasure. Johannesburg: Pan MacMillan, 2016

Ibid. Rusty Bell. Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2014.

Ibid. Small Things. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2013.

Hlongwane, Perfect. "A Close Reading of Sipiwo Mahala's *Can Themba – The Making and Breaking of an Intellectual Tsotsi: A Biography*". Herri (2023).

***The Near North* by Ivan Vladislavić - Niamh Ahern**

Vladislavić, Ivan. *The Distance*. Cape Town: Penguin Random House, 2019.

Ibid. *The Near North*. Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2024.

Ibid. *Portrait with Keys*. Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006.

***The Algebra of Insignificance* by Stephen
Symons - Allan Kolski Horwitz**

Symons, Stephen. *The Algebra of Insignificance*. Cape Town: Karavan Press, 2024.

Hearn, Julia, "African NGOs: The New Compradors?", *Development and Change*, Vol. 38, No. 6 (2007), 1095–1110.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. France: François Maspero, 1961.



DEAR READERS,

New Contrast has, not for the first time in its sixty-three years history, once again hit a financial squeeze: loss of institutional donations, sharp increases in printing costs, and declining subscriptions. To avoid the possible discontinuation of *New Contrast* we are urgently appealing to you for help in one or both of the following ways. Firstly, you can purchase an annual subscription for yourself or someone else at www.newcontrast.net/subscribe. Secondly, please make a donation. You can do so by clicking the 'Donate' button on our website. *New Contrast* has been the leading literary journal in South Africa for six decades, and with your help, we commit to ensuring it remains so for decades to come. Those who donate R 2 000 or more per year will receive a free digital subscription to our journal, and be recognised by having their names published as PATRONS, unless they prefer anonymity.

CONTRIBUTORS

Niamh Ahern is a writer, editor, literary scholar, and aspiring librarian based in Cape Town, South Africa. Her writing has been featured in *Lesbians Are Miracles* and *New Contrast*. She publishes a sporadic newsletter entitled *The Good, The Bad, and The Rain Man*. She is currently completing her BA Honours in Afrikaans at the University of Cape Town with a focus on literary freaks and enfreakment, and is Deputy Editor-in-Chief of UCT's *Varsity Newspaper*. She is an Editorial Assistant at *New Contrast*. Outside of her literary endeavours, she is a tutor, musician, and public library volunteer who thoroughly enjoys curling up with her cats.

Rizwan Akhtar is a writer from Lahore, Pakistan. His debut collection of Poems, *Lahore, I Am Coming* (2017), is published by Punjab University Press. He has published poems in well-established poetry magazines in the UK, the US, India, Canada, and New Zealand. He was a part of the workshop on poetry with Derek Walcott at the University of Essex in 2010.

Madeleine Bazil is a multidisciplinary artist and writer

interested in memory, intimacy, and the ways we navigate worlds—real and imagined. Her poetry and criticism is published or forthcoming in *West Branch Magazine*, *The Seventh Wave Magazine*, *Identity Theory*, *Pleiades*, *Stanzas Poetry Magazine*, *Sonora Review*, *Split Lip*, and elsewhere. She was longlisted for *Palette Poetry's* 2023 Rising Poet Prize.

Mangaliso Buzani grew up in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth (now Gqebera) and trained as a jeweller in Tshwane/Pretoria. His first collection of poems in isiXhosa, *Ndisabhala Imibongo* (Imbizo Arts, 2014), won the 2015 SALA Award for poetry. *a naked bone* (Deep South, 2019), his first book in English, won the 2019 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry. From 2016 to 2023, Buzani taught poetry writing in English and isiXhosa for the MA in Creative Writing at Rhodes University.

Jacques Coetzee is a poet, musician and freelance translator. Since 2007 he has been the singer and one of the main songwriters in the band Red Earth & Rust, which released its fifth album of original material in 2022. In January 2018 he and Barbara Fairhead launched their joint anthology of

poems, *The Love Sheet*, which was published by Hands On Books, an imprint of Modjaji. His debut solo collection, *An Illuminated Darkness* (uHlanga Press, 2020) was the winner of the Ingrid Jonker Prize and the 2022 Olive Schreiner Award. His poem, “Doepa vir Allenigheid”, was the winner of the 2021 AVBOB Poetry Prize in the Afrikaans category.

Danyela Demir holds a PhD from the University of Augsburg. She is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her monograph, *Reading Loss: Post-Apartheid Melancholia in Contemporary South African Novels*, was published in 2019. Danyela has published articles on various contemporary South African writers. In 2021, Danyela, together with Olivier Moreillon, published the book *Tracing the (Post)Apartheid Novel Beyond 2000: Interviews with Selected Contemporary South African Authors* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press). Her current project is tentatively entitled “Writing Against a Loveless World: In Search of Black Consciousness in Selected South African and Middle Eastern Texts”.

Hakopike (Amy-Leigh Braaf) is a South African artist born and raised in Johannesburg, and has

been working as a painter, illustrator, and photographer for the last 8 years. Hakopike specialises in acrylic paintings and digital pieces exploring her mixed heritage. As a South African woman of mixed heritage, she has been labelled from the moment she was born and started exploring oral stories and ancestry in her family from a young age. This was the catalyst that caused her to question the validity of documenting history through story-telling primarily.

Kerry Hammerton lives in Cape Town, South Africa and has an MA in Creative Writing. She has published poetry and prose in various South African and international literary journals and anthologies, including *Living While Feminist* (Kwela Books, 2020), *The Only Magic We Know* (Modjaji Books, 2020) and *Tiger* (Karavan Press, 2023). Her fourth poetry collection, *afterwards*, was published in 2023 (Karavan Press). Kerry is a freelance tutor and supervisor for the Rhodes School of Literature and Language on their Masters in Creative Writing programme. You can find her on Instagram @kerry_hammerton

Allan Kolski Horwitz grew up in Cape Town. Between 1974 and 1985 he lived in the Middle

East, Europe and North America, returning to South Africa in 1986. Since then he has been based in Johannesburg. He is a member of the Botsotso Jesters poetry performance group and Botsotso Publishing.

Zeenit Saban Jacobs is an award-winning South African poet. Born in a small town in the North West Province, she began writing at the age of thirteen. Zeenit draws inspiration from her dreams, observations, and personal experiences. Her style is influenced by Arabian Mythology, and Surrealism, – also, Khalil Gibran, Emily Dickenson, Vasko Popa, Al-Khansa, and Rumi. She is currently completing her Masters Degree in Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town.

Karen Jennings is a South African writer whose novel, *An Island*, was longlisted for the Booker Prize in 2021. Her new novel, *Crooked Seeds*, comes out in South Africa on 1 May. She is currently writer-in-residence as a postdoctoral fellow at the Laboratory for the Economics of Africa's Past (LEAP), Stellenbosch University. Karen co-founded The Island Prize for unpublished African authors to help them get published globally. Now in its third year, the prize has helped authors from

all over the continent, with both winners so far being published in the UK.

Paul Kammies is a writer from Cape Town, South Africa. He is currently an honours student at the University of the Western Cape and completed his BA degree at Stellenbosch University. His writing focuses on interpersonal relationships, drawing on mythology to invite readers to question traditions and contemporary life. In 2023 he was selected for a writers residency provided by Jakes Gerwel and Passa Porta; a debut collection is on the horizon. *On Klyntji* and *Litnet*, Kammies also reflects on theatre, TV and literature.

Keith Oliver Lewis is an award-winning poet from Smartie Town in Paarl. Lewis's poetry has appeared in *Yesterdays and Imagining Realities*, *Fluid*, and *New Contrast*, among other publications. His writing has been longlisted for the Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award. Lewis won the 2023 Short.Sharp.Stories Prize for his short story, "Blue Boy Lagoon". He was a writing fellow at the Johannesburg Institute of Advanced Studies in 2023 and the Jakes Gerwel Foundation's PEN It Down residency in 2024. Lewis has performed on the Poetry

CONTRIBUTORS

Africa stage, the Espresso Morning Show, Adam Small Fees, and at other literary festivals.

Phelelani Makhanya is a writer born in KwaMaphumulo KZN. His work has been published in major South African literary journals, including *New Contrast*, *New Coin*, *Botsotso Journal*, *Avbob Poetry Project* and *Stanzas*. His literary accolades include the 2021 Time of the Writer Poetry For Human Rights (Prize?), the 2021 Avbob Mini Poetry Prize, and the 2021 New Coin Poetry Award. He came 3rd in the 2022 Poetry In McGregor Poetry Award, was shortlisted for the 2023 Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Award, and was Longlisted for the The Island Prize in 2023. His third poetry collection, *The Village Watch*, is forthcoming.

Kobus Moolman has published seven collections of poetry, two collections of plays, a collection of short stories, and has also edited an anthology of poetry, prose and art by South African writers living with disabilities. He is Professor of Creative Writing and English Literature in the Department of English Studies at the University of the Western Cape. He has won numerous local and international awards for his work. His most recent publication is *Notes from*

Body: Health, Illness, Trauma, edited with Duncan Brown and Nkosinathi Sithole. In his writing and research, Kobus explores the relationship between the non-normative body and experimental textual practices that challenge generic boundaries.

Alexander Murie is a poet, lecturer, and doctoral candidate based in Cape Town, where he writes, reads, and stays up too late. His work has previously appeared in *Botsotso*.

Frankie Murrey worked in the book retail sector for many years before becoming the coordinator of Open Book Festival, which takes place every year in early September in Cape Town. In 2015, her work was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. She resigned from Open Book Festival at the end of 2019 and started her own company, FM Project Management. Through this company, she has since been curating and managing creative events and projects that align with her interests. She also returned to Open Book in 2022, a space she'd missed intensely. *Everyone Dies* is her authorial debut and recently won the HSS Award for Best Emerging Author in the Fiction Category.

Olwethu Mxoli is a primary school English teacher. She was primarily raised by her grandmother 'Mam' English' in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth. She has been part of the Ecce Poets since 2018. Her contribution came from two of their anthologies 'Staying Hungry' and 'Alles is Anders' respectively.

Francesco Nassimbeni I've never been only a writer, or only one of anything. I began writing poetry in 2010. It became part of the several and various ways in which I expressed myself. My practice is interdisciplinary – I make pictures, plays, poems, objects, short stories. All of them inhabit a similar artistic reality, which I usually express via performance. In some ways I consider myself a designer expressing themselves through multiple media. To me, poetry is a kind of graphic design. Words have materiality, and are concrete. Ideas have edges and surfaces, can be layered, stacked, superimposed. There is line, shape, rhythm, texture, opacity and weight to all the elements that comprise poems, which are themselves also graphic.

Sue Nyamnjoh is a Cameroonian-born creative currently residing in Cape Town. She has a background in media studies and

languages and holds a BA(Hons) from the University of Cape Town. Last year, Sue released her debut poetry collection, *[un]ravelling* (Mankson, 2023), which explores universal themes of love, grief, joy, and loneliness from a deeply personal lens. Beyond literary pursuits, Sue enjoys large doses of music, food, and people, in no particular order. She is mother to a feline named Shola and various plants in questionable states of existence.

Yewande Omotoso studied architecture and received a Master's in Creative Writing from the University of Cape Town. Her debut novel *Bombay* (Modjaji Books, 2011), won the South African Literary Award First Time Author Prize. Her short stories include "How About The Children" (Kalahari Review), "Things Are Hard" (2012 *Caine Prize Anthology*), "Fish" (*The Moth Literary Journal*) and "The Leftovers" (*One World Two*). Yewande was a 2015 Miles Morland Scholar. Her second novel, *The Woman Next Door* (Chatto and Windus, 2016), was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and The Barry Ronge Fiction Prize and longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. Her third novel, *An Unusual Grief* (Cassava Republic Press, 2022) was

CONTRIBUTORS

longlisted for the Dublin Literary Award and the Republic of Consciousness Award and shortlisted for the Barry Ronge Fiction Prize.

Robyn Paterson is a writer living in Cape Town, South Africa. While doing her Master's in Contemporary Literature at Trinity College Dublin, her writing turned to exploring how food challenges and channels us into, and out of, different moments in our lives. Her essays have been published in UK and Irish journals and she has recently started a Substack, Chomp, where she publishes personal essays about food culture. In 2024, she became Managing Editor of *New Contrast*.

Pravasan Pillay is a South African writer who now lives in Sweden. He has published two poetry chapbooks, *Glumlazi* (2009) and *30 Poems* (2015), as well as a collection of co-written comedic short stories, *Shaggy* (2013). His short story collection *Chatsworth* was published in 2018, and was translated into Swedish in 2020. His latest publication is a chapbook of short stories, *Aiyoi!* (2023).

Stephen Symons was born in Cape Town in 1966. He has published award-winning poetry and short fiction in local and international journals, magazines, and

anthologies, and has authored five poetry collections and a collection of short stories. Symons holds a PhD in History (University of Pretoria) and an MA in Creative Writing (University of Cape Town). He was shortlisted for the 2015 Hudson Prize for Poetry (USA), the 2017 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry, the 2017 Ingrid Jonker Prize, and the 2023 SA Literary Awards. He won the Red Wheelbarrow Prize for Poetry in 2022. His fifth collection, *The Algebra of Insignificance*, was published by Karavan Press in 2024. He lives with his family in Oranjezicht, Cape Town, where he runs a graphic design studio.

Aika Swai was born in her mother-country that no longer exists – the German Democratic Republic. As a toddler she moved to Tanzania, her father-country, where she grew up multilingual and surrounded by storytellers. By the time she graduated from the International School of Moshi, she was certain that she wanted to become a teacher of stories and storytellers. Craving to continue her immersion in a multicultural community, she moved to the United States where she completed her BA in Comparative Literature, followed by an MA in Modern Thought and Literature, at Stanford University. After

many years of teaching in a wide variety of classrooms on both coasts of the USA, she moved to South Africa in 2016 to complete her PhD in the University of Cape Town's Department of English Literary Studies. The title of her dissertation is "Decolonizing magic while 'keeping it real' in a selection of African and American (Indian) novels written in English.

Stanzas, New Contrast, New Note Poetry, New Coin, Dwelling, Knaap, and more. They were shortlisted for the 2022 Sol Plaatje European Union Poetry Prize.

Hedley Twidle is a writer, teacher and researcher based at the University of Cape Town. He specialises in twentieth-century, southern African and world literatures, as well as creative non-fiction and the environmental humanities. His essay collection, *Firepool: Experiences in an Abnormal World*, was published by Kwela Books in 2017. *Experiments with Truth*, a study of life writing and the South African transition, appeared in the African Articulation series from James Currey in 2019. A new essay collection, *Show Me the Place*, was published by Jonathan Ball in April 2024.

Shane van der Hoven (they/ them) is a radically Kweer poet and feral literary scholar. They are currently reading for their doctoral studies and are teaching poetry translation at the University of Cape Town. They have most recently been published in

ADVERTISING WITH NEW CONTRAST RATES

TYPE	RATE
Inside Front/ Back Cover (Full Page)	R1000
Full Page	R800
1/2 Page (Vertical)	R400
1/4 Page (Vertical)	R200

DEADLINES

New Contrast is published quarterly. In order to accommodate our design and printing timeline, we require all advertising materials six weeks prior to our set distribution dates. Please see the table below for more information:

DISTRIBUTION DATE	FINAL SUBMISSION DATE
15 March 2023	1 February 2023
14 June 2023	3 May 2023
13 September 2023	2 August 2023
13 December 2023	1 November 2023

For any queries regarding our rates, please contact our
business manager: business@newcontrast.net.

SUBSCRIPTIONS & SUBMISSIONS

SUBSCRIPTION DETAILS

Local subscriptions are R600 p.a.

International subscriptions are R1100 p.a.

Our print subscriptions are inclusive of postage for all 4 issues.

Electronic subscriptions are R300 p.a. worldwide.

Current prices are shown on the website: www.newcontrast.net/subscribe

We can only accept payment into our account in ZAR or by Telex transfer to SWIFT or by credit card on our website: www.newcontrast.net

EDITORIAL AND SUBSCRIPTION ADDRESS

New Contrast
PO Box 44844
Claremont, 7735
Cape Town, South Africa

Editor: ed@newcontrast.net
Business Manager: business@newcontrast.net

EFT Standard Bank, Thibault Square
Branch Code: 05-10-01
Account Name: South African Literary Journal Ltd
Current account
Account Number: 070508666
Please send proof of payment to: business@newcontrast.net

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Submit your contributions on our online portal, Submittable, located at www.newcontrast.submittable.com and visit www.newcontrast.net, where the prevailing requirements for each category are published. | Submit no more than 3 poems per submission or one short story or prose extract with a maximum of 75 lines for each poem and 5 000 words for prose pieces. | Only online submissions via our submission platform will be considered. We no longer accept submissions via email.

If you are submitting the same material to another publication at the same time, say so in your covering email or letter. Inform us if your work is accepted elsewhere before you hear from us. | Do not submit poetry manuscripts or novels. | Note it can take up to three months to receive a reply. | If your work is accepted for publication, you will receive a complimentary digital copy with an offer of a 25% discount on a year's print subscription. | If your work is published in *New Contrast*, do not submit new work to us for a period of six months, in order to give new writers and poets an opportunity to be featured.

A unique magazine -
inquisitive, beautiful
and rewarding.

R140 INCL. VAT
**Bruce
Jack**
WINES
ISSUE 4 OUT NOW!



Art, adventure, poetry, wine and much more.

Available at Woolworths, Pick n Pay, Spar, Exclusive Books, good independent bookstores as well as via us, online, at brucejack.com.



FEATURING:

Poetry from Olwethu Mxoli, Keith Oliver Lewis, Mangaliso Buzani, Stephen Symons and Jacques Coetzee. *Prose from* Yewande Omotoso, Hedley Twidle, Karen Jennings and Pravasan Pillay. *Artwork by* Hakopike.



www.newcontrast.net