

Grieving Forests

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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Note: This thesis is presented in two volumes: Grieving Forests (shorter poems) and Ancestral Wealth (longer poems).

Abstract

This is a collection of village narrative poems mainly set in rural Limpopo that searches into the complexity of the past and how historical events impact on the present. Although the poems are imagined along the Marxist dialectic, they're fresh imaginative creations featuring a strong element of surprise, spiritual mysticism, experimenting with form, delving into unknown poetic avenues, creating new music, exploring new sounds and taking risks. The long and intense poem, *Ancestral wealth*, which is a tribute to the poet's father, reflects on death and its impact through the effective application of various stylistic elements and poetic devices, thus immortalising the life of a rural South African. Overall the poems, including retrospective and experimental ones, condemn the free market economic system and all that it seems to necessitate: the degradation of ecology, indifference to human suffering and the alienation of vulnerable social groups.

Contents

Baloyi's art gallery, 7
Saluting Lake Fundudzi, 8
Letsatsi's neighbour, 9
Masindi's return, 10
I have a niece, 12
Rose's note, 14
Goats in my town, 15
After the marula season, 16
When age catches up with you, 17
Burning, 18
All the way to Pretoria, 19
The Toilet Cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport, 20
Burgersfort Landfill, 21
What she wore that day, 22
Things I've Picked Up On the Road, 23
Stella's Parrot, 24
Durbs occasion, 26
Outside the Blue Waters Hotel, 27
Indonesia, 29
Ciputra World, Surabaya, 30
Tribute to departed poets, 32
Glossary, 40

Baloyi's art gallery

For Albie Sachs

it's a round chapel-like gallery
baloyi built it with bare hands in the bush
with everything he could find
without begging or sulking

he built it with stones and bricks
and grass and reeds and weeds
he built it with grey tiles
and scraps of steel and corrugated iron

mirrors glint on the walls
wheel hubs have moulded the spherical windows
the floor is covered by patterned cowdung
the walls are painted with ochre and animal figures

baloyi bought a generator
he was tired of finding his way through fireflies, moon and stars
he bought a truck to collect twisted logs of *mondo*
brought down by elephants in phafuri and makuleke

baloyi sat under the mango tree
carving drums with tails and legs
his darlings – kangaroos and camels
dolphins and shuddering beasts

carving and filing wingless birds that soared up in the skies
carving *tindzhundzhu* with breasts that glugged mud
carving a godzilla to guard the constitutional court in distant joburg
carving the foreign species that surround his dreams

albie sachs came to the opening of baloyi's art gallery
how i wish he were the minister of arts and culture
he would buy and place these sculptures
in all of our public spaces

now baloyi has died and clouds are forming, rains are coming
water will pour through the leaking roof
ants will mottle the wood piece by piece
until it dissolves

Saluting Lake Fundudzi

we walk in file like prime domba dancers
through the silent cliffs
of sacred forest

we bend our knees
our backs facing the immaculate lake
look in between the legs
& salute the lake
ndaa!
& the women say *aaa!*

here, ashes of the dead are sprinkled
in water, a cemetery
but thoughts of disaster
of not returning home
grabbed by *ndzhundzhu*
linger in my head

we look ahead
facing the Thathe Vondo grey mountains
gazing at the lazily grazing cattle
& the boys catching fish by the lake

we are here carrying the blessings
of *vha*-Musanda Tshitangani
& *vhakoma, magwena* a Venda.
the Vhavenda say if you are mauled
by a white lion guarding the bush
you'll be discovered only after a decade

oh beautiful Lake Fundudzi
is it true that the one-eyed shadowy *swidudwana*
burrow holes in sand, from where they call the cattle herders?
is it true that the fertile yet orphaned pythons mingle & swim in you?
is it true that you hide the *ndadzi* bird that causes thunder & lightning?
is it true that you once destroyed a fence a day after it was erected
& showed some white researchers darkness when they tried to steal from you
or were they stealing you...?

Letsatsi's neighbour

Thanks to Thabo the prophet

letsatsi's neighbour, *hayikhona!*
deploys rats and roaches to mine food from my kitchen
I buy 80kg bag of mielie meal
usually it lasts for a month
but the bag is finished in two weeks
because of her rats and roach invasion

her neighbour says I mustn't kill the creatures
because they eliminate snakes, keep eco-system in balance
but when I chase the rats and sweep away the roaches
they all race through the fence
and when I spray them with Doom
my neighbour frowns upon me

letsatsi's neighbour, *hayikhona!*
she's a senior witchcraft expert
she sends lizards on a listening mission
the lizards I know are hunted down by hadedas on roofs
or eaten by owls, but not these ones

letsatsi's lizards have high definition ears
they perch themselves behind curtains
or just hang over the ceiling
and listen to a husband and wife in their nuptial bed
these creatures record faster and harder the news of your lips
they follow your movements
until her plan is masterminded
until someone is lowered to the grave

Masindi's return

For Carlos

Masindi died twenty years ago
of heart attack
buried the next day in his yard intact
buried with all his jewels, coins, buttons
no limb or brain or worm removed
his fire helmet, jugs, saucers,
kettle and antique gadgets

but carlos shishonge had told me
at midnight, Masindi takes a shower
in the weeping wind
or in drizzly rain

I'm here in his abandoned paradise
to savour the sweetness of Lufuno her neighbour
quench my lustful thirst
in Masindi's deplorable bed

and 12am
a man splashes in the shower
the shower door is half-open
shhh, shhh, shhh

I switch on the torch
there's a tall figure in the passage –
a sturdy man glowing
in the pale night
it's him, Masindi, in a neat black suit
and moonly sparkling shoes
the shimmer hurts my eyes
his photograph dangles on the wall

when I greet him, pretending to be fearless
he stares at me like a bust
as if to say:
tsotsi, build your own house
even if you built it in the forest or by the river
you could cuddle and stroke your flimsy concubine
to your heart's desire
in your rickety bed
your gutter

he looks askance with dejected eyes
I sweat, my face burns
noxious fumes hit my nose
my cheeks turn red in fright
hair pulled this way and that way

sink onto the makeshift bed and shiver
while the owner of this abandoned choking house
keeps on walking, stretching distances in my head

it's dark
but Masindi has lit all the lanterns outside
switched on the water pump
invisible dogs are fed from the splintered kennels
the wind and the brittle leaves howl
tree branches break and creak
I hear non-existent sounds
because they say when a man is buried with jewels and buttons
and the gate is not changed
he easily finds his way home

I sit on his rickety bed
light a cigarette to chase away his stubborn ghost
walk through the backdoor in my unzipped pants
Lufuno holds my hand too tight
though my hand never sniffed her breast
nor travelled around her waist
I know the rumour smoke of shame
will lift up to the rafters at dawn
and my reputation will be in tatters

we toss in the bush against the *nkanyi* tree
flat and silently bruised
but Masindi's Mazda bakkie doggedly grovels
down the gravel road
right near the bush where we are hiding

until I scream:
leave me alone!
it's not me who killed you!

I have a niece

I have a niece
who dreams of chopping up my wife's body
of stuffing the pieces into a black bag
and calls it a day
plant a marquee in my yard
while mourners sing *tihubyeni minkhubyeni*

once she walked behind her granny in the kitchen
brandishing a knife
aiming to stab her back
or pierce her heart into shreds
but the hand trembled
and the knife fell down

she's been to hospital several times
harangued by an overdose of pills
she wanted to meet her ancestors too soon
because every time she fights with her boyfriend
we at home must eat the fire
she says our love for her can't fill up a cup

my niece, nineteen years old, solemnly goes to church
she comes back home
locks herself in her house –
her granny's house, my father's house, our old house
a house which we are banished from entering
she talks to her mother only
and the rest of us, except for my two boys, are foes
each morning I greet her, but she keeps quiet
she lives in my house stubbornly
last year crazy talkers stole her moment in her head
she stole my wife's bank card during her exam time
withdrew almost a thousand rands every day
to buy a kfc or pizza or coke

when she watches tv, no one must dare change the channel
even the children can't watch their comical ben 10 and spiderman freely
once she kept the tv remote control for days
starving granny of her favourite nigerian movies and muvhango soapie
starving *malume* of watching the news and soccer
starving my wife of watching generations, pastor irene and prophet joshua
she thinks she's the boss
I'm only scared she'll commit suicide
when I reprimand her
I'm scared she'll write a long letter
blaming me for hanging herself

often, she cooks her own food, eats alone
she gives my three-year old boy beer to drink
she says my wife is a piece of shit
that the husband and the things she's so proud of
will vanish very soon

but I can understand the pain of this fatherless child
with extreme swinging moods
the tears of seeing her coloured father in the coffin
the tears of being cheated by the breast that fed her
the tears of a diminishing family history and blurry identity
I understand the music of her inflated song of anguish
I understand why she feels free and safe only when the bottle is open
or when the dagga *zol* is fuming

I have a niece
perhaps with a loathsome heart
a niece with a thick chest
but a moonly niece who needs urgent help
but no one at home, no teacher
no psychiatrist, no psychologist
has managed to talk sense
to my niece who must stop wasting her future
a niece I pray for
that one day she becomes a star
that doesn't fade in the clouds
in the sky

Rose's note

Wherever you are mama,
Forgive me for running away,
For leaving a fatherless two month old red baby,
For returning home with eyes fixed and dry lips:
I'm the lost cow, unheralded by flocks of white birds.

Mama, death has tamed me so young,
I don't have wrinkles and grey hair to caress.
I never danced the python domba dance as radiantly as you –
Heaving breasts, ebbing with fire from your waist,
All I ever did was to revel in night clubs, in skimpy wear, stoned.

When you come to collect my remains,
Where hail and storm dissolved my fortress brick by brick,
In the wintry night so hostile,
Please don't bring tree branches to collect my spirit,

When you finally take my head home, far away in Limpopo,
Let my corpse not enter the yard, nor grandfather's cattle kraal,
Let my corpse not rest for a night in my hollow hut,
Let no burning candles grieve for my demented, dark heart.

Mama, my home address is this road to Elim
Just bury me without a coffin:
A makeshift plank and a thin *muraha-donki* blanket will do.

Bury me silently, for I'm the wild, thorn flower
Of the shrubbery savannah.
Throw me in the wetlands with fungus and moss,
Preserved in clay like a toddler

Goats in my town

wander through the market place
they know what they are looking for
it's not coffee beans
but bananas bananas

in many towns and cities
goats sleep on pavements and apartments
in Accra or Dakar, goats eat pineapple and drink palm oil
but the town from where goats graze freely
not bothered by shoppers
not scared of lightning and thunder
not bothered by hammering rains
watchful of traffic and groaning buses
is my town, Elim

now that we have a big mall in Elim
architects have had to put fence around the mall
or else goats will stroll around gazing at ornaments and jeans
lift cabbage and spinach at Shoprite
snatch grannies' bags and purses
bleating, mee, mee, mee!
or simply steal a beer and get drunk
fertile goats graze visibly outside the mall
the same goats my father shepherded in the 30s and 40s
still enjoy bananas bananas
bringing kids to earth
these small framed pointed eared goats,
wild perhaps, are merely goats
nothing more, nothing less

these boer goats make me smile
have helped *makholwa* to find directions home

After the Marula Season

After the marula season
Elephants multiply in Makuleke village.

Fires are lit, glow endlessly in families,
Men under trees down jars of marula.

Nature becomes green again.
Lions roar in the bush.

I've heard some women go to drinking sessions without panties.
Enjoy quickies behind the toilet. Return home with mouths wiped.

They complain of nausea. They miss menstrual periods.
Even write-off husbands raise their shoulders in the chief's kraal.

After the marula season, sins of impotence are burnt.
Drums throb. It's time to feast and dance.

Grannies giggle and ululate.
It's their dream to cuddle fresh & strong babies.

When age catches up with you

Donato 'Bra Zinga Special' Mattera says –
when age catches up with you
you go to the loo to pee
you wait for the urine
and it comes
flooding the urinal

then you zip up your pants
if you can remember
and walk away

suddenly, the pants flow like the Orange River
urine bursting through the banks
uncontrollably
just when you walk outside
just when you think you are free

Donato 'Bra Zinga Special' Mattera says –
be careful of drowning in laughter
because when old age catches up with you
you may not have enough nuts and bolts
to close all the valves.
or enough guts
to watch yourself in the mirror

Burning

First it was the persistent coughing and spitting sticky phlegm
Then the slimy liquid slipped through the nose
Now I pee red blood through my thin horn
Not from eating beets or hot curry
Not from swimming in bitter and brown streams
Not even for letting my spear jab and bang stones

My elders say the urine of a dying man is like tea –
Brown, burning and pungent
Mine is red, it fills glasses in doctors' labs
My elders say man must drink his urine to see the rising sun
But mine is blood, only a sorcerer can slurp

My wife holds my hand at the doctor's consulting room
She has never seen me crumpled like a Mopani worm
Or even walking like a crab on hot sand of buzzing ants
Now her sweet pipe is under siege
Like a bleeding de-horned Skukuza rhino

The young female doctor says, "you've got hematuria, Mr Bila
But don't worry,
This condition is not life threatening."
"Is it contagious Doctor?" My wife asks.
"You can still have sex
But let him heal first..."
A smile sits on my wife's face
Because I'll still jive between the sheets
Without breaking my horn

I take the prescribed Ciprobay tablets and Citro-soda granules
Suddenly I tremble like a rat whose hole is flooded
A heap of blankets over me still doesn't build the heat
But my pipe is burning, haemorrhaging
The pipe is leaking. It's a torrid time.
If I were a woman whose urinary tract is a dam that has burst
I would be in diapers, looking up at the stars for mercy

Samora, my two year old son screams with fright late in the night
He grabs my feverish hot body as if to examine my heart beat and temperature
He has never seen me so sleepy and weak when we're supposed to play karate
And wrestle and jog and ride on bikes and push toy cars
My wife holds my hand, assures my soldier, "papa is here."

All the way to Pretoria

The man who's given me a lift from Polokwane's hiking spot
Speaks of things a man like me wants to hear:
It's easy to make your wife love you
So simple: use her washing rag
Or let her use your washing rag

Let her wear your t-shirt that stinks of sweat
The same shirt you wear when you sleep
Or work in the fields
Just that sweat
Sweet sweat is all she needs to think about you
In one bathtub
Where both of you wash your underwear
And wash with the cream of love

There's no other better *korobela* than that
I've tried silver bullets
I couldn't run the marathon
I've tried *mpesu*
Never worked particularly well for me
I've settled for the *Chinese brush*
Try it man
No side effects
Your wife will never ask for sugar next door
You'll rock like a porn star

So says the priest
Who knocks them down wherever he goes

The Toilet Cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport

Young and energetic
with a clean-shaven head
and well-trimmed beard
and red work wear
smiles broadly:
“Good afternoon sir,
welcome to my office.”
Then he goes to the toilet cubicle, cleans it,
kills the odour of any diarrhoea
with detergents

The man in the urinal
wearing an expensive black suit
executive tie and pointed shoes –
the man who pushes a black suitcase
full of modern gadgets, cash, credit cards,
important documents and perhaps a bottle of whisky
this familiar black diamond says:
“You have a nice office man!”

And bursts into uncontrollable laughter
Hahaha! Hahaha! Hahaha!
Hehehe! Hehehe! Hehehe!
Kekeke! Kekeke! Kekeke!
Wakakaka! Wakakakakaaa!
Wakakakakakaaaaaaa!
Wakakakakakakaaaaaaa!

Burgersfort Landfill

Vultures dwell here
Among the grim faced shack dwellers
With their famished children

When the waste delivery truck arrives
The dark human vultures shove and shuffle
Fighting over dirt, competing with rats and pigs

No one talks about this grim enterprise
The vultures hope to turn rags to riches
In this, our wasted market economy

When ministers talk of black empowerment
No one mentions this grim enterprise
Which tries in vain to turn rags to riches

But on election day –
The vultures are fed with pap and beef stew
Dressed in a clean T-shirt with the leader's face

And when darkness falls
They jadedly retire to the dump
A celestial graveyard of hopes – their home

What she wore that day

it was her choice
to wear a tight skin stomach-out
and zero centimetre mini skirt
and perhaps a *g-string*

it fitted her waist perfectly
it lifted her spirit as she strode in noord street
she didn't know some wasted *babalaazed* lumpens
would stop everything they were doing
just to grope her
dragoon her
touch her bum
call her slut
take pictures with their cellphones

the taxi rank mob hate to be provoked
because some of these folk with receding hair
with an army of girlfriends
and unnamed children
sip nips of kwa mai mai *imbiza*
that make them hungry lions
they say girls, even babies in nappies
must know their place
wear nothing that leaves the cleavage or thigh open
nothing like a zero centimetre miniskirt or kanga
that makes bending impossible

Things I've Picked Up On the Road

My wife removed three teeth at once at Polokwane Hospital
She has lost the taste buds twice in the past two summers
Kissing her is like asking for a dentist's pliers, scissors and needles
But I sleep naked, dip my tongue so tenderly deep in her mouth sighing
Like a toothless child married to candy
So that I can giggle, counting the missing teeth like her

A few years ago, Dr De Kok in Polokwane numbed my left sole
He removed planter warts and burned them
And I remembered seeing my father
Sitting on a rock, behind our two roomed house in Shirley village
Soaking his foot in warm water sprinkled with salt and ZCC coffees
Pricking, peeling the dried and dead skin of the warts
With a sharp needle or nail clipper
That's why I tell you of the things I've picked up on the road
Things my children will pick up on the road

People have always told me that I look like my father
And I was born with a light complexion like him
But Bila didn't have a beard and died still light in complexion
But my face is a jungle and a victim of the smothering sun
My mother is 78, and doesn't have grey hair
At 40, my chin is hard, grey hair growing like rice
None of my brothers have this type of hair
So I can't explain all these things that I pick up on the road

Mhlahlandlela looks like papa. That's fine.
Samora the soldier has a round face like mama. Fine.
And when my mother cuddled him for the first time
She said: "Ah, feel his head bones at the back, they are just like mine
But the big foot and toe are yours *Guerrilla*."
And now I know all the things I've picked on the road
Even the smallest things make me whole

Stella's Parrot

Stella's African grey parrot is gravely depressed
He's been sick for two weeks now
Lost weight intolerably
The avian vet in Polokwane says
Jimmy the parrot has respiratory problems
His kidney is not working
& he suffers from pneumonia
He might have inhaled something too toxic
Maybe he drank an overdose of wine or gin
That's why his head is down
& depleted

*He breaks my heart –
When he's well, he bites, jumps, flails, flutters
& he repeats after me
When I say hello
He says 'hollow'
When I say good morning
He says 'God mourning'
When I say I love you Jimmy
He says 'fuck off!'*

Stella cuddles the ten year old African grey
But he shits on her white silk shirt
Leaving black grain fresh droppings
He won't reach the African Grey lifespan of 75
The poor bird has no manners
How can he shit on her owner's shirt around the dinner table?
Now he's looking down
Breaking Stella's heart
Won't even eat nor take his medication

*He's a better companion
He communicates
Better than my ex-husband
More smart than that stupid old man who's always reading
Or sitting behind the laptop
Or downing whisky
When I need someone to scratch my back
That's why I use a vibrator
To relieve my hormones
& kiss the biting beak of my sweet African grey parrot
In silence*

Stella's parrot eats fresh veggies
& fruits in a bowl so clean
Sweet potatoes & broccoli

Cucumbers & carrots
Green beans, peppers & peas
He munches kiwi, banana & pawpaw
He drinks lots of bottled, mineral water
Ah, but he likes tender chicken wings
Beef steak & grilled fish
And when he's happy, he shares red wine
& gin with Stella
Perhaps that's why his feathers are bright
More beautiful than the chicken in my yard
That feed on grass, grains, ants & locusts

*His feathers are falling off
But he's got a medical card
I'll rush him to hospital again*

John the invisible backyard shack dweller
Eats stiff pap and cabbage
He has been complaining of a back injury for days
He breaks stones, dig trenches in Stella's garden
Doesn't own a medical aid card
He rubs some herbs on his back & heals naturally
Poor Zimbabwean worker sleeps under a paraffin lamp light
The hard reed mat pinches him like a horsefly
Tired torso covered with a cheap, thin blanket

When Jimmy dies
A post-mortem will be carried out
The funeral procession will be sober
The sky will be bright & clear
Men & women in navy blue suits
& polished black shoes will pay their last respects
Speaker after speaker will wail how important
& pleasing Jimmy was in the neighbourhood
He'll be buried in a finely carved coffin, in the garden of wild willows
Where Stella's German Shepherd was laid to rest
Perhaps he'll be cremated, ash sprinkled in the garden

Hymns will be sung, a band will play violins, cellos & hit the cymbals
Stella will plant flowers & erect a tomb
She'll lock herself in the house for days without taking a bath
She'll cry every time she gets a call from her children overseas
She'll take a leave from work, stop going to the gym
She'll do everything that a true lover must do
To remember her sweet African Grey
Who communicates better than her ex-husband
That professor Mulder with his radio voice

Durbs occasion

Thanks to *boys from seshego*

The European Union and Jacana are flying me down to Durban
They've booked me at the Blue Waters hotel
It doesn't happen every day

I'm not wearing skins, feathers, *nghundhu* nor do I carry a warrior staff
I'm not wearing a t-shirt and jeans like a comrade
Can't wear a tracksuit and sneakers like an aerobics fanatic
I need a good perfume
I don't want to smell like a he-goat
It's a special night
The night for the dignified Europeans
The night for the African poet to warble!

A black suit will do –
What I need urgently are black shoes, black socks and a red tie
I'll borrow from my brothers or friends if I can't raise the cash
I'm sure they'll not mind to teach me how to make a tie

I must go to the salon
Dye, wash and twist my dreadlocks
I don't want to look like a wild man before the cameras
I must trim my beard like a sportsman
Call me sell-out if you think I've gone too corporate
I want to look radically elegant and sassy like civilized Sol Plaatje

When I step on stage lively to receive the EU Sol Plaatje poetry award
People will applaud nonstop
Give me a standing ovation
The judges were sober when they made me a winner
After all, I haven't received a prize in my twenty years of writing poems

I don't know what I'll do with this cash
But I don't owe *mashonisa* a cent
Maybe I'll buy a new bed
So that I can dream well next to her who
I paid *lobola* for, three years ago

Outside the Blue Waters Hotel

Midday, the sun is up
Opposite Durban's beachfront
A middle aged cab driver greets me:
"This is the land of honey and sunlight, my son
I'm here to take you to the beehive
It's not about money
But hospitality, my son"

The patient man with a sweet tongue
And darting eyes says:
"I know every part of Durban
If you need a Japanese woman
Or ride between the hips of a scented Chinese
Or a spicy hot Indian with glimmering hair–
Or the blonde and silky
Let me know my son
Don't chase the shadows
I'm here for you
Whatever you want to devour, my brother
Bunny chow, curry, breyani, good wine, Cuban cigars
I park my cab here
Durbs by the sea
I know every branch and hamlet of the city
Corner to corner
Kloof to Valley of a Thousand Hills
24 hours"

"Here is my number, my son
I know what a young man like you needs
I was once a young man
Call me anytime, 24 hours I'm available.
My name is Moolah
As in money, money, money"

I nod, walking to the beachfront of dahlias
I plant my feet in the balmy Indian ocean
Watch the scuba divers and surfers
And body boarders and sailors cruise
Admire the creators of sand art: lions and tigers
Watch the orange sun slip into the idyllic ocean
Watch joggers with naked torsos and women turning brown in the sun

I lick Durban's sweetness with my eyes and ears
Rather than being held hostage by a regimen of high hookers
I know honey abounds in Durban
But lustful strangers' veins are numbed
By drug-filled needles and powder
Unsuspecting strangers perish in brothels

Corpses lie like slabs of granite
The dead men of fun are simply
Unlocatable

Indonesia

The bending road along the jungle of whispering bamboo
The narrow asphalted road along tall teak and abaca trees
The road of roaring trucks coming down the hill
Green trucks full of logs or quarried stone or scooters
Noses edging close to the cliff
Where wreckage and skeletons sprawl
The heavy silent, grieving forests and caves
 Oh, Indonesia, Indonesia
 I get drunk on your toxic beauty

The road zigzagging through green rice patches and cocoa beans
Large fields of sugar cane, banana and coconut
Large fields of cashew nuts, pineapple and pepper
Fields of tobacco and sweet hairy rambutan
The bashful rain always kiss the ground
But I wonder who owns the seeds and harvest of your sweat
For your children, Indonesia, drill holes in their lungs
With Sampoerna cigarette blades to bury smells of poverty
 Indonesia, Indonesia
 I get drunk on your deadly beauty

Youth climb on the blaring Honda and Suzuki motorbikes
Bravely mingle between roaring trucks and buses
A farmer proudly carries a bunch of green bananas on his bike
Another carries loads of coconut and sells by the roadside
Another carries bamboo leaves to feed his sheep
Before he retires to his crowded house
 Indonesia, Indonesia
 I get drunk on your violent beauty

The road along brown murky canals of garbage
The road along cruel bitter rivers of dead fish
The whistling winds of Java sea full of oil-drunken gliding dying swans
At the break of dawn, village children swim in rivers and catch typhoid
Mothers wash and hang their sorrows of unemployment on the banks
Men catch trout, maintain sticky silence as their slim and small daughters
Entertain tourists in the brothels of Bali and Jakarta
 Indonesia, Indonesia
 I get drunk on your deadly beauty

Earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis wash away
Burning lakes and dissolving mountains that spit fire
Somehow people have not lost their smile
They patch themselves on the highlands
Knowledge passed to them by their ancestors and oral poets
 Indonesia, Indonesia
 I get drunk on your deadly beauty

Ciputra World, Surabaya

this giant glittering tower of glass
escalators, sit-down restaurants
towering over Surabaya city
has birthed a new species
that is fat even
in their fingers

the indonesians i know
eat sambal soup, steamed rice, fish and vegetables
the javanese savour gado gado and otak otak
the balinese eat bebek betutu
the indonesians i know are fit, small and strong
their faces beam with endless smiles
and have the stamina
from eating sarang burung walet

in magelang i met a farmer who grows coffee and pepper
and another farmer who grows rubber trees and sisal
but since this mall of burgers, hot dog
and needle pricked chicken was built
a sick society of fat giants of foam has emerged
dragging away Indonesian traditional dishes
a man kisses a fellow man
in full view of the praying muslims

ciputra world may be far away
dubai mall may be far away
but in my own backyard of polokwane
i have mall of the north
beggars are swept away like filth
children of the rich with layers of make-up watch movies
eat caviar, smoke cigars
can't take freebies
because they are extremely loaded
with fat and cash

in magelang i met a shaman dressed in black
who sprinkled flowers on the ground
calling on spirits to fertilise the land
to bring manageable rain, enough sun and the wind
the barefooted shaman drank some tonic and sang
*i won't go back to the city
because city water for tea is bottled and boiled
i won't go back to the city
because the rivers and canals are full of shit
worse than bangladesh
i won't go to ciputra world*

*i'll get lost in the mall
in the culture hanging tower
i'll remain in magelang
because there's the sun and fresh air in the village
because everyday is a ceremony*

Tribute to departed poets

For left-wing wordsmiths of the world

I

Far away in freezing Moscow
Away from your beloved homeland Turkey
Hikmet, you died of a heart attack
While picking up a newspaper
At the door of your summer house
Perhaps your heart was destabilized by exile
And loneliness and vodka
But words sound through your head
Though they can't mow your sorrows

In your birth country they banned your poems
Gagged your loud voice
They even wanted to hang you
You wished to be buried under a plane-tree
Anywhere in a village cemetery in Anatolia
When your heart failed to pump further
You joined Marx, Engels, Pottier in the other world
To drive revolution against greed beneath the tomb
But no one remembered your wish
Now your tomb, comrade, is a tourist attraction
You lie with the rich and famous
In Novodevichy Cemetery
But like a beast with a rope and chains
You vainly kick and bite for freedom

*Oh radical of the word,
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla
The earth trembles under your feet
And the new world is born*

II

Oh, Chairman Mao Zedong the Red Emperor
Peasant smoker who ended decades of civil war
Tiger with many wives
You opposed arranged marriage
At 13, your father made you marry a 17-year old
You who spoke of the Cultural Revolution
And the Great Leap Forward
You, the founding father of modern China
You ruled for three decades – [some say like a dictator]
But you gave land to the women
You raised life expectancy

You taught the nation to read and write
But sometimes you are accused of glorifying violence
And the murder of millions [scattering ghosts across the land]

Oh Chairman Mao Zedong the Red Emperor
When you suffered a heart attack
And a lung infection
Turned blue and died in 1976 aged 83,
Your body lay in state at the Great Hall of the People
A memorial service was held
There was a three-minute silence observed during this service.
You wanted to be cremated, your soul stashed in an urn
It's you who signed the proposal that "All Central Leaders be Cremated after Death"
Like Hikmet the mighty tree, when your heart's depths dried
And your urine count dropped
No one remembered your wish
They placed your shrunken body into the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong

*Oh radical of the word,
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
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III

*Masimong a matalana
It was ha Mmamokoto
Re hlopilwe ke mekotoyi
Ntja di biswa bo gcoka sihambe
Khumbula my child
That's where you were born*
Ingoapele Madingoane – prophet of black oral poetry
Because Soweto where you lived
The smog of *mbhawula* hangs in the air
Youth hang in corners, smoking *nyaope*, throwing their futures hastily
Avalon cemetery is full, its tombs are beds for sex workers and serial rapists
Ravens live in taverns with blue bruised eyes
Behind the four roomed house is a shack which feeds the family
Amaguduka live there, back home *umsebenzi awukho*

You speak of brotherhood in Africa
But the black condition is under trial
Look, the bucket system of flies and cholera is rife in Walmer Township
People relieve themselves in buckets
In the same room occupied by their intimate partners/ parents/ children
In the same room in which they must sleep and receive their guests/
And prepare their meals
The municipal truck empties the buckets once a week

And the runaway shack fires are burning outside the city –
There is a war over excrement
Black condition is under trial
Flash floods in the mother city, the seat of parliament
Black condition is under trial

Unlike Zuma who has built a palace in Nkandla;
They say Mbeki did nothing in Idutyia
His mother still runs the spaza shop
She walks in the mud
Mandela built a mansion in Qunu
He greened a desert of sheep with tall trees and flowers
But now that he is gasping for breath, there's no peace in his house
Bones of his children are exhumed and reburied
What have the Mandelas learnt from Madiba, a man of grace and dignity?

Madingoane, loud and brave
Survivor of tavern brawls and township smells of shame
You are no more
No street named after you
No library named after you
No Order of Ikhamanga for you dear poet
When you died on 12 December 1996
The flags of the country were not lowered
Only a small passage in a newspaper remembered you
But your poetry mobilised millions to take up arms against the Boers
Braving the noise of SADF tanks
Braving their guns that aimed at decapitating children
Bullets mopping servants returning home from washing missies' underwear in the suburbs
Radical poet, your poetry fought against the blaze of curfews and special branch forces
Against John Vorster prison
Against the odour of township poverty, paralysed by wars in hostels

Madingoane, it was you and Mihloti Theatre, Malo Poets, Allah Poets, Dashiki
Who caused a shriek on the spine of the apartheid system –
You and Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya and Duma ka Ndlovu
You and Lefifi Tladi and Nise Malange and Gqina Mhlophe who shouted *Afrika izwe lethu*
You and Alfred Qabula and Mi Hlatshwayo and James Matthews and Maano Dzeani Tuwani
Who shouted *Mayibuye iAfrika*
You and A. Ka Themba and Julius Chingono and Farouk Asvat
You and Mongane Serote and Chris van Wyk and Sipho Sepamla
You and Mazisi Kunene and Eugene Skeef who took poetry to the people
In streets and halls and theatres and everywhere
Making people ululate when they hear their biter stories in their tongues
Making us cry and remember the songs of the Khoisan and the *imbongi*
Making us remember to love the greatest hard flowing river that Africa is –
The river we drink from its fresh water
But Madingoane, those men in Cape Town hardly remember you
Your memory is strangled by the people you freed
I can't blame them; we are an illiterate tribe

But it's you whose work was banned
Bashed by the police for speaking through poetry
When dogs were out to maul us
Mandela in jail, Biko hauled behind the police van and Soweto burning
You stoked the fires of revolution

*Oh radical of the word,
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla
The earth trembles under your feet
And the new world is born*

IV

Rendra, Rendra
Javanese peacock of the archipelago is no more
At 73, you died from heart failure and kidney complications
Buried in your own modest backyard hamlet in Citayam
In your days, you spoke for the uneducated children
The oppressed workers, prostitutes, the hungry and marginalised grassroots
You were not scared of Suharto, the dictator with an antiquated heart
When disaster hit Indonesia your land—
You didn't only use words to describe the hungry children
But you worked with the people
To save the lives because poetry and dance alone are good but not enough
Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java
Father of Indonesian theatre and freedom
Suharto the insulated dictator nipped you
Because he couldn't match your dance mechanics on stage
So he sent his dogs to throw ammonia bombs on to the stage
Because when a man is brainless empty
All he does is to bomb, bomb, bomb
Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java
The dogs arrested you
They imprisoned you in the notorious Guntur military prison
Nine months in solitary confinement
Your cell's ceiling was too low to stand up
Mosquitoes were buzzing, Suharto clapping
Because mosquitoes like Suharto like to feed on people's flesh
Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java
When you walked out of prison, your body marred by mosquito bites
Still Suharto was not satisfied
So he banned you from speaking in public
Banned you from reading your poems and dancing on stage
Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java

You spoke to the hookers of Jakarta
And understood their desperate circumstances
You wrote them a poem, *Prostitutes of Jakarta Unite*
You knew reality is the driver of change
You couldn't watch children wrapped on stretched card box
In the rain, and do nothing
Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java
Six days before you packed for good
You spoke to God:
I want to cleanse my body
From chemical poison

I want to return to nature's way
I want to improve my dedication to Allah

God, I love you

Rendra, Rendra
Peacock of Java
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla
The earth trembles under your feet
And the new world is born

V

Neftali Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, born in Chile in 1904
You preferred to be called Pablo Neruda
Called upon the dead of many centuries to speak through you
Against slavery, against US imperialism
Your three houses are public museums

Luckily you lost breath in your Santiago
Not in flight or hotel room in a diplomatic mission
Crazy about Stalin and Fulgencio Batista
We find reason to love your incomparable poetry
Remember the poem *Canto a Stalingrado*
Remember *Salute to Batista*
And when Stalin died, you wrote an ode to the dictator
Perhaps it was necessary to do so
Because unrighteous Stalin the communist defeated Nazi Germany
But poets who questioned Stalin ended in the Gulag labour camp

When frail and weak, Neruda, you won the Nobel Prize for Literature
Then hospitalised with prostate cancer
Then like petals Hikmet and Chairman Mao
You died 12 days after the military coup of 1973

of heart failure at Santa Maria clinic in Santiago
 Your driver and advisor think the Pinochet junta had a hand in your death
 That a suspicious injection was shot into your blood
 Pinochet the bull that flattened 3000 leftists
 Because a day before your death
 You were firm on your feet
 Your house was broken into
 Papers and books taken or destroyed
 But thousands crowded the streets
 Braved the police
 To mourn a poet –
 Their ray of light that penetrated their flesh so deep
 Their lantern that lit through the choking fog and darkness
 To protest against the brutish General Augusto Pinochet
 There's every reason to hate Pinochet
 Because it's possible that he injected you with poison
 After all, his regime murdered scores of leftists
 Thirty years since your death, your tomb is opened
 The world wants to find out what really killed you
 The world knows your radical views didn't impress the fat cruel Pinochet
 Pinochet burnt the grass
 But he didn't know beautiful resilient flowers would grow and blossom

*Oh radical of the word,
 I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
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 And the new world is born*

VI

Far away in Russia
 The unloving regime of Joseph Stalin didn't like you, Joseph Brodsky
 Couldn't find any reason to like you
 They declared you a schizophrenic
 They said your poems were pornographic and anti-soviet
 Poems undeserving to be read by the Russian public
 They called you a pseudo-poet in velveteen trousers
 Twice the regime put you in a mental institution
 And when they finally arrested you, the charge was social parasitism
 But in New York you stood before students in lecture halls of universities
 The schizo became Poet Laureate of the United States of America
 Received a Nobel Prize
 Brodsky the Russian Jew didn't live long
 At fifty five, you died of heart attack in New York City
 Buried far away in Venice, in Italy
 Today your tomb is a tourist destination

When some poets commit suicide
Or die of heart attack to escape Stalinism
When some catch trains and leave Moscow for good
You Anna Akhmatova couldn't run away from Stalin the vermin
Though the regime kept you under constant surveillance
Though your son was arrested from time to time
Nothing could stop you writing *Requiem*
Writing about the suffering of the poor under the Soviet terror
Akhmatova, like Hikmet, Chairman Mao, Brodsky –
You succumbed to heart failure, aged 76
Buried in St Petersburg's Komarvo Cemetery
Perhaps your wish was granted

*Oh radical of the word,
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away
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Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla
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And the new world is born*

VII

Adrienne Cecile Rich, they say you were a poet of towering rage
What kept you awake at night were voices of shouting lesbians
Voices that needed care and defence
But poet of steel nerves
You hibernated in lesbianism for years
Though it stretched her limbs far and wide
But gave your first husband children
Yet your poetry couldn't hide your true love

Poet of steel nerves
When your husband saw the Black Panthers crowding the space at home
Watching his wife marching against everything wrong America was doing in Vietnam
Marching against soldiers disappearing in Iraq
Soldiers swallowed by Clinton's war
Marching against the cynical politics of the White House
Your husband knew his wife was lost to the world
And gusts of cold air blew in the lonely bedroom and kitchen
Poet of steel nerves
That's why your marriage cracked and collapsed
That's why your husband gunned himself down

Poet of steel nerves
You knew words alone couldn't change the world
You argued:
*Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy.
Neither is it a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard.*

Though you knew the poet couldn't stop corporate greed and unseat Clinton

But you also knew the robustness of poetry

Again you declared:

*... poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible,
remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is
represented as separation*

Poet of steel nerves

Your feelings of patriotism lay bare

Damn Clinton and his White House of Dark Deeds

You were right to refuse his award

You knew his heart was covered with fur

Damn this war monger

Sister of the universe, your voice belongs to the world

Sisterhood is a calm ocean, thanks to you

Oh radical of the word,

I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away

I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers

Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla

The earth trembles under your feet

And the new world is born

Glossary

Aaa!:	Feminine mode of greeting in the Venda tradition.
Afrika izwe lethu:	Struggle slogan for the Pan Africanist movement, declaring that 'Africa is our land.'
Amandla:	Literally 'power', a slogan of the struggle chorused at mass meetings.
Bebek betutu:	Is a Balinese (Indonesian) seasoned and spiced dish of steamed or roasted chicken or duck. It takes at least 24 hours to cook.
Chinese brush:	A liquid designed to help men stop ejaculating prematurely during the sexual act.
Gado gado:	An Indonesian salad of boiled vegetables served with a peanut sauce dressing.
Hayikhona:	IsiZulu for 'not at all' or 'there is no such a thing' as in ' <i>hayi, ayikho lento</i> '.
Imbiza:	It is an African medicinal tonic made from the African potato and other ingredients. It is believed that it reduces high blood pressure, clears skin conditions, boosts energy and vitality, and helps to clean the womb and prevents arthritis.
Imbongi:	IsiZulu for a praise singer or a modern oral poet.
Korobela:	Sepedi for a dangerous love potion usually used by women to keep their husbands obedient.
Magwena:	Literally it means crocodiles, but figuratively, it refers to the revered men usually from the royal house, in Venda tradition.
Makholwa:	Workers, usually working in towns, who are known to be alive but choose to neglect their families in the rural villages for many years, only to return home when they are old, sick and broke.
Malume:	Xitsonga for uncle.
Mashonisa:	Usually an unregistered, illegal and unscrupulous money lender who sinks the people who borrow money from him so deeply in debt that they can't recover. A <i>mashonisa</i> or loan shark, often has access to your bank account, which means you belong to him.
Mayibuye iAfrika:	Struggle slogan made popular by the Pan Africanist movement, meaning 'Come back Africa.'

Mbhawula:	Xitsonga for a brazier, a tin container in which coal or wood is burnt to warm people of the townships in the cold South African winter. The <i>mbhawula</i> can be dangerous because fatal fires often break out if the <i>mbhawula</i> is not extinguished, and people fall asleep while warming themselves indoors with the windows closed.
Mondo:	Leadwood tree.
Mpesu:	A concoction of herbs mixed with baboon's urine, which is widely sold by traditional healers in the Vhembe region of Limpopo and believed to be having a sex-boosting effect.
Muraha-donki:	Xitsonga for a cheap blanket.
Ndaa!:	Masculine mode of greeting in the Venda tradition.
Ndadzi:	Lightning (bird) in Tshivenda.
Nghundhu:	A long and colourful hat adorned by feathers which is worn by Tsonga men during the dance festivities. The hat is also worn by a chief or traditional healer.
Nkanyi:	Marula tree in Xitsonga.
Otak otak:	A cake made of fish meat and spices, widely known across Southeast Asia, where it is traditionally served fresh, wrapped inside a banana leaf.
Rambutan:	A medium-sized tropical tree closely related to the lychee which grows naturally in most parts of Southeast Asia. The fruit produced by the tree is also known as <i>rambutan</i> .
Sarang burung wallet:	A luxuriant Chinese snack made of the swallows' bird saliva. It is claimed that this snack is preferred by the rich and it provides the man with extra sexual stamina.
Swidudwana:	In African mythology, these are spirits believed to be malevolent.
Tihubyeni minkhubenyi:	Part of a hymn that is commonly sung in funerals among the Vatsonga who are members of the Presbyterian Church.
Tindzhundzhu:	Xitsonga for water deities.
Umsebenzi awukho:	IsiZulu for 'there's no job.'
Vha-:	Added to a person's name as a title of respect, e.g Mr or Mrs.
Vhakoma:	Tshivenda for officials at the chief's place.
Zol:	Spliff or a marijuana cigarette.

Ancestral Wealth

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

Freddy Vonani Bila

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Note: This thesis is presented in two volumes: Grieving Forests (shorter poems) and Ancestral Wealth (longer poems).

Abstract

This is a collection of village narrative poems mainly set in rural Limpopo that searches into the complexity of the past and how historical events impact on the present. Although the poems are imagined along the Marxist dialectic, they're fresh imaginative creations featuring a strong element of surprise, spiritual mysticism, experimenting with form, delving into unknown poetic avenues, creating new music, exploring new sounds and taking risks. The long and intense poem, *Ancestral wealth*, which is a tribute to the poet's father, reflects on death and its impact through the effective application of various stylistic elements and poetic devices, thus immortalising the life of a rural South African. Overall the poems, including retrospective and experimental ones, condemn the free market economic system and all that it seems to necessitate: the degradation of ecology, indifference to human suffering and the alienation of vulnerable social groups.

Contents

N'wa-yingwani, 7

Why I am not a teacher, 11

Boys from seshego, 14

Ancestral wealth, 18

Memory, 29

Landmarks, 31

Glossary, 55

n'wa-yingwani

n'wa-yingwani
your only son xiringa left elim in the riotous 80s
a white farmer was found dead
body parts chopped to pieces
flesh stuffed in a black body bag
& thrown into the levubu river
but the hungry crocodiles
shook their heads
let the white man float away

we are told
the farmer slapped xiringa's aunt maria
that boy she carried on her back
on the same farm twenty five years ago
but the boer boy forgot who wiped his soiled backside
he set the dogs on maria
after she asked for permission
to bury her grandmother
in the village

so when xiringa heard the news
of his aunt's death at the hands of pitbull dogs
he walked in the hazy night
brandishing his axe & okapi knife
he walked from valdezia village to levubu farm
to slice through the pale flesh
because the white man had to pay
for his sins & those of his forefathers

n'wa-yingwani
the green flies put a price tag on xiringa's head
wanted: dead or alive
they searched for him in the mashau mountains
in the mambila caves
& under the deep flowing albasin dam
that's where he was arrested, after a week
but he had long shaved his head & beard so clean
chewed *phunyuka bamphethe*
that's why even in court it was stinking
for he had oiled his body with *phala bashimane* muthi
the judge fell asleep & let him walk free
but xiringa couldn't work on farms anymore
he fled to the tautona gold mine in carletonville
west of jozi-mjipa-msawawa
he left guva the wife waiting
to be serviced by night angels
because he only returned home on good friday & december
to plant seeds

n'wa-yingwani
your son toiled under the belly of the dark earth
crawling, digging the gold in collapsing mine tunnels
sweating in the deep, dark & damp tunnels
colliding with the big biting rats in tunnels
fingers freezing in the winter so cold in tunnels
breathing leaks of gases so deadly in tunnels
ankle deep in muddy water, up & down in tunnels
extracting the ounce of gold for the white man
stamping on skulls of ghosts that live in tunnels
that's where your son sucked the silica dust
the dust that weakened his lungs

n'wa-yingwani
your son lived in cramped hostel living quarters
cracking sounds of *kwaito* from friday to sunday
cash begging mamas in pleated skirts
keeping vigil in men's hostels
when his hormone-relieving machine started to stutter
he would drink *imbiza* to cure any sign of gonorrhoea
& at dawn on friday morning, he would drink gallons of warm water
& throw it away, groaning like a bull
he'd drink the bitter aloe juice
& cheap chinese sex tablets to boost his body
then he would brag about knocking three girls a day
without a rubber
at month end, he would fill up the table with black label
dance to blasting sounds with trousers dangling
then, he would retire to the living quarters
pockets full of holes
grovelling

n'wa-yingwani
when your son was retrenched
he moved to the bright lights of jozi
he stood over the glinting high-rise building
& like a discerning man & declare:
hillbrow is awash with fresh swaying roses
beetle-like rural girls use cowdung as body lotion
xiringa the cock-eyed miner returned home dissolved
girls with darting eyes
at high-rise hillbrow's little roseneath melted his heart
girls in skimpy wear flaunting their assets
at the moulin rouge hotel melted his heart
xiringa loved girls winking at him at the summit & ambassador
disco girls bingeing & smoking weed at the royal hotel
strip teasers in cubicles at the diplomat hotel
those thighs re-birthed him everytime
& the bottle fed the newborn

at high-rise hillbrow

n'wa-yingwani
lust withered xiringa's heart
he returned to lean on guva the village wife, broke & broken
once an ubiquitous *pantsula* of flair
he came home a mere bundle of bones
wearing thrush and tuberculosis
he came home, a parcel loaded in city to city bus to valdezia
he returned to be changed soiled nappies
because he couldn't eat a sweet with its wrapper
in fast-paced joburg
he returned to guva the hospice
but he had long pumped her with the poison of a social virus
he returned wheelchair-bound to die
without any azt-virodene-arv solvent
because he roamed around hillbrow's pubs, brothels & disco joints
where de kok's askari hordes planted the aids landmine
in desperate girls

n'wa-yingwani
when guva fell ill, some people called her a *cabbage*
because she'd been born prematurely
mbeki gave her an aids pension
n'wa-yingwani, you bathed her
changed her soiled nappies, wiped her vomit
& slimy foam around the mouth
you carried her feeble frame on your back to the pension pay-point
sometimes you'd push her, fastened on a green wheelbarrow
manto's ubhejana, garlic, beetroot, ginger
& lemon couldn't straighten her legs
not even after drinking and washing
with the urine of a donkey
could revitalize her scorched face
oh guva, beautiful woman, why don't the medics give her an anesthesia
so that she could be free from the bucket for emergency behind the door?

n'wa-yingwani
mbeki might never have seen an aids grave
but here in this village
the day slips into night so quick
& in the early hours of the morning
the young ones line up to fill up fresh open graves

n'wa-yingwani
every time you see your sick grandchildren
tears well down your cheeks
your heart has borne the weight of pain
your son died in your hands, at dusk
on the zigzagging dirt path to elim hospital

just after six months of returning home
now your daughter-in-law is packing up
she tried to take a shower in a plastic basin
to clean away the pungent smell of aids
but the death monster groans feverishly in her lungs

n'wa-yingwani
your two grandchildren on arvs
will soon vanish like doves in the night
but when the tree is uprooted like that
where'll children so young find a branch to rest their hopes on
to shelter secrets of adulthood...?

oh, n'wa-yingwani
you weep tearlessly in a hospital bed
stretched & worn-out
frothy & skeletal frame wired with drips and tubes
the clock ticks slowly
the doctor checks the colour of your urine:
you've got high blood & you are hiv-positive mama
i look into your sunken eyes
& the weary look you wear
& the furrow lining your brow
a cluster of glistening *xirimela* dims
i hold your cold hand & feel the heavy silence
death is in your throat here at giyani block
brown clouds hang in the burning air
a tent is planted in your yard
the elderly women in black line up on mats
how'll they announce the dreaded news to your tearful infants
your ailing, yelling grandchildren –
because nothing like this daily death is a hoax anymore?
again, shovels clatter
& we shove & shuffle facing the tomb

Why I am not a teacher

thanks robert berold and frank o'hara

I am not a teacher. but I studied
to be one at my blacks only college.
I specialised in Economics and Business Economics
in third year I got distinctions in these subjects
but we didn't have a spaza shop at home to practice my economics

those days, the early 90s, students at Tivumbeni College
were guarded by fully armed soldiers
they stood erect by the classroom door with their dogs
they were on duty, to protect the white lecturers and spies among us

those days, our list of demands was long:
fight bantu education. free education for all. change the college menu.
fight the mosquitoes in hostels and on campus. reinstate expelled students.
allow pregnant women to study. allow unions to operate on campus.
release the detained students whose balls we hear are being tortured in Pietersburg prison

our stomachs and necks were mammoth
from eating mountains of pap, chunks of kudu meat and cabbage
on Sundays we ate penguins disguised as chicken
some would queue at the toilet
because sometimes that food was a laxative
but my stomach was as hard as Thabazimbi steel

those days, it was necessary to march
even to be chased away from the campus for weeks
we wanted to be nourished by eating rice, fresh fish and salad
we wanted English breakfast, yoghurt, cereal and fruits
essential food for a teacher we didn't eat everyday at home

we were not always angry
on Fridays we demanded to watch blue movies
enjoyed disco at the main hall
we wanted more money for liquor for our fresher's ball
yes, we wanted to be complete teachers

we threw stones against ready-to-shoot soldiers and their ugly casspirs
dustbin lids were our shields
we knew that to jump over barbed wire could tear our shirts and trousers
but we were at war with dogs

the old men and women students were cowards
they didn't like to toyi toyi or throw stones
they had left their partners and children back home
they were at college to learn
but learn what?

those days, the 90s, we slept in hostels
in old shaking mattresses that sank like ships
if one student caught flu, all of us would cough and sneeze
mosquitoes loved the blood of first years specially
in summer we removed our beds, slept outside

we wanted to share hostels with female students
but no man was allowed at the female's hostel after 12 midnight
that was prison
to be accommodated in separate camps

I hated our showers –
this one guy would wake up too early to take a shower
but would finish after an hour
if you peeped through the shower door
you would see him rubbing his dick hard and fast with Sunlight soap
you would hear him scream softly, then madly and loudly
S'bongile! Si-bo-ngi-le! Sibongi-lee!

many students were too poor –
some depended on the cash made from corn beer or even dagga
some on cash from annual sales of goats and cattle and pigs
at first year, I only had one pair of trousers, and police shoes, from Philly my brother
and a t-shirt with the words:
nkosi sikelele iAfrika

I felt I could only teach in Gazankulu or Venda
couldn't dream of teaching the township kids in Pretoria or Soweto
couldn't stand teaching coconuts who knew English better than their teacher
that's why I am not a teacher

there were border industries in Nkowankowa
village men and women from Dan and Lusaka village worked there
we never visited these firms like Busaf
but we were studying Business Economics
from 7H30 to 1pm, we repeated high school Economics

I wished the governor of the Reserve Bank would give us a talk at college
or get Mbhazima Shilowa to come tell us about trade unions and scab labour
I wished someone from the PAC or Azapo would tell us why blacks were landless
why they worked on farms in Tzaneen and mines in Phalaborwa and Musina
to generate the wealth they didn't own
it never happened

I came to college to be a smart teacher:
to understand the public budget and why so little was streaming to so-called reserves
I wanted to understand the country's debt and the odious apartheid debt
why there's no water in Elim when I'm told
and there's a pipeline from Joao Albasini Dam that passes through Elim

to supply whites in Louis Trichardt

I am not a teacher
because those days new teachers got jobs far away in Bushbuckridge
but I was lucky, I got my job at Ongedagte High in Ekurhuleni near Elim
on Sunday I went to my new family with pots, plates, paraffin stove and blankets
a beautiful girl swept my room
then she brought a tray full of pap and *miroho*

the principal wanted me to teach Accounting from grade 8 to grade 12
I told him I got F in Accounting in matric
I couldn't teach something I don't know
so I resigned on my first day as a teacher
I asked Vivien my classmate who specialised in Accounting to take my post.
though even Vivien thought I was mad
then I came home with my pots, paraffin stove and blankets
leaving my empty hut and its fresh cowdung floor

boys from seshego

you loiter through polokwane town
knock at doors of our apartments and offices
with darting eyes
you monitor every movement of tenants
a shit job you create for yourselves
a job that only requires
the ability to ashamedly, carelessly
instil fear & fever
in your defenceless victim
with a sharp blade
& a coughing metal

you clean shaven heads from seshego
in sneakers, jeans & hats
you crawl like crabs
or just walk as if the earth is layered with eggs
you like it when the clouds brood
in streaming rains
especially in the night
wearing balaclavas & gloves
you check curtains of bedrooms & kitchens
sprinkle muthi, burn muthi
you do your job unhindered
not even dogs bark at you
no shadows follow you
& no police can trace
your fingerprints or footprints
all washed away by rain
& dew of the night

on may day
red t-shirt clad workers
sing & dance in squares and streets
as they celebrate the right to strike
& a living wage
but you, a merciless brigade
you enter suburb after suburb
house after house
shack after shack
you shepherd the workers, your sheep
& shear their wool in winter
you strike like slithering serpents
you search & find doors even in the dark
strike like serpents
serpents from the sprawling township of delirium,
of coughing lungs & aids-ravaged frames
of cracked lipped children

crammed in dark matchbox walls
in incestuous aging beds
you don't sleep in winter
you roam, buzz around our dreams of hysteria
scare us with swords, pangas & guns

boys from seshego, you should be on scaffolds – rebuilding the city
you should be on farms – tilling the land
or growing crops to feed this starving nation
boys, you should be in universities sucking knowledge and skills
teaching the illiterate nation to read & write
boys, you should be on the road side
fixing the potholes, mapping the road and bridge to mtititi
boys, you should be saving lives
that crumble like mud huts
in decaying hospitals
but here you are, scar-faced
forever drunk
dead hearts
when it's cold & dark
normal human beings fast asleep
pulling the blanket that way and this way
you break burglar doors
with crowbars and chisels
flat screens, touch screen cellphones, dvd players,
laptops, cash, clothing – your loot
you even finish off the left over food
sell stolen goods to second hand shops
for next to nothing
sometimes you sell mine back to me
in the street

march 2012: at lerato's place, apartment number 7
you took liquor from the fridge
sat on the sofas & opened beer with your teeth
& drank leisurely
then, you prepared a meal
pap, mutton & gravy
the couple and their son had locked themselves
in their bedroom
“we heard them when they came in,
we heard the noise as they ransacked
& combed the cupboards in the sitting room
we heard the noise & their drunken laughter
as howling prowlers emptied the tv sets & jewelry box
& when my sleep-walking husband woke up from his dreams
he pulled out an iron rod
a pepper spray in hand
i held his hand tightly:
'matome, you are not going to do silly things

these stone-hearted thieves are armed to the teeth
they'll haul & drag me like an animal
drop their pants & devour me
before they slit your throat in your pyjamas
do you want to become garbage –
a bundle of frozen worms?
you'll be lucky if these mindless wolves
leave you to stumble on crutches
please listen to me my love
these scumbags might put our only toddler in a bag
sell him at a baby auction
i'm too young to be a widow
to carry a void in my heart'
so the boys with river-like zigzagging scars
took what they wanted in the sitting room
then they knocked at our room
tried to open the door
we pushed back the door
screaming, help, help!
my husband with a pepper spray, trembling
we tried to call the police
but the boys vanished in the rain
before the men in uniform could come
after an hour
just three kilometres away
& all they did was to take down
the statement
'so the boys didn't rape you?' they asked
& laughed at my urine wet night gown"

may 2008: burglars climbed into the roof
of the president's official mahlamandlopfu residence
in government avenue
right in the capital city, pretoria
closed circuit television cameras watching
thieves walked away with the aluminium wire

* * *

april 2012: you thugs with delirium were here again
here at ritruda number 12
you knew i live alone
you knew i go home to elim
you came
used crowbars to try to break in
but the bila gods held the door too tight
i only came back to finish your job
broke into my house
because i needed to enter
& my neighbours who sleep in the sitting room

beside the window
just a few centimetres from my door
simply didn't hear a thing
though they drink the whole night
& sleep in the morning
or they didn't want to be witnesses in court
or perhaps they work with the prowlers from seshego
the suspects that are always at large

* * *

boys from seshego, if you come again
i'm going to phafuri, the heartland of real sangomas
if you come here at ritruda number 12
you'll be trapped in my apartment
run around the house which will become an anthill
swarming bees & horseflies will sting your eyes & balls
you'll not collect my double-decker bed
you'll run around naked
dangling penises sweeping the floor
you'll bleat, slippery liquid forming in your mouths
you won't collect any red meat in the fridge
you won't take away my stove & toaster
your long fingers will be glued to my new plasma tv
boys from seshego, if you come again
end of the month, i'm going to phafuri
that heartland of real sangomas
if need be, i'll even cross the limpopo
& mumithi river to lands yonder
sail to bileni, the land of makhayingi bila my great grandfather
i'll give the sangoma all my wages
we'll erect a fence of snakes to guard my house
against you, the boys from seshego
with your souls sucked out by vampires
with the shit job you've created for yourselves
whose only qualification is cruelty

Ancestral Wealth

(For my father Risimati Daniel Bila: 1931-1989)

I

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors dwell
Jonas is buried in a woven grass kenya
When Dayimani woke up dead at 10 am
He was buried in the afternoon, the same day
His body covered with white linen and a thin blanket
My ancestors dwell here
Seated, facing home in the east
Facing Bileni, far away in Mozambique
A broken mattress and xihlungwani heaped on the grave
Cracked enamel plates and mugs heaped on the grave*

II

Papa, when you finally got admitted at Giyani Block
We thought the learned doctors who can see what's hidden in blood and water
Would remove these needles
And pins and spears in your veins and wearied bones
But their bewitched green-red flashing machines in theatre confirmed you healthy
And when you got into the late night train ride to Garankuwa Hospital
Far away in Pretoria, on that ultra-distance bumpy ride
We thought the learned doctors would have removed this excruciating pain
In your chest and packing bones
But doctors in white gowns saw no fault in your stuttering engine
They sent you home
You got into that long bumpy train ride uncured
They asked you to come with your wife on 4th December 1989
For possible heart surgery
And the next day you came back home
Sat with your family around the fire
That night you didn't cough blood clots, nor groan
That night you didn't vomit
Nor was your body a river of sweat
Your face was sun-beaming
Blue eyes were shining
We ate chicken stew and pap
Drank Rooibos tea with buttered bread
That night owls and the wind didn't howl in trees
The mountain snake and bush baby didn't cry
Dogs and cats didn't wail nor mew
That night I slept like a baby

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise and hold hands*

*They sing in unison
Dance in rhythmic step
Around the fire*

III

Wednesday 13 September 1989, 1 am:
You asked mother to extinguish the paraffin lamp
Burning on the red polished cement floor
The time to switch off your tormented heart beat had beckoned
That day you requested *mhani* N'wa-Noel
Your concubine from Mbhokota
To sleep in the grass-thatched rondavel with your girl children
Because the last night of intimacy
And pain belonged to your wife Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani
Your black beauty of twenty six years
Yena wa ka mkhamu wa nsuku na ngwavila (She whose body glitters with gold and gems)
Mbati ya ku fuma (The door to wealth)

Your last night belonged to your wife
Who birthed you seven healthy children
Children born between 1964 and 1980
The last night to outline your will –
Because you knew *n'wana wa munhu u le kusuhanani*
The last night to outline how your homestead should be run
So that you don't return home wearing shorts
And run riot
In case your house was turned into a playground
Emachihweni, emathumbhanini
You sat on your three quarter bed
Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores
Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof
Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document
And you said:
Mhana Oom (he called me Oom)
The roof is old
I have bought the bricks
But they'll not be enough to build a decent house
When they give you my little pension fund
Build a house:
A room for Oom, a room for Simon, another room for Makhanani and Julia
If God had given me seven more years to live
Oom and Simon would be working
They would take care of Makhanani and Julia
Then the burning paraffin lamp was extinguished:
Each sleeping in their separate three quarter beds
Suddenly a heavy hand whipped mother's shoulder
It was her grandmother N'wa-Xakhombo
Whose voice shrieked:
Pfuka wena N'wa-Mafelalomo (Wake up, you who dies in far distant places)

A wu swi voni leswaku wa weriwa? (Don't you see the roof is falling, collapsing upon you?)
 All she heard was one groan
 Hhmmm, hmmm!
 And papa, when she came to your three quarter bed
 Daniel Risimati Bila the son of Dayimani and N'wa-Zulu
 Had packed for good
 Papa, your room was filled with cold air
 Misty cloudy smog covered the room at 1am
 Mama says you didn't hit nor kick the walls violently
 As you wrestled with the monster
Kwalaho ndzi n'wi longa (Then I laid out his body)
Ndzi koka minkumba ndzi zola milenge (I removed blankets and elevated his legs)
Ndzi lola mavoko ya longoloka na yena (I elevated his hands and arms along his body)
Ndzi vuyetela mahlo (I gently closed his eyes with a simple touch)
Ndzi n'wi sula xikandza (I wiped down his face)
A hlambile a nga se etlela (He had bathed before bedtime)
Mapfalo ya mina a ma file (I was but remorseless)
Ivi ndzi khomelela mubedwa (Then I held the bed so firm)
Ndzi ku kumbe u ta pfuka (Thinking that he would wake up)
 She searched for Rattex in the wardrobe
 If she had found it
 She would have crushed it
 Swallowed it to burn her liver and heart
 And join you in the other world
 How would she raise her children
 With cents from selling banana and tomatoes
 At the Elim market?

Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise and hold hands
They sing in unison
Dance in rhythmic step
Around the fire

IV

'My time to go has arrived,' you told mother several times
 The ZCC prophets Markos Mukhuva and vho-Ramantshwane
 Had tearfully told you the same at Magangeni church:
Your life's ticket is over
 They told you a few months before your departure
 To the land yonder
 They told you to stop chasing after the skirts
 Because skirts were a cloth covering a big bottomless pit
 And you came home to tell your wife
 You were not taking anyone's cows nor calves in the kraal
 But helping the wandering women in need
 You lived facing the tomb
 Facing the red setting sun

Knowing your living days
Were vanishing fast like paraffin paper fire
You lived facing the tomb
Knowing you couldn't afford skipping monthly subscriptions
To Saffas the undertaker in Louis Trichardt
Because the ancestors *emaxubini* were calling you
You lived facing the tomb
That's why you cleared the bushy shrubs
Making the road with a pick and shovel
Making the road with a spade and hoe
Because you wanted the hearse
To collect your remains at home with ease
Because you didn't want to be loaded in a wheelbarrow
And driven to be collected at the main road
Watched by birds, monkeys and stray dogs
You lived facing the tomb
Because papa, something so sharp was piercing you
Needles stinging your veins with deadly venom
Nails biting on your flesh
The sharp spear jabbing your heart
Something so sharp was numbing your veins
Draining your energy from your bowels
You breathed heavily every time you climbed a steep hill
You coughed strenuously, sneezing, lungs rattled
Sometimes you collapsed on the narrow paths
After vomiting blood, groaning, vomiting air
Sometimes you bellowed
Like someone who had eaten fresh poison
But papa, you carried the burden of a family man
On your shoulders
Working every day of the week
Slowly walking ten kilometres every day
To Elim Hospital
For all these thirty years
Helping doctors carry out post-mortems –
Cutting through skulls, stitching and cleaning the dead so stinking
Burying the dead in black shrouds at ten o'clock every day
Behind the hospital sewerage
Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital:
Ferrying patients to theatre
Feeding relieved mothers at the maternity wards
Scrubbing the floor in the Eye Department
Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital
Just a for a paltry R300 salary in 1989
Because you had beaks to feed
And clothe

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise like elephants*

*At the break of dawn
To drink water
From the mountain's fountain*

V

Saturday 26th September 1989 we hid you
In this sacred ground where shoes are taken off
It's not a cemetery for commoners
It's not Mazokhele nor Avalon
It's the Bila gardens, within my yard
It's a pity you spent two weeks in those mortuary pans
Ice must have burnt your skin and bones
Silencing the sense of hearing that never dies
Burning the growing beard and hair
When Saffas brought you home at dusk on Friday
In that dark hearse
Candles and a paraffin lamp burnt the whole night
In your lonely bedroom
The funeral parlour had bathed you
Dressed in a white silky shroud
Mother and the elderly women wearing blankets
Slept on the floor around the coffin the whole night
In your two-roomed house
I remember *hahani* N'wa-Mandlalele
And *muhulu* N'wa-Danki were there to support my mother
Their husbands had long died
Papa, when you left us
Your three quarter bed was removed from the room
Put outside the house against the tree
I was a small boy of seventeen
Doing standard nine at Lemana High
For days I didn't go to school
Even though *a ka ha ri vusiku*
The elders said *ku fanele ku songiwa masangu*
I listened to *Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni* on Radio Tsonga
To hear your name mentioned on that dreadful programme
7am, your light brown casket covered with a blanket
Was displayed in the courtyard
We walked around it to view you for the last time
People cried, some fell to the ground so hard
It was the first time I saw a dead man
And the fallen man was my father
Who in that fateful night
Told mom that had he known better
That he would die prematurely
He wouldn't have fathered his four last children
Including Oom
So I viewed you for the last time on earth
And I shed no tear because death had long come

I had seen you walk away
 Eaten by an illness no doctor could detect
 The night before the funeral—
 I sat around the big fire
 Reverend Chabalala was preaching in the crowded tent
 Papa, know that John Zulu your uncle donated a beast for the funeral
 It was slaughtered *eka* Mapuve
 80 kms away from Elim/Shirley
 Papa, know that people spoke so well at your burial
 Elias Machume was the Programme Director
Hahani N’wa-Risimati Xisana, in tears,
 Informed the mourners about your death
 And asked your ancestors Dayimani the son of Jonas
 Jonas the son of Makhayingi
Makhayingi wa Mpfumari
Mpfumari wa Xanjhingu
Xanjhingu wa Ntshovi
Ntshovi wa Xisilafole xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla
 To receive you on the other side
 Your brother John Bila who had disappeared for more than twenty years
 Came back home the day you died
 He trembled, speaking on behalf of the family
 Can’t remember what he said, because he said nothing, but cried
 Your wife’s brother J.S Mashele also paid tribute to you
 Even your colleagues from Elim Hospital came in numbers
 They sang hymns melodically
 P. Mathavha spoke on behalf of the ZCC
 Meriam Shetlele represented the neighbourhood
 Thomas Mahlasela read the wreaths
Sivara Rev Maluleke the short and handsome friend of yours and
 Carried your coffin to the grave
 The ZCC *mokhukhu* men danced in khakhi and *manyanyatha*
 Chonaphi Cawuke, Phineas N’wavungavunga, Shilowa,
 Mahanci and Xikhudu the great dancers were there
 The yard was full of mourners
 Men wearing jackets and women draped in blankets
 Even The Lion of Judah, your first wife’s brother, was there!
 He gave the vote of thanks with his moving coarse voice
 Mourners contributed cash –
 It was recorded in a book. It was good money.
 But some members of my family with long fingers
 Never showed all the money to my mother
 I was still small papa. But I’ve forgiven these thieves
 We planted your remains
 Filled the grave with blood red soil
 It had a hump like a bull
 The elderly planted maize, beans, corn and pumpkins
 Inviting the rain to come
 Because your death was never going to bring famine
 And starvation in this house

The elderly placed coins and your preferred drinking mug and plate
On the grave
We laid you besides your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu
Who died on 16 November 1980
And your father Dayimani who died in June 1964
A white cross marked your name:
Daniel Risimati Bila
Rest in peace

Under these tall thorn umbrella trees
My ancestors rise and hold hands
They sing in unison
Dance in rhythmic step
Around the fire

VI

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because Giyani Block breeds the pungent death smell
Shallow breathing skeletons crumble in the crowded ward
With no family member to preserve their sanity
The jaws lock, eyes fixed
And the white pupils enlarged in the light so bright

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because shivering patients with bluish lips
Watch tearfully as the final air bursts from the belly
Of a patient next door, bursting like a detonated bomb
Misty air blackening the ward with coldness

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because the restless patients with irregular pulse
Watch helplessly as the nurses remove the linen
With that stinking last black stool
Transferring this man who died in the night to another ward –
Next to a living patient in a single room
The living patient is happy he's got a neighbour
But the neighbour is fast asleep, wearing a shroud
The new neighbour is neither hungry nor thirsty
The living starts to hallucinate
Gets lost in nappies
Now he knows the nurses brought him a strange ghost
Who'll gnaw at his dreams

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because in this hospital, like many hospitals
Just an hour after someone has been confirmed dead by the doctor
The nurses make up the same bed
A new patient sleeps in there comfortably
He doesn't know someone has just died there

He collects the spirit of the dead
In the middle of the night
The new patient rushes to the toilet to pray
Pleading to see his only son from Joburg
And when his son arrives the next morning
And hold his father's cold hand
The old man opens his mouth with difficulty
As if to say, *my son take care of my cattle*
But no word shoots from the mouth layered with white foam
And again goes another patient
In broad daylight

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because mottling patients with a blotchy skin
Cry to go home to try herbs
To heal the cancerous rotting wounds that breed worms

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital
Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates
The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because some patients jump from the bed like impalas
Tearing drips and tubes away
They race around the ward wearing the catheters
Bubbling with urine tea
They too scream in hallucination:
Nurse, come and help
They are here with knives
They want to suffocate me
They want to cut my throat

Papa, you came home to rest forever
In the intensive care unit, someone is motionless
Trapped in a truncation
His car rolled three times into the donga
His head was almost crushed
Perhaps he's brain dead
But the heart is still beating slowly
The nurses feed him
They change his nappies every hour
His family won't allow the medics to
Switch off the life support machine
Because though he's brain dead
Miracles can still happen
They happened in the days of Jesus Christ
And when his spear suddenly rises
The nurses know the brain dead patient's life ticket is still intact

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Because some burnt-out nurses simply talk on cellphones
Watching this ongoing groaning and vomiting and shitting drama
But you papa, you didn't want to die like your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu
Who spent five months at Shangaan Block without eating
Nor going to the toilet on her own
My grandmother who died alone
Who when her coffin was opened for viewing
Even a brave man like you papa, cried
Because there was no one to close her mouth

Papa, you came home to rest forever
Like Dayimani your father
And Jonas your grandfather
And Makhayingi your great grandfather
You came home to rest forever
After a family meal
In the hands of your wife
In your bed
In the morning so still

VII

If you were alive today, *madala* –
I'd buy you a suit and soft skin ostrich shoes
I'd fly you to Durban or Cape Town
So that you walk on the beach
Feel the soft grains of summer sand
I'd take you out to sit down restaurants
Try out shrimps, mussels and this good food I eat

If you were alive today, *madala* –
We would plant avocado and litchi trees
Grow spinach and beetroot together
Pinch and prune sweetest tomatoes that yield
You would teach me how to dig a trench
How to prepare a seedbed for seedlings
How to make ridges and furrows
How to mulch and make compost and manure
How to save water and use grey water
We would grow those red roses
And maintain those white lilies
We would do gardening on our ancestral land
Singing your song:
7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani
U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani

If you were alive today, *madala* –
You would tell me how you survived the white dog

That followed you every morning to work
The dog that would run fast past you
The strange dog that would slide through your legs
Or even hit your legs with its tail
The dog that walked ahead of you
The dog that numbed your feet
The dog that shook and wearied your bones
The dog that disappeared at the bus stop
Just before the hospital gate
The same white *vaveni* that received you back from work
But couldn't enter the gate to your house
To throw you into a grave

If you were alive today, *madala* –
You would tell me about that rope
That roamed in your nightmares
The rope that made you so impatient
And hate everything about your wife
The rope that made you hit her
And want to kill her with a knife
The rope that prophet Muvhangeli said:
Don't pick it up when you find it placed on your path
The tough rope of wicked relatives
Who had long sized your neck

If you were alive today, *madala* –
You would tell me how you and Ngholeni picked up that dead rabbit
Early in the morning on your way to work
How you skinned the rabbit with delight
How you wanted to cook it for lunch
When suddenly a strange man came
And touched your forehead
And said, "*and hi yena papantsongo wa Frank.*"
Then your forehead ached and pounded
And when you came back home from work
The same strange man
Hobbled to your house
All he said was one sentence:
I needed to find Frank's brother's place
Then he vanished
Stealing your heart
Placing it in a cave
Planting a cockerel's heart in you
And you coughed and coughed

* * *

Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone
All along the wind was blowing you away
The sun was burning you

Your pillow was your hand
But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace
Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts
Since you left, your wife has remained in the house
I've not seen a man sitting on your chair
It's still your house
Full of trees and vegetables

7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani
U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani

Memory

i

i remember the people of pfukani
whose huts were uprooted in 1968
grass-thatched roofs loaded in gg trucks
goats, dogs, bicycles and pots heaped onto the trucks
poor people trekking to the unknown barren land
leaving behind fruit trees and gardens
leaving behind graves of their beloved ones

trekking to gandlanani, squashed like sardines
vavanuna va xandile na maburuku (men's pants back to front)
vavasati va xandile na swikete (women's skirts back to front)
hi xibububu xo pfuxiwa hi huwa ya tilori (woken up hurriedly by the roaring trucks)
 because it was time
 to separate vhavenda from vatsonga
 because it was time
 to make way for the white man.

ii

i remember my days at shirley primary
 the same school where eduardo mondlane taught
 boys used to play, jumping over the dump
 jumping over the blazing fire
 but i can't forget that day
 when oriel tried to jump over the burning flames
 whether he tripped or was pushed i don't know
 but his clothes caught fire
 his hair caught fire
 clothes and flesh became one
 everyone thought it was the end of him.

iii

i remember
 my mother making fire in the open ground
 stirring the bubbling pot of pap amidst cracking thunder
 pelting rain and flashing lightning
 even in our windowless huts
 we sailed, floating in water on the mats
 when grass-thatched huts caved in to bucketing rains.

iv

i remember
 days at lemana high
 white teachers opened windows in winter
 for the chilly air to freeze my toes
 the same teachers who were paid
 a tolerance bonus to teach a black child.

v

i remember
 the wooden electric pole behind our house
 planted in the family cemetery
 cables of fire trapping swallows and owls
 turning mischievous monkeys green
 cables of modern fire that galloped kilometres from town

to supply a certain dombani (Thomas), victor, magantawa (macintosh)
and bernard with warmth
amidst darkness and the smog of burning paraffin.

vi

i remember
the graves under water
the colossal deep dam of death
that the big man dombani built
where we swam naked in summer
our rags drying in thorn trees

i remember
dombani the hefty burly-surly man
clad in khakhi wear and *veldskoene*
the man with a bloodthirsty temper
wielding a rifle
on horseback
at sunset
cracking shots in the air
reptiles and porcupines retreating to holes
riding around the dam
for the black boy to raise his head above water
to fire with delight
cracking the boy's skull
halting his breath
or to just see the little boy consumed by water
to teach him a lesson
that under the orbiting sun
the dam is not for naked black boys
it's not for a speck of village dust
but it's for sailing white men in boats
who catch fish
even when drunk.

Landmarks

I

I was born in 1972
Mudzwiriti River swelled over roads and boulders
But nothing green grew in the reserve of Gazankulu Bantustan
Even plants and trees and shrubs
Even the animals and birds and reptiles
Even the mountains and lakes and streams
Felt the pain of apartheid war
I still live there in the backwoods
With the common people
Warming ourselves around bonfires

I've slept in grand sky scraping hotels and villas of the world's jaw-dropping cities –
My name is inscribed in books, postcards, newspapers, zines and films
I've never been on *Facebook* or *What's up*
When I finally sleep
I want to be folded neatly
Planted into a family cemetery
Head facing east
Please my boys, don't pile up goods on the grave
The rain will wash my memory away
The sun will dry them and wild fire will burn me to ashes
Please my boys, don't be foolish and chop the trees I planted with passion
They're your future oxygen, bread and soup

Though I possess no clattering wheel
Or a bike spoke and chain
I've lived like a swallow –
Weaving nests across the mountains and oceans
I rode in rickshas buses trains planes and dilapidated taxis
I've ridden in boats motorbikes, donkey carts, and cars

Sometimes I spin, sideslip and skid every week as if flying is catching a taxi lift to town
I've been chauffeured in bombastic cars to attend meetings with ministers,
Social movements, artists, culture gurus, donors, NGOs and professors
The woman at the Polokwane Airport check-in counter
Feels pity for my wife in the village while I fly out to cities on Fridays

I grew up in a mud hut,
Drank water from the wells
Slept on the itchy river *majekejeke* mat on a cow-dung smeared floor
At 10, I was still wetting myself in the night
The millipede powder couldn't stop the habit either
I showered from a plastic basin
Often used a water-filled mug to wipe the face
And extinguished the rotten rat wreaking havoc in the armpits

I've also lived in an apartment with portraits and tidy rooms for visitors
But I've also lived in an apartment with racing roaches and wet laundry

I grew up using a long drop toilet
Newspaper, *mugabagaba* and guava tree leaves wiping my backside
Others used stones and bare hands to clean themselves in the bush
Later I enjoyed steam baths and massage in spas
Sat in armchairs, rode a horse and walked on red carpets
One day I may receive a Nobel Prize for Literature
Like Neruda, Brodsky and Szymborska

At 25, I danced in a sunlit pool almost naked
I sat in a Stockholm public sauna with staggered old white couples
Watching me cuddling my Camilla who wept like a baby
Because her black man couldn't relocate to first world
Under apartheid, it was immoral to kiss a white woman

At 35, I spent three hours at Jomo Kenyatta airport jail
For travelling on a valid yet decrepit passport
I met a Chinese, an Ethiopian and a Somalian who had been there for three months
Prison warders pushed them to agree that they are al Qaeda operatives
Trained in caves and mountains of Afghanistan or Pakistan
That they knew where the bearded Osama bin Laden was hiding

We sat on linen-free bunks, tortured by anopheles mosquito parasites
We were fed spinach and rice in a plastic with no plate or spoon to eat with
I didn't have Dollars to bribe Mulongo my captor with mocking disdain
I prayed frantically:

*God, my gentle wife is pregnant
A human heart is beating in her womb
It's my first child*

Six years later, I watch fire swelling into flames
Jomo Kenyatta Airport gutted by deafening inferno
Airport banks charred; flights redirected
I see officers passing water buckets in attempts to squash the blaze
But Kenya is a country without fire engines
Six years ago, I was detained here
Though I know nothing about the Taliban or al Qaeda

I return to my birthplace gawking at the forming clouds
But Shirley is a dark shadow – foul witchcraft air floats at midnight
Woolly dogs bark, strange cats mew outside my window
Owls hoot over the water tank, the wind howls in reply
Bush babies yell like infants in the avocado trees
The mountain snake cries in the tall thorn umbrella trees

Though I love the smell of rain, I fear when thunder rumbles
Lightning shakes the big oak tree that's been there for years
At forty, the prophet in Moria told me some people are jealous
They want me to go round the bend, family in disarray

But even when my eyes are shut at night, they won't succeed

I stash holy salt granules in pockets when I walk
Sprinkle ZCC spring water on my face and in the house
To scare the barking dogs that want to maul me
Here, I fear to walk on *xifula* planted in the yard
Or drink from a *xidyisa*-spiked cup at a party or funeral
Ndzi chava ku pepejeriwa ndzi duga naro ku fana na tatana (I'm scared to be sent away to the wilderness of madness like dad)
Ndzi chava ku nusiwa nkondzo hi valoyi va tiko leri (I'm scared to be bewitched by witches of this land)
Va nyankhandli xiyani wa ngove si nga fi! (The cruel witches who only deserve to perish)
That's why in bedtime I put the Bible under the pillow
But I was never scared of the Boers and their dogs

I return to my birthplace gawking at the forming clouds
But the unyielding comrades in power know all about tenders,
Cars, villas, soapies, sushi parties and holidays –
In fact they are a set of carnivores
Lethal tigers leopards and lions
They are adult *izikhothane* –
The type that burn money and new clothes when stoned
Look, they own krugerrands and gold bars
Live in marble houses with servants
Drink from gilded cups
They entertain guests with pipe and beer
Yet expect us the voters to drink urine
And wash our faces with sweat and saliva

Don't they see the impassable roads and mud in my toes?
Don't their hearts bleed when we push coffins in wheelbarrows,
In the pelting rain to bury the dead?
Are they not haunted by sun-bleached children
Shuffling sand on foot to catch education in indescribable broken down schools?

Here, meek souls live in gloomy mud huts
Silhouetted with sparkles of fireflies
The moonlit streets with intermittent electricity is on the canvas
Though I served as a guerrilla against the apartheiders
I still walk on the scorching gravel roads

II

Mama says her pregnancy was a nightmare
A horde of witches were pointed by papa
N'wa-Mahatlani had to chew boiled roots of kweek grass
To keep me growing in the war-zone womb

At three months mama went to Dombani the village foreign veterinarian

The hefty vet who had drugs for horses, cats, dogs and bulls asked:
 “*U twa yini? U huma kwihi?* (What’s your problem? Where do you come from?)”
 “*Ndzi huma eka Mr Phillips.* (I come from Mr Phillips)”
 “*Why u nga yanga eka Phillips?* (Why didn’t you go to Mr Phillips? You belong there.)”
 “*Hikuva mirhi ya wena yi strong dokodela.* (Because your medicine is much stronger, doctor!)” she replied
 Perhaps that’s why I didn’t escape from the womb wounded
 But the womb-war persisted:
 At five months, Jacques the limping Swiss doctor at Elim Hospital
 Put a torch-like gadget deep in mama’s womb
 It sucked all the unwanted blood
 Mama was haemorrhaging before birth time

Head up, legs down
 Chonaphi advised mama to drink *mogabolo*
 So when she got to the maternity ward –
 She didn’t have to incessantly hit the walls in agony
 A minute was enough to throw me out unharmed

I criss-crossed and jived in the womb for ten months
 I emerged fresh and strong I emerged
 Yet with a tiny frame
 Mommy wondered why she had to take me home
 Instead of keeping her bundle in a bottle
 The Swiss doctor nicknamed Mushathama said:
Vona n’wana wa wena wa tika (Your child is weighty)
U na rhambu ro tiya (He has a strong bone)
A nga fani na lava nga tala khuvi (Unlike those fatty-foam children)
A nga vabyi, u fresh (He’s not sick, he’s fresh)

III

When I was three, the sun had just set
 When I set alight mama’s grass-thatched windowless hut
 She was busy cooking on an open fire
 The sky was dark covered by black smog
 The fire consumed all her bracelets, the bangles, *minceka*, *swibelana* ...
 All the adornments that made her young
 burnt to ashes, burnt to ashes
 I ran to the neighbours for shelter because none could fight that fire
 Scared to be whipped

The next day mama took me to Xidonkana the prophet at Mbhokota
 I had to be exorcised, demons had to be chased away
 The dreadlocked prophet kept me in a stone hut he had built
 In his New Jerusalem up in the hill
 The singing women of the Apostolic church quickly covered the hut with old blankets
 And thick construction red and green plastic
 I burnt in the sauna

His disciples brought red burning stones
 Poured them in the bucket
 I burnt, I burnt
 They added a bucket of hot water
 Mixed with a bowl of hard salt granules
 They asked me to inhale the smog without flinching
 I burnt, I burnt
 Cow-hide drums were throbbing outside the stone hut
 Goatee-bearded Jackson stood outside by the makeshift door bare-feet
 His dreadlocks dangling over his white gown and red crosses
 He turned and twirled a carved stick and burst into song:
Yesu, Hosi ya vhangeli (Jesus, Lord of evangelism)
Tanani mi ta horisa timbilu (Come, set your hearts free)
Na swifula mi ta susa (Come and cure your cancers)
... tatani mi ta horisa timbilu (Come and set your hearts free)
Na swidyisa mi ta susa (Come and rid yourselves of the toxins)
... tanani mi ta horisa timbilu (Come, set your hearts free)
Na swinkhovha mi ta susa (And the owls will be tamed)
... tanani mi ta horisa timbilu (Come, set your hearts free)
Na tinyoka mi ta susa (And the snakes will be removed)

The *mafufunyani* felt the heat
 And escaped in a haste
 Like tokoloshi dashing to the river
 Jackson asked me and mom to drink and wash with steamed water
 He called the red dirty water the blood of Jesus

IV

At seven, me and my brothers had come back from school
 It was time to release the goats to graze
Tlhoko! Tlhoko! [There it's a bird's nest]
I xinyenyani [It's a big bird]
 Up in an umbrella thorn tree a child lay in a nest

She smiled, bent down like someone praying
 We stood there motionless, helpless
 She had a furrowed forehead and a pointed nose
 Its tiny fingers tightly held the nest
 We raced home and reported this strange thing we saw.

Papa, the only ZCC priest in the village prayed for us
 Stroke every part of our bodies with *kotana*
 Then we burnt in the sauna
 The next day the baby and the nest were gone
 But no grave had opened at home.

V

At 11, papa sent me to Elim Hospital for circumcision

That's where Hebert Stanley Phillips the son of a missionary had taken him too
 Kokwani John Xihosana Zulu wanted me to sing *hogo* in the mountain
 Sit with my back around the undying fire
 Sleep in a nest like a bird
 Drink *malusu* to forget my warm blankets at home and my mother's hot meal
 Kokwani John Zulu wanted me to watch *vadzabi* carry logs at dawn, and make fire.
 He wanted me to wear red ochre and wield sticks of triumph
 He wanted me to learn *milawu* and chants by heart
 Learn to eat *xivonelo* with hands tied at the back
 Survive sharp blades or just wither and die
 He wanted me to wear a warrior name like Khazamula, Magezi, Xitlhangoma,
 Risimati, Hlengani, Yingwani, Maduvula, Mphahlele, Mzamani, Mhlava
 Mafemani, Mandlakazi, Gezani, Skheto
 I'm happy I didn't go to the camps shrouded in mystery
 Where boys are told to stop living until *madlala* expires
 Where boys must look down and not face the burning fire for fear of death
 I'm happy I didn't go to the circumcision camps shrouded in mystery
 Where villagers must stop ploughing or digging
 Or listen to radio
 Or play music out loud

For a month or weeks beds must not shake
 All we do is to sing one song *hogo huwelela*
 And celebrate when boys keep away from water for days
 Just to horde ticks in the name of culture
 But a certain chief simply collects cash to enrich himself
 Instead of building roads, paving streets, schools, clinics for his forgotten people

I'm happy I didn't go to expose my tiny frame to that cold weather in the bush camps
 Where scores of dehydrated boys died in Mpumalanga's botched circumcision camps
 Boys bled to death
 Some only come back with gangrene and amputated manhood
 Denied drinking water and nourishing food
 I think of my two boys...
 Oh no, I won't send them there
 What type of a father would send his boys
 To suffer in the extreme cold, suffer malnutrition?

I became a man at Elim Hospital in full view of female nurses
 I was too young to admire their breasts
 They pierced me with an injection, and the part they pierced died for a while
 Then they pulled my foreskin over the head of my short penis
 They did that with a pair of forceps
 My foreskin was snipped by female nurses
 They stitched the wound
 And dressed it with a bandage
 They gave me pain killers
 But I walked home like a crab
 They told me not to sit around the fire
 Or ride bicycles, *swigirigiri* and *swibantsheke*

I was too young to have sex or masturbate with my bandage on
Papa insisted that I use Vaseline to get the wound to heal faster
After a week, I removed the bandage and I was a man
I saw the stitches falling off like weathered feathers
Now I can speak at board meetings and chief's kraal boldly
Knowing that I've the required arsenal against Aids

At 13, I called myself Vonani –
Because I admired Vonani the sassy taxi driver from Mbhokota
But village pals call me Tete the dancer
At three I used to sing and dance
Tete hi tee, Tete hi tee!
Tete hi tee, Tete hi tee!
Corn-beer drinkers would beat enamel paint tins and clap
Singing along *Tete hi tee*

Some children wear names of spooks
Hitler, Idi Amin, Mugabe, Dlayani, Matlakala
I wear my grandfather's name Dayimani –
The man who walked to Kimberley
The man who dug diamond in the big gaping hole
The man who came home with a truck full of suits, bags of corn and sugar
To feed the Makhayingi Bila clan of hunters
But there wasn't a single shining diamond in the bags

I wanted to call myself Mkhacani, Dayimani's other name
But Mkhacani means to urinate
Villagers who love me call me *Dayimani ya Maphutukezi na Manghezi*
Every time Albert Jesi meets me, he sings:
Ndzi tsakile ngopfu ndzi nga vuya na dayimani
Ndzi nga vuya na dayimani

VI

At 12 I went to Shirley Presbyterian church for the whole year
I didn't know I was wasting my energy and time with these Bible lessons
End of the year, 22 December 1985 in church –
The elders of the church and their reverend E.F.C Mashava wielded a Samurai sword
To behead the son of a peasant:
He asked the son of a peasant Freddy Vonani Bila
And three others to stand before the congregation
While other children were receiving their certificates of baptism
I shivered as the elders with flowing garbs mocked us:
Your parents are members of that ZCC church that crushes steel
They walk around with a shining metal star
They worship a mere mortal when they should be worshipping Jesus
We cannot baptize you, because you are still minors
I returned home with a heavy heart
Mama cried bitterly, tears beneath her eyes
I had never seen her weep before

When she saw mud on my face
I had been told that without a baptism certificate
The Boers wouldn't give me a job
In their Christian South Africa
Since 1985, I've never set my foot in that church
I can't listen to sermons of the intoxicated
Who collide with witches in the dark
The mud they threw on my face couldn't stick

VII

1986, I read Karl Marx's *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* at Akanani
Hambileswi a yo na yi xa (Even though it rained and cleared)
It was better than wailing in churches, temples, synagogues
Or consulting sangomas and prophets
Which is what most people do

At Akanani, there were whites from Joburg, Durban and Cape Town
They liked to greet people
Gave us lifts from Shirley to Elim or Louis Trichardt or Polokwane or Johannesburg
They played football with the common folk
Some learnt to speak Xitsonga and Tshivenda fluently
Mike and Astrid sent their child Cabral to a village school
They wore red-shirts with messages and faded jeans
Since meeting them in the night political school
I've read Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Freire, Boal, Gaddafi
Nyerere, Cabral, Sankara, Fanon, Ernest Mandel
They taught me how to run a co-operative
How to use theatre to get people to talk
About their daily problems like lack of water

We travelled around the province doing theatre for development
I knew, "unless we organize, we'll be washed away!"
Eighteen years into liberation, I still question those who are not fit to govern
Those who loot in the name of the struggle
I'm glad this government won't hang me for speaking frankly, not yet anyway

At eighteen, I distributed *samizdat* pamphlets and recited poems in ANC rallies
In Thohoyandou, Makwarela, Vleifontein, University of the North
We organized consumer boycotts against the white shops in Louis Trichardt
But now the white shops are in Elim
Alongside spaza shops of the Pakistani, Nigerians and Somalians
My rural folk remain beggars on their land
Talk of black economic empowerment is empty
Comrades who shouted long live Marx and Lenin and Lumumba and Sankara
Don't have a socialist vision
They build a billion-rand Gautrain that doesn't go to Soweto or Mamelodi
Yet expect a vote from the stranded, desperate township folk
I live not too far from Muyexe where millions are being wasted by tenderpreneurs
I dream of a speed train from Elim to Cape Town

I dream of a university in my village
 I dream of tarmac roads to replace zigzagging village paths
 I dream of public parks and sports facilities
 I don't want to live in the world of butchers of miners
 When my father died, I took my passport in Sibasa
 I wanted to cross the Limpopo river and join MK in Lusaka
 Return home like inyamazane with an AK47 over my shoulders
 Singing gloriously over a hippo for freedom:
Sabasiya abazali emakaya (We've left our parents at home)
Siwela emazweni (Fleeing to lands far away)

The dream evaporated, exiles were returning home
 At Codesa, Mandela and de Klerk were smoking the same pipe
 But I joined the defence unit at Akanani
 Received a crash course on arms and guerrilla warfare
 I never fought in a battle. Wouldn't like to spill blood.
 But my dance is toyi toyi:
Kubi kubi kubi (Although things are bad)
Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli (But we are going to Pretoria)
Noma basishaya (Even when they beat us)
Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli (We are going to Pretoria)
Noma basidubula (Even when they shoot us)
Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli (We are going to Pretoria)

But when I walk on gravel and count bodies decomposing
 Patients sleeping on the floor and benches
 Patients who will not be sent to x-ray because there's no money
 Or the machine is broken
 Black patients who don't matter in the eyes of a black government
 I feel like bombing the Luthuli House
 But it won't happen. I can't bomb my comrades.
 I am a man of peace. I hate to spill blood.

VIII

At fourteen, I went to Lemana High in Magangeni
 Eduardo Mondlane had sat at the same desk
 Today that school that taught the community to grow their own vegetables
 Build their houses and make their tables and chairs
 Is overgrown by vegetation and weeds
 I hated the separate staff rooms for black and white teachers
 But I enjoyed inter-school sport and eisteddfod
 I walked 14 kms on foot everyday
 Because Majeje the homeland puppet couldn't build a high school in my village
 It was good to be taught by good teachers
 But some white teachers taught us with contempt and disdain
 While lazy black teachers cared only for cash, girls and beer
 I hated teachers who dragged their sorrows and egos to the classroom
 Instead of teaching with passion
 At 17, my father died

I still don't know what killed him
I have no photo frame to hang on the wall
Ms Jacobs my Afrikaans teacher with a heart comforted me
It felt like she would adopt me
Perhaps the black boy from the village was going to work in the garden, earn some income
Sit silently around the table and eat *potjiekos*, tomato *bredie* and mutton stew with rice
Perhaps the black boy was going to enjoy the taste of biltong and *droewors*
I shrugged, not me; there's peace in my mother's windowless mud hut

I couldn't dodge lessons at Lemana
I smiled every time I saw Nyeleti's oval face
I wanted to hear the tenderness of her baritone voice
Touch her pushback hair style
When she wasn't in class, my day was wasted
Inside I was burning, but poverty shut my lips with a padlock
But Nyeleti is the reason I completed matric
There must be valid reasons to go to school
But Nyeleti kept me alive
Not a degree, or big house or car in the future
But her smile

IX

At 19 I went to Tivumbeni College of Education
It wasn't my intention to be a pedagogue
I wanted to be a ceramist or journalist
I've always admired brave journalists
Nosy and sniffing
But everyone who ate bread and cheese, bacon and eggs
In the village was a teacher, nurse or railway worker

I've been a poet since I was seventeen
Poetry has been my passport to countries around the world
My poetry is published in ten or fifteen languages
It is used in foreign universities
Quoted in papers, magazines, newspapers, dissertations and books
Researchers from far visit me to make films about me
But in my South Africa, in my Xitsonga my work is foreign
And there's no library or bookshop to keep them safe in my village

I completed my teacher's diploma with three distinctions
But never worked as a teacher
At twenty two, I took up a teaching job at Ongedaagte High
I left the next day
They wanted me to teach Accounting from Grade 8- 12
But I failed Accounting while at high school
I could teach everything else except Accounting and Afrikaans
At nineteen, Ntsan'wisi closed the college for the whole year
Angry students loaded Hager the rector on the back of the bakkie
I hated *Spesiaal Afrikaans* with passion. I was at college to study Economics.

What was special about Afrikaans, when children were mowed down in Soweto 76?

At twenty two, people voted in Mandela's men and women to power
It was good to see long queues of hope
My hope was elevated when former unionists went to parliament
I imagined a new country without sprawling shacks
Though I supported the Reconstruction and Development Programme –
I didn't vote for a Joe Slovo's sunset clause
I supported Azapo, but this party of Biko will never win the elections
When the RDP was suspended, and replaced by Gear
I faxed a poem to President Mandela's office –
Mandela, Have You Ever Wondered?
... that the triumphant crowd retires to ghettos?

At 20, I had sex for the first time
It was late at night, in a dark room at Tivumbeni College with a high school girl
Xhosa my friend took me there. He had made the arrangement.
The girl had come to see the college with her school.
I don't remember her name
I wouldn't remember her even if we meet in Bushbuckridge
The teacher vulture didn't use any condom.
I didn't have one, and I wouldn't have known how to use it.
If she fell pregnant; then I'm sorry my dear girl
My seeds fell on the rocks

In my first year at Tivumbeni I shared a room with boys from Valdezia
They drank every week
Used hungry girls from Nkowankowa like dogs before my eyes
Girls camped in the room from Friday to Monday morning
Sometimes these boys would growl, complaining of drop and gonorrhoea
I wouldn't catch anything like that
Would you get drunk and hurt from watching a porno?

X

I treasure the women I loved
Not all of them have seen me naked
But my one night stands were a disaster
Lele used to drink wine at my flat in Ritrua
When she was drunk we would kiss
She would feel my hard stick rubbing her thighs
One morning she came over
She was on her way to Joburg
I drank body-boosting *mageu* but the dick was lame
So I ashamedly let her go, catch a taxi to Joburg
Years later, I met her, she was frail and weak
She'd lost hair and weight
I'm glad *mageu* didn't give my body any boost that morning
I thought of the days she used to be driven in BMWs

Wear expensive labels

My one night stands were a disaster
With Prim, that girl who loved every man with bling bling
My stick was hard, but the traffic was red
She was drunk from her wine
At the Cape Town Hollow hotel she shouted in her coconut tone:
“Don’t be a typical Xhosa man,
My white guy doesn’t mind licking me
It’s sweet with blood, flowing blood.”
I chose to be a typical Xhosa man
Who is scared to cough blood clots
Scared to shit droppings like a goat
Scared that my system might be blocked
For I want to crawl, live until hundred years
Where I come from they say *swa yila wa yila*

I wish I were like King Solomon
The poet with 700 wives and 300 concubines
But I’m far from matching his record
I picked up a wandering town girl one night
She followed me to the Glenkens apartment at Hans van Rensburg
We had a Nando’s grilled chicken, pap and a Coke for supper
She slept with her tight jeans on
Until morning
Can’t remember her name
Nor where she came from
She was a girl with a sweet voice
She wasn’t a ghost. No, I can’t remember her
It doesn’t bother me either
Her unshaved armpits were meerkat smelling
She was *mushavhanamadi* – a spider in the web
Or should I dare say a croc that lives in water but refuses to wash
I slept looking the other way
She took me to task with her smell of putrid turns and twirls
Glad I slept looking the other way
I didn’t extend my hand around her –
Even with my erotic habits, I couldn’t risk loving her, except to share a bed
She was going to give this loner, strange *siekte*
Bad take-away from a cheap oven
Next day I woke up with a hangover from her pungent smell
I washed my blankets with detergents
Dried them for two days
Never expected her to touch a broom
Let alone the vacuum cleaner
But she was better than the run-down whore
I once picked up
Who the next day wanted to move in with me
Without any lobola
Couldn’t tell her there’s no honey left in her pot

I really treasure the women I loved:
Onica was a clean and beautiful thief with a trendy hairdo.
She knew the perfume to attract the Bila bee
Loved the songs of Beyonce, R Kelly and TP
She broke into my apartment
And stole my radio and clothes
She left a voice message on my mobile phone:
So you think you are smart? God be with you.
When she received calls while we were eating out
She would say, "I'm with my husband,"
Her fingers pressing against my palm
There was no reason to worry about another man
I thought she was a respectable woman fit for marriage
But I was her sex trash bin
Her ATM

Mpume rode in lux buses from KwaMashu to Polokwane
We went to poetry readings and book launches together
But when I wanted a baby, all I could get was drop
The Malawian healer gave me something bitter to cook
It was smelling, ready to give me TB
I threw the *muthi* to Pietersburg Primary school grounds at night
Her cousin notified me of her death eight years later
I should have attended her funeral and met her son Manqoba
Rest in peace my friend

At 25, I appeared in *Next* magazine with Camilla
It wasn't a betrayal of values. Love cuts across race and culture.
At twenty three, I slept with two prostitutes in Hillbrow.
Flaxman introduced me to the Little Rose. It was a dangerous place.
Most men have walked in and out of brothels.
A prostitute searched my pants, stole all my notes whilst I was busy with another one
In another encounter, I couldn't have an erection.
I had to pay still and there was no change
That's why I no longer enter brothels

XI

I've been to several countries in my life
I watched opera for the first time in Algeria
They sang in Arabic, Wahiba translated every line they sang
It was torture
I would have enjoyed the impromptu village dancers of *makhwaya*

At 24, I travelled to Harare by Translux bus on my own
Marjorie Jobson had invited me to the prestigious African Human Rights camp
I saw pictures of Mugabe lined up on the road to the airport
Dictator I thought. But it was none of my business.
His people want him to rule forever

Or is it true that the dead can vote for Uncle Bob in Zim?

I arrived late and slept at the Earlside hotel
There were faeces under the double bed of old unwashed linen
A prostitute knocked, it was late in the night
I couldn't open the door, I hadn't invited her
I had been warned thousands die of Aids in Zim
I suffered from flu for three weeks
There's a permanent Zim scar on my face from that flu

I met a woman who was horny, I was horny too
But when I noticed her black clothes, I knew she was a widow
I curtailed all movements of my flesh
Scared to die of *makhuma*

I saw married course participants removing their rings for young boys
I met priests who smoked and drank unashamedly, and still made sense
I went to Chinhoyi caves, admired the pool of cobalt blue water
Some white ultra divers dived deep into the pool
I feared the spirits would capture me, curse me for good
In Zambezi River I feared to be grabbed by Nyaminyami, the river god of the Tonga
But Nyaminyami deals with the adventurous clan
That dares to see what's beneath the mud
I returned home safe
With a wooden sculpture and a drum from Harare

XII

At 25, I flew to Sweden with fifteen young people from Limpopo
Theresa my love held on to my sweater
But when she saw the tall Swede Andreas, she relocated to his room
Then she returned my sweater
I betrayed her for a woman fit to be my older brother's wife
She glowed in the night

I stayed with Peter Idar, the man from Uppsala who could drive a car with his legs
Manage the kitchen without full hands
The man who taught me to ride a horse
In Uppsala, I met a man busking at the street corner
He was playing an acoustic guitar, singing in Shangaan
I stopped and joined him in song
He was a homeboy from Mozambique, land of my ancestors.
Sweden was sweet, but I missed pap

XIII

At 35, Mhlahlandlela my son was born in Polokwane
There was load shedding in town
Agh shame big brother Joe, why did you think *ndzi biwe hi xitluka*?
I rushed to see him a few minutes after his birth

He had scales on feet and hands
He cried when I took pictures of him
He was born ten days later than what the gynaecologist had predicted
I walked home proudly
Framed the photo I took when he was twelve minutes old
Today I read him bedtime stories
And he tells me everything about Tom and Jerry
He calls himself Ben Ten
He works methodically
Packs everything orderly

At 37, my second son Samora was born
He was premature, weighing 2.2 kg
Some children are born weighing just a kilo
With a head of a bird
I lost weight before his birth
At four months, Tshivhula the gynaecologist said
The child's blood and mother's are different
I lost weight when I heard the sad news
I rushed Gudani to Moria for prayers and rituals
Elderly women washed her
But she didn't stop going to western doctors
She's a woman of steel
Today Samora is a big boy of three
He walks like a soldier Mashele
He eats well and his brain is razor sharp
He sings:
Modimo a le teng (Where God resides)
Gago na mathatha (There's ever no problem)
Modimo a le teng (Where the Almighty resides)
Gago na makaka (There's ever no shit)
He bursts into laughter
Hahaha, hehehe!
One day he'll speak properly

XIV

In July 2010 I paid lobola to the Ramikosi family
Far away in Tshitereke, at the end of Limpopo
I sent my aunt Sylvia, my brother Philly, Piet Jonas, Conny Shisana
They brought Gudani my black beauty home dressed in nwenda
She's the one who danced domba at Ha-Tshivhase
And sung:
Lua songolowa lutanga vhana vho lima (A river reed zigzagging, while children have ploughed)
Ahee, ahee (Yeah, yeah)

Vhavenda women beat the drums and danced *malende*
Matakadza mbilu ndi nwana (That which pleases the heart is a child)
Ahehe, ahe ndi nwana (Yeah, yeah, it's a child)

Matakadza mbiluni ndi nwana (That which pleases deep inside is a child)
A-shoo shoo baby ndi nwana (Hush, hush baby, my child)

There was too much food and beer
The whole village came to feast
We ate *tihove* and sliced pumpkins
Vhavenda looked at the expanse of my ancestral land –
And the green fields of growing spinach, tomatoes and onions –
They realized their daughter wouldn't starve
But I'm glad she's not *nyankwavi* –
She's given me two boys

I've been going to the gym since 27
But I hardly lose weight and fat
Because I eat a mountain of pap every day
Plate piled up to the ceiling with pap and wors
I sit in the steam bath, talk about
Women, corruption and fraud in Limpopo, and football
Clean-shaven tall men freely dangle their AK 47s
I watch the slim girls in tracksuits and tights jog on the tread mill
My wife likes her sweets and Cola
Big cars are parked outside
I walk to Thabo Mbeki Street
There's beauty in walking along singing
But one day this communist will drive a Benz

XV

At 32 I flew to Belgium via Heathrow
I enjoyed wine everyday. Never got drunk.
Suzan Binnemans translated my poems into Dutch
I read poems at Kafka café where Karl Marx wrote *Grundrisse*
Three days before returning home, a Moroccan stole my bag
Veerle my host drove through the mist looking for this twenty year-old scumbag
And when we got him, his 60-year old girlfriend whisked him out
Before the police could arrest him

XVI

In 2010, I stayed with Roxana for two weeks in Helsinki –
She's a poet from the mountains in Peru
She adores Cesar Vallejo her home poet from Lima
Her seven year child surfs the Internet
Children in my village push bricks as toys
One night after dinner she sobbed:
My husband is a dog –
He brings friends into the apartment
When they're drunk from long bouts of boozing

*He frivolously tells them to fuck me
To drink me like the cheap ration of wine from the supermarket
And then he passes out.*

I was helpless. I went to bed and lay flat on my stomach
Prayed to God, hear her lamentation
How can a goddamn university professor in a neat jacket and tie
Who's been awarded a feminist revolutionary award
Desperately turn against the woman who introduced him to Peru
Where he researched about the struggle ways of the mountain people, guided by the wife?
Now the upper-class activist with uncontrolled drinking habit
Lives with a student in another apartment
Only becomes a man after taking vitamins, sedatives and tranquilizers
That's why Roxana is divorcing him
That's why Roxana is sobbing

XVII

I've read my poems in Tampere, Turku and Helsinki
But Lahti Poetry Week was special, I read poems by the lake
Old male poets played horns, flutes, trumpets and trombones
They sang their sorrows with precision accompanied by the *kantele*
At the Lahti library, my books were displayed everywhere
When I read my poems, an old man read the translated Finnish version
Though I never told him which poems I was going to read.

On May 2009, the South African ambassador for Finland
H.E. Mr Sobizana Mngqikana invited me
To read poems at his official residence in Katajaharjuntie
He nodded as I condemn corruption in ANC-led government
He nodded as if to say it's an unintended consequence of the revolution
He gave me a Johnnie Walker Black Label bottle
A week earlier he gave the same bottle to Hugh Masekela.
'I know artists. Don't tell me you don't drink, sober like a judge.'
But walking in Helsinki, travelling in trams and buses made me feel like the only black
But the Finns were nice to me
It's just that I come from an apartheid land
Where everything is in black and white

XVIII

At thirty, upon landing In Addis Ababa
A rogue took me around the city, he organized a metered taxi, I paid
We went to Abyssinia hotel –
The guide called it house of culture
But I saw a stinking brothel
Girls made strong coffee from the bean granules
They danced to reggae tracks happily
They invited me to dance with them

I bought them wine and paid 200 Dollars for a bottle of champagne
It was ridiculous. Daylight robbery
We left Abyssinia brothel with two prostitutes to the Ghion hotel
One for Bila, the other for Thami my shy comrade from Cape Town
The hotel management demanded cash to give girls access to our rooms
I was tired and didn't have Dollars for one round
I'm lucky I wasn't strangled by prostitutes
I'm lucky I attended the African Social Forum
And helped them start the paper *African Flame*

XIX

In Ghana, novelist Niq Mhlongo nicknamed me Banku
Because I ate *banku* and tilapia every day for three weeks
Sandile Ngidi called me Samson because of my long dreadlocks
At the Elmina slave castle at Cape Coast
Black Americans wept when they heard how slaves were whipped to death
Women forced to have sex with the governor
How the strong men got into ships
And sailed on the Atlantic to work on plantations
To build cities, churches and bridges
Driven like bulls to the dipping hole
It was necessary to weep
I was close to tears
I shouted, reparations now!
Because after reading *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*
I agree with Ayi Kwei Armah
Just like Manu Herbstein's novel *Ama: Atlantic Slave Trade*
The fruits of liberation are still to be harvested

XX

At thirty seven I went to Algeria
Libya the neighbour was burning. Gaddafi: wanted dead or alive.
I grew up adoring his green book. But he had now earned the stripes of a tyrant.
They killed him in the Battle of Sirte
That's what occupied my mind in Algiers

At Tipaza ruins
I was reminded of ancient Mapungubwe and the living gods
I washed my feet at the silver-plated Mediterranean sea
I wanted to visit Frantz Fanon's grave, but next time

At the Algiers Book Fair, people carried brown paper bags full of books
In my country, politicians seldom set foot in bookshops and libraries
Those who push trolleys and carry big bags are from supermarkets in the mall
I didn't see a tavern or bottle store in the city of Algiers
They say Algeria is a police state. But I liked it
Children go to school, otherwise there's punishment

The Berber were invisible, yet it's their land till Sahara
The Berber sent the French packing
Now they fight against the Arabization of their lives
I stayed away from Muslim women
Can't touch them like we do in Mzantsi
I went to opera a few times
Few villagers have heard of the opera
It's not necessary. There are better things to do.

XXI

I've been a publisher since 27
Where I come from it's sexier to drink than to read
I wish Zuma could give me the Order of Ikhamanga
Like he did with Serote and Kgosisile!
Give me a Phd if you like what I do
I publish black poets without an apology
Sometimes paranoid writers shit on my head. It's okay
I've sat behind screens, paper heaped on my desk
Writing and editing reports, stories and poems
When my eyes go, the world must know they saw many things
They read raw, virgin tales
Though I carry Strunk and White wherever I go
I doubt my English, I've always doubted it
Every line I jot down must be panel beaten!
But I don't walk around with a dictionary

I grew up listening to the mesmerising sounds of General M.D Shirinda, Banda Six, Xinyori Sisters, Samson Mthombeni, Goodman Nghulele, Mbongeni Ngema, The Soul Brothers, The mesmerising disco sounds of Splash, Condry Ziqubu, Paul Ndlovu, Brenda Fassie, Chicco, Kamazu, Umoja, Lazarus Kgagudi, Peta Tenant and CJB
I heard these soothing sounds over the Omega radio
My taste of music hasn't changed really: simple and affordable
Jazz buffs love John Coltrane, Charlie Parker and Theolonius Monk
Classic buffs love Mozart and Beethoven
But I treasure the polyrhythmic sounds of Obed Ngobeni, Kanda Bongo Man, Pepe Kalle, Rufaro, Hotstix Mabuse and Joachim Macuacua

Some treasure the writings of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Gunter Grass, Toni Morrison, James Joyce, James Baldwin, George Orwell, Chinua Achebe, J.M Coetzee, Victor Hugo, Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marques, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare
I'm attracted to robust poets who hardly win prizes
Poets who shake the earth and captains of industry with their words
Rendra, Frank O'Hara, Keorapetse Kgosisile, Pablo Neruda, Nikki Giovanni
Adrienne Rich, Ingoapele Madingoane, Allen Ginsberg, Henry Dumas
The militant voices of Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Zaqtan, Allen Ginsberg
Nazim Hikmet, Zinjiva Nkondo, Lesego Rampolokeng, Gil Scott-Heron
The prophetic voices of Habib Jalib, Mafika Gwala, Cesar Vallejo, Yiannis Ritsos, Lemn Sissay

Aime Cesaire, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Matthews
June Jordan, Jayne Cortez, Margaret Walker, Tanure Ojaide
Thunderous voices of Joseph Brodsky, Brenda Marie Osbey, Langston Hughes
Mutabaruka, Richard Wright, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Sonia Sanchez

XXII

At 40, I asked my wife to burn the thirteen year-old dreadlocks on my head –
Not because I was honouring the dead
Nor was I scared of thugs in Pretoria that can kill a man for dreadlocks
To beautify black women's heads who love African locks and braids
Nor was I slaving in Tomboni jail
It was nice to wear dreadlocks –
Girls dipped their fingers in dreads in salons
I danced on stage like a sangoma in a trance
Artists loved me
Christians judged me
Airport police always ambushed me
Confusing me for a criminal on the run

At 38, every part of my body itched
I scratched my body for the whole night
My manhood shrunk
The wolf was knocking on the door
Perhaps I was paying the price for building a writers' village in the sea of poverty
My brother Simon took me to Moria
But I couldn't enter the holy place with dangling dreadlocks and a beard
Two years later, I bled through my pipe
Two days before that, three men in black suits visited my house
They said they were preaching the word of God
Visiting every house in the village
They had their own type of Bible which they wanted to read
I told them to leave my house in peace
They said they were members of Jehovah's Witness
My brother's son Hluli asked them to look at the ZCC badge on my mother's chest
On their way out
They remained seated on the sofas
They wanted to convert all of us to their church
But eventually they left
I don't want to see them again

I don't know what's growing in my blood
I drink lots of fresh water, bitter raw aloe juice, African potato and rooibos tea
I drink buchu, camomile, ginseng and green tea like the long living Chinese and Japanese
My diet is garlic and ginger and lemon, thanks to the whisky boozing Dr Beetroot
I eat lots of *xibavi* and *nkaka* and *guxe* that grows in my garden
Because I want to be a man even at 90
But I'm scared of organ failure

Like Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine –

I believe in sage herbs and roots that heal
Like King Solomon the poet –
I believe in the vegetal alchemy resources that exist in Africa
The aromatic barks and bulbs that heal

My medical history is not colourful
And I don't want it to be colourful
I've never spent a night chained in a mental hospital
Nor lay unconscious, wired in a life support machine
One man got a good job after years of eating ash
Then became diabetic from enjoying his cash and salacious dishes
And when the pains and aches attacked his obese body –
Doctors ordered the man to get rid of the saturated fat and salt
Run in the tread mill brother, burn in the steam bath
Stop braaing and boozing brother
Now the tycoon eats cabbage and salads
Perhaps he feels he's deprived of good life

Though I don't paint my lungs with smoke
Nor live in taverns of arthritic binging ravens
I'm shit scared of cancer and Aids
Mugabe – with or without a nappy, flies over to Singapore for treatment
Mandela is rushed to a private clinic in Pretoria
Bara is crowded
Corpses are on sale
Undertakers book corpses in broad daylight
My pockets have holes –I have no medical aid
My wife is unemployed
My mother a pensioner
My father is dead
I can't afford to be bed-ridden eaten by bugs and parasites
Many patients don't return when they go to that public hospital

My medical history is not colourful
And I don't want it to be colourful
At 40, hematuria made me learn to pray
I grew shingles and dermatitis –
My stomach burnt, veins pained
I suffered cramps when I jogged
Air-filled stomach growled, it was full of foul smoke
Dr Flip van As from Polokwane tried to fix the symptoms
I don't think he dealt with the malaise
But I'm still standing, erect like Rivilwa mountain

My blood group type is 0 positive
There's a lot I must not eat
I wish red meat was not one of them
But the prophet at Moria warned me against eating red meat
I don't want a repeat of what happened to mama

The prophet told her to stop eating red meat
One day she ate *boerewors*
Her body itched, she couldn't sleep
She walked around the house almost naked
Scratching herself against the wall
To ward off the itchy body

At 28 my brother said I was skinny like an Aids frame
Meaning my shoulders were like a clothes' hanger
At 38 I took an HIV test
The nurse from Liberty Life came to Timbila office to squeeze my blood
Negative. Hurray!
It wasn't for the first time
I did my first HIV test at 27
Every time I take out a life cover, my blood is squeezed by pathologists
I thank God and my ancestors for keeping me breathing
In my country people don't live long –
Those who live long are whites and black bourgeoisie with medical aid
When I feel feeble and weak
Others join the brothers in monasteries
And become monks who reflect in silence
I just want to be soaked in Gwenani River
That's where papa and mama got baptised

At 41, May Day
I rushed to Moria
Followed the star of *Thaba ya Sione*
The same mountain comrade Mandela sought prayers after Robben Island
To dismantle the chains of racial oppression in a land without moral gravitas
To forge racial reconciliation and peace in a country where a white assassin murdered Hani
To snuff out the fires of De Klerk decapitating lives in his Inkatha inspired township slaughter

XXIII

On May Day, proletarians and peasants
The reds and greens
Anarchists and gays
Marched upright
Chanting hau hau
The future is socialism
Demanding a living wage
Calling for an end to labour brokers
Daring to end the e-tolls in Gauteng
They marched upright
Hand in hand with the Palestinians
Demanding that Obama free the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay
I was not there
But my heart is welded in their just struggle

As my comrades marched in cities' revolutionary squares

I was dizzy
Something was clotting my chest
Choking and gasping for breath
That's why I cut my dreadlocks and a beard
Followed the star of Mount Zion
That's why I was soaked three times in cold Gwenani River:
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
And I became closer to Marx, Engels and Lenin
I became one with Fanon, Garvey and Biko

Now without dreadlocks and a beard
I wear khakhi, cap and dance mokhukhu
With the strong army of men
The earth trembles
I leap up and down
Stamping the ground hard with the white *manyanyata* boots
And I'm not drunk, have never tasted beer since I was born
Unless Joko tea and *mogabolo* have intoxicating properties

Though I'm not a limnologist
Nor a student of potamology
I walk through bushes to follow sounds of waterfalls downstream
I know the braided Mukomadi River that runs through the swampy Levubu valley
That's where mama collected *hlangasi* grass to make brooms
Brooms she sold at the Elim market to fight hunger
I know rivers along the plains
Rivers creating gorges
I know sources, doors and mouths of rivers of life
Bubbling rivers and gurgling streams

Without dreadlocks and a beard
I look for all types of water to see the next day
I gather waters of the waterfalls
Water under bridges
Collect sprite waters of the Mucirindzi well
And the still waters of the meandering Ritavi
I do all it takes to see my boys grow fresh and strong
One day they'll finish school, work, walk up the aisle

Without dreadlocks and a beard
I know where still and flowing water separate each other
I know the mixtures of chicory coffees and teas with salt
And what they do to keep me lean, strong and virile
I know how to wash with salt and coffees
Smear my feet with salt and Vaseline petroleum jelly
I sit in *xixambu* and enjoy the steam of vapour
To scare off nails that want to shoot my feet, drifting to my heart

Without dreadlocks and a beard
I no longer eat pork, *timenemene* and *masonja*

Here I don't smoke or drink beer
Sometimes I long for bacon in a hotel breakfast
But there's a lot to eat in the world than pork

Without dreadlocks and a beard
I know how to be pricked with that huge needle on my feet and hands
To get rid of the impure blood
I fear God and prayer
More than my church uniform and shining emblem
More than the stream water and the sauna
More than the coffees and tea mixtures

Without dreadlocks and a beard
I'm learning to pray midnight and early in the morning
I submit my heart to God of Mount Zion
I cherish love, respect and honesty
I'm a Zionist Christian, not a Jewish Christian Zionist
I have nothing against Palestine
I salute the Palestinians' fight against Apartheid Israel

I'm an African
I feel safe in an African church led by an African prophet
Here, we dance and sing songs familiar
We chant *mbogo*, the classical tune
I'm visited upon by dreams I can't ignore
For in the world populated by witches and wicked people
You eat from the same bowl with your own relatives at your own risk

Marxism and Black Consciousness are good but not enough –
I need protection from my ancestors and God
Though I can't create my own deity
Kae Morii, a Japanese poet and palm reader once told me to be careful
She said that if I want to live longer
I must take care of my health in my fifties
I asked her how long she would live
Unflinchingly, she said, 120 years

I'm lucky to have prophets who pack news of my future
I'm no longer scared when I see prophets squealing, grunting and swinging their faces
Now it's my turn to perform rituals
Owls are hooting outside
Dogs are barking and snorting in the night
Now it's my turn to perform rituals

Glossary

And hi yena papantsongo wa Frank: And it's him, Frank's uncle.

A ka ha ri vusiku: Xitsonga, meaning, I was in the dark, meaning I hadn't started dating.

Banku: Ghanain for pap

Bredie: Originally associated with the Cape Malays and the Dutch, *bredie* is a stew made with mutton, and its seasonings include cinnamon, ginger and chilli.

Buchu: Is a flowering plant known for its fragrance and medicinal use.

Droëwors: Afrikaans for "dry sausage" is a South African snack food, based on the traditional, coriander-seed spiced boerewors sausage.

Eka: Xitsonga preposition for *at*.

Emachihweni: A village the head of which has died.

Emaxubini: In the ruins.

Hahani: Xitsonga for aunt.

Hlangasi: Xitsonga for grass that grows in swampy areas, usually harvested to make brooms.

Hogo: A traditional circumcision school

Hogo huwelela: A common song sung at the circumcision camp.

Imbiza: An African medicinal tonic made from the African potato and other ingredients. It is believed that it reduces high blood pressure, clears skin conditions, boosts energy and vitality, and helps to clean the womb and prevents arthritis.

Izikhothane: It's a street slang, derived from the isZulu word *ukukhothana*, which means 'to lick'. Izikhothane gatherings often culminate in the burning of expensive clothes and money by young people in an act of showing off wealth.

Jozi-mjipa-msawawa: Slang for Johannesburg.

Kantele: A plucked string instrument of the dulcimer and zither family native to Finland and Karelia.

Kenya: A large bundle of woven grass thatch tied in such a way that it can be unrolled on the roof of a hut. Among the Vatsonga, this mat was also used to wrap and preserve the corpse of a poor person who couldn't afford a decent blanket or linen.

Ku fanele ku songiwa masangu:	Xitsonga proverb: mats must be folded; meaning sex is prohibited.
Kotana:	A little stick used by ZCC priests to bless the sick and troubled.
Kwaito:	A style of popular music similar to hip hop, featuring vocals recited over an instrumental backing with strong bass lines.
Lobola:	Traditional bride-price, formerly paid in cattle, but nowadays given a cash payment.
Madala:	Nguni [IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele and IsiSwati] for old man.
Madlala:	Circumcision lodge and rites.
Mafufunyani:	A state of sudden madness or hysteria.
Mageu:	Light fermented body-boosting drink made of corn.
Majekejeke:	Grass or reed used to make sleeping mats.
Makhuma:	Illness of men caused by connection with female not yet purified after abortion or confinement; illness due to omission of purification rites after a death.
Makhwaya:	Traditional Tsonga dance for men.
Malende:	A traditional Venda dance for both men and women, boys and girls. Unlike tshigombela which is performed on special occasions to praise chiefs, malende can be performed for any happy event.
Malusu:	Muthi with a spell that is used in male circumcision camps to make the initiates not to think of returning home whatsoever.
Masonja:	Xitsonga for “mopani worms”, a delicious dish mainly served in Limpopo province.
Mbogo:	A signature song of the ZCC.
Mbhokota:	A populated rural village near Elim in Limpopo province.
Mhani:	Xitsonga for mom.
Milawu:	Laws and chants sung in a circumcision school.
Miroho:	Xitsonga for vegetables.
Mugabagaba:	A plant with big elephant-like leaves often used for detoxification.

Muhulu:	Your mother's sister in Xitsonga.
Muthi:	Medicine, usually traditional.
Mushavhanamadi:	Tshivenda for a person who does not wash.
Mogabolo:	Sepedi for holy and blessed ZCC drinking water and tea.
Mokhukhu:	Sepedi for a shack dwelling. In this poem, <i>mokhukhu</i> refers to the Zion Christian Church's male organised rhythmic dance which is characterised by frequent and collective leaps into the air and coming down stamping their feet on the ground with their white boots called manyanyatha . Usually, the <i>mokhukhu</i> performances last for hours, with no meals in between, except the drinking of sugarless tea and <i>mogabolo</i> (holy and blessed water) before the performance. The <i>mokhukhu</i> dancers are usually called <i>mashole a thapelo</i> , meaning the soldiers of prayer.
Ndzi biwe hi xitluka:	Xitsonga proverb for 'I'm impotent'.
Nyankwavi:	The girl who is not supposed to get married, but feed the xin'wanakaji, alternatively known as tokoloshi.
Nwenda:	A colourfully embroidered upper garments made from multi-coloured striped cloth worn by Vhavenda women and girls.
N'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani:	The Son of Man is nearby, meaning Jesus is coming.
Pantsula:	A fashionable young urban black person, especially a man. a dance style in which each person performs a solo turn within a circle of dancers doing a repetitive, shuffling step.
Phala bashimane:	Traditional medicine.
Phunyuka bamphethe:	African magic spell that enables a thief to escape unhurt or where clear evidence that supports that something nasty was committed by the suspect is simply brushed aside in the court of law.
Potjiekos:	Literally translated as "small pot food", <i>potjiekos</i> is a stew prepared outdoors, usually cooked in a three-legged pot.
Sangoma:	A traditional healer or diviner.
Sivara:	Bother-in-law in Xitsonga.
Swa yila wa yila:	Xitsonga for 'a taboo is always a taboo.'
Swibantsheke:	A game of sliding down the hill or skating usually by boys
Swigirigiri:	Cart wheel made of a disc or wood.

Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni: For the deceased [a Radio Tsonga programme in the 80s which was aired every night].

Timenemene: Xitsonga for edible flies that are collected from anthills in summer

Toyi toyi: A dance step characterised by high-stepping movements commonly performed at political and protest gatherings.

Order of Ikhamanga: Is a South African honour, instituted in November 2003 and it is granted by the President of South Africa for achievements in arts, culture, literature, music, journalism, and sports.

Ubhejana: A concoction which was promoted by post-apartheid South Africa's health minister Dr Manto Tshabalala as a cure for Aids.

Vadzabi: Traditional circumcision mentors and carers of the initiates.

Vaveni: Xitsonga for tokoloshe, evil spirit or voodoo.

Vho-: Added to a person's name as a title of respect, e.g Mr or Mrs in Tshivenda.

Wa: Xitsonga preposition *of*, in the poem it means *the son of*.

Xidyisa: Xitsonga for something harmful one has been made to eat without knowing, such as poison, a drug or a magic ingredient.

Xifula: A cancerous wound, stroke or any sudden and unusual incurable medical condition allegedly believed to be planted in people by wicked people and witches.

Xihlungwani: A carved wooden crown or cover of thatch that is used to close the top of hut roof. Among the Vatsonga, when the head of a family dies, the *xihlungwani* is removed to indicate that he is no more; and the place is usually referred to as *emachihweni*, meaning the place of lawlessness.

Xirimela: The Pleiades, which rise at hoeing time.

Xivonelo: Cone-shaped portion of porridge brought by women to feed those in circumcision camp.

Xixambu: Xitsonga for vapour bath.

Xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla: He who crushes [tobacco] without a mortar and pestle but with bare hands.

7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani / U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani: An IsiZuku song that my father Daniel Risimati Bila liked with passion. The composer is not known, but

the song was performed by a male song and dance troupe during his school days at Shirley Agricultural and Industrial School for Natives, and during the potato tasting festivities organised by the Swiss missionary and liberal, Herbert Stanley Phillips and his wife Lucette Phillips, at Shirley farm.