

Part A: Thesis

Magnitude

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by

Deborah Seddon

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6269-0655

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Abstract

My thesis is a collection of lyric, narrative, and prose poetry directed towards two forms of death – physical death and the disavowal of the self. Many poems focus on the death of my mother, and the work required after loss to sort through a family’s life in my Harare childhood home. This associative exploration draws together childhood memories, encounters with physical objects, letters, and songs, as well as with the city and its people. Tadeusz Różewicz’s *Mother Departs* has influenced my approach to writing of my mother’s death, particularly how to grant her a voice in the telling. I also draw on the poetry of Harmony Holiday and Pascal Petite, in their attention to the complexities and emotional dangers of the mother-daughter bond. Other poems draw on the work of Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Ocean Vuong, and Saeed Jones, in terms of imagining queer life into poetry, the use of the erotic as a means of empowerment, and developing a queer political identity, to examine various aspects of queer love, including the heartaches associated with self-denial.

Magnitude

Deborah Seddon

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition
(James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*)

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7 Balfour Road

The dark wooden tea trolley no longer stands
where it should –

under the windowsill in the dining room.
The tea tray set, ready, covered with a net.

The windowpane, where daily, the gardener still places
an enormous leaf,
sliced with a knife from the banana tree

to save the birds who, should they see through the pane
to the wide lawn and strelitzia tree
on the other side of the house, fly

into the glass.

I look through the glass into the dining room, onto the stoep,
to the wild green stretch beyond the dark interior.

It is easy to believe you can fly straight through.
It is easy to believe you can fly straight down the curling driveway
through the house to the green beyond.

Once we found a loerie under the window
amongst the cement flowerpots.

Its green feathers soft as your hair.

Before the rigor mortis set in, you took it to the National Museum
to be stuffed. To teach the children about such creatures.

The underside of its wings
scarlet as a rush of blood from the brain.

Arrivals, Departures

I have been flying away from you
and towards you my entire adult life.

Standing among strangers, you never hide your grief.
Cover my face with your tears and kisses,
unashamed who sees.

You tie little bows to the handles of my suitcase.
They trundle around to greet me from the carousel.
Waving loops caught in the zip's metal grin.

To be a mother is always to be letting go.
From the moment the child turns in the womb,
head engaged in the pelvic brim.

From the moment the contractions shudder through
the body like the pain of a torn-away limb.

*

When you got old, I no longer let you drive me to the airport.
Contained your pain at the gate of your house,
the waiting taxi's smoke idling into the dawn.

Harare. Johannesburg. Port Elizabeth. Makhanda.
Makhanda. Port Elizabeth. Johannesburg. Harare.

To leave you was to travel all day with our grief.

My heart hanging in the pit of my chest,
a dark well where the handle keeps spinning.

I hated the drive to P.E. airport.
Our last ninety minutes spent on a highway
to meet your early morning plane.

Your face turned towards me in the passenger seat
to hand me a steaming cup from our flask of sweet tea.

Watching you slip again through the check-in point to security.
Letting other people help you lift your case and coat.

Staying as close to you as I could until the plane left the ground.
Watching the runway from the restaurant with a coffee

until you file across the tarmac with the other passengers.
Your little four-wheeled red suitcase dragging behind you.

Your bent head, your weeping visible from the high windows,
where I watch you climb the juddering staircase into the plane.

The clang of each steep metal step a return to your task
of making each day count in a house bereft
of husband and children.

*

In those moments when you descended from planes,
with each considered step of your low-heeled pumps,

wheeling your little four-wheeled red suitcase ahead of you
on the hot tarmac, seeing me at last through the glass,

stopping to jump, smile, wave with both hands,
beginning to walk more quickly,

your mama beehive hairdo pushed to the back
of your head like a little crushed bird's nest,

you brought into my opening adult arms
everything you had loved in the child.

Your wet, red face creasing into joy and relief,
leaving damp spots of it on my cheeks, my shoulders, my neck.

My heart tugged up hard above my head.
Like a brand new kite on clean strings.

The First Time

With my small cardboard suitcase. My sandy-coloured sandals. My dress with the orange flower buttons than can pop out at their middles. I know that I am five. I know how to unlatch the gate. I take my floppy cotton hat. An apple. Some juice and a book. I know the way to town.

Barton finds me sitting in the tall grass at the corner. Where my small road joins the big one. On the edge of the footpath that cuts through the feathery grass. The sand is littered with bottle caps and stompies. My hands around my knees. In his starched white uniform he looks at me in silence. His outstretched hand is not a demand. We go back up the hill together.

Harare City, Sunshine City

You can ride all the way through the centre on Samora Machel with skyscrapers on either side. Except now it's called the A5. There are new roads and roundabouts. It's confusing. You could follow on Google maps except that Google maps doesn't know anything about the men with AK-47s on the corners by State House. How they can hiss and raise their guns a little higher when you stop at the robots (especially when you have a dog in the car). People call through their open car windows at the next robot. *Are you okay? What did he want? Do you think it was the dog?* Remember then, that the wrong turn home will always be right, down Josiah Tongogara. Better to go the other way, left down Herbert Chitepo, except that Google maps always calls him Herbert Chai-po and then you shout at the woman's voice on the phone.

Outside the new law offices that your father would have loved you stop to buy a Biggie Bear banana flavoured ice lolly from a Dairiboard ice cream vendor. He tells you through the smoke rising from the refrigerated box on the front of his bicycle that his name is Shame. You wonder what his mother was feeling at his birth and you say this. He laughs and shakes your hand. You take his picture and send it to him on Whatsapp.

There, on the corner, beside the huge chrome and copper sulphate blue employment insurance office that you do not even bother to visit because the claim you could make to help pay for the funeral is not worth the time nor the paper work, but don't the orange spathodea trees in flower everywhere look so pretty against the bright blue glass?

At the robots at the corner of Herbert Chitepo and Simon Muzenda by the Sacred Heart Cathedral you see Wilson again and feel like crying because this time you have the pin to the EcoCash on her phone. You yell out of the window, Wilson! I'm back and I've got EcoCash! The light goes green and he runs across the robots with you. You buy two enormous bags of unshelled monkey nuts. Wilson receives the Ecocash on a friend's phone. His has been stolen. In the photograph, his smiling grey-brown face says everything about what it means to live hawking monkey nuts at the robots next to the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. His eyes are bloody. His hoodie is dirty and torn. So is his upper lip. But he says it again. Just as he did when you met him here before.

He holds up both bags, leans through the window, and says *Hello my sister, you know you want some.* You laugh together.

You are so astonished to find yourself home and addressed in this fashion.
You want to step out of the car and hug him hard with the huge
sad joy of being here again on Herbert Chitepo with Wilson
and his friends in the land of your birth. In the city of your youth.

There is the Ambassador Hotel where the security guards chased you and
your friends that night on the roof for playing drinking games. Your schoolgirl faces
dotted with the soot of champagne corks as you slide down the fire escape
and away. You slid away. You gave it all up. You know you can never live here again.
You know that you are only playing at all this. Buying yourself ice cream
and monkey nuts in the drive time between doctors and lawyers.

On Samora Machel you can drive down the middle of the small patch
of skyscrapers. Past the curved beauty of the Monomatapa Hotel,
the gold B&H box of the Sheraton. The stone chameleon and the praying mantis
at the Museum of Human Sciences. You can drive straight through in one day
to the fever trees and sweat of Lake Kariba. Barefoot. In shorts. To sing
every Freddie Mercury song aloud together under the stars the night he died.

Living Will

You have been telling me this
since I was old enough to be allowed
to watch your soap operas, sitting right next to you on the couch
instead of peeping in secret from under the table
in the dining room, until you chased me back to bed,
away from the evil J.R. and the alcoholic Sue Ellen,
Alexis Carrington returned to haunt her ex and his new wife
(one of them driven crazy when the walls of the offices
are coated in toxic paint). They make us all feel better,
these dysfunctional Americans lives. Every Sunday night,
as the camera pans over Southfork Ranch in the opening credits,
you suck your teeth and can be counted upon to utter
the same pronouncement on the living arrangements
of Texan millionaires. *Not a tree in sight!*

Given a hospital scene – the family gathered
around the bed of an ailing loved one, kept alive
with an oxygen mask and machines, the room full of feeding tubes,
beeps, and screens – you would reach for my hand
without once turning your face from the television,
give it a squeeze and a shake for emphasis:
*I don't ever want that, do you hear me, to be kept
going on life support like that.*

You'd seen it with your only brother, 19, his shaved head
bandaged to bind up the cracks in his skull, reaching
his unseeing hands across the bed in search of yours.
I don't ever want to be kept alive as a vegetable.

When a life in the mines finally killed granddad,
the black fungus of tuberculosis spreading across
the walls of his lungs, his trachea (you said it as you wept,
sitting on the floor of my room, while I played with your brother's
Mechano set, fixing a bendy straw into place as the chimney
for my train) *split like an old perished pipe.*

But there is no way we can switch off this stroke.
It has split you in two. The left side moves
but the ponderous right will do nobody's bidding.
Not even yours.

You give me power of attorney with your thumbprint.

Sitting up in your hospital bed for your lawyer determined and focused
as if all this is just a temporary inconvenience.

Each day in the hospital, I keep your living will folded at the ready in the back pocket of my jeans.

You make me write it on the white board above your head:
ALLERGIC TO STRAWBERRIES.
NO ARTIFICIAL LIFE SUPPORT.

I direct that I be allowed to die and not be kept alive by artificial means and I specifically reject any electrical or mechanical methods of treatment aimed at prolonging or sustaining my life.

We are learning patience, you and me, I suggest.
Neither of us has ever had it and now we need it most.

You will not listen. Will not hold your right arm for safety in your left when we lift you out of bed each day to sit you upright in a chair. Insist on using your good arm to lift yourself up while the ragdoll right arm bucks and swings until I shout that you are going to injure it all, even the parts that work.

Why do you, I demand, always have to be so *again-est*?
But I know why, because we are the same, you and I.
You may just be the only person who is more *again-est* than me.

I think it was the borrowed wheelchair that did it. The day I set it up you were gone. I think you took one look at the life that lay ahead and refused. You never sat in it

instead you said you needed sleep inside your dream you found your own way out

slipped the noose of the body

that had failed you

shipped out for somewhere you could be alive again and whole

a spirit deliberate and certain striding away from all of us

into the wayward dark

Scratch that

I was in the house when it happened. It happened while I slept. I lay down on the couch. I slept like the dead. On a hot Sunday afternoon in March I rolled in amongst the cushions.

*

I wake up cold. On that hot day in March on a Sunday afternoon. The wind chime on the stoep. The birdsong. The birds. I walk down the passage. Thuli, the nurse, sits quiet in her chair, reading. She stirs and smiles as I enter the bedroom. How is she? I ask. She's fine, she says, she's sleeping. We smile at each other.

I like her. This calm gentle woman who makes my mother laugh. Who teases that my mother will be dancing at her wedding in August. I reach for my mother's sleeping face on the pillows. I brush her hair from her forehead. Cold. She isn't breathing. She is cold.

*

I lay down for an hour. I lay down for just an hour. On a hot Sunday afternoon in March. I slept for the first time since I'd arrived. I was in the house when it happened. I brush her hair from her forehead. She is cold. I put my mouth over hers. I put my mouth over hers and blow my breath into her mouth. My fists pump her chest.

I blow my breath into her mouth. I shout. My fists pump her chest. I cry. Thuli cries. I phone the doctor. I phone the ambulance. The ambulance doesn't answer. I phone a friend. I shout. I pump her chest. My breath blows into her mouth.

*

The doctor arrives. The six-foot doctor with his hairy chest. He leans over her. He puts his stethoscope to her chest and listens for her heart. No, he says, she's gone. I shout again no, no, no, no, no! He tells the ambulance not to come. I do something I have never done. I sit next to my mother in bed and I smoke. A friend arrives. Then another. They talk to me. I talk to them. The night comes on in this blur of conversation.

*

The news of her collapse arrives and keeps arriving, as I book my ticket, pack my bag. The calls and calls from her friends, telling me about my mother, the ambulance, the hospital. She can't speak Debs, I think it's quite bad. She can't speak. I take a black shirt out of my cupboard. I hold it up and throw it back. No, I say to the shirt, I don't need you. I am not going to a funeral. Most of the clothes I pack are dirty. Taken from the basket in the bathroom I'd planned to wash that weekend. I start packing and I do not sleep.

*

My tall broad mother sits in the hospital bed like a little puppet with her strings cut. Her gasp as she turns her head toward me and opens her eyes to my voice is her gasp. Then the rush to speak herself to me as she has always done hits the slack sag of lips without nerves. Hiss and teeth and repetition. The left side pressing forward to help. The effort. Just to shape her lips around the same old words. To lift the sag at the right corner of her mouth. All the old shapes lost. She cannot smile but I can tell she is happy I'm here. Her beautiful and very important hair is ragged. She cannot move and her voice is a breathy frustrated riddle. I watch her face. Her eyes are wild. She cannot keep still. Fighting against her immobility and silence. Fighting so hard she cannot breathe.

*

Lying in the spare room at my best friend's house, I want to be in the hospital. I want to smoke at three in the morning. I want to be in the hospital with my mother. I want to smoke. But there is no way out. No way past all the armed and alarmed doors and windows. I roll towels under the door and puff out of the window. I want to smoke. So they give me the key to their generator cage. I stand out there smoking at night next to the petrol-driven thump. One spark from my cigarette and we'll all blow. All that time the night jar cries and cries. My mother called it her death bird. The night jar who sang under her college window every night that term until her brother died.

*

Tiny little traps or gaps in time. We fall into them. Like a needle trapped in the scratch on a record. Living inside the bit that's missing. I can't even remember the name of the hospital but I am still sitting there in the foyer. With a huge picture of Emmerson Mnangagwa hanging over us all. It's dark. The night air on the pavement has its autumn chill. There is so much activity inside. Too much noise. People wander in and out from the street. Shouting and banging. Trolleys and bedpans. This hospital sounds like a riot. But no one is visiting anyone. I find it impossible to understand why I cannot be allowed to simply sit quietly beside her. In the ward where she lies above me. Listening to all this. Unsleeping. Unable to get out of bed. Unable to call out for help. Exactly one floor above my head.

*

My mother lay just above my head on the next floor. The matron of the ward would not let me stay with her. My mother was so hungry she pulled herself up by the bars of the bed and roared. In 24 hours, I will move her somewhere else, to the cool quiet wards of the Avenues Clinic. In 72 hours, Evelyn the night nurse will arrive in her sleeveless blue jersey. Just by being there, she will make everything calm. But now I am thirsty and my mother is roaring somewhere just above my head.

*

It is after visiting hours. The ward matron will not allow me to stay. I have asked her quietly three times. I am thirsty and tired. I haven't slept since I got the call. Yesterday. In another country. I am texting my friend for a lift home while staring at the empty water cooler and the dirty blue plastic cups piled around it.

I have to keep telling that woman who is still sitting in the hospital foyer that she moved her mother out by lunchtime of the next day. That they couldn't take her anywhere better because no one had the US dollar cash needed for admission elsewhere.

*

One of her best friends hunches over her kitchen counter and tells me that she had taken the wrong envelope. She had her salary in one and her grocery money in the other. In her rush to meet the ambulance, she had taken the money for her groceries. It wasn't enough. It's alright, I say. She weeps with my arm around her shoulders. I am not the only one who stays sitting in the foyer of the only hospital anyone could afford in US dollar cash that day. No one should have to be stuck in such a place.

*

I am still sitting in the foyer of the hospital when I am taken by friends to see an improv show at Reps Theatre. It is a Friday. This is what they are doing this evening. I am their guest and life goes on. I am still sitting in the hospital foyer or wishing to be on the floor above it when I sit in the audience gripping a plastic tumbler of gin and tonic. All around me people are laughing so hard they twist and rock their bodies in their chairs and wave their hands in the air. I think about that improv now. I wonder, was it really that terrible? Yes. It was really that terrible. So bad, in fact, it deserved the words Jack Nicholson says to Shirley MacLaine in *Terms of Endearment* when she asks him if he wants to come in: "I would rather stick needles in my eyes." My school friends and I have used this phrase since 1985. The film was released in 1983. We saw it two years later, our first year of high school, because that was how long the movies took to reach us in Zimbabwe.

*

You are my mother and you are death. You have become death. Because of you I have never known it so close. I have slept beside it on the pillow and kissed its cold soft forehead. I have combed its dark and tangled hair.

*

You are so alike, say my friends. She's nothing like me, I think. But our road rage is identical. Who am I? Who is anyone?

*

When I was a small girl I fell down a hole my mother had dug for a palm tree. Correction: I fell down a hole she had *ordered* dug for a palm tree. I was in the hole the entire afternoon. I couldn't climb out. The soil walls crumbled under me, pushed me back down. I felt like a beetle in an ant lion pit. I knew how to trick them. How to lie in the dirt and spit in their holes to catch them. Now I was the meal in an ant lion pit. I just sat in the dirt and waited.

Lamrik the gardener found me. He laughed at the small dirty child sitting in a hole in the soil. I laughed with him as he doubled over in his laughter. Lamrik had spent the whole day digging for my mother and weeding her garden but he still had the strength to lift me out.

I need you to lift me, Sekuru. I need you to lift me out. I want to sit with you again on a low wooden stool on the stoep of your house. I want to sit at your fire and sing with you as your fingers pluck the fishing wire strings of your guitar. Your guitar of green and gold. Handmade from a big square tin of Olivine oil. A circle of sound sliced into the centre. Teach me those words again, please Sekuru, sing them again and lift me up. *Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home.*

O-o-h Child

O-o-h child
lifting the record player arm with a trembling hand
laying your head next to the speaker

your father is at war
Nixon is a crook and that naked child

running from the napalmed forest and
out-screaming Munch is only one of many

O-o-h child, it's not going to stop
this wash of death on the shore each morning

For where can they live?
The refugees crammed into boats
their homes all wrecked by sonic boom and flame

The men and women suffocating side by side
in containers in trucks and on ships

running out of air in the darkness
running away into their airless futures

O-o-h child, the people can't breathe
the police are still pressing on their necks

and just the other day they shot a little boy
with his pockets full of biscuits
but no one goes painting his name

O-o-h child, look around, things aren't going to get easier

the young have never had your kind of hope

the old ones took for granted
the lake at dusk, the flies and the fish
rising to the rippled surface

the beauty of the world seemed unassailable

The trees still shed enough pollen
on one summer day for a thousand orchards
but there won't be enough bees left to cope

Last Morning

I wake beside you. The dark is thinning
but you will never see this sun.
I take up the plastic basin and the warm water,
the face cloth and the soap.
Turn your body over in my hands.
Climb over you like an ant, like a child.
Lift you like the woman I have become.

You are still my mother.
You are heavier like this. Every limb flops now
like that stricken right side.

I am afraid I may snap you,
if I let go, if you land oddly.
But I have chosen to do this.

My sweat slicks my face, drops from my hairline,
runs from the pits of my arms.
I stop to lie on the carpet.
Feel the tears pool in my ears.
But I go back to you. I am thorough.

I wash between each creased and freckled finger.
The short modest nails.
The groove on your finger where
the gold ring rests. You never took it off,
not once in forty-nine years. Not for anything,
not even surgery.

We bury her with it,
I tell the two men in their white coats.

As I turn you, I watch the slow movement of blood
under your skin. I am afraid I will disturb
the perfect peace of your face.
I do not want to leave you blotchy or lopsided.

I want you beautiful.
Sent out in a fresh, ironed nightgown.
Cream on your face.
Perfume in your hair.
This is my only prayer.

Your knees still bend, and your elbows.
But I can feel death taking you from me.

Your swift laughing capable body
is stiffening like plaster under my hands.

I am hours at this task.
I have washed, rubbed, oiled these feet,
these baby toes which both tuck in, next to the rest.

These raspy heels.
These high-strung arches.
These carefully shaven legs.
These durable sun-damaged arms.

On your belly, I wipe down the length
of your thick liver-coloured scar,

the wound from which we were born, where they lifted us
out into the light.

Bella

The vet came to my house on a Tuesday morning to end the life of my dog. I lay on the carpet, smoothing her snarl, closing her eyes. She didn't want any more injections. When the vet had left, I held her and wailed. My tears ran down and dampened her whitened fur. I stroked her until the warmth left her little body.

Once death was like this for every family. To die at home. Laid out to be washed on a table in the house. I washed my mother's body. Some friends were shocked. They had not wished to see or touch their parents after death.

I could choose an end for my dog. I held her in my arms all night, knowing the morning would bring her mercy, release. Most people are not so lucky.

It took me two days to dig a deep enough grave. To wrap her in a sheet, place her in the earth, shovel it over her. I needed to keep her with me for a while. Her heart had stopped in ten seconds.

It took me two days to let her go. To put her in the ground. Then listen gladly to rain falling over the garden, soaking down into her hair and skin. To think of her turning into part of the earth herself. Food for insects and plants.

I want to be wrapped in a cotton sheet, lain in the soil. If I cannot have this, I want to be burnt. The idea of a coffin is disgusting. To rot all alone in a box. The final prison.

I wanted my mother. I wanted her voice and comfort. There is no comfort now. Will I ever weep again in someone else's arms? My mother and my dog are dead. The other little dog and I are so silent and bewildered together.

Family Home

There is a purple pin pushed deep into the felt of the tomato-shaped pin cushion
in the drawer under the bed where no one ever vacuums

In the cupboard in the passage there is a carton of Leopard matches
that cost \$52 000

In the liquor cabinet a bottle of pink bitters for \$65 000

In my bedroom cupboard a cake tin full of plastic hair curlers,
hair pins, an invitation to my parents' wedding,
and a little note from my grandmother to my great-aunt
Baie, baie dankie, dat jy my hare so mooi gedoen het

A bottle of Holy Water labelled HOLY WATER
Cardboard boxes labelled CARDBOARD BOXES
A big Mazoe Orange Crush bottle filled up with grit
to scour the pots when nobody could buy any Vim

A bottle of calamine lotion. The white liquid set solid
at the bottom. You kept a bottle of the lotion
you once dabbed all over my small girl body

The chalky chemical smell as the cotton wool was soaked
and squeezed to cool the red welts rising up under
my skin because once I was allergic to everything

You kept the junket tablets and 20 tiny bottles
of the food colouring you used to make our cakes
My father's red Christmas shirt labelled CHRIS CHRISTMAS SHIRT

I lie in bed one whole morning to listen to a CD labelled "Chris's Voice"
– hear him firing off legal letters on his dictaphone without
even a pause between one missive and the next –
We are, not unnaturally, more than a little vexed

What is this? I ask. Handing over, to your old friend,
an object fashioned from leather and string

Oh, those were our dogtags, he says
He stretches them over my head
fastens the ties around my neck
I begin to shake a little

the history of a family and a nation
spoken by the objects left behind

All the words

words on the birthday cards and the shopping lists and the letters
all the bills and the emails and the envelopes and the aerograms

little notes you'd left me long ago next to the kettle
to read when I came home from out dancing late

they all begin and end the same
to *Dearest Darling Debs* from *your Everloving Mummy*

words inside your notebooks
every wish and prayer and plan

years and years and years of our words
kept folded up in drawers
and in the cupboards and the passageways

you left your messages everywhere for me
you knew this would be my task
to find them out and burn them up

all the words churning above us now
in the air over the roof

rising with the smoke every night
mingling in the green and orange flames

the sweet dark brandy sleep
every night on the carpet next to the fire

waking to the call of the spookvoël
a green ghost crying into the dawn

Sisters

Cut a large aloe leaf at the base with a penknife
Cut several large aloe leaves
Make a hole in the head of each with a sharpened stick
Then string them together for ease of carrying

These will be our fish

We will slice them down the middle
carve out and eat the bitter transparent flesh

We will taste it with herbs and sometimes with peas
cooked over a fire made from the flowers of spathodea trees

Later when their seedpods crack they will shape into perfect boats

to crest over the bubbling fountain into the pool
where the razor-bite leaves of the spikey palm
are the sharks that swim amongst us

The red waterberries cram tart in our mouths
But we have to be secretive about the peas

If we are found eating peas whole, green, sweet, squeaky, delicious
we will be smacked

We are also forbidden from scaring the chickens
while they lie quiet in the straw
in their dark shit stink of a coop

but we are choosing among them one
to be our golden feathered phoenix

We climb into the smooth branched tunnel
of the red hibiscus hedge it is our road to Golgotha

we hang there till our arms hurt till we cry out from the pain

We call out from the tangled interior as a friend arrives for tea
hello Mrs Watson! we're being crucified today!

We throw ourselves into piles of spathodea flowers
to thrash and moan as we burn alive

We are the children cast into the fire
by the evil king Nebuchadnezzar

The white maggots feast in the flesh of vrot guavas
These make the perfect hand grenades

We jump from the roof of the hut with plastic bags as parachutes
We ride our hobby-horses through the leaf mould of the flower beds

We are soldiers, pirates, outlaws, braves

I am the man from Snowy River in the outback
You are the girl who must wrest herself free before the ropes catch fire

Our grandmother lives in the purple petrea bush at the arch by the gate
in its hardy fuzzy leaves its helicopter flowers

She also lives in her purple hibiscus
The centre is all scarlet and the palest of yellows

Our great-grandmother's roses shake their petal rain
on to the polished slate of the stoep

We have driven hairy caterpillars inside dinky cars in the sand pit
We have slept on the lawn in a tent

We have sat astride branches singing and riding our horses
We have slept top to toe in our grey blanket hammock

We have eaten of the fruit of this garden
We have purpled all day in its mulberry trees

We are covered in ants from the loquat tree
they bite the sticky yellow juice from our fingers and faces

We are each handed half a lemon to rub our bodies of their purple
We stand naked at the kitchen door
under the spray of the hose

before we are allowed back inside

Smartphone

I've looked and looked,
said my mother,
For that little bear to send you,
the one who gives you a hug.
But I couldn't find him.
You won't find him mum, I said.
He's in Skype, not Whatsapp.
He's in another programme.
Oh I see, she said,
But I did find the face of a bear.
Did you see him in my message?
Yes, I did, I said. Well done
for finding him.
So I thought, she said, that he
could be our hug in Whatsapp,
is that okay?
Yes mum, I said,
That's wonderful.

Visitations

Its pale ribcage reflecting the torchlight,
I stomp and shriek at the snake on the night driveway,
sliding for cover right in front of my toes.

The day we bring you home from hospital,
there's an exhausted pigeon in the kitchen
crouched on the worn formica tile next to the red pedal-bin.
An identification bracelet clasped to one clawed foot.
I hide her in the leafy flowerbed with a bowl of honey water.

She's lost, let her rest, drink.
She'll die where she is or recover her strength to fly.

The mortuary men will not let me watch
while they lift you from the bed to wheel you from the house.
It is distressing for the family, they advise.

They stand beside their trolley and seem terrified
of something in me that threatens to cry out,
like a beast, like a strange, unknowable bird.
Like the night jar who threatened your dreams.

So I am sitting on the back kitchen steps with a cup of tea,
when the black beetle flies up the passage,
claps me on my shoulder, pats me on the head.
Disappearing with a whirl into the bright blue hands of the air.

You are shedding your skin.
You are trying to get home –
*be ye therefore wise as serpents,
and harmless as doves.*

Your last night on earth, a gogga comes in through the window,
I think he is a flying ant until we raise our heads to watch
those glorious blue wings tap dance on the ceiling.
Dragonflies don't fly at night.

Here is my father in his glittering blue coat –
come to Fred and Ginger you up the silver staircase
to the moon.

How Long Has This Been Going On?

In my favourite wedding photograph
(snapped through the windscreen
as they are leaving the church)
they are looking only at each other.

He is all insignia, epaulettes, and hair oil.
She is satin in cream, tiara and pearls.
Her wide seductive laugh.
His bespectacled grin.
I love his look of boyish rapture –
he cannot quite believe this woman is his wife.
What a badass, what a darling, what a Bond girl.

They never quite lost it, whatever they shared
in this first look between them. That last holiday
together, when I joined them in Durban
a year before his death,
she giggled in the sun on the verandah
and scanned the horizon for ships,
while he cooked us kippers and eggs.
The salt air alive with the frisson of honeymoon.

When I was a child I liked to lie in bed
and hold back sleep, listen to the murmur
of their voices intertwined
on the other side of the wall.
Talking, laughing low,
that music made between them fanning out
into the safest place in the world.

Baba

You were as soft as your feet.
You sang us the song of *the fair hippopotami maid*
but there was never *mud, mud, glorious mud* between your toes.
You never went barefoot. You wore a pair of leather slippers
to walk the short walk on the drought withered grass to the pool.
A quiet man in a house full of women who cried a lot.
Shouted. Slammed doors. I cajoled, complained
that you would kill us all, each time you lit up in the car.
If I had been you, I would have left me at the side of the road.
You gave it up for my sake but the cancer got you anyway.

Oh Daddy Cool, you gave me Boney M.
Flanders and Swann. *Porgy and Bess*. *I like a Gershwin tune, how about you?*
You gave me jazz. Louis Armstrong and Louis Prima. *Buona sera, signorina,*
kiss me goodnight. I thought you'd made up the funny words of all those songs
you sang to us as children. *Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego,*
into the fiery furnace, they did go.

Fair enough, it's a considered position. That was your response
to my refusal of a British passport at sixteen.
You did not insist I see it your way. I never changed my mind.
Dad, if I could take all the English blood out of my body
and replace it with Afrikaans blood, I'd do it.
These people invented concentration camps. I will never
swear allegiance to the Queen. I will never
bear the passport of a country
that has brought down more evil on the world
than everyone else put together.

You died in harness, like a shire horse,
dictating a letter to your secretary,
pacing your office floor, composing words in air like Henry James.
Stopped, caught your breath, a hand to your chest.
Your big knees and hairy hooves keeling under you
in a long slow bend towards the floor. Dead
before the ambulance arrived,
before my mother reached you,
blind to your pale green walls, your acres of documents
in the IN and OUT trays, stacked on every filing cabinet
and piled up on each of the chairs.

Perhaps you are too young to understand this, says your friend.
But he was lucky. He had a good death. I sit with him on the stoep
(wishing you were still somewhere inside this lunchtime
to offer me a gin – *with a little pink*).

This man sitting opposite me is not my father. He means me no harm,
but he is neither capable nor willing to consider my position.

I want to carry you to the end of your journey, to shoulder you out
as you had shouldered me in.

But no, no, my girlie, you cannot be a pallbearer, he says.

That is a job for the men.

A Winter Story

It was inopportune, that night in June,
beneath the sly smile
of a waxing moon,
the child who came late
for the rest of her life decided
to come too soon.

Mother and baby worked into the night.
They almost died. It was one helluva fight.
The Catholic doctor, who felt
he was right, kept the unborn infant
in his line of sight.
(With far less concern
for the new mother's plight).
A last minute C-section –
will they make it? They might.

The daughter within, the mother without
(with no help but the nurses
of that there's no doubt) for hours
they laboured. Such weeping and shout.

Both born under the sign of the Twins. Shot through
with contradiction, so nobody wins.
The same shoulders and teeth.
The same mouth and shins.
They are part of each other, the cells
under their skins.

The Water Bearer, his face just the same,
as the child's, in the mirror
she greets him again.
He paced up the corridors
in that bleak winter dawn.
He could not be there
with them, when his daughter was born.

When at last she emerged,
he could not be in the room.
A dark head of hair but so tiny,
too soon! She shouted, she bawled,
there was no way to placate her.
She spent her first weeks
in a square incubator.

She was tired. She was grumpy.
She was really quite blue.
With his first look, he liked her,
because he'd felt that way too.

The new father watched
his new child through the glass.
She said, Dad, if this is life,
it's a pain in the arse.

Grief Doesn't Come in Five Stages

Grief is a mess
you need to keep wiping up.
A troll with a spade
lurking to wallop you in doorways.
An ambush, a panic attack,
while waiting at a boiling kettle.
Yesterday you were angry all over again.
Today it was dark when you woke.
You pulled on a woolly hat
and got back into bed, wept.
Because you miss your mother
but also you fear you've become her –
an old woman going to bed in a woolly hat
because she is all alone and it is so cold.
Jy huil. Jy huil. It is clearer in her language.
The sky pebbling the ground with frozen hurt.
Perhaps you are the one who has died.
Perhaps her death has killed you.

Someday I'll Love Deborah Seddon

After Ocean Vuong / After Roger Reeves / After Frank O'Hara

Someday I'll love Deborah Seddon
Someday I'll love the woman who
came out of that child

a small stick
whittled down

still green, pliable

Seated in a puddle of her own shame
because she is too afraid to ask

the sweet Miss Jackson out loud
if she can go to the toilet please

Sometimes it feels
as if I might sit there forever

as my classmates whisper their questions
across the crayons

Why didn't I ask before?
What am I going to do now?

Miss Jackson has dark curly hair
She leads us in songs in the hall

She sits so far away, too far away to get up

If I get up everyone will see
the back of my dress

I have always been afraid

when I have spoken through it
the shame has spread anyway

dark and wide enough
to drown in

One day I'll love Deborah Seddon
One day I'll love that child

in the red Snoopy shirt
her father sent her in the post

playing with her soccer ball
on the spikey winter grass

so that she will be the first thing he sees
as the truck comes down the driveway

to bring him back
from the bush where he

has been sent again on call-up

The little girl who lived in a puddle
of her own shame

The woman who found a scrapbook
full of postcards her daddy sent her
from the war

He couldn't tell her where he was
but he could ask her

TAKE GOOD CARE OF MUMMY AND YOUR SISTER
before she could even read

Miss Jackson

The strangest thing is that Miss Jackson
on our first day in her classroom

stuck up a big picture on the board
of a little girl with muddy knees

holding a big bunch of carrots
She taught us to read our first word

LOOK!

She drew in the eyes

She drew a wide open pupil
into each of the Os and we
her wide staring pupils we

fell in love
(at least I did)

LOOK!

The word enacts itself on the page
So began a search that lasted years

The word for train can be given wheels
The small circle of the i makes the steam
to puff it off the page

The P and L of an aeroplane
give it wings to fly

But LOOK!

The little girl who likes Miss Jackson
with her wide skirts and curly hair
is sitting in a puddle of her own making

even though she is already five

LOOK!

The little girl who likes Miss Jackson
is too scared for words

She cannot find her feet
She cannot push out her chair
She cannot put up her hand to ask

She cannot wait anymore
She cannot hold it in

Template

plates in the warming drawer kept warm or not kept warm enough
plates for ordinary and plates for best
plates kept all year in the cupboard brought out only for guests the ordinary
not warm enough plates flying across the dining room

you want hot plates? I'll give you hot plates! little flying saucers smash
like exclamation points as they hit up against the walls
the hands flying across the table

the spilt gravy on the tablecloth a tragedy from which no one might ever recover

she spills her egg the orange yolk bleeding and
he slaps the side of her small head pigtails flaring

in one deft reply you stand and smash his glasses onto his face
he sits at the head of the table staring
through his fractured lenses

there is value in such teachings
and I am thankful

he hit you only once and you hit him so hard
you broke three of his ribs

he never hits us again
he sometimes grits his teeth and raises up the flat of his hand

but your bite is as bad as your bark

your hackles on edge
you bare your teeth and snarl and warn
as you strike your blinding arc in a circle all round us

so no one will ever
get in there and harm us

except you

Old Testament

The obedient father and his son
climbing with a backload of branches
to the altar on the mountainside.

The boy asks, *but where is the lamb
for a burnt offering?*

Did he kick? Did he struggle?
Did he cry out
and plead? Did he beg
his father not to –

as Abraham bound his wrists and ankles,
hoisted him onto the altar,
held him down and took up the knife
to slay his only son?

Seated on a hard church pew
beside my obedient mother,
my little-girl-of-eight-years-old questions
the first to slip the knots that tied me down.

Would she? I asked myself.
If God asked her, would my mother do the same?
Would she sacrifice me?

I found out at fourteen.

She turned around,
the pale pink powder on her face
still in her eyebrows,
her perfume in the air,
using her brush to punctuate each word.

Seated in her dressing gown,
she turned around
on the dressing table stool from the mirror
to look me sitting on the bed.
She chose her words with care.

To say to her fourteen-year old child –
I know what you are.
I know what you are
and I won't have it.
I can't love it.
You revolt me.

All I could do was deny it. I wasn't lying.
I didn't know myself. Found out
before I was found. Told not to love
before I could love. Turned in against my desire
before I could listen to it sing.

Twenty-five years
before I made love to a woman.

She sentenced me to twenty-five years.

A precise and artful targeting –
to pinch out just the tips
of the plant. Crushed
between forefinger and thumb.
The making impossible of either petal
or seed.

No Mama, No Papa, No Whisky Soda

Seizing his chance, a barefoot beggar-boy ran beside the Packard. He drummed his fists on the doors and held out his palm to Jim, shouting the street cry of all Shanghai: 'No mama! No papa! No whisky soda!' (J.G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun*).

We are all penga here.
No mama. No papa. No whisky soda.
No Zesa. No petrol. No Coca-Cola.

I am cutting my brandy with Pepsi tonight
it's four months in and it is all I can do, serious,
not to take each of the new red metal chigubs I bought to feed the generator

from the only two petrol stations in town that use US dollar coupons, but will
no longer fill the plastic ones

not to take every single one, and pour them round the perimeter of the house. As if
laying down poison for ants.

Chigub, chigub, chigub

then set it all ablaze, little Firestarter, stand back and watch it burn

burn baby burn, disco inferno.

It's all I can do not to go all Stephen King on myself
in the garage

I half expect to find a rabid dog

coz the governments and the Empires fucked with my parents,
left them holding tightly to everything they bought or owned for 50 years
just in case they needed it one day

until the old house moulders like Miss Havisham's wedding cake in its stasis, excess
and deprivation.

Maswera sei?
Taswera kana maswerawo.

Everything they possessed black bagged up. Labelled with duct tape and permanent marker
the clothes, shoes, sheets, towels, pillows, blankets, books, and toys

divided between the Children's Home, Hospice, the old age charities, the schools,
the cyclone survivors, and the prisons, because there are so many people who need,
who have almost near to nothing

Are you fine?
How can I be fine if you are not fine?

I swing my solar lantern down the passage of the house. A bee tied to the light
as I walk from the kitchen to the bedrooms like Ophelia going to her muddy death,
singing snatches of old songs

*She's crazy like a fool
What about Daddy Cool?*

Today we cut down the pecan nut tree my father planted at my birth. It has stood
dead in the yard for years. Dhererai said we should take it down before it falls of its own
accord.

I said yes, and if you have a friend who can do it call him. Fifteen minutes later,
three men are in the back garden with a chainsaw and ropes, cutting it branch by branch

Maiwe!
Ndinopenga. Tinopenga.
Maningi sterrek!

A school friend arrives who has quit her antidepressants. Her husband and children
don't approve. We sit in the empty sandpit smoking among the naked Sindy and Ken dolls
drying out on the hot bricks

I have washed them in buckets of bleach. Salvaged from the boxes
of toys in the back hut covered in rat shit and the entire line is hanging
with the clothes I washed when the water was delivered over the wall

*Hey kid, would you like a Hershey bar?
So would I.*

My father's clothes left hanging or folded in the cupboard for ten years without help or
salvation. This is Harare where if you don't iron every seam, every crease

you'll hatch putsi fly grubs from your arms where they laid their eggs in your sleeves.
Yet for ten years these beautiful clothes were left to face the goggas. Now they are all
on the line hanging full of holes and I cannot even give them away until I wash them

*but I cannot choose but weep,
to think they should lay him i' the cold ground.*

The trunk is coming down. I run towards it. The tree he planted that once stood for me

*Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!*

My frame can't take it. It crashes and scatters into a hundred pieces of very
viable firewood all over the grass.

We all sit on the shattered brought down trunk. I take photographs of everyone
and of the huge brown hairy caterpillars as big as my hand who have made their home
in the rotten stem

Dead Woman Standing.
They all fall down.

We read *Empire of the Sun* for O Level in a hot classroom in Zimbabwe on a Wednesday
afternoon with a syllabus written in Cambridge.

Our exams were marked in England too. We still have the words in our heads

Children of hondo
Children of flight
This one goes out to the diaspora tonight.

Zesa is the Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority although supply is a contested word.
The municipal water stopped coming through the taps twenty years ago

the borehole is dry so the water comes from the pipes on the bowsers
that deliver over the wall to fill the big green tank in the garden

No water. No sadza. No ATMs.
No Twitter? No WhatsApp? Get a VPN.

She should be asleep, this bee, who flies with the solar lantern swinging from my arm as if
tied to the light that floats and sways beneath the photographs framed along the walls
of the passage

*How do you hold a moonbeam
in your hand?*

She named me well, for here I am, drunk in the dark, still working on these drawers,
these cupboards, busy bee, burning all the candles I can find.

The perfume still pouring from her bedroom cupboard. This is the third night
the doors have stood open to release the perfume from the garments before
I can handle her clothes

*My darling, your daddy
has been dead for ten years now.*

My supper cooks in a pan on the one plate gas cooker. Lit by blue flame
the carefully frozen kippers dissolve in the oil. The salt smoke drifts down the passage
and the perfume from her cupboard drifts up
to meet and coming at the place where she fell

*on the clear understanding
that this kind of thing can happen
shall we dance?*

This must be the place where she fell – the picture frame cracked and askew –
just next to the light switch for the bathroom. The seismic aftershocks crackle
every time I walk past.

Where the weight of her shoulder hit the wall. This is the place she was struck. Struck down,
struck out. A blow to the head. To the heart. A stroke of luck. A caress of wings.

The strike that put an end to the desolate nights without him

*Zvicha manifesta,
zvicha manifesta
Ehe zvicha manifesta.*

When did you fall that night, my mother? How long after we spoke on the phone?
When did something finally break inside?

Did you sleep? Did you wake late that night or early that morning? Did it happen
as you prepared for bed? While you were flossing and brushing?

Did it hurt? Were you cold? Where you lay in the passage in the dark? In the place
where you fell. From where you would never get up.

Where you lay in the dark with no one to hear you til morning when your brain
could no longer breathe.

Like a strange new skin

Mould grows all over
the carpet left out
on the line in the rain.

The dogs don't mind if
the papers pile up
and the whiskey bottle
comes into the bedroom.

The weeds poke up
their little green lives
between the gaps
in the paving stones

Magnitude

She loved the stars, my mother
She said they had tested her idea of God

Not the idea of the stars – a child
joining the dots on the sky's shifting canvas
– but the actual stars:

elemental balls of gas and plasma
living, dying, and still being born in their stellar nurseries
inside the dark dusty lanes of the Milky Way

a hive mind of burning light
giving birth to everything that is

hydrogen to helium
helium to carbon
carbon to oxygen

Combustions and combinations
the white hot furnaces of nucleosynthesis

*Imagine it, she would say,
all that activity up there*

They are still working on the question of where
we got the heavy metals – all the gold,
the silver, the platinum, the vanadium

From the collisions of neutron stars perhaps
or the terminal explosions of massive supernovae

She worked in the mines when she was young
Saw the exposed ore running like arteries through host rock
until the accident happened and the men

blamed the woman on their shift
and the spirits who were unhappy
with a female underground

So she became a teacher
I don't know when it was she first started looking up

but she lived long enough to hear the first chirrup
of a gravitational wave

cascading through spacetime like the trace of a stone
still skimming over the bendable surface of a lake

the curved rhythm of rib bones still breathing with a spine

It took hundreds of scientists over forty years
to design an instrument that sensitive

She lived long enough to learn that all matter
that moves leaves its signature behind

She still chirrup into the atmosphere
of this small spinning planet

warmed by the light of its third generation star

reminds me to see the universe as Einstein chose,
as a miracle

reminds me that the chicken, the kitten,
the msasa tree and its hairy caterpillars are holy

What happens to a solar system when it loses its brightest star?

Oh Stella by Starlight, I wonder where you are
Oh Stella by Starlight, I don't think you've gone far

South Africans Only

Everyday we get more illegal
– *Juan Felipe Herrera*

There is a Zimbabwean mother on Bathurst Street.
She is about to board the Greyhound back to Harare.
I know this trip well. It will take her two days. If she is lucky.
She used to work with my dad. We have settled her daughter
into a university residence. It is Orientation Week. Just before she leaves,
she is refused a plastic spoon for her yoghurt by the woman
behind the counter in the KFC because she cannot reply
to a sentence in isiXhosa. Because black as she is, she is too black or perhaps
she is not black enough. *Because the amakwerekwere are
criminals and animals who bring us disease. All they
want is to steal our livelihoods, and take our jobs.*

When the mob attack the spaza shops –
*because South Africa does not belong to all who live in it
and what are these people doing here anyway?*
They are killing us for muti, they are marrying our women.
Mabahambe! Mabatshise!
They must go! They must burn! –
we spend the night getting the students out.

I fetch them one by one. Handed each address by the International Office
I find them. Collect them. Bring them onto campus.
One by one they sit beside me in the passenger seat,
some cowed, some panicked, some angry. Each clutches a bag, a backpack,
sometimes a small suitcase.
Kenya, he says.
Malawi, she says.
Zimbabwe, Harare, she says. Oh Chisipite Senior School?
Yes, me too!

*I'm actually from Durban, she says. I'm Zulu but I'm so dark
I'm afraid I'll be mistaken for a Nigerian. I watched them
from my window as they dragged the woman out to the street.
They threw bricks. They climbed on the roof to get inside her shop.
They called her a whore. They took everything.*

The SAPS take five hundred men to safety in a hotel on the highway.
Their wives and children are left behind.

The young Zimbabwean poet will only come to the poetry sessions
on campus. He will not join us on the bus when we travel each fortnight
up Jacob Zuma Drive to the Assumption Development Centre in Joza.

On campus he can read, he is a poet, amongst poets.
In the *kasie*, he is not welcome. So he will not come.
Your white skin gives you a pass I do not get.
I will never be one of them. I do not belong.

Sectioned

A person may be sectioned, under the United Kingdom's Mental Health Act, section 136: "If a person appears to a constable to be suffering from mental disorder and to be in immediate need of care or control, the constable may, if he thinks it necessary to do so in the interests of that person or for the protection of other persons (a) remove the person to a place of safety within the meaning of section 135, or (b) if the person is already at a place of safety within the meaning of that section, keep the person at that place or remove the person to another place of safety."

Everyone in here is white, except the nurses.

Everyone in here, except the nurses, has terrible teeth.

English shark-teeth smiles.

Coz the NHS don't ever pay for the dentist, innit?

The nurses are all dark brown. They are calm

in their starched white dresses. More composed than I

facing this shiver of shark-toothed women

who swim all around me as I walk through the second set

of double sealed doors with my Tesco plastic bags

to bring you brand new underwear, t-shirts, trackpants, toiletries.

A nurse tries to get them away from me.

Leave me be, you black bitch, snaps a shark-tooth.

You think you so clever.

I've also brought you smokes. A mistake, perhaps.

I've made you the centre of attention and now you're surrounded.

You are breathless. Your eyes have disappeared down two black holes.

You are wearing the paper panties they gave you

and somebody's smelly jersey. Except

they don't call it a jersey here.

They call it a jumper. Stupid words.

Jumpers. Trainers. Innit?

I want to get you out of this place

where the white women whose mouths reek

as they talk think they are better

than the black women they call bitches.

We are smoking on the tiny patch of grass

in the small courtyard. The wet green grass

on which no-one can ever sit down. Not even

when it is sunny. In the windows across from us

on the first floor, the men appear. All in a row

at the tall windows wanking. All in a row

with their pink cocks out.

Orrr, go on then big boys, give us a show!

shouts one of the shark-tooths.

The women forget your cigarettes as they crowd
to the windows or out onto the wet grass
whooping and grunting. *This happens every day*
you say quietly. We watch as the men
and women separated by a courtyard
grind up against each other across the open air.
The nurses stand silently and watch.

I find the nurse I spoke with on the phone.
She has nothing with her, she said. *She is wearing*
paper panties. She needs toiletries, clothes.
She needs to see you.
I write down the address, the list. Then I say:
Sister, may I ask something. Are you from
Zimbabwe? A silence on the line.
Why do you ask, she says slowly, at last,
If I am from Zimbabwe?

Because I am from Zimbabwe,
I say. And now I am here, I want to say
to her, to myself, to you, *what is any*
Zimbabwean doing in a place like this?
But we don't ask. We simply clap our cupped hands
and meet each other's eyes
as the shark-teeth swim around us.

They are small. They are smelly and damp.
The one talking to you now
has grey foam in each corner of her mouth.
But she rounds her vowels and lifts her chin.
She thinks she is better than the black women she calls bitches.
I can almost taste her breath and
there is yellow sleep in the corners of her eyes and
for all the time we smoke outside she stays with us and
clearly she has befriended you and that terrifies
me because I have to leave you here.
I have to bring you back after they release you
into my care to check on your cat, your flat.
I have to make you pinky swear – like we did as kids –
at the doubled-sealed doors as we step
into London, that you won't run away.
Because there's nowhere to go.

Line in the Sand

We are in my house. Sitting side by side on the broken second-hand sleeper couch watching Oprah. It is a Tuesday in spring, and the cats are at play in the late afternoon grass. I rescue the chameleon they are chasing. He hisses, nips and twists. His rage has turned him a dark purply green. Oprah is telling us, beyond anything she says, that the world can always be put right – that it can be made even better. It is your last night here. I am cooking you a special supper. Herbs and salad from the earth at my feet. You have been here two weeks. Our laughter bouncing in the car as sunflowers, cattle, and mountains glide past. I have taken you everywhere. We have been to Robben Island on the boat and back. Felt the cold tiles on the floor of Madiba's cell. Now you are here, in my part of the world, the Eastern Cape. You are here in it with me.

The SABC interrupts Oprah and you are on the phone to your parents in Washington DC. It is still morning there, and you are crying and shouting and asking questions about a friend in New York and suddenly, instead of being afraid for you, I am afraid of you, of something in the tone of your voice, as you sit on the wooden floorboards in the passage. I am afraid of what it will take to assuage your pain. Of what it will take to make you feel safe again. You are unharmed. The people you love are unharmed. But with this first and terrible baptism, wet all over with a splash of its waters, you are incredulous, petulant. Your pain so unbearable because it has never learnt to be modest – to accept the simple fact of a father in uniform taken away in a truck. I begin to step away from you. I go back to the kitchen, to cook, to breathe. I walk out into the beautiful light and sit on the bench and smoke. We eat together. I give you my small FM radio, and you ride through the night on the Greyhound to Cape Town listening to the reports. I sit up unsleeping on the broken second-hand sleeper couch and watch the explosions begin in the night sky over Kabul. No one knows who is responsible.

I think it is the Americans. I am wrong tonight but I am not that wrong. It is not the Americans yet but it will be. The Americans who are already demanding without saying in so many words that at least one person must die in Afghanistan for everyone who died in New York. Maybe not just in Afghanistan. Maybe double or triple would do it.

We know what is coming. We know we can do nothing to stop it. We know the heft and taste and smell of it without yet knowing the details. Those of us who have never been safe, we know. We have known since we were children not to trust. Not the government, the police, not a word we read in the paper. We look on in disbelief as you fall for it all.

Godson

This child and I have only a day
for a beach on which we might have spent
a lifetime.

The time itself like one
of these temporary tidal pools,
full for the moment

with rafts of gathered bubbles
patterning the unstill sand,

with the movements of tiny fishes
who flee as we step.

They, like us, dart as one.
Schooling.

We glut on the time.
You want me to watch you
and I want to watch.

Every jump, dive, splash,
of your stubby little body.
Look at me! you cry. Calling and calling my name.
And I do.

We will see each other again.
But you will be much changed.
I will be much the same.
Walking here with my dogs.

Look at the shallow dip
on the sand by that rock.

That day it was a pool
where you spent almost an hour
chasing one grey fingerling of a fish
with the glare of their stainless steel bowl.

You kept it, and kept it –
its little fins fanning the tepid water –
until I made you give it back.

So it could live its own life,
in the sea, I said.

Blueberries

This little box of blue
in the supermarket fridge
is a miniature scrap of my flag.
PRODUCE OF ZIMBABWE, it declares.
I hold the clear plastic box to my chest.
Stand staring into the fridge
until my shoulders stop heaving.

I take two.
Sit down at my kitchen table
and eat an entire bowl of them straight off.
Bite down into the red soil and rain
of my homeland. Think of the hands that picked them.
The people who watered and pruned,
working the rows of saplings for two whole years
before the pale green bushes bore fruit in the sun.

I know this taste. Nhimbe Fresh.
They grow on Edwin Moyo's farm near Marondera.
These are the OZblu. The largest
sweetest variety in the world. Flown out in cold storage
to the markets in Europe and South Africa,
long before the harvest can begin elsewhere.
Why do I care so much?
Nations are stories. Colonial fictions.
Farms are farms. Workers are workers.
They face the same privations the world over.
But I do.

This farmer has recovered. This farmer is exporting!
He's partnering with small-scale growers again.
He offers training and a clinic.
Has plans for tobacco and peas,
stone-fruit and raspberries.

This farmer has risen from the ruin
of his farm, Kondozi. His workers
beaten, evicted at gun point.

The tears come again
as I bite down deep into the blue-black sadness,
taste the dark bittersweet of the diaspora blues.

Crypsis

What a difference a leg makes.

You are not – the big bullet of your head
 flecked in scales of shadow, bronze, and grey,
your unblinking eyes black as polished agate,
 the flick of your forked tongue both midnight and lightning,
tasting our smell as you fix your stare from inside the creeper
 at the top of the house on the dog and me below
while we stare up, my heart's percussion sounding through my hands
 and into the body of the dog as I lift her straight off the ground,
hold her up against my breathless chest,
 all the hairs on her back, my arms, standing straight up, awake, shouting:

Snake! Snake! The heated air around us liquid as the gathered muscles in your gaze.

A stand-off. I wish I could clone myself.
One of me to carry the dog off to safety in the house and fetch the phone,
 the other to stand watch outside lest you vanish which you do.

The snake-catcher,
 the clasp at the end of his wooden walking stick fashioned from the brake of a bike,
pokes at the undergrowth, all along the corrugated iron peeling away from the wall,
 until you climb out into the sun to show yourself –

You are not the biggest puff adder I've ever met but a leguaan.
 You climbed up there with your hands, your claws,
stirred from the depths in the damp narrow space between the buildings
when I grabbed at the creeper and shook,
 yelled to force the rats towards the waiting dog, her bark a clear alarm
that what I'd shaken loose was more than vermin.

I watch you stand on my roof until you turn, with fierce deliberate slowness, to climb
 back down to your burrow in the cool dark. I'm so sorry I disturbed your sleep.
I flush with an odd sense of benediction, in your decision to choose my pond, this wall,
 this gap between the houses as your dwelling place.
When the snake-catcher leaves, I go out again, to leave you an egg.

When UNoluthando arrives that week for work
 I tell her over coffee what I've scared up outside,
warn her not to go near that side of the house for a while. *A water leguaan is living there.*
A monitor lizard. She shakes her head a little, frowns.
 I google the isiXhosa term.

Uxam, I learn to say at last.
Uxam, she replies, lets loose a long, low whistle. *We believe*

that if Uxam comes to your house that the ancestors are visiting.

It was my father's birthday, I say.

Yes, she says. Uxam.

The Cut-Off Wheel

There are men at work (and perhaps at play)
this suburban Saturday morning. One across the road
at the front of the house. One off somewhere to the left
at the back. There is nowhere to escape the sound,
nor the smell, as the angle-grinders gnaw, burn through
the metal with their sharp little teeth.

I lived with this noise for years. A husband
in the garage under the house, sawing
through silence and birdsong.

The carve, cut, whirl, strip.
The hammer, polish, burnish of each Saturday.

But I could not encroach the silence
where he lived inside that racket.
Mr-He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Disturbed.

His therapist thought we should
place a small chair just outside the door
to his study where I could sit. To signal
with my noiseless presence that I needed contact,
speech. Not a wife, then, but a bywoner.
Suffered to live near but not with.

When he thought her idea an excellent plan
I was out of my chair. I almost hurled it
through her window. Instead, I shouted. Many things.
One small word in particular. No!
I had to get out. Of her rooms, her garden, this marriage, this life.
She refused to open her gate until I bellowed,

pawed at that ground like a bull kept in the dark for days
before its shot in the blinding ring.
Delirious, panting. Three floriated banderillas
stabbed deep behind my head, I could no longer raise
my neck. Could run only in straight lines.

I had to cut myself free

before I could use both hands to scoop up that metallic dust	fine as soot	as ash
before I took salt water	ink	my menstrual blood
the briny surprise	of my loverwoman's come	my mother's milk
to make myself a paste	mould myself a torso	

arms a set of two square-fingered hands
capable, at last, of purchase
two sturdy legs

to pull me
from my
knees

Today the steel dust in my nostrils

 at the back of my throat

The sound smell taste of a woman

once dispersed
 in air

Fallen

I need my rage to split
and branch like a tree

to branch like lightning
a river underground
or in the sky

I need this fruit to fall
and split open

stew and soak into the earth
to seed

I have fallen and broken open
I have fallen and I have broken open
I have dropped myself

Most of all I need you
to come to me in the night
and put your mouth on my breast

rub your fingers
across my lips

kiss me as you wished to
but could not

your branching light
breaking into me again
breaking me into leaf

One Hundred Lesbians

After Wisława Szymborska

When was I last with one hundred lesbians?
One hundred women who love women?

Jozi Pride, 2011.
High as a balloon on E and leaping
for the sky at Zoo Lake.

Lira womans onto the stage
and sings us “Pata Pata.”
Everyone whoops and stamps.
We leap on the flat dry grass.

One hundred lesbians? More.

Queer women everywhere.
It’s as queer as the eye can see.

The shirtless firemen on their float.
The BDSM peeps with their studs and whips.

The thin old white guy who
joins our table in the sun
doesn’t say a word.

When we say hello
he holds up a cardboard sign
that reads “Born this Way”
and smiles without his teeth.

Me in my new blue jeans
and the dark brown t-shirt
that was a gift from a friend:

*Dip me in chocolate and
throw me to the lesbians.*

Brand new. Freshly hatched.
38 and never been kissed
– by a girl.

(No. There was that one time,
that truth-or-dare game, that undergrad party.
It made me so afraid of myself).

But here I am at last in my
new blue jeans and my new
chocolate shirt standing in
the queue for the portaloo in
my shweshwe hat.

And a beautiful girl with wide
dark eyes asks me if this is the queue.

When I reply she smiles and says
“Oh you’re so cute! Can I give you a kiss?”

When I say yes, she kisses each of my cheeks.
Then another girl says, “Oh me too please.”

Suddenly here they are.
Women putting their arms around me.
Oh all the lovely beaming and kissing!

Alone in the portaloo, I can
hardly stand. I look at myself
in the tiny square of mirror
hooked over the basin
on the blue plastic wall.

My face is covered in lipstick.
Kisses in pink, in red, in brown
and purple and green. The pupils
of my eyes are enormous.

I took a selfie of the new
me in a portaloo
at ten past three.
My pupils wide with Ecstasy.

38 and just covered in kiss.
Tell me, who could have pictured this?

So let’s take one hundred lesbians.

Those who knew from very young they were, somehow different?
Seventy-eight.

Those who knew exactly who they were as children
and became gold star lesbians?
Fifteen, maybe. (Statistics here will depend on the letter of their generation.)

Those who were tomboys and different from the other girls
but went on to marry a man and have children?
Fifty-eight (maybe more).

Those who never considered themselves queer but one day, to their surprise,
found themselves in love with a friend?
Thirty-two.

Those who came out to their families, to be accepted and loved without questions asked?
Two.

Those who were bullied by parents, peers, and teachers?
Ninety-eight.

Those who have been raped, harassed, or assaulted because they are lesbians?
Fifty-six.

Those who have been raped, harassed, or assaulted because they are women?
Eighty-four.

Those who have been with more than one man and wonder if they are permitted
to embrace the name of “lesbian”?
Seventy-seven.

Those who embrace “queer” as a better term for themselves?
Sixty-three.

Those who sometimes wish they weren’t queer?
Thirty-five

Those who feel being queer is the best thing in the world?
Forty-two.

Those who beat themselves up for leaving it all so goddamn late?
Eighty-nine.

Those who decide to transition to somewhere non-binary or fluid?
Twenty-one.

Those who live with self-hatred that surfaces without warning?
Ninety-eight.

Those for whom it sometimes surfaces, what they really want,
but who’ve decided it is either too late or too difficult to come out?
Thirty-four.

You cannot take one hundred lesbians and tell their stories in numbers.

All models are subjective.
Besides, I'm a poet, not a mathematician.

At one point, we all might have been any of these women.

Except (of course)
those lucky two.

Holy Wine

The rain is falling, falling
down so hard, outside
On to the thirsty grass

Inside, the wood
is burning in the grate
It cracks and it sparks

Prince is singing Joni Mitchell
He's drinking a case of her
and he's still on his feet

While I'm

making this poem

It is coming into being
at the tip of my tongue

The horn it sings
the joy it brings

You're in my blood
You're in my mind

The fresh wet ink
in every line

Don't Regret, Remember

The title of the poem is a quotation from the 2019 film, Portrait de la Jeune Fille en Feu (Portrait of a Lady on Fire), a historical drama, written and directed by Céline Sciamma, starring Noémie Merlant and Adèle Haenel.

I watch a film about a woman
who paints another in secret.
She may not speak of her work.

Each day they walk on the beach.
The painter looks but she cannot speak.

Not of her longing nor of her paint-box.

At night, alone,
she closes her eyes and remembers.
With her brush she may touch

face, lips, eyelash, neck,
the hard firm knot of each collar bone.
The precise shape and gesture of each finger.

She cannot speak of her work.
The painting is for a suitor.
When it is done, she must leave this place.

She cannot herself be a suitor.
She cannot herself allow hope.
It is the oldest of the untold stories.

So she paints.
She walks on the beach.
She loves and she watches.

Alone at night in her room
she closes her eyes and she paints.
She does not speak.

Not of her longing nor of her work
until the painting is finished.

The woman she loves is deliberate.
She does not look away.

2.

On the night of the fair
the woman she loves stands so close
to the bonfire the hem of her dress ignites.

She fixes her gaze and she moves very slowly
to show the painter how she too
is set alight.

Before the women of the village run to push her
to the ground and beat out the flames
she does not look away.

3.

I want to set them free
to fly out
to break their way across the page
these wild unsayable lines

these words of my heart I dare not speak
these caged birds covered in cloth

I want them to speak

with your throat and with your breasts
into the deep silent thicket of your hair

The sparks etching their way
across the tips of the trees

catching and flaring in the dark

Let us speak with the tongues of women and of angels

until every bright leaf in this forest
cries aloud with flame

Your beautiful shirt

The one that buttons behind your back
with just one button at the nape of your neck
and underneath that one small button

a small oval glimpse
of your brown speckled back
and just one bone
of your spine

Do you know how long I have wanted

all of that day and on
all the days since

to stand behind you
and trace with one fingertip
a perfect O

on that small oval glimpse of your skin

kiss my way through
the raised flecks, the freckles,

learn with my open mouth
the shape of that beautiful bone?

Late Spring

That late afternoon, the beach
was a picture of the inside of my head.

The slow-burning sky poised
to burst into flame.
The swell of the uncertain sea
mixing every hue of blue.

In the low light

each grain of sand
left so iridescent
by the crash and pull of the hissing foam

I could not look at it directly.
Nor at the loveliness of your face

talking and laughing beside me,
as the cool, moving, shining water
splashed irrepressibly at our feet

and the plough snails feasted
on the gifts the tide brought in
with every ripple of the soft, wet sand.

Saturated by a day of salt, moisture, and sunlight
each molecule of the air itself,
above, around, between us,
turned the colour of the apricot sky.

And I walked as if inside a spell
afraid to speak in case I broke it.

And I envied the wind that played
at your neck and lifted the ends of your hair.

I could have walked with you forever

stopping only to look more closely
at some small detail
you had noticed or I had noticed.

Even the dead cormorant was beautiful.
The black rubbery flippers
beneath those beetle-ravaged feathers.

Suddenly you came up behind me,
seized both my shoulders,
and whispered

I'm telling you, there's something there. Look!

We shaded our eyes and stared,
out where your fingers were pointing.
Watched the faraway splash in the wide blue water.

For days you had stopped and stood on the shore,
called out for a whale.
I want a whale! you had said to the sea.
Here was the answer.

Moving about in the depths,
now and then
breaking the surface
to breathe.

I want to remember how
we stood together
in that wild, liquid light
and read the sea for the breath of a whale.

Animal

They take off their shoes and socks as they sit
under the orange tree in the winter sun.
They wiggle their toes. Shake out their feet.

She knows it, and so does she,
that she could if she wanted place her instep alongside hers
and knowing they want this at the same time
turns the silence vertiginous.

The dog they walk with knows.
She runs two laps around the house just to burn off her joy.

I can touch this dog whenever I feel like it,
thinks the younger woman.
I can kiss her on the top of her head.
I can stand with her long body between my legs,
rub her soft ears. When I sit down,
she presses herself against my side,
falls into me, shows me her soft belly,
asks me for more without it making her less.

I want to be animal with you.
As guileless, as frank, as undefended.

But she says nothing.

The older woman, watching her dog
rolling in the lap of her friend, laughs sharply.
Oh you little slut! she says, and goes inside to make tea.

Months later, when her dog stands up to greet her friend
with a paw placed on either shoulder,
she speaks to her more kindly.

I know you love her,
she says to the dog,
but don't be overcome.

Instructions for Late-Life Lesbians

Come out,
as early as you can.
Especially if
you've married
a man. Don't look
back. Don't waste
one minute. Your life
is waiting. Go girl.
Get in it.

And once you're out
of the starting
gate. Don't fall for women
who think they're
straight. The spaghetti girls.
Straight
until wet.
They'll break you
in half with their want
and regret.

They'll draw you
like a magnet,
true. Because you
were once
a spaghetti girl
too. You'll battle
their shame,
your hope,
their fear.
Give up all that.
Just choose
the queer.

Thank you, Cavafy

Remember the old man in Alexandria
alone in his house at night

when his lips and skin
are drunk on it again

the pleasures of his body
come to life in his verse

Remember body, remember

Remember the woman who stood in your kitchen
and shuddered
when you kissed her for the first time
on the back of her neck

Remember how her whole body shook
and the sound she made with her mouth
how the tremor spread into your chest
when she leant back against you

You had never felt it before
how her body twitched under your lips
she taught you how a woman might move
if she has been waiting to be touched like this

Remember body, remember

The first woman you ever lay down with

How she shared her plainspoken desire
lay down the naked length of you and laughed
Entangled in her laughter you sound to the seafloor of sorrow
drunk on her body you taste the full measure of thirst

We were lovers for nine hours, lovers
for one night, a night in which we did not sleep
in which we did not wish to close our eyes

Remember body, remember

Cavafy gave in to his desires
he ran towards danger and risk

He said he could neither regret nor refrain
that he would last two weeks at the most

He recorded the words of Myrtias, the Syrian scholar
I will not fear my passions, like a coward

Remember body, remember

The others, let us speak of the others
The women whose eyes, voices, trembled for you

Left you standing dazed at the top of the stairs
handed a glass of water and a midnight kiss
as she fled down the passage to her husband's bed

She wrapped herself around your arm
as you crossed the street
looked into your face and said
you don't know what you've done to me

Remember body, remember

Your mouth searches for the kiss she never gave
You press the flat of your fingers against your closed lips
to bring them some relief

The aureoles of your breasts still hurt a little
when they remember her nipples, risen,
rising, to greet you through the cotton fabric
of your clothes as you hug goodbye
in the dark and the words escape
too quick to catch

you tell her you love her
she says, I know

She tells you that she loves to laugh
that she doesn't laugh enough
you love to watch the quiver
in the hollow of her throat
as she throws back her head

Remember body, remember

You lay alone on the couch late into the night
her voice in the phone on your chest

You were wretched and filthy with love
but you spoke of it anyway, you spoke your love
through your shame, but in your speaking you shamed her
and in her shame she needed to shame you
by saying there was no chemistry

Her eyes, did they not?
Rest on yours just a beat,
or two, too long?

Your eyes, thighs, streaked
with the juice of this
the coming undone and loose with this

Remember body, remember

She's lost to you entirely, as if she never existed
You have lost her for good, as if she had not lived
You have lost them completely, as if they had never been

*Try to hold on to them, poet,
when they come alive in your mind*

To salvage from what's lost, what's left
for the shape of the lines to come

Cavafy walks on to his balcony, to look out at the city he loves
to share in the movements of its people

He thinks of the men whose eyes had met his
he remembers the tremor in their voices

He knows their value in the life of the poet

the memory of these loves short-lived
these desires that have died too young
without one single night or morning together
without one single kiss

The Song of Deborah

I didn't want to be the prophet under a palm tree,
dispensing counsel to citizens and warriors.

I liked the sound of the other woman, Jael,
who snuck back into the tent that night
to hammer a peg into the forehead of the enemy general
while he slept off the battle and her gift of the milk.

Don't worry about me, I'd say.
I was named after a woman who drove a tent peg
into a guy's head, I'm going to be fine.

But I wasn't. I was named after the other one.
When I saw my mistake, I was disappointed.

I'm still growing into this name.
The wide open door in the capital D.
The walk tall stretch of the b and the h.

I sit in the shade of the uprights,
like she sat under her tree.

My work is to teach the young people.
I want each of them to live their own lives
and well.

Notes and Acknowledgements

Harare City, Sunshine City (page 10) takes its title from the nickname given to the capital of Zimbabwe. EcoCash is a mobile phone-based money transfer service, launched in 2011 by Econet Wireless, and used widely to manage almost all transactions in Zimbabwe Dollars, Bond Notes, or RTGS, as local bank notes and coins are in very short supply, and there are no working ATMS. At the time of writing Zimbabwe utilizes two currencies: the mostly virtual Zimbabwe Dollar (or RTGS) and US Dollars in cold hard cash.

Living Will (page 12) references the American soap operas *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, two of the most popular television series in the 1980s, and shown at 8pm on Sunday nights on ZBC.

Again-est is Zimbabwean slang for being stubborn or contrary.

Scratch that (page 14) *Sekuru* is the ChiShona word for uncle or grandfather, also used as a term of respect when addressing any man who is older than the speaker.

O-o-h Child (page 18) takes its title from the name of the song by the Five Stairsteps, from their album *Step by Step by Step* (1970). Their song was sampled by hip-hop legend, Tupac Shakur, in his song “Keep Ya Head Up” (1993).

Visitations (page 27) quotes from the Gospel of Matthew 10:16 in the King James Version:

“Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.”

How Long Has This Been Going On? (page 28) takes its title from the name of one my father’s favourite songs, by George and Ira Gershwin (1928).

Baba (page 29) takes its title from the ChiShona name for father. The poem borrows lyrics from “The Hippopotamus Song,” from Michael Flanders and Donald Swann’s album *At the Drop of a Hat* (1957); the jazz standard “How About You?” written by Burton Lane and Ralph Freed (1941); “Buona Sera,” by Louis Prima and his Orchestra (1957); and Louis Armstrong’s “Shadrack,” from *Louis and the Good Book* (1958).

Someday I’ll Love Deborah Seddon (page 34) is after Ocean Vuong’s poem “Someday I’ll Love Ocean Vuong,” from his collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2017), which, in turn, is after Roger Reeves, after Frank O’Hara.

Old Testament (page 39) quotes from the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:7 of the King James Version.

No Mama, No Papa, No Whisky Soda (page 41) borrows from a range of sources and uses ChiShona, one of the two major indigenous languages in Zimbabwe.

Chigub is Zimbabwean slang for a petrol container (the word alludes to the pouring sound).

burn baby burn, disco inferno is a lyric borrowed from The Trammps’s song “Disco Inferno” from their 1976 album of the same name.

Maswera sei? Taswera kana maswerawo is a ChiShona greeting which directly translates to “How did you spend your day? I spent my day well if you spent your day well.”

She’s crazy like a fool / What about Daddy Cool? is a lyric borrowed from the Boney M song “Daddy Cool” from their debut album *Take the Heat Off Me* (1976).

Maiwe! is a ChiShona exclamation of distress or surprise, akin to the English word “alas.”

Ndinopenga. Tinopenga. Maningi sterrek! is ChiShona for *I am crazy, we are crazy, too much so.* (*Sterrek* is Zimbabwean slang adapted from the Afrikaans word *sterk* for strong.)

Hey kid, would you like a Hershey bar? So would I is a quotation from J.G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*. *But I cannot choose but weep, / to think they should lay him i’ the cold ground* are words spoken by Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Awake, awake, Deborah! / Awake, awake, utter a song! is from “The Song of Deborah” in the Book of Judges in the King James Version.

They all fall down is a line from the song “Ring a Ring o Roses,” made popular around 1665 during the time of the Great Plague of London.

Hondo is the ChiShona word for war.

Sadza is the ChiShona term for a porridge made from maize meal. It is a staple food in Zimbabwe but there are frequent shortages.

No Twitter? No WhatsApp? Get a VPN references the blocking of social media platforms in Zimbabwe during times of protest or stay-aways. The easiest way to avoid the internet blockades is to download a free Virtual Private Network, well before they happen.

How do you hold a moonbeam / in your hand? is a lyric borrowed the song “Maria” from the film *The Sound of Music* (1965).

On the clear understanding / That this kind of thing can happen/ Shall we dance? is a lyric borrowed from “Shall We Dance” from the film *The King and I* (1956).

Zvicha manifesta, / zvicha manifesta / Ehe zvicha manifesta is a lyric borrowed from the song “Sahwira” (a ChiShona term for a friend as close as family) by the Zimbabwean rapper Holy Ten (Mukudzei Chitsama) from his album *Risky Life* (2021). The words translate as “it will manifest, it will manifest, yes, it will manifest.”

Magnitude (page 46) “Stella by Starlight” is a jazz standard, originally written by Victor Young for the film *The Uninvited* (1944).

South Africans Only (page 48) *kasie* is contemporary South African slang for the racially segregated locations, created in all urban areas during apartheid for black working class people, now more widely known as townships. It stems from the Afrikaans word *lokasie*.

One Hundred Lesbians (page 60) The idea and form for this poem is after Wisława Szymborska’s “A Word on Statistics” from her collection *Miracle Fair* (2002). The statistic forty-two is an in-joke, which will only be grasped fully by those who are fans of Douglas Adams’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979).

Holy Wine (page 64) plays with the lyrics of Joni Mitchell’s song “A Case of You” from her album *Blue* (1971). Prince covered her song on his album *One Nite Alone* (2002) and, in so doing, also provided a master class in the craft of editing.

Instructions for Late-Life Lesbians (page 71) borrows a line, “Get out as early as you can,” from Philip Larkin’s famous poem, “This Be the Verse,” in order to deliberately queer it.

Thank you, Cavafy (page 72) draws on a range of Constantine Cavafy’s poetry in translations from the Greek into English by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Chatto Poetry, 19995), and Avi Sharon (Penguin, 2008). Quotations from Cavafy appear in the poem in italics and are from Avi Sharon’s translations of “Remember Body,” “Dangerous Things,” and “When They Come Alive.”

The Song of Deborah (page 75) takes its title from “The Song of Deborah,” in the Book of Judges 5:2–31, as sung by Deborah and Barak, to celebrate the military victory of some of the tribes of the Israelites over the Canaanites, led by Sisera, due to the decisions of two women, Deborah and Jael.

Part B: Portfolio

Magnitude

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

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by

Deborah Seddon

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Reflective Journal 2020-2021

But there come times—perhaps this is one of them
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die
(Adrienne Rich, “Transcendental Etude”)

Introduction

I applied for admission to the Masters in Creative Writing for three reasons. Firstly, as an academic who teaches poetry on an almost daily basis, I felt it was time I carved out a space to take my own poetry more seriously. I wanted to engage with and learn from other writers, particularly poets, and to develop my skills and techniques with the support of a supervisor. Secondly, I was harrowed by grief and loss. Not only for a person but also for a place. I knew I wanted to write about my mother, and her death, at seventy-six, following a stroke that had robbed her of speech and movement. I lived in my childhood home in Harare, Zimbabwe for almost five months in 2019, caring for her, and then packing up the house after her death. This allowed me to live in Harare again for an extended period – for the first time since I left the country to go to university. I wanted to find a way to frame my experience into something more shareable, find a way to tell something of the difficult story of my country through the framework of my family. I knew that I needed to let in the grief, loss, and rage, engage with it deliberately, if I was ever to let it go. My mother’s death had taken away my ability to either read or write. Thirdly, I was determined that a focus of my work would be to write more poems that are visibly queer. To write of my queer experience, celebrate the love, reckon with the damage, the waste, the long-term impact of familial and internalised homophobia. There is not enough queer writing by women in Africa. Compared to the United States, there is hardly any at all.

This consideration of my development as a poet does not include every reflective journal entry. It cuts by more than half the words I wrote to track my progress. These entries distil the crucial moments – of breakthrough, frustration, recognition, revision, confusion, and understanding. I discuss writers who influenced my writing, my engagements with various assignments, key advice and feedback received from facilitators and fellow writers, from the first Contact Week in January 2020 onward.

Entry 1: Contact

30-1-2020

“It’s alive!” The words shouted in amazement by Colin Clive as Henry Frankenstein in the 1931 film, as his monster first starts to move, have been resounding in my head all week. Contact Week was challenging and electrifying. It was difficult to turn my brain off at night. I was full of intense and contradictory emotions: fear, relief, joy, shame, hope, doubt. I felt rooted again, having spent a whole week in the company of poets and writers: these deep-sea divers, who plunge straight into the heart of the questions – love, violence, death, families, politics – from the first saying out of a writing prompt. I enjoyed the free writing sessions most. Everyone had to read, everyone had to write, from the moment of the reading out of the prompt; like when the gun goes off at the start of the race, or you are thrown into water and have to start swimming. I was writing again – racing to catch the words as they spilled across the page. It was an emancipation. I took up, on first hearing it,

the suggestion made by the poet and facilitator, Vangile Gantsho, about keeping a writing prompt jar in the house to keep up the free writing.

I also felt more rooted in South Africa for the first time since my long time in Harare. There was something beautiful about the different voices and languages around the table: IsiXhosa, Kaaps, Afrikaans, in the free writing, reading, and feedback sessions. I spent Contact Week straining after each word, feeling proud to catch an entire sentence or grasp the gist of a discussion or a poem. I cannot connect fully until I learn to speak and write more fluently in South Africa's languages. I appreciate the way this course is structured: so that students who write in the various South African languages can exercise their creative and critical muscles without having to translate for, or seek to include, those with less ability and fluidity in their writing and speaking. I like this turning of inclusion and exclusion on its head. We should do it more often.

Entry 2: "Fierce Writing"

23-2-2020

Our first assignment, "Fierce Writing," was an apt start. Kerry Hammerton began by providing a dictionary definition of "fierce": hostile or aggressive; marked by unrestrained zeal; intense; vexatious. She explained the etymology of the word "fierce": from the Greek for wild animal. She encouraged us "to tackle something you've not tackled before or in a different way." She asked us to read a range of strong, fierce poets. Franny Choi, Hirata Toshiko and Malika Booker were new to me. I knew the work of Danez Smith and Vangile Gantsho but it was important to read them again, to connect these brave, original poets to my own writing. Kerry's discussion of James Wood's chapter on free indirect style in his book *How Fiction Works* raised the idea of how to consider the use point of view, dialogue, and remembered words in my poems.

Three poets stood out and remain influences: Ocean Vuong, Harmony Holiday, and Pascal Petit. I was haunted by Petit's image in her poem, "Her Harpy Eagle Claws": "my mama is perched / on top of the wardrobe / growling." Petit couples this to the description of the child letting go of her mother's hand as she is dragged across the boulevard: "because being hit by cars / felt so much safer" (Petit 57) The poem is twelve lines long yet contains a lifetime of complex mother-daughter pain, evoked by images that communicate a high level of emotional danger. I wanted to push myself to recreate that effect in my own work. I read as much of Petit's work as I could find online that week and determined that I should read her collection, *Mama Amazonica* (2017) in full.

I made all the topics Kerry Hammerton gave us into free writing prompts rather than choosing beforehand. I wrote them on strips of paper, folded them into my new prompt bowl. Whenever I had free time, I set my timer, unfolded a prompt and wrote. I wrote on all the prompts several times, something I'd not done before. This pushed me to take the same idea into several different places. I tried, alone, to capture the immediacy of the free writing we'd done during Contact Week.

For this first assignment, I wrote the first versions of several poems that have made it into my thesis. I also wrote in unanticipated forms. I tried to tackle some of the most painful experiences in my life. I had tried over the years to write about some of these experiences but failed utterly. With the combination of the poems from the seminar reading, and the assignment topics as prompts, the ideas came. I drew inspiration from Petit's representation of the mother as wild beast, unpredictable, vulnerable, but also

dangerous, for my poem “Template” (page 38), which surprised me. I’d not ever written a poem with this visual spatial structure and no punctuation – a challenge Kerry Hammerton had set me after giving me verbal feedback on two unpublished poems from my application portfolio in one of the Contact Week feedback sessions. I also wrote about the first time I tried to run away from home (“The First Time” page 9). I tackled the destructive impact of maternal homophobia in “Abraham and Isaac,” the first version of a poem that, after months of revisions, became “Old Testament” (page 39).

With “Line in the Sand” (page 52), I experimented with another new form. I’d never written a prose poem before and found the demands of the form a challenge and a liberation. Since Contact Week, when we could choose a few books from the MACW library, I had begun to work through *Models of the Universe: An Anthology of the Prose Poem*, looking at how the form has changed since its earliest uses in the mid-nineteenth century. The most successful prose poems, in my opinion (those by Baudelaire, Vallejo, Ponge, Merwin, Ondaatje) have something terse or rhythmic in them, or manage to capture the essence of an event, a scene, a happening, or a story. Revising “Line in the Sand” taught me an important lesson that I have put into practice in responding to feedback on poems framed from a Zimbabwean perspective. My decisions were guided by a poem I encountered the same week, during the first session of the weekly Poetry Reading Group, hosted in Makhanda by Robert Berold and Mangaliso Buzani for the Full-Time MACW students. In her poem, “To Be in a Time of War,” the Syrian-American poet, Etel Adnan, trusts the reader to know what she is talking about without describing the details of the war itself. She focuses, instead, on her claustrophobic distress in her apartment: making tea, reading the headlines. I trusted Adnan’s instinct, and her political stance. I have continued to draw on the lessons I learnt from Adnan, and from the poet Ghassan Zaqtan. Both suggested ways into my own experiments with form – and how to approach writing rooted in another place: somewhere not anything like Europe or the United States.

As I reworked “Line in the Sand,” I implemented all of the feedback except if it went counter to my own intentions. Kerry suggested that I try to describe what the war in Afghanistan felt like in terms of my five senses. After much thought and more free writing, I altered the lines to do the opposite. Adnan’s poem helped me understand why, instinctively, I had not attempted to describe the war. To my mind, the absence of the detail regarding the imminent war is part of the clear division set up in the poem, especially when the speaker moves from “I” to “we” in the final stanza. Adnan’s example made my decision conscious and helped me realise that I needed to strengthen my creation of a solidarity among readers situated in the so-called “third world,” at the end of the poem. If you weren’t repulsed at the time by the horror about to be unleashed on the people of Afghanistan, with spurious justification, if you can’t bring to mind what happened to the people there without my guidance, then the poem and its politics cannot include you. You are on the other side of the line. As the year went on, we were asked to read a range of writing on writing by poets and novelists, particularly in articulating our own positions and guiding principles as writers for our Poetics Essay. Their decisions and strategies for inclusion and exclusion were to engage me repeatedly as I wrote on my own experience of being a Zimbabwean.

Entry 3: "Writing the Body"

8-3-2020

Stacy Hardy's seminar on "Writing the Body" introduced me to the work of the Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik. I admire the distillation of emotion and image, the intensity and suggestiveness, in her work. In her poem, "On Silence," Pizarnik notes: "The poem is space and it scars" (Pizarnik para. 13). The seminar focussed on how much of the psychic distress in the world is inhabited physically. Stacy observed that people have tried to write about how society acts on our bodies, to articulate their experiences, but: "the writing doesn't heal, I would like to suggest, because it doesn't hurt." This idea has become a touchstone. To have any effect, the writing needs to hurt: while being written and when read. Stacy quoted Pizarnik: "the job of poetry is to heal the fundamental wounds, to rescue the abomination of human misery by embodying it." To prepare for the assignment, I sat in front of my fire, drawing a map of my body, in terms Stacy suggested: scars, diseases, breaks, burns, inner and outer wounds. Two things emerged from this exercise. Firstly, that my connection with my own body has become more rooted, due to focused exercise and meditation. Secondly, the realisation that despite this, it is still complex for me to write about the body, because I was taught to spend most of my life not listening to it speak.

The body mapping exercise resulted in an unanticipated poem. I had been haunted since my mother's death by the similarities in our bodies: my feet, identical in shape to hers, the twin beauty spots on our each of our shoulders. I wrote about waking beside and washing my mother's body on the morning after her death in a poem called "Last Morning" (page 19). Stacy suggested I listen carefully to my own pauses and emotion when reading it aloud to find the line breaks. I have, for some years, read my poems aloud onto my phone's voice recorder, while editing. Revising "Last Morning," I understood how this is also good practice for deciding how the poem should look on the page – so that in print the poem is embodied by the speech and breath of my body and the reader's body.

Entry 4: "Writing from Emptiness, Silence, Uncertainty, Enchantment"

23-3-2020

Mxolisi Nyezwa's assignment was equally productive. Inspired by the readings he shared with the class, I read books of poetry by Vallejo, Różewicz, and Merwin. I also discovered by accident (that lovely kind of library accident) a book of critical essays on *Lesbian and Gay Writing*. I was delighted by Caroline Halliday's chapter: "The Naked Majesty of God: Contemporary Lesbian Erotic Poetry." I recognised many poets, the fruits of my own search, for literary foremothers, women writing about loving women. Some were brand new. I marvelled at the imagery in some of the love poems. I also witnessed some poets try and fail to describe what I too have tried and failed to describe.

Of the poems I wrote for this assignment, "Godson" (page 53) arrived unbidden by free-write. The queer poems, "Late Spring" (page 68), and the love lyric, "Your beautiful shirt" (page 67) took far more work. They were inspired by Mxolisi's wonderful prompt, "enchantment," and his suggestion that we combine this idea with silence and uncertainty. Mxolisi's feedback was immensely fruitful. He alerted me to excise from my poems moments where I tend to overwrite, and thus lose the reader who begins, at that point, to argue with the poem. Mxolisi noted that the job of a poet is to lure the reader in with their half-conscious mind – the moment you break that spell and lead them to question

something, you lose them. This approach reminded me of what Toni Morrison says about hiding your own struggle as a writer: the writing “must not sweat.” I always come back to this idea but the way Mxolisi spoke, I think I understood it fully for the first time.

Entry 5: “The Only Writing is Rewriting”

5-4-2020

Nathan Trantraal’s assignment focused on rewriting. After much deliberation, I settled on Vallejo’s “The rage that breaks a man into children” – a poem that had a huge impact on me when I encountered it in January. I was astonished during the feedback session to realise that I had not even redeployed the line had prompted my poem: “the rage that makes a tree break into leaf.” This image came through better in the revised poem, which took a great deal of time, work, and retitling, as “Fallen” (page 59) to feel complete. I still feel Vallejo’s short poem is so enormous and rich that I could have taken several other, quite different, angles. From Nathan’s assignment, I have utilised the idea of rewriting or engaging quite deliberately with other poems and songs.

Entry 6: *Mother Departs*

19-4-2020

Today, I returned to a book I have been too afraid, too frail, to face. Tadeusz Różewicz’s *Mother Departs* (2013). So much honest reflection, as the seventy-eight-year-old poet of the Holocaust, whose poetry I know and love, turned that clear-eyed gaze on his relationship with his mother. Różewicz once said to his translator, Adam Czerniawski: “I search books and poems for practical help. I hope they will help me overcome despair and doubt” (Różewicz xv-xvi). Here, after fifteen years of teaching, are the exact words to say to my first-year students as I introduce them to poetry in the coming weeks. From the poet who said to himself, and to all of us, after World War II, in an attitude the opposite of Adorno’s:

waiting for me at home
a task:
Create poetry after Auschwitz (Różewicz xiii)

The man who lost his brother to the Gestapo torturers speaks to me in my garden as I weep, laugh, and read him aloud. It takes me three hours to get through the introduction and the first eight pages, which contain so much wisdom and insight I almost burst with it. That is enough for today. After that, his mother’s narrative begins in her voice. Her detailed recollections of her small Polish village. Instead of reading further, I write a list of my mother’s familiar phrases down one page.

Is a poet, Różewicz asks, “a man who writes lamentations dry-eyed so he can see the form clearly?” (Różewicz 5). The great Polish poet turns his clear, dry, eye not only on his mother’s death, but on the act of writing poetry: “Why is it so difficult to utter these words: ‘I’m a poet,’” he asks. He notes, that if people die, your voice too, is quiet, especially when you are left, almost alone, in that death: “my voice is so quiet that my Parents can’t hear my words: ‘Mum, Dad, I’m a poet [...] ‘I know, Darling’ Mother says ‘I’ve always known.’ ‘Speak up’ says Father ‘I can’t hear a thing’” (Różewicz 3-4).

Entry 7: Reviews

3-5-2020

This fortnight we had the task of reading reviews. Once I began to look for reviews of Różewicz's *Mother Departs* I felt saddened that the major papers, where I expected to find serious, well-written engagements, had passed this book by. Today, the genre of creative non-fiction is a growth area in literary production. But, when Różewicz wrote of his mother's death in a similar form, few paid attention. I also registered the fact that an event which is life changing is little noticed by the rest. I can count on one hand the friends who remembered the first anniversary of my mother's death. We do not remember this for each other. We remember days of birth and marriage but not death. Do I know the death date of anyone else's mother or father? No, I do not. For my own writing, I am learning from Różewicz how to approach the subject of the death of one's mother. How to grant her a voice in the telling.

Entry 8: "Poems from Other Poems"

17-5-2020

Yesterday I read Adrienne Rich's essay "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying" (1975). Every year, since her death, I read it on her birthday, the 16 May. Once I left my marriage, this essay was a thread out of the labyrinth and into my own, queer, life. I read it to remind myself how far I have come, to echo Rich's intentions in writing it: "in an effort to make myself more honest, and to understand the terrible negative power of the lie in relationships between women" (Rich 185).

In this week's feedback session, with Marike Beyers, we attended to the subtle differences, when the poem as read aloud differs from the poem on the page, as a valuable means of editing poems. My poem for this assignment, "Don't Regret, Remember" (page 65), draws on a film rather than on another poem. The feedback pushed me into finding ways to create more continuity between the sections and stanzas. None of my poems are mere exercises, they come from the gut, from my life as lived. I am determined to write them as well as I can, to capture an experience acutely. Particularly the poems I am writing about my love affairs and relationships. As Rich notes in "Women and Honor":

Heterosexuality as an institution has also drowned in silence the erotic feelings between women. I myself lived half a lifetime in the lie of that denial. That silence makes us all, to some degree, into liars.

When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her. (Rich 190-1)

It means something vital to my life, and to my writing, to read "Women and Honor" this year. I can mark quite clearly, how far I have come, as a queer poet, since the MACW began in January.

Entry 9: "The Zuihitsu"

15-9-2020

Vangile Gantsho's seminar hinged on the word "ambiguous," and on the poetic form she introduced to us: the Japanese zuihitsu, which in Chinese means "follow the brush." Vangile observed that the zuihitsu "allows you to be a fully complex human being, allowed to move fluidly between associations," more able to account for "the poetry of everyday life. Our very lives are political, even when we choose not to be political we are making political decisions." She described the form as "expansive" but "very controlled" allowing for poems "willing to be porous, filled with other things that are not ideological but lived." Lucia Ortiz Monasterio describes the zuihitsu as "a literary genre in which the text can drift like a cloud." Monasterio quotes Italo Calvino from his *Six Memos for the Following Millenium*:

Who are we, if not a combinatorial of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined. Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly reshuffled and reordered in every conceivable way. (Monasterio para. 2)

Ambiguous, ambivalent, drifting, insomniac, angry, bereft, terrified, shaken, shut down and away, a combination of every experience, every object, past or present. This is the state of flux I have inhabited, since the end of our virtual Contact Week in July. I had constructive feedback on my poems from a range of facilitators, some of whom I had not received feedback from before. I learnt to listen carefully but to only put into operation feedback from readers who understood what the poem was trying to achieve and to help it get there or somewhere even more interesting – not become something else entirely. This was important because one of the things that has long been a major impediment to my own writing is becoming so adrift and unsure after receiving feedback that I cannot finish a poem to my own satisfaction.

Learning to accept that no poem is ever finished and that not all feedback should be implemented is one of the major lessons of the MACW. I am not simply a lyric poet. I favour a fusion of lyric and narrative poetry. The MACW is helping me to discover poets and forms that allow for the expression of experiences that have not found a way into the light through other, more conventional, guises. Vangile Gantsho gave me very insightful feedback. She suggested that I over-write at times because I do not trust that I am heard. Her reading the poet through the poetry highlighted for me how deeply our personal lives are knitted into our creative efforts. She suggested that if I take anything away from Contact Week it should be to avoid overthinking. This, I joked, is my default setting. But this lack of trust and this analysis paralysis is, I could tell from the feedback, a negative influence on my voice as a poet.

This realisation was compounded by the challenge of the next assignment. Mxolisi Nzeywa asked us to use old photographs from our childhoods as prompts. I seized up. The pain was too raw. In the face of everything I had allowed to bubble to the surface as I attempt to write about my mother's death, her life, and her complex emotional legacy, I could not sit looking at a photograph of myself and my sister as children and write. I could only feel immense pain. It scared me that I had only silence and pain to offer, nothing

fruitful. This impeded my reading too. A line, a word, an idea opened me up but not in a productive way.

Enter the *zuihitsu*: the opportunity to be porous, to drift and range rather than to attempt to present a concrete or settled idea. I could write of my childhood past, and how it enters the present, after weeks of battling to do so. I could be both/and. I could move, be fluid, follow the brush where it led, find a space for the political story that infuses the personal one, the story of Zimbabwe enmeshed within the story, the house, of one family. Vangile Gantsho said in her feedback that my writing for this assignment felt less self-conscious. About my poem, “Here,” which, after much revision, became “Family Home” (page 22), she said that my writing had “both a delicacy and a roughness, a strong emotional throughline.” In a comment that became a guiding light: “it is not asking the reader to feel it, to anything it, it is just there. That is brave writing – where you are not begging to be heard.” The form we encountered in Vangile’s seminar allowed something new to emerge in my work. I used her technique of combining three or more different free-writes again. I like the chance encounter with ideas this allows.

Entry 10: “Le Mot Juste”

27-9-2020

Nathan Trantraal’s assignment focused on the notion of the perfect word: “le mot juste.” He asked us not only to write poems in which every word was necessary but to edit the work of our fellow poets on such principles. My poems “The best” and “Holy Wine” were well received. I jettisoned “The best” finally, however, as it felt too maudlin. Months later, I took the best lines from it to develop these into a new poem, “Like a strange new skin” (page 45). I am learning to build poems from free writes, to salvage the best lines from failed poems into more successful poems. To break things apart and build them into something new.

Of “Holy Wine,” I was delighted when JahRose Jafta said it gave her “took-me-to-church kinda vibes” – precisely the reaction I was looking to evoke. We are working well together. She was listening to Prince and Joni Mitchell to understand and edit my poem, and I was listening to examples of how to sing a vibrato on *YouTube* to understand and edit her poem, “Lost and Found.” Nathan said he doesn’t like rhyme ordinarily but he enjoyed how my poem broke in and out of rhyme in a way that felt “seamless.” I worked for almost a year on his feedback to make the poem tighter in terms of the communions and transmutations poetry makes possible. Nathan noted: “there’s a killer ending to this poem that you haven’t yet found.” I agreed, but the killer ending eluded me. Even in the current version of “Holy Wine” (page 64), I may not yet have succeeded.

Entry 11: “Maskandi”

11-10-2020

This fortnight, in the weekly poetry sessions with Robert Berold and Mangaliso Buzani on Zoom, we have been reading the twentieth-century Greek poets. It was important for me to return to Cavafy. All year I have been trying to write a poem (“Thank You, Cavafy,” page 72) that celebrates Cavafy’s erotic poetry for the way it captures and celebrates the momentary experience of love, reaches back over time and space, speaks of a brief encounter, a single night of passion, or simply the moment of meeting another man’s eyes. Cavafy seems to be singular in this regard. It strikes me that only a queer poet could have written erotic poetry

of this nature. It is not a poetry of love but of love denied, desire snatched, passion lived only for an interlude, bodies coming together for an evening's pleasure or sometimes only meeting in the fantasy of each other's minds. It is a poetry of memory and yearning, which communicates how the erotic can infuse our thoughts, loneliness, solitude. In this meta-textual verse, Cavafy is direct in his sense of how crucial the erotic is to human experience.

The Greek poet Yannis Ritsos was a revelation. His extraordinary attention to the details of a situation, offering little to no explanation, often making it plain that it is well beyond his power to offer one. Rob explained to us that he wrote a great deal of his work in the 1970s in the face of a brutal military dictatorship. This has struck me as an approach I need to try in my own writing, to capture what seems unsayable about the history of Zimbabwe. Since encountering his work, I have tried to write with an eye to letting details speak for themselves, but the poems I wrote for Mxolisi's assignment, which asked us to draw on the patterns and lyrics of maskandi, and songs from our childhoods, have an entirely different feel.

Here, at last, I have begun to do what I wanted, to write about my experience of sorting out my mother's house after her death. This began in a poem I at first called "Spirit." I engaged with a range of songs for the assignment, often freewriting while listening to music. But this poem came unbidden, in the best way that they can arrive – by surprise and all in a rush. It was during a rupture in my internet connection while we read the Greek poets on Zoom together, halfway through a long poem by George Seferis. Instead of battling to get back online straightaway, I just stopped and wrote it down – to catch the visitation before it disappeared. I received valuable feedback from Mxolisi and JahRose Jafta on making the poem clearer and less allusive, which I incorporated in the revised version, now entitled "All the words" (page 23). I also learnt a lesson from this week's feedback: if something sits uneasily in an early draft, just take it out. In an earlier version of the poem entitled "O-o-h child" (page 18), I tried to contrast versions of my more hopeful younger self with my current vision of the world. As I admitted to my feedback group, I had failed. I cut these corny lines away in the revised version.

This fortnight has been full of recognitions of what I have not yet written, addressed, described, and full of weighing ways of doing so. In this respect, the poets Alejandra Pizarnik and Ghassan Zaqtan have been eye-opening. In Zaqtan's *Like a Straw Bird it Follows Me and Other Poems* he interweaves personal and political realities into poems with a kind of dream-like quality, which open a space to consider the on-going operations of the unconscious. In a poem like "Black Horses" for instance, the horses carry a metaphorical freight but of what exactly it is quite impossible to say. Pizarnik is direct, deft, brief. Her poem "Duration," from *Extracting the Stone of Madness*, provided an idea of what might be possible as I try to write about the constant presence of my absent mother. The dead are always with us. I will continue to try to capture this fact in my poems.

Entry 12: "Wording the Unworded"

25-10-2020

Our final assignment of the year with Marike Beyers, "Wording the Unworded," had a feeling of synchronicity, having focussed for the previous fortnight on what I still needed to find a way to write about. So much of what I wish to write is the unworded, the unspoken, the unresolved and, in some cases, the untellable. This assignment provided a way to give

shape to a poem I'd been trying to write all year, which only existed in a series of self-abasing fragments where I veered between writing about the dog as proxy for the feelings of the women and criticising my own efforts ("this is crap, this is journalling not writing, arggh") and pushing myself back the story I was trying to tell ("stop it, trust it, go back to the dog"). I scoured my notebook for all the many free-writes about the dog. These were reread, pieced together, and pared down to become "Animal" (page 70). Ritsos inspired the approach I took to structure the poem as a very short story: interweaving dialogue and the unspoken.

Entry 13: Bella

8-11-2020

It has been a truly awful eleven days. I am again facing life-threatening illness and possible loss, as I ask myself, and my vet, if I am asking my old dog Bella to bear too much for my sake. I'm writing about it because it has brought a lot back. Time has folded in half: I am seated on the grass outside the vet visiting my dog each morning and inside the two hospitals in Harare where I visited my mother after her stroke. The relief of being able to bring Bella home, twice, only to have to take her back to be placed on a drip, prompted recall of the tangible physical relief in seeing my mother returned to and seated once again in her own bed. The bed where she would die while I slept on the couch in the lounge so as not to disturb her sleep, leaving her in the care of the nurse. Since Bella got sick, I have thought of myself visiting my mother as often as they would let me, a copy of her living will folded in the back pocket of my jeans so that if it came to machines to help her breathe I could say no, no on her behalf, make it stop. (This memory became, in 2021, the poem "Living Will," page 12). The parallels are uncanny.

This is where it all came together in the last 11 days – the disavowal of self. How for the caregiver there is often little or no choice. Love drives the will, love blurs the lines, brings an almost physical relief in the lowering of another's distress. Now I understand the strange mix of hope and disappointment in consolidating the poems I may use for the final creative thesis to send to my new supervisor, Kerry Hammerton. This is only part of the story I am trying to tell. I have spent almost a year writing and yet, this is all there is. Some of it I have written but have not shared yet, because it felt too raw, unfinished, and risky to share too soon, to read out as an assignment. But there is an equal balance of hope. In writing my abstract, the connections between poems have been made clearer. My thinking has been sharpened in terms of my influences and inspirations.

Entry 14: *Say Something Back*

22-11-2020

My supervisor Kerry Hammerton sent me eight collections of poetry in the post that I've read since Bella's death. The poetry has helped. Denise Riley's collection about the death of her son, *Say Something Back* (2016), stood out. What an apt title. The collection evokes that desperate need to interact again, and, as that proves impossible, the wish to join the dead. What I admired in Riley's long poem, "A Part Song," is her confidence in her shifts in tone and form as she charts her emotional experience in a sequence of very different poems. I looked closely at her choices of line breaks and stanza breaks, reading some of the poems in the collection aloud. The capitalisation at the beginning of each line is old fashioned in one

sense but also allows an interesting effect in emphasising the first word of every line. The engagement with death in this collection examines so many angles I could write so much more. I loved Riley's image in "Under the answering sky" of wishing (while knowing it cannot be), that the "bright flat blue is a mouth / of the world speaking back" (Riley 25) and the repeated idea of the dead tiring of our entreaties. In "Listening for Lost People" Riley notes: "the souls of the dead are the spirit of language:/ you hear them alight inside that spoken thought" (Riley 32).

Entry 15: "Knife-work"

2-5-2021

Since the feedback sessions in the April Contact Week, I have begun to live inside my poems again. Listening to them play as sound files buzzing inside my brain. This is welcome. I thought it had stopped for good. After the feedback, some of their words feel settled, clear. Other words are still squirming with possibility and uncertainty. The Saturday morning after Contact Week, I worked through the copious notes I had taken during each of the six feedback sessions. I colour coded the feedback. I highlighted in green the feedback that made immediate sense, to be implemented straightaway, and in orange the more complex responses, or surprising suggestions, that are going to take much more time, work, and thought. I've begun to edit as directed. In terms of responses to my work, this week has been heartening. I feel a sense of relief that my work is beginning to communicate as intended.

In our final session, Nathan Trantraal used the image of the fishmonger, noting: "I'm not here to make friends with words. I'm violent with my poetry. I'm in charge of the words." This image put me in mind of Nikky Finney's collection *Head Off and Split* (2011), which has profound meaning to me as a queer poet and a political poet. In her prologue to the text, "Resurrection of the Errand Girl: An Introduction," Finney arrives in her hometown in the American South, to buy Friday fish for her parents' supper and, now well past forty, she decides for the first time to leave the fishmonger's shop with the fish whole. As Nathan spoke of the poet as fishmonger, I remembered Finney. A moment of metaphorical synchronicity. Yes, I thought: you can become a woman, an adult, a poet, only when you are capable, finally, of undertaking the deciding and the cutting:

Head off and split? Her answer is offered even quicker than the fish. No. Not this time. This time she wants what she was once sent for left whole, just as it was pulled from the sea, everything born to it still in place. Not a girl any longer, she is capable of her own knife-work now. She understands sharpness & duty. She has come to use life's points and edges to uncover life's treasures. She would rather be the one deciding what she keeps and what she throws away. (Finney 3)

I'm getting there. Nothing makes you into an adult who understands sharpness and duty more than facing your mother's death.

It was interesting in these sessions to test my poems out on a group of people, some of whom know Harare well, and others who have never been there. Hleze Kunju knows Harare. I choked up a little hearing his words about "Harare City, Sunshine City" (page 10): "Zimbabwe is such a beautiful place to be when you are there. But it is so difficult too, so dangerous to live there, so it does become this 'huge sad joy' as you say, maybe you need a

poem on this, or to reflect on this idea?" These words provided the impetus for the poem that eventually became "No Mama, No Papa, No Whisky Soda" (page 41). A poem I had already been trying to write and failing. Hleze's words gave me the courage to persist.

As the first afternoon session included both the lesbian powerhouse poets on the course, I decided this was where I would read two of my queer poems. Both Vangile Gantsho and Mthunzikazi Mbungwana liked the revisions and the new title for "Old Testament" (page 39), and the way the Biblical story of Abraham and Isaac frames the interaction between the mother and daughter. Like me, they were brought up on what Vangile termed "those cruel Bible stories." They helped me refine the framing of the poem in terms of the homophobia enabled and empowered by Christian doctrine. Vangile noted: "there is weight in the new title" which allowed the poem to speak to a wider context, and to also be "more condemnatory." But, she rightly saw that some parts of the poem were now stronger than others. I grappled with this poem for many months afterward. Mthunzi made a beautiful observation, setting the physical masculine violence of the sacrifice of the mountain against the psychic violence in the feminine domestic scene: "here, in the make-up room, things are a mess." This helped me think about how the poem should finally coalesce on the page. In our discussion of "Animal" (page 70) we had a great discussion about the difficulties presented by the use of pronouns in queer poems, something Mthunzi is also challenged by in her IsiXhosa poems.

Nathan Trantraal surprised me as he really liked a section of "Scratch that" (page 14) I'd not thought particularly strong: the idea of women not being like their mothers, because they are always expected to be. This alerted me to the fact that readers will resonate with aspects of my work differently to the way I read it. He said of the piece: "I liked this a lot, it's a no bullshit piece that goes to the heart of things." This feedback meant a great deal as this piece felt quite risky to include but also a crucial element in the thesis. I still needed to work until it was solid.

The responses I received to "O-o-h Child" (page 19) were perhaps the most encouraging, as they took the form of delight. Both Mangaliso Buzani and Hleze Kunju immediately recognised the song I was drawing on. Manga began singing it while commenting. Hleze played it for us during our bathroom break. I returned to my lounge from the kitchen to hear The Five Stairsteps blasting from my computer and to see Manga on the screen dancing in his chair. Again, I got tears in my eyes. It is wonderful when a poem takes people precisely where you are trying to go. The feedback also gave me a lot to think about: how exactly to use the song's title in my own title, how precisely to deploy the refrain (which I adapt and so reinterpret), whether or not to add a little more from the song itself. Their positive responses emboldened my use of song in other poems.

It was a useful experience, reading a new poem "Arrivals, Departures." Everyone felt that was too long and monotonous. I realised while reading that the monotony is where I've been living for two years, and so I was not yet sufficiently outside the grief to make objective decisions. Afterwards, I wondered if I might work with this. The worst thing about mourning is the wearisomeness. You get tired of being your grief-stricken self. When Mxolisi Nyezwa said, "I wanted the piece to break away from the inward tone and then come back," I remembered the porter scene in *Macbeth*. How Shakespeare lightens the mood by giving us a drunken porter letting everyone else into the castle after Duncan's murder has just happened. The scene allows a breather, a laugh, a space, before we descend into horror again. This observation, as well as the laughter and delight some of my other poems had drawn, helped me a great deal when deciding on the ordering of my poems months later.

The importance of tempering grief with humour: mixing these experiences. Revising “Arrivals, Departures” (page 7) I cut it radically and I heeded the advice of my supervisor, who suggested listening to what the poem itself wants to do. For months, the poem had been telling me a story about those decades of experiences in airports, leaving my mother bereft, or seeing her off bereft, as being akin to the unrelenting pain I’ve felt since her death. If the poem was going to work, then those goodbyes should be felt, as an effect of the text.

I learnt from this Contact Week that I need to stop over-writing, being caretaker and shepherd. This is exactly what I need to learn in life. Learning it will make me a better poet. Mxolisi said such a beautiful thing in the last session. He observed that we work with our words until we can trust them to live, out in the world, “all alone on the page, by themselves.” He also said that whatever the connections between our poems, these will not and cannot be immediately apparent to us, as we are too close as writers: “You cannot really see yourself. You are writing one piece.” Nathan agreed and described a collection of poems as a “collage of dreams.” At the end of this momentous week, the relationships between my poems have taken on a shape I’d not seen before. I am also struck by how much there is still to do, to write, and to make right.

Entry 16: The List

16-5-2021

As Contact Week ended, I made a list of the ideas I have had for poems I still need to write. I made myself a prompt bowl containing writing prompts to these poems, to focus my mind on what still has to be written, or in the case of poems that already exist, thought out more fully. This has given me a concentrated sense of what still needs work and attention as the poems and their sequencing begin to take shape. I also made a decision to immerse myself in reading, and rereading, Zimbabwean writers in the next few months.

I read Tariro Ndoro’s electrifying collection *Agringrada: Like a Gringa, Like a Foreigner* (2019). Ndoro strikes into the heart of issues that have also made me angry. She prompted my own memories, which I wrote about furiously. Ndoro’s usage of Chishona encouraged me to use the language, and all kinds of slang particular to Zimbabweans, to better effect in my own work. This is a bold and impressive debut, from which I have taken much inspiration. I reread Yvonne Vera’s *The Stone Virgins* (2002). She writes of harrowing experiences, poverty, the Chimurenga and its aftermath, white racism and its effects, but in a singular, lyrical style, which affects the reader forever. I grew up knowing how horrific the war was but I felt I needed to do more deliberate research. I ordered a book written by a journalist and an ex-soldier: *A Brutal State of Affairs: The Rise and Fall of Rhodesia* (2020). It is the first book I’ve read about Zimbabwean history which details the brutal truth of Cecil John Rhodes’s mercantile entitlement: the racism, violence, and English myth-making that became the “Rhodesians never die” sensibility in the Rhodesian Front who declared UDI and went to war. The first few chapters reminded me of words that I’d forgotten because I had needed to get away, far away, from that awful white Rhodesian sensibility. Returning to writing my poem on Cavafy, I began to make real progress when I spent two days rereading all his queer poetry in two different translations, and taking careful notes. All this taught me the value and necessity of bringing my research skills to my poetry.

Entry 17: Sadza

30-5-2021

Since April Contact Week, my reading, and my writing is far more targeted. I wake up and the first thing I do is read something linked directly to my thesis: poetry or prose related to the lives of queer folk or Zimbabweans. These marginal entities no one really knows, unless you've inhabited either yourself. This is all I will read until I submit. Unless a poem comes at me, unbidden, and demands to enter the world, my free writing is driven by my list and the prompts in my bowl. I keep circling around poems that, in this final phase, feel the most difficult to write emotionally and, so, the most important to find a way to write. It is painful work, at the rock-face of loss.

A few months ago, my supervisor suggested I also consider writing about my father, and she sent me some of the poems Pascale Petit has written about her father, in her collection, *Fauverie* (2014). I ordered my own copy. It is a useful counterpoint to Petit's poems about her mother in *Mama Amazonica* (2017), which has informed so much of my writing. Poems about both my mother and my father are now coming into being, slowly. It began with the image of my father's impossibly tender bare feet, which could not walk on grass. I've also tried to catch a sense of my parents as a couple from the day of their delighted joy in being married to each other. I am marked, as a person, by their passionate, contentious, but loving bond, and what it meant, my entire life.

I attended an online reading by the young Zimbabwean poet, Tariro Ngoro, and she was so happy to see me there. I have continued to read Johnathan Culler's majestic *Theory of the Lyric* (2015). I have read Saeed Jones's memoir about growing up queer and black in Texas: *How We Fight For Our Lives* (2019). His memories of Louisville, Texas in the 1990s evoke my experience of Zimbabwe in the 1980s. A beautiful, funny, violent, racist, dangerous, homophobic place. I have read his poems on loving men, and losing his mother to cancer in *Prelude to Bruise* (2014), which echoes, in a very different register, Ocean Vuong's novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Both queer young men loving their difficult and beloved mothers, reading them into a longer, violent history that involved such damage to the person tasked with loving you best of all. In a book edited by Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed, *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Rethinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Art* (2018), I discovered the work of Duane Michals, whose photographs in his series *Homage to Cavafy* (1978) echo visually what I am attempting to do in my poem. I was moved to tears by Michals's introduction to his work, ten photographs accompanied by ten poems by Cavafy: "he wrote about the truth of himself with painful honesty, and the strength of his art protected him and freed others. I salute his courage and thank him for the gift of his life" (Michals qtd. in King and Reed 108-9).

Entry 18: "Packaging Material"

1-8-2021

I having been rereading queer women writers: Audre Lorde, Anne Sexton, Judy Grahn, Nikki Finney, Carol Ann Duffy, Kay Ryan, the translations of Sappho by Ann Carson. I ordered Ellen Bass's new collection, *Indigo*, which allowed me to see for myself again the kind of poet I want to be. She takes the ordinary, the very ordinary – and makes these experiences into beautiful, profound poems. I discovered Kay Ryan last year and have relished her book of essays on poetry: *Synthesising Gravity* (2020). In Ryan's essays, I realised I have been drawn

instinctively to the work of a poet who shares my love of Dickinson, Philip Larkin, Stevie Smith, and Wallace Stevens. All poets who use rhyme, as Ryan does. Inspired by Ryan, I finished a poem, “A Winter Story” (page 31), I have been trying, unsuccessfully, to write about my father’s first encounter with me, the story he repeated often, of our first night in the world as father and daughter.

I have spent weeks immersed in my father’s music, the songs of Cole Porter, Gershwin, the New Orleans jazz he loved, Louis Armstrong, Louis Prima, Fats Waller. I think having the echoes of those old jazz standards in my head, those brilliant inventive rhymes, allowed me at last to tell the story as Ryan, Larkin, Smith and Dickinson often do – using rhyme to create a dark, sometimes even flat, humour. My father was Rodgers and Hart, my mother was Rodgers and Hammerstein. I am playing their music again, just as I did in the house in Harare if there was electricity. I am getting clearer and closer to an idea I had from the beginning: incorporating these words into my poems, the best thing they gave me, the first poetry I knew by heart.

I’ve continued to reread Zimbabwean literature: Yvonne Vera, Petina Gappah, Phillip Zhuwao. I reread Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Book of Not* (2006), so that I could read *This Mournable Body* (2018): the third book in the trilogy about Tambudzai. *The Book of Not* is the best book I’ve ever read about the Chimurenga. It presents it as it happened to most of my generation, as school kids, hearing the stories and the sounds of the war from far off, having brief and unforgettable encounters with the horror, but being most of the time at one remove – with fathers who did not want to talk about it when they came home.

In an essay called “Radiantly Indefensible,” Kay Ryan has helped immensely with my disappointment in my work, in my sense of being so stuck and pedestrian:

Exact articulation is all there is.

Something exactly right is the door through itself.

So it matters utterly.

But here’s the thing: the thing that is exactly right may be a tiny part of a great deal that is much less exact, not very right at all and certainly not *that* right. Actually it’s got to be like that. Almost everything has to be packaging material. The job of almost all the words is to suspend the essential words, which cannot exist without some context.

This is ennobling all the way around. It imparts value to all the whistling needed to suspend those two transcendent notes that open the dark.

Nor will I know in advance which will be the two notes and which the packing. (Ryan 237-8)

I’m not sure I’ve ever read such freeing sentences about writing poetry.

I have read Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* in the new translation by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows (2021). It is the best version. Rilke claims for poetry what so many poets claim, what Césaire in his essay “Poetry and Knowledge” claims, that poetry is a form of

knowing on par with scientific knowledge. The more I immerse myself in what my mother knew, about the expanding universe, the multiverse, the imprint we leave behind on spacetime, measurable in the gravitational waves Einstein predicted with his formulas, and which we can now measure and hear, the more I feel this to be true. She had read Einstein, she quoted him to me in my heartache and despair. I am humbled by what she knew. Knowing it in order to write it as a poem, “Magnitude,” (page 46) has helped me to understand not only why, but also *how* she had become ready to die. Ryan has helped me finally to find a way to try to say all this, because in poetry “almost everything has to be packaging material.” You cannot know in advance what will be the transcendent notes that open the dark, and what will simply be the packaging that holds it all together.

Entry 19: Final Reflections

18-10-2021

I wish to begin my final reflections by highlighting poets I have encountered over the last two years who have influenced my writing the most. They will remain potent sources of inspiration. For some, I have reflected on their craft in my choice of book reviews, but here I would like to register impacts more directly personal. It is difficult to express fully the abiding influence Tadeusz Różewicz’s *Mother Departs* (2013) has had on my work. It felt like synchronicity, having his book in my hands early last year, just as I had written the first version of “Last Morning” (page 19) about washing my mother’s body after her death. The braided structure of *Mother Departs* and Różewicz’s inclusion of a range of forms as well as family voices provided ideas for the project as a whole. Różewicz also helped me to realise that this person whom I knew so well will also always remain unknown – my mother was born, grew up in, and was shaped by a different time.

Evan Boland has left me much to consider in terms of the relationship of poetry to history; including the question of how healing, both personally and nationally, involves active remembering but also, sometimes, a deliberate break with a traumatic past. Boland’s formal decisions, particularly in her long poem about her grandmother in *A Woman Without a Country* (2015), were important, in combination with the formal experimentalism of Ocean Vuong, in helping me work towards a suitable form to hold together the different elements in my poem “No Mama, No Papa, No Whisky Soda” (page 41). Boland and Vuong have been instructive to my poetry overall, in terms of their evocations of place, and in deciding how best to link the historical and the national with the lives of particular individuals. In revising my work, I studied their varied use of form repeatedly as I decided how best to shape the movement of each of my poems over the page.

In Vuong, I have found a poet who knits his queer experiences into a complex familial and political history. He has guided, in myriad ways, my questions of how to speak about my Zimbabwean identity, the long-term impact of war, and how to interlace family memories with my queer experiences. Vuong’s “Aubade with Burning City,” coupled with Harmony Holiday’s attention to the influence of her father’s music on her life, in *Go Find Your Father/A Famous Blues*, allowed me to discover ways to incorporate my parents’ music into my poetry. Holiday and Vuong, alongside the writing of Vangile Gantscho, who introduced me to the Japanese *zuihitsu*, gave me the courage to play with a range of techniques in order to incorporate the lyrics of those childhood songs into my poems. Vuong also taught me to trust the reader, something I began to learn how to do at the beginning of 2020 with the example of Etel Adnan. Vuong trusts his poems to the kind of

reader who is able to allow poetry to happen to them over time, to sit with the complexity, without searching after quick or easy answers.

Pascale Petit's animal imagery, her focus on environmental destruction, as well as her attention to the complexities of the mother-daughter bond, runs through my work as a thoroughgoing influence. I also need to highlight Saeed Jones, who opens his memoir, *How We Fight for Our Lives* (2019), with a beautiful poem, "Elegy with Grown Folks' Music," about his mother dancing to Prince. Jones's mother is closer to my generation than Jones himself, but in this remarkable poem, he combines Prince, his mother's death, and his adolescent revulsion towards his own queerness in a way that set me going in all kinds of directions. It was another striking moment of poetic synchronicity:

"I Want to Be Your Lover" comes on the kitchen radio
and briefly, your mother isn't your mother –
just like, if the falsetto is just right, a black man in black
lace panties isn't a faggot, but a prince,
a prodigy – and the woman with your hometown
between her hips shimmies past the eviction notice
burning on the counter and her body moves like she never
even birthed you. (Jones xvii)

Prince's defiant gender fluidity reflected something about me back to myself as teenager – long before I was able to come out consciously. Prince's music has been a lifelong obsession of mine, not just an influence. He is a fantastic poet, whose music fused African-American blues, jazz, gospel, soul, funk, and hip-hop with pop and rock, melding these genres together in original ways. Prince's deliberate fusion of the sacred and the profane in his love songs make him, in my view, John Donne's poetic descendant. It was wonderful to encounter Prince in Saeed Jones's writing having discovered Jones himself through his poem about his dead mother, "The Stranger," on the *New Yorker Poetry Podcast*.

Jones's attention, in his memoir, to the internalised homophobia that leads to psychic and sometimes physical violence between gay men, helped me to find ways, in "Thank You, Cavafy" (page 72), to write of the emotional agony I had experienced, in attempting relationships with women who felt, sometimes acted on, but could not bring themselves to accept, their own queer desire. Kay Ryan, a queer poet whose delicate and subtle use of rhyme allows her to be wryly funny about serious issues, gave me the permission I needed to use rhyme in my own work.

Reading these poets, I have found the courage to laugh, cry, play, sing, experiment, fail and try again: to push myself to places I didn't know were possible. I've made myself to return to poems that I've wanted to write to make them work, by free-writing on the idea repeatedly, until something usable comes clean. I've let go of pedantic punctuation use, learnt to view the white space on the page as a place in which to paint. During much of 2021, a major question was what writing would end up in which poem. I realised I was learning to treat my poems, or the lines that arrived, like bits of Lego, to be built up, deconstructed, mobile and attachable to any other bit of poetry. I have long used this metaphor with my students for their editing of academic essays, but it was a light bulb moment to realise I could use it in my own creative work. I learnt to welcome lines on their arrival, and hold off on my decisions as to their final destination. As I worked on poems I felt

were crucial to the thesis overall, the question of where best to attach the words that felt workable became more open-ended. I learnt to go with this and be more flexible.

My initial impression from my Reader's Report was a sense of relief that the political poetry and my lived connection with Zimbabwe had been so well understood. This meant a huge amount to me, especially the positive response to "Blueberries," "Harare City, Sunshine City," "Line in the Sand," and "Sectioned." I was delighted by the encouraging feedback on my use of music, musical references, rhythm and rhyme: particularly in the case of "No Mama, No Papa, No Whisky Soda." I appreciated the reader's thoughtful attentive, and detailed response to my work as a whole, and their enjoyment of the playful and humorous elements. I was also buoyed by the idea that someone who doesn't know me found reading my poetry an "enriching experience." I felt frustrated, however, as it was clearly back to the drawing board with a few poems the reader highlighted as confusing. These three poems had all received feedback at Contact Weeks, after which I had allowed the huge variety of suggestions received to pull them apart in different directions. In working towards final revisions to these poems in the light of the Reader's Report, I again reread all the feedback, and all my different versions of these poems, before working from scratch towards final versions that I hope will have legs on the page for future readers. Thus, one of my major lessons from the Reader's Report is that I still need to be more judicious in terms of implementing feedback. Doing my own knife-work should also mean owning my own poem, not changing it to suit other people's ideas, but editing and revising the poem to be clearer in communicating my original intention.

Another disappointment from the Reader's Report was their sense that my poems don't yet work as a publishable collection. This was something I had agonised about as I put the poems together, utterly frustrated with myself that there are at least seven poems, from the list I wrote myself after the April 2021 Contact Week, that are still not complete, and so not ready to include in the final thesis. These poems interweave my family history with a larger global history or political events in Zimbabwe itself. "Funic" intertwines the dictionary definitions of a word for the umbilical cord to trace my ancestry on both sides. "Ode to Joy" centres on the Rhodesian Front's racism, terrorism, and theft, including their appropriation of the fourth movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony as the Rhodesian National Anthem in 1974. "Crackdown" describes my father being beaten by the police in Harare at a peaceful demonstration by members of the Law Society of Zimbabwe in 2008. "#This Flag" is a tribute to the work of Evan Mawarire, whose poetic reading of the colours of our Zimbabwean flag in a Facebook video in April 2015 went viral. This Flag developed into a global movement that returned pride in our country to Zimbabweans at home and in diaspora. I hosted Mawarire in Makhandia in 2016 as he travelled to speak at several South African universities. His ongoing critique of the Zimbabwean government has led to his being repeatedly arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. "Masahwira" centres on my three oldest friends, two of whom were in Zimbabwe due to the deaths of their fathers, while I was in Harare in 2019. "Down South" explores the complex relationship between Zimbabwe and South Africa: a country that both sustains and reviles Zimbabwean migrants in equal measure, most recently in the hashtag #ZimbabweansMustFall trending on South African Twitter in June 2020. "Tony Blair and the Gay Gangsters" begins with the attempt by the gay activist, Peter Tatchell, to enact a citizen's arrest on Mugabe, on charges of torture, in London in 1999, to explore the intertwined histories of homophobia and racism in Zimbabwe, Britain, and the United States during the AIDS crisis of 80s and 90s. These are painful, difficult, poems to get right. In September 2021, I decided to set aside poems that

would require far more research and time to complete, and focus on editing those that felt more final.

At the same time as I was making these decisions, I listened to a craft talk from the Tin House Live podcast by Lidia Yuknavitch (author of *The Chronology of Water*) on “Writing from the Deep Cut.” Yuknavitch begins by asking her audience to write down a few examples of wounding in their own lives, in three categories: personal, historical, and ancestral. She then suggests that in all three cases writers need to ask a searching question: “what is the wound generative of?” Yuknavitch has helped me to view my own writing in terms of three concentric circles. I realised that I had needed to drill down into the centre, the personal and socio-political wounding, first, in order to open out my writing to considerations of the historical and ancestral. My unfinished poems are moving outward into the next two categories. Yuknavitch also made an observation that stayed with me, as I revised and finalised my queer poems: “we are yet to write into what sexuality can tell us about ourselves.” She urged her audience away from writing tired old sex scenes and towards viewing sexuality as a dynamic territory for psychological exploration.

My next step as a poet will be to work on submitting the MACW poems that are able to stand alone to various poetry magazines and journals. I will finish my incomplete poems and then work towards putting together a more considered collection. This collection will also include other poems, both published and unpublished, that focus on either Zimbabwe, or my queer experiences, or both. These poems were not written during the period of the MACW and are thus not included in the thesis. As I came to the end of this writing project, I also felt disappointed with myself because there are so many more poems, so many more stories, to tell about my mother. It continues to be a great comfort to me to reflect on the fact that two poets I admire, Ellen Bass and Eavan Boland, both wrote poems about their mothers well into their seventies. There is still time to say more.

I will end my reflections on this writing journey with the most vital realisation I have learnt from this experience. I'm a Zimbabwean. I'm queer. These are two of the most basic facts about me. Given to me before I was born, as I grew in my mother's womb. I was born into the world with these two fundamental elements to my identity that (like being a poet) are easy to hide away from or deny. In the last two years, as I've taken my writing far more seriously, made space for it deliberately in my life, invited it in almost every day, I've understood these two facts far better, because I have begun to explore them in all their dimensions. This, in turn, has helped me understand, more consciously, why I write. Writing has allowed me to inhabit, more fully, who I am. To understand it and experience it. Even the pain of it. Perhaps especially the pain. Sometimes being a Zimbabwean cancelled out being queer but being queer never cancelled out being Zimbabwean. Nothing can or will. It is who I am. It is the most fundamental aspect of myself. I feel blessed to be a Zimbabwean, to have been granted the experience of growing up in a socialist African republic, even if the pain, hopelessness, and hardships that accompany this identity have sometimes become unbearable to the point that I have tried, at times, to step away, forget, become someone or something else. But, as Tom Waits sings in “Blind Love”: “they say if you get far enough away / you're on your way back home.” I am writing to come home, to speak, feel, and hear home. I can never be homed except by finding it in my writing. It is the ground and the grounding. I am poet. I am a Zimbabwean. I am queer. Intertwining all three things, giving myself conscious permission to speak from this place of self-reckoning and self-recognition will be the work I do for the rest of my life. To speak of, to, and for my personal life, my country, my people. It is daunting but it's beginning to feel more possible. There are so

many more poems waiting for me in the future. There is so much left to say. To seek, draft out, explore, turn over in my hands, or sometimes, in those rare and wonderful moments, be alert enough to catch the lines as they seem to arise by themselves – coming in like feathered arrows from nowhere conscious at all. I need to read, research, and understand in order to write but I cannot understand more fully without the act of writing. I've only just begun.

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Poetics Essay

Writing on the Edge of the Wound – the Poetics of Possibility, Danger, and Risk

The condition of creation is a condition of entrancement. Till you begin – *obsession*; till you finish – *possession*. Something, someone, lodges in you; your hand is the fulfiller not of you but of it. Who is this *it*? That which through you wants to be.
(Marina Tsvetaeva, “Condition of Creation”)

What is perhaps most striking about essays by poets on poetry, essays by writers on writing, is how *poetic* they are. In order to describe the act of creation the poet creates more images, experiences, in which the reader may dwell. It is inescapable, the compulsion to make metaphorical comparisons about the act of making metaphor speak. In Adrienne Rich’s evocative essay, “Someone is Writing a Poem” (1993), she says, unforgettably, that “every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome.” She also describes how, “in the wash of poetry the old, beaten, worn stones of language” take on new colours. Poetry is made of language, a material “so old, so familiar,” a “utensil” we use every day but poetry makes it into a play of light, shadow, sound, rhythm, and colour. Poetry makes language mean more than it says. It is a mysterious business. We barely understand it ourselves. We are driven to it, compelled by something we barely understand, a line, or idea, an image, which can occur like a visitation that is the spark to take up the act of writing again – right there and then if possible.

In her extraordinary essay, “Condition of Creation,” quoted in the epigraph above, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva describes the condition in which the poet creates as akin to the state of being obsessively in love or possessed by something that “lodges” inside the poet, moving the hand of the poet to create. A “condition of entrancement” – as if under a spell – “a condition of dreaming, when suddenly obeying an unknown necessity.” But, what is even more remarkable about Tsvetaeva’s essay is how vividly and accurately she describes the activity of writing poems, the condition in which you are both written through by “that which through you wants to be” and yet, at the same time, acting as yourself: “Is it your act? Clearly it *is* yours (after all, it is you sleeping, *dreaming!*). Yours in complete freedom. An act of yourself without conscience, yourself as nature.”

This idea of returning to the natural or primal is a key idea for a number of poets. But what stands out for me in Tsvetaeva’s description is how she understands this complete freedom of being – this being without conscience, this being as free to be yourself as an animal in nature – as being at the same time a very human kind of freedom: an existential condition which entails a series of difficult and conscious choices. In a paragraph that reads like the telling of a dream, but as told from the inside by the still sleeping dreamer, Tsvetaeva describes, more accurately than anything I have encountered before, the mind of

the poet at work. A condition in which the poet is one who works under the spell of the compulsion to choose:

A series of doors, behind one of which someone, something (usually terrible), is waiting. The doors are identical. Not this one – not this one – not this one – *that* one. Who told me? Nobody. I recognise the one I need by all the unrecognised ones (the right one by all the wrong ones). It's the same with words. Not this one – not this one – not this one – *that* one. By the obviously *not-this* I recognise *that*. ("Condition of Creation")

This is an apt description of the search for "the *blow of recognition*" in the right word, the right door to walk through, the right choice known only by its opposite. For Tsvetaeva, we do not need, ever, a key to understand poems. The poet's compulsion to choose exists because "the poems themselves are the key to understanding everything." All poets know this. If you can write it well enough, any human experience, no matter how chaotic or painful, may be understood or even exorcised so that its grip on you is lost. The Zimbabwean poet, Philip Zhuwao tells of a recurring dream of being chased by black bulls he has had since childhood and suggests: "Maybe by writing it, I will get exorcised. It will be like breaking something" (*South African Poets on Poetry: Interviews from New Coin*, 2003). I have certainly had this experience of exorcising the hold an experience has over me if I manage to write it into a poem. In Tsvetaeva's description, the poem, in the moments, days, or months of its being written into being is not simply a dream-state but an encounter – entering into a mode of thinking and choosing in a state akin to dream-like compulsion. If we write to understand, driven by the compulsion to choose, to choose, and to choose again, we know that we do so because within our understanding *is* acceptance:

from understanding to accepting there isn't just a step, there is no step at all; to understand is to accept, there is no other understanding, any other understanding is non-understanding. Not in vain does the French *comprendre* mean both 'understand' and 'encompass' – that is, 'accept' and 'include'.

There is no poet who would reject any elemental force, consequently any rebellion. ("Condition of Creation")

We write to comprehend the world: to understand it, accept, and embrace it in our arms – even the most terrible things. That is why no true poet will reject rebellion – because an ever-expanding, encompassing vision is one that accepts the need for resistance, for change, for alteration, expansion and inclusion of the new, the unknown, and the unseen.

But it is on the final page that Tsvetaeva's tiny tsunami of an essay really punches home – with her final description of how the poet comes to be so overcome, possessed, entranced, in the first place. In a surprising move – one that demonstrates her grasp of how being a poet is akin to the experience of those possessed by demons, or psychotic aural

hallucinations, Tsvetaeva describes “the sole prayer of the poet not to hear the voices.” For the moment when those first words break, unbidden, into your head is where the compulsion starts:

For to hear, for the poet, is already to answer, and to answer is already to affirm, if only by the passionateness of his denial. The poet’s only prayer is a prayer for deafness.

[...]

(On Odysseus’s ship there was neither hero nor poet. A hero is one who will stand firm even when not tied down, stand firm even without wax stuck in his ears; a poet is one who flings himself forward even when tied down, who will hear even with wax in his ears, that is – once again – fling himself forward.

The only things non-understood by the poet from birth are the half-measures of the rope and the wax.) (“Condition of Creation”)

I still cannot account fully for how affected I am by this section in parenthesis that closes Tsvetaeva’s essay. A rereading of the mythical story that ties back into the poet’s connection to nature and the elemental, yes. But so much more. In his letter to Paul Demeny, 1871, Rimbaud notes that as a poet: “I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer.” This is an idea that recurs in the writing of poets writing about poetry: the ancient idea of the poet as seer to which Rimbaud adds the essential value of “disordering of all the senses,” taking in and taking on the suffering, the madness of the world, finding these inside and becoming other, and thus arriving “at the unknown. Because he has cultivated his own soul – which was rich to begin with – more than any other man!”

Tsvetaeva’s description of the poet has far less ego in it, than all this focus on choosing to be, or making oneself, into the all-seeing god-like eye/I. She takes us back, before the eye and the magical ability to inhabit other beings, to what essentially must come first. The poet can be a seer only if the poet is first a hearer, a listener who understands, and understanding means “understanding everything,” including the unacceptable. The “*intelligence of the ear*” is important to Tsvetaeva, as she notes in another essay, “The Poet and the Critic” (1926), where she describes the process of “becoming conscious of one’s hearing” so that theory comes afterwards, from the poet’s own experience of the labour” following our “tracks in reverse” and asking: “I did it. How did I do it? By carefully checking through the rough drafts ... the poet reaches a certain conclusion which he then works at and presents as some theory or other.” Theory, in this case, “is verification,” a “supplement to practice.”

I appreciate Tsvetaeva’s honest resistance to theory, which is often reified and taken more seriously than it deserves to be. No one theory can account for the different kinds of ways there are to be a poet. Tsvetaeva is honest enough, *humble* enough, to note the reliance of any theory of what poetry is, what it should be, how it is written, and so on, on one’s own individual experience as a poet, on the simple action of walking backwards

through your own many drafts to seek out the forward growth of the poem. But, as the strength of my own response to Tsvetaeva's essays demonstrates to me, she underestimates rather how valuable such theory can "be of use to others." She admits it can, be "as a check." But she sees continual practice, the recurring task of choosing words, as the best teacher:

The only book of information is your own ear...
There is only one teacher: your own labour.
And only one judge: the future. ("The Poet and the Critic," 1926)

In both these essays, Tsvetaeva notes the importance of being conscious of one's own hearing, of what the poet hears from the world and sounds into the poem. The hearing of the words that come into one's head unbidden. Her compelling use of the myth of the siren calls in "Condition of Creation" takes us back to the many-doored dream with which she begins the essay. Unlike Rimbaud, who seems to suggest that the poet can become a seer by an act of sheer will, for Tsvetaeva, the poet cannot choose but to go through the door, to look through the window, even as she is resisting. She *cannot choose but hear. She cannot resist hearing*. In fact, she prays for deafness, to stop the endless process of being so wide open to all the voices of the world and so compulsively drawn toward them. She is one who looks, hears, listens, understands, accepts, even the unacceptable. To hear is to be seduced, to hear is to answer, to hear is to understand. These experiences are not choices. The only things she cannot understand are the half-measures of the restraints: the rope and the wax. Even tied down, even with her ears stopped, she flings herself forward. She hears the songs and must go toward them. The hearing is not, as in Rimbaud's view, an enriched heightened seeing clearer and farther than others, the hearing is to be once again compelled to the endless choices of doors and words. If she is compelled through the door she must still choose the right door, if she is compelled by the songs she must still choose the right voices to listen to, the right words to say. As she observes: "Choice from birth, that is, to hear only what is important, is a blessing bestowed on almost no one."

There is an acute vulnerability in this definition of the poet as one assailed and acted upon by the dreams, voices, and words of the world, whether we like it or not, choose it or not, that I find accurate and inspiring. This is coupled with Tsvetaeva's specific and detailed focus on the complex, frenetic activity of choosing, endlessly choosing, in descriptions that capture something of the chase, the compulsion towards the poem, and the "labour" entailed with each act of creation, which is the only teacher one ever really has. Feedback and praise may be given and received but only the poet can assess whether or not "I did it." Only the future will judge whether the poem is strong enough to live beyond its own time.

In Adrienne Rich's essay, "Someone Is Writing a Poem," the same idea of poetry as a series of carefully considered decisions emerges as, in the act of writing a poem, each word is charged with an energy that acts on other words:

Someone is writing a poem. Words are being set down in a force field. It's as if the words themselves have magnetic charges; they veer together or in polarity, they swerve against each other. Part of the force field, the charge, is the working history of the words themselves, how someone has known them, used them, doubted and relied on them in a life. ... The theater of any poem is a collection of decisions about space and time—how are these words to lie on the page, with what pauses, what headlong motion, what phrasing, how can they meet the breath of the someone who comes along to read them? And in part the field is charged by the way images swim into the brain through written language: swan, kettle, icicle, ashes, scab, tamarack, tractor, veil, slime, teeth, freckle. ("Someone is Writing a Poem," 1993)

What Rich's essay conveys above all else is the sense that *every poet is someone writing a poem for somebody else*. Each poet, each poem, cannot fully exist without, and thus seeks a reader: "the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished." The poem only half exists without the breath, memories, experiences and word pictures the reader brings to the poem to bring it to life. I love the listing of words in this paragraph, by which Rich enacts, through her own careful language choices, the choices a poet makes while creating images in a poem that may enter the reader's mind through written language. Rich's description also focuses in detail on the series of other choices to be made.

I always use this essay in my introductory lectures on poetry to first-year students because it enacts, all the way through, the idea of a poem as a series of decisions about diction, form, tone, design, line length. It is crucial to understand the poem as a series of decisions that could have gone any number of different ways. This particular word might have remained in the poem instead of another chosen in the penultimate draft. Then there was the decision to cut that final stanza. To suddenly realise that a line that works as mere description would work better as the final line of a poem where its meaning is heavier, more richly metaphorical, more loaded with emotional significance. To cut or not cut. Where and how to break the line, where to punctuate, whether to use punctuation at all or, like W.S. Merwin, to decide to dispense with punctuation altogether and trust the reader to find out for themselves where to match their breath to the poem. The image of the "force field" is a powerful one. For me it conjures the experiment almost every child at a decent school gets to see – the iron filings placed on the paper and the magnet placed underneath. The magical moment when suddenly the magnetic field is revealed, as the filings set themselves into a pattern, like words on the page in a poem, the hidden patterns of the universe revealed Henry James's idea of the figure in the carpet. Rich also introduces the idea of "the working history of words" here. No word is neutral or new. This is the paradox of poetry – it is made of the old made new.

This is a very ancient idea. The Chinese poet Lu Ji, writing in the third century, compares editing a poem to tailoring a suit and the words of the poem to old clothes made new:

Tailor the poem to be plump or slender,
look it over and consider the form.
Make changes when they're apt,
sensitive to the subtle difference they make.
Sometimes raw language conveys complex ideas
and light words carry weighty truth.
Sometimes you wear old clothes yet make them new
or discover clarity in the fog.
Sometimes you see it all in a flash,
sometimes it takes a lot of work.
(*The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters*, 1996)

This notion of the combination of old and new is echoed by Aimé Césaire in his essay on "Poetry and Knowledge" (1973) and communicates the same sense of being assailed by the deluge of reality that Tsvetaeva describes:

The poet is that very ancient yet new being, at once very complex and very simple, who at the limit of dream and reality, of day and night, between absence and presence, searches for and receives in the sudden triggering of inner cataclysms the password of connivance and power. ("Poetry and Knowledge," 1973)

How does one communicate such heightened experiences, particularly if you are an artist in a medium used every day in very ordinary and often dishonest ways? Repeatedly, in the writing of poets, this sense of language as a collective possession recurs. As Antonio Machado notes, "in order to express my feelings I have language. But language is already less much *less mine* than are my feelings. For after all I have had to acquire it, learn it from others. Before being *ours* – because it will never be *mine* alone – it was theirs; it belonged to that world which is neither subjective nor objective ... the world of other I's" (Machado, "Notes on Poetry," 1917). Language is what constrains and imagery is what makes possible the unique possibilities of poetry. For Machado, the image can speak "directly to our feelings" as it works through intuition rather than logic but it still requires "the ghostly background of familiar, generic images against which its uniqueness can stand out." This suggestion, that the original and alternative vision of the poet still needs to be communicated in a language accessible to readers, also recurs in a variety of ways. One of the most interesting attempts to discuss this issue is Jackie Wang's essay "Aliens as a Form-of-Life: Imagining the Avant-Garde." If anything is possible in the imagination, Wang asks, why do the aliens we create look so familiar?

The alien as it exists in our imagination is a liminal creature, existing at the threshold of what is familiar and what is imaginatively possible but not-yet, both formally recognizable and always somehow *strangerly*.

Sometimes, sitting before a blank page, I get a rush just thinking, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE. Why is it that everything I write fails to capture the range of what is possible? I think *We could write anything and yet we don't*. (“Aliens,” 2015)

So why don't we? Wang's answer is very moving and chimes with my own position as a poet completely – in signalling the importance to her of remaining in relationship with and accessible to her readers. Writing for Wang is a relational act of love:

there's tenderness in the impulse to clarify ourselves (for an-other, *for you*) even if it means that, in anticipating what forms might be legible to an-other, we are circumscribed. I call this the PARADOX OF AUDIENCE: the creator is both profoundly limited and animated (read: enabled, opened) by the receiver(s) [...] Every situation that is concrete involves some measure of negotiation. Therefore it is not true that anything is possible. But we can always do better, cultivate wilder and more feral imaginations by building spaces that open us, creatively. (“Aliens,” 2015)

I like Wang's assertion that we should conceive of the avant-garde not so much in terms of formal innovation but “in terms of space.” I agree with her assessment that “the pursuit of the ‘new’ has left us neurotic. I feel this about a great deal of Western art, which is often driven by novelty, shock value, and the need for fame. Wang suggests redirecting our collaborative energies into “creating material, psychic and symbolic spaces” where “non-normative activity and artistic production can take place.” This is a far more collective, political, and community-focussed approach to making art. I wholeheartedly agree with Wang that “art is always what happens during the encounter, for writing is first and foremost ENERGY and CONNECTIVE TISSUE – a relation. It's not the textual objects *but the bonds* that matter.” Like me, Wang is a queer woman. She also faces the additional psychic burdens and physical risks to her person in being a black woman in the violent racist society of the United States. As she notes “my whole life I have been looking for a place to call home.” The home that can be created virtually, psychically, and materially by collective artistic action has been an important facet of both queer and anti-racist activism, and an art that sets itself as part of the collective good is an art than seems far more radical and avant-garde than formal innovation for the sake of an individual ego.

Wang's thoughts on the limits of formal experimentalism can be linked to Brian Evenson's astute critique of the failure of the typical gestures of the avant-garde which, in an apt and powerful metaphor, he likens to the crazy party guy. Everyone expects the crazy party guy to do something crazy – like put jelly beans down his pants or wear the lamp shade. In addition, because the crazy party guy is always at the party, that's how the status quo keeps the avant-garde in a neat little niche where it is actually quite ineffectual. We have come to expect the exact same gestures from it. Evenson demonstrates the circularity of a system in which avant-garde art is accessed by those already “braced” for its style of critique of the system and thus, actually, inured to it. I would concur with Evenson's

assessment that formal experimentalism can only take us so far, particularly because such an audience is often only responding on an intellectual level. Evenson's understated ideas about his own artistic impulses are far braver and more radical:

But there is also avant-garde work that mimics more conventional modes, so that you realize how deftly it is taking apart the institutions you participate in only once it's too late. For me, the latter is ultimately much more unsettling, and the work that I want to do is work that destabilizes the reader gradually but profoundly, in a way that he or she can neither prepare for in advance nor recuperate from afterward. ("The Crazy Party Guy, or, A Disruption of Smooth Surfaces," 2015)

This is an electrifying and astonishingly original idea. When I first read Evenson's essay, I thought immediately about *Cagney and Lacey*, the 1980s television show about two female detectives, which is literally the avant-garde hiding in plain clothes. It is an outstanding example of those forms of radical art that look very ordinary on the surface – it's a police procedural for crying out loud – but in fact it ushered in all kinds of freewheeling feminism and queer desire. I am just staggered by the history of it: when I begin to reckon with everything I learnt (about feminism and the history of feminism, HIV, safe sex, sexual assault, breast cancer, the military, the political system, and more) from one television program, with two strong female leads, which the studio heads kept trying to take off the air. I could give numerous other examples of novels, poems, plays, films that operate thus, while wearing plain clothes. But, to discuss *how* such works get quietly into the blood and change you forever would require an essay on its own. Evenson's essay has inspired an ambition for my own writing, to create work for which a reader can neither ready themselves nor recover from encountering.

Evenson does not dismiss formal experimentalism altogether. Some of the most unforgettable essays by writers on their own writing are addressed to the question of form. Much of this discussion centres on how politics involves every aspect of being human. For Amina Cain, a political text involves engagement with far more than "ideas about the status quo" and incorporates the unconscious mind, which she believes has a place in the political ("Slowness," 2015). Other writers articulate how politics is a fundamentally embodied experience. Lidia Yuknavitch notes that she strives towards what she calls "corporeal writing" and judges the success of her own writing by whether or not a reader feels it in their bodies:

What I need, what I live for, what I write for, is this: that moment when the reader is holding an actual book in their hands and they can feel their skin differently ... Can you feel your body when you read this? Your lashes, differently. Your spine. The well of warmth underneath each breast. Your shoulder. Your mouth. Your eye/I. ("Why Do You Write it All Weird?" 2015)

In Camille Roy's essay, "Experimentalism" (2004), she notes that in most mainstream heterosexual fiction the way women are represented as objects of erotic desire empties them of their subjectivity but that "it is quite difficult, perhaps impossible, to represent a dyke as empty in that way." In quoting passages that combine dialogue with erotic physical encounters from her own short stories, she demonstrates exactly what she means. Her writing is not just a turn-on, but conveys with its erotic charge a powerful representation of what sex between women can entail when it is a means of communicating the unspoken wishes and desires of the self. I feel Roy's writing in my body every time I read it. But I would argue that this challenge of representation for the queer women writer is more difficult than Roy suggests, because of the long history of representation of women in writing and in visual art. We still need to face two stark facts. Firstly, that writing requires the participation of a reader. A male or heterosexual reader may well learn nothing whatsoever about dyke subjectivity from Roy's stories, reading them very differently, so as to rob the characters in advance of their subjectivity in service of their own agenda. Secondly, misogyny and objectification are, sadly, not the preserve of men and can also be expressed by some queer women. I am aware of these realities every time I write queer erotic poetry – that I am writing against an entire history in which women have been represented for an objectifying gaze. I do not wish to participate in such a history.

Perhaps the only way women can overcome this troubled history of representation, as a number of writers point out, is to write from *inside* their own bodies. Bettina Judd's attention to the activity of her own "Black woman, queer-identified, round-bodied hand that puts pen to paper, to keyboard, and creates whatever I create" is instructive here. She is acutely aware that her writing will be "read and recognized through this body" whether she "like[s] it or not." Unlike other writers of various identities she is not "invested in erasing this paradigm" because the moment of her brown hand, writing, "is not an accident. It was fought for." Judd's reference to the history of the United States, where it was forbidden to teach slaves to either read or write, is crucial to a number of contemporary queer African-American women writers. To erase this history is, for Judd, "to pretend as if this was given to me and to refuse to acknowledge that history for the sake of *some* folk getting to feel comfortable about reading it (potentially)" (Judd, "Writing about Race," 2015).

As a poet, I have only recently learnt the value of disallowing comfort to some of my readers. In my own work and in these essays, I find the idea of refusing as well as creating community through one's own writing to be a compelling one. Like Rich, Charles Santos Perez values poems that speak against silence, particularly "indigenous absence and silence." Although he values poetic forms that "weave moments, languages, voices and geographies to create multiple layers of meaning and tries to write poems that have multiple points of access" he also values "walls of inaccessibility" – moments where he refuses to translate or activates indeterminacy ("Unincorporated Poetic Territories," 2015). I am learning that sometimes the refusal, the exclusion, of certain readers may well be more powerful than seeking to explain to, and so include, readers whose own ignorance or

positioning would mean a refusal of the politics of one of my poems. I think this recognition, that there is an audience and it will never include everyone, is particularly important as white anti-racist queer writer – if only to signal my participation within and valuing of an anti-racist queer community vastly different to the one in which I was raised. As Santos Perez notes “access is power” and disallowing some readers access to a full understanding is a refusal of their mainstream comfort and complacency in the face of certain personal experiences or political events.

Thus, I have been drawn, in a number of essays, to variously situated writers’ attention to what Santos Perez calls the “aesthetics of power.” For Cristina Rivera Garza “writing is an embodied practice ... connected to situated bodies in contexts shaped by uneven power relations. Conflict. Contestation.” Our bodies are “keys that can only open certain doors,” nevertheless, we can write to create (or sometimes refuse) community, conscious that we write indebted to others, with others, and for others, and our writing can be a constitutive act of, quite consciously, “producing the present” (“The Unusual: A Manifesto”). For Garza, as for Wang, Yuknavitch, Roy, Judd, and bell hooks, writing is a means to usher in new communities and new futures. As hooks expresses it: to imagine is “a way to begin the process of transforming reality. All that we cannot imagine will never come into being” (“Narratives of Struggle,” 1991).

If writing creates community then, as a poet, the most empowering and exciting aspect of these essays is my discovery of common ground with writers for whom risk, alternative ways of imaging the world into being, and attention to all forms of human experience, are not viewed as dangers to be avoided but valued as proof that both the writer, and their writing, are engaged with what is most real. It is quite bewitching, to encounter this idea repeatedly, and to recognise, to return to Tsvetaeva’s notion of poems being our keys to understanding, that our decisions as to poetic form are crucial, not incidental, to the process of opening both poem and the poet to the unseen, the unknown, the wished for but not-yet possible. As both Charles Olson and Robert Duncan observe, neither the poem nor its form can be determined in advance. For Olson, the artist composes on the fly, and can follow “no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself” (“Projective Form”). Duncan notes that he is “more and more fascinated by the idea of form as creation or fiction of a universe, as a way of ‘knowing’ the real universe. Form as a mode of participation in the real. It is not only in order to participate in the universe but also to participate in self” (“Notes on Poetic Form,” 1979). For Dambudzo Marechera, “beneath reality there is always fantasy” but this is not fantasy in the negative sense of escape or denial. Instead, such a recognition is premised on careful attention to the harsh realities of experience and the active use of the imagination to transform that reality in potent and progressive ways (“Beneath Reality there is always Fantasy,” 1988). For Lesego Rampolokeng, this developing knowledge of the self refutes any notion of limitation or containment. He questions the cliché of the sky being the limit and stretches his ambitions further: “I’ve got my own sky that resides within myself and I want to punch a hole through it, and go beyond that, the better for me to get to know myself” (*South African*

Poets on Poetry, 2003). In a similar vein Aimé Césaire describes poetry as “that process through which word, image, myth, love and humour, establishes me at the living heart of myself and the world” (“Poetry and Knowledge,” 1973)

But such living at the heart of your own existence involves the darkest of experiences as well as punching through one’s own sky. In a brave and moving essay, Ann Lauterbach details her decision to eschew logical narrative structure as a response to the death of her sister, in order to reckon as fully as possible with how radically her own narrative had been ruptured. Lauterbach expresses how a writer may find ways to deploy experimental poetic form to face up to, and articulate, the impact of devastating personal experience – death, loss and pain:

It is the pressure of experience, the fact of attention to experience, which leads to real—that is, authentic—experimentation; a willingness to adapt to contexts, in order to derive not so much new meanings as new ways of interpreting the unpredictable. (“Use This Word in a Sentence: ‘Experimental,’” 2005)

Lauterbach’s personal experience of fragmentation lead to her valuing of the fragment as a form of expression which allows new possibilities for connection, for herself and her reader, ways of making vital, unpredictable connections that cannot be so easily recognised or labelled. Lauterbach’s serious experimental play is not “experimentation for its own sake” which she notes is so often “the aesthetic equivalent of narcissism.” Instead, her choice of the fragment is a renunciation of any “constructed, even coerced, coherence” in favour of discovering a formal approach that evolves out of and is driven by “affective” need as well as her willingness to risk failure and make mistakes. For Lauterbach experimental writing of this kind “is always between, like a hinge,” between “promise and fact, between new and unapproachable, known and unknown.” In my own life and my own writing in response to my life experience, I am learning to value and trust that risk is part of the process putting pain, chaos, violence, death as well as the opposite – a wished for future – into words. It is a very important shift. In Lauterbach’s essay, the fragment is no longer a broken shard, disconnected from more easily recognisable forms of human life and relationships, but reimagined in the “figure of the mobile, moving in time and space.” To be “mobile” is to be capable of free motion and thus multiple, unpredictable connections, in several directions at once, with a wide range of people, open to experiences not available in more domesticated and recognisable forms of life or writing. This is to accept that living at the heart of yourself and the world entails acceptance that there is never any arriving, completeness, full knowledge, only continuous choice, movement, risk, and change. It is here that formal experimentalism may play a crucial role in reinventing the writer’s self as well inviting the reader to co-create the text by entering into its affective power. As Lauterbach notes, in a paragraph that spoke directly to my own life as a poet:

Those who view form as static and reified are doomed to repetition, historical as well as personal. The fragments among which we live are, in my view, cause for celebration rather than lament, an invitation to create new ideas of coherence, where boundaries are malleable and permeable, so that inclusion and exclusion are in unstable flux. The fragment offers a possibility of vitality and variety—multiple perspectives, disparate vocabularies. (“Use This Word in a Sentence: ‘Experimental,’” 2005)

Lauterbach asserts that “to risk failure one needs a sense of unfettered play, the play that would allow a failure to become useful for the next attempt, that would, in a sense, recycle the disaster.” Even the failed attempt is a valuable process if one learns to view it as a form of serious play. As Lara Glenum observes, the writer should dare to “risk annihilation” because “abject failure is a far better gift to the world than self-satisfied moderation” (“Language is the Site of our Collective Infection,” 2010).

In her essay detailing the politics of literary form, Kathy Acker echoes this idea of play. Realism, she notes, is a political choice, connected to the conservative need to retain both safety and power: “realism doesn’t want to negotiate, open into, or even know chaos, or the body, or death.” But, she asks, “why bother being so miserable, so reductive, when one could play? She notes that “to make literary structures that play into and in unknown or unknowable realms, those of change and death and the lack of language, is the desire to live in a world that is open and dangerous, that is limitless. To play, then, in both structure and in content, is to desire to live in wonder” (“The Killers,” 2004). Similarly, Anna Kavan explains her decision to abandon realism in favour of more unconventional techniques as a choice to explore with her reader a “different, though just as real, “reality” which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary daily life and the surface aspect of things” (“The Radical Revisioning of Anna Kavan”).

Mxolisi Nyezwa articulates a similar sense of form being the route to new realities in an essay in which he details what the Maskandi artists have taught him about being a Xhosa poet. The Maskandi artist stretches “the limits of the language” to “bend” speech so that it serves its purpose, which is to “see life not simply as it is, but as he envisions it can become.” In words that resonate deeply with me, he asserts that the artist does not “seek peace with the world,” nor to “please anyone,” instead he “aims for the disruption of the senses,” in order to “awaken the missing spirituality in the plastic lives we have built for ourselves” (“I Heard Rhythms,” Unpublished MACW Dissertation, 2015).

Nyezwa links the notion of *inkenque*, amongst both the amaZulu and amaXhosa iimbongi, and Maskandi artists, to Lorca’s famous essay on the importance to the artist of *duende*. In an essay that explains *duende* by expanding ever outwards to include a huge range of examples from all forms of artistic expression – poetry, music, dance and song – the example that I find perhaps the most moving is Lorca’s description of the eighty year old woman who came first in a dance contest in Jerez de la Frontera:

against lovely women and girls with liquid waists, merely by raising her arms, throwing back her head, and stamping with her foot on the floor: but in that crowd of Muses and angels with lovely forms and smiles, who could earn the prize but her moribund *duende* sweeping the earth with its wings made of rusty knives. ("Theory and Function of the *Duende*")

The angel and the muse, due to their connection to the human ideals of perfection and beauty, are no match for the mysterious power of *duende*. As Lorca puts it, "All that has dark sounds has *duende*. And there's no deeper truth than that. Those dark sounds are the mystery, the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art." The true artist, for Lorca, ignores, kicks to curb, in fact, the influence of both the angel and the muse knowing that, beneath the smooth surfaces, reality is far darker, stranger, more dangerous and thus more powerfully beautiful. The dance of eighty-year-old woman connects us back to where we began: the myth of the sirens – the image of whom shifted from winged harbingers of death in Homer's time to the seductive mermaids depicted in paintings of the Odyssey in the late nineteenth century. As Lorca notes, "in seeking the *duende*, there is neither map nor discipline." *Duende* calls for the rejection of all preconceived ideas and styles. *Duende* is connected with death, the earth, and experiences of inconsolable loss and pain. The experience of *duende* through art is one which is certain "to shake those branches we all carry, that do not bring, can never bring, consolation." With idea, sound, gesture, "the *duende* delights in struggling freely with the creator on the edge of the pit." Lorca notes that "the *duende* loves the edge, the wound, and draws close to places where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible expression." It is everywhere and if you can handle it, it will keep you new:

The *duende* Where is the *duende*? Through the empty archway a wind of the spirit enters, blowing insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents: a wind with the odour of a child's saliva, crushed grass, and medusa's veil, announcing the endless baptism of freshly created things. ("Theory and Function of the *Duende*")

Nothing quite expresses this refusal of the angel and muse, in favour of the darker, more mysterious, workings of the will of the poem itself, better than Barbara's Guest's "The Beautiful Voyage." As a poet, I completely concur with Rich's view of the act of creation as a series of choices but I will conclude with Guest's exploration of the exact opposite: the requirement from any good poet to encounter "the dark identity of a poem" – this mysterious process by which the poem comes into being with its own "will," "powers," and control over its own "shape." In Guest's poem to the power of poems to write themselves, she describes the uncanny way in which a poem comes into being alongside and with the poet and not entirely by the "didacticism of your own will." Like Tsvetaeva, Guest draws on the myth of Odysseus to tell a similar story of the poem as a visitation. But Guest delineates the patience, trust, and humility required of the poet, the necessity "to go inside the poem

itself” and “*be in the dark* at the beginning of / the journey.” She describes the poet as “trembling with excitement” which is “a good idea” because it means “you are not entirely in charge.” In fact, the process of writing poetry is to entertain with the poem “circumstances over which/ you must eventually take control, but at first you have no control.” The poem is the ship, the sea, *and* the magic in the sails of the ship in Guest’s evocative imaging of the process by which the poem casts “its spell over the poet” and writes itself into being. The trust required for such a process flows in both directions: while “the poem is in the making it changes as thoughts change” but Guest’s description conveys the idea, which I’ve experienced myself, that these thoughts belong as much to the poem as to the poet:

What is so fascinating about poetry is: how many encounters we meet
with on the way of its writing
And the explicit will of the poem, until it releases. the myth: of itself

*“the poem wrote itself.” when the identity of the poem is so fixed the poem
is willing to trust itself to the poet*

(“The Beautiful Voyage,” 2015)

The poem at the beginning of its life does appear like a visitation and sometimes I find I have to write something down quite quickly to catch it, as if the poem, as Tsvetaeva describes, is writing itself through me. The most exciting experiences, in writing poetry, are writing in response to poems whose identities seem so “fixed” it feels as if they write themselves, that I am merely the vessel through which they arrive in the world. But other poems have to be worked on for months, years sometimes, before they are finished. Then suddenly you feel it in your gut – it’s done – the iron filings make their pattern on the page. At the same time, a poem is never finished, there is always more to be done. You simply have to let it rest eventually and go forward to others. Writing a poem is a delicate balance, an honouring of an entity that appears like a spirit, a spirit in sound, and must be listened to if it is to come into full being on the page. Writing a poem is a balance, which cannot be decided in advance. It is both a waiting in the dark for the identity of the poem to show its shape *and* the action of making a series of careful choices. It is always a practice of allowing the powers of the poem to speak, to learn how to listen, how to *not* know, to wait trembling with excitement in the dark in a process where sometimes the best approach is to have no control at all. Sometimes lines appear all of a sudden and only days later does the rest of the poem emerge. You have to catch what you can, convert the very stirrings of suggestion into something that can live on the page.

The thread that I have attempted to follow in this essay concerns my encounter with writers who value the risk of writing at the very edge of possibility, change, promise and failure. Writers engaging with finding structures, forms, and spaces that will allow the poet to be open: to the wound, to danger, to disruption, to embracing the unpredictable, even

the unacceptable, to all that you cannot choose but hear. It is not an easy place to live, it is not a comfortable way of being in the world, it is sometimes emotionally, psychically dangerous, risky – there are far easier paths but this is my path and I feel grateful to be making my road by walking it and to have found writers with whom to walk alongside.

Poetry is both “the hinge” and “the fragment,” making possible new connections in threshold spaces, showing us the world again in language made new, life made strange, or “strangely.” It works in the liminal spaces between worlds, between the known and unknown, and is always a gesture towards the unknowable, “the possible but not-yet.” It connects us with “the mire,” the inconsolable sorrow we all share, it shows us the real beneath the workaday realities, but it also punches “a hole through the sky.” For the poet, it is the struggle at “the edge of the pit,” “the edge of the wound,” it is the sound of the sirens we cannot *not* hear, even with wax in our ears, those harbingers of death, pain, loss, desire, joy, heartache. But, if we can handle it, it is the process that returns us to “the living heart” of ourselves and the world. I am grateful to be involved in listening for “the endless baptism of freshly created things.” Thus, when I hear the poem stirring I will always fling myself forward but I am also learning to wait, to listen, to sound out its powers as it swims into being in a shape of its own making.

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Book Reviews

Tadeusz Różewicz, *Mother Departs* (Stork Press, 2013)

In 1999, when he was seventy-eight years old, the great Polish poet and playwright, Tadeusz Różewicz, turned his attention to the death of his mother, Stefania, who had died of cancer decades before. *Mother Departs* received Poland's most prestigious literary award, the Nike Prize, in 2000. It was also adapted for the theatre. The book only appeared in English in 2013, however, in a translation by Barbara Bogoczek, accompanied by an insightful introduction by Tony Howard, which situates the work in historical context, and also within Różewicz's long career as a poet. As Howard notes, *Mother Departs* is perhaps Różewicz's "most personal work" (ix). It is a brave and beautiful text, which sets into conversation several family photographs with a range of forms of writing: poetry, prose, memoir, diary entries, and fragments from letters. This conversation is enacted most strongly in Różewicz's poem, "The Photograph," in which he records the words written by Stefania Różewicz on the back of a photograph of herself, words which haunt the entire book – "year 1944 cruel to me" (67).

1944 was the year in which the Różewicz family lost Tadeusz's elder brother Janusz. As young men, both brothers were promising poets, and both joined the Polish resistance against the Nazis after the Second World War began. Tadeusz joined the Home Army in 1941 and Janusz the underground military intelligence. Janusz was betrayed to the Gestapo, tortured, and, in November 1944, executed in Łódź. As Różewicz details in "The Photograph," his family kept the devastating information about his imprisonment and death from Stefania for as long as they could. But, despite their best efforts, she knew, and no one was spared the pain of his loss. As an absent presence, Janusz looms as large in *Mother Departs* as his mother Stefania, who mourned him until the day she died. The diary Tadeusz Różewicz kept as his mother was dying in 1957 is included as part of the hybrid text of *Mother Departs*, under the title "Gliwice Diary." Here the poet records, just days before her death: "how my poor mother suffered all those years after Janusz's death (right until today – this very day) – I cannot think about what the Gestapo did to him" (97).

The structuring of this sentence, which enfolds into one the pain undergone by both mother and son due to the horrific final months of the family's oldest child, enacts one of the central preoccupations of *Mother Departs*: the ways in which the individual suffering of one family member becomes the pain of all the others. The Różewicz family suffer throughout their lives due to what Janusz had to endure in prison before his death. In the "Gliwice Diary," Różewicz records the agonising months undergone by his family as his mother battles cancer, first in hospital, and then in his home, before finally succumbing to her illness. The poet is direct about the facts of her daily struggle, which reduces her to a tiny birdlike bag of bones. He questions repeatedly his continued need for her continued life:

I see how she is suffering and I should wish for her release. But I wish so much she could live, so I could scrounge at least half a year more, so I could look at her sometimes. Is this selfishness – but no, love can be like this... she may suffer terribly but let her breathe, let her eyes be open, let her look, let her speak – there is still life in this poor, butchered, tormented human body. (92)

Unable to walk, and, as the months go on, increasingly bereft of either consciousness or language, his mother Stefania nevertheless remains an irreplaceable force of life in the poet's own, as necessary to him while bedridden and dying as she has ever been: "She's in the other room, breathes, whimpers, but she's alive! Alive" (101).

In the "Gliwice Diary," Różewicz also records his thoughts on his own poetry, his inability to write, his varied reading, his views on the post-war state of Polish literature, as well as his honest assessment of his failures as a carer to his dying mother: the moments when the emotion and exhaustion get the better of him and he erupts in frustration or anger. One of the most extraordinary aspects of *Mother Departs* is Różewicz's thorough self-interrogation of what poets or poetry may be for, a question made even more stark when raised in the presence of a mother's death:

What kind of action is the writing of poems? What is it?

I suspect nobody actually knows.

The worst poem can be a good poem – for somebody, sometime, somewhere... So why do you correct the text ten times over... What, who demands that? What is the force inside a poet, writing?

The gall bladder attack is still going on.

It's as if she's completely emptied herself. Her poor tiny bones. Stas said: 'I wish Mother would die.' I can't bring myself to second his wish – the best thing one could hope for her.

An unclear poem. (104)

As this extract from his 1957 diary demonstrates, *Mother Departs* continues the unadorned and polyphonic approach to writing that has long characterised Różewicz's work. Here, the poet contrasts his own need for his mother's continued life with his brother's wish that their mother would be released into death. The differing views of the two brothers coalesce into the next sentence: "an unclear poem."

Everything included in the multi-vocal text of *Mother Departs* becomes, by virtue of Różewicz's astute decisions as to the arrangement and juxtapositions of his text, a form of poetry. The two sections that close the book are in the voices of his brothers. Firstly, a beautiful fragment of a letter from Janusz, written in 1940, in which he recalls his walk home from school and his mother adorning his bed with lily of the valley and jasmine on his name day. The final entry, entitled "In the Kaleidoscope," is a childhood recollection from his brother Stanislaw (the Stas of the diary entry). It is Stanislaw who recalls that while Janusz was in prison and his letters stopped coming: "we do not tell mum, we tell her tales of all the different situations in the underground where you have to disappear for a long while" (135). Stanislaw also recalls a woman who worked with Janusz in the underground remembering later: "A few days before his arrest, Janusz suddenly said out the blue – as if anticipating what was to happen – 'Above all, I'm sorry for my mother'" (135).

One of the reasons *Mother Departs* achieves its palpable effect is because of these different voices. The final section also provides the metaphor by which to read the entire book: the effect of Różewicz's combinations of form and voice is kaleidoscopic. The different sections provide a shifting and crystalizing perspective that gradually builds a vivid picture of his family over decades of life, death, war, and change. Stefania is granted her own voice early on, in an extensive recollection of her own childhood in the village of

Szynkielew. Stefania details the filth and hardship of most of the villagers' lives as well their humour and acceptance in the face of their difficult existence. Her account of the rural people amongst whom she grew up is a world away from the city in which she will die. In her observations, what comes through clearly are Stefania's intelligence and compassion, qualities that were to mark all her children in their relationships to her.

One of the great strengths of *Mother Departs* is Różewicz's thoroughgoing exploration of the fact that all of us remain, all our lives, all the people we have ever been – a fact that can often be best understood within the intimacies of family life. This comes through clearly in the poems in the text, which record the idyllic beauties of his childhood, as well as the war, and his mother's illness. In the "Gliwice Diary," the poet more than once describes his dying mother as a child, a person who, in her vulnerability and frailty, has become "my poor little child" (92). At the same time, the adult son retains his own child-like need of his mother. This idea is present from the outset of the text, which opens with a photo of Stefania, and a sustained meditation on the ever-watchful nature of his mother's devoted attention:

Now, as I write these words, my mother's eyes rest on me. The eyes, mindful and tender, are silently asking, 'what's troubling you my darling...?' With a smile I reply, 'nothing... everything's fine Mummy, really,' 'but tell me,' Mother says, 'what's the matter?' I turn my head away, look through the window. (3)

The prose sections that open *Mother Departs* achieve their affect by means of this moving and child-like address of the poet to his mother. As an old man of seventy-eight, Różewicz confronts himself as a man who did not love his mother so well in life as he did in his poems, a poet who cannot live up to the ideals of his own poetry. Throughout these opening sections, his mother is a ubiquitous presence, and the description of her eyes watching him from her photograph develops into a consideration of the eternal vigilance of the mother in all our lives: "Mother's eyes which can see everything watch the birth watch throughout life and watch after death from the 'other world'" (4). Różewicz observes that those who live without such motherly attention are "lost in a world stripped of love and warmth" (4). Much later in the text, as she lies dying in hospital, Stefania embarrasses her adult son with her open displays of affection and asks him to return the next day, simply "so I can have a look" (92). This need for his mother to keep looking at her child is echoed in the son's persistent need to keep talking to his mother. As his mother is buried, and the family leave Różewicz's home, the poet notes: "It's quiet. Mum I am talking and I will always be talking to you. I'll talk to you as if you were next to me" (106). Despite its title, *Mother Departs* suggests that our mothers never leave us, not even in death. It also answers precisely, with its spare honest explorations of familial love, the question of why we need poetry.

Pascale Petit, *Mama Amazonica* (Bloodaxe Books 2017)

With the publication of her second collection, *The Zoo Father* (2001), Pascale Petit began a sustained poetic relationship with the animals of the Amazon jungle that has become a defining characteristic of her work and a means to write the unspeakable: her history of childhood trauma, abandonment, and abuse. In her sixth collection, *Fauverie* (2014), her terrifying but charismatic father is collapsed into the figure of Aramis, the black jaguar in the Parc Zoologique in Paris, whom she visits every day while in the city where her father is dying. As Petit observes in her notes to *Mama Amazonica*, her jaguar poems “wouldn’t exist without Aramis” (112). She also explains that all the animals featured in the poems she either observed in the wild, in two research trips to the Peruvian Amazon, or encountered in the Parc Zoologique and the Ménagerie of the Jardin des Plantes.

Petit is a British poet with French, Welsh, and Indian heritage – and her recourse to the fauna and flora of the Amazon has allowed her to track in astonishing psychological detail the entangled roots and routes of her own identity and family history. The Fauverie is the big-cat house in the Jardin des Plantes but the word also evokes les Fauves (French for “the wild beasts”), the name given to the group of early twentieth-century French painters who used raw colour straight from the tube and emphasised painterly abstraction over realism in their work. To read *Mama Amazonica* is to step straight inside such a painting – a brightly coloured nightmare world where Petit’s metaphorical technique reaches new heights of emotional risk. Her use of animal imagery allows these poems to reside somewhere between the primal realities of animal life and the grotesque brutalities of folktale and myth – but it is her focus on the torments of animal existences hemmed in from all sides by human activities that allows her to speak most powerfully of our capacity for violence and cruelty.

The poems are set in the psychiatric ward where her mother lives, which is figured as an Amazon rainforest. The notion of an asylum for animals threatened with extinction, habitat destruction, and exposed to the daily horrors of hunting, poaching, and the trade in exotic wildlife, allows Petit to deal in an unflinching manner with all types of psychic, physical, and sexual violence, as well as her mother's mental illness. The treatment is often as horrifying as the hallucinations and entrapments of the disease. Petit's animal imagery is the route to the quick of her questions about the life of her "were-mama" who becomes, in these breath-taking poems, a water lily, a jaguar, a boa constrictor, a hummingbird. These contradictory images are held up against each other and, as the collection unfolds, permit Petit a multifaceted, often tender, examination of the life and death of a mother who married her rapist and gave birth to his children, as well as the injurious consequences this has had for her own life:

Grief squatting in your heart
like a strangler fig high in a branch fork,
 that sends roots
down your chest and weaves a cage
around each hope – (42)

With the threatened Amazon as her extended metaphor, Petit focusses with searing precision on the realities of intergenerational trauma, and the terrible embodied suffering

we share with the animal kingdom we are steadily destroying, without requiring the framing details of a localised historical human life:

My Animal Mother
shaman's bitch

a highway bulldozed
through her brain (15)

In the psychiatric ward, her mother lurks like a jaguar in a cage with the sedative wearing off. She is a little hummingbird trapped with birdlime or stamping her feet to make her nest watertight. She is a waterlily who replays her trauma night after night:

how the white

lily of her youth
let that scarab of a man

scuttle into her floral chamber
before she could cry no. (13)

The images in these poems stand out as if ringed in fire. Her mother "calls her depression Anaconda" but she is indistinguishable from the snake itself, whose "eyes can mesmerise a fawn" and who, like the ouroboros, swallows herself, and "lies in depression's belly" for months dissolving "in the monster juices" (63). Her father is figured as a cockroach, a caiman, and a man violently abusive to women and animals alike. In "Taxidermy," he has given her mother cotton wool instead of a heart, scraped out her eyes and replaced them with "glass eyes she cannot close" (20). In "Bottled Macaw" (72) the extended metaphor of the daughter as the macaw in the text is linked to the illegal trafficking of animals made drunk and then crammed into bottles and into suitcases, travelling in conditions of appalling suffering. In "King Vultures," one of the final poems of the collection, the poet notes, "I've gone as far back as I can," and presents the powerful possibility that she might have escaped her suffering if she had been permitted not to exist in the first place. The daughter rewinds the tape of her life until she is a foetus in the womb: "my eyes sink into their sockets / then vanish" (104) and the doctor tells her pregnant, psychologically ill mother that she should not have any children. A collection that knits together, in an astonishing fashion, our ecological disaster and the myriad ways in which abuse begets abuse closes with questions as to encounters and navigations that might take the poet "through and away" (108) from the damage done to her as a child.

Eavan Boland, *The Historians* (Carcenet, 2020)

As she finalised the proofs for *The Historians* in early 2020, neither Eavan Boland nor her long-time editor at Norton, Jill Bialosky, knew it would be her final collection. Boland died aged seventy-five, from a stroke in her home in Dublin, in April 2020. *The Historians* appeared in October of the same year. Knowing this adds a poignancy to reading these poems, which now register as the culmination of her life's work. *The Historians* is a collection concerned, like so much of Boland's poetry, with the intersections of family, memory, and the Irish past. In her attention to what will inevitably be lost, marginalised or, in some cases, deliberately erased from our own personal and more official memories, the poet maintains what has long been a complex relationship with the very idea of making history.

The title poem of the collection presents two women in a garden: "Say the word *history*: I see / your mother, mine." They are burning letters, journals, some of Boland's earliest poems, on a bonfire:

 Their hands are full of words.
 [...]
 Before the poem ends
 they will have burned them all. (16)

"The Historians" sets the activity of "these women we loved" putting words to the flame: "To stop memory becoming history. / To stop words healing what should not be healed" against the "patriots" of Irish history labouring to write their own story of their island: "a story that needed to be told." The women are, she asserts: "Record-keepers with a different task" (16-17). The difficult ideas in this poem, particularly the issue of what cannot and should not be healed, the complex relationship between memory and history, are explored throughout her collection. In "Two Waters," the poet describes herself as born between the river Liffey and the Irish Sea, which figure differently in the island's long history of being invaded by others, from the Vikings travelling up the Liffey in their longboats to the English colonisers arriving from across the sea:

 What could heal
 this other water,
 this Irish Sea,
 soured by emigrant tears? (45)

Boland watches the sea breaking onto the granite rocks of the shore and considers what, if anything, the sea communicates: "warning record-keepers / not to write down an old grief: / as if the sea could remember it" (46).

Perhaps only those who have lived surrounded by the consequences of political trauma can adequately consider the value in forgetting as well as remembering a history marked by old griefs, factions, and retaliations. Throughout the collection, the centuries of oppression and violence that disrupted the lives of Irish people are figured in imagery of salt water, wind, and storms:

 All we know is

the winds that blew in from
our stolen ocean
brought salt.
They provided the wounds (6)

But, in contradistinction to those who entangle themselves in “old quarrels clothed in a hundred years of heat” Boland presents herself, in “Margin,” as someone who has discovered the necessity of speaking from elsewhere:

a transient, a woman
dressed for warmth,

telling the island to myself, as I always have,
so as to see it more clearly:

not the land of fevers and injuries. But the region
I found for myself,
described for myself in my own language

so I could stand if only for one moment
on its margin. (59)

Transience, the marginal, the lives of those who fall outside the lines of official record, are central preoccupations in the collection, which is also characteristic in its attention to the activity of writing poetry. Boland played a vital role in both feminist and Irish literature throughout her fifty-year career, ensuring with quiet persistence that the real lives of women, which she argued had been reduced to the stuff of myth or ornament in the male-dominated canon, found a place in Irish poetry. In a documentary made about her life and work in 2018, *Eavan Boland: Is It Still The Same*, she noted that the debate over what constituted legitimate subject matter for poetry, which had inflected her early career, has continued, asserting that it was still “easier to have a political murder in an Irish poem than a washing machine.” Her final collection continues to raise these questions but in important ways also to interrogate her own stance towards them.

In a sequence of three poems grouped under the title “Three Ways in Which Poems Fail,” and moving through centuries of history, Boland attends to a poem written by a monk in the margin of an illuminated manuscript, a poem that cannot find any way to name or to face the Viking longboats coming into shore. She raises the question of how poetic forms travel through conquest, by considering how Virgil’s Latin forms came to influence poetic registers in Ireland, whereas she has had different priorities, searching for ways “to bring words home, / to winter hills, fogged-away stars, / and children’s faces fading into sleep” (55). In the third poem of this sequence, “Silence,” she considers her own approach to the question of the Irish Troubles, this sectarian violence once again figured as a storm: “the doors of the ocean were open / to a wind with an appetite for roadside bins, roofs.” She knew “what I wanted / to write was not storms / or wet air, it was something else” (57). But the poem ends on a note of self-doubt and failure, settling only on the undecidability of the value of her silence on this pertinent issue. The proper relationship of poetry to history is a

question that moves restlessly through the collection as Boland considers, from a number of perspectives, how not everything can be articulated or recuperated, nor even should be.

“The Break-Up of a Library in an Anglo-Irish House in Wexford: 1964” ends with a stirring idea, that the actual end of empire is signalled unobtrusively, as the words that came with it, and named ways of being, are lost from use forever:

the end of empire is and always will be
not sedition nor the whisper
of conspiracy but that

slipper chair in the hallway
that has lost the name
no one will ever call it by again. (48)

In other poems, however, loss, erasure, and omission are less easy to bear. “Eviction” details how the poet must imagine into being her grandmother’s appearance in a Drogheda court for rent arrears, as her lived experience had no value to and thus has been written out of the official record. The newspaper column that records her case notes only the amusement of the lawyers, the serving of the notice, and the registration of her name as a tenant in the plaintiff’s rent books:

A woman leaves a courtroom in tears.
A nation is rising to the light.
History notes the second not the first.
Nor does it know the answer to why
on a winter evening
in a modern Ireland
I linger over the pages of the *Drogheda*
Argus and Leinster Journal, 1904,
knowing as I do that my attention has
no agency, none at all. Nor my rage. (14-15)

As the *New Yorker* noted in Boland’s obituary, she had been submitting poems to the magazine since 1987. “Eviction” was her final contribution, published, in an apt coincidence, on the day of her death, April 27, 2020.

Boland’s final collection considers, repeatedly, the question of the agency of the poet in the face of the occlusions and distortions of history. She offers no easy answers. As the title poem suggests, each of us, in our own way, is a record-keeper, and we each bear responsibilities in deciding what to attend to, what to keep, and what to burn. The motives of the two women in “The Historians” are obscure, what they burn is precious, but nevertheless they have decided to destroy it rather than keep this record of their family’s words for posterity. As they burn words, the poet looks on from the vantage of time, writing words that record of this act of burning. This poem, like so many in the collection, is self-reflective, attending to the question of what poetry can achieve. Some of the most vivid poems in the collection link poetry to other ancient crafts – the lamplighter lifting his long pole with a lit wick, mapping the dark city anew with his fire; the woman threading wool on a spindle; the wood and canvas used to fashion the *currach* (the Irish name for a small boat)

– and to her mother’s art of painting. An idea that recurs is that we cannot always choose what we remember or forget. There is choice, but also contingency and chance, involved in what is lost to memory, and thus to life, forever. “Anonymous” recalls “a near relative” who was an active participant in Irish resistance to English rule, helping carry messages and documents, “ferrying revolt to the far corners” of Dublin. Again, the poet attempts to imagine a woman related to her into being, on cold nights she thinks she can still see her “strolling,” but then she questions her ability to know anything for certain:

Then I ask myself
what is it I know?
The evening mist unfolds.
It is empty. That
is history. This
is only poetry. (33).

Boland prefers a poetry alive to what has been lost to any attempt to fashion the past into something definitive. In “Statue 2016,” she considers the bronze bust of a woman in Stephen’s Green “flensed off to make this fixed look. / To make it seem set. To make it look necessary. / I will never be convinced” (49).

But Boland’s final poem, “Our Future Will Become the Past of Other Women,” deliberately sets out to create a poetic history. As the epigraph notes: “This poem was commissioned by the Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations and the Royal Irish Academy to mark the centenary of Irish women exercising their right to vote in 1918.” The poem is deeply moving as Boland writes the lives and work of these women into being. She considers how the persistent, determined actions of women link us through time, change our lives, as we in turn will change the lives of women who come after us. She offers her hand to take the hand of “our ghost sister,” each one of those women “who came before” and worked for women’s freedom in a different century:

Your palm roughened by heat, by frost.
By pulling a crop out of the earth.
By lifting a cauldron off the hearth.
By stripping rushes dipped in fat
To make a wick make a rush light. (65)

The poem names sixteen Irish women, saying “some of their names / To honor all of their names” and Boland asserts that her poem will not only mark “the act, the law, the vote” but also “their hours of doubt, / Their years of work” (64) and their “gathering one by one in Irish cities” (65). She promises: “as we mark these hundred years / We will not leave you behind” (63). Boland’s poem also notes that freedom is never guaranteed: it “is not abstract, not a concept,” sometimes it exists only as “a hope raised, then defeated” (64). This feminist Irish poet, who divided her time between her home in Dublin and her teaching at Stanford, wrote these words, celebrating the centenary of the vote for Irish women in 2018, during the awful years of the Trump presidency, when hard-won freedoms for women were (and still are) being rolled back in the United States, and all over the world. Remembering this context gives this poem a global reach. Boland’s final poem, in a collection marked by what has been lost, makes us consider what we have lost in a poet

who made the lives of women the focus of her writing for fifty years. I feel the need to echo Boland's own promise back to her, we will not leave you behind: "give me your hand: / It has written our future (66).

Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (Jonathan Cape, 2017)

From the compelling imagery of its title, which evokes the name given to a visual artwork, Ocean Vuong's astonishing debut collection centres on the idea of the psychic and physical wounding caused by various forms of exit: migration, exodus, exile, as well as the culture of gun violence in the United States. The book has received numerous awards, including the 2017 T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. It is a complex self-portrait, emerging from the poet's unflinching exploration of the history of his family, and the fact that he would never have existed if it had not been for America's military involvement in Vietnam.

Born on a rice farm near Saigon, in 1988, Vuong grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. In "Self Portrait with Exit Wounds," he traces his life history as a series of journeys and encounters from the refugee camp, "sick with smoke and half-sung / hymns" where he spent a year with his mother and grandmother before their arrival, when Vuong was two years old, in the United States. He imagines his American grandfather:

his blond hair flickering in napalm-blasted wind, let it pin
him down to the dust where his future daughters rise,

fingers blasted with salt and Agent Orange. (26)

The poem, like the collection as a whole, examines Vuong's complex identity as "another / brown gook," born "to cock back this rifle, smooth and slick, like a true / Charlie" (27) but also, for better or worse, an American. His adolescence is spent being taught to hunt deer in the Connecticut woods, and lying to his mother about where he is going, before meeting for secret dates in cornfields and cars with young men who get their kicks by pointing their "daddy's revolver / to the sky" (43). As the title of another poem indicates, he is the product of a "(Deto)nation" searching for the story of his family "on the bomb-bright page" (58). He reflects in "Notebook Fragments":

An American soldier fucked a Vietnamese farmgirl. Thus my
mother exists. Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me.

Yikes. (67)

The playful slip into American slang here is but one illustration of Vuong's deft command of language, form, and tone. Jackie Kennedy voices one of the finest poems in his collection, "Of Thee I Sing," as she holds her husband's skull together in the back of the black limousine after he is shot. Part of the poem's extraordinary effect is that the reader does not know to whom the voice belongs until, almost halfway through, the speaker observes: "I am not Jackie O yet" (31). The assassination of J.F.K. was one of the events that led up to America's active military engagement in Vietnam under President Johnson. Reminiscent of the traditions of Asian calligraphic art, in which a poem is also a painting, Vuong's poem moves over the white space of the page in lines set against each of the margins so that its visual form replicates the tensions between promise and horror that is the ongoing story of America:

Your hand letting go. You're all over

the seat now, deepening
citizen, surrounded by Jesus
this country. The twisted faces.
limousine. My one white glove
our American dreams.

my fuchsia dress. But I'm a good
& ambulances. I love
My country. The blue sky. Black
glistening pink – with all

Vuong's poetry moves through time and space in a collection that is unforgettable in content as well as a verbal and formal triumph. In "Seventh Circle of Earth," the poem consists of only white space and footnote markers: enacting the erasure of the gay couple, Michael Humphrey and Clayton Capshaw, who were murdered by immolation in their Texan home in 2011. Their words to each other as they greet their deaths are confined to the tiny font of the footnotes at the bottom of each page. The imagery of the night sky or the blue sky recurs in poem after poem, coming together in the ekphrastic "*Untitled (Blue, Green, and Brown)*: oil on canvas: Mark Rothko: 1952." The painting's twinning of rectangular shapes, green and brown horizontals set against a vivid electric blue, evoke the fall of the Twin Towers against a clear September sky:

They say the sky is blue
but I know it is black seen through too much distance.
You will always remember what you were doing
when it hurts the most. (47)

In "Immigrant Haibun," Vuong utilises the ancient Japanese poetic form, originally used for travel writing, to mythologise his own name and give voice to the precarious ocean voyages of thousands of refugees: the boat people who escaped Vietnam from the fall of Saigon in 1975 well into the 1990s. "Aubade with Burning City" takes the reader with cinematic immediacy into Saigon as it falls, and the Armed Forces Radio plays Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" as the coded signal to begin "Operation Frequent Wind," the evacuation of American civilians and Vietnamese refugees by helicopter:

A military truck speeds through the intersection, children
shrieking inside. A bicycle hurled
through a store window. When the dust rises, a black dog
lies panting in the road. Its hind legs
crushed into the shine
of a white Christmas. (10)

Saigon erupts into chaos, and as the song plays on the city is covered in snow: a powerful metaphor for the destructive hubris of American whiteness falling on to lives of the Vietnamese people.

Vuong reiterates the idea that his life was conceived and lived in the presence of political and familial violence. The text is a portrait of the child of a working-class immigrant family, a journey of both mourning and healing, in which his tender evocations of the bodies

of his various lovers, as well as his parents, can be read as love poems that celebrate the wordless liberations to be found in human touch. His relationships with his mother and father are marked by their very different gifts. In "Always and Forever" his father kneels at his boy's bed "his overalls reeking of gasoline" and slides a shoebox containing a Colt .45 underneath, saying: "Open this when you need me most." The boy holds the gun and wonders: "If an entry wound in the night / would make a hole wide as morning" (16). In "The Gift," he presents a moving portrait of his mother, the chemicals she uses in the nail salon where she works "fuming / through her pink / I ♥ NY t-shirt" (23) as she teaches him to write the first three letters of the alphabet: as far as she can go, without knowing how to read and write herself. The poet is "Telemachus" (7): a son searching for knowledge of his wandering father. He is the first literate member of his family, learning that in taking his mother's gift: "by pressing this pen to paper, I was touching us back from extinction" (73). Here, as in so many poems, bodily touch and the act of writing combine as a way to heal. In this complex quest for a place to belong, as a queer Vietnamese-American poet, the penultimate poem, "Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong," establishes a poetic lineage of queer affiliation in echoing poems by both Roger Reeves and Frank O'Hara. Vuong addresses himself and the violent history of both his countries:

Don't be afraid, the gunfire
is only the sound of people
trying to live a little longer
and failing. (78)