

# **Grieving Forests**

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by

**Freddy Vonani Bila**

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Note: This thesis is presented in two volumes: Grieving Forests (shorter poems) and Ancestral Wealth (longer poems).



### **Abstract**

This is a collection of village narrative poems mainly set in rural Limpopo that searches into the complexity of the past and how historical events impact on the present. Although the poems are imagined along the Marxist dialectic, they're fresh imaginative creations featuring a strong element of surprise, spiritual mysticism, experimenting with form, delving into unknown poetic avenues, creating new music, exploring new sounds and taking risks. The long and intense poem, *Ancestral wealth*, which is a tribute to the poet's father, reflects on death and its impact through the effective application of various stylistic elements and poetic devices, thus immortalising the life of a rural South African. Overall the poems, including retrospective and experimental ones, condemn the free market economic system and all that it seems to necessitate: the degradation of ecology, indifference to human suffering and the alienation of vulnerable social groups.



## **Contents**

Baloyi's art gallery, 7
Saluting Lake Fundudzi, 8
Letsatsi's neighbour, 9
Masindi's return, 10
I have a niece, 12
Rose's note, 14
Goats in my town, 15
After the marula season, 16
When age catches up with you, 17
Burning, 18
All the way to Pretoria, 19
The Toilet Cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport, 20
Burgersfort Landfill, 21
What she wore that day, 22
Things I've Picked Up On the Road, 23
Stella's Parrot, 24
Durbs occasion, 26
Outside the Blue Waters Hotel, 27
Indonesia, 29
Ciputra World, Surabaya, 30
Tribute to departed poets, 32
Glossary, 40



## Baloyi's art gallery

*For Albie Sachs*

it's a round chapel-like gallery  
baloyi built it with bare hands in the bush  
with everything he could find  
without begging or sulking

he built it with stones and bricks  
and grass and reeds and weeds  
he built it with grey tiles  
and scraps of steel and corrugated iron

mirrors glint on the walls  
wheel hubs have moulded the spherical windows  
the floor is covered by patterned cowdung  
the walls are painted with ochre and animal figures

baloyi bought a generator  
he was tired of finding his way through fireflies, moon and stars  
he bought a truck to collect twisted logs of *mondo*  
brought down by elephants in phafuri and makuleke

baloyi sat under the mango tree  
carving drums with tails and legs  
his darlings – kangaroos and camels  
dolphins and shuddering beasts

carving and filing wingless birds that soared up in the skies  
carving *tindzhundzhu* with breasts that glugged mud  
carving a godzilla to guard the constitutional court in distant joburg  
carving the foreign species that surround his dreams

albie sachs came to the opening of baloyi's art gallery  
how i wish he were the minister of arts and culture  
he would buy and place these sculptures  
in all of our public spaces

now baloyi has died and clouds are forming, rains are coming  
water will pour through the leaking roof  
ants will mottle the wood piece by piece  
until it dissolves

## Saluting Lake Fundudzi

we walk in file like prime domba dancers  
through the silent cliffs  
of sacred forest

we bend our knees  
our backs facing the immaculate lake  
look in between the legs  
& salute the lake  
*ndaa!*  
& the women say *aaa!*

here, ashes of the dead are sprinkled  
in water, a cemetery  
but thoughts of disaster  
of not returning home  
grabbed by *ndzhundzhu*  
linger in my head

we look ahead  
facing the Thathe Vondo grey mountains  
gazing at the lazily grazing cattle  
& the boys catching fish by the lake

we are here carrying the blessings  
of *vha*-Musanda Tshitangani  
& *vhakoma, magwena* a Venda.  
the Vhavenda say if you are mauled  
by a white lion guarding the bush  
you'll be discovered only after a decade

oh beautiful Lake Fundudzi  
is it true that the one-eyed shadowy *swidudwana*  
burrow holes in sand, from where they call the cattle herders?  
is it true that the fertile yet orphaned pythons mingle & swim in you?  
is it true that you hide the *ndadzi* bird that causes thunder & lightning?  
is it true that you once destroyed a fence a day after it was erected  
& showed some white researchers darkness when they tried to steal from you  
or were they stealing you...?



## **Letsatsi's neighbour**

*Thanks to Thabo the prophet*

letsatsi's neighbour, *hayikhona!*  
deploys rats and roaches to mine food from my kitchen  
I buy 80kg bag of mielie meal  
usually it lasts for a month  
but the bag is finished in two weeks  
because of her rats and roach invasion

her neighbour says I mustn't kill the creatures  
because they eliminate snakes, keep eco-system in balance  
but when I chase the rats and sweep away the roaches  
they all race through the fence  
and when I spray them with Doom  
my neighbour frowns upon me

letsatsi's neighbour, *hayikhona!*  
she's a senior witchcraft expert  
she sends lizards on a listening mission  
the lizards I know are hunted down by hadedas on roofs  
or eaten by owls, but not these ones

letsatsi's lizards have high definition ears  
they perch themselves behind curtains  
or just hang over the ceiling  
and listen to a husband and wife in their nuptial bed  
these creatures record faster and harder the news of your lips  
they follow your movements  
until her plan is masterminded  
until someone is lowered to the grave

## **Masindi's return**

*For Carlos*

Masindi died twenty years ago  
of heart attack  
buried the next day in his yard intact  
buried with all his jewels, coins, buttons  
no limb or brain or worm removed  
his fire helmet, jugs, saucers,  
kettle and antique gadgets

but carlos shishonge had told me  
at midnight, Masindi takes a shower  
in the weeping wind  
or in drizzly rain

I'm here in his abandoned paradise  
to savour the sweetness of Lufuno her neighbour  
quench my lustful thirst  
in Masindi's deplorable bed

and 12am  
a man splashes in the shower  
the shower door is half-open  
shhh, shhh, shhh

I switch on the torch  
there's a tall figure in the passage –  
a sturdy man glowing  
in the pale night  
it's him, Masindi, in a neat black suit  
and moonly sparkling shoes  
the shimmer hurts my eyes  
his photograph dangles on the wall

when I greet him, pretending to be fearless  
he stares at me like a bust  
as if to say:  
*tsotsi, build your own house  
even if you built it in the forest or by the river  
you could cuddle and stroke your flimsy concubine  
to your heart's desire  
in your rickety bed  
your gutter*

he looks askance with dejected eyes  
I sweat, my face burns  
noxious fumes hit my nose  
my cheeks turn red in fright  
hair pulled this way and that way

sink onto the makeshift bed and shiver  
while the owner of this abandoned choking house  
keeps on walking, stretching distances in my head

it's dark  
but Masindi has lit all the lanterns outside  
switched on the water pump  
invisible dogs are fed from the splintered kennels  
the wind and the brittle leaves howl  
tree branches break and creak  
I hear non-existent sounds  
because they say when a man is buried with jewels and buttons  
and the gate is not changed  
he easily finds his way home

I sit on his rickety bed  
light a cigarette to chase away his stubborn ghost  
walk through the backdoor in my unzipped pants  
Lufuno holds my hand too tight  
though my hand never sniffed her breast  
nor travelled around her waist  
I know the rumour smoke of shame  
will lift up to the rafters at dawn  
and my reputation will be in tatters

we toss in the bush against the *nkanyi* tree  
flat and silently bruised  
but Masindi's Mazda bakkie doggedly grovels  
down the gravel road  
right near the bush where we are hiding

until I scream:  
*leave me alone!*  
*it's not me who killed you!*

## **I have a niece**

I have a niece  
who dreams of chopping up my wife's body  
of stuffing the pieces into a black bag  
and calls it a day  
plant a marquee in my yard  
while mourners sing *tihubyeni minkhubyeni*

once she walked behind her granny in the kitchen  
brandishing a knife  
aiming to stab her back  
or pierce her heart into shreds  
but the hand trembled  
and the knife fell down

she's been to hospital several times  
harangued by an overdose of pills  
she wanted to meet her ancestors too soon  
because every time she fights with her boyfriend  
we at home must eat the fire  
she says our love for her can't fill up a cup

my niece, nineteen years old, solemnly goes to church  
she comes back home  
locks herself in her house –  
her granny's house, my father's house, our old house  
a house which we are banished from entering  
she talks to her mother only  
and the rest of us, except for my two boys, are foes  
each morning I greet her, but she keeps quiet  
she lives in my house stubbornly  
last year crazy talkers stole her moment in her head  
she stole my wife's bank card during her exam time  
withdrew almost a thousand rands every day  
to buy a kfc or pizza or coke

when she watches tv, no one must dare change the channel  
even the children can't watch their comical ben 10 and spiderman freely  
once she kept the tv remote control for days  
starving granny of her favourite nigerian movies and muvhango soapie  
starving *malume* of watching the news and soccer  
starving my wife of watching generations, pastor irene and prophet joshua  
she thinks she's the boss  
I'm only scared she'll commit suicide  
when I reprimand her  
I'm scared she'll write a long letter  
blaming me for hanging herself

often, she cooks her own food, eats alone  
she gives my three-year old boy beer to drink  
she says my wife is a piece of shit  
that the husband and the things she's so proud of  
will vanish very soon

but I can understand the pain of this fatherless child  
with extreme swinging moods  
the tears of seeing her coloured father in the coffin  
the tears of being cheated by the breast that fed her  
the tears of a diminishing family history and blurry identity  
I understand the music of her inflated song of anguish  
I understand why she feels free and safe only when the bottle is open  
or when the dagga *zol* is fuming

I have a niece  
perhaps with a loathsome heart  
a niece with a thick chest  
but a moonly niece who needs urgent help  
but no one at home, no teacher  
no psychiatrist, no psychologist  
has managed to talk sense  
to my niece who must stop wasting her future  
a niece I pray for  
that one day she becomes a star  
that doesn't fade in the clouds  
in the sky

### Rose's note

Wherever you are mama,  
Forgive me for running away,  
For leaving a fatherless two month old red baby,  
For returning home with eyes fixed and dry lips:  
I'm the lost cow, unheralded by flocks of white birds.

Mama, death has tamed me so young,  
I don't have wrinkles and grey hair to caress.  
I never danced the python domba dance as radiantly as you –  
Heaving breasts, ebbing with fire from your waist,  
All I ever did was to revel in night clubs, in skimpy wear, stoned.

When you come to collect my remains,  
Where hail and storm dissolved my fortress brick by brick,  
In the wintry night so hostile,  
Please don't bring tree branches to collect my spirit,

When you finally take my head home, far away in Limpopo,  
Let my corpse not enter the yard, nor grandfather's cattle kraal,  
Let my corpse not rest for a night in my hollow hut,  
Let no burning candles grieve for my demented, dark heart.

Mama, my home address is this road to Elim  
Just bury me without a coffin:  
A makeshift plank and a thin *muraha-donki* blanket will do.

Bury me silently, for I'm the wild, thorn flower  
Of the shrubbery savannah.  
Throw me in the wetlands with fungus and moss,  
Preserved in clay like a toddler

## Goats in my town

wander through the market place  
they know what they are looking for  
it's not coffee beans  
but bananas bananas

in many towns and cities  
goats sleep on pavements and apartments  
in Accra or Dakar, goats eat pineapple and drink palm oil  
but the town from where goats graze freely  
not bothered by shoppers  
not scared of lightning and thunder  
not bothered by hammering rains  
watchful of traffic and groaning buses  
is my town, Elim

now that we have a big mall in Elim  
architects have had to put fence around the mall  
or else goats will stroll around gazing at ornaments and jeans  
lift cabbage and spinach at Shoprite  
snatch grannies' bags and purses  
bleating, mee, mee, mee!  
or simply steal a beer and get drunk  
fertile goats graze visibly outside the mall  
the same goats my father shepherded in the 30s and 40s  
still enjoy bananas bananas  
bringing kids to earth  
these small framed pointed eared goats,  
wild perhaps, are merely goats  
nothing more, nothing less

these boer goats make me smile  
have helped *makholwa* to find directions home

## **After the Marula Season**

After the marula season  
Elephants multiply in Makuleke village.

Fires are lit, glow endlessly in families,  
Men under trees down jars of marula.

Nature becomes green again.  
Lions roar in the bush.

I've heard some women go to drinking sessions without panties.  
Enjoy quickies behind the toilet. Return home with mouths wiped.

They complain of nausea. They miss menstrual periods.  
Even write-off husbands raise their shoulders in the chief's kraal.

After the marula season, sins of impotence are burnt.  
Drums throb. It's time to feast and dance.

Grannies giggle and ululate.  
It's their dream to cuddle fresh & strong babies.



## **When age catches up with you**

Donato 'Bra Zinga Special' Mattera says –  
when age catches up with you  
you go to the loo to pee  
you wait for the urine  
and it comes  
flooding the urinal

then you zip up your pants  
if you can remember  
and walk away

suddenly, the pants flow like the Orange River  
urine bursting through the banks  
uncontrollably  
just when you walk outside  
just when you think you are free

Donato 'Bra Zinga Special' Mattera says –  
be careful of drowning in laughter  
because when old age catches up with you  
you may not have enough nuts and bolts  
to close all the valves.  
or enough guts  
to watch yourself in the mirror

## Burning

First it was the persistent coughing and spitting sticky phlegm  
Then the slimy liquid slipped through the nose  
Now I pee red blood through my thin horn  
Not from eating beets or hot curry  
Not from swimming in bitter and brown streams  
Not even for letting my spear jab and bang stones

My elders say the urine of a dying man is like tea –  
Brown, burning and pungent  
Mine is red, it fills glasses in doctors' labs  
My elders say man must drink his urine to see the rising sun  
But mine is blood, only a sorcerer can slurp

My wife holds my hand at the doctor's consulting room  
She has never seen me crumpled like a Mopani worm  
Or even walking like a crab on hot sand of buzzing ants  
Now her sweet pipe is under siege  
Like a bleeding de-horned Skukuza rhino

The young female doctor says, "you've got hematuria, Mr Bila  
But don't worry,  
This condition is not life threatening."  
"Is it contagious Doctor?" My wife asks.  
"You can still have sex  
But let him heal first..."  
A smile sits on my wife's face  
Because I'll still jive between the sheets  
Without breaking my horn

I take the prescribed Ciprobay tablets and Citro-soda granules  
Suddenly I tremble like a rat whose hole is flooded  
A heap of blankets over me still doesn't build the heat  
But my pipe is burning, haemorrhaging  
The pipe is leaking. It's a torrid time.  
If I were a woman whose urinary tract is a dam that has burst  
I would be in diapers, looking up at the stars for mercy

Samora, my two year old son screams with fright late in the night  
He grabs my feverish hot body as if to examine my heart beat and temperature  
He has never seen me so sleepy and weak when we're supposed to play karate  
And wrestle and jog and ride on bikes and push toy cars  
My wife holds my hand, assures my soldier, "papa is here."

## All the way to Pretoria

The man who's given me a lift from Polokwane's hiking spot  
Speaks of things a man like me wants to hear:  
It's easy to make your wife love you  
So simple: use her washing rag  
Or let her use your washing rag

Let her wear your t-shirt that stinks of sweat  
The same shirt you wear when you sleep  
Or work in the fields  
Just that sweat  
Sweet sweat is all she needs to think about you  
In one bathtub  
Where both of you wash your underwear  
And wash with the cream of love

There's no other better *korobela* than that  
I've tried silver bullets  
I couldn't run the marathon  
I've tried *mpesu*  
Never worked particularly well for me  
I've settled for the *Chinese brush*  
Try it man  
No side effects  
Your wife will never ask for sugar next door  
You'll rock like a porn star

So says the priest  
Who knocks them down wherever he goes

## **The Toilet Cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport**

Young and energetic  
with a clean-shaven head  
and well-trimmed beard  
and red work wear  
smiles broadly:  
“Good afternoon sir,  
welcome to my office.”  
Then he goes to the toilet cubicle, cleans it,  
kills the odour of any diarrhoea  
with detergents

The man in the urinal  
wearing an expensive black suit  
executive tie and pointed shoes –  
the man who pushes a black suitcase  
full of modern gadgets, cash, credit cards,  
important documents and perhaps a bottle of whisky  
this familiar black diamond says:  
“You have a nice office man!”

And bursts into uncontrollable laughter  
Hahaha! Hahaha! Hahaha!  
Hehehe! Hehehe! Hehehe!  
Kekeke! Kekeke! Kekeke!  
Wakakaka! Wakakakakaaa!  
Wakakakakakaaaaaaa!  
Wakakakakakakakaaaaaaa!

## **Burgersfort Landfill**

Vultures dwell here  
Among the grim faced shack dwellers  
With their famished children

When the waste delivery truck arrives  
The dark human vultures shove and shuffle  
Fighting over dirt, competing with rats and pigs

No one talks about this grim enterprise  
The vultures hope to turn rags to riches  
In this, our wasted market economy

When ministers talk of black empowerment  
No one mentions this grim enterprise  
Which tries in vain to turn rags to riches

But on election day –  
The vultures are fed with pap and beef stew  
Dressed in a clean T-shirt with the leader's face

And when darkness falls  
They jadedly retire to the dump  
A celestial graveyard of hopes – their home

## What she wore that day

it was her choice  
to wear a tight skin stomach-out  
and zero centimetre mini skirt  
and perhaps a *g-string*

it fitted her waist perfectly  
it lifted her spirit as she strode in noord street  
she didn't know some wasted *babalaazed* lumpens  
would stop everything they were doing  
just to grope her  
dragoon her  
touch her bum  
call her slut  
take pictures with their cellphones

the taxi rank mob hate to be provoked  
because some of these folk with receding hair  
with an army of girlfriends  
and unnamed children  
sip nips of kwa mai mai *imbiza*  
that make them hungry lions  
they say girls, even babies in nappies  
must know their place  
wear nothing that leaves the cleavage or thigh open  
nothing like a zero centimetre miniskirt or kanga  
that makes bending impossible

## Things I've Picked Up On the Road

My wife removed three teeth at once at Polokwane Hospital  
She has lost the taste buds twice in the past two summers  
Kissing her is like asking for a dentist's pliers, scissors and needles  
But I sleep naked, dip my tongue so tenderly deep in her mouth sighing  
Like a toothless child married to candy  
So that I can giggle, counting the missing teeth like her

A few years ago, Dr De Kok in Polokwane numbed my left sole  
He removed planter warts and burned them  
And I remembered seeing my father  
Sitting on a rock, behind our two roomed house in Shirley village  
Soaking his foot in warm water sprinkled with salt and ZCC coffees  
Pricking, peeling the dried and dead skin of the warts  
With a sharp needle or nail clipper  
That's why I tell you of the things I've picked up on the road  
Things my children will pick up on the road

People have always told me that I look like my father  
And I was born with a light complexion like him  
But Bila didn't have a beard and died still light in complexion  
But my face is a jungle and a victim of the smothering sun  
My mother is 78, and doesn't have grey hair  
At 40, my chin is hard, grey hair growing like rice  
None of my brothers have this type of hair  
So I can't explain all these things that I pick up on the road

Mhlahlandlela looks like papa. That's fine.  
Samora the soldier has a round face like mama. Fine.  
And when my mother cuddled him for the first time  
She said: "Ah, feel his head bones at the back, they are just like mine  
But the big foot and toe are yours *Guerrilla*."  
And now I know all the things I've picked on the road  
Even the smallest things make me whole

## Stella's Parrot

Stella's African grey parrot is gravely depressed  
He's been sick for two weeks now  
Lost weight intolerably  
The avian vet in Polokwane says  
Jimmy the parrot has respiratory problems  
His kidney is not working  
& he suffers from pneumonia  
He might have inhaled something too toxic  
Maybe he drank an overdose of wine or gin  
That's why his head is down  
& depleted

*He breaks my heart –  
When he's well, he bites, jumps, flails, flutters  
& he repeats after me  
When I say hello  
He says 'hollow'  
When I say good morning  
He says 'God mourning'  
When I say I love you Jimmy  
He says 'fuck off!'*

Stella cuddles the ten year old African grey  
But he shits on her white silk shirt  
Leaving black grain fresh droppings  
He won't reach the African Grey lifespan of 75  
The poor bird has no manners  
How can he shit on her owner's shirt around the dinner table?  
Now he's looking down  
Breaking Stella's heart  
Won't even eat nor take his medication

*He's a better companion  
He communicates  
Better than my ex-husband  
More smart than that stupid old man who's always reading  
Or sitting behind the laptop  
Or downing whisky  
When I need someone to scratch my back  
That's why I use a vibrator  
To relieve my hormones  
& kiss the biting beak of my sweet African grey parrot  
In silence*

Stella's parrot eats fresh veggies  
& fruits in a bowl so clean  
Sweet potatoes & broccoli



Cucumbers & carrots  
Green beans, peppers & peas  
He munches kiwi, banana & pawpaw  
He drinks lots of bottled, mineral water  
Ah, but he likes tender chicken wings  
Beef steak & grilled fish  
And when he's happy, he shares red wine  
& gin with Stella  
Perhaps that's why his feathers are bright  
More beautiful than the chicken in my yard  
That feed on grass, grains, ants & locusts

*His feathers are falling off  
But he's got a medical card  
I'll rush him to hospital again*

John the invisible backyard shack dweller  
Eats stiff pap and cabbage  
He has been complaining of a back injury for days  
He breaks stones, dig trenches in Stella's garden  
Doesn't own a medical aid card  
He rubs some herbs on his back & heals naturally  
Poor Zimbabwean worker sleeps under a paraffin lamp light  
The hard reed mat pinches him like a horsefly  
Tired torso covered with a cheap, thin blanket

When Jimmy dies  
A post-mortem will be carried out  
The funeral procession will be sober  
The sky will be bright & clear  
Men & women in navy blue suits  
& polished black shoes will pay their last respects  
Speaker after speaker will wail how important  
& pleasing Jimmy was in the neighbourhood  
He'll be buried in a finely carved coffin, in the garden of wild willows  
Where Stella's German Shepherd was laid to rest  
Perhaps he'll be cremated, ash sprinkled in the garden

Hymns will be sung, a band will play violins, cellos & hit the cymbals  
Stella will plant flowers & erect a tomb  
She'll lock herself in the house for days without taking a bath  
She'll cry every time she gets a call from her children overseas  
She'll take a leave from work, stop going to the gym  
She'll do everything that a true lover must do  
To remember her sweet African Grey  
Who communicates better than her ex-husband  
That professor Mulder with his radio voice

## **Durbs occasion**

Thanks to *boys from seshego*

The European Union and Jacana are flying me down to Durban  
They've booked me at the Blue Waters hotel  
It doesn't happen every day

I'm not wearing skins, feathers, *nghundhu* nor do I carry a warrior staff  
I'm not wearing a t-shirt and jeans like a comrade  
Can't wear a tracksuit and sneakers like an aerobics fanatic  
I need a good perfume  
I don't want to smell like a he-goat  
It's a special night  
The night for the dignified Europeans  
The night for the African poet to warble!

A black suit will do –  
What I need urgently are black shoes, black socks and a red tie  
I'll borrow from my brothers or friends if I can't raise the cash  
I'm sure they'll not mind to teach me how to make a tie

I must go to the salon  
Dye, wash and twist my dreadlocks  
I don't want to look like a wild man before the cameras  
I must trim my beard like a sportsman  
Call me sell-out if you think I've gone too corporate  
I want to look radically elegant and sassy like civilized Sol Plaatje

When I step on stage lively to receive the EU Sol Plaatje poetry award  
People will applaud nonstop  
Give me a standing ovation  
The judges were sober when they made me a winner  
After all, I haven't received a prize in my twenty years of writing poems

I don't know what I'll do with this cash  
But I don't owe *mashonisa* a cent  
Maybe I'll buy a new bed  
So that I can dream well next to her who  
I paid *lobola* for, three years ago

## Outside the Blue Waters Hotel

Midday, the sun is up  
Opposite Durban's beachfront  
A middle aged cab driver greets me:  
"This is the land of honey and sunlight, my son  
I'm here to take you to the beehive  
It's not about money  
But hospitality, my son"

The patient man with a sweet tongue  
And darting eyes says:  
"I know every part of Durban  
If you need a Japanese woman  
Or ride between the hips of a scented Chinese  
Or a spicy hot Indian with glimmering hair—  
Or the blonde and silky  
Let me know my son  
Don't chase the shadows  
I'm here for you  
Whatever you want to devour, my brother  
Bunny chow, curry, breyani, good wine, Cuban cigars  
I park my cab here  
Durbs by the sea  
I know every branch and hamlet of the city  
Corner to corner  
Kloof to Valley of a Thousand Hills  
24 hours"

"Here is my number, my son  
I know what a young man like you needs  
I was once a young man  
Call me anytime, 24 hours I'm available.  
My name is Moolah  
As in money, money, money"

I nod, walking to the beachfront of dahlias  
I plant my feet in the balmy Indian ocean  
Watch the scuba divers and surfers  
And body boarders and sailors cruise  
Admire the creators of sand art: lions and tigers  
Watch the orange sun slip into the idyllic ocean  
Watch joggers with naked torsos and women turning brown in the sun

I lick Durban' sweetness with my eyes and ears  
Rather than being held hostage by a regimen of high hookers  
I know honey abounds in Durban  
But lustful strangers' veins are numbed  
By drug-filled needles and powder  
Unsuspecting strangers perish in brothels

Corpses lie like slabs of granite  
The dead men of fun are simply  
Unlocatable

## Indonesia

The bending road along the jungle of whispering bamboo  
The narrow asphalted road along tall teak and abaca trees  
The road of roaring trucks coming down the hill  
Green trucks full of logs or quarried stone or scooters  
Noses edging close to the cliff  
Where wreckage and skeletons sprawl  
The heavy silent, grieving forests and caves  
    Oh, Indonesia, Indonesia  
    I get drunk on your toxic beauty

The road zigzagging through green rice patches and cocoa beans  
Large fields of sugar cane, banana and coconut  
Large fields of cashew nuts, pineapple and pepper  
Fields of tobacco and sweet hairy rambutan  
The bashful rain always kiss the ground  
But I wonder who owns the seeds and harvest of your sweat  
For your children, Indonesia, drill holes in their lungs  
With Sampoerna cigarette blades to bury smells of poverty  
    Indonesia, Indonesia  
    I get drunk on your deadly beauty

Youth climb on the blaring Honda and Suzuki motorbikes  
Bravely mingle between roaring trucks and buses  
A farmer proudly carries a bunch of green bananas on his bike  
Another carries loads of coconut and sells by the roadside  
Another carries bamboo leaves to feed his sheep  
Before he retires to his crowded house  
    Indonesia, Indonesia  
    I get drunk on your violent beauty

The road along brown murky canals of garbage  
The road along cruel bitter rivers of dead fish  
The whistling winds of Java sea full of oil-drunken gliding dying swans  
At the break of dawn, village children swim in rivers and catch typhoid  
Mothers wash and hang their sorrows of unemployment on the banks  
Men catch trout, maintain sticky silence as their slim and small daughters  
Entertain tourists in the brothels of Bali and Jakarta  
    Indonesia, Indonesia  
    I get drunk on your deadly beauty

Earthquakes, landslides and tsunamis wash away  
Burning lakes and dissolving mountains that spit fire  
Somehow people have not lost their smile  
They patch themselves on the highlands  
Knowledge passed to them by their ancestors and oral poets  
    Indonesia, Indonesia  
    I get drunk on your deadly beauty

## Ciputra World, Surabaya

this giant glittering tower of glass  
escalators, sit-down restaurants  
towering over Surabaya city  
has birthed a new species  
that is fat even  
in their fingers

the indonesians i know  
eat sambal soup, steamed rice, fish and vegetables  
the javanese savour gado gado and otak otak  
the balinese eat bebek betutu  
the indonesians i know are fit, small and strong  
their faces beam with endless smiles  
and have the stamina  
from eating sarang burung walet

in magelang i met a farmer who grows coffee and pepper  
and another farmer who grows rubber trees and sisal  
but since this mall of burgers, hot dog  
and needle pricked chicken was built  
a sick society of fat giants of foam has emerged  
dragging away Indonesian traditional dishes  
a man kisses a fellow man  
in full view of the praying muslims

ciputra world may be far away  
dubai mall may be far away  
but in my own backyard of polokwane  
i have mall of the north  
beggars are swept away like filth  
children of the rich with layers of make-up watch movies  
eat caviar, smoke cigars  
can't take freebies  
because they are extremely loaded  
with fat and cash

in magelang i met a shaman dressed in black  
who sprinkled flowers on the ground  
calling on spirits to fertilise the land  
to bring manageable rain, enough sun and the wind  
the barefooted shaman drank some tonic and sang  
*i won't go back to the city  
because city water for tea is bottled and boiled  
i won't go back to the city  
because the rivers and canals are full of shit  
worse than bangladesh  
i won't go to ciputra world*

*i'll get lost in the mall  
in the culture hanging tower  
i'll remain in magelang  
because there's the sun and fresh air in the village  
because everyday is a ceremony*

## **Tribute to departed poets**

*For left-wing wordsmiths of the world*

### **I**

Far away in freezing Moscow  
Away from your beloved homeland Turkey  
Hikmet, you died of a heart attack  
While picking up a newspaper  
At the door of your summer house  
Perhaps your heart was destabilized by exile  
And loneliness and vodka  
But words sound through your head  
Though they can't mow your sorrows

In your birth country they banned your poems  
Gagged your loud voice  
They even wanted to hang you  
You wished to be buried under a plane-tree  
Anywhere in a village cemetery in Anatolia  
When your heart failed to pump further  
You joined Marx, Engels, Pottier in the other world  
To drive revolution against greed beneath the tomb  
But no one remembered your wish  
Now your tomb, comrade, is a tourist attraction  
You lie with the rich and famous  
In Novodevichy Cemetery  
But like a beast with a rope and chains  
You vainly kick and bite for freedom

*Oh radical of the word,  
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away  
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers  
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
The earth trembles under your feet  
And the new world is born*

### **II**

Oh, Chairman Mao Zedong the Red Emperor  
Peasant smoker who ended decades of civil war  
Tiger with many wives  
You opposed arranged marriage  
At 13, your father made you marry a 17-year old  
You who spoke of the Cultural Revolution  
And the Great Leap Forward  
You, the founding father of modern China  
You ruled for three decades – [some say like a dictator]  
But you gave land to the women  
You raised life expectancy



You taught the nation to read and write  
But sometimes you are accused of glorifying violence  
And the murder of millions [scattering ghosts across the land]

Oh Chairman Mao Zedong the Red Emperor  
When you suffered a heart attack  
And a lung infection  
Turned blue and died in 1976 aged 83,  
Your body lay in state at the Great Hall of the People  
A memorial service was held  
There was a three-minute silence observed during this service.  
You wanted to be cremated, your soul stashed in an urn  
It's you who signed the proposal that "All Central Leaders be Cremated after Death"  
Like Hikmet the mighty tree, when your heart's depths dried  
And your urine count dropped  
No one remembered your wish  
They placed your shrunken body into the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong

*Oh radical of the word,  
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away  
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers  
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
The earth trembles under your feet  
And the new world is born*

### III

*Masimong a matalana  
It was ha Mmamokoto  
Re hlopilwe ke mekotoyi  
Ntja di biswa bo gcoka sihambe  
Khumbula my child  
That's where you were born*  
Ingoapele Madingoane – prophet of black oral poetry  
Because Soweto where you lived  
The smog of *mbhawula* hangs in the air  
Youth hang in corners, smoking *nyaope*, throwing their futures hastily  
Avalon cemetery is full, its tombs are beds for sex workers and serial rapists  
Ravens live in taverns with blue bruised eyes  
Behind the four roomed house is a shack which feeds the family  
Amaguduka live there, back home *umsembenzi awukho*

You speak of brotherhood in Africa  
But the black condition is under trial  
Look, the bucket system of flies and cholera is rife in Walmer Township  
People relieve themselves in buckets  
In the same room occupied by their intimate partners/ parents/ children  
In the same room in which they must sleep and receive their guests/  
And prepare their meals  
The municipal truck empties the buckets once a week

And the runaway shack fires are burning outside the city –  
There is a war over excrement  
Black condition is under trial  
Flash floods in the mother city, the seat of parliament  
Black condition is under trial

Unlike Zuma who has built a palace in Nkandla;  
They say Mbeki did nothing in Idutyia  
His mother still runs the spaza shop  
She walks in the mud  
Mandela built a mansion in Qunu  
He greened a desert of sheep with tall trees and flowers  
But now that he is gasping for breath, there's no peace in his house  
Bones of his children are exhumed and reburied  
What have the Mandelas learnt from Madiba, a man of grace and dignity?

Madingoane, loud and brave  
Survivor of tavern brawls and township smells of shame  
You are no more  
No street named after you  
No library named after you  
No Order of Ikhamanga for you dear poet  
When you died on 12 December 1996  
The flags of the country were not lowered  
Only a small passage in a newspaper remembered you  
But your poetry mobilised millions to take up arms against the Boers  
Braving the noise of SADF tanks  
Braving their guns that aimed at decapitating children  
Bullets mopping servants returning home from washing missies' underwear in the suburbs  
Radical poet, your poetry fought against the blaze of curfews and special branch forces  
Against John Vorster prison  
Against the odour of township poverty, paralysed by wars in hostels

Madingoane, it was you and Mihloti Theatre, Malo Poets, Allah Poets, Dashiki  
Who caused a shriek on the spine of the apartheid system –  
You and Matsemela Manaka, Maishe Maponya and Duma ka Ndlovu  
You and Lefifi Tladi and Nise Malange and Gqina Mhlophe who shouted *Afrika izwe lethu*  
You and Alfred Qabula and Mi Hlatshwayo and James Matthews and Maano Dzeani Tuwani  
Who shouted *Mayibuye iAfrika*  
You and A. Ka Themba and Julius Chingono and Farouk Asvat  
You and Mongane Serote and Chris van Wyk and Sipho Sepamla  
You and Mazisi Kunene and Eugene Skeef who took poetry to the people  
In streets and halls and theatres and everywhere  
Making people ululate when they hear their biter stories in their tongues  
Making us cry and remember the songs of the Khoisan and the *imbongi*  
Making us remember to love the greatest hard flowing river that Africa is –  
The river we drink from its fresh water  
But Madingoane, those men in Cape Town hardly remember you  
Your memory is strangled by the people you freed  
I can't blame them; we are an illiterate tribe

But it's you whose work was banned  
Bashed by the police for speaking through poetry  
When dogs were out to maul us  
Mandela in jail, Biko hauled behind the police van and Soweto burning  
You stoked the fires of revolution

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Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
The earth trembles under your feet  
And the new world is born*

#### IV

Rendra, Rendra  
Javanese peacock of the archipelago is no more  
At 73, you died from heart failure and kidney complications  
Buried in your own modest backyard hamlet in Citayam  
In your days, you spoke for the uneducated children  
The oppressed workers, prostitutes, the hungry and marginalised grassroots  
You were not scared of Suharto, the dictator with an antiquated heart  
When disaster hit Indonesia your land—  
You didn't only use words to describe the hungry children  
But you worked with the people  
To save the lives because poetry and dance alone are good but not enough  
Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java  
Father of Indonesian theatre and freedom  
Suharto the insulated dictator nipped you  
Because he couldn't match your dance mechanics on stage  
So he sent his dogs to throw ammonia bombs on to the stage  
Because when a man is brainless empty  
All he does is to bomb, bomb, bomb  
Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java  
The dogs arrested you  
They imprisoned you in the notorious Guntur military prison  
Nine months in solitary confinement  
Your cell's ceiling was too low to stand up  
Mosquitoes were buzzing, Suharto clapping  
Because mosquitoes like Suharto like to feed on people's flesh  
Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java  
When you walked out of prison, your body marred by mosquito bites  
Still Suharto was not satisfied  
So he banned you from speaking in public  
Banned you from reading your poems and dancing on stage  
Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java

You spoke to the hookers of Jakarta  
And understood their desperate circumstances  
You wrote them a poem, *Prostitutes of Jakarta Unite*  
You knew reality is the driver of change  
You couldn't watch children wrapped on stretched card box  
In the rain, and do nothing  
Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java  
Six days before you packed for good  
You spoke to God:  
*I want to cleanse my body  
From chemical poison*

*I want to return to nature's way  
I want to improve my dedication to Allah*

*God, I love you*

*Rendra, Rendra  
Peacock of Java  
I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away  
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers  
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
The earth trembles under your feet  
And the new world is born*

V

Neftali Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, born in Chile in 1904  
You preferred to be called Pablo Neruda  
Called upon the dead of many centuries to speak through you  
Against slavery, against US imperialism  
Your three houses are public museums

Luckily you lost breath in your Santiago  
Not in flight or hotel room in a diplomatic mission  
Crazy about Stalin and Fulgencio Batista  
We find reason to love your incomparable poetry  
Remember the poem *Canto a Stalingrado*  
Remember *Salute to Batista*  
And when Stalin died, you wrote an ode to the dictator  
Perhaps it was necessary to do so  
Because unrighteous Stalin the communist defeated Nazi Germany  
But poets who questioned Stalin ended in the Gulag labour camp

When frail and weak, Neruda, you won the Nobel Prize for Literature  
Then hospitalised with prostate cancer  
Then like petals Hikmet and Chairman Mao  
You died 12 days after the military coup of 1973

of heart failure at Santa Maria clinic in Santiago  
Your driver and advisor think the Pinochet junta had a hand in your death  
That a suspicious injection was shot into your blood  
Pinochet the bull that flattened 3000 leftists  
Because a day before your death  
You were firm on your feet  
Your house was broken into  
Papers and books taken or destroyed  
But thousands crowded the streets  
Braved the police  
To mourn a poet –  
Their ray of light that penetrated their flesh so deep  
Their lantern that lit through the choking fog and darkness  
To protest against the brutish General Augusto Pinochet  
There's every reason to hate Pinochet  
Because it's possible that he injected you with poison  
After all, his regime murdered scores of leftists  
Thirty years since your death, your tomb is opened  
The world wants to find out what really killed you  
The world knows your radical views didn't impress the fat cruel Pinochet  
Pinochet burnt the grass  
But he didn't know beautiful resilient flowers would grow and blossom

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Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
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And the new world is born*

## VI

Far away in Russia  
The unloving regime of Joseph Stalin didn't like you, Joseph Brodsky  
Couldn't find any reason to like you  
They declared you a schizophrenic  
They said your poems were pornographic and anti-soviet  
Poems undeserving to be read by the Russian public  
They called you a pseudo-poet in velveteen trousers  
Twice the regime put you in a mental institution  
And when they finally arrested you, the charge was social parasitism  
But in New York you stood before students in lecture halls of universities  
The schizo became Poet Laureate of the United States of America  
Received a Nobel Prize  
Brodsky the Russian Jew didn't live long  
At fifty five, you died of heart attack in New York City  
Buried far away in Venice, in Italy  
Today your tomb is a tourist destination

When some poets commit suicide  
Or die of heart attack to escape Stalinism  
When some catch trains and leave Moscow for good  
You Anna Akhmatova couldn't run away from Stalin the vermin  
Though the regime kept you under constant surveillance  
Though your son was arrested from time to time  
Nothing could stop you writing *Requiem*  
Writing about the suffering of the poor under the Soviet terror  
Akhmatova, like Hikmet, Chairman Mao, Brodsky –  
You succumbed to heart failure, aged 76  
Buried in St Petersburg's Komarvo Cemetery  
Perhaps your wish was granted

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I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away  
I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers  
Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla  
The earth trembles under your feet  
And the new world is born*

## VII

Adrienne Cecile Rich, they say you were a poet of towering rage  
What kept you awake at night were voices of shouting lesbians  
Voices that needed care and defence  
But poet of steel nerves  
You hibernated in lesbianism for years  
Though it stretched her limbs far and wide  
But gave your first husband children  
Yet your poetry couldn't hide your true love

Poet of steel nerves  
When your husband saw the Black Panthers crowding the space at home  
Watching his wife marching against everything wrong America was doing in Vietnam  
Marching against soldiers disappearing in Iraq  
Soldiers swallowed by Clinton's war  
Marching against the cynical politics of the White House  
Your husband knew his wife was lost to the world  
And gusts of cold air blew in the lonely bedroom and kitchen  
Poet of steel nerves  
That's why your marriage cracked and collapsed  
That's why your husband gunned himself down

Poet of steel nerves  
You knew words alone couldn't change the world  
You argued:  
*Poetry is not a healing lotion, an emotional massage, a kind of linguistic aromatherapy.  
Neither is it a blueprint, nor an instruction manual, nor a billboard.*

Though you knew the poet couldn't stop corporate greed and unseat Clinton

But you also knew the robustness of poetry

Again you declared:

*... poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible,  
remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is  
represented as separation*

Poet of steel nerves

Your feelings of patriotism lay bare

Damn Clinton and his White House of Dark Deeds

You were right to refuse his award

You knew his heart was covered with fur

Damn this war monger

Sister of the universe, your voice belongs to the world

Sisterhood is a calm ocean, thanks to you

*Oh radical of the word,*

*I raise my clenched fist, vultures and parasites run away*

*I sing The Internationale, anthem of the workers*

*Because when erect poets like you shout Amandla*

*The earth trembles under your feet*

*And the new world is born*

## Glossary

<b>Aaa!:</b>	Feminine mode of greeting in the Venda tradition.
<b>Afrika izwe lethu:</b>	Struggle slogan for the Pan Africanist movement, declaring that 'Africa is our land.'
<b>Amandla:</b>	Literally 'power', a slogan of the struggle chorused at mass meetings.
<b>Bebek betutu:</b>	Is a Balinese (Indonesian) seasoned and spiced dish of steamed or roasted chicken or duck. It takes at least 24 hours to cook.
<b>Chinese brush:</b>	A liquid designed to help men stop ejaculating prematurely during the sexual act.
<b>Gado gado:</b>	An Indonesian salad of boiled vegetables served with a peanut sauce dressing.
<b>Hayikhona:</b>	IsiZulu for 'not at all' or 'there is no such a thing' as in ' <i>hayi, ayikho lento</i> '.
<b>Imbiza:</b>	It is an African medicinal tonic made from the African potato and other ingredients. It is believed that it reduces high blood pressure, clears skin conditions, boosts energy and vitality, and helps to clean the womb and prevents arthritis.
<b>Imbongi:</b>	IsiZulu for a praise singer or a modern oral poet.
<b>Korobela:</b>	Sepedi for a dangerous love potion usually used by women to keep their husbands obedient.
<b>Magwena:</b>	Literally it means crocodiles, but figuratively, it refers to the revered men usually from the royal house, in Venda tradition.
<b>Makholwa:</b>	Workers, usually working in towns, who are known to be alive but choose to neglect their families in the rural villages for many years, only to return home when they are old, sick and broke.
<b>Malume:</b>	Xitsonga for uncle.
<b>Mashonisa:</b>	Usually an unregistered, illegal and unscrupulous money lender who sinks the people who borrow money from him so deeply in debt that they can't recover. A <i>mashonisa</i> or loan shark, often has access to your bank account, which means you belong to him.
<b>Mayibuye iAfrika:</b>	Struggle slogan made popular by the Pan Africanist movement, meaning 'Come back Africa.'



<b>Mbhawula:</b>	Xitsonga for a brazier, a tin container in which coal or wood is burnt to warm people of the townships in the cold South African winter. The <i>mbhawula</i> can be dangerous because fatal fires often break out if the <i>mbhawula</i> is not extinguished, and people fall asleep while warming themselves indoors with the windows closed.
<b>Mondo:</b>	Leadwood tree.
<b>Mpesu:</b>	A concoction of herbs mixed with baboon's urine, which is widely sold by traditional healers in the Vhembe region of Limpopo and believed to be having a sex-boosting effect.
<b>Muraha-donki:</b>	Xitsonga for a cheap blanket.
<b>Ndaa!:</b>	Masculine mode of greeting in the Venda tradition.
<b>Ndadzi:</b>	Lightning (bird) in Tshivenda.
<b>Nghundhu:</b>	A long and colourful hat adorned by feathers which is worn by Tsonga men during the dance festivities. The hat is also worn by a chief or traditional healer.
<b>Nkanyi:</b>	Marula tree in Xitsonga.
<b>Otak otak:</b>	A cake made of fish meat and spices, widely known across Southeast Asia, where it is traditionally served fresh, wrapped inside a banana leaf.
<b>Rambutan:</b>	A medium-sized tropical tree closely related to the lychee which grows naturally in most parts of Southeast Asia. The fruit produced by the tree is also known as <i>rambutan</i> .
<b>Sarang burung wallet:</b>	A luxuriant Chinese snack made of the swallows' bird saliva. It is claimed that this snack is preferred by the rich and it provides the man with extra sexual stamina.
<b>Swidudwana:</b>	In African mythology, these are spirits believed to be malevolent.
<b>Tihubyeni minkhubenyeni:</b>	Part of a hymn that is commonly sung in funerals among the Vatsonga who are members of the Presbyterian Church.
<b>Tindzhundzhu:</b>	Xitsonga for water deities.
<b>Umsebenzi awukho:</b>	IsiZulu for 'there's no job.'
<b>Vha-:</b>	Added to a person's name as a title of respect, e.g Mr or Mrs.
<b>Vhakoma:</b>	Tshivenda for officials at the chief's place.
<b>Zol:</b>	Spliff or a marijuana cigarette.

# **Ancestral Wealth**

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Creative Writing

of

Rhodes University

by

**Freddy Vonani Bila**

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### **Abstract**

This is a collection of village narrative poems mainly set in rural Limpopo that searches into the complexity of the past and how historical events impact on the present. Although the poems are imagined along the Marxist dialectic, they're fresh imaginative creations featuring a strong element of surprise, spiritual mysticism, experimenting with form, delving into unknown poetic avenues, creating new music, exploring new sounds and taking risks. The long and intense poem, *Ancestral wealth*, which is a tribute to the poet's father, reflects on death and its impact through the effective application of various stylistic elements and poetic devices, thus immortalising the life of a rural South African. Overall the poems, including retrospective and experimental ones, condemn the free market economic system and all that it seems to necessitate: the degradation of ecology, indifference to human suffering and the alienation of vulnerable social groups.



## **Contents**

N'wa-yingwani, 7

Why I am not a teacher, 11

Boys from seshego, 14

Ancestral wealth, 18

Memory, 29

Landmarks, 31

Glossary, 55



## **n'wa-yingwani**

n'wa-yingwani  
your only son xiringa left elim in the riotous 80s  
a white farmer was found dead  
body parts chopped to pieces  
flesh stuffed in a black body bag  
& thrown into the levubu river  
but the hungry crocodiles  
shook their heads  
let the white man float away

we are told  
the farmer slapped xiringa's aunt maria  
that boy she carried on her back  
on the same farm twenty five years ago  
but the boer boy forgot who wiped his soiled backside  
he set the dogs on maria  
after she asked for permission  
to bury her grandmother  
in the village

so when xiringa heard the news  
of his aunt's death at the hands of pitbull dogs  
he walked in the hazy night  
brandishing his axe & okapi knife  
he walked from valdezia village to levubu farm  
to slice through the pale flesh  
because the white man had to pay  
for his sins & those of his forefathers

n'wa-yingwani  
the green flies put a price tag on xiringa's head  
wanted: dead or alive  
they searched for him in the mashau mountains  
in the mambila caves  
& under the deep flowing albasin dam  
that's where he was arrested, after a week  
but he had long shaved his head & beard so clean  
chewed *phunyuka bamphethe*  
that's why even in court it was stinking  
for he had oiled his body with *phala bashimane* muthi  
the judge fell asleep & let him walk free  
but xiringa couldn't work on farms anymore  
he fled to the tautona gold mine in carletonville  
west of jozi-mjipa-msawawa  
he left guva the wife waiting  
to be serviced by night angels  
because he only returned home on good friday & december  
to plant seeds



n'wa-yingwani

your son toiled under the belly of the dark earth  
crawling, digging the gold in collapsing mine tunnels  
sweating in the deep, dark & damp tunnels  
colliding with the big biting rats in tunnels  
fingers freezing in the winter so cold in tunnels  
breathing leaks of gases so deadly in tunnels  
ankle deep in muddy water, up & down in tunnels  
extracting the ounce of gold for the white man  
stamping on skulls of ghosts that live in tunnels  
that's where your son sucked the silica dust  
the dust that weakened his lungs

n'wa-yingwani

your son lived in cramped hostel living quarters  
cracking sounds of *kwaito* from friday to sunday  
cash begging mamas in pleated skirts  
keeping vigil in men's hostels  
when his hormone-relieving machine started to stutter  
he would drink *imbiza* to cure any sign of gonorrhoea  
& at dawn on friday morning, he would drink gallons of warm water  
& throw it away, groaning like a bull  
he'd drink the bitter aloe juice  
& cheap chinese sex tablets to boost his body  
then he would brag about knocking three girls a day  
without a rubber  
at month end, he would fill up the table with black label  
dance to blasting sounds with trousers dangling  
then, he would retire to the living quarters  
pockets full of holes  
grovelling

n'wa-yingwani

when your son was retrenched  
he moved to the bright lights of jozi  
he stood over the glinting high-rise building  
& like a discerning man & declare:  
*hillbrow is awash with fresh swaying roses*  
*beetle-like rural girls use cowdung as body lotion*  
xiringa the cock-eyed miner returned home dissolved  
girls with darting eyes  
at high-rise hillbrow's little roseneath melted his heart  
girls in skimpy wear flaunting their assets  
at the moulin rouge hotel melted his heart  
xiringa loved girls winking at him at the summit & ambassador  
disco girls bingeing & smoking weed at the royal hotel  
strip teasers in cubicles at the diplomat hotel  
those thighs re-birthing him everytime  
& the bottle fed the newborn

at high-rise hillbrow

n'wa-yingwani  
lust withered xiringa's heart  
he returned to lean on guva the village wife, broke & broken  
once an ubiquitous *pantsula* of flair  
he came home a mere bundle of bones  
wearing thrush and tuberculosis  
he came home, a parcel loaded in city to city bus to valdezia  
he returned to be changed soiled nappies  
because he couldn't eat a sweet with its wrapper  
in fast-paced joburg  
he returned to guva the hospice  
but he had long pumped her with the poison of a social virus  
he returned wheelchair-bound to die  
without any azt-virodene-arv solvent  
because he roamed around hillbrow's pubs, brothels & disco joints  
where de kok's askari hordes planted the aids landmine  
in desperate girls

n'wa-yingwani  
when guva fell ill, some people called her a *cabbage*  
because she'd been born prematurely  
mbeki gave her an aids pension  
n'wa-yingwani, you bathed her  
changed her soiled nappies, wiped her vomit  
& slimy foam around the mouth  
you carried her feeble frame on your back to the pension pay-point  
sometimes you'd push her, fastened on a green wheelbarrow  
manto's ubhejana, garlic, beetroot, ginger  
& lemon couldn't straighten her legs  
not even after drinking and washing  
with the urine of a donkey  
could revitalize her scorched face  
oh guva, beautiful woman, why don't the medics give her an anesthesia  
so that she could be free from the bucket for emergency behind the door?

n'wa-yingwani  
mbeki might never have seen an aids grave  
but here in this village  
the day slips into night so quick  
& in the early hours of the morning  
the young ones line up to fill up fresh open graves

n'wa-yingwani  
every time you see your sick grandchildren  
tears well down your cheeks  
your heart has borne the weight of pain  
your son died in your hands, at dusk  
on the zigzagging dirt path to elim hospital

just after six months of returning home  
now your daughter-in-law is packing up  
she tried to take a shower in a plastic basin  
to clean away the pungent smell of aids  
but the death monster groans feverishly in her lungs

n'wa-yingwani  
your two grandchildren on arvs  
will soon vanish like doves in the night  
but when the tree is uprooted like that  
where'll children so young find a branch to rest their hopes on  
to shelter secrets of adulthood...?

oh, n'wa-yingwani  
you weep tearlessly in a hospital bed  
stretched & worn-out  
frothy & skeletal frame wired with drips and tubes  
the clock ticks slowly  
the doctor checks the colour of your urine:  
*you've got high blood & you are hiv-positive mama*  
i look into your sunken eyes  
& the weary look you wear  
& the furrow lining your brow  
a cluster of glistening *xirimela* dims  
i hold your cold hand & feel the heavy silence  
death is in your throat here at giyani block  
brown clouds hang in the burning air  
a tent is planted in your yard  
the elderly women in black line up on mats  
how'll they announce the dreaded news to your tearful infants  
your ailing, yelling grandchildren –  
because nothing like this daily death is a hoax anymore?  
again, shovels clatter  
& we shove & shuffle facing the tomb

## **Why I am not a teacher**

*thanks robert berold and frank o'hara*

I am not a teacher. but I studied  
to be one at my blacks only college.  
I specialised in Economics and Business Economics  
in third year I got distinctions in these subjects  
but we didn't have a spaza shop at home to practice my economics

those days, the early 90s, students at Tivumbeni College  
were guarded by fully armed soldiers  
they stood erect by the classroom door with their dogs  
they were on duty, to protect the white lecturers and spies among us

those days, our list of demands was long:  
fight bantu education. free education for all. change the college menu.  
fight the mosquitoes in hostels and on campus. reinstate expelled students.  
allow pregnant women to study. allow unions to operate on campus.  
release the detained students whose balls we hear are being tortured in Pietersburg prison

our stomachs and necks were mammoth  
from eating mountains of pap, chunks of kudu meat and cabbage  
on Sundays we ate penguins disguised as chicken  
some would queue at the toilet  
because sometimes that food was a laxative  
but my stomach was as hard as Thabazimbi steel

those days, it was necessary to march  
even to be chased away from the campus for weeks  
we wanted to be nourished by eating rice, fresh fish and salad  
we wanted English breakfast, yoghurt, cereal and fruits  
essential food for a teacher we didn't eat everyday at home

we were not always angry  
on Fridays we demanded to watch blue movies  
enjoyed disco at the main hall  
we wanted more money for liquor for our fresher's ball  
yes, we wanted to be complete teachers

we threw stones against ready-to-shoot soldiers and their ugly casspirs  
dustbin lids were our shields  
we knew that to jump over barbed wire could tear our shirts and trousers  
but we were at war with dogs

the old men and women students were cowards  
they didn't like to toyi toyi or throw stones  
they had left their partners and children back home  
they were at college to learn  
but learn what?

those days, the 90s, we slept in hostels  
in old shaking mattresses that sank like ships  
if one student caught flu, all of us would cough and sneeze  
mosquitoes loved the blood of first years specially  
in summer we removed our beds, slept outside

we wanted to share hostels with female students  
but no man was allowed at the female's hostel after 12 midnight  
that was prison  
to be accommodated in separate camps

I hated our showers –  
this one guy would wake up too early to take a shower  
but would finish after an hour  
if you peeped through the shower door  
you would see him rubbing his dick hard and fast with Sunlight soap  
you would hear him scream softly, then madly and loudly  
S'bongile! Si-bo-ngi-le! Sibongi-lee!

many students were too poor –  
some depended on the cash made from corn beer or even dagga  
some on cash from annual sales of goats and cattle and pigs  
at first year, I only had one pair of trousers, and police shoes, from Philly my brother  
and a t-shirt with the words:  
*nkosi sikelele iAfrika*

I felt I could only teach in Gazankulu or Venda  
couldn't dream of teaching the township kids in Pretoria or Soweto  
couldn't stand teaching coconuts who knew English better than their teacher  
that's why I am not a teacher

there were border industries in Nkowankowa  
village men and women from Dan and Lusaka village worked there  
we never visited these firms like Busaf  
but we were studying Business Economics  
from 7H30 to 1pm, we repeated high school Economics

I wished the governor of the Reserve Bank would give us a talk at college  
or get Mbhazima Shilowa to come tell us about trade unions and scab labour  
I wished someone from the PAC or Azapo would tell us why blacks were landless  
why they worked on farms in Tzaneen and mines in Phalaborwa and Musina  
to generate the wealth they didn't own  
it never happened

I came to college to be a smart teacher:  
to understand the public budget and why so little was streaming to so-called reserves  
I wanted to understand the country's debt and the odious apartheid debt  
why there's no water in Elim when I'm told  
and there's a pipeline from Joao Albasini Dam that passes through Elim

to supply whites in Louis Trichardt

I am not a teacher  
because those days new teachers got jobs far away in Bushbuckridge  
but I was lucky, I got my job at Ongedagte High in Ekurhuleni near Elim  
on Sunday I went to my new family with pots, plates, paraffin stove and blankets  
a beautiful girl swept my room  
then she brought a tray full of pap and *miroho*

the principal wanted me to teach Accounting from grade 8 to grade 12  
I told him I got F in Accounting in matric  
I couldn't teach something I don't know  
so I resigned on my first day as a teacher  
I asked Vivien my classmate who specialised in Accounting to take my post.  
though even Vivien thought I was mad  
then I came home with my pots, paraffin stove and blankets  
leaving my empty hut and its fresh cowdung floor

## boys from seshego

you loiter through polokwane town  
knock at doors of our apartments and offices  
with darting eyes  
you monitor every movement of tenants  
a shit job you create for yourselves  
a job that only requires  
the ability to ashamedly, carelessly  
instil fear & fever  
in your defenceless victim  
with a sharp blade  
& a coughing metal

you clean shaven heads from seshego  
in sneakers, jeans & hats  
you crawl like crabs  
or just walk as if the earth is layered with eggs  
you like it when the clouds brood  
in streaming rains  
especially in the night  
wearing balaclavas & gloves  
you check curtains of bedrooms & kitchens  
sprinkle muthi, burn muthi  
you do your job unhindered  
not even dogs bark at you  
no shadows follow you  
& no police can trace  
your fingerprints or footprints  
all washed away by rain  
& dew of the night

on may day  
red t-shirt clad workers  
sing & dance in squares and streets  
as they celebrate the right to strike  
& a living wage  
but you, a merciless brigade  
you enter suburb after suburb  
house after house  
shack after shack  
you shepherd the workers, your sheep  
& shear their wool in winter  
you strike like slithering serpents  
you search & find doors even in the dark  
strike like serpents  
serpents from the sprawling township of delirium,  
of coughing lungs & aids-ravaged frames  
of cracked lipped children

crammed in dark matchbox walls  
in incestuous aging beds  
you don't sleep in winter  
you roam, buzz around our dreams of hysteria  
scare us with swords, pangas & guns

boys from seshego, you should be on scaffolds – rebuilding the city  
you should be on farms – tilling the land  
or growing crops to feed this starving nation  
boys, you should be in universities sucking knowledge and skills  
teaching the illiterate nation to read & write  
boys, you should be on the road side  
fixing the potholes, mapping the road and bridge to mtititi  
boys, you should be saving lives  
that crumble like mud huts  
in decaying hospitals  
but here you are, scar-faced  
forever drunk  
dead hearts  
when it's cold & dark  
normal human beings fast asleep  
pulling the blanket that way and this way  
you break burglar doors  
with crowbars and chisels  
flat screens, touch screen cellphones, dvd players,  
laptops, cash, clothing – your loot  
you even finish off the left over food  
sell stolen goods to second hand shops  
for next to nothing  
sometimes you sell mine back to me  
in the street

march 2012: at lerato's place, apartment number 7  
you took liquor from the fridge  
sat on the sofas & opened beer with your teeth  
& drank leisurely  
then, you prepared a meal  
pap, mutton & gravy  
the couple and their son had locked themselves  
in their bedroom  
“we heard them when they came in,  
we heard the noise as they ransacked  
& combed the cupboards in the sitting room  
we heard the noise & their drunken laughter  
as howling prowlers emptied the tv sets & jewelry box  
& when my sleep-walking husband woke up from his dreams  
he pulled out an iron rod  
a pepper spray in hand  
i held his hand tightly:  
'matome, you are not going to do silly things



these stone-hearted thieves are armed to the teeth  
they'll haul & drag me like an animal  
drop their pants & devour me  
before they slit your throat in your pyjamas  
do you want to become garbage –  
a bundle of frozen worms?  
you'll be lucky if these mindless wolves  
leave you to stumble on crutches  
please listen to me my love  
these scumbags might put our only toddler in a bag  
sell him at a baby auction  
i'm too young to be a widow  
to carry a void in my heart'  
so the boys with river-like zigzagging scars  
took what they wanted in the sitting room  
then they knocked at our room  
tried to open the door  
we pushed back the door  
screaming, help, help!  
my husband with a pepper spray, trembling  
we tried to call the police  
but the boys vanished in the rain  
before the men in uniform could come  
after an hour  
just three kilometres away  
& all they did was to take down  
the statement  
'so the boys didn't rape you?' they asked  
& laughed at my urine wet night gown"

may 2008: burglars climbed into the roof  
of the president's official mahlamandlopfu residence  
in government avenue  
right in the capital city, pretoria  
closed circuit television cameras watching  
thieves walked away with the aluminium wire

\* \* \*

april 2012: you thugs with delirium were here again  
here at ritruda number 12  
you knew i live alone  
you knew i go home to elim  
you came  
used crowbars to try to break in  
but the bila gods held the door too tight  
i only came back to finish your job  
broke into my house  
because i needed to enter  
& my neighbours who sleep in the sitting room

beside the window  
just a few centimetres from my door  
simply didn't hear a thing  
though they drink the whole night  
& sleep in the morning  
or they didn't want to be witnesses in court  
or perhaps they work with the prowlers from seshego  
the suspects that are always at large

\* \* \*

boys from seshego, if you come again  
i'm going to phafuri, the heartland of real sangomas  
if you come here at ritruda number 12  
you'll be trapped in my apartment  
run around the house which will become an anthill  
swarming bees & horseflies will sting your eyes & balls  
you'll not collect my double-decker bed  
you'll run around naked  
dangling penises sweeping the floor  
you'll bleat, slippery liquid forming in your mouths  
you won't collect any red meat in the fridge  
you won't take away my stove & toaster  
your long fingers will be glued to my new plasma tv  
boys from seshego, if you come again  
end of the month, i'm going to phafuri  
that heartland of real sangomas  
if need be, i'll even cross the limpopo  
& mumithi river to lands yonder  
sail to bileni, the land of makhayingi bila my great grandfather  
i'll give the sangoma all my wages  
we'll erect a fence of snakes to guard my house  
against you, the boys from seshego  
with your souls sucked out by vampires  
with the shit job you've created for yourselves  
whose only qualification is cruelty

## **Ancestral Wealth**

*(For my father Risimati Daniel Bila: 1931-1989)*

### **I**

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees  
My ancestors dwell  
Jonas is buried in a woven grass kenya  
When Dayimani woke up dead at 10 am  
He was buried in the afternoon, the same day  
His body covered with white linen and a thin blanket  
My ancestors dwell here  
Seated, facing home in the east  
Facing Bileni, far away in Mozambique  
A broken mattress and xihlungwani heaped on the grave  
Cracked enamel plates and mugs heaped on the grave*

### **II**

Papa, when you finally got admitted at Giyani Block  
We thought the learned doctors who can see what's hidden in blood and water  
Would remove these needles  
And pins and spears in your veins and wearied bones  
But their bewitched green-red flashing machines in theatre confirmed you healthy  
And when you got into the late night train ride to Garankuwa Hospital  
Far away in Pretoria, on that ultra-distance bumpy ride  
We thought the learned doctors would have removed this excruciating pain  
In your chest and packing bones  
But doctors in white gowns saw no fault in your stuttering engine  
They sent you home  
You got into that long bumpy train ride uncured  
They asked you to come with your wife on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1989  
For possible heart surgery  
And the next day you came back home  
Sat with your family around the fire  
That night you didn't cough blood clots, nor groan  
That night you didn't vomit  
Nor was your body a river of sweat  
Your face was sun-beaming  
Blue eyes were shining  
We ate chicken stew and pap  
Drank Rooibos tea with buttered bread  
That night owls and the wind didn't howl in trees  
The mountain snake and bush baby didn't cry  
Dogs and cats didn't wail nor mew  
That night I slept like a baby

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees  
My ancestors rise and hold hands*

*They sing in unison  
Dance in rhythmic step  
Around the fire*

### III

Wednesday 13 September 1989, 1 am:  
You asked mother to extinguish the paraffin lamp  
Burning on the red polished cement floor  
The time to switch off your tormented heart beat had beckoned  
That day you requested *mhani* N'wa-Noel  
Your concubine from Mbhokota  
To sleep in the grass-thatched rondavel with your girl children  
Because the last night of intimacy  
And pain belonged to your wife Fokisa N'wa-Mahatlani  
Your black beauty of twenty six years  
*Yena wa ka mkhamu wa nsuku na ngwavila* (She whose body glitters with gold and gems)  
*Mbati ya ku fuma* (The door to wealth)

Your last night belonged to your wife  
Who birthed you seven healthy children  
Children born between 1964 and 1980  
The last night to outline your will –  
Because you knew *n'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani*  
The last night to outline how your homestead should be run  
So that you don't return home wearing shorts  
And run riot  
In case your house was turned into a playground  
*Emachihweni, emathumbhanini*  
You sat on your three quarter bed  
Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores  
Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof  
Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document  
And you said:  
*Mhana Oom* (he called me Oom)  
*The roof is old*  
*I have bought the bricks*  
*But they'll not be enough to build a decent house*  
*When they give you my little pension fund*  
*Build a house:*  
*A room for Oom, a room for Simon, another room for Makhanani and Julia*  
*If God had given me seven more years to live*  
*Oom and Simon would be working*  
*They would take care of Makhanani and Julia*  
Then the burning paraffin lamp was extinguished:  
Each sleeping in their separate three quarter beds  
Suddenly a heavy hand whipped mother's shoulder  
It was her grandmother N'wa-Xakhombo  
Whose voice shrieked:  
*Pfuka wena N'wa-Mafelalomo* (Wake up, you who dies in far distant places)

*A wu swi voni leswaku wa weriwa?* (Don't you see the roof is falling, collapsing upon you?)

All she heard was one groan

Hhmmm, hmmm!

And papa, when she came to your three quarter bed

Daniel Risimati Bila the son of Dayimani and N'wa-Zulu

Had packed for good

Papa, your room was filled with cold air

Misty cloudy smog covered the room at 1am

Mama says you didn't hit nor kick the walls violently

As you wrestled with the monster

*Kwalaho ndzi n'wi longa* (Then I laid out his body)

*Ndzi koka minkumba ndzi zola milenge* (I removed blankets and elevated his legs)

*Ndzi lola mavoko ya longoloka na yena* (I elevated his hands and arms along his body)

*Ndzi vuyetela mahlo* (I gently closed his eyes with a simple touch)

*Ndzi n'wi sula xikandza* (I wiped down his face)

*A hlambile a nga se etlela* (He had bathed before bedtime)

*Mapfalo ya mina a ma file* (I was but remorseless)

*Ivi ndzi khomelela mubedwa* (Then I held the bed so firm)

*Ndzi ku kumbe u ta pfuka* (Thinking that he would wake up)

She searched for Rattex in the wardrobe

If she had found it

She would have crushed it

Swallowed it to burn her liver and heart

And join you in the other world

How would she raise her children

With cents from selling banana and tomatoes

At the Elim market?

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*

*My ancestors rise and hold hands*

*They sing in unison*

*Dance in rhythmic step*

*Around the fire*

#### IV

'My time to go has arrived,' you told mother several times

The ZCC prophets Markos Mukhuva and *vho*-Ramantshwane

Had tearfully told you the same at Magangeni church:

*Your life's ticket is over*

They told you a few months before your departure

To the land yonder

They told you to stop chasing after the skirts

Because skirts were a cloth covering a big bottomless pit

And you came home to tell your wife

You were not taking anyone's cows nor calves in the kraal

But helping the wandering women in need

You lived facing the tomb

Facing the red setting sun

Knowing your living days  
Were vanishing fast like paraffin paper fire  
You lived facing the tomb  
Knowing you couldn't afford skipping monthly subscriptions  
To Saffas the undertaker in Louis Trichardt  
Because the ancestors *emaxubini* were calling you  
You lived facing the tomb  
That's why you cleared the bushy shrubs  
Making the road with a pick and shovel  
Making the road with a spade and hoe  
Because you wanted the hearse  
To collect your remains at home with ease  
Because you didn't want to be loaded in a wheelbarrow  
And driven to be collected at the main road  
Watched by birds, monkeys and stray dogs  
You lived facing the tomb  
Because papa, something so sharp was piercing you  
Needles stinging your veins with deadly venom  
Nails biting on your flesh  
The sharp spear jabbing your heart  
Something so sharp was numbing your veins  
Draining your energy from your bowels  
You breathed heavily every time you climbed a steep hill  
You coughed strenuously, sneezing, lungs rattled  
Sometimes you collapsed on the narrow paths  
After vomiting blood, groaning, vomiting air  
Sometimes you bellowed  
Like someone who had eaten fresh poison  
But papa, you carried the burden of a family man  
On your shoulders  
Working every day of the week  
Slowly walking ten kilometres every day  
To Elim Hospital  
For all these thirty years  
Helping doctors carry out post-mortems –  
Cutting through skulls, stitching and cleaning the dead so stinking  
Burying the dead in black shrouds at ten o'clock every day  
Behind the hospital sewerage  
Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital:  
Ferrying patients to theatre  
Feeding relieved mothers at the maternity wards  
Scrubbing the floor in the Eye Department  
Papa, you did everything at Elim Hospital  
Just a for a paltry R300 salary in 1989  
Because you had beaks to feed  
And clothe

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees  
My ancestors rise like elephants*

*At the break of dawn  
To drink water  
From the mountain's fountain*

## V

Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> September 1989 we hid you  
In this sacred ground where shoes are taken off  
It's not a cemetery for commoners  
It's not Mazokhele nor Avalon  
It's the Bila gardens, within my yard  
It's a pity you spent two weeks in those mortuary pans  
Ice must have burnt your skin and bones  
Silencing the sense of hearing that never dies  
Burning the growing beard and hair  
When Saffas brought you home at dusk on Friday  
In that dark hearse  
Candles and a paraffin lamp burnt the whole night  
In your lonely bedroom  
The funeral parlour had bathed you  
Dressed in a white silky shroud  
Mother and the elderly women wearing blankets  
Slept on the floor around the coffin the whole night  
In your two-roomed house  
I remember *hahani* N'wa-Mandlalele  
And *muhulu* N'wa-Danki were there to support my mother  
Their husbands had long died  
Papa, when you left us  
Your three quarter bed was removed from the room  
Put outside the house against the tree  
I was a small boy of seventeen  
Doing standard nine at Lemana High  
For days I didn't go to school  
Even though *a ka ha ri vusiku*  
The elders said *ku fanele ku songiwa masangu*  
I listened to *Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni* on Radio Tsonga  
To hear your name mentioned on that dreadful programme  
7am, your light brown casket covered with a blanket  
Was displayed in the courtyard  
We walked around it to view you for the last time  
People cried, some fell to the ground so hard  
It was the first time I saw a dead man  
And the fallen man was my father  
Who in that fateful night  
Told mom that had he known better  
That he would die prematurely  
He wouldn't have fathered his four last children  
Including Oom  
So I viewed you for the last time on earth  
And I shed no tear because death had long come

I had seen you walk away  
 Eaten by an illness no doctor could detect  
 The night before the funeral–  
 I sat around the big fire  
 Reverend Chabalala was preaching in the crowded tent  
 Papa, know that John Zulu your uncle donated a beast for the funeral  
 It was slaughtered *eka* Mapuve  
 80 kms away from Elim/Shirley  
 Papa, know that people spoke so well at your burial  
 Elias Machume was the Programme Director  
*Hahani* N’wa-Risimati Xisana, in tears,  
 Informed the mourners about your death  
 And asked your ancestors Dayimani the son of Jonas  
 Jonas the son of Makhayingi  
*Makhayingi wa Mpfumari*  
*Mpfumari wa Xanjhinghu*  
*Xanjhinghu wa Ntshovi*  
*Ntshovi wa Xisilafole xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla*  
 To receive you on the other side  
 Your brother John Bila who had disappeared for more than twenty years  
 Came back home the day you died  
 He trembled, speaking on behalf of the family  
 Can’t remember what he said, because he said nothing, but cried  
 Your wife’s brother J.S Mashele also paid tribute to you  
 Even your colleagues from Elim Hospital came in numbers  
 They sang hymns melodically  
 P. Mathavha spoke on behalf of the ZCC  
 Meriam Shetlele represented the neighbourhood  
 Thomas Mahlasela read the wreaths  
*Sivara* Rev Maluleke the short and handsome friend of yours and  
 Carried your coffin to the grave  
 The ZCC *mokhukhu* men danced in khakhi and *manyanyatha*  
 Chonaphi Cawuke, Phineas N’wavungavunga, Shilowa,  
 Mahanci and Xikhudu the great dancers were there  
 The yard was full of mourners  
 Men wearing jackets and women draped in blankets  
 Even The Lion of Judah, your first wife’s brother, was there!  
 He gave the vote of thanks with his moving coarse voice  
 Mourners contributed cash –  
 It was recorded in a book. It was good money.  
 But some members of my family with long fingers  
 Never showed all the money to my mother  
 I was still small papa. But I’ve forgiven these thieves  
 We planted your remains  
 Filled the grave with blood red soil  
 It had a hump like a bull  
 The elderly planted maize, beans, corn and pumpkins  
 Inviting the rain to come  
 Because your death was never going to bring famine  
 And starvation in this house



The elderly placed coins and your preferred drinking mug and plate  
On the grave  
We laid you besides your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu  
Who died on 16 November 1980  
And your father Dayimani who died in June 1964  
A white cross marked your name:  
*Daniel Risimati Bila*  
*Rest in peace*

*Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*  
*My ancestors rise and hold hands*  
*They sing in unison*  
*Dance in rhythmic step*  
*Around the fire*

## VI

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because Giyani Block breeds the pungent death smell  
Shallow breathing skeletons crumble in the crowded ward  
With no family member to preserve their sanity  
The jaws lock, eyes fixed  
And the white pupils enlarged in the light so bright

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because shivering patients with bluish lips  
Watch tearfully as the final air bursts from the belly  
Of a patient next door, bursting like a detonated bomb  
Misty air blackening the ward with coldness

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because the restless patients with irregular pulse  
Watch helplessly as the nurses remove the linen  
With that stinking last black stool  
Transferring this man who died in the night to another ward –  
Next to a living patient in a single room  
The living patient is happy he's got a neighbour  
But the neighbour is fast asleep, wearing a shroud  
The new neighbour is neither hungry nor thirsty  
The living starts to hallucinate  
Gets lost in nappies  
Now he knows the nurses brought him a strange ghost  
Who'll gnaw at his dreams

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because in this hospital, like many hospitals  
Just an hour after someone has been confirmed dead by the doctor  
The nurses make up the same bed  
A new patient sleeps in there comfortably  
He doesn't know someone has just died there

He collects the spirit of the dead  
In the middle of the night  
The new patient rushes to the toilet to pray  
Pleading to see his only son from Joburg  
And when his son arrives the next morning  
And hold his father's cold hand  
The old man opens his mouth with difficulty  
As if to say, *my son take care of my cattle*  
But no word shoots from the mouth layered with white foam  
And again goes another patient  
In broad daylight

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because mottling patients with a blotchy skin  
Cry to go home to try herbs  
To heal the cancerous rotting wounds that breed worms

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital  
Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates  
The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because some patients jump from the bed like impalas  
Tearing drips and tubes away  
They race around the ward wearing the catheters  
Bubbling with urine tea  
They too scream in hallucination:  
*Nurse, come and help*  
*They are here with knives*  
*They want to suffocate me*  
*They want to cut my throat*

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
In the intensive care unit, someone is motionless  
Trapped in a truncation  
His car rolled three times into the donga  
His head was almost crushed  
Perhaps he's brain dead  
But the heart is still beating slowly  
The nurses feed him  
They change his nappies every hour  
His family won't allow the medics to  
Switch off the life support machine  
Because though he's brain dead  
Miracles can still happen  
They happened in the days of Jesus Christ  
And when his spear suddenly rises  
The nurses know the brain dead patient's life ticket is still intact

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Because some burnt-out nurses simply talk on cellphones  
Watching this ongoing groaning and vomiting and shitting drama  
But you papa, you didn't want to die like your mother Makhanani N'wa-Zulu  
Who spent five months at Shangaan Block without eating  
Nor going to the toilet on her own  
My grandmother who died alone  
Who when her coffin was opened for viewing  
Even a brave man like you papa, cried  
Because there was no one to close her mouth

Papa, you came home to rest forever  
Like Dayimani your father  
And Jonas your grandfather  
And Makhayingi your great grandfather  
You came home to rest forever  
After a family meal  
In the hands of your wife  
In your bed  
In the morning so still

## VII

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
I'd buy you a suit and soft skin ostrich shoes  
I'd fly you to Durban or Cape Town  
So that you walk on the beach  
Feel the soft grains of summer sand  
I'd take you out to sit down restaurants  
Try out shrimps, mussels and this good food I eat

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
We would plant avocado and litchi trees  
Grow spinach and beetroot together  
Pinch and prune sweetest tomatoes that yield  
You would teach me how to dig a trench  
How to prepare a seedbed for seedlings  
How to make ridges and furrows  
How to mulch and make compost and manure  
How to save water and use grey water  
We would grow those red roses  
And maintain those white lilies  
We would do gardening on our ancestral land  
Singing your song:  
*7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*  
*U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
You would tell me how you survived the white dog

That followed you every morning to work  
The dog that would run fast past you  
The strange dog that would slide through your legs  
Or even hit your legs with its tail  
The dog that walked ahead of you  
The dog that numbed your feet  
The dog that shook and wearied your bones  
The dog that disappeared at the bus stop  
Just before the hospital gate  
The same white *vaveni* that received you back from work  
But couldn't enter the gate to your house  
To throw you into a grave

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
You would tell me about that rope  
That roamed in your nightmares  
The rope that made you so impatient  
And hate everything about your wife  
The rope that made you hit her  
And want to kill her with a knife  
The rope that prophet Muvhangeli said:  
*Don't pick it up when you find it placed on your path*  
The tough rope of wicked relatives  
Who had long sized your neck

If you were alive today, *madala* –  
You would tell me how you and Ngholeni picked up that dead rabbit  
Early in the morning on your way to work  
How you skinned the rabbit with delight  
How you wanted to cook it for lunch  
When suddenly a strange man came  
And touched your forehead  
And said, "*and hi yena papantsongo wa Frank.*"  
Then your forehead ached and pounded  
And when you came back home from work  
The same strange man  
Hobbled to your house  
All he said was one sentence:  
I needed to find Frank's brother's place  
Then he vanished  
Stealing your heart  
Placing it in a cave  
Planting a cockerel's heart in you  
And you coughed and coughed

\* \* \*

Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone  
All along the wind was blowing you away  
The sun was burning you

Your pillow was your hand  
But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace  
Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts  
Since you left, your wife has remained in the house  
I've not seen a man sitting on your chair  
It's still your house  
Full of trees and vegetables

*7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*  
*U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani*

## **Memory**

i

i remember the people of pfukani  
whose huts were uprooted in 1968  
grass-thatched roofs loaded in gg trucks  
goats, dogs, bicycles and pots heaped onto the trucks  
poor people trekking to the unknown barren land  
leaving behind fruit trees and gardens  
leaving behind graves of their beloved ones

trekking to gandlanani, squashed like sardines  
*vavanuna va xandile na maburuku* (men's pants back to front)  
*vavasati va xandile na swikete* (women's skirts back to front)  
*hi xibububu xo pfuxiwa hi huwa ya tilori* (woken up hurriedly by the roaring trucks)  
because it was time  
to separate vhavenda from vatsonga  
because it was time  
to make way for the white man.

ii

i remember my days at shirley primary  
the same school where eduardo mondlane taught  
boys used to play, jumping over the dump  
jumping over the blazing fire  
but i can't forget that day  
when oriel tried to jump over the burning flames  
whether he tripped or was pushed i don't know  
but his clothes caught fire  
his hair caught fire  
clothes and flesh became one  
everyone thought it was the end of him.

iii

i remember  
my mother making fire in the open ground  
stirring the bubbling pot of pap amidst cracking thunder  
pelting rain and flashing lightning  
even in our windowless huts  
we sailed, floating in water on the mats  
when grass-thatched huts caved in to bucketing rains.

iv

i remember  
days at lemana high  
white teachers opened windows in winter  
for the chilly air to freeze my toes  
the same teachers who were paid  
a tolerance bonus to teach a black child.

v

i remember  
the wooden electric pole behind our house  
planted in the family cemetery  
cables of fire trapping swallows and owls  
turning mischievous monkeys green  
cables of modern fire that galloped kilometres from town

to supply a certain dombani (Thomas), victor, magantawa (macintosh)  
and bernard with warmth  
amidst darkness and the smog of burning paraffin.

vi

i remember  
the graves under water  
the colossal deep dam of death  
that the big man dombani built  
where we swam naked in summer  
our rags drying in thorn trees

i remember  
dombani the hefty burly-surlly man  
clad in khakhi wear and *veldskoene*  
the man with a bloodthirsty temper  
wielding a rifle  
on horseback  
at sunset  
cracking shots in the air  
reptiles and porcupines retreating to holes  
riding around the dam  
for the black boy to raise his head above water  
to fire with delight  
cracking the boy's skull  
halting his breath  
or to just see the little boy consumed by water  
to teach him a lesson  
that under the orbiting sun  
the dam is not for naked black boys  
it's not for a speck of village dust  
but it's for sailing white men in boats  
who catch fish  
even when drunk.

## Landmarks

### I

I was born in 1972  
Mudzwiriti River swelled over roads and boulders  
But nothing green grew in the reserve of Gazankulu Bantustan  
Even plants and trees and shrubs  
Even the animals and birds and reptiles  
Even the mountains and lakes and streams  
Felt the pain of apartheid war  
I still live there in the backwoods  
With the common people  
Warming ourselves around bonfires

I've slept in grand sky scraping hotels and villas of the world's jaw-dropping cities –  
My name is inscribed in books, postcards, newspapers, zines and films  
I've never been on *Facebook* or *What's up*  
When I finally sleep  
I want to be folded neatly  
Planted into a family cemetery  
Head facing east  
Please my boys, don't pile up goods on the grave  
The rain will wash my memory away  
The sun will dry them and wild fire will burn me to ashes  
Please my boys, don't be foolish and chop the trees I planted with passion  
They're your future oxygen, bread and soup

Though I possess no clattering wheel  
Or a bike spoke and chain  
I've lived like a swallow –  
Weaving nests across the mountains and oceans  
I rode in rickshas buses trains planes and dilapidated taxis  
I've ridden in boats motorbikes, donkey carts, and cars

Sometimes I spin, sideslip and skid every week as if flying is catching a taxi lift to town  
I've been chauffeured in bombastic cars to attend meetings with ministers,  
Social movements, artists, culture gurus, donors, NGOs and professors  
The woman at the Polokwane Airport check-in counter  
Feels pity for my wife in the village while I fly out to cities on Fridays

I grew up in a mud hut,  
Drank water from the wells  
Slept on the itchy river *majekejeke* mat on a cow-dung smeared floor  
At 10, I was still wetting myself in the night  
The millipede powder couldn't stop the habit either  
I showered from a plastic basin  
Often used a water-filled mug to wipe the face  
And extinguished the rotten rat wreaking havoc in the armpits



I've also lived in an apartment with portraits and tidy rooms for visitors  
But I've also lived in an apartment with racing roaches and wet laundry

I grew up using a long drop toilet  
Newspaper, *mugabagaba* and guava tree leaves wiping my backside  
Others used stones and bare hands to clean themselves in the bush  
Later I enjoyed steam baths and massage in spas  
Sat in armchairs, rode a horse and walked on red carpets  
One day I may receive a Nobel Prize for Literature  
Like Neruda, Brodsky and Szymborska

At 25, I danced in a sunlit pool almost naked  
I sat in a Stockholm public sauna with staggered old white couples  
Watching me cuddling my Camilla who wept like a baby  
Because her black man couldn't relocate to first world  
Under apartheid, it was immoral to kiss a white woman

At 35, I spent three hours at Jomo Kenyatta airport jail  
For travelling on a valid yet decrepit passport  
I met a Chinese, an Ethiopian and a Somalian who had been there for three months  
Prison warders pushed them to agree that they are al Qaeda operatives  
Trained in caves and mountains of Afghanistan or Pakistan  
That they knew where the bearded Osama bin Laden was hiding

We sat on linen-free bunks, tortured by anopheles mosquito parasites  
We were fed spinach and rice in a plastic with no plate or spoon to eat with  
I didn't have Dollars to bribe Mulongo my captor with mocking disdain  
I prayed frantically:

*God, my gentle wife is pregnant  
A human heart is beating in her womb  
It's my first child*

Six years later, I watch fire swelling into flames  
Jomo Kenyatta Airport gutted by deafening inferno  
Airport banks charred; flights redirected  
I see officers passing water buckets in attempts to squash the blaze  
But Kenya is a country without fire engines  
Six years ago, I was detained here  
Though I know nothing about the Taliban or al Qaeda

I return to my birthplace gawking at the forming clouds  
But Shirley is a dark shadow – foul witchcraft air floats at midnight  
Woolly dogs bark, strange cats mew outside my window  
Owls hoot over the water tank, the wind howls in reply  
Bush babies yell like infants in the avocado trees  
The mountain snake cries in the tall thorn umbrella trees

Though I love the smell of rain, I fear when thunder rumbles  
Lightning shakes the big oak tree that's been there for years  
At forty, the prophet in Moria told me some people are jealous  
They want me to go round the bend, family in disarray

But even when my eyes are shut at night, they won't succeed

I stash holy salt granules in pockets when I walk  
Sprinkle ZCC spring water on my face and in the house  
To scare the barking dogs that want to maul me  
Here, I fear to walk on *xifula* planted in the yard  
Or drink from a *xidyisa*-spiked cup at a party or funeral  
*Ndzi chava ku pepejeriwa ndzi duga naro ku fana na tatana* (I'm scared to be sent away to the wilderness of madness like dad)  
*Ndzi chava ku nusiwa nkondzo hi valoyi va tiko leri* (I'm scared to be bewitched by witches of this land)  
*Va nyankhandli xiyani wa ngove si nga fi!* (The cruel witches who only deserve to perish)  
That's why in bedtime I put the Bible under the pillow  
But I was never scared of the Boers and their dogs

I return to my birthplace gawking at the forming clouds  
But the unyielding comrades in power know all about tenders,  
Cars, villas, soapies, sushi parties and holidays –  
In fact they are a set of carnivores  
Lethal tigers leopards and lions  
They are adult *izikhothane* –  
The type that burn money and new clothes when stoned  
Look, they own krugerrands and gold bars  
Live in marble houses with servants  
Drink from gilded cups  
They entertain guests with pipe and beer  
Yet expect us the voters to drink urine  
And wash our faces with sweat and saliva

Don't they see the impassable roads and mud in my toes?  
Don't their hearts bleed when we push coffins in wheelbarrows,  
In the pelting rain to bury the dead?  
Are they not haunted by sun-bleached children  
Shuffling sand on foot to catch education in indescribable broken down schools?

Here, meek souls live in gloomy mud huts  
Silhouetted with sparkles of fireflies  
The moonlit streets with intermittent electricity is on the canvas  
Though I served as a guerrilla against the apartheiders  
I still walk on the scorching gravel roads

## II

Mama says her pregnancy was a nightmare  
A horde of witches were pointed by papa  
N'wa-Mahatlani had to chew boiled roots of kweek grass  
To keep me growing in the war-zone womb

At three months mama went to Dombani the village foreign veterinarian

The hefty vet who had drugs for horses, cats, dogs and bulls asked:  
“*U twa yini? U huma kwihl? (What’s your problem? Where do you come from?)*”  
“*Ndzi huma eka Mr Phillips. (I come from Mr Phillips)*”  
“*Why u nga yanga eka Phillips? (Why didn’t you go to Mr Phillips? You belong there.)*”  
“*Hikuva mirhi ya wena yi strong dokodela. (Because your medicine is much stronger, doctor!)*” she replied  
Perhaps that’s why I didn’t escape from the womb wounded  
But the womb-war persisted:  
At five months, Jacques the limping Swiss doctor at Elim Hospital  
Put a torch-like gadget deep in mama’s womb  
It sucked all the unwanted blood  
Mama was haemorrhaging before birth time

Head up, legs down  
Chonaphi advised mama to drink *mogabolo*  
So when she got to the maternity ward –  
She didn’t have to incessantly hit the walls in agony  
A minute was enough to throw me out unharmed

I criss-crossed and jived in the womb for ten months  
I emerged fresh and strong I emerged  
Yet with a tiny frame  
Mommy wondered why she had to take me home  
Instead of keeping her bundle in a bottle  
The Swiss doctor nicknamed Mushathama said:  
*Vona n’wana wa wena wa tika (Your child is weighty)*  
*U na rhambu ro tiya (He has a strong bone)*  
*A nga fani na lava nga tala khuvi (Unlike those fatty-foam children)*  
*A nga vabyi, u fresh (He’s not sick, he’s fresh)*

### III

When I was three, the sun had just set  
When I set alight mama’s grass-thatched windowless hut  
She was busy cooking on an open fire  
The sky was dark covered by black smog  
The fire consumed all her bracelets, the bangles, *minceka, swibelana ...*  
All the adornments that made her young  
burnt to ashes, burnt to ashes  
I ran to the neighbours for shelter because none could fight that fire  
Scared to be whipped

The next day mama took me to Xidonkana the prophet at Mbhokota  
I had to be exorcised, demons had to be chased away  
The dreadlocked prophet kept me in a stone hut he had built  
In his New Jerusalem up in the hill  
The singing women of the Apostolic church quickly covered the hut with old blankets  
And thick construction red and green plastic  
I burnt in the sauna

His disciples brought red burning stones  
 Poured them in the bucket  
 I burnt, I burnt  
 They added a bucket of hot water  
 Mixed with a bowl of hard salt granules  
 They asked me to inhale the smog without flinching  
 I burnt, I burnt  
 Cow-hide drums were throbbing outside the stone hut  
 Goatee-bearded Jackson stood outside by the makeshift door bare-feet  
 His dreadlocks dangling over his white gown and red crosses  
 He turned and twirled a carved stick and burst into song:  
*Yesu, Hosi ya vhangeli* (Jesus, Lord of evangelism)  
*Tanani mi ta horisa timbilu* (Come, set your hearts free)  
*Na swifula mi ta susa* (Come and cure your cancers)  
 ... *tatani mi ta horisa timbilu* (Come and set your hearts free)  
*Na swidyisa mi ta susa* (Come and rid yourselves of the toxins)  
 ... *tanani mi ta horisa timbilu* (Come, set your hearts free)  
*Na swinkhovha mi ta susa* (And the owls will be tamed)  
 ... *tanani mi ta horisa timbilu* (Come, set your hearts free)  
*Na tinyoka mi ta susa* (And the snakes will be removed)

The *mafufunyani* felt the heat  
 And escaped in a haste  
 Like tokoloshi dashing to the river  
 Jackson asked me and mom to drink and wash with steamed water  
 He called the red dirty water the blood of Jesus

#### IV

At seven, me and my brothers had come back from school  
 It was time to release the goats to graze  
*Tlhoko! Tlhoko!* [*There it's a bird's nest*]  
*I xinyenyani* [*It's a big bird*]  
 Up in an umbrella thorn tree a child lay in a nest

She smiled, bent down like someone praying  
 We stood there motionless, helpless  
 She had a furrowed forehead and a pointed nose  
 Its tiny fingers tightly held the nest  
 We raced home and reported this strange thing we saw.

Papa, the only ZCC priest in the village prayed for us  
 Stroke every part of our bodies with *kotana*  
 Then we burnt in the sauna  
 The next day the baby and the nest were gone  
 But no grave had opened at home.

#### V

At 11, papa sent me to Elim Hospital for circumcision

That's where Hebert Stanley Phillips the son of a missionary had taken him too  
Kokwani John Xihosana Zulu wanted me to sing *hogo* in the mountain  
Sit with my back around the undying fire  
Sleep in a nest like a bird  
Drink *malusu* to forget my warm blankets at home and my mother's hot meal  
Kokwani John Zulu wanted me to watch *vadzabi* carry logs at dawn, and make fire.  
He wanted me to wear red ochre and wield sticks of triumph  
He wanted me to learn *milawu* and chants by heart  
Learn to eat *xivonelo* with hands tied at the back  
Survive sharp blades or just wither and die  
He wanted me to wear a warrior name like Khazamula, Magezi, Xitlhangoma,  
Risimati, Hlengani, Yingwani, Maduvula, Mphahlele, Mzamani, Mhlava  
Mafemani, Mandlakazi, Gezani, Skheto  
I'm happy I didn't go to the camps shrouded in mystery  
Where boys are told to stop living until *madlala* expires  
Where boys must look down and not face the burning fire for fear of death  
I'm happy I didn't go to the circumcision camps shrouded in mystery  
Where villagers must stop ploughing or digging  
Or listen to radio  
Or play music out loud

For a month or weeks beds must not shake  
All we do is to sing one song *hogo huwelela*  
And celebrate when boys keep away from water for days  
Just to horde ticks in the name of culture  
But a certain chief simply collects cash to enrich himself  
Instead of building roads, paving streets, schools, clinics for his forgotten people

I'm happy I didn't go to expose my tiny frame to that cold weather in the bush camps  
Where scores of dehydrated boys died in Mpumalanga's botched circumcision camps  
Boys bled to death  
Some only come back with gangrene and amputated manhood  
Denied drinking water and nourishing food  
I think of my two boys...  
Oh no, I won't send them there  
What type of a father would send his boys  
To suffer in the extreme cold, suffer malnutrition?

I became a man at Elim Hospital in full view of female nurses  
I was too young to admire their breasts  
They pierced me with an injection, and the part they pierced died for a while  
Then they pulled my foreskin over the head of my short penis  
They did that with a pair of forceps  
My foreskin was snipped by female nurses  
They stitched the wound  
And dressed it with a bandage  
They gave me pain killers  
But I walked home like a crab  
They told me not to sit around the fire  
Or ride bicycles, *swigirigiri* and *swibantsheke*

I was too young to have sex or masturbate with my bandage on  
Papa insisted that I use Vaseline to get the wound to heal faster  
After a week, I removed the bandage and I was a man  
I saw the stitches falling off like weathered feathers  
Now I can speak at board meetings and chief's kraal boldly  
Knowing that I've the required arsenal against Aids

At 13, I called myself Vonani –  
Because I admired Vonani the sassy taxi driver from Mbhokota  
But village pals call me Tete the dancer  
At three I used to sing and dance  
*Tete hi tee, Tete hi tee!*  
*Tete hi tee, Tete hi tee!*  
Corn-beer drinkers would beat enamel paint tins and clap  
Singing along *Tete hi tee*

Some children wear names of spooks  
Hitler, Idi Amin, Mugabe, Dlayani, Matlakala  
I wear my grandfather's name Dayimani –  
The man who walked to Kimberley  
The man who dug diamond in the big gaping hole  
The man who came home with a truck full of suits, bags of corn and sugar  
To feed the Makhayingi Bila clan of hunters  
But there wasn't a single shining diamond in the bags

I wanted to call myself Mkhacani, Dayimani's other name  
But Mkhacani means to urinate  
Villagers who love me call me *Dayimani ya Maphutukezi na Manghezi*  
Every time Albert Jesi meets me, he sings:  
*Ndzi tsakile ngopfu ndzi nga vuya na dayimani*  
*Ndzi nga vuya na dayimani*

## VI

At 12 I went to Shirley Presbyterian church for the whole year  
I didn't know I was wasting my energy and time with these Bible lessons  
End of the year, 22 December 1985 in church –  
The elders of the church and their reverend E.F.C Mashava wielded a Samurai sword  
To behead the son of a peasant:  
He asked the son of a peasant Freddy Vonani Bila  
And three others to stand before the congregation  
While other children were receiving their certificates of baptism  
I shivered as the elders with flowing garbs mocked us:  
*Your parents are members of that ZCC church that crushes steel*  
*They walk around with a shining metal star*  
*They worship a mere mortal when they should be worshipping Jesus*  
*We cannot baptize you, because you are still minors*  
I returned home with a heavy heart  
Mama cried bitterly, tears beneath her eyes  
I had never seen her weep before

When she saw mud on my face  
I had been told that without a baptism certificate  
The Boers wouldn't give me a job  
In their Christian South Africa  
Since 1985, I've never set my foot in that church  
I can't listen to sermons of the intoxicated  
Who collide with witches in the dark  
The mud they threw on my face couldn't stick

## VII

1986, I read Karl Marx's *Capital* and *The Communist Manifesto* at Akanani  
*Hambileswi a yo na yi xa* (Even though it rained and cleared)  
It was better than wailing in churches, temples, synagogues  
Or consulting sangomas and prophets  
Which is what most people do

At Akanani, there were whites from Joburg, Durban and Cape Town  
They liked to greet people  
Gave us lifts from Shirley to Elim or Louis Trichardt or Polokwane or Johannesburg  
They played football with the common folk  
Some learnt to speak Xitsonga and Tshivenda fluently  
Mike and Astrid sent their child Cabral to a village school  
They wore red-shirts with messages and faded jeans  
Since meeting them in the night political school  
I've read Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Freire, Boal, Gaddafi  
Nyerere, Cabral, Sankara, Fanon, Ernest Mandel  
They taught me how to run a co-operative  
How to use theatre to get people to talk  
About their daily problems like lack of water

We travelled around the province doing theatre for development  
I knew, "unless we organize, we'll be washed away!"  
Eighteen years into liberation, I still question those who are not fit to govern  
Those who loot in the name of the struggle  
I'm glad this government won't hang me for speaking frankly, not yet anyway

At eighteen, I distributed *samizdat* pamphlets and recited poems in ANC rallies  
In Thohoyandou, Makwarela, Vleifontein, University of the North  
We organized consumer boycotts against the white shops in Louis Trichardt  
But now the white shops are in Elim  
Alongside spaza shops of the Pakistani, Nigerians and Somalians  
My rural folk remain beggars on their land  
Talk of black economic empowerment is empty  
Comrades who shouted long live Marx and Lenin and Lumumba and Sankara  
Don't have a socialist vision  
They build a billion-rand Gautrain that doesn't go to Soweto or Mamelodi  
Yet expect a vote from the stranded, desperate township folk  
I live not too far from Muyexe where millions are being wasted by tenderpreneurs  
I dream of a speed train from Elim to Cape Town

I dream of a university in my village  
 I dream of tarmac roads to replace zigzagging village paths  
 I dream of public parks and sports facilities  
 I don't want to live in the world of butchers of miners  
 When my father died, I took my passport in Sibasa  
 I wanted to cross the Limpopo river and join MK in Lusaka  
 Return home like inyamazane with an AK47 over my shoulders  
 Singing gloriously over a hippo for freedom:  
*Sabasiya abazali emakaya* (We've left our parents at home)  
*Siwela emazweni* (Fleeing to lands far away)

The dream evaporated, exiles were returning home  
 At Codesa, Mandela and de Klerk were smoking the same pipe  
 But I joined the defence unit at Akanani  
 Received a crash course on arms and guerrilla warfare  
 I never fought in a battle. Wouldn't like to spill blood.  
 But my dance is toyi toyi:  
*Kubi kubi kubi* (Although things are bad)  
*Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli* (But we are going to Pretoria)  
*Noma basishaya* (Even when they beat us)  
*Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli* (We are going to Pretoria)  
*Noma basidubula* (Even when they shoot us)  
*Siyaya, siyaya, siyaya ePitoli* (We are going to Pretoria)

But when I walk on gravel and count bodies decomposing  
 Patients sleeping on the floor and benches  
 Patients who will not be sent to x-ray because there's no money  
 Or the machine is broken  
 Black patients who don't matter in the eyes of a black government  
 I feel like bombing the Luthuli House  
 But it won't happen. I can't bomb my comrades.  
 I am a man of peace. I hate to spill blood.

## VIII

At fourteen, I went to Lemana High in Magangeni  
 Eduardo Mondlane had sat at the same desk  
 Today that school that taught the community to grow their own vegetables  
 Build their houses and make their tables and chairs  
 Is overgrown by vegetation and weeds  
 I hated the separate staff rooms for black and white teachers  
 But I enjoyed inter-school sport and eisteddfod  
 I walked 14 kms on foot everyday  
 Because Majeje the homeland puppet couldn't build a high school in my village  
 It was good to be taught by good teachers  
 But some white teachers taught us with contempt and disdain  
 While lazy black teachers cared only for cash, girls and beer  
 I hated teachers who dragged their sorrows and egos to the classroom  
 Instead of teaching with passion  
 At 17, my father died



I still don't know what killed him  
I have no photo frame to hang on the wall  
Ms Jacobs my Afrikaans teacher with a heart comforted me  
It felt like she would adopt me  
Perhaps the black boy from the village was going to work in the garden, earn some income  
Sit silently around the table and eat *potjiekos*, tomato *bredie* and mutton stew with rice  
Perhaps the black boy was going to enjoy the taste of biltong and *droewors*  
I shrugged, not me; there's peace in my mother's windowless mud hut

I couldn't dodge lessons at Lemana  
I smiled every time I saw Nyeleti's oval face  
I wanted to hear the tenderness of her baritone voice  
Touch her pushback hair style  
When she wasn't in class, my day was wasted  
Inside I was burning, but poverty shut my lips with a padlock  
But Nyeleti is the reason I completed matric  
There must be valid reasons to go to school  
But Nyeleti kept me alive  
Not a degree, or big house or car in the future  
But her smile

## IX

At 19 I went to Tivumbeni College of Education  
It wasn't my intention to be a pedagogue  
I wanted to be a ceramist or journalist  
I've always admired brave journalists  
Nosy and sniffing  
But everyone who ate bread and cheese, bacon and eggs  
In the village was a teacher, nurse or railway worker

I've been a poet since I was seventeen  
Poetry has been my passport to countries around the world  
My poetry is published in ten or fifteen languages  
It is used in foreign universities  
Quoted in papers, magazines, newspapers, dissertations and books  
Researchers from far visit me to make films about me  
But in my South Africa, in my Xitsonga my work is foreign  
And there's no library or bookshop to keep them safe in my village

I completed my teacher's diploma with three distinctions  
But never worked as a teacher  
At twenty two, I took up a teaching job at Ongedaagte High  
I left the next day  
They wanted me to teach Accounting from Grade 8- 12  
But I failed Accounting while at high school  
I could teach everything else except Accounting and Afrikaans  
At nineteen, Ntsan'wisi closed the college for the whole year  
Angry students loaded Hager the rector on the back of the bakkie  
I hated *Spesiaal Afrikaans* with passion. I was at college to study Economics.

What was special about Afrikaans, when children were mowed down in Soweto 76?

At twenty two, people voted in Mandela's men and women to power  
It was good to see long queues of hope  
My hope was elevated when former unionists went to parliament  
I imagined a new country without sprawling shacks  
Though I supported the Reconstruction and Development Programme –  
I didn't vote for a Joe Slovo's sunset clause  
I supported Azapo, but this party of Biko will never win the elections  
When the RDP was suspended, and replaced by Gear  
I faxed a poem to President Mandela's office –  
*Mandela, Have You Ever Wondered?*  
*... that the triumphant crowd retires to ghettos?*

At 20, I had sex for the first time  
It was late at night, in a dark room at Tivumbeni College with a high school girl  
Xhosa my friend took me there. He had made the arrangement.  
The girl had come to see the college with her school.  
I don't remember her name  
I wouldn't remember her even if we meet in Bushbuckridge  
The teacher vulture didn't use any condom.  
I didn't have one, and I wouldn't have known how to use it.  
If she fell pregnant; then I'm sorry my dear girl  
My seeds fell on the rocks

In my first year at Tivumbeni I shared a room with boys from Valdezia  
They drank every week  
Used hungry girls from Nkowankowa like dogs before my eyes  
Girls camped in the room from Friday to Monday morning  
Sometimes these boys would growl, complaining of drop and gonorrhoea  
I wouldn't catch anything like that  
Would you get drunk and hurt from watching a porno?

## X

I treasure the women I loved  
Not all of them have seen me naked  
But my one night stands were a disaster  
Lele used to drink wine at my flat in Ritrua  
When she was drunk we would kiss  
She would feel my hard stick rubbing her thighs  
One morning she came over  
She was on her way to Joburg  
I drank body-boosting *mageu* but the dick was lame  
So I ashamedly let her go, catch a taxi to Joburg  
Years later, I met her, she was frail and weak  
She'd lost hair and weight  
I'm glad *mageu* didn't give my body any boost that morning  
I thought of the days she used to be driven in BMWs

Wear expensive labels

My one night stands were a disaster  
With Prim, that girl who loved every man with bling bling  
My stick was hard, but the traffic was red  
She was drunk from her wine  
At the Cape Town Hollow hotel she shouted in her coconut tone:  
“Don’t be a typical Xhosa man,  
My white guy doesn’t mind licking me  
It’s sweet with blood, flowing blood.”  
I chose to be a typical Xhosa man  
Who is scared to cough blood clots  
Scared to shit droppings like a goat  
Scared that my system might be blocked  
For I want to crawl, live until hundred years  
Where I come from they say *swa yila wa yila*

I wish I were like King Solomon  
The poet with 700 wives and 300 concubines  
But I’m far from matching his record  
I picked up a wandering town girl one night  
She followed me to the Glenkens apartment at Hans van Rensburg  
We had a Nando’s grilled chicken, pap and a Coke for supper  
She slept with her tight jeans on  
Until morning  
Can’t remember her name  
Nor where she came from  
She was a girl with a sweet voice  
She wasn’t a ghost. No, I can’t remember her  
It doesn’t bother me either  
Her unshaved armpits were meerkat smelling  
She was *mushavhanamadi* – a spider in the web  
Or should I dare say a croc that lives in water but refuses to wash  
I slept looking the other way  
She took me to task with her smell of putrid turns and twirls  
Glad I slept looking the other way  
I didn’t extend my hand around her –  
Even with my erotic habits, I couldn’t risk loving her, except to share a bed  
She was going to give this loner, strange *siekte*  
Bad take-away from a cheap oven  
Next day I woke up with a hangover from her pungent smell  
I washed my blankets with detergents  
Dried them for two days  
Never expected her to touch a broom  
Let alone the vacuum cleaner  
But she was better than the run-down whore  
I once picked up  
Who the next day wanted to move in with me  
Without any lobola  
Couldn’t tell her there’s no honey left in her pot

I really treasure the women I loved:  
Onica was a clean and beautiful thief with a trendy hairdo.  
She knew the perfume to attract the Bila bee  
Loved the songs of Beyonce, R Kelly and TP  
She broke into my apartment  
And stole my radio and clothes  
She left a voice message on my mobile phone:  
*So you think you are smart? God be with you.*  
When she received calls while we were eating out  
She would say, "I'm with my husband,"  
Her fingers pressing against my palm  
There was no reason to worry about another man  
I thought she was a respectable woman fit for marriage  
But I was her sex trash bin  
Her ATM

Mpume rode in lux buses from KwaMashu to Polokwane  
We went to poetry readings and book launches together  
But when I wanted a baby, all I could get was drop  
The Malawian healer gave me something bitter to cook  
It was smelling, ready to give me TB  
I threw the *muthi* to Pietersburg Primary school grounds at night  
Her cousin notified me of her death eight years later  
I should have attended her funeral and met her son Manqoba  
Rest in peace my friend

At 25, I appeared in *Next* magazine with Camilla  
It wasn't a betrayal of values. Love cuts across race and culture.  
At twenty three, I slept with two prostitutes in Hillbrow.  
Flaxman introduced me to the Little Rose. It was a dangerous place.  
Most men have walked in and out of brothels.  
A prostitute searched my pants, stole all my notes whilst I was busy with another one  
In another encounter, I couldn't have an erection.  
I had to pay still and there was no change  
That's why I no longer enter brothels

## XI

I've been to several countries in my life  
I watched opera for the first time in Algeria  
They sang in Arabic, Wahiba translated every line they sang  
It was torture  
I would have enjoyed the impromptu village dancers of *makhwaya*

At 24, I travelled to Harare by Translux bus on my own  
Marjorie Jobson had invited me to the prestigious African Human Rights camp  
I saw pictures of Mugabe lined up on the road to the airport  
Dictator I thought. But it was none of my business.  
His people want him to rule forever

Or is it true that the dead can vote for Uncle Bob in Zim?

I arrived late and slept at the Earlside hotel  
There were faeces under the double bed of old unwashed linen  
A prostitute knocked, it was late in the night  
I couldn't open the door, I hadn't invited her  
I had been warned thousands die of Aids in Zim  
I suffered from flu for three weeks  
There's a permanent Zim scar on my face from that flu

I met a woman who was horny, I was horny too  
But when I noticed her black clothes, I knew she was a widow  
I curtailed all movements of my flesh  
Scared to die of *makhuma*

I saw married course participants removing their rings for young boys  
I met priests who smoked and drank unashamedly, and still made sense  
I went to Chinhoyi caves, admired the pool of cobalt blue water  
Some white ultra divers dived deep into the pool  
I feared the spirits would capture me, curse me for good  
In Zambezi River I feared to be grabbed by Nyaminyami, the river god of the Tonga  
But Nyaminyami deals with the adventurous clan  
That dares to see what's beneath the mud  
I returned home safe  
With a wooden sculpture and a drum from Harare

## XII

At 25, I flew to Sweden with fifteen young people from Limpopo  
Theresa my love held on to my sweater  
But when she saw the tall Swede Andreas, she relocated to his room  
Then she returned my sweater  
I betrayed her for a woman fit to be my older brother's wife  
She glowed in the night

I stayed with Peter Idar, the man from Uppsala who could drive a car with his legs  
Manage the kitchen without full hands  
The man who taught me to ride a horse  
In Uppsala, I met a man busking at the street corner  
He was playing an acoustic guitar, singing in Shangaan  
I stopped and joined him in song  
He was a homeboy from Mozambique, land of my ancestors.  
Sweden was sweet, but I missed pap

## XIII

At 35, Mhlahlandlela my son was born in Polokwane  
There was load shedding in town  
Agh shame big brother Joe, why did you think *ndzi biwe hi xitluka?*  
I rushed to see him a few minutes after his birth

He had scales on feet and hands  
He cried when I took pictures of him  
He was born ten days later than what the gynaecologist had predicted  
I walked home proudly  
Framed the photo I took when he was twelve minutes old  
Today I read him bedtime stories  
And he tells me everything about Tom and Jerry  
He calls himself Ben Ten  
He works methodically  
Packs everything orderly

At 37, my second son Samora was born  
He was premature, weighing 2.2 kg  
Some children are born weighing just a kilo  
With a head of a bird  
I lost weight before his birth  
At four months, Tshivhula the gynaecologist said  
The child's blood and mother's are different  
I lost weight when I heard the sad news  
I rushed Gudani to Moria for prayers and rituals  
Elderly women washed her  
But she didn't stop going to western doctors  
She's a woman of steel  
Today Samora is a big boy of three  
He walks like a soldier Mashele  
He eats well and his brain is razor sharp  
He sings:  
*Modimo a le teng* (Where God resides)  
*Gago na mathatha* (There's ever no problem)  
*Modimo a le teng* (Where the Almighty resides)  
*Gago na makaka* (There's ever no shit)  
He bursts into laughter  
Hahaha, hehehe!  
One day he'll speak properly

#### XIV

In July 2010 I paid lobola to the Ramikosi family  
Far away in Tshitereke, at the end of Limpopo  
I sent my aunt Sylvia, my brother Philly, Piet Jonas, Conny Shisana  
They brought Gudani my black beauty home dressed in nwenda  
She's the one who danced domba at Ha-Tshivhase  
And sung:  
*Lua songolowa lutanga vhana vho lima* (A river reed zigzagging, while children have ploughed)  
*Ahee, ahee* (Yeah, yeah)

Vhavenda women beat the drums and danced *malende*  
*Matakadza mbilu ndi nwana* (That which pleases the heart is a child)  
*Ahehe, ahe ndi nwana* (Yeah, yeah, it's a child)

*Matakadza mbiluni ndi nwana* (That which pleases deep inside is a child)  
*A-shoo shoo baby ndi nwana* (Hush, hush baby, my child)

There was too much food and beer  
The whole village came to feast  
We ate *tihove* and sliced pumpkins  
Vhavenda looked at the expanse of my ancestral land –  
And the green fields of growing spinach, tomatoes and onions –  
They realized their daughter wouldn't starve  
But I'm glad she's not *nyankwavi* –  
She's given me two boys

I've been going to the gym since 27  
But I hardly lose weight and fat  
Because I eat a mountain of pap every day  
Plate piled up to the ceiling with pap and wors  
I sit in the steam bath, talk about  
Women, corruption and fraud in Limpopo, and football  
Clean-shaven tall men freely dangle their AK 47s  
I watch the slim girls in tracksuits and tights jog on the tread mill  
My wife likes her sweets and Cola  
Big cars are parked outside  
I walk to Thabo Mbeki Street  
There's beauty in walking along singing  
But one day this communist will drive a Benz

## XV

At 32 I flew to Belgium via Heathrow  
I enjoyed wine everyday. Never got drunk.  
Suzan Binnemans translated my poems into Dutch  
I read poems at Kafka café where Karl Marx wrote *Grundrisse*  
Three days before returning home, a Moroccan stole my bag  
Veerle my host drove through the mist looking for this twenty year-old scumbag  
And when we got him, his 60-year old girlfriend whisked him out  
Before the police could arrest him

## XVI

In 2010, I stayed with Roxana for two weeks in Helsinki –  
She's a poet from the mountains in Peru  
She adores Cesar Vallejo her home poet from Lima  
Her seven year child surfs the Internet  
Children in my village push bricks as toys  
One night after dinner she sobbed:  
*My husband is a dog –*  
*He brings friends into the apartment*  
*When they're drunk from long bouts of boozing*

*He frivolously tells them to fuck me  
To drink me like the cheap ration of wine from the supermarket  
And then he passes out.*

I was helpless. I went to bed and lay flat on my stomach  
Prayed to God, hear her lamentation  
How can a goddamn university professor in a neat jacket and tie  
Who's been awarded a feminist revolutionary award  
Desperately turn against the woman who introduced him to Peru  
Where he researched about the struggle ways of the mountain people, guided by the wife?  
Now the upper-class activist with uncontrolled drinking habit  
Lives with a student in another apartment  
Only becomes a man after taking vitamins, sedatives and tranquilizers  
That's why Roxana is divorcing him  
That's why Roxana is sobbing

## **XVII**

I've read my poems in Tampere, Turku and Helsinki  
But Lahti Poetry Week was special, I read poems by the lake  
Old male poets played horns, flutes, trumpets and trombones  
They sang their sorrows with precision accompanied by the *kantele*  
At the Lahti library, my books were displayed everywhere  
When I read my poems, an old man read the translated Finnish version  
Though I never told him which poems I was going to read.

On May 2009, the South African ambassador for Finland  
H.E. Mr Sobizana Mngqikana invited me  
To read poems at his official residence in Katajajarjuntie  
He nodded as I condemn corruption in ANC-led government  
He nodded as if to say it's an unintended consequence of the revolution  
He gave me a Johnnie Walker Black Label bottle  
A week earlier he gave the same bottle to Hugh Masekela.  
'I know artists. Don't tell me you don't drink, sober like a judge.'  
But walking in Helsinki, travelling in trams and buses made me feel like the only black  
But the Finns were nice to me  
It's just that I come from an apartheid land  
Where everything is in black and white

## **XVIII**

At thirty, upon landing In Addis Ababa  
A rogue took me around the city, he organized a metered taxi, I paid  
We went to Abyssinia hotel –  
The guide called it house of culture  
But I saw a stinking brothel  
Girls made strong coffee from the bean granules  
They danced to reggae tracks happily  
They invited me to dance with them



I bought them wine and paid 200 Dollars for a bottle of champagne  
It was ridiculous. Daylight robbery  
We left Abyssinia brothel with two prostitutes to the Ghion hotel  
One for Bila, the other for Thami my shy comrade from Cape Town  
The hotel management demanded cash to give girls access to our rooms  
I was tired and didn't have Dollars for one round  
I'm lucky I wasn't strangled by prostitutes  
I'm lucky I attended the African Social Forum  
And helped them start the paper *African Flame*

## **XIX**

In Ghana, novelist Niq Mhlongo nicknamed me Banku  
Because I ate *banku* and tilapia every day for three weeks  
Sandile Ngidi called me Samson because of my long dreadlocks  
At the Elmina slave castle at Cape Coast  
Black Americans wept when they heard how slaves were whipped to death  
Women forced to have sex with the governor  
How the strong men got into ships  
And sailed on the Atlantic to work on plantations  
To build cities, churches and bridges  
Driven like bulls to the dipping hole  
It was necessary to weep  
I was close to tears  
I shouted, reparations now!  
Because after reading *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*  
I agree with Ayi Kwei Armah  
Just like Manu Herbstein's novel *Ama: Atlantic Slave Trade*  
The fruits of liberation are still to be harvested

## **XX**

At thirty seven I went to Algeria  
Libya the neighbour was burning. Gaddafi: wanted dead or alive.  
I grew up adoring his green book. But he had now earned the stripes of a tyrant.  
They killed him in the Battle of Sirte  
That's what occupied my mind in Algiers

At Tipaza ruins  
I was reminded of ancient Mapungubwe and the living gods  
I washed my feet at the silver-plated Mediterranean sea  
I wanted to visit Frantz Fanon's grave, but next time

At the Algiers Book Fair, people carried brown paper bags full of books  
In my country, politicians seldom set foot in bookshops and libraries  
Those who push trolleys and carry big bags are from supermarkets in the mall  
I didn't see a tavern or bottle store in the city of Algiers  
They say Algeria is a police state. But I liked it  
Children go to school, otherwise there's punishment

The Berber were invisible, yet it's their land till Sahara  
The Berber sent the French packing  
Now they fight against the Arabization of their lives  
I stayed away from Muslim women  
Can't touch them like we do in Mzantsi  
I went to opera a few times  
Few villagers have heard of the opera  
It's not necessary. There are better things to do.

## XXI

I've been a publisher since 27  
Where I come from it's sexier to drink than to read  
I wish Zuma could give me the Order of Ikhamanga  
Like he did with Serote and Kgosisile!  
Give me a Phd if you like what I do  
I publish black poets without an apology  
Sometimes paranoid writers shit on my head. It's okay  
I've sat behind screens, paper heaped on my desk  
Writing and editing reports, stories and poems  
When my eyes go, the world must know they saw many things  
They read raw, virgin tales  
Though I carry Strunk and White wherever I go  
I doubt my English, I've always doubted it  
Every line I jot down must be panel beaten!  
But I don't walk around with a dictionary

I grew up listening to the mesmerising sounds of General M.D Shirinda, Banda Six, Xinyori Sisters, Samson Mthombeni, Goodman Nghulele, Mbongeni Ngema, The Soul Brothers, The mesmerising disco sounds of Splash, Condry Ziqubu, Paul Ndlovu, Brenda Fassie, Chicco, Kamazu, Umoja, Lazarus Kgagudi, Peta Tenant and CJB  
I heard these soothing sounds over the Omega radio  
My taste of music hasn't changed really: simple and affordable  
Jazz buffs love John Coltrane, Charlie Parker and Theolonius Monk  
Classic buffs love Mozart and Beethoven  
But I treasure the polyrhythmic sounds of Obed Ngobeni, Kanda Bongo Man, Pepe Kalle, Rufaro, Hotstix Mabuse and Joachim Macuacua

Some treasure the writings of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Gunter Grass, Toni Morrison, James Joyce, James Baldwin, George Orwell, Chinua Achebe, J.M Coetzee, Victor Hugo, Milan Kundera, Gabriel Garcia Marques, Charles Dickens, Shakespeare  
I'm attracted to robust poets who hardly win prizes  
Poets who shake the earth and captains of industry with their words  
Rendra, Frank O'Hara, Keorapetse Kgosisile, Pablo Neruda, Nikki Giovanni  
Adrienne Rich, Ingoapele Madingoane, Allen Ginsberg, Henry Dumas  
The militant voices of Mahmoud Darwish, Ghassan Zaqtan, Allen Ginsberg  
Nazim Hikmet, Zinjiva Nkondo, Lesego Rampolokeng, Gil Scott-Heron  
The prophetic voices of Habib Jalib, Mafika Gwala, Cesar Vallejo, Yiannis Ritsos, Lemn Sissay

Aime Cesaire, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Matthews  
June Jordan, Jayne Cortez, Margaret Walker, Tanure Ojaide  
Thunderous voices of Joseph Brodsky, Brenda Marie Osbey, Langston Hughes  
Mutabaruka, Richard Wright, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Sonia Sanchez

## XXII

At 40, I asked my wife to burn the thirteen year-old dreadlocks on my head –  
Not because I was honouring the dead  
Nor was I scared of thugs in Pretoria that can kill a man for dreadlocks  
To beautify black women's heads who love African locks and braids  
Nor was I slaving in Tomboni jail  
It was nice to wear dreadlocks –  
Girls dipped their fingers in dreads in salons  
I danced on stage like a sangoma in a trance  
Artists loved me  
Christians judged me  
Airport police always ambushed me  
Confusing me for a criminal on the run

At 38, every part of my body itched  
I scratched my body for the whole night  
My manhood shrunk  
The wolf was knocking on the door  
Perhaps I was paying the price for building a writers' village in the sea of poverty  
My brother Simon took me to Moria  
But I couldn't enter the holy place with dangling dreadlocks and a beard  
Two years later, I bled through my pipe  
Two days before that, three men in black suits visited my house  
They said they were preaching the word of God  
Visiting every house in the village  
They had their own type of Bible which they wanted to read  
I told them to leave my house in peace  
They said they were members of Jehovah's Witness  
My brother's son Hluli asked them to look at the ZCC badge on my mother's chest  
On their way out  
They remained seated on the sofas  
They wanted to convert all of us to their church  
But eventually they left  
I don't want to see them again

I don't know what's growing in my blood  
I drink lots of fresh water, bitter raw aloe juice, African potato and rooibos tea  
I drink buchu, camomile, ginseng and green tea like the long living Chinese and Japanese  
My diet is garlic and ginger and lemon, thanks to the whisky boozing Dr Beetroot  
I eat lots of *xibavi* and *nkaka* and *guxe* that grows in my garden  
Because I want to be a man even at 90  
But I'm scared of organ failure

Like Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine –

I believe in sage herbs and roots that heal  
Like King Solomon the poet –  
I believe in the vegetal alchemy resources that exist in Africa  
The aromatic barks and bulbs that heal

My medical history is not colourful  
And I don't want it to be colourful  
I've never spent a night chained in a mental hospital  
Nor lay unconscious, wired in a life support machine  
One man got a good job after years of eating ash  
Then became diabetic from enjoying his cash and salacious dishes  
And when the pains and aches attacked his obese body –  
Doctors ordered the man to get rid of the saturated fat and salt  
*Run in the tread mill brother, burn in the steam bath*  
*Stop braaing and boozing brother*  
Now the tycoon eats cabbage and salads  
Perhaps he feels he's deprived of good life

Though I don't paint my lungs with smoke  
Nor live in taverns of arthritic binging ravens  
I'm shit scared of cancer and Aids  
Mugabe – with or without a nappy, flies over to Singapore for treatment  
Mandela is rushed to a private clinic in Pretoria  
Bara is crowded  
Corpses are on sale  
Undertakers book corpses in broad daylight  
My pockets have holes –I have no medical aid  
My wife is unemployed  
My mother a pensioner  
My father is dead  
I can't afford to be bed-ridden eaten by bugs and parasites  
Many patients don't return when they go to that public hospital

My medical history is not colourful  
And I don't want it to be colourful  
At 40, hematuria made me learn to pray  
I grew shingles and dermatitis –  
My stomach burnt, veins pained  
I suffered cramps when I jogged  
Air-filled stomach growled, it was full of foul smoke  
Dr Flip van As from Polokwane tried to fix the symptoms  
I don't think he dealt with the malaise  
But I'm still standing, erect like Rivilwa mountain

My blood group type is 0 positive  
There's a lot I must not eat  
I wish red meat was not one of them  
But the prophet at Moria warned me against eating red meat  
I don't want a repeat of what happened to mama

The prophet told her to stop eating red meat  
One day she ate *boerewors*  
Her body itched, she couldn't sleep  
She walked around the house almost naked  
Scratching herself against the wall  
To ward off the itchy body

At 28 my brother said I was skinny like an Aids frame  
Meaning my shoulders were like a clothes' hanger  
At 38 I took an HIV test  
The nurse from Liberty Life came to Timbila office to squeeze my blood  
Negative. Hurray!  
It wasn't for the first time  
I did my first HIV test at 27  
Every time I take out a life cover, my blood is squeezed by pathologists  
I thank God and my ancestors for keeping me breathing  
In my country people don't live long –  
Those who live long are whites and black bourgeoisie with medical aid  
When I feel feeble and weak  
Others join the brothers in monasteries  
And become monks who reflect in silence  
I just want to be soaked in Gwenani River  
That's where papa and mama got baptised

At 41, May Day  
I rushed to Moria  
Followed the star of *Thaba ya Sione*  
The same mountain comrade Mandela sought prayers after Robben Island  
To dismantle the chains of racial oppression in a land without moral gravitas  
To forge racial reconciliation and peace in a country where a white assassin murdered Hani  
To snuff out the fires of De Klerk decapitating lives in his Inkatha inspired township slaughter

### XXIII

On May Day, proletarians and peasants  
The reds and greens  
Anarchists and gays  
Marched upright  
Chanting hau hau  
The future is socialism  
Demanding a living wage  
Calling for an end to labour brokers  
Daring to end the e-tolls in Gauteng  
They marched upright  
Hand in hand with the Palestinians  
Demanding that Obama free the prisoners of Guantanamo Bay  
I was not there  
But my heart is welded in their just struggle

As my comrades marched in cities' revolutionary squares

I was dizzy  
Something was clotting my chest  
Choking and gasping for breath  
That's why I cut my dreadlocks and a beard  
Followed the star of Mount Zion  
That's why I was soaked three times in cold Gwenani River:  
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit  
And I became closer to Marx, Engels and Lenin  
I became one with Fanon, Garvey and Biko

Now without dreadlocks and a beard  
I wear khakhi, cap and dance mokhukhu  
With the strong army of men  
The earth trembles  
I leap up and down  
Stamping the ground hard with the white *manyanyata* boots  
And I'm not drunk, have never tasted beer since I was born  
Unless Joko tea and *mogabolo* have intoxicating properties

Though I'm not a limnologist  
Nor a student of potamology  
I walk through bushes to follow sounds of waterfalls downstream  
I know the braided Mukomadi River that runs through the swampy Levubu valley  
That's where mama collected *hlangasi* grass to make brooms  
Brooms she sold at the Elim market to fight hunger  
I know rivers along the plains  
Rivers creating gorges  
I know sources, doors and mouths of rivers of life  
Bubbling rivers and gurgling streams

Without dreadlocks and a beard  
I look for all types of water to see the next day  
I gather waters of the waterfalls  
Water under bridges  
Collect sprite waters of the Mucirindzi well  
And the still waters of the meandering Ritavi  
I do all it takes to see my boys grow fresh and strong  
One day they'll finish school, work, walk up the aisle

Without dreadlocks and a beard  
I know where still and flowing water separate each other  
I know the mixtures of chicory coffees and teas with salt  
And what they do to keep me lean, strong and virile  
I know how to wash with salt and coffees  
Smear my feet with salt and Vaseline petroleum jelly  
I sit in *xixambu* and enjoy the steam of vapour  
To scare off nails that want to shoot my feet, drifting to my heart

Without dreadlocks and a beard  
I no longer eat pork, *timenemene* and *masonja*

Here I don't smoke or drink beer  
Sometimes I long for bacon in a hotel breakfast  
But there's a lot to eat in the world than pork

Without dreadlocks and a beard  
I know how to be pricked with that huge needle on my feet and hands  
To get rid of the impure blood  
I fear God and prayer  
More than my church uniform and shining emblem  
More than the stream water and the sauna  
More than the coffees and tea mixtures

Without dreadlocks and a beard  
I'm learning to pray midnight and early in the morning  
I submit my heart to God of Mount Zion  
I cherish love, respect and honesty  
I'm a Zionist Christian, not a Jewish Christian Zionist  
I have nothing against Palestine  
I salute the Palestinians' fight against Apartheid Israel

I'm an African  
I feel safe in an African church led by an African prophet  
Here, we dance and sing songs familiar  
We chant *mbogo*, the classical tune  
I'm visited upon by dreams I can't ignore  
For in the world populated by witches and wicked people  
You eat from the same bowl with your own relatives at your own risk

Marxism and Black Consciousness are good but not enough –  
I need protection from my ancestors and God  
Though I can't create my own deity  
Kae Morii, a Japanese poet and palm reader once told me to be careful  
She said that if I want to live longer  
I must take care of my health in my fifties  
I asked her how long she would live  
Unflinchingly, she said, 120 years

I'm lucky to have prophets who pack news of my future  
I'm no longer scared when I see prophets squealing, grunting and swinging their faces  
Now it's my turn to perform rituals  
Owls are hooting outside  
Dogs are barking and snorting in the night  
Now it's my turn to perform rituals

## Glossary

**And hi yena papantsongo wa Frank:** And it's him, Frank's uncle.

**A ka ha ri vusiku:** Xitsonga, meaning, I was in the dark, meaning I hadn't started dating.

**Banku:** Ghanain for pap

**Bredie:** Originally associated with the Cape Malays and the Dutch, *bredie* is a stew made with mutton, and its seasonings include cinnamon, ginger and chilli.

**Buchu:** Is a flowering plant known for its fragrance and medicinal use.

**Droëwors:** Afrikaans for "dry sausage" is a South African snack food, based on the traditional, coriander-seed spiced boerewors sausage.

**Eka:** Xitsonga preposition for *at*.

**Emachihweni:** A village the head of which has died.

**Emaxubini:** In the ruins.

**Hahani:** Xitsonga for aunt.

**Hlangasi:** Xitsonga for grass that grows in swampy areas, usually harvested to make brooms.

**Hogo:** A traditional circumcision school

**Hogo huwelela:** A common song sung at the circumcision camp.

**Imbiza:** An African medicinal tonic made from the African potato and other ingredients. It is believed that it reduces high blood pressure, clears skin conditions, boosts energy and vitality, and helps to clean the womb and prevents arthritis.

**Izikhothane:** It's a street slang, derived from the isZulu word *ukukhothana*, which means 'to lick'. Izikhothane gatherings often culminate in the burning of expensive clothes and money by young people in an act of showing off wealth.

**Jozi-mjipa-msawawa:** Slang for Johannesburg.

**Kantele:** A plucked string instrument of the dulcimer and zither family native to Finland and Karelia.

**Kenya:** A large bundle of woven grass thatch tied in such a way that it can be unrolled on the roof of a hut. Among the Vatsonga, this mat was also used to wrap and preserve the corpse of a poor person who couldn't afford a decent blanket or linen.



<b>Ku fanele ku songiwa masangu:</b>	Xitsonga proverb: mats must be folded; meaning sex is prohibited.
<b>Kotana:</b>	A little stick used by ZCC priests to bless the sick and troubled.
<b>Kwaito:</b>	A style of popular music similar to hip hop, featuring vocals recited over an instrumental backing with strong bass lines.
<b>Lobola:</b>	Traditional bride-price, formerly paid in cattle, but nowadays given a cash payment.
<b>Madala:</b>	Nguni [IsiZuku, IsiXhosa, IsiNdebele and IsiSwati] for old man.
<b>Madlala:</b>	Circumcision lodge and rites.
<b>Mafufunyani:</b>	A state of sudden madness or hysteria.
<b>Mageu:</b>	Light fermented body-boosting drink made of corn.
<b>Majekejeke:</b>	Grass or reed used to make sleeping mats.
<b>Makhuma:</b>	Illness of men caused by connection with female not yet purified after abortion or confinement; illness due to omission of purification rites after a death.
<b>Makhwaya:</b>	Traditional Tsonga dance for men.
<b>Malende:</b>	A traditional Venda dance for both men and women, boys and girls. Unlike tshigombela which is performed on special occasions to praise chiefs, malende can be performed for any happy event.
<b>Malusu:</b>	Muthi with a spell that is used in male circumcision camps to make the initiates not to think of returning home whatsoever.
<b>Masonja:</b>	Xitsonga for “mopani worms”, a delicious dish mainly served in Limpopo province.
<b>Mbogo:</b>	A signature song of the ZCC.
<b>Mbhokota:</b>	A populated rural village near Elim in Limpopo province.
<b>Mhani:</b>	Xitsonga for mom.
<b>Milawu:</b>	Laws and chants sung in a circumcision school.
<b>Miroho:</b>	Xitsonga for vegetables.
<b>Mugabagaba:</b>	A plant with big elephant-like leaves often used for detoxification.

- Muhulu:** Your mother's sister in Xitsonga.
- Muthi:** Medicine, usually traditional.
- Mushavhanamadi:** Tshivenda for a person who does not wash.
- Mogabolo:** Sepedi for holy and blessed ZCC drinking water and tea.
- Mokhukhu:** Sepedi for a shack dwelling. In this poem, *mokhukhu* refers to the Zion Christian Church's male organised rhythmic dance which is characterised by frequent and collective leaps into the air and coming down stamping their feet on the ground with their white boots called **manyanyatha**. Usually, the *mokhukhu* performances last for hours, with no meals in between, except the drinking of sugarless tea and *mogabolo* (holy and blessed water) before the performance. The *mokhukhu* dancers are usually called *mashole a thapelo*, meaning the soldiers of prayer.
- Ndzi biwe hi xitluka:** Xitsonga proverb for 'I'm impotent'.
- Nyankwavi:** The girl who is not supposed to get married, but feed the xin'wanakaji, alternatively known as tokoloshi.
- Nwenda:** A colourfully embroidered upper garments made from multi-coloured striped cloth worn by Vhavenda women and girls.
- N'wana wa munhu u le kusuhani:** The Son of Man is nearby, meaning Jesus is coming.
- Pantsula:** A fashionable young urban black person, especially a man.  
a dance style in which each person performs a solo turn within a circle of dancers doing a repetitive, shuffling step.
- Phala bashimane:** Traditional medicine.
- Phunyuka bamphethe:** African magic spell that enables a thief to escape unhurt or where clear evidence that supports that something nasty was committed by the suspect is simply brushed aside in the court of law.
- Potjiekos:** Literally translated as "small pot food", *potjiekos* is a stew prepared outdoors, usually cooked in a three-legged pot.
- Sangoma:** A traditional healer or diviner.
- Sivara:** Bother-in-law in Xitsonga.
- Swa yila wa yila:** Xitsonga for 'a taboo is always a taboo.'
- Swibantsheke:** A game of sliding down the hill or skating usually by boys
- Swigirigiri:** Cart wheel made of a disc or wood.

**Ta lava hundzeke emisaveni:** For the deceased [a Radio Tsonga programme in the 80s which was aired every night].

**Timenemene:** Xitsonga for edible flies that are collected from anthills in summer

**Toyi toyi:** A dance step characterised by high-stepping movements commonly performed at political and protest gatherings.

**Order of Ikhamanga:** Is a South African honour, instituted in November 2003 and it is granted by the President of South Africa for achievements in arts, culture, literature, music, journalism, and sports.

**Ubhejana:** A concoction which was promoted by post-apartheid South Africa's health minister Dr Manto Tshabalala as a cure for Aids.

**Vadzabi:** Traditional circumcision mentors and carers of the initiates.

**Vaveni:** Xitsonga for tokoloshe, evil spirit or voodoo.

**Vho-:** Added to a person's name as a title of respect, e.g Mr or Mrs in Tshivenda.

**Wa:** Xitsonga preposition *of*, in the poem it means *the son of*.

**Xidyisa:** Xitsonga for something harmful one has been made to eat without knowing, such as poison, a drug or a magic ingredient.

**Xifula:** A cancerous wound, stroke or any sudden and unusual incurable medical condition allegedly believed to be planted in people by wicked people and witches.

**Xihlungwani:** A carved wooden crown or cover of thatch that is used to close the top of hut roof. Among the Vatsonga, when the head of a family dies, the *xihlungwani* is removed to indicate that he is no more; and the place is usually referred to as *emachihweni*, meaning the place of lawlessness.

**Xirimela:** The Pleiades, which rise at hoeing time.

**Xivonelo:** Cone-shaped portion of porridge brought by women to feed those in circumcision camp.

**Xixambu:** Xitsonga for vapour bath.

**Xi nga ri na nhonga xi sila hi mandla:** He who crushes [tobacco] without a mortar and pestle but with bare hands.

**7/8 u ya lithanda isaka la mazambani / U ya lithanda isaka la mazambani:** An IsiZuku song that my father Daniel Risimati Bila liked with passion. The composer is not known, but

the song was performed by a male song and dance troupe during his school days at Shirley Agricultural and Industrial School for Natives, and during the potato tasting festivities organised by the Swiss missionary and liberal, Herbert Stanley Phillips and his wife Lucette Phillips, at Shirley farm.