

My silver stripes
and other poems

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My silver stripes

and other poems

Maletšema Ruth Emsley



No matter how big a child is, he cannot deny that he was
once carried on the back of a woman.
(African proverb).

In memory of Abram Nkgelepeng Mashilo (1920–1994) and
Paulus Isaac Emsley (1960–2020)

'I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength'
(Philippians 4:13).

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Foreword

Maletšema Ruth Emsley assembled this debut volume, consisting of a total of 123 poems in 8 sections, as creative input making up part of her research submission requirements at the Department of Higher Education and Training at University of Limpopo. When Ruth initially approached me, as editor, to assist her, she stated that the poems were intended for “readers interested in learning about South African women’s hardships, the lawlessness in the country and Covid-19”. In her Preface to her book, she has written –

Through the written word I seek to vent, to advise and to shine a light on truth in ways that prose cannot do.

My silver stripes and other poems is not to be taken as a volume of poetry produced for its own sake. Poetry in this book is used frankly as a vehicle to convey just about everything that flows from life through us – we are given glimpses into intimate feelings and moments; are confronted with the poet’s strong political and feminist views; we hear her fiercely scolding government failures and crimes associated with the patriarchy; she laments her husband’s and others’ deaths to Covid-19; she questions the evasiveness of the medical staff; she pays tribute to valued elders; records aspects of rural life, including events that show ways in which spiritual belief structures are

embedded in rural rituals; and she describes human behaviour that ranges from watching tv, to taking drugs, to waiting for the bus, to conducting a choir, to eating in a restaurant, to domestic chores. The most moving poem, illustrating the last-mentioned of these themes, must surely be the tribute and lament for her late husband, 'Fingerprints on the window pane' (p.107).

Emsley knows how to craft poetry according to traditional standards, showing originality and a fine sense of rhythm. 'No reverse' (p. 152) and 'Frogspawn' (p.5) are examples. The title poem, 'My silver stripes', on p.12, is a signature poem. Not only is it honest and real, but also offers an utterly original way of seeing – simultaneously memorable and humorous, the image weds lightness of spirit with serious self-reflection. The comparison of the stretch marks with "streaks of light in dark clouds" and their identification with "a filigree of silver snakes" are potent and self-empowering literary images. In a superbly cheeky turnaround of conventional standards of beauty, the poem concludes that "these streaks [...] kind of smarten my body", as they are "Just fine signs of me growing!" The speaker's remarkable inhabitation of her physical body here demonstrates what, for me, is the most valuable among the feminist angles provided in this collection – where spiritual, mental, emotional and physical dimensions are integrated to radiate a splendid quality of soul.

Similar humour and frankness can be found in 'My knees' (p.132), which begins with the unforgettable line, "My knees are ostrich's eyes".

One of my favourite poems in the collection is 'We waited for no aid' (p.30), which quietly reclaims the colonial pastoral image of African women with gourds on their heads, by means of simple statements that take us from the tops of their heads right down to the soles of their feet. "We boastfully balanced

our black pots on our heads”, it begins, continuing with these excellently authentic lines –

They stood straight, free, secure
 on our trained, independent necks,
 on the comfort-crown, wound from ragged
 large Black Label nappies,
 which have now turned yellow, holed –

The poem ends resonantly and assertively –

In a line, on a faithful path
 that greets us at dawn
 and bids us farewell at dusk, we traipsed,
 humming in harmony,
 quieting the dewy roads with our bare feet.

The contact of the bare feet with the ground, and their quieting influence on the “dewy roads”, is, in my opinion, one of the most powerful feminist AND feminine moments in the book. It is, moreover, a potent spiritual leadership statement regarding the relationship between humanity and the earth.

By contrast, many other poems in the collection are loud, unrestrained outcries against injustice, crime and what the poet calls “lawlessness”. An awareness of the wholesomeness of rural lifestyles nevertheless often shines through.

In ‘A lost boy in the roving world’ (p.90) we see the adjective “roving” applied to the world, rather than the boy – an interesting reversal of the stereotype of boys. For Emsley, it is the world that roves, because it conditions “a life that demands quick travel, / the deceiving life moves, and mocks / old thoughts on the edge.” She successfully uses an image of rural life to capture this ‘mockery’ –

Our boys are slipping away,
like calves from amniotic sacs,
ejected onto a dry world that does not receive them.

The poem ends with an unambiguous injunction –

The village must come back
to raise the child.

Emsley's concern for society as a whole is shown in her dramatic monologues, for example, 'Beggars' survival' (p.70) and 'Confession' (p.56). In the latter, a man with daughters apologises to all women, admitting that –

Like male lions, we marked our environment
with our pee,
to defend its emptiness.

Her nostalgic tribute to her grandfather, 'My grandfather, my hero' (p.171) affirms the value of groundedness, of living close to the earth and practising hands-on skills –

Sunday mornings,
we received a treat
before we went to church: Dutch Reformed, under the
tree.
He'd squeeze goat's milk
into our mouths,
after his stainless steel bucket had overflowed with foam,
for grandma to prepare sour curds.
'Knowing how to milk
is not quite as simple as it sounds!'
he'd say,
aiming a few squirts into our mouths!

Emsley is a teacher and trainer, and not a few of the poems are plainly didactic, for example, 'A woman's life' (p.53), 'Senses' (p.54) and 'Celebrate my achievements' (p.59). Then there are the enigmatic 'Superstitions' (p.162), 'Waters for healing' (p.165) and 'Mourning' (p.48) – which deal with mysteries beyond the physical world. The last-mentioned is one of the most extraordinary poems in the collection, offering a detailed scene of ritual, in which a new widow is visited by the other women in the village. It transcends categories in its unflinching depiction of the visceral nature of spiritual experience.

The reader should note that, while she was offered comment, recommendations and textual guidance, the final responsibility for each poem rests with its author.

With its wide range of themes and register, this sizeable debut collection has something to offer every kind of reader.

– Silke Heiss
Sunrise-on-Sea, Amatola Coastal, June 2023

Preface

This book traverses my childhood and adult experiences, embedded as they are in the cultural, political and gender realities of pre- and post-apartheid South Africa. The pain of losses to Covid-19 are here, along with concerns about our neglect of the boy child, no longer raised by the nurturing, bracing and wholesome African village. Nature is a thread woven through these poems; gratitude for life and for love, I hope, shines through. I wander from the past to the present, focusing on incidents and observations that struck me as meaningful, painful, beautiful or unjust. The issue of gender looms large, as it must in a country like ours.

Through the written word, I seek to vent, to advise and to shine a light on truth in ways that prose cannot do. A poet mentor said, 'Say it as it is.' This is what I strive to do. Poetry is a sharing of the heart – in whatever condition it may be. Above all, I seek to be honest, to be real. Another mentor said, 'Be sincere with your readers'.

Though I have spent decades as a literature teacher, I was pleasantly surprised to read my own collection! Some of these poems are as old as my secondary school years; others as recent as Covid-19. I hope that all bring a sense of recognition to the reader, as all literature should do, reminding us of truths we may have overlooked. As Ben Jonson said of literature, 'It is not for an age but for all time'.

I am grateful to a number of people who have shared with me their experiences of poetry writing and publishing. Many helped me during the writing of this book; most notably, my truest friend and husband, Paulus, who succumbed to Covid-19 in 2020. Others are still alive, and continue to help me in one way or another in this journey of life. To all, I say thank you – I am grateful to have you in my life.

M.R. Emsley, 2023.

PART ONE
Nature

Town purple

In Pretoria on spring days,
the purple of Jacaranda petals spread evenly,
as a queen's quilted violet eiderdown.

Frogspawn

My mum's biggest fear:
leaping frog after a night's drizzle;
spawn clumped in water.

Survival 2

Roses survive among thorns;
beauty rests, conspicuous and scented,
blunting the harmful.

When nature calls

Angry skies release snaps and claps
as ears collect thunder's loud shouts.
Eyes shut down from dancing fires in the air.

Under the skies' sullen spell,
tree trunks fall and sleep on now invisible roads,
as waters glug in hollowed grounds.

Honking geese float above the waters;
confused crocodiles gape on stoeps,
regurgitated by their own habitats.

Iron sheets and branches swoosh through the air.
Tables and cupboard doors twist and spin
on sparkling mirrors of raging streams.

Gradually, the skies quieten,
letting the slow sun peep above the horizon.
Chirps and coos ululate in a washed heaven.

Chocolate slicks of mud coat the land.
Clear skies will wait before clouds re-gather to clean the earth –
first letting the green appear.

Spectra

A rare pink chameleon
seems to have flown to the sky –
rainbow.

Sharing a locust head

When you eat alone,
your legs will not carry you.
Skinny legs will deny your big body.

Nature knows

A mind that is thoughtful,
ponders why a crab is so mindful.

A crab, whose shell remains hard
against man's polluting heart.

The jellyfish and sharks pick natural fights,
but the crab hides its inner side.

The crab, whose flesh man devours
to satiate his hunger.

Nature is a playground for the fool,
who knows not that crabs are food!

When the new moon is up

The forced seed in parched earth does not grow;
if it survives, its buds bruise, and will not glow
till arid land is tilled.

If earth and sun and moon
are equals,
the tides will rise,
the sun will bless,
the moon will bathe the land in light,
but the red earth
will stand and wait for rare drizzles
to clean and wet the soil
so that the seed feeds.

Very dry land
should be moistened.
Let the dry soil be dampened
so the fruit can be good
for the soul.
So when the new moon sets
red and glowing,
it gently dispels the pandemic and heals.

When the new moon lingers,
we'll build a safe world
if we can harness
the harshness of the fresh moon.

My silver stripes

These lines on my thighs shine bright as
streaks of light in dark clouds;
a filigree of silver snakes
in miniature.

These glistening lines on my thighs,
are parallel snails' trails on brown sand,
showing that my growth is no
disability!
My silver stripes are signs of life.
They're adornment
not pain.
They don't stop me playing games.

These streaks on my tummy,
breasts, hips and back
kind of smarten my body.
Just fine signs of me growing!

Love for the city

I do not have fears that the world will soon
engulf us with ire or fire or heaven's roar,
pouring out to clean the clutter.

I do not have fear of thunder;
I do not have fears that the earth will burst and bruise and
bury
us with righteous anger.
– those prognoses do not bother me.

I do not have fears that the last drop will dry,
that rivers' cracked mud will reproach us
in abandoned dryness.

When the constellations
deny us brightness,
I have no fear in the cool, clear darkness.

I have fears of spiritual famine ravaging us
when the cities cry to the valleys,
begging for a gasp of air and of earth;
I fear that contamination of the village,
will soon erode the culture and all remnants of morality.
People close their eyes and shut their ears
to the now gentle warnings
of the impending gnashing of teeth.
I fear that.

Our undying mistakes are pleasant warnings
from the plagues to humanity.
It is man's desire for the world to give up its all –
but then the wealth ceases to come!

Ageing

Petals flaunted their fragrance;
they sprouted, blossomed and bloomed.
Now, beauty dwindles to dry foliage.

PART TWO
Love

Filicidal fires

I recollect fires burning at a distance.
Granny would tell me they're veld fires
caused by careless tobacco smokers,
or by farmers clearing arid fields.
But there were furious fires, too!

Those flames were far away,
and no threat to us.
Flames fuelled by tyres,
flames that burned those who spoke out.
They were torched for telling the truth
in townships,
for freedom.

But these fires I have seen now!
Of rage and irreverence
and envy and jealousy!

Children charred to death,
bodies shrunken, reduced
to crumpled sacrifice,
deeply-fried to soot –
by jilted fathers!

When it dies

My first love, for you, now
withers like wingless
butterflies

reversed to worms
that lie over my windshield
after a night's travel.

Uncertainty of new love

Like the shut eyes of a mole
– when they open up to the sun,
they die.

Real love knows not which heart to fill.
Compassion is an abyss!

Lost love is a stray needle
in a haystack,
with open palms I cannot grope.

I am still searching for the lyrics

I got tranced
and danced
in my sheets.
When I saw his call, I choked in my bed.

I ignored it.
Then gnawed my lips,
to figure what his move was, to call me in the night.

Then he *WhatsApped* me a song,
one of Gerald Levert's love songs.
The intro said, 'I've got a couple of nice cars,
a pretty nice house ...'

But,
I could not respond to a song.
I am still mourning.

Besides,
he knew I waited.
We were all mourning our losses.

I waited
with the sheer thought
that he was waiting too!

It was not long after this, a month,
that he posted a pic of his fiancée.
He got engaged!

I fretted over my delay,
but the lyrics have not come yet.
I am still searching for the words,
to tell him I liked the song better than him.

Would we be wrong?

We witnessed with terrified eyes
the horrible words you hurled
at your so-called wife.

The public's blood froze
as you charred
her heart with insults
that scarred her dignity with humiliation.

Ears heard your slaps,
your tongue-lashing snaps
and resounding claps.

Is this your expression
of true love?
Would we be wrong
to love your woman?

Conversations stopped

At the garden table, I sat and stared
at the steaming teacup.
The tumble dryer roars at my side.
My ring finger moves round the rim of the cup.
The tea becomes cooler, then colder.
My eyes glued to my phone ...
no beep, no message.
But his pro-pic still stands.
Him, his new date, and his son.

I thought it was just the dark stage.
But it wasn't! The tumble drier still roars!
I stand up.
Water running from my atlas to my coccyx.
Sip my cold tea.
Stop the dryer.
Hang my washing.
Keeping them clean, the only thing that is clean.

Closure

I am drained
by your love vacuum.
I moved out of my heart today.
I left it to its own judgement.
Like a snake in summer,
it must shed its own winter skin.

But inside, my heart cringes.
Or perhaps
it will be relieved when one of us
will silently save our love.

Giving love space to be peaceful,
because my heart disallows its ejection of you.
My deceiving heart, decides on which side you fall!
 Don't dispose of me like a used needle.

PART THREE
Gender

We felt free

In every space,
everywhere and every time,
day or night,
we played how we wanted.

As girls we were never nervous
that at any moment monsters might prey on us.

We did not sleep with one ear open
and only one eye closed!
We opened our muddy legs and spread them
and played outside, with boys.

We played mgusha,¹ kgati,² dibeke,³
throwing our bloomed butts high
in our little dresses,
with no shame.

We stretched out on the dusty ground,
we sang songs until the moon
declared its tiredness
to us.

The sounds of bridal songs
and proposing songs
echoed in grannies' ears,
in the huts filled

1-3 Traditional African games

with smoke and the snores of tired grandfathers,
who dreamed of their dear oxen.

We poodled around,
we sang, we hid,
and we sought one another
in the light, in the dark, under same blankets
in same huts.
No one touched us!
Nor looked at our grimy thighs!

We waited for no aid

We boastfully balanced our black pots on our heads.
They stood straight, free, secure
on our trained, independent necks,
on the comfort-crown, wound from ragged
large Black Label nappies,
which have now turned yellow, holed.

We balanced the clay gourds on our heads with pride.
From pre-maiden years to womanhood,
unshaken, never shaky!
We strode with them on our heads
to the far-away, fat fields –
long, fertile and wide.

In a line, on a faithful path
that greets us at dawn
and bids us farewell at dusk, we traipsed,
humming in harmony,
quieting the dewy roads with our bare feet.

For Car star

In you, no remnants
of any boosters were ever found.
Tracks just open their arms
and give you charms.

Like a greyhound,
you feed the fields with your sweat;
unapologetically galloping across the ground,
sending dust
to the winning poles.

The synergy of your brain
and your vigour
they tried to stain, but in vain.

Still, you remain sober,
again and again.
You raised the bar!

You're the cat
whose speed is unmatched!

A threat to the lions, you have become!
Your victory over them
is assured in the lanes.
That's where you extract their claws!

In grass

Where foliage is all one in colour,
all sepals and petals are patriots.

In grass,
colours bright are unknown,
all is green, all colours fused together.

Sepals admit,
they are apetalous,
they continue to grow in their lonely green,
shouting brightly.

Petals might be timid in their inner whorl,
but sepals know well they offer protection.

Attention

Rare:

A man who invades the kitchen,
adds his own flavours.

Men who can pick up a broom
and sweep quietly without need
of recognition.

Still planning

All of us can see the bruises
And hear the cries of mothers and girls
We smell the blood stench,
We count and count the coffins.
We commemorate lives, so many!
And plead to see justice, so long!

The law says, 'The results are coming, from Pretoria.
We don't know whose semen it is,
We are not sure whose hair it is,
The results of the DNA are coming.'

We hear our own hearts throb,
we taste the salt of our own sobs,
and swallow it into our hearts.
We try to block the blows with our
feeding palms.
And then feed the very source of our pain.

The blows are too powerful!

Each of us has issues.
Each of us is terrified!
If not of our own men, for our sons.
Each of us
is jittered when we see
a pack of them gathered down the streets.

The law is looking for evidence, still.
The government is still planning to plan to reduce GBV.

The cry of a woman who was gang raped

Mess.

How do you look at such a belly
and say: Please grow well, rape baby.
How do you rejoice, in your loudest voice,
and say: This will be my baby's perfect name?
Whom do you name it after?
Which father owns the sperm?
A whole army of them got into you.

Distress.

Perhaps if I take it to the scene
and wait for the father-rapist to come,
again.
But I'd rather not use this unborn thing as bait.
Maybe all the eggs got crushed
when I was raped?
I pray that I did not conceive
in the gang rape.

Form one class, 1981

'I smell a female rat.'

'I smell a female rat.'

This was the saying of our teacher.
It meant little to us then.
Every Monday, he said this saying of his.
Even now, I don't have a clue what he meant!

On Monday mornings, he always smelt a female rat.
We knew.
We prepared.
We prepared our palms to be fed
with lashes of a salty cane.

Every Monday morning,
in our Form One class,
we were punished for love.

The lanky, bearded teacher
would enter the classroom
in bell-bottomed trousers,
as moody as ever;
he'd say, 'I smell a female rat.'

We knew.
All girls.
We lined up,
to be lashed with a pregnant cane,
because Mary denied his love advances.

I knew later he was mad

When I was twenty-four
with my seven-month pregnancy,
a horrible thing happened.

I boarded a taxi halfway from Tzaneen
to Pietersburg, Polokwane,
around four in the afternoon.

I gave the driver a bigger note.
hoping for change
as usual.

The sixty-looking driver,
stout,
instructed me to alight
when I asked for my change.

He gave me the beating
of my life.

He grabbed me, pushed me to the coarse ground,
then ran to the taxi, fetched a stick with a knob,
which was ready next to his black cap with a starred pin,
on the dashboard.

I ran into the furniture store,
with my baby floating in my tummy
praying my similar prayer, I guess.

I laid a charge.
I learned that the man was mad,

after months with no feedback.
No one told me he was sick, I just knew.

I saw it in his reasoning, in his body, in his eyes
that he was not fine.
My baby is fine. A woman now.

A brainwashed schoolmaster in the 80s

I knocked at the door of his spacious office.
The schoolmaster sat with his legs crossed
at his ankles. Clean socks showed off shiny shoes
under a big table. Books stacked neatly
in the corner. He looked at my tiny figure
and pointed at the chair by the door.

I said, 'My name is Ruth.
I am looking for a teaching job.
I have just qualified as a teacher,
majored in English and Biology.'

He gave me a brisk leer.

And said:
'I want teachers here, not debris.'

I leaned forward with my neck
to his table and gave my ear.

He said it again.

Yes. Again.

'I do not want debris.

I want teachers.'

Yes, he said it to me.

An angry old man.

In my heart I felt sorry for the ones he'd hired.

During the college course selection

In the wee hours of re-opening day at the local College of
Education
we waited at the gate, waited for our fate
to be dispensed by the white rector's hands.

When we arrived,
our Form 5 results were collected.
Like potatoes piled into a trailer,
they were checked for market fitness.
Then we sat under the trees
with our heads between our knees,
praying for our names to be called –
as if we did not all deserve to study!

Finally, our names were called out.
Like convicts we filed before the judge.
Mine, too, was called,
my course, too, was chosen for me –
to study how to teach.

Mutualism

It is no rivalry;
it is splendour
and vigour

that at Cape Agulhas,
the warm and cold waters deny each other,
but never fight!

The two seas roar in proximity

and kiss at a distance,
and allow each other space to live.

Nature still calls for our emulation;
natural noises still hold harmony.

Let's go to the graves

When democracy dawned,
men no longer carried buck on their shoulders
to feed the village –
they carried women.
Slit throats hanging like
captured buck;
harmless ankles chained like criminals.
These women's bodies,
buried in furrows,
so shallow and easy.

Let's go to the graves and ask these women.
Let's go to the graves of these slain bodies
and enquire
if we properly understand
how they died,
or if their murderers represented the painful process
plainly to the bereaved and to us.

I refer to the actual words poor women cried out,
especially the last words,
when they smelled the iron ore or smoke
and felt the rope or blade.

Let's go to the killers' homes and ask the killers
what these women said before they passed.
What last words did they pray?

Did they scream and plead?
So you mean they did not tremble and shake?
Or they did, and you ignored it?
Did they say 'I am sorry',
though they were innocent?
Did they whimper and cry?
Did you continue
with sheer cruelty, and slaughter
her like a buck?
You mean you went on,
and burned her like a frayed rug?

Routine of a rural woman

Each day, she swept the yard.
and serenely sang,
 as if performing a ritual as she spiritedly swept.
She stroked her broom
of gathered grass,
tied with a strip of rubber from a tube
of a wagon with which her husband gallivanted.

Each day, she worked the whole yard,
moving round all the muddy huts,
 creating patterns of curved lines and crosses
in the sand.
Her whole being adhered to her soil-art, forming patterns
as she swept.

She continues to sweep,
he continues to move around the village,
 searching only
for the free, homemade sorghum beer.
When he comes back,
like the donkeys hauling the wagon,
he is spent.

We were called Sunbeams

In our sapling years,
we joined the Sunbeams.
As girls we were deceived:
Songs of loyalty and politeness,
of humility and finesse
were sung,
were made to sit in our heads and
hearts.

We sang to close the deep wounds of race,
ethnicity, class and religious division;
to confront the contradictions inherent
in the political necessity.

We thought the war over, these would fade away.

We sang pledges and promised good deeds
and good will to all.

In our neatly-pressed dresses
of clear sky-blue,
some with shoes, some without,
we belted out the chorus in high spirits and devotion:

We are marching in the light of God,
We are marching in the light of God.
We are marching, marching,
We are marching, are marching,
We are marching in the light of God.

We are still chanting now
in anger and anguish,
but conscious of ourselves.

We sang songs of freedom;
we plead those songs still –
we lift our voices to be freed from those we love
mainly; to be protected from them.
They smile in the light,
and hurt us in the dark.
We have not yet found love.
We have tried to march in His light.
We have not yet found peace.

A winnower

The fire in the hearth never stops burning,
flocks shepherded by the dog return
by the same route. They kneel down, chew the cud.
The dog waits at the hut's door.

The winnower's womanly energy
unlocks her strength
to still the pangs of poverty,
to stay the course.

She turns and roasts corn in hot ash,
eyes watering from the smoke,
as she bends in the pail.
Eyes blink behind the sooty door.

Still, up on the hill, the winnower's skirts
swell like a balloon again,
as she lifts high the grains
to winnow away the chaff.

Mourning

We walked into the cocoon with signs of respect –
humbled, empathetic, sorrowed.
Ambling in, we found our widowed friend coiled,
like a venom-free viper that sees no promising prey.
Her body enveloped in heavy shawl,
patterned with olive and azure blocks.

We greeted in faint, timid voices,
our tone blending with her whole being.

Her neck and head were cloaked in heaviness,
her sunken eyes and darkened skin
sautéed by sweat,
gleaming in the airless enclosure,
as she lay on the makeshift mattress
of folded blankets, looking out, but barely.

So alone in her dark cocoon,
dimly lit by white candles,
whose wax melted patterns of flowers
on the ground of cow dung.

A grim-faced group of aged guards
and a child mourner
surrounded her in a half-circle,
she lying at the centre.

We looked at their lips, who welcomed us.

The old lady directed us,
silently pointing to where we should sit.

Her heavy shawl constrained her shoulders,
the black hood made a coop-like Halloween dress,
made her look like a flying witch from Macbeth,
we re-lived our school years.

Shrunken and shrewd in the shawl
that was suffocating her to another death –
I tried to make her laugh about that.
The lanky old lady shooed me away –
unaware of her ruthlessness,
frightening away our freedom.

Another, stooping into the hut with rat's eyes,
brought wooden dishes
of malty meal,
looked at us like intruders.
Our friend forged a smile,
and nodded,
to signal we were legal.

The pungent smell of minty snuff
permeated the room, irritating my nose,
heightened by the yeastiness in a gourd
that shed its foamy brown tears
on the curves of the red clay pot.

I saw the pain that swamped her.
The loneliness, the cloud of silence
infesting her hut, was loud.

Her eyes never met ours,
until we vacated the hut.

Lost blood

Oh! Oh, little girls of quick deeds!
You are so swift to open your legs,
yet so slow to count your eggs.
When you crush them,
with big pills, they wither and die!

Life of a widow

A new and scary life, indeed.
You'll do things the best way.
Marriage's union is pure,
a widow's divine bond to hold.
But death's delight is sure,
proud of its power to unravel
life's beautiful gift,
wrapped in purest joy,
now ended by a cruel ploy.

You will deal with all this sorrow.
The world will stare at you, everywhere,
eye you like a killer, today and tomorrow –
obliging you to move, anywhere.

The smell of a widow reaches far.
Her clothes smell of death,
her clothes emit copper,
in her mourning spell.
Whether she's a pauper's wife or not.

Unhurried, learn to do things your own way;
make good mistakes,
trust your instinct.

She is not barren

A woman in the ancient texts, Hannah,
desperately wanted a child.
Her sister wife scorned her for being childless,
shamed her, self-righteously.
Hannah prayed like a lunatic, hanging her head in depression.
Eli the priest thought she was drunk.
Really?
Maybe it was not the woman's barrenness, but her husband's.
In her 90s, when Sarah heard of a coming baby, she laughed.
But a life's cry or laugh cannot impregnate you!

A woman's life

Are we pictures in an art gallery?

When a woman looks good,
she is misread as being on display, for sale,
she is submitted to culture and religion
to be a precious object, donated,
or perhaps auctioned?

Collections are selected, stored,
ownership transferred.
Some well maintained,
others clearly overlooked.
But still, like the priceless pieces in an art gallery,
kept by owners with no will to engage
or by the artists who perfected the pieces.

To their parents,
these women are precious pieces of art.
They will forever remain invaluable.

Senses

I have as my way of escape:
my brains, my intuition.
Womaness –
which only sisters listen to, of course.

Sisters,
we must fight with our legs closed,
with our opened eyes and opened minds.

Do you really think that opened legs
will gain accolades?
That is not how we were taught!
When you sweat and labour like termites,
they build more roofs of glass
you cannot penetrate!
They insist that you lie down there. Down!
There!
So that it works on you.

So you fall
like a nestling
when it tries to fly;
it collides with the hard branch,
falls to the cold earth.

Still, they pluck its feathers out!
Out! With no pity.
Ouch!
We shall overcome, sisters.

We have as our way of escape,
our brains and our intuition.
Our Womaness.

An escape from patriarchal rage and ire,
of irrationality and inanity.
If you use your brains,
your intuitive Womaness,
they will never wash you down
and you will forever wear a crown.

Confession

'I apologise on behalf of all of us.
I am sorry for our vindictive demeanour.
My allies and I saw you as a threat
to our territory.
Like male lions, we marked our environment
with our pee,
to defend its emptiness.

'I apologise for seeing you as
an average child bearer,
an obvious child minder.
I apologise for seeing you as
a dependent idiot,
an emotional imbecile.
That is how I saw you.
I apologise.

'I spread the disease of hate among the cubs
in our territory
to undermine you and your mind.

'I apologise to society
for the contempt I scattered
and sowed in young cubs' minds;
the idea that you are valueless.
You endured all and earned your accolades,
I turned away in envy.

'I apologise for my selfish ideas
that misled me.
I apologise for the disrespect.
I apologise for pressing your head down
when you tried to rise.
I pressed you down.
I apologise for spreading acts of
selfishness and dominance.
I apologise – for I have daughters.
I apologise.
For I have daughters.'

Wrestling

It is not just a lame game,
when wrestling men wrestle.

When these wrestling men wrestle
and show off their chests,
when they get scary and angry
– breathing fire from fiery nostrils,
mouths spitting saliva,
panting and heaving,
pushing and dragging –
encircling vipers emitting venom.

Salivating like rabid felines,
ruthlessly punching and knocking each other down,
then squashing the head,
grunting and sweating –
It's not child's play!
The fittest sarcastically looks up and
shouts,
calling for more action! More attack, more fight!

Fighting life's battles is like that.
We fight and wrestle with them,
we win some and lose some.

Watching wrestling games, in my small room,
with a white antenna hanging from my decrepit roof,
making it look opulent,
I sit in my low, sinking bed,
with my reeling wrestlers –
him ... gone!

Celebrate my achievements

The weaker sex:
for you

– unmarried, polygamous –
to ogle at and choose the body you desire.

Genital mutilation,
virginity testing and abortion,
unplanned pregnancy, STIs,
inequality at home and at work – all because of you!

And you look down on me!
Slyly greet me with a kiss on the cheek,
while men in the room get handshakes.

Being adept,
my work ethic irritates my own blood, even,
my veins ooze tenacity,
from slavery until now!

Cutting me off in your ‘strategic’ meetings,
you dismiss my ideas to silence me!
Will you ever succeed?
Ah, no – it merely toughens my blood.
It will never boil, though –
it merely flows with more stability,
in greater austerity.

You can’t fire me because I’m less lustful than you are.
You cannot hire me because of my hips.

I have been to school!

Yes, I have been to school, too!
The same school you went to, and more.
I noticed your patriarchal moves
of exploitation and devaluation,
the severity of the silent violence you inflict
when love tore my skin.
I have grown from all of that,
and from fear –
fear of menarche, of birth, of men, of death ...

My cup is now filled
with resilience and integrity
from the school of reality,
and from your dispensed inequality.

You nurtured
my strength
with your discrimination
under your law – and under you!

Now, celebrate my achievements.
I, I too, I have been to many schools.

PART FOUR
Society, Politics,
Lawlessness

Crabbed

Baby crabs walk as their parents do.
My ambition is to see if baby crabs can move straight.
Crooked and jointed though their legs may be,
surely they can walk straight if they try!

I should not be nosy, though,
peeping into the deepest sea secrets
to see how they learn
 to manoeuvre the sands and claw their way to the shore.

With vigour in rough seas!

If they can walk sideways,
with their eyes peeping perfectly forward,
then surely they can move in any direction,
perfectly straight.

Without imitating the parents!

Parenting

If not wrestled with strong feminine hands,
good bread turns bland.

Like dough that is plumped and prepared with yeast,
children are raised by hand, thrown and rolled over,
pushed and pulled, in zest and in love.

Pure palatable bread is pounded,
folded and kneaded, baked until brown crowned,
announcing itself from kitchens,
to far-away fields and near,
filling the nostrils of sailors,
shepherds, pilots, troopers.

As bread, children,
loved and cherished,
become the salt of the earth.

A culture of fear

Everything is fenced –
fences all around:
Woven, barbed ones,
tall concertina-like wires,
electric fences for the able.
Angry fences!

Some well-offs hide in estates
and call that development. Living in hibernation?

We breathe steel!
Steel everywhere.
Steel bars, steel gates, steel doors;
plus alarm systems
with armed reaction services;
vehicles clad with satellite trackers;
all around Jozi, all cities of Mzansi, in fact!

We are forever locked in.
Some of us throw up walls of concrete
with broken shards of glass on top.
So we're safe from nyaope boys
and they are safe from our dogs.

I hate fences.
But, they are our saving evils.

Soon we'll need fences
across our labia.

Who will need a fence then?
A simple cedar fence, maybe:
Just medium height and durable,
yet graceful and beautiful,
or just a hedge of apple trees.

No foreign ranger

In my work, I travelled the world.
As a teacher, and as an advisor, a planner ...
I taught teachers how to be teachers.
In this month, I went to support teachers
in rural schools.

On this day, I drove past farms,
massive farms.

I saw a black ranger on a farm
when I drove out in search of
rural schools in the far northern reaches of Limpopo.
Exasperation intensified
as I entered the realm of isolated black schools;
with no resources, crammed, loud, littered!

This farm stretched out massively.

This foreign farm ranger, like the ostriches there,
is native to this land now; he knows no other world,
for he has maniacally roamed here since young.
His back has broadened
but it cannot help him hurtle away
to somewhere freer.
He is not afraid of the owner here
as he guards the farm.
He's also hesitant to his own blood
outside this cage.

Vigilantly, as an ostrich shielding its eggs
from impending fire,
he protects this soil with his whole body.
He is indebted to this farm
with his blood.

With powerful strides, like a legionary,
he surveys the horizon for illegal hunters'
snares, traps, suffocated game ...

His bare neck elongates and stretches,
rotates like a viper to scan all sides, all times,
eyes of a diurnal bird, staring, penetrating.

My ire grows as I drive, the farm never-ending.
The villages get narrower.
The classrooms smaller,
the children more unnoticed.

The entourage

I have seen long lines of vehicles.
They would drive slowly, up and down,
as we watched from our fences.
Stern, heavy helmets,
commanding orders and
brooding anger.
Then they would race to chase
after the mobs
and cliques from halls and churches.

Now this convoy in black
with wailing blue lights,
appears to swagger like a peacock in full display,
like a prestigious, alluring stream
of lustrous black millipedes' backs,
pompously strutting towards the complaints.

Cordoning off railways, overpasses and subways in their
territory;
the black boxes on wheels
contain sly smiles
behind dark-tinted panes
as they parade down the dusty streets.
Some watch in rage and distress,
others in awe and delight, but with a hard edge
as they cry out their grievances to the human in the midst of
them,

longing to hear a response,
one that will end this growing, intolerable genetic scourge.

And when the important person alights,
the rowdy crowd abandons all but does not listen.

Then
the entourage takes him back to the house in the walled city
garden.

Beggars' survival

Stuck again, as reeds in the mud,
under the bridge, we launch into our daily chore.
First, securing our squalid linen in a heap;
then searching for littered cigarette butts
in the streets' intersections.

Till we get lucky, we show our soiled boards:
'no mony, no jop, no food, no shelta, please yelp, God bless'
– and abruptly, we know, eyes will avert,
brows will furrow.
Some naughty drivers will suggest sexual favours
(offensive to us!).

A friend shows her baby as emotional bait,
and receives negative stares.
Better than termination, though, I reckon.
Some generous Jo'burgers
do throw out some change.

In a sunny patch, we share the day's catch.
Swiftly get the fix.
Like gazelles, then, some sleep as they stand,
streams of saliva now rolling,
in euphoria we die alive.

Job hunt in the city

En masse we lie on our hungry bellies
on the Polokwane City's once manicured lawns.
Tired of walking and asking,
tired of reading at each gate: No job, no donation,
we resort to lying and dreaming.

Watching schoolgirls
as they stalk past with their tanned muscles
in chic tunics.

Like storks, they are not seen in all seasons.

We whistle at them, and beckon them to us.
We know very well they won't buy our tries!
If they do respond to us with an accent
and an educated frown,
we bury our foreheads in the lawn,
and continue to wait for the soup kitchen.

Jammerfontein

All and sundry draw closer.
A destination for all nations, all colours –
the flag and the tongues bear this out.

The colours in the sky bend closer
and lure everyone.
Sharing glamour,
splendour,
the divine scenery
that stretches from the green slopes to the high hills.

Peace was approaching, but is it peaceful now?
All and sundry still are drawn.
The dramatic creations of nature, the landscape and the caves
that echo –
come and gaze at this sanctuary!

This park invites the far and the fearful,
the fragile and the feeble.

This park knows no colour.
It is life's colour itself.
Will the modern world keep its beauty?

All nations replicate here,
a place of freedom.
Freedom Park. It is a wonder.

Leaking vessel

Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika

We sing the national song.

The vulnerable nation. Our land.
'The rock from which we were cut,
the quarry from which we were hewn.'

We are a hardwood forest
with many soft spots
for the western woodpeckers.

We are an open vase,
longing to be filled with
roses;
but our own buds are toxic to us,
we are continually distressed, even when pruned.
Too damaged to allow the productive ones to bloom;
they need total re-germination.

We try to absorb the nourishing water,
but it has become bitter to us.
Our love was betrayed.
We received gifbossies to fill us.
As flowers in leaking flowerpots

filled with sandy soil, our roots
remain underfed.

We are in a fertile land,
our roots reaching towards
ever-flowing waters,
but never nourished.

We seek love, not gas lighters.
As worker bees in the hive
we get down, but are never endowed.
Only the mother queen is forever nourished.

The grass is not yet greener.
When people shouted about it,
a picture of tranquillity was painted, as if flawless.

*We are in a fertile land,
our roots reaching towards
ever-flowing waters,
but never nourished.
We are in our fertile land now,
but our fruits are sour to us.*

*Some cry: In Egypt we were slaves,
but we never starved and died!*

#Tables are turning

Freedom calls.
It has by rights called.
But we are still a troubled people.
Amongst us there is still a quarrel;
Chaos, fires, riots.

#Tables are turning!
We want houses, decent houses.
We want water, safe water.
We want education, free education.
We want jobs, decent jobs.
We want houses.
Decent, big houses.
We want water,
safe, free water.
We want education.
free, decolonised education.

How do we come to you, Freedom?
The chase is tiring, our toes are calloused,
our fingertips too weak to hold you!
Our legs are swollen!
We see you, but we easily slip and fall!

Predators in the golden city

Active lambs

loved to climb, they loved to explore
the sands in the West, seeking golden feed.
They knew which scenery was alluring.
But upcoming lambs forage for themselves.

That fall of a lamb from the village,
a curious and comic fall it was!
It decided to climb up into the hills –
behold! How they scamper in delight!
Every time they arrive here
for a feed.

For the lambs, it is the most attractive site,
built on conspicuous golden sands
where riches once were found.
Now the sands call all
from far and near
to try their luck,
to inspect these sands for gold.

But hyenas cornered the fall,
smote them,
the fall chafed their backs and
mauled their tender flesh,
the golden sands betrayed their eyes.

Western villages, tread well

in your anger.
Your livestock
is horribly injured, we know.

Stay calm, village.
Stay calm.

Justice will dig out the truth, we hope.
More fire will not quench the heinous acts of shame.
Let the predators go on
and predate. They will soon die a killer's death.

But only remove your cloaks from your faces
and tie them around your waists.
War is not a joke – not for you, and not for the hyenas.
Just stay calm.

The system is down

Outside the traffic department,
you see class and poverty with
your own eyes.

In front of the closed offices,
when 'the system is down',
you see low-class pedestrians rush
to hike
to the Mall of the North,
to open the restaurants
to serve the drivers of
Mercs and Rangers.

Hawkers line up with boiling oil for vetkoek.
Some sell fruit and cigarettes in the mornings
to the early risers who go
to book a place in the queue at 4 or 5 am.

Littering has become a habit.
Pollution in all forms grows –
of people and of things.
Like petals, plastic conspicuously
clings to fences.

In winter, lines of fires
wait for passengers
alighting from cold buses
needing to feed empty stomachs.

On this road to the inner city,
clad in khaki and blue,
fresh ladies write tickets,
leaning with pride and nonchalance
against white government bakkies.

Huge, well-stocked trucks park, then move on, heading
to Zim on the Dendron route.
Truckers wave at petite young ladies
who are here to negotiate their driving licences,
hoping to sway the weary, portly assessors.

On the other side,
enterprising photographers
make makeshift backdrops on sheets
to shoot ID photos
for uninformed applicants
who know nothing about the system.

Majelathoko

On stayaway days,
boys skated around the schoolyard,
then scampered down the Skotiphola Road
towards Zone 2 shops.
Pha! Pha! Delivery vans busted open!
Whistling like sandpipers,
they converged like ants over syrup.
Like sailfishes they wolfed down bread
and slurped the milk like puppies.
Hungry from poverty.
Hungry for freedom.
When the BIC 4 o'clock buses returned from Pietersburg,
to Seshego,
hunger flared again.

The oldies who returned from town
will get the township vibes!
These passengers were fed
with their own groceries;
the fish oil they drank
and the mealie meal they bought was scattered
like the markings for athletic tracks on the playgrounds:
A consequence of running away from their own,
of being zombies and hyenas who rush to misuse townhouses.
Now they are facing their own blood that they betrayed,
by working on Amandla days.
Now they sit back and beg and watch others eat,
because they sold out the comrades
by working on Amandla days.

Overloaded

During Covid-19's reign
we felt such a strong desire to travel,
such a yearning to offload the burdens of the pandemic
and shake ourselves free.

Our driver packed us all in a mini-bus.
He used the rat's road
until he veered into Kranskop.
I envied the aura of other travellers:
In fleets of caravans, trailers, boats,
they seem relaxed.
The glow of travelling embraced them.
Some drivers in safari looks,
leisurely walked around
their Jeeps and
pleasurably kicked the Land Cruiser's tyres
with hiking boots.

We were offloaded
from our one Siyaya mini-bus,
and the driver went for additional fuel
before we flattened the tyres
again, when he hit the rat's road
to avoid tollgate charges
on our first vacation
after Covid-19 to Belabela.

Despite all the challenges,
and the fear of catching Covid,
just the travel bliss,
which I brought home, was sufficient.

A forsaken sick man

For the past ten years,
or more,
this man has been at this crossing,
on the road to the plaza.
At first, he looked like he was trying
to prank us commuters.

From dawn until dusk,
sounding well read and urbane,
and as loud as an opera singer,
he would speak and he would walk.
He'd gather cans and bottles,
rags and wool, grass even,
and nicely
arrange his heap around the robot pole.

Now, he looks more distraught,
voice fading, like his flesh.
This man can't even walk across the road or
wave at us anymore.
He just sits and points,
with eyes popping out;
his lips dried, like his heels.
He stoops, he looks, and I ask myself:
What is the point of
having psychologists and social workers
passing by here daily?

I know my course is wrong

A woman's tears stream and drip
from studded eyelashes
as long as her fingers.
She presses them,
as the tears run down her cheeks,
creamed in hazelnut brown.
More tears follow.
She is afraid to shout for help,
continues throwing
her shoeless feet onto the pavement.

The snatcher hops away in victory, again,
empties the bag,
throws it in a cavernous pothole,
always water-filled, so deep as to submerge a child.

Another pair of soiled All Stars
hangs loosely above the power lines
and points out the joint where the herb is found.

I also grabbed, this time, the i-phone before my eyes;
a township dream to own a Sandton device!
I always regret it, but tempted, I still attempted.

Amapiano drums call, dark-tinted Mercs hoot
for girls who sacrifice themselves,
and boys afraid to come out of the closet.
I draw near to get the loot,
for my girl waits for booze.

My dreams struggle in this crime-infested street,
sleep is denied through the nights.
Some snuggle, drenched in sweat.
Though nights can be blissful,
for me, the street life hustle is homicide.

I got caught last Friday evening,
I'm locked up until next week.

From the time I was young, very young,
I saw horrendous things,
I did horrendous things,
I tried to fight, but alone I could not.
Innocent people were hurt.
A few were detained, no details known.
I still rave in the streets,
I never can say I am safe,
and nor are you safe around me.

To other people,
we look like faeces.
We are just pushers,
but there are real makoyas behind
the dark windows,
behind the hooded lids.
I know my course is wrong.
But it numbs my butt.
So I continually relive the hustling course,
jumping on the bandwagon,
in and out of the big house.

They did not take long in those days

During days, before these,
it did not take long for the chiefs
to decide
to tie the offender to the tree trunk
that breeds killer ants,
with sharp knives of death,
so when they sting his manhood he'll
cry out his vows never to rape again!

Because they did not play then,
the monster would be unmanned –
no, they did not play.
They made no allowance
for beasts that feed on lambs,
forcefully eating their fill,
and painfully procreating
life!

It did not take long for them
to decide that the beast must be lashed
with an animal-skin whip.
They did not waste time to investigate
the plain truth that he raped!

Now the new papers are here,
they speak for him,
they take hours determining

how he did it.
And they do not ask him,
they ask the poor women!

The toothless law defanged and smothered the tribes.
They did not take time to scold and punish!
They did not take time in those days!

The law was close, close-by, then.

I wish the law would come

And say 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy
and true.

Write them from the wells of your heart.'

I wish I could hear a command
as stern as the murders
that assail. As easy as words,
the killings come.

I wish to hear a command:
'Phonsa izibhamu zakho olwandle
phinda ubuntu bakho' –
'The people's blood already feels your hands,
let the iron erode in oceans
and rust in sands.'

Not dwell in boys' hands!
Not land on women's and children's heads!

I wish to hear that voice,
but the voice of the land is silent.

Criminals brandish guns
like children waving sparklers
on New Years' Eve.
Blood runs across the streets.
Souls hover between heaven and earth,
howling for rescue.

Death stinks like smoke of crackers.

I wish I could hear a command
as stern as the murders
that assail. As easy as words,
the killings come.

I wish to hear a command:
'Gooi julle gewere in die see!'

Perhaps the voice is here,
but our ears cannot hear.
The message should be clear
as we see the burials and the bones.

Maybe the command will come:
'Lahlelang dithunya tsa lona ka lewatleng!'

A lost boy in the roving world

A lost boy in the roving world,
a life that demands quick travel,
the deceiving life moves, and mocks
old thoughts on the edge.

Think, for example,
think of the child –
the ten-year-old child,
whose mother is a friend to crack.
Think of that child,
whose sister lives with HIV from rape,
who lives in a shack
with his siblings
and no TV.

Think
of that child:
A boy lost in the roving world,
the object of derision and mockery
in this village,
the village that no longer raises the boy,
but feeds him with ill that kills,
including that his father is a loser.

You, mother, should not push the boy away
to the village.
The village will not quieten the boy
when he cries.

You, father, don't say to the boy,
'Argh! You cry like a girl!'
The village is no longer there
to help you listen to your boy.

The same village ushers the boys into the arms
of the mobsters, to be hammered,
to be crushed, and then to
torch their mothers.

The same village moves away,
to the law, to the city, and leaves the village to dry.

Our boys are slipping away,
like calves from amniotic sacs,
ejected onto a dry world that does not receive them.

The village must come back
to raise the child.

A letter to mom

A response to Charles Mungoshi's 'Letter to a son'

Dearest mother,

Amai ndine urombo.

i have not ignored your letters

they might have gone to the previous addresses.

But i am sorry i did not respond to you, you know.

Moneywise, i have not yet saved enough.

Besides, i stay with many folks in my neighbourhood

We stay in cliques.

We stay in a squatter area,

those who do better piece jobs

rent better rooms behind owners' big houses

or rent what they call RDPs here.

Here land is not a big issue for staying.

People invade and sometimes stay for good.

We squat anywhere where there is space.

If we are lucky, we stay forever, too.

Sometimes they remove people.

Services, sewerage, water, electricity and

things like that, come later, you know.

Now the elections are nearer,

we enjoy every right.

Most youth are in the streets,

taken by entertainment trends; drugs, social media,

booze, partying. Some get hurt in this merriment.

We watch and learn.
 Here, girls go for girls
 Boys are busy with boys
 and even men and women.
 Mom, i know i have promised much.
 i know, i know, i must do more for Rindai
 And Tinashe and Nyaradzo.
 About Rindai, remember there are so many things
 that happen in schools.
 And growing girls also need things.
 Maybe she is stressed,
 like i was when i left home.
 i still try to accumulate more.
 The people here are generous, though.
 i sleep not on an empty stomach,
 but i fear for the hate
 that sometimes erupts.

Recently, Mama, issues of land are taken seriously
 i pray that the abled must not prey on land
 and forget what happened to us!
 But our advice is futile here.
 There are people who are listened to.
 We just work
 Work! Work! Work!
 Every piece of work, Ma.

Mother, i am still alive.
 i'm just sad, you know,
 highly homesick.
 i long for your free range chicken and real sadza, you know.
 With some chicken dzuza and mupotohayi ...
 Nostalgia is on my neck

All the time.
So, father must not panic.
That is one thing that makes it hard for me.
Men who remain unchanged,
and the drought and growing poverty.
Coming home now won't help.
It's not that i don't want to come.
His frailty, ongoing deprivation
i am afraid, will widen the void.
If i talk to you from far away like this,
it is better.
My presence there
will cause me more sad feelings.
It's long that i've touched the soil, I know.
But it's home here as well, is it not?
i have a family, two daughters and four boys.
We try to feed the children,
but we toil!
The three are in primary school.
Although they walk a distance,
they do get meals at school.
The government here is sympathetic
to pregnant mothers and infants.
They try to save women and children
from the ongoing abuse.
But that never scares the wrongdoers.

I am just worried about the handling of land!
i will come, when time is right.
i move from one area to another
where it is cheaper to stay.
i also try some means at times.
i try to gather all: used clothes, furniture,
rice, sugar, oil ...

Please tell father i am coming soon.
He mustn't be so quiet
and cry inside anymore!
He cannot change the situation alone
He tried. He must let you take charge.
Greetings to all of you,
and all who continue
to battle real struggles over there.
Thank you, Rindai,
for reading this letter for Mom.
Love,
Goodenough
That's how i am known here.

Love, Tambu.

A call to a street child

'When will you come home?
Cows have come home still chewing the cud,
the calves have suckled for the evening,
and are resting in their comfy, fly-infested kraals.

Why are you not coming home?

Like a cricket, you spend your days
in cracks, as if you don't have a home!
You emerge only in the dark of night,
and bother peoples' peace.

I sleep like a dolphin,
half of my brain drowsy,
partially dead, the other half wide awake.
I sleep with one eye open;
with one ear to the ground
listening to your possible sneaking in.

Owls' eyes are wide open, too,
wooing on calm nights.
Surely you have heard them woo,
perched on unlucky houses?

Fireflies try to light your way,
but you ignore their guidance.
Like a moth, you are active at night,
during the day, dully, you hide.

Why are you not coming home?
Why do you hibernate in the warmth of days?'

They are not our children

‘... weep for yourselves and for your children.’
When young minds are disregarded,
they create victims with their boiling rage.

No matter what we say,
we gave birth to these children.
Yet, they are ours no longer,
and we cannot rescue them from the hyenas.
Things have got out of hand for us all –
everyone is dazed, shaken, panicky, saying
‘When did we lose our children?’
Not that they are not here,
but we do not feel them
as normal children, bothering us
with childish noise and silly squabbles.

No, they are as silent as souvenirs,
mementoes of horrible hidden histories.
They hide from their own lives;
they hide from us, too.
They hide behind the killing narcotics,
that keep them silent and remote,
yet quick to attack.
Nothing helps.
They hide from us,
then hurt themselves.
They say they do not want to hurt us,
but they hurt us, in silence.

Aches

This is how mothers are thanked
by their sons
whom the world has turned into monsters.

Craving for his first feed of the day,
the nyaope boy went for the flat-screen TV next door.
Eagerness to ease his addict's morning cramps
drove him to his current state.

He was squashed and trampled on
when residents caught him red-handed.
Red and blue, he was left flattened
at his mother's gate.
On this Tuesday.
In this month of Women.
(9 August is Women's Day.)

Maybe there was order, maybe there wasn't

I recall. Yes, I recall well
the house we lived in,
with two bedrooms
a kitchen, another room
and a toilet.

The chimney belching smoke every four o'clock.

Yes, I recall the house.

The soldier moved around at night
from one four-roomed house to the next
during the state of emergency.

I peeped through the window –
the boots shuffling on dark grass.

Yard's clean, but tension always enslaved us.

I saw the soldier's helmet, an arm that pointed a rifle,
Pointed as his own nose.

I felt the indeterminate safety.

I sat in the kitchen,
in front of a Defy burning like a furnace,
to warm the powerless home.

When coal was not there,

I knelt in the cold winter
in that house – in the dining-room,
we called it; an all-rounder room.

Few had black and white boxes
to watch propaganda.

In that room, I memorised

name van plekke

and *trappe van vergelyking*

from Die Lewende Taal
for a once-off exam.

Now, it is still scary;
I pray for a licence to respect humanity.
A call for sound sensibility.

About the news tags on TV –
we already know them. Every day
it is ‘Viewer discretion advised’.
Our lungs always constrict,
our hearts leap out of our mouths,
we watch horrible highlights.
You’d even wish the whole programme was sport
so you could watch the old Kaiser Chiefs and
Mamelodi Sundowns
or Orlando Pirates.
I do miss ‘The Conundrum’ days as well,
or shows and plays
like Lapologa.

Or Fiona Coyle’s
The Weakest Link show,
so that I learn and grow.

I know now,
when I hear steps,
whether night or day,
I must kneel
at my bedside and pray
with my heavy heart,
for others to be safe,
with my gadgets clenched
in my hand,
in a decent house,
now lit and warm.

That's not the way we were taught

When I extend my greeting to you,
please say hi back to me.
Do not take your nose
and put it on your forehead
when I say hello!
You make your chin and lips
greet your neck when I wave to you.
The sneer that you throw,
will be followed by the sheer blow
of a fall you will remember.

Do not degrade the elders
because they are old!
Their skins were once supple
and glowing like yours,
their breasts as erect as yours right now.
That is not how we were taught!
Your radiance won't shine forever.
Look at the sun –
it never loses its radiance,
but it sets, and rises again
in its brightness.

It allows the night to come
and it rises again.

The towel

It is hung there on the wall,
sagging.
In the silver loop,
hanging.
It awaits wet hands,
dripping.
It says on the tag,
'warning',
the words written on it,
reminding
'Do not hang after use' –
if used,
it is to be thrown on the floor,
leave it lying.

No life of a man
suffering
should be left to fall
hanging
himself from a loop.

PART FIVE
Covid-19, Death,
Sorrow

An orange sack for my back

When your hand waved goodbye,
the orange bag became a buff for my back.
I turned to it to scratch and exfoliate myself,
and to remove the dirt
that has built since you left.

Who knows?

Every time we made a call to the ICU –
‘Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!’

No one showed us where you were,
how you lay in your terrible bed.

I saw only tubes, wires and cables in my mind,
picturing what we saw on TV.

I asked myself what went wrong:
Was it the heart or the lungs?
Was it the heart or the kidneys?

The hospital said you had problems with breathing.

How do you treat an airborne disease?
Did the ventilator go wrong?
Did the oxygen press your lungs too much?
Were you anxious or stressed out?
Or was it the deep sedation?

The ICU was noisy and getting louder every time we called.
Alarms, noise! Noise!
Interfering with all our chats.

With us banned from hospitals,
you were able to talk for only a few minutes.
Over the landline the nurse would say
‘OK, you need to rest now.’

Or 'Today he's up but asleep, we sedated him,'
as if sedation has healing power.
You said, 'I want to get back home, I have recovered.'
The following day, you could not say a word.
The following week, you were no longer among the living.

Fingerprints on the window pane

Weeks before my husband died
of concealed corona virus signs,
he filled the window with new panes,
later succumbed to silent pain.
His prints are pressed upon the glass –
the whorls of his fingertips as clear
as if created yesterday:
His life pressed forever on our windows.

The last view

One behind the other, we stood and waited for
an hour on the morgue's porch.
I, the widow, entered last,
behind the five bearers.
The receptionist seemed
not uneasy about time wasted.

Importantly, I wanted to see my husband,
not the corpse.
I ignored the rule that
Covid-19 cases cannot be viewed.

When they brought the iced pan,
we expected to see a mummy
in those wraps for the dead!

But when the undertaker opened the pan,
he lay peacefully, with the living smile we knew,
which the sanitiser could not erase.

Then I looked at the shadows of their eyes,
they looked down, poor bearers,
abiding by the law:
No Covid-19 case can be viewed.
The mummified bodies cannot be uncovered.

At last,
that night in the silent vigil
observed by our family and friends

who kept their distance,
we told them we had seen him.

The following day, we knew whom we were burying.

Tears in her dimples

When I heard my
granddaughter's first cry
a few months
after my husband's passing,
I would, alone, cry.

When a mournful visitor
sang dirges at the doorway,
I would wipe away my tears
with the belt of my blue dress,
forging a smile, slyly,
so they would not cry for me.

But my granddaughter's cry
was not for disguise.
It was not for pretending.
We knew when she was sad or hungry or sleepy!

The tears from her cries
would always linger in her dimples.

During Covid-19 lockdown

You shall not Sneeze.
You shall not Cough.
You shall not Touch.
You shall not Greet by hand.
You shall not Gather in cliques.
You shall not Sell beer.
You shall not Sell tobacco.
You shall not Eat in public.
You shall not Leave your house.

You shall Only leave your house for essential services,
And, if you Sneeze,
If you Cough,
If you Have a congested chest,
If you Get tired,
You must be Quarantined
and be Cleansed.

Greetings

During Covid-19 waves,
we did not kiss when we met,
we just waved, with our eyes wet,
and touched each other's elbows in fear
of the wavering waves that hissed as snakes
and continued to snatch humans like vultures
whisking chicks from their mothers
and mothers from their chicks.

South African students from China put in silos

Like the accused awaiting trial,
students were stored
in Polokwane at the Ranch Hotel,
until they were cleared and freed.

After the first blood

You must not play with boys
or else
you will get a child.
Or,
you can stay home for now,
and be married
to the lone farmer across the river,
after the contagion has died.

Old folk during Covid-19

The septuagenarian peeps through the door opening.
Eyes dart from one end to the other of the school corridor.
Lickety-split!
From the floor above, the nervous senior lecturer
glides like a skateboarder down a hill,
onto the glossy deserted passage of lecture halls.
He summons suspected students though the intercom –
keep away, keep away!
The old heart prays that no queries come to his office
lest they bring news of another virus.

Turned claustrophobic

Challenges of pillow throwing, dances, songs, aerobics,
targeted weight loss, indoor games and long life
shared in good spirit,
following no strict rules of any formal game.
Everyone's whiling away Covid-19 time,
champing at the contagion's restrictions.
Unbearable! Spending life like incarcerated things!
Until Jerusalema came and lit flames in our souls!

Epitaphs on their graves

On the north-eastern side
of Church Street cemetery
lie our dearest ones.
Placed there,
labelled Covid-19 cases.

A few cars rushed by,
as our eyes tried to halt the tears that
dampened our dry lips.

The waiting municipal workers
saw us arrive,
they stood to attention in their PPE²
looking like astronauts.

We dimly sang a hymn,
forcing the words from under our masks.

The operator released covering soil,
sending off sad dust
when the last soil was thrown on our behalf.

For your epitaph I wrote
in my heart:
'Rest peacefully here, my love.
It was not our wish
to lay you here with no familiar mass,

2 Personal protective equipment.

with songs faint and dim –
that was not the way you sang for Him.
You were not even allowed to
say farewell to your yard!
The law said you
were contaminated with Covid-19!

When the trumpet sounds
and you find yourself here,
do not shout loudly in indignation.
When rocks and sands that were
thrown into your grave turn
and bring you up,
be merry.

We are not even certain you are here.
We don't know.
We just saw the hearse lights, and – action!
They said we had to take you within two hours
to mourn and bury you!
That is why there is no epitaph on your headstone.

At your work,
the white man takes too long to compensate us.
Besides, how does it help?
How does it help us, to enjoy
the fruit of your labour when you
are captured by the so-and-so corona?

Rest in peace here, my love.
This is just a sign that we
came here, for your name.
This small writing here about your days:
Of birth, and life, and resting here,

it is what we know.
But, Love, as you always smile,
inspire the spirits next to you.'

We will write these words
on our hearts.
The world will not see
this epitaph.

Pumpkin in the graveyard

Once it is there, do not point at it!

At the graveside, it is a bad omen
if the verdant pumpkin grows and spreads.
It is a grave plague to the bereaved.

Mature popping seeds will wind up
in the remaining lot, beloved or not,
as long they have a hand in the dead.

Go and grow somewhere else, lush pumpkin,
go and burst on the open roadside!
But not on my graveside!

Longing

If I were invited to invent a charm,
I would make a divine chain –
yes, with the Maker's blessing,
I would use this chain,
to link to you. Going places with you –
places that don't envy my blood and flesh.

You led us before, and up there you still do,
just as when you were young and fresh;
no evil hand nor sword would hurt me or our children.
For our safety, you'd hold the chain up there.
We'd be joined like Siamese twins,
linked, with our daughters;
so no monster harms them,
no hunger lures them into criminality,
no colour myths misguide their blackness
to diffidence, despair and indignity.

The last room

8 July 2020 was an unusual day.
My husband left for work
dressed in civilian clothes,
which was uncommon
for him, during the week –
usually, he represented his hospitality work,
every day.

My husband had never been in hospital,
never consulted a GP
for an ailment that would keep him in bed.
But he was anxious to visit
the doctor's rooms that day.
It was a Christmas day for him! A rare day!

Just past lunch hour on that Wednesday,
he sent a selfie from the outpatient room.
Settled, enjoying leisure for the first time ever
in a hospital bed.

'Should I bring you warmer clothes?' I asked.
'No. I am finishing now,' he said.
'They are just checking my BP.' He laughed.

It was cold.

I took his windbreaker

I drove to the hospital.
He told me the doctor had sent him there.
In the happiest mood.

He did not return.
Starting to panic, we called
when night approached.
He told us the doctor predicted
a discharge after two days.

On day four,
the lady nurse over the line said:
'Please come and collect Mr P's valuables,
because he's going to the ICU.'

The ICU?
That was it, the Intensive Care Unit.

You were in so many hands,
so many hearts: The gastroenterologist
pulmonologist
physicians
critical care nurses
online pastor
us.

We want to know the details, to understand how they died
so that we mourn like people who have hope
that on the third day, He will restore us.

Each will console the other

When Mzansi's disasters have vanished –
lootings, killings, floods, dam walls collapsing,
darkness, court cases, commissions,
and corona virus diseases,
and when the rand has picked up –
if there is any one left in afflicted and affected homes,
we will personally bring solace to the bereaved,
when the impenetrable clouds have cleared.

We will move from house to house
and ask the bereaved:
'Le reng le apeile ka pitša e kgolo?'
['Why did you cook in such a huge pot?']
meaning, we are aware of your loss and we are sorry.

Then they will say,
in a sorrowful way:
'Re paletšwe ke go diša.'
['We were unable to shepherd our livestock']
meaning, death is unstoppable, we couldn't stop death.

Death is like a blanket, we will say.
It is found in all households.
We all cover ourselves under the blanket.
It is the bride of all families,
it enters when least expected.

Death between two hearts

Deaths' bullying threatens me unstopably,
pouring out alienation, coldness and despair.
yet, new love comes, too.
Are these fake feelings, perhaps only lust?
Is it because I am sad, missing him?

This faint lamp, however tiny it may be,
wishes to join yours – to shine brighter.
Mine alone will choke,
I feel it, as with each death it grows dimmer and fainter
in this home that was once warm and shared.

See, you also wrote last words on a grave –
your wife's. You threw petals six feet down,
as did I.
You released her with your last love wave,
but – do we all still agree that love grows again?
Or does loving again make you a fiend?

Your grief is expressed in your drooping cheeks.
Your grief and mine are all from death.
Like puppies we whine in empty kennels,
both you and I know what death slyly does.
But our loved ones did not die, surely – they're in us, still.
Our possible union, I think, they will approve.
Perhaps it's our minds that are still aloof.

The long howl

The dog howls again
in the still of night.

Silence accepts,
in the quiet darkness,
a disturbed peace.

I listen, worried,
under the thickness of my blankets,
to the howling, undying sound
that is agonising.

My grandmother opines
it is calling for another death.

Steaming

The garlic's aroma is ululating in all rooms
from the central boiling pot.
Ginger dances between the teeth,
not easy to crush and swallow.

The ceiling drips.

Upon your arrival

In heaven, always remember,
if ever there was a man who loved his wife, it was you.
You needed no approval of law to show your love.
You triumphed over all, overcame all troubles.
It is just the way you died!
Be aware, though, that death's pettiness to you
is a misfortune to me, remaining here.
I know you will unblock the sunshine,
and when it is released, you will liberate me
from this shroud of your dark freedom.

Epitaph for children's graves

'You don't miss much.
The old puppies have grown.
The boys and girls are now men and women.
The huts are no longer there.
The fields are bare.
No one ploughs.
The rich soil accommodates shacks.
There is no more fresh milk, no kraals, no sound of chickens.
There are new things: Cellular phones,
TVs, plasma screens, laptops, Wi-fi, 3G to 5G,
double storeys, malls!
Life is all boxed in with illusory innovations.
Propaganda, profanity, porn –
sheer fictitiousness, hypnotic moves,
a licence to lose our humanity to
the giant of technology and internet.
You don't miss much.

'But you ...
Rest in peace within this serene dwelling
until angels awaken you when the time is right.
You have been called by Someone who loves you.
For those whom He loves do not live long;
His Kingdom is theirs.
We remember you.'

Elegy on the death of an academic friend

For Pat

We started our route timidly,
feeding our ambition, then voraciously,
as nestlings handle food,
demanding to satisfy our hunger for learning.

As PhD students,
we sought to protect our learning,
so we would be able to fill our hoods
with fellow graduates.
We sifted, shared
knowledge –
seized every moment given to us.

We wished to cry with joy,
loudly applaud with the others,
fling our regalia together.

But you were quickly quietened,
like a dove.
Surely, with the angels, you are clapping in praise,
a learned Daniel. You joined them
assuredly,
after He tied His knot.
'Even the angels do not know the hour.'

PART SIX
General

My knees

My knees are ostrich's eyes:
so immense,
so vigilant,
determining who will be in my future.

Boys,
when they see my knees,
black patches of art,
they call for the Uber.

My knees are my strength!
My full support, at length.

In prayer, they kneel
for calm:
They crawl
beside beds
to beg for peace,
in the storms
of war.

On the ground, they kneel
to grind mealies;
offering water to wash,
to my man,
and to ignite the fires.

My knees are my strength!

My full support, at length.

Some women's knees
look like smiling babies.
Pillows of smoothness,
clear and soft.

My knees!
Dark torches –
proof of agonies.
So dissimilar to
my calves!
Threatening my future,
chasing potential love away,
rejecting my dresses,
with their roughness.

My knees are still my strength, though!
They go down and bend for me.

Uncles

They can, best, help you.
They can, worst, harm you.

This one:

Mornings, he'd wait, a short, creepy, sober owner at the door,
to borrow ice-cold, black, fizzy drink from his coming
pension money.

He'd heel-walk or tiptoe on calloused toes from the shop
(as if walking flat on his feet is forbidden)
to gulp down alone his credited drink,
and puff his herb,
rolled in paper labelled 'addiction'
from a concealed package.

He'd look so serious and satisfied
when he pushed his doped chin upwards
and rolled out the smoke on the air,
as if he saw his back-up in the heavens
cheering on his dubious act,
with his sly eyes closed
from killing puffs that filled his already sponge-holed lungs.

He'd spread his face ...
his nose meeting semi-closed eyes somewhere,
ears looking for celebration with his fontanelle,
and he'd stick out his forever dehydrated tongue.

He'd puff and puff, showing the satisfaction of a child

wagging its erect tail, with mother's teats oozing milk
into its mouth like an overflowing river.

Offering lessons of grandmother's rooster fights,
he let dogs fight dogs.
He taught us to read thrillers,
shoot at crickets and mice with catapults,
forecast rain and storms,
told us to dress in best brands.

When he told us fascinating and appalling stories:
of heavens and angels,
of friendship and neighbourhoods,
of patriotism and globalisation,
of philanthropy and humanity,
of prostitutes and drugs,
of sportsmen and balls,
of paedophiles,
of escapees,
of ants!

So vividly,
I always wished him to be sober!

Food, scrumptious though it may be – he does not touch it.
He fiddles and presses and scans everything on the plate,
spreading each portion with his middle finger
like an investigator on a murder case;
every piece seems nauseating to him.

At times he's as calm as a mortuary,
despite the pain he has inflicted on souls.
His conscience weighs on him now, surely –
distorted manners of my uncle remain a menace,
that inwardly disfigure and scar us, like his face.

Lament for a missing person you know has died

It becomes a hypocritical sorrow.
Nothing will hide forever.

The cruellest killer, after a favourite one's death,
is silence.
Especially when the loved one is murdered.
Or should I say, has disappeared?

The saddest and most complicated part
is that no noise is [was] heard:
The silenced police report,
the bloody stains wiped to clear,
tormented mouths zipped by fear;
no possible traces here.

Seven years will pass.
Another seven will come and go.
Then real tears will flow.
When the wheat and the weeds
have parted.
For now, let them grow together
The truth will out.

At the bus stop

We waited at the bus stop
and talked about our men, when they
had gone –
returned to Jo'burg City.

After the last puff of dust was smelled down the road,
when the saffron horizon disappeared behind our sad kraals,
we felt loneliness, bereftness befalling us like a slow settling
cloud.

We'd discuss whether they'd pitch over
the next Good Friday or Christmas.
We shared.

We shared how some killed long-time hunger
and quenched dryness that had lingered for months
in these dry homes, lonely homes, lonely huts.

We spoke of some who, on arrival from Jo'burg,
dropped their bags
and headed to where bubblegum music called,
and where homemade sorghum beer,
made by aged, silver-bangled arms,
with traditional methods,
announced its presence
and knocked thirsty men to the streets.
Then their doors denied them.

We spoke of those husbands who came with complaints
that the huts were not well-decorated with cow dung
and walls not smooth with red soil!

We spoke how some came
with nothing!
They cried that their pockets had been ransacked
on the long trip,
that all they wanted was home-cooked pap,
from earthen pit of undying fire
and not from a stove that prepares uncooked pap
that you eat alive!
Not that pap cooked on mbawula that gave them TB, they
said.

Or unready porridge by the women of the south
that made their stomach cramp!
The women who know nothing but
snatching them and thieving from them nicely,
with their long red nails and red, red lips
in Alex!

Some of us did not speak. Of receipts,
of weeks' wages in envelopes,
and sacks of dried bread slices,
and old clothes that smelt of ironing
with electricity at missus' houses.

We continued waiting at the bus stop,
for all that had taken place,
and talked about them
when they had gone,
until the last puff of dust was no longer smelled
down the dusty road.

Everyday life

On the chilly mornings of each winter,
the precious sun's streaks in the east
sow warmth on the commuters' shivering bodies.

At the bus shelter,
whose iron sheets are now full of rust,
chattering teeth wait each dusk for the bus.

Each cold seat greets its casual passenger,
who rubs his palms so hard,
as he sits, glued to his friends for warmth.

When the queue is half done, the driver
lets the exhaust burp.
When it rumbles for the last time,
his chin is still resting on the steering wheel,
because of the passenger,
who always pees against the back wheel
before he enters at last, and the bus can leave.

The relieved one boldly reoccupies his usual seat,
digs his hand into his scuff tin
of perfectly spooned porridge,
layered with salted and peppered meat with tomatoes and
onions,
which still look alive.
He smiles at the crying container lid,
passionately eats up his lunch in the bus.

African mealtime

When mealtimes came,
we squatted around the wooden calabashes,
one of porridge, the other of meat.
We touched nothing, until the eldest had imperially sat and
inspected our hands, rinsed in one dish
behind the door of the smoking hut.

Like sheep behind a bellwether, we always followed his lead.

We sat together and waited for his order
after he'd first dipped his hands in. We all shared germs
from fingers mobbed by our lips,
slurping sauces from our arms also.

We ate with anxious eyes
glued to the bellwether's bragging hand
that did not pick his piece from the tower of porridge.
We had to finish this before we started on the meat.

He continued dictating lousy rules like
'Sit with both bums, properly!'
'Don't sit on one arm!
'Go and clean your nose!'

Around the large wooden bowl of porridge
accompanied by the small one of meat
luxuriating in starred sauce,
pure and natural,

we would wait for him.

He would watch his piece of meat, watch
it as he guided it
to himself,
scooping it up with his ball of porridge;
guiding it gradually in his direction.

He would let us feed on the sauce,
until the porridge mountain was nearly finished.
Then he would pick that largest piece.

We followed, one by one, by our ages.
We knew our order. We knew that!
We did.

If there was any odd piece loitering,
he'd tear it into minute pieces,
with his soiled fingers
smeared with saliva and creamed porridge,
spreading the threads of meat in the bowl.

Then again, one by one,
we'd pick a fibre of meat, after him.

Relishes

Our relish was morogo,
morogo,
morogo,
morogo,
all the way!
Every day it was morogo.
Morning, day and night.
And all the nice things
were for the old people.
You slaughter a chicken:
Feet,
necks,
intestines,
that is for the women and children.
All nice things –
back, breast, and thighs – are for the men.
Mashotša,
Mashotša,
Mashotša,
all the way.
All the remaining meat of any
slaughtered game
belonged to men.

Guy Fawkes in our youth

On this day, Guy Fawkes Day,
for us and our parents,
the fun spread, and our neighbourhood
grew on this day.
We didn't know the guy,
but we had lots of fun on his day!

Elders pulled out handkerchiefs to wipe happy tears
on this day.
We got ourselves big mammas' unusual attire to wear:
Shoes like logs, oversized shirts, tattered ones,
and put on wild make-up and big hats.
From house to house we went dancing and singing
special songs.

Now, you can't shout your joyous moments,
let alone sing carols with neighbours.
Our township yards are surrounded by fences,
doors and windows alike. There is steel
around our hearts and souls.
We no longer share happiness
with our community on this day.

The man in the eatery

Oils and juices
ooze off his full lips.

Meats of all sorts wait in his mouth's cavity –
gobbling down each titbit with voracity,
he licks the plate.

His costly phone
agitatedly moves to all corners of the table,
to capture every pleasure on the plates.

He devours in a thrice
the crushed fruit with a heap of ice cream,
a line of cream forming a foamy moustache.

The hectic waitron agrees to snap
his last pic quickly, to send to his wifey –
how he bolts his hotel dish
from The Ranch!

The choir conductor

The choir conductor, AKA 'Big Short',
was a conductor of note.
He got children to win at all events,
even at the Eisteddfod.

His body, gestures and instructions exuded prowess;
he conquered the podium,
exhilaration would ripple from the stage
as he performed at peak level.

Once, the toughest soloist piece
produced a brilliant escapade:

The cc propelled his energy, like a chopper,
opening his arms as wide as a bat,
leaping and beating in silence.
His legs moved in vibrato.

When the most difficult note came,
the conductor tactfully fell on his back
and pointed up with his sharp-nosed shoe!
The roar of the audience closed the crack

of the unheard high note.
He chanted and moved with the soloist,
the adjudicators missed the unsung note.
The comedian choir conductor's singer won!

Cheating for the future

The sight of the exam hall
always brought on a panic attack.
Slim sweat lines my back,
like slithering snake it crawls.
I feel it in armpits, underpants
as it descends and shares the seat
with me.
No matter how many times I wrote an exam.

Others showed no fright.

And yet, the scene before me ...
a student with
one unfolded microscopic note,
affluent with information,
with his pen strutting stylishly
on the exam book!

Beyond my watering eye
under the watchful eye
of the invigilator, who hovered about me
like a hawk
sensing some fresh dead catch,
I still wandered.

Like a pretentious possum
I closed my eyes tight,
then pat my head with

my rich ruler that talks in silence.
Poor teacher sees not the fat content on it!

Another with his minute notes in the pen
slipped onto the sheet, pretending to shake the ink!

The stories on fingernails
prestigiously ornamented like embroidery
as she held her twin thumbs up,
making them kiss her lips
as she inspects the tiniest letters
accurately documented on them;
perfectly pioneered mnemonics.

Cheating for our own future!
Made it again this time.

Catharsis

Penning forged rhymes on paper,
spat out from greed and not from the heart,
spoils the core mission of a verse:
a serum that soothes with words,
instinctively directing and inspiring.

My nakedness of truth,
my vulnerability,
when I commit my spirit to paper,
leave words that haunt you
like a snake's skin –
shedding nothing but the truth with my words.

The happiness of a baby

The happiness of a baby makes us merry.
It patters like rain.
But, when the cruel nanny comes,
it crumples into a ball.

The joy of a baby brightens us all.
It spreads like a sunflower.
But when the rough hand arrives,
it curls up like an armadillo.

Do ti la so

There were organised choir competitions for schools in the then Transvaal.

I trained the infant category of the primary school beginners. The song in 1989 expressed the Pedi tradition about a grandfather's specs.

Just before the competition, the whole school assembled, to hear the songs and see if the conductors were ready to perform on stage.

The strict principal would choose the qualifying choir.

All learners lined up in rows, on dusty ground, listened with awe all day.

They swayed along with the tunes and tapped their dusty knees.

Hundreds of these little boys and girls didn't even know the meaning of the lyrics.

Now, when the day of the competitions nears, like a police inspector, the principal checks for discord – only his best conductors represent the school at Matipane Centre.

Me! I stayed behind, even though I purchased the grey TUATA attire.

Who takes down the trees

Who takes down the trees
and sleeps on leaves
so green as to give life?

Who takes down the trees
and sits on dry leaves
that cry to the sky to live?

Who climbs onto trees
and treads down branches
so trunks stand nude in the air?

Who pulls out roots
that anchor the earth?

Who will climb up the trees
in the now nude earth
that awaits flooding?

No reverse

A point of no reversal:
An airplane plunging through
thick clouds.

Winning

A winning word

For the SA 2017 national spelling bee competition:

Chrysanthemums.

Hungry in winter

A boy sells pots
from a metal scrapyard
on an icy day.

When it rains

I think of my grandmother
who dwells alone in her husband's holding.
She sits in the kitchen, facing the road,
and hopes that one of her children will come
with nice things from the city, when it rains.
She sits on the floor
on her ragged blanket
(no one would take that from her)
and absorbs all the cold into her already frail body,
when it rains.
She sits and looks in anticipation.

Her eyes become red with tears
when you suddenly appear.
Granny had her umbilical cord cut fifteen times.
When it rains, I see her tears
flowing to mourn her nine buried children.
When I see the rain,
I stand and look,
and feel grandma's pain and touch her tears
of loss and loneliness.

When it rains,
I wish my grandma was nearby,
so I could share the warmth and
show the courtesy she deserves –
because she is the carrier of my genes,

the bones of my lineage,
the blood still living above the earth.
She is my fore-mother and future guide.
None can detach me from my grandmother's love –
not the harshest winds nor cruellest floods.
My love for my grandmother reigns,
especially when it rains.

To learn how to give birth

It is more than nine months' heaviness and joy
being relieved by the sharp pains of labour.

To know how to bear a girl or a boy
is not something one can teach.

It is the understanding of lips that know no smile,
eyes filled with pain above
a silent, sombre and cold heart.

To learn how to give birth:

It is when a mother feels the need of the baby
from a distant well.

Mothers feel the pierce of the baby's cry,
the glands yearn to comfort
when any baby cries.

You do not learn to give birth
by giving birth.

The umbilical cord is cut
to initiate motherhood –
the separation is a test,
paving the way to parenthood.

To learn to give birth,
is not to crave chalk or clay or chocolate,
or to throw up!

It is to realise that those children

who dream in the dark,
should be overwhelmed with light.

Mothers who learn how to give birth –
they do so even in soiled earth.

Mothers' backs are cradles
that naturally rock the baby
in the stormiest seas.

And they make music out of
whistling winds.

Mothers sing along with the wind.

In all torrents,
real mothers always give birth.

Giving back

Unfortunately, the elite calls it black tax.
When you acknowledge the impoverishment
you arose from. I reckon you earn your honour,
inspired by your impoverished past,
which you surpassed by sweat and suffering.
I know you were exposed to the deepest
and saddest of worlds,
but you rose; rose to the highest and lightest of peaks.

Yet, know that there will be no harmony
till womankind is honoured
by taking care of yourself – who is
the one who bore you.

PART SEVEN
Spirituality, Religion,
Culture

Superstitions?

The black-mouthed white maggots
from nowhere
scattered and grouped themselves
on the cupboard top.

I had no clue where they came from,
or where they fell from. No trails of holes
or any rot in the roof showed!

On that clear morning, I worked myself almost to death
to make the house spick and span,
before I scaled the fence
on a nearby road to board a taxi.

It is taboo
to cross over neighbours' fences
when the unborn one
kicks in your tummy.
I had energy, I cared not.

On the way to the obstetrician's room,
a lady known to me
for years,
rebuked me in her friends' and colleagues' midst:
'Greet everyone by hand!' she said.

Was it a bad omen?
Or some premonition I ignored?

I cared not until the obstetrician instructed
to pitch for a C-Section the day after.

Back home,
I found the cupboard top as clean as it had been
before the mysterious visitors appeared.

Then, when the bad news
of my legendary grandfather came,
I asked myself if it was
the worms, or the woman, or the crossing-over?
Or maybe the old must go
for the new to come?

Prayer on the deathbed

If I survive and live,
I will remember that there is life to live
– happiness unmeasured, it is,
just to live –
the inexplicable gift
of life.

Waters for healing

Still waters will always be calm
for those who comply
with their ancestral cues.
Waters will gather in anger
for those who owe the calling gods.

For to swim
in these waters, a person needs to be free
of spiritual complications.
But if the ancestors are calling,
swimmers will never exit these sacred waters, not wholly.

Swimmers in water need to be free of ancestral debt,
or they will never leave these waters alive.
They can simply admire,
gaze at photos of the trees all around,
but not plunge right in, otherwise
the water spirits will welcome the debtors' shades
and call them home.

Time

Do you see it fly?
Is it the fragrance of roses
that drags you back with a jolt of remembrance?
Is it that sensation of warm butter
gliding down your throat,
the delicacies that tantalise your taste buds,
or the bitterness of unripe granadilla
that you spit out – because you can still choose your tastes?

Is it the air you still breathe,
the horizon you chance to see?
The creeping red-orange dawn,
as enchanting as a fresh omelette after sleep?
Is it the shimmering moonlight infusing
the cool night
when the sun is resting?
Is it the blue fly buzzing,
following your folk to the grave?

Will we ever see time as it flies past,
and finally throws a last goodbye?

Loss

You feel down, so low
that even when you cry
and try to look up,
the tears still roll down.
They don't fall down and dry up.
They roll down and let you down
again and again and again.

PART EIGHT
Tribute

Well-being

My husband was always on a buying spree.
Especially on Mondays and Fridays, around three.

Paulus would call:

‘Wat eet ons vanaand?’

‘Hmm, uhm ...,’ I’d hesitate.

He’d say, ‘Moet ek vleis koop?’

Of tjips?’

I would say, ‘Whatever, anything is fine.’

‘OK, ek sal ‘n hoender kry.’

He’d call again.

‘Moet ek Coke of juice bring?’

I would say, ‘I’d prefer juice, breakfast punch.’

‘Okay, sharp sharp,’ he’d answer.

I knew, the chicken wouldn’t come alone,
it would be accompanied by:

An ox tongue, wors, salami,

country sausages ...

a box of drinking yoghurt,

a sack of grapes, really, a sack,

a bag of butternut,

a bag of uncooked chicken,

atchaar, Coke,

a loaf of cheese, Nosh chocolates or Amajoy sweets.

Above all, he always brought a box of love.

Which we miss, because he’s now above.

My grandfather, my hero

I remember my grandfather fondly:
Abram Nkgelepeng;
'Nkgelepeng', meaning 'help me'.
Named after an Afrikaans-speaking man.

Every day, my grandfather would rise
before us all, make a fire
and boil bush tea for us
in a big yellow enamel kettle.

He shouted for us to run to school,
where he served as secretary
of the school committee.

After school,
we'd find him under a Jacaranda,
tanning skins, or fixing yokes for oxen
and donkeys.

On good days, skinning a squirrel or
hare for a delicious dish,
mixed with crushed marula nuts.

Saturdays were not playing times for us,
with my grandfather's green fingers!
He had ours in the ground –
ploughing, weeding or harvesting.
'Oxen must walk in a straight line, and pull steadily.

At the end of each furrow, let the animals rest,
he'd say.
At the end of such days,
we cherished pay-time,
and from the local general dealer we'd get
Fanta or Pepsi-Cola and bread from Tal's Bakery.

During quiet winter seasons,
on his bicycle, my grandpa sold vitamins,
chewable gummies, syrups, malt, and all.
We knew no ailments in his time.

Sunday mornings,
we received a treat
before we went to church: Dutch Reformed, under the tree.
He'd squeeze goat's milk
into our mouths,
after his stainless steel bucket had overflowed with foam,
for grandma to prepare sour curds.
'Knowing how to milk
is not quite as simple as it sounds!'
he'd say,
aiming a few squirts into our mouths!

Chunks of goats' meat
on Christmas Day, New Year's Day and Good Friday,
made my grandfather a superhero!

You could feel how proud
he was of his sons' services: soldiers and teachers.

All these memories show his precious gifts
to his large family.
He left a legacy of service and love,
hard work, discipline and faith.

When I look at these, and sing his praises,
I think of my grandad every time.

He's a hero.
He's my hero!

My grandmother is still bright

My grandmother is 103 in 2024.
The pass system missed her birthday
when she first got her *dompas*.

Her nickname is Lesufi,
meaning darkness, illogicality or non-sense.

She would say,
'Don't tell me Lesufi,'
and the community adopted the name.
Even the chief's men know:
Lesufi does not take nonsense.
Her children know, at her age,
not to take her for granted.

At 103
she knows who owes her money,
she reads with her naked eye
from her Jehovah's Witness books,
she inserts a needle and sews,
she bakes her bread,
she bathes herself.

But my grandmother is now distraught.
Now, at this time, she misses her slain son:
Her last-born son, a soldier.
That is what makes my grandma old.

My grandmother is still bright.
But her heart carries old pain,
her body is becoming frail,
only from the loss she has endured.

Gifts

I love my granny's love for things
like liver, spinach, KFC, cake
and visiting the masseuse.
She likes sautéed liver,
and spinach mixed with herbs and veggies
– carrots, garlic, onion, marrows.
She says KFC know how to fry chicken.
She enjoys these with mabele porridge,
soft and warm.
She delights in well-cooked food
and is always glued to old books.

I wish my grandmother could give me her wealth:
Wisdom, fairness and good eyesight.
I do not want her other gifts.

She can dream about things,
and they become real tomorrow.
When she wakes up,
she will tell you who will be
coming to visit.
How does she know these things?
It is a weird gift.
My granny has predicted so many big things,
and healed hundreds of people of their ailments,
physical, mental, financial,
but some are threatened by her revelations,

and it is scary sometimes –
she speaks the truth without fear!

Still, the only gifts I wish for from her,
are her wisdom, her simplicity and her uprightness.

Lessons

My mother taught me
to eat with my mouth closed
and to sit when in the house.

She taught me
to stay indoors and darn those
holed socks,
rather than stand and stare
at the street mongers
or share falsehoods through fences.

She showed me
how delightful desserts
help bring families together
more than malicious talk
that spills blood.

She stuck to prayer.
Our neighbourhood
knew that at seven
we sang and prayed.

I am still sticking to my mom's
orders of saying grace,
but, as for socks, I cannot darn.
My primary school teacher
scarred my heart
by beating me for
not perfecting a darning patch.

My mother's lessons are simple:
To indulge in sweet things
sweet things for my taste buds
and healing hymns for my heart.

That's what I took from her.
Selected lessons that sustain life well.

