

Poem to be sung

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by

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Abstract

My collection of poems expresses the complexities that exist beneath the surface of my life – my tongue, our bleak country, the politics of having a dark skin, my ancestors who speak to me in unexplainable ways, and the speech of nature – the wind, the sea, death, birds. It is in writing poems and songs that I make a space to be alive, a space to meet my ancestors and to say the unsayable. The poems move between the ordinary, the magical, the abject, and the spiritual, often expressing the contradictions that exist within life. The main influence on my poetry has come from music, from African jazz musicians such as Zim Ngqawana, Thandiswa Mazwai and Msaki Mvana. Literary influences have come from Spanish poets such as Juan Ramón Jiménez, whose strong imagery and short lines capture profound emotion, and from ancient Chinese poetry that moves in a fluid and minimal way. I have also been inspired by the African spirituality expressed in Mazisi Kunene's poetry and the down-to-earth associative poetry of Mangaliso Buzani and Mxolisi Nyezwa.

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I

the edge

i sit at the edge of myself
tilting over into the sky

the sun peeps through the curtain
to wonder about my skin
it goes to a place my fingers
can't go

i sit as close as i can to the ground
so it can change me
my shoes slant more than others
my dreams lie heavy underneath them

the trollies have started
9am mc donald street
the voices disturb the emptiness
roaring engines fill the ears

the bodies move
they come
they go

we are here
sitting at the edge of ourselves
swimming

inside a taxi rank
inside the shoes
of those possessed
by the wind

what makes us crazy

we came to hell in rose-filled boxes
with rosaries and chants
names we knew nothing of

our innocent minds polluted
on dung splattered pavements

the sorrow grows

we came to hell for a reason
to look good while we fell apart
to be whores
to look for the things we lost in the sheets

camera

i see stark colours of poverty
drawn back eyebrows the shape of triangles
mannequins teach us what to wear
to be mute

we always wash our hands
though it does not change
the colour of our pain

the grip takes our picture
and leaves

a drunken night

when I pee
in the middle of nowhere
i always get my feet wet

winter

being particular
about how i clean the toilet
is not so important now
the soap scum bothers me a lot less
the rain hasn't fallen
in one whole month
two now

barefoot

we were born in a nut case
shaped like colonial joy
we were barefoot in the wine
hoping it would write the songs

we continued to find healing
on our mother's washing lines
we dreamed but we weren't asleep

break-in

today I do not have poems
but a lump that is unfolding
inside my throat
like a broken mirror

today the sunset
while it was still day
and I do not know why
his mother gave him his name

his name is thandolwethu
his name is thandolwethu
but I also want to know
why he peed in my bed

why his stench is left all over
why we have to begin again
from broken places
and burning skies

he said
ndizaw phuma ngomso
and I said
rha unyile today jou shit
he said
f'tsek
and I said
unyile swine unyile today

I cannot see the way home
I can see his face
his smelly ass crack
that hasn't been washed in months

his arrogant tongue
that is entitled to this story
the broken ash trays and candles
the broken window and suitcases

his arrogant tongue
that ate all the chicken
drank all the oros
and found my panties
befitting to be in his bag

he says
f'tsek
and I say unyile today
unyile

today my mouth
is full of soap
and a scream
that will not
come out

neighbours
who have seen
the colour of my insides

today he is sleeping
in his old prison bed
and his mother will
never know how
she failed him

today I am clutching at
my voice that was almost
lost between the screams
and the burning sky

lost between black faces
who continue to scorn
each other's existence
and I refuse no other word
but unyile
unyile today

when freedom comes

I

the flowers will ignite in us
what the ants have always told
take what is yours

the truth will glisten
on an ochred face
blue beads in its mouth

blood will trickle down
quenching the dried up rivers
the numbed fight left within us

books and ash and flying bread
will inherit the smoke filled sky
no one will be here to meet us

II

the women
children on their backs
guns in their hands
after the futile war
what difference does it make
the war is not over

III

they still get beat up by white little boys on the farms. black men, older than my father. they were talking about the unburied black bodies that still haunt irhini and the vivid story behind that hill's name. i try not to look at them, regret not borrowing the recorder. when will i see them again? probably never.

IV

the petrol bombs have not been made
there are no guns in the shed
what shed
what guns

V

i am tired of all the talking and protesting as if it will unchain the oppression from our lungs.
i am tired from standing in all the lines and the distance i have to travel to reach just

halfway. i am tired of hunger and the broken families who continue to break their backs. i am tired of our mothers building churches that will not save them. i am tired of the shops that teach us to make nothing. i am tired of people who have given up their right to govern themselves. i am tired of my own tongue.

||

the corners of our everything

the mirrors are dusty. the chandeliers are a bright death in the middle of the room. the couch, drenched in our faeces. how unworthy is life that we continue living it? how empty are the bottles we have drunk to fill us? who is the custodian of our emptiness? the maker of this void that overwhelms the table. the wooden spoon stirs nothing within us. lost keys. fables on how to make headaches go away. food that does not nourish completely. the lonely hour of the singing cars outside. driving now is not void of witchcraft. myths of ufutha nocima that might never come true.

the songs move us to nothing but words. fuck. only words. and making futile love. and burps. and farts. empty plates. stretched out penises in drunk texts. and unbended knees. the incense does nothing for our souls. nor does the weed. and staying out late. nor do our hands and the lines that have carved themselves on our palms. our hands have always held pain more than others. held suicide at our wrists. rape on our thighs. signs from our ancestors on the corners of our everything. there is nothing in our hands. only love in songs that never end.

for my sisters

the place where we built our dreams
is no longer there

do you remember how the moon caved in
to the sky that night
do you remember how the ocean called
how we walked on the pavement
to see the sand

i knew we couldn't keep
the wine bottles
filled with shells and trinkets
the mpepho balls
made with our little hands

do you remember
our song
the part where we forgot
we were still recording

these feet are now elsewhere
on a new mat with new shoes
while your bellies grow

blue jeans

i

when a house has been abandoned for more than five months, you can tell by the spiralling spiderwebs on its insides, the short permanent shadows on every corner at night. the ceiling speaks in disjointed voices of those who tried to live here. the lights must stay on this evening.

ii

each morning you must sweep. sweep your house clean. you never know who comes in the day. empty out your cup. you never know who might be in need of sleep.

iii

a new horizon. misplaced scarves. i remember yesterday i was on the other side. a beauty so persistent. i would bow at your feet day by day without wavering. two birds take flight. the smell of rain lingers in the air. the moon's call i hear beckoning for another night. a shimmer of hope lays fondly on the particles of this water. your smell is the perfection i seek when all is just a dream. wishes that are irrelevant to the sentences you have written time and time again. you are ageless. time flows into forever night. just the thought of where i will go leaves me breathless, but full of life in messages put together in beads.

iv

birds fly
clouds
cradled by the sea
air
unseen womb
overstayed welcome
afternoon blunts
chance the rapper
people with small hands
dead children
blood on the tar
weeping mothers

v

always have a pair of blue jeans. for the pain.

vi

the bluest sky. the bluest sea. and the bluest of all the jeans. for when we fight again. don't forget to bring the gin.

estishini

there are no words this time
and the slow-turning bus
arrives to take us home
there are no goodbyes
no photographs
no indication
that we will ever arrive

lessons from the well

try not to look
beauty is not in the eyes
but in the wine
ignore what lies before grief
and after
stay in the mouth
of the crocodile

grief

the soul might rot
avoiding the mirror
might not forgive self
for what you'll find
in the darkness
say something
before the numbing defines you
say nothing
while you sit at your altar
grieve

every time

I have always stood at this fall
turned myself upside up
and you always just watch
watch my heart rust
and my face between your thighs
that is how I know
it has to have been love
but I lose you every time

magwaza

screaming foreskin
on a motel roof
you have no rite
no blanket
for your urine drenched mattress
no escaping this journey
up this mountain

the goat of destiny awaits
your mother on the other side of the pots
with every intention not to touch them
and ululate your return



the elephant in my hair

i was asleep
for a very long time
umama notata gave me
the sleepy tea in his testes

we try to forget

i have slept with everyone in this room. my little sister is a cancer. our father is the same. and i am a gemini. my father fucked her mother some time ago and she was born. we try to forget but we don't. my mother wore black at her grandfather's funeral.

his cheating was never about how beautiful my mother was or perhaps not so beautiful. he has no excuse about my little brother. or his aggressiveness. i have only indulged him because he is the testicles of my birth.

how fucked is parent. i learned this shit from you. the children are sick but you will never know.

demons

demons

my niece reckons angena xa umntu ekuphatha entl
my cousin almost sunk in her sinking bed
though a man swallowed her before it could
my best friend says i should cleanse my sexual energy
my demon alone understands that

wayendi moera

when meeting the back of his hand
i wondered when love left
in which ntlanti he had hid it

he had forgotten his smile
he had forgotten the music
i suckled on his breast

father

i have lit the purple candle only three times
in twenty six years. the three times i have tried
to let you go. into my dreams you crawl
to suffocate me. if i fall asleep you might.

how i became a whore

i have given everything to men. and now my voice hides at the back of the room. in grade 6 my valentine dumped me at first break while everyone by the tuckshop watched. in grade 6 utata forced me to quit choir because they stole his car outside the school yard during the eisteddfod. my first boyfriend had five girlfriends because i was still a virgin and apparently umfundisi ulindwa ngeculo. in high school i was told i was pretty and how quiet the toilets can get in the afternoon when most people have gone home.

i have warmed many sheets. played third fiddle many a time. the snoring of the other one's husband is still loud in my ears, his belly still as heavy on mine and i will never forget the things i had to do when utata stopped working at the buses.

i remember umama's reaction when i told her i'd been raped. quite similar to my cousin's reaction when i told him one of my brothers had touched me while he was watching *emmanuelle* on the black and white tv in my room. i still remember that when my brother sends me money or buys me airtime on some of his paydays.

emptiness is this full bucket I have always emptied out. onto fully watered plants.

melody for my uncle

my love is ocean
ocean bottom
and the lesson
of his suicide
comes back to
remind me
of the exodus
of the people
at dawn which
leaves the sun weary

poem to be sung

on my mat

there are mysteries

found in the sky

at the bottom of the ocean

stones

that lead me

to the edge of this fall

and i'm falling

hiding

i'm hiding

who will fix the cupboards

they have given birth to me
I will give birth to you
when you receive this
the cupboards
will be slanting
broken

lusapho

the birds are traveling west
and we meet here again
our umbilical cords not far behind

IV

leaving

on the eve of my twenty fourth birthday, umanci lit two white candles ne mpepho in the middle of the living room and we talked. we talked about why my parents have never visited my sister's grave since. if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. darkens. twists and turns.

she did not say. she went to sleep.

just before twelve i followed the moon through the dark streets of motherwell. slept in my friend's shack where the rats played slide on the ceiling cardboards and he said "you know there is something you will have to do".

when i was twenty two, what i knew as life slowly withered through my fingers. jesus could no longer save me. my friend's shoes were way too high and the road between home and town was suddenly way too long. i packed. i packed so many bags. left school. left home with so many questions.

when i was born, my mother was grieving and so was my father. the light left the dark's side and it crumbled. the sun unclasped itself from its axis and enveloped the earth. and the dark was a mere myth.

when i was twenty four i had to sit my parents down for one of those serious talks. there were two camp chairs and i sat barefoot on the floor on my red mat. i took out my journals with poems and songs and tried to explain how umakhulu visits me in my dreams in song. i tried to explain why i am different from the other children. why my hair grows as it does and how the shells ended up there.

at twenty seven, i still struggle to explain. to breathe. to wake up in the morning. to fulfill these dreams with no clear sense of direction. with heavy shoulders. with seagull feathers and sea shells i have collected to lead me along the way. i still look to the sun for answers finding none. i still look to the waves that drown me at a distance.

seeds

days start at night. the seeds my grandmother planted in this bed. sprout. uncontrollably. strangling the breath left inside of me. melody by melody. shell by shell. that I have picked up along the way. to have some light to bear the dark.

olu bizo

there's a pain in my tooth and heavy clouds sit on my chest. i make haste to the poems that have conjured themselves and left and come back. and roamed around my dandruffed head. it is kind of clean now. but olu bizo still hovers above it like an old empty nest we had promised to feed, there in the dream. there in the belly of manzi. there in the palms of my ancestors.

i should feel everything. but I feel nothing. their voices have drowned in this constant coming and going of hardship. letting my hand go.

shati

at the door
of your empty home
my eyebags
grey with tire
my shoulders heavy
with the burden of shinga njika

shinga
the red rock I have carried
since that dream

Mama

I have spent all your money Mama
Now we have to carefully
Hold the fridge door
So it doesn't fall

The rusting bottom of the microwave
Reminds me of that last bit of money you gave me
To study

My mattress is on the floor
Umakhulu said this is the last time
She will appear to make a person out of me

Mama I cry when you call me
I imagine what April will look like
Tears of all shapes on my face

water

i have found the medicine man. he has shown me my midwife. but not how i should find my sister's grave. i cannot fetch ubhut'magamase ebhofolo no bhut'ntsika from his eternal sleep.

in the water i will find a way to tell usis'unathi how beautiful she was in her coffin and how nomonde fits in my arms.

after death

there is nothing new to say
the clock ticks against our dreams
the cattle bells have rung out
night creeps into our nostrils
and the purple of our feet is well covered

nina

upon my visit to the kraal
there was nothing to drink
and nothing to smoke
there was nothing in your garden
that I could eat
and nothing
in your dreams

carriers of my light
the grave you left me in
does not have weeds
and the grass too
is eaten
by the cows
who graze here
it has been days
and my tired bones
long for more sleep

i am going back
to my place
where no one comes
and no one goes
I will listen
to the lonely song of birds
and await

demands

idlozi lam
who lives at the mouth of the river
comes to the front of the line
to take apart
what he has put together

he insists that we pray before the sacrifice
he does not forget utywala bomlungu
nala BB that burnt his insides

9th door

during the day
the door is not there
and I cannot go back
to where I was sent from

my guide

i have listened to the wind
watched the birth of silhouettes at sunset
the moon waxing in the mornings
remembered to always watch the birds
and listen