

Malume's bones

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by

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Abstract

My poetry is about real stories: poverty, love, politics, past pains and healing. I try to follow the example of Amiri Baraka who says his poetry is whatever he thinks he is, that he makes poetry with “what can be saved out the garbage of our lives”. My collection also preserves and embraces demotic language, which is also a part of who I am. I am influenced by Baraka’s and Ike Muila’s use of demotics, and the way that poets such as Antonio Jacinto, Costa Andrade and Mafika Gwala tackle political matters in a colourful and powerful way. I have also been inspired by ancient Chinese poets to explore love and eroticism, particularly how it plays out in the eyes of my people.

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I

music tour

so where to?
dube station
via the main road
jozi fm on the left
they play gospel and cheaters on thursdays
i bump into uncle ray next to the toilet
(they call the police station the toilet)
ray's from the gibson kente days
they used to gather at his home
not far from nkathuto primary
they created plays and songs
now he exchanges his lesson on g-scales
for a quart of black

hearty's fruit & veg ifile
no one eats vegetables these days
behind it used to be bus terminals
hip hop used to be the heart of this place
mcs high on politics creating passionate verses
now it is a parking lot for sanele's tavern
isihogo nje
my heart weeps

i pass eyethu theatre, naked on machaba drive
stop by inside out, thebe lipere's jazz lounge
find khaya mahlangu jamming
with themba mokoena and some young bloods
they are serving butternut and spinach

so where to?
avalon cemetery
i will not bother the dead
their bones are resting, but their spirits –
their spirits live in these songs

gog' sis phakama

a gogo by the name of sis phakama
is the first to be called
when someone in our family dies
she understands death
washes dead bodies
cries the most

gog' sis phakama was never married
spent many days in prison for shoplifting
one day, she wore inzila
as a disguise for her pickpocketing

she was diagnosed with hiv in her mid-forties
but it was like she got a dose of new life
at sixty-eight, she wears short leather skirts
manicured nails and organic weaves
enjoying her old age in six inch stilettos

gog' sis phakama ends every family gathering
with a prayer
she prays for everyone one by one
on christmas last year
she prayed for mpumi my nephew
she asked the good lord to protect him
when he crosses koma road
inkulu baba somadla ikoma road, amen

the music that keeps me up at night

in the hour of dreams
young voices dance
to the distant doef-doe sound
of senseless lyrics

drums chant ceaselessly
to izangoma who've woken
the drunken spirits of their fathers

the religious ones tap and clap
at a night vigil
a coffin in the bedroom

backroom tenants
discharge sexual screams
or are they violent ones?

my heart moves between keys
trying to find the right note
to start the day

on the N17

poor man
with a red and yellow plastic bag in your hand
potatoes are scattered on the road
the rainbow chicken waiting to boil with onions
but the freeway is for cars
where were you going?

a telephone call from now
they'll be looking to identify your body
arms stretched, head facing the other side
your body cold
like the pieces you brought for dinner
frozen, melting under the silver tinfoil
roasting like sunday lunch news

the magic place

in 1994

we used to put on our best dresses to go to the magic place
mine was sweet pink floral printed with lace layered underneath
lips were glossed up vaseline from a yellow jar
mine were shining from whatever i could find –
fish-oil or glycerin
we used to walk with excited smiles to the magic place
find the magic man waiting with his box of tricks
we would be entertained, transformed into happy girls
who'd just seen a snake turn into a red rose
we'd clap our hands amazed at the bird that lived in a box
and flew when called out in spells
we would take the magic and put in our hearts
use it when we really needed to dream

in 2012

i was sent to go call my dad from the magic place
i walked into a breath of drunken voices
staring at my father i couldn't recognize
his face had turned extremely old and tired
i looked at the magic man
falling off his chair with a box of itakunyisa in his hand
all the men had been gathering here lately
to dull their pain in glasses of brandy
the pain made them look like boys who can't be sober
but it was despair that killed their manhood
broken guitar scales playing redemption songs
i walked out with boulders in my soul

to my BEE mzala

the humble four-roomed house
a toilet on the other side of the yard
the one meal a day
we enjoyed on a plate of tears

hey love,
then time continued its ticking role
people grew into their predictable state

we started sleeping less
high on truths that kept rising
thanks to you, love
whose luck was nothing short of a miracle
that came in loaves of rands
from black economic empowerment:

a private school for your kids
a house in a safe neighborhood
a car
i mean a very expensive car

the respect that abo-uncle give you all the time
'coz now you give them hope for their next meal

you just have to update your status
followed by your thousands of followers
who like your check-ins into fancy bars
with men that are not on your son's birth certificate

i heard all of this at sparks' funeral
queuing for a seven-coloured lunch
on a random tuesday afternoon

apparently your daughter is experimenting with weed
she's sleeping on old men's chests
far away from the remedy she needs

hey love,
we are not sure how to greet you anymore
we are somewhere between chuckles and shame

corner pritchard

corner pritchard
has a salon not much wider
than a backroom of a house
in mzimhlophe

a man selling imvunulo yesizulu
is sitting at the door
weaving coloured beads
into white *tommy* tekkies
earrings, necklaces, belts nezicholo
displayed on a small table

the guy who helped park my car
is washing another car
using water from the 750 ml bottle
of sunlight liquid

the barber makes room
for a talkative drunk man -
he moves the damp towels
hair brushes, blow-dryers
and combs from a chair
opposite the nail bar

i'm sitting on a crate
facing a mirror with a view
of people rushing, chatting
shopping, getting directions
smoking, busy on their phones

my hairdresser his name is pat
pulls a needle from his pocket
sections my hair into little blocks
grabs one section at a time

knits every strand
in-and-out, in-and-out
until it is dreadlocked
then he moves on to the next block
then the next one
then the next

little girls' creed

the little girl from ghana has a big voice
she talks angrily when she speaks
she maintains good eye contact
but never says much
since she moved here from ghana
her father has touched her body three times
the last time was really bad
her skin turned blue
she wears the same blue dress to mass on sundays
watches her father pray at the foot of the cross
with ten votive candles shining on his face
she tries hard to remember the creed
she goes to bed without food
she gives up on prayer, dreams of
making dresses when she grows up

there's a little girl in my english class
her father is in the sgb
everybody knows that he is unable to hold himself
he klapped a nun on the face once
now there is a rumour that
he is also a free handed man at home
his little daughter who i teach
doesn't know where to keep her pain
she watches her father stand up for communion
every day during the weekday mass
she tries hard to remember the creed
draws her mother's bruised body instead
at the back of her exercise book

another little girl came to school hallucinating
she thought death was following her
she found her mother drowning in the bath
the night after her father won the title match
against her mother's body
this little girl doesn't even try to learn the creed
she knows which number to call
when her father touches her mother's body
her creed is 911

sunlight

god shows up dressed in dirty flesh
distributing duplicate keys
to unlock heaven

i remember
the rusty blue kitchen cupboards
the day my father left

it doesn't bother me much that
the president is on the news
promising houses
building ramps for the disabled

people fight
for title deeds through witchcraft
in my world
pain makes people sin

we go through sundays babalazed
we remember christ on good friday
we sing for a moment
we offer ourselves up
because death scares us

we melt sunlight in a tin
for recycling purposes
we wash our bodies with sunlight
mask our faces with sunlight

II

poet's sermon

dear faithfuls, snap your fingers –

a poet that lived in the times of eve
paints the garden of eden with images
every letter awakens the taste of apple water
music from the solomon's song of songs
“sustain me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for i am sick with love”
the smell of fresh flowers fragrant on the page
the poet touches souls with her lines
the dear faithfuls bodies remember to breathe

dear faithfuls, remember to let your bodies breathe –

all kinds of joy

looking at you erects all kinds of joy
like that one dawn on the n12 freeway
breathing each other's breaths
my soft skin all over your macho

i looked out the misty window
it was dark
the stars looked close
and you flickered
like my little heart

the floor was making crackling sounds,
from chocolate, poetry pages
all kinds of wrappings beneath our feet

we spoke in smiles and giggles
seats reclined all the way down
we looking up, hoping the sun

would be a little late
so we could keep the heat
between our bodies
a little longer

i would have loved

a house
a pendulum clock in the hallway
wooden floors
a typewriter
pages scattered on the bed

i would have loved to live with you here
in my twenties –
giving love a chance
free of consequences
with the sun awakening
to our dreams

here, roses must stand

because the soil that buries
has also called me to plant
everything growing inside myself

if anyone should ask
where the lonely should rest –
here, i will say

in case today becomes
a celebration of thorns
here, roses must stand

ghosts

cracks on my bedroom walls
have ghosts crawling in and out

each time i make love
they fiddle with my orgasm

ghosts of my own
roam inside my cunt
fill the room with ex-lovers' rage

him

the night becomes the dawn
of my loneliness my temptation
my thoughts of him every night
as my body is tangled around yours

my body is tangled around yours
we'll glimpse into the future
tonight will find us holding hands

but his heart is pumping blood in my heart
tonight and every night

full moon

your constant light flows
into unbalanced bodies
who search for god in theories
you stand tall and close and high
confident that the sun will rise
while i don't even know
who'll hold my insecurities tonight
take all the hard pieces of my soul
make them soft again

i envy your completeness
you never take the shape of the stars
or mute your glow behind clouds
you are full in your moonness
while i beg my sexiness from thick lips of men
and skin my happiness in desires
that never survive dawn

pot plant

nothing ever grows in my home
except a small pot of coriander
barely surviving
on my kitchen window sill

in my closet
i have pains neatly folded for morning
i mostly pick the ones that don't need ironing
so it's easier for me to say
i used to love you

death came to me

death came to me today
he explained himself to me
told me that souls love
before they die
also that sometimes
souls die alive

i believed him
because of my sister
the man she loved
killed her
and me too – i'm alive
but my soul is dead

death told me
not to die alive
because the one thing
he cannot kill
is love

he told me that
he walks with me
just because he is lonely
and jealous of how i love
to stay alive

i made a deal with death
that i would keep him company
as long as he doesn't show up
until i have truly loved

he smiled
and said
he would see

mountain

the sea hangs
over your body of stone

yellow trees stand
at your feet

they dance to the music
of the wind carrying stories

the lonely traveller
looks at you from a distance

she sees god
dressed in silence

the lost poem

i was writing about men
it was a powerful angry piece
when i wrote it, i had menstrual pains
took some grandpa, felt sicker

i could have emailed my poem to myself
saved it on the cloud
or taken a picture of it
but i was in so much pain, i had to sleep

it had punch lines about mandoza the lover,
daddy mandla
president mandela and usomandla
i was glad to rest from the cramps of my womb

i was happy to let go of that poem
all that power means nothing
to the woman that i have become
open to messages from the sky

III

naked

i got out of the shower
walked into my fully lit room

saw my body reflected
behind the opened curtains
my light reflected as the moon

in the window my curves
were to me a love story
from the sides of my womb

knees that kiss
do not always love each other
but they belong together

on my heavy legs
below my dimpled thighs
there is a sharing of souls

paths on my belly
spread out the pulse
to the rest of my body

mountains guard my heart
soft rain gathers in my mouth
then storms out

love belongs in my heart
only my body speaks the truth
i'm naked and flying

lit from within

the road before me is uncertain
i can already feel the humps
and roadblocks

when i look back
my footprints
are lost between potholes, plodding

my head facing down
i look inside –
a force with angel wings
and faces that look like mine

consecration

to paballo

her breasts grow
her body changes soul shifts
her face has woman spit on it
her lungs inhale more than they let out

she might not understand
why her lunchbox
has a fetus growing inside
with strawberries as a snack
or why inkomazi
is served as dinner sometimes

she begins to practice acts of contrition
holy communion is her dream right now
this coming sunday she receives for the first time
sins confession absolution penance
she prays: let there be light in my tongue
may i find the perfect size for my dancing shoes

she dances with her eyes shut
arms stretched wide
feels the rhythm through her bones
she is a child of a thousand moons
hanging

without wings

a person can get drunk
from drowning in thought

being a mother is taking pictures
capturing moments that made you cry

we leave our children un-cleansed
because of the moon

the moon doesn't show up
on heavy nights

our scares make us laugh
we break into pieces

our shadow follows us
like answered prayers

we scorch like fire

we are half angels
flying without wings

counting

at age three
everything was a blur
except my mother's voice

when i turned thirteen
my father broke into my body
i nagged mom until
she bought me a bra –
i needed to support my breasts
even though my chest was flat
i became aware of my height
i became a tomboy
whose body bled once a month

at twenty-tree
i learnt that beauty
was measurable
i jumped on and off of scales
i had a mirror in the bathroom
dining room
and a small mirror in my purse
my taste for chocolate
died in those years

this year i turned thirty-one
my body has gone through labour twice
wine-gums dance in my mouth
heels are good for my knees
orgasms are great
and i still call my mother

six letters for 2016

to my little brother

you came into this world
when freedom was a breath away
we held you as fulfillment
of answered prayers
suddenly we were allowed to dream

to my big brother

i know where to look up to
and brother
you're the reason
why we climb forbidden trees

to my daughters

i don't expect obedience
be nothing like me if you don't want to
but bring to life everything
that makes you walk
that makes you dance

to my husband

i'm not willing
to die before my time
without laughter
or writing a beauty full poem

to my fourth graders

your hearts are more open than mine
and i cannot spell correctly
all the words on your spelling list

to my body

you've kept me away from my grave
revealed my being through your weakness
i've pushed you more than what my soul can bear

responsory

after adélia prado

st anthony
please find what i'm looking for
you who are tireless
there with God
enjoying eternal happiness
i am tired
not sure if what i need is laughter
or money or a feeling of peace
between my husband and i
silence comes from anguished memories
chaos explodes from our tongues

st anthony
you who had compassion for human suffering
i am haunted by an unbreakable vow
i have children to raise, bills to pay
i have stopped dreaming
i ponder about my life at night
and the sin i always confess

st anthony I promise
i will light a votive candle
pray the mystery of the rosary
i will chant your praises, lover of the cross
servant of the Lord, please find my lost peace

nala

i thank god, nala,
choosing me must have been hard
my soul was absent,
but He sprinkled a seed in my garden.
i promised when it grew
i would call it nala...
nala, sweet nala

i cannot wait to see your lovely face
maybe some of it will look like mine
i know your heartbeat
but cannot wait to hear your song
when you grow up nala, fly!
spread your wings nala, sweet nala

when it's time for you to meet my eyes
i want you to remember
how i felt writing these words
how i picked myself up that day
to the magical place that is you
nala, sweet nala

how i've burdened you with my tears
but we'll be dancing to lullabies
reading fairytales together
i'll hold you close
show you how much
i rejoice in you
nala sweet nala

my baby is born

some time from now
the year won't matter much
this day
today
my body leaked

they killed me waist down
cut through my flesh
moments later
i held 3.4 kilograms of life
both of us were crying

years from now
i will remember

between life and death
today
life chose me

IV

to my father

at the end of your time
i want to see
flowers on your grave
not letters dying to be read

my thighs carried
your heavy body with grace
i wanted to help carry your heart
relieve it of its shame

i loved you
i hate you now
you hurt me
i'm hurting me now
and i hate you
and i forgive you

at the end of my time
i want to carry
soil on my chest
not words i haven't said

ma's underwear

she kept her underwear clean
washed it through its shreds
let it air-dry overnight

where are her children now?
the daughter married (miserable)
the son self-employed (selling weed)

today i walk into a boutique
pick things from my favorite rack
and now i am here
between the black and pink underwear

first lesson

i was ready for my first day of school
in my new blue tunic with a gold collar
and a saint matthews' badge
on my left breast pocket
i had a red and white suitcase
my lunch and pen and paper
packed inside

at the door
men in blue uniform came in
banging things in the house –
sideboards, wardrobes, cupboards, chest of drawers
“ons soek jabulani, waar is jabulani?”
they came out with a black and white picture
of malume jabu, who i'd never seen enough
to remember his face

umkhulu mhlongo the school transport driver
didn't hoot for me when he saw police vans
he just left me to learn
my first lesson in history and afrikaans
inside our four roomed house
my teachers the police in front of our gate
and gogo gasping for air

june sixteen

the house i grew up in
hasn't changed that much
the kitchen is still the kitchen
the toilet is still outside
only with hot running water now

the coal box still stands
in our backyard
packed full of magazines and pictures

after watering the garden
my siblings and i
fold the hosepipe inside
and cover the coal box
with a white table cloth

now and then
when there's a family gathering
we use the coal box as a table
we sit around the table
as if none of us has ever died

we welcome the departed from their graves
sing about their lives in songs
mama comes out from the main bedroom
june sixteen soaked in her eyes

mama tells us the story about mkhulu's funeral
that very same june sixteen of 76
mkhulu couldn't get to his grave that day
grandmother was alone with him in his coffin
while their three children were dodging bullets
holding fear in their clenched fists

we pray sorrowful mysteries
we beg the perpetual light to shine upon
the missing souls

the floors in our house have changed since
from carpets to ceramic tiles to wooden boards
polished reflecting flames of fire
like the youth of june sixteen

malume's bones

to jabu mazibuko

i was nine month's old
in prison with my mother
on the dawn of a march
so long ago it ceased to matter

my mother's heart broke
inside my mouth that day
i was feeding on her right breast
from 5am until 8 pm

we were in a small holding cell
at the protea police station
our crime a letter that we never received

malume you had written us letters from exile
but not even one reached us
the telephone didn't ring with your voice
but the security police detained us anyway
demanding us to account for a body
whose bones we still wish to bury

my nappy rash worsened
if only mama knew your grave number malume
or the house number of your current residence

today
my freedom still hangs on politics
of a country that has forgotten
that the dead speak

they let us out that night
but i'm still in prison malume
mama's breasts still bleed
i will feed on her left breast
until we can put flowers on your grave

mama's story

mama's husband hamilton died
in the arms of another woman
his body was found cold
on an eastern cape train-station
his liver had stopped working
mama arranged for his body
to be buried close to home

mama's sister dorah bled ceaselessly
in baragwanath hospital,
her death was unfair to mama
it gave her six more children to raise

mama's brother mandla was assassinated
in washington dc
he was flown to south africa
in a beautiful american casket
buried in avalon cemetery
his grave has a black green
and gold tombstone

mama's mother died when i was six –
the apartheid police banged the door
so hard that her heart stopped

mama might have seen
her daughter mangi's soul leave her body
at the johannesburg gen
she was sitting in a wheelchair
smiling at mama
and then she closed her eyes

mama says if I wasn't around
she would have been dead by now

i am mama's beloved
her beloved daughter
beloved husband
beloved sister
beloved brother

behind closed curtains

there is a room in our house
that's draped in red curtains
behind them is a box
covered in long silence
we never let the sun in

when night falls
we go inside the room
holding white candles
open the curtains for moonlight
hold the box very close to our hearts
and remember