

Part A: Thesis

Salt in my footsteps

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by

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of poems which focus on human experiences related to my background. I grew up in a countryside village, freely experiencing nature in unrestricted walks to the rivers and mountains; communal living instilled in me the humanitarian values which I uphold to the present. I use short and long lyrical prose poems to bring life and humanise the untold or unexpressed stories of my community. My use of simple everyday language and clear, concrete but surprising images that resonate with deeper meanings and emotions is influenced by Seitlhamo Motsapi's poems, especially his collection of poems titled *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* and Mxolisi Nyezwa's poetry book, *Song Trials*. Spanish poems in English translations by the 20th century Spanish poets: Blas de Otero, Juan Roman Jimenez and Federico Garcia Lorca, published in the book titled *Roots and Wings* have had a huge impact on my construction of images. I also draw from the free-form and narrative prose poetry experiments of poets: Mangaliso Buzani, vangile gantsho and Ivy Alvarez.

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In my hometown

the road slides from side to side
weighed down by cars on its back
and zebras where people cross

we collide with one another
until someone shouts
inyandzaleyo!

street lamps are blinking eyes
a lonely car stands
with its hazard lights on

supervised by the moon
night flies to the sea
to fetch a morning breeze.

Boyhood

when we were young
we shoved old tyres with wooden sticks
a tyre was a moving car
this game was the whole world

we ran between home and mlumati river
inhaling hot rubber
in my mind i am still in the forest
searching for a little boy.

before the road was a highway
the bridge had no railings
birds nested under it

and children played at its edges
occasionally jumping into the river
when vehicles passed

in the rainy seasons mlumati river
would flood over
the birds would lose their homes
the children would stop playing

once a bus driver took a chance
and lost control midway
the community mourned their loved ones
the businessman cried for his bus.

Mlumati River

i have ferried your water
from the river to the mountains
drinking and urinating
fierce ants ravaged my soles
leaving a thousand footprints

you have washed my soul clean
sometimes you are green and serene
still pictures of your water
reflect your depths

mlumati of the north
i can count the water
that flows through my mind
in the memory of your waterfall.

The flute man

when Bhek'zo blows the pipe flute
it is not the wind of his breath that makes it cry
it is the pain he has been bottling over the years
when he closes his eyes and taps his foot
he is not dancing
he is walking into the past
looking for answers

me too, when i close my eyes
i hear many questions
i tighten my belt from time to time
to keep myself together

countless times
life has slipped from my hold
dragging me and my trousers
down to my ankles
where i got tripped
by loose shoelaces.

Weight of heaven

i walked from my home
fearing the sky would
one day cave in
from the weight of heaven

visionary hands built grass top huts
in the image of the hills
i can no longer blink

this trepid path is a steep waterfall
i am water trying to climb back.

Peripheries

the sea prostrates itself blue
to the mirror we call sky

the wind is searching for direction
the sun paints me in gold

peripheries pull me towards
a growing dot at the sea's end

a chimney scratches the horizon
a smile breaks at the corner of a wink

a ripple swims to the shore
a cock crows at the edge of a dream.

Mirror

sometimes i look the sun in the eye
send it shivering down to the horizon
it turns dark as i face my reflection in the mirror

when the moon rises at the centre of night
it reflects the horrors of my mind.

Salt in my footsteps

i stand on a path
where a pattern of my footsteps
measures my life

i hold time by its horns
and pull life by its tail

i hunger to swallow my fears
to leave footprints on the sea

emerge with a clean pair of shoes
and a handful of salt.

Using the pyramids

i have seen the pyramids
using their slopes for sundials
with time going scarlet towards sunset

my life a continuous red circle
a fire-dancer spinning my timeline
in luminous trails.

Forgiveness

i never knew you died
grudges grow on fertile hearts
like natural grass

now that my strength is finished
i am finally opening up
wanting to meet you again.

To know

i want to enter people's homes
to learn what boils their hearts
on the bed of a smoking river
the tall tree fears completely

i want to know
what food is served on the moon-plate
what frightens the crying child.

Gogo's memories

*while gogo was away
i fought with celiwe
and broke her left arm*

*while gogo nursed her
i fought with ncamiso
and broke my left arm*

my mind is an album with torn pages
of photos jumbled into collages
motion-pictures of my childhood

sometimes i retrace my steps
to see the sacred sculpture
the hairy man feeding on grass
and the framed portrait
of a man crying

i have lived short and long hours
but now my seconds are stretches of forever
i have forgotten when my heart was happy

i have been chewing my thoughts for too long
my fingers are numb to feeling
i am a bubble suspended in still air
wishing neither to fall nor rise

the city at night is a galaxy
looking across the sky
winking at stars
tricking them to fall

the lights of the passing cars
dance with the city's shadows
around my body
i hear my silence in high walls
where will the shadows go?
when will i die?

dreams of sleeping citizens
move through the night in quiet steps
crossing streets and intersections

a moving light stops at red
and moves again at green

gogo said i must not fold myself when i sleep
or i won't be free to fly
in my dreams.

i have a clear picture of my uncle crying
after gogo died
i walked in on him sobbing
i didn't ask him anything.

Poems

I

poems enter the body
through pores of the skin
then dry into map islands on pages

some poems are found on the leaves of trees
where the birds of the sky sing

some live on roofs
rains wash them
into a river's humming flow

i want to write my poems on grass
so that cows can chew them

my poems stay in touch with the world
they never let me forget what i am saying.

II

the poems in my mind
are not written in lines
they have no clear subjects
they are made of bleak images
that swallow the tastes of my tongue

my poems carry sharp sounds
faint shadows through the keyhole
when i write my poems
i carry black words.

III

with swift lines

poems lift me from my darkness

and place me on a table

made of fibre light

an earthquake rises

my breath shakes the room

my vision collides with coats

running out of the wardrobe

the moon knocks on my window

i close the curtains with my feelings

i become a small tree

in a raining forest.

People's hearts

people's hearts yearn for home

we lock them out

and follow minds

they hunger for peace

they cry

we silence them

they hunger for love

they bleed

then we forget them.

Our love

the sky exhibits its rage
in the starry night
our love grows like wild hair

i was a dry season
gravel heart
growing sadness

you came
with tender hands and seeds
watering my hopes

our hearts interlock
thoughts embrace the world
and close the distances.

When love leaves

the exact moment is hard to know
a thin line grows to a crack
hatching the incubation
in my chest is a sound
like air breaking
the clocks ticks

the night climbs the ladder of my limbs
stealthily
my pillow is sweating
my forehead a window glistening
my love, where are you going?

i have closed my ears with noises
but still hear the question
i stretch my shadow in an arc
simulating the rainbow

i sing verses to darkness
i don't know how far my voice will go
from my mouth to the skyline

in a bed of forest litter
sleeps your music with open eyes

the news of her death
cut me like sharp knives
purple ones with flat blades
buried in my flesh

my wounds keep festering

she leaves a footprint
an image of a shattered wave
i am a continent of loneliness
the ocean is slowly swallowing my head
my brain is a large cloud melting with green tears.

My grandmother's hands

I

"Grandma's hands

Used to issue out a warning

She'd say, "Billy don't you run so fast

Might fall on a piece of glass

'Might be snakes there in that grass'" - Bill Withers

The dust of dawn made me sneeze off my sleep. The earth was breathing through gaping wounds, inflicted by the hoes in our hands. Between the mealie plants we inserted pumpkin and watermelon seeds like secrets. Sometimes we threw seeds on virgin land like waste; nature did the rest. Gogo told stories that cooled the sting of the sun, the migrations of Vusweni and Ndlalambi, the clay digging at Lungungu. When I became a worker in the coal mine I realised the real virgin land was my mind, her stories the seeds. Time did the rest.

From the produce of summer, Gogo made provisions for winter. I loved *umfuso nendakala* (dried herbs and peanut soup). The bottles of canned guavas were sweet as Gogo's stories. I learnt that time can be prolonged. Eating habits may change, but the stories preserved the ancient tastes. *Bonel'entfutwaneni* - learn from the ant. I owned goats, chickens, a small plot and a smile from Gogo.

II

Bheki left on Christmas Eve. The night became tears soaking the house in anguish. In the morning we forgot our new clothes and the delicious food. Gogo said I must eat something. My stomach was full of pain.

Mta left on a winter morning. The cold froze Gogo's teardrop midway between my eye and the ground. I fell on her feet like drop of pain. The wind wheezed through the roof. A wire broom sweeping the ridges of my heart. When I think about the past, there are blank spaces and hollow sections. I drop in names to fill up the spaces every day. And they get swallowed.

III

As young children, we floated grass pyres to set the river on fire. I learnt that water cannot be trusted to extinguish flames. Fire burns upwards and water flows downwards. As the pyres became ash, the biggest responsibility of the water was to cleanse itself. Later in life I learnt that elsewhere the ash would have human remains. The river would be the sea. And this would not be a children's game.

*

I looked for peace in the gloom of a cave. Only the sounds of my footsteps assured me that I was still searching, I followed rebounds of misleading echoes. Though I stumbled on stalagmites and her thinning scents, I was yet to stumble on hope. In the endless dusk I wandered, praying not for morning or light, but direction.

*

In my dream she is the morning floating in a sleeping dam that is quietly breaking its borders. An egg releasing yellow sun in a pool of transparent white. I eat it hot and light up the day with warm eyes. Her happiness grows like goosebumps on my skin when she laughs, multiple dots bulging on her tongue till I'm swallowed in her open mouth. Her teeth are piano keys, her laughter a perfect composition. She understands me before I say anything. Sometimes I fear she understands me too much and I want to explain that I was wrong. But I wake up.

IV

Iridescent foam shifted multi-colour air-balls around the basin. She was washing her favourite dress, the one with pockets and cat prints among lazy stripes. She pressed it down in the cold water as though she wanted the cats to drown before she hung it by the neck. But the dress had air in the pockets, the cats were breathing through the baptism. With each wash the dress lost a colour, and she, her youth. Her hands came out wrinkled and pale, still holding on to fragments of dirt, colour and age. She wanted to cleanse them before giving me a hug. I flung myself forward and got wrapped in the warmest hug of my life.

*

Her voice calling my name assured me of life, as its volume went lower and lower with each call, I wondered if it was her dying, or me?

V

Her open hands were the internal peace that received an open book. I was once cradled by her hands which were wider than rolled fists, and could cool the air of heated moments; wipe sweat, rub and massage to relax tension.

*

I threw my milk teeth with the cotton thread in the ash-heap, massaging the empty gums with my tongue, chanting the begging ritual for re-growth. Gogo was friends with the thin cotton thread, not the sisal rope which robbed me of a *mam'ncane*, her second born. She would sew clothes to cover her wounds with a touch of beauty.

Gogo's hands had different stitches for different fabrics; they held the family together. When her sight was failing my duty was to move the thread through the eye of the needle.

When I leant that cotton thread could write names on fabrics, I tried my hands at sewing. I too wanted to write my name.

VI

Orange peeling, onion chopping, firewood smoke; I had cried to these all my childhood. But when Gogo died the pain flowed from a different well.

In my hands the earth is a pair of trees, five branches each, writing freedom on the surface of a leaf. My story walks tall between veinal margins of green palms. Misery burns wood into charcoal lead that writes black on white. I am a tree growing against the book. My toes are roots moving on surface. My hair grows towards the rain.

*

Acceptance came in her handshakes, hugs and gesticulations that spelt her warmth. Gogo's hands were tiny, with palm prints that cut my thoughts deeply that I always got lost in their

meandering. I never saw them rolled into fists. They held a hoe, a sickle, crochet sticks, needles, clay and moulded me. When I visited her room to admire her handicraft, my starting point was always the mirror on the wall.

VII

We lost her during the drought season, same way we lost our seeds to the greedy soil. We dug the whole night, the ground harder than the log that broke the iron axe. In the end we were a muddy pile, moist from our tears next to the dust, broken souls and broken pick handles.

*

Steaming coffee cups remind me of winter mornings. We spoke in white vapours and watched our words demystify into clear space. I remember smoke sifting through the thatch of our kitchen hut as though it was burning. I tried to blow an incarnation into the dying fire. A faint charcoal glow in Gogo's eyes scanned through the smoke. Inside the three- legged pot was warm. Outside it was struggling to balance.

VIII

A young girl carrying a rolled sleeping mat walked into a future already lived. It was the 7th of September. She hauled an army of women stripped to the girth. I spotted Gogo swinging her *sicholo* like she carried the globe on her head. The delayed moon followed a train of bodies driven by song and fueled by tears. A fire burned the patience out of the waiting hosts.

*“Nguyengunge nguyeyedvwakabo
Bambizizwelonke...”*

I belonged to neither the arrivals, nor the hosts, only to her. I did not dance, just watched dust rise into a cloud hanging above the song. I was there when she crossed the river, reversing the flow of time. I remembered that I was my mother's egg.

My mother, carried a sleeping mat rolled with a blanket walked into a land of completed incarnations. The 7th of September again, I was given a pick and shovel to mark Gogo's last

home. The night was elastic bands forever stretching to a morning that did not see the sun. A coffin in hands that could not hold her life from passing on.

IX

The day is colours and shapes. The night is silhouettes of her laughter and splinters of yearning, scattered in flying sounds by crickets. The language of wishes speaks in dialects of hope and longing. I am a stone in the sling of fate. The distance hums of my longing to see her.

She wears starlets on her smile, adorning the veil of time. She convinces the graveyards to smile and the epitaphs to rhyme. Even her tears melt like honey. The sun licks them off her cheeks.

I have written a wish list on a cloud using a matchstick. Soon it will rain peace on her roof, and the gutters will direct a warm flow to the garden of her heart.

She runs a finger on the mat-marks on my head. I open my eyes to see her, then I realise that she was the night, and her hand, my dream.

*

I stretch my step to skip over the sensitive skin of our story. Human love stretches farther than maps and longitudes. When folded, the people we love are a sleeping mat neatly rolled by the gods into a supreme love. When released from their bonds, people are boundless energies.

We live in different songs, yet still share quiet moments of breaths and counts of silence. I could have written this on the scale of an octave, but my inkwell dried in the throat.

I close my eyes to swallow a night where trees sleep under leaves for blankets. I wake up in a garden with my hands over my loins. She reminds me of innocence.

.

X

“Ngiyolala ngingedvwa

Ethuneni lami”

Dirges in the background. Strangers read verses that did not rhyme with her life. Her obituary had typos and dashes. She was survived by two daughters and two grandsons. One daughter was lost in her teens. I never knew her, nor the whole story.

She sleeps still under handfuls of soils poured in pebble counts over her chest. Her skeletal frame balances a mountain grown under a rising cloud of chorus. She always sang. Now a hand of wind takes a melody from her whisper pouted lips and scribbles grave messages on a strip of my tongue. One day she will stand and walk away from my tears, flowers and wooden crucifix planted on her head. But now she waits for her walking stick which I always forget to bring.

*

Gloomy days

a wingless bird in my dreams
a branch growing in my heart
a red fruit falling out of my breath
more blood in the streets

my voice is stuck to my tongue
i place a rope tied on both ends
*“who will untie the rope
that fastens my hands?”*

my ear cups fill with the cold wind
i hear gnashing teeth from the shadows
i rub my palms to embrace my fate
winter grows from my hands.

Township girl

she hides behind desert sands
nothing grows in her garden

she lost herself to the rainbow
her tears were mistaken for a drizzle
the ground bathed its hands
in the clarity of her teardrops

the grass breathes morning dew
the sun is a hot towel
wiping her glow
from the face of the earth.

Politician

he started eating because of hunger
but he continued for the taste of eating
he eats so that nothing is left

he ate his conscience first
then the conscience of his defenders
now he eats his critics alive

he sits bloated and tired
but he must continue eating
this is all he knows.

To the needle

i sharpen my tongue
to talk about your seams
that have strung families together
and patched lives torn by misfortune

you have sewn back flesh to bones
and picked out thorn stumps
to give a boy back his freedom
i knew you could sew and patch
but one day you pricked a festering boil
and pain came out from the source

i want to see the world through your eye
to see where the world is torn
then begin my thread of mending.

To the waiting room

you keep an eye on the road
to receive greetings of transient feet
and carry the weight of tired luggage
and anxious travellers

house without a door
you hide our impatience
you are many things to many people

sometimes a sleeping place
sometimes a matchmaker
sometimes our turning point.

To my coat

you have worn many colours
over many years
army green, lime, now just pale

your buttons
have lost their silver tint
rubbing against rough bodies
in long queues

rains have tried to dampen your spirit
winds have tested your patience
at night you amplify my silhouette
you dress me with dignity

now i carry your body
and you carry my face.

The way back home

the aloe tree dangles
multiple tongues
that speak in a thorny rash

a drunk man stands
by the roadside
his song is blown away
by the wind

my toes write every step
on my way back home
when the road finds a stream
i become a footbridge

i keep water in memory
the passage of time
cannot drive me thirsty.

The seed

the seed smells of fortune
the rains have softened its clay
the seed itches to be picked
and buried in a grave
where it will live
flapping its leaves towards light

it may not wave a hand
to everyone in the village
and children will not know
the angry sighs of the coal miners.

Pain

i am passing through life
riding on a chariot of pain

my emotions hang at the end of time
lacerations on the skin of my soul

green music is heard from the bush
in summer

i am the rusty voice
from the dried winter leaves
the wind bounces on the edge of season

i want to borrow a foot from the mountain
and a peak from time

but i am the tail that follows the river
the sea is a pool of voices
a choral expanse conducted by the moon

my world is a mutilated song
chopped into unequal parts.

Hardships

my eyes can see
what my body cannot touch
the seed holds the future in a shell
the root crosses layers of earth
searching for anchor

the river yearns
for what my memory cannot recall

i am carving time
into a wooden sculpture
a man with swollen tits
where posterity milks
memories of my hardships.

On hold

i hold a breath in my prayer
with tiny fingers of hope
and the mind of a quiet lake

i sit still at the bottom
a stone thrown is no danger to me

i hold my words in my mouth
no one should know
i cover my heart with my hands
hiding secrets in open palms
i hold a breath in my lungs
to hang on to a thread of life

i juggle the truth in my feet like a ball
it may fall out of control
or get burst by a stone
and explode!

On a blade

i stand on a blade of time
the sharpness of my voice
slices through a medley of dirges

a ladybird on a twig overhangs my troubles
in my orchard sunflowers follow the moon
my heart responds to lunar pulls
tomorrow's hands have an extra finger
pointing at my fate

an eagle soars without flapping
mangroves grow in my lake of tears
the lotus blossoms in a muddy pool

at the edge of the sea
a mast appears like a raised fist.

Obscure

Webs of draping
cover my story
i bleed internally

a forest in my head
hides my fears
and wonders

time in my hands
a clock in my heart
moments
are granules of pain

the legs of my bed are swollen
my dreams are heavy.

Villages

a dry river

flows on the bed of memory

dry throats cannot sing

hollow reeds

flutes out of tune

begging lips cracking with despair

thirsty villagers cry on the mountains

praying for rain.

Falling asleep

behind the curtains drawing over my eyes
a somnambulist hand
stretches a lazy moment
my thoughts, a waterfall in slow motion

at the bottom is my trance
nocturnal voices massage
the walls of a quiet night.