



**NEVER LOOK BACK:
A COLLECTION
OF POEMS**

Molefe Solomon Mabuse

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First edition published by Molefe Mabuse in 2023

ISBN 978-1-991248-02-2

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This publication was made possible by the generous support from the Department of Military Veterans (DMV) and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). The HSRC team comprised Dr Gregory Houston, Dr Yul Davids, Dr Mokhantšo Makoe, Ms Namhla Ngqwala, Mr Lebohang Ndaba, Ms Tshegofatso Ramaphakela and Ms Sbahle Cele.

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Produced, designed and typeset by COMPRESS.dsl | 800753_A | www.compressdsl.com

Cover image: Alamy

Printed and bound in South Africa.

Dedication

*To Mabuse family especially my deceased parents,
Nancy and Johannes Mabuse.*

*To my siblings especially Gilbert and Silas who
helped me to be reintegrated into civil society.*

To my wife and daughter.

To everyone who played a positive role in my life.

And above all to God, the Almighty for everything.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Author Biography</i>	<i>ix</i>

Mixed Poems

A Summer Day	1
Two Birds	2
Winterveldt	4
Sounds	7
Return From Prison	9
The Fugitive	12
Not A Silent Night	14
A Tribute To Morula Tree	16
The Karoo – Again	18
Just The Karoo – A Place	19
Easter Monday Morning	20
The Red Sun	21
Winter Nights	22
A Misty Day	23
Robben Islanders Unknown To Our Land	25
Monologue Persona 1	28
Sun Set – A Painting	31
Monologue Persona Ii	33
They Hanged	35
Earth Tremor	37
Stone Breaking Work	39
Kiwi Fever – Robben Island	41

Boer Poet	43
El Nino Sunset	44
Cosmos Flowers	47
The Invaders	49
The Road	51
Full Moon	52
Violators 1	54
School-Girl Mother	55
Time Served	57
Time Blurred Time	59
A Rainy Morning Indoors	61
Exhumation – Up Close	63
Exhumation – Closure	65
Unveiling Of A Tombstone	66
Voices	70
The Call Of Azania	73
By The Coast	76
To A Dead Snake	79
Stayin Awake	81
The Stench	84
A Fable	86
Elegy On Demise Of Unknown Prisoner	89
Hard Labour On Robben Island	94
Spare Diet	98
Sketches	
Canton 1: Flotsam And Jetsam	101
Canton 2: Earth Tremor 1967	102
Canton 3: A Young Warder Died	104
Canton 4: The Premier Is Dead	106
<i>Explanatory Notes And Translations</i>	<i>108</i>

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to the Department of Military Veterans for providing the funding for this publication, and in particular Diapo Mathole and Alitta Mosupyoe, who guided and provided critical support to the project to enhance, edit and publish this book. I am also grateful for the support provided by the research team of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) – Dr Yul Davids, Dr Gregory Houston, Dr Mokhantso Makoe, Namhla Ngqwala, Lebohang Ndaba, Tshegofatso Ramaphakela and Sbahle Cele – and for the role they played in enhancing and editing the manuscript, and in getting it published.

Author Biography

My late father was a World War II veteran, my late mother a domestic worker. I was born on 13 June 1941 in Mmakau, a village between Pretoria and Brits. I am the last born in a family of six children, and all my siblings attended school up to and beyond secondary school. I grew up in a family of readers, where education books and magazines were plenty.

My consciousness of the disparity between black and white in South Africa was awakened when I noticed the difference in amenities for blacks in townships and the rich white suburbs. I was an avid reader of Drum magazine from a young age. I got exposed to African leaders in the late 1950s: Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Modibo Keita, Obafeni Awolowo; in South Africa there were names like Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Chief Albert Luthuli, Nana Mahomo, Peter Molotsi and Robert Sobukwe. On 6 March 1957, Kwame Nkrumah became the head of Ghana. I heard about this from our teacher, Philip Mahuma.

I attended high school at a boarding school in Kilnerton, Pretoria, that belonged to the Methodist Church. There were a lot of cultural, sporting and debating activities, and the students were militant and political. I joined the Pan African Congress of Azania (PAC), which was banned after the Sharpeville shooting of 21 March 1960. I went underground and joined Poqo, the military wing of the PAC.

At the end of 1963, the Kilnerton training institution was closed down and relocated to Hebron, a tribal village west of Pretoria. We students had to reapply. I applied, got accepted and continued with both schooling and underground work. In April 1963, I was arrested for plotting to overthrow the government by force. I was in a group charged with conspiracy and sabotage. On 13 July 1963, I was sentenced for 15 years, which I spent on Robben Island until my release on 11 July 1978.

I was then sent to Bophuthatswana, where I was put under restriction for two years in the Pretoria/Brits area. I stayed around there till the dawn of democracy in 1994. Since 1978, I have worked as a teacher; got married; completed degrees – BA (Unisa), HED (Unisa), BA Hons (University of Pretoria) – and a certificate in adult education; volunteered in community-based organisations; and taught in a number of adult education centres around Pretoria. I retired in 2006. I have green fingers that are useful because what I plant bears fruit.

Presently I am a veteran of the liberation struggle, a member of the Association of Ex-Political Prisoners as well as a member of LiberationHistoryWriters (Association).

Mixed Poems

A Summer Day

The grass is green
All around birds twitter
Up in the trees are doves cooing
Man is nowhere seen

Patches of angular plough fields endlessly stretch far away
Far away towards some blurry blue mountains, they stretch.
And, like a molten beetle along the horizon, a moving tractor
shimmers.

And, huge dark tree dominates the landscape.

There is a monotonous trailing sound of a passing aeroplane
It is a twin turbo engine Dakota
And, into nothing this plane dissipates.
The rural atmosphere stays, as always, quiet.

I was here banished
Upon my release from Robben Island
This place my home became
It is bush veld
Only by me inhabited

Two Birds

Two huge birds flew past over my head
It was a windless winter day
The two birds flew heading north
They balanced themselves on the membranous firmament.

I look and looked, as they flew.
They glided like a kite
Never beating their wide spread wings
How did they fly? Why no flapping of wings?

They flew into the blue sky.
I watched them fly away
Until a myriad of monsters
Gnawed at my eyes, monsters translucent and many

I was earth-bound, but wanted to soar;
To fly high into the sky
Free and ethereal, to join
The two northward-bound birds.

Two birds had passed over my head
They could be lovers
Bound by nature
To be separated by death as birds do.

Two birds flew away
Left me heartbroken
Earth-bound and restricted
By man-made laws that none respected.

1979
Revised 1990

Winterveldt

Seen from a distance, spreading, sprawling, flat, grey;
All was winter the first time I saw you,
Trees ashen grey, roads deep and straight
Dotted with houses of all types and sizes.

Squat flat roofed mud houses
Stretching like mason grey stones
No piece of land left empty
Houses, massed and angled closely

A gravel road snakes away into the bush
Another wide road stretches far away
Marked by majestic marula trees
And ground below studded with yellow swelling fruit.

A tangy heady marula aroma pervades the air
The air heralding autumn season
Goats and sheep feeding on the fruit
The shepherd, also, sucking on the sweet juice.

A bundle on her head, a trail of children behind
A woman shuffles towards the murky swamp
To do household laundry and
To spread it on the hard grey grass to dry

Deep into the area houses stand far and distant
Sparse portions of land are owned by individuals.
Huge, red brick houses stand derelict
This evidence of opulence now gone to waste

This is the winter of past dignified human existence
Huge exotic trees tower ruins
Dilapidated school buildings stripped of dignity,
Stand abandoned next to the dusty bus road.

This is the winter of human existence
The place of absentee land lord
Yet a place of human dignity
Where owners prided themselves for holding their own sway

Each hamlet had its common burial ground
Each hamlet had its own leader
Each hamlet had its rituals
Each hamlet had plenty of food and shelter

It is huge, Winterveldt,
It is broad, Winterveldt
It is varied, Winterveldt

It is resilient, Winterveldt

Winterveldt, Winterveldt the Babel of our Time

Winterveldt, always winter

Winterveldt, a place in the veldt

Winterveldt, a gateway to the hinterland – Dipompong,

Moiletswane, Shakunyaneng;

Winterveldt, a refuge for the displaced.

Winterveldt, humans live there.

Winterveldt, people love to be there,

And yet it is always a veld in winter;

It really looks like a veldt in winter

Grey, ashen grey, drab, ominous – Winterveldt.

1979

Revised 1987

Sounds

They start very early in the morning
Sounds that send the place trembling
Sounds of running feet to the kitchen
And back to the cells – it was said

The trembling sound goes on for hours
It goes on for hours because
There are hundreds of souls
To be fed.

A cloying aroma of no-grade soup and
Maize meal hangs in the corridors

Orders barked, brief and curt;
You hear not what they say
Someone is screaming for help
Orders are spewed again and again

And then there is a punctuated thud of
Heavy doors and a double grinding turn of key

And then quietness disturbed by a measured boot-beat.

Quack, quack, quack, and twirl;

A lone warden is on the boat.

And then a distant sound of a speeding electric train

Tatatata, Tatatata, Tatatata, Tatatata

All these sounds are heard, but the source never seen

These are sounds

Of

Prison. Jail.

Trunk.

1978

Return From Prison

The car slid and glided on highways
Which had not been there before.
The mountains pass was unfamiliar
But the distant mountains down below
Had not changed, same old mountains.
The farm houses still looked the same.

We were driven to some double storey buildings
Buildings dingy and shabby serving as offices
Same old procedure, photos, finger prints and
Signing of papers, papers filled
And then the long wait for the release
Unlike in the movies, the waiting was long.

Life beyond the fence was normal:
School kids on bread, munching their food
Talking, gesticulating and happy
The school bell rang and they ran
As in those days, fifteen years ago.
Life had not changed. And so what?

The stomach was churning with hunger
And the day was turning cold
And the waiting was long
And at last he came the officer.
He was arrogant and proud
And he separated and released us.
Alone, far away
My mother
'You are now free to go
Your long term is over
Your terrorist chommies are waiting for you
We are watching you. GO'

I was free, being taken home
The winter village was drab and grey
Dry winter maize stalks stood in the field
Heavily coated men moved about
Women, draped in blankets around their waists,
Went on with home chores.

This was the village scene of fifteen years ago
The home-made gate still looked the same
The gate was open for me to be home

The car drove up the old path
Clonk, clonk went the flat hoot
A cold welcome. My father is four years dead.

Out came my brother and, another brother, then my mother
All were tense and everything went quiet.
The river opened the car door

I sat there in the car
I cried
'Don't cry brother mine
Don't you cry, you are home'

I was home but nothing had changed.
A Luta Continua. I said in my heart

1979

The Fugitive

I feel am going to die tonight
I fear I will die indeed
But I have done no one no harm
My offence to the system is, my conviction

My father died long ago
And ostracised is my mother and, so shall she stay
Without any company
Because of my convictions

I was away. And now I am back
All whom I saw are in danger
I am told I am a wanted.
Torture awaits me.

Here under darkness I move
That shining start north is Manaka
Those are Southern Cross, due south
I keep then to my right and left and I'm Right

I am caged in insecurity
I feel the net closing
The blood hounds are on my tracks
I feel I am going to die tonight.

1980

Not a Silent Night

Distant drums thud through the night
Their rhythmic beats keep me awake
I try to sleep, but the beat goes on
I am awake, and awake I stay, the drums they beat.

The drums they boom, they thud they clang
They double, they triple, and then there is a solo boom
People are jiving, for sure, to the beating of cow-hide drums
They dance to the pulsating beat of the drums.

The car purrs through the night
The drums beat nonstop through the night
The voices shout in unison
The drummers are hard at work

Fragments of voices drift through the night
There are people walking about at night
I hear men drunkenly singing out of tune
Dogs barking; drums are thudding.

Cocks crow, birds twitter
It is morning
Dogs bark, drums are still beating
It is dawn, it is day.

30 May 1982

A Tribute to Morula Tree

Remnant from the great past
Sentinel over forest vast
Huge, impressive and elephantine
Is the lonely morula, a tree of divinity.

It is the only remaining tree here
Clean and hard is the ground around it.
It is a source of refuge from the hot sun
It has a million stories to tell.

Late summer, early autumn, is morula fruit time
Cream round berries cover the ground
The tangy aroma hangs in the air
Just for weeks it is there, then gone till next time

Goats and calves munch the fruit
And later, like elephants, get drunk.
Men collect it for their women
To brew the delicious morula beer.

Morula is a sacred tree
Only cut during winter
Its grey bark bleeds real blood.
Its wood is the favourite medium for the Sculptors

1990

The Karoo – Again

I am travelling through the Karoo, again
This is my first journey, as free person, not chained.
I journey down to the Cape of storms, on my own.
This is still the Karoo, vast, dry, scantily covered by dwarf bushes

Horrible thoughts haunt my mind, pinch my heart,
I am traversing this wasteland.
I once passed here, by road, chained,
Now I pass by rail, bored, but free.

I glide through the Karoo
And, with every triple-wheel-beat on rail
I suppress a shout, I swallow a lump

I am choked by the vast emptiness of the Karoo.

One day I will fly to Cape Town
And view the Karoo below, from the window
Of a jumbo jet up in the sky
Yes, I am going to fly to Cape Town.

1982

Just The Karoo – A Place

This is the Karoo
Land of the shrub and sheep
A cluster of dark green trees
Is a beacon of human existence

This is the Karoo
Where sheep look like ant heaps
And ant heaps look like sheep
And the nights are broad and full of bright stars.

This is the Karoo
Somewhere at some distance towers a langsteel-garing-boom
At some place a rusted windmill stands still
And near it also, stands a cracked reservoir, its fittings missing.

A lonely gravel road stretches deep into the wilderness
A long straight road broken where it dips into a gorge
Then stretches far into infinity towards the distant blue
mountains.
This is the arid land of the cactus and the tamma melon.

1982

Easter Monday Morning

Silence rules in the stony place of sadness
We lie in rows wrapped in stinking grey blankets
We wriggle, we toss, we turn, we groan
We are in Limbo

Sparrows twitter, doves coo, and sea gulls are mewing
As they swing freely in the wind
We hear them all but see none
We are locked up.

It is Easter Monday morning by the calendar
It is a holiday for the wardens and,
We take a break from the soul breaking
Monotony of loading and of crushing stones.

The distant murmur of the sea
Fills the morning silence of the Island
Replaces the whining sound of the night winds
I am awake, in the stony place of sadness.

1973

The Red Sun

I saw the red sun setting
I watched it sinking through the trees fast
There was a red fire where it sank

The red sun sank, red, ebullient, translucent.
It reminded me of a sweet I once ate as a child
I desired to eat that sun,
It sank and darkness came.

I saw the round red sun setting
Dark moonless night came
Dreams haunted me
I saw myself running to stop the red sun from setting.

6 February 1982

Winter Nights

Winter nights were long and cold
Strong winds battered the bastion of oppression
The air was damp, fetid and mouldy
Our minds were working in overdrive.

The foghorn bellowed ceaselessly throughout the night
It bellowed intermittently
It resurrected dreadful monsters from the depth of the ocean
It bellowed from beneath your hard pillow.

In gusts white thick mist rushed past
By florescent security lights the fence was distorted
Monsters and ghosts flew past the barred windows.
Foghorn, mist and wind fought through the night,

You long for sleep
You are awake but stay silent
The foghorn is king of the night
It bellows then quietens and bellows again
Quiet bellowing and quiet again.

A Misty Day

There is no sun today
All space around is encapsulated is whirling grey.
Mist billows like smoke from a veld fire
It twirls and races eastwards.

A stealthy rain is in the mist
It weighs heavily on our canvas jackets
Our lips taste salty, our noses leak
Our stomachs shudder to generate heat.

A sighing sound is heard
As shells and pebbles ashore are washed
A thud is heard as waves hit protruding rocks
The mist is pervaded by a cacophony of sea gull cries.

This mist is going to last the whole day
This mist is omnipresent.
It distorts tree-lines into impregnable black walls
It induces a fearsome claustrophobia.

The fog horn continues to bellow,
And empty its warning into the vast firmament.
Its sound echoes through the moving mist.
The faint cold moon-like sun helplessly tries to peep.

The cold misty day ending
The night will be long and cold
The blanket will be clingy and heavy
And the fog horn will drive all sleep away.

Robben Islanders Unknown To Our Land

No one knows them

Except

Police station reception records

Low and High court records

The hearts of their beloved once

And

Reception Register at Robben Island Maximum Prison

And

Robben Island Prison political community into which they
were assimilated.

Huge security police sedans cruised through the night

Clandestinely and, ghost-like they arrested people:

Social activists, entertainers, sports administrators, teachers
and men of cloth

Terrorists

They were all branded. They were tortured, forced they were

To admit crimes they never committed.

Fear gripped black townships of the platteland dorpias
‘Have you heard? So and so has been picked up.’
Fear, cold fear of arrests the once tranquil areas in thrall it had.

From Steynsburg to Middleburg,
From Middleburg to Molteno,
From Dodrecht to the sleepy mountains of Indwe
From Indwe to the rolling farmlands of Elliot,
From Elliot up to the windy mountains of Barkly East,
Into Sterkspruit and Lady Grey it was the same whisper:
‘Have you heard? So and so has been picked up.’

Painful and confusing it was:
Is it real or a dream?
Confrontation with peer at a petrol station was politics
A text from a pulpit on a Sunday was seditious
A public praise to an African leader was incitement
A history lesson in class was sabotage.

Cases were conducted at a breakneck speed
Sometimes held in camera, sometimes at night
Heavy prison sentences were meted out
And hundreds of people were sentenced
For conspiracy, sabotage, incitement and attempted murder.

And
On Robben Island they landed
And

Their memories were recited by their interrogators:
Names and places they never heard,
And yet they were sentenced for that.

These are men the outside world came to know about
While on Robben Island.

These are men that our land never knew about
And yet, were locked up in Robben Island
These are the men who never returned home
An inland island, Ilinge township
And the world forgot about them
And South Africa never knew about them.

21 April 1988

Monologue Persona 1

Luister en glo my

Dis die waarheid wat ek jou gaan se

My father was a fisherman

Hy het diep in ocean gaan vis vang

Hy het sy company ge own

Maar dis nie weer daar nie

Die grand monopoly het hom geswallow

Toe sterwe hy so arm soos niks.

My ma het gastruggle

'She was a fine figure of a women' soos Dickens gese het.

My ma het gestruggle om my by die skool te hou

'Education is key to good life' sy het altyd gese

'Maar hoe leer ek as ek honger is en kaal voet skool toe gaan,'
retork ek.

'Word bedragsaam, my kind. Be Patient, my son.'

Maar ek was hastig vir high flying life

Toe doen ek crimes. The law caught up with me.

My ma died with a smile on her face
But with a gaping wound in her heart
She mumbled my name before she expired, they say
May her soul rest in peace, my mother
I still miss her this day, this time
I am the State President's guest soon now now
Metal gates and doors are opened and closed on

Nou hies ek eh regte skollie
Sonne huis sonne pa sonne ma sonne iets
Mya gal het my gelaai, but,
The right boys with their open coupes
Have swept her away
Once a high flyer always a high flyer
By hook or by crook
Such is life, my Bro

Hier is ek nou dipe in die water
Ver van die city bright lights af.
Hulle se ek is a politikus
Ek wens ek was
Daar uit by Die Perle word ek a courier
En toe set hulle my up – incriminating doccies
'Djys nie weer a rampoker nie
Maa nou djys n regte terrorist' so se the Board.

Nou ja, voor my Damascus moment, soos ek se

Was ek a trunk wanderlaar gemaak
Ek was a Prisoner on the move
Roelandstraat, Bellville, Pollsmoor, dePaarl, Klien Drakenstein
Geen facility kon my lank hou nie.
To slaan hulle my met a bomb
Figuratively so, my Bro, a Bomb
Literally ek land op die eiland.

Luister soos ek djou serenade, My Bro
Ons chaisa hie ren ons chaisa daar
Die skollies en di tsotsis hul stoot mekaar
Dis die stof want waai
Daar onne in Ougadam
Hulle gee djou pap
Met a rou patat
Daar bo in De Pert se wereld

Djy skud djou kop
Djy dink eks mal
Maar ek se vir djou
Dis nie lekke nie
Die waarheid bly die waarheid:
Malay, Coolie, Kleurling
Bantoe, Poqo, Africanis
You are born to suffer.
Undated

Sun Set – A Painting

The sea is ablaze with colours of red
The sky is an archipelago of flaming clouds
The sky mirrors the sea, the sea is the mirror of the sky
The sun is setting

Silver-red burns everything

Phosphorescent vermilion is the firmament
The surface billows like a sea lion
Wavelets wriggle and splash a myriad of starlets.

A thin thread marks where the sky meets with the sea
Clouds are crocodiles, whales, dragons, cheese and wool.
They glow like red coals,
They are ablaze with cracks of red.

The sun drowns itself into the ocean.
It leaves shimmering rods of red on the surface
And it sends the last golden rays to the sky.
Darkness is approaching from the east.

A pheasant sings to its mate
A lonely sea gull eerily mews
Shades of red fade fast
Night has come

2 February 1980

Monologue Persona II

I long for days gone by
Bygones cannot be bygones
My father was a fisherman
For months he went fishing
When he returned
Happy days were back again.

My father played the guitar
My mother played the piano
I strummed the banjo
My sister sang the solo
My aunties and uncles danced
Those were happy days.

The fishing season fever gripped the community
Mother had a premonition it was a single trip
When my father gave his back to Kalk Bay
Robben Island, Dassen Island, Saldanah Bay.
The trawler went missing without a trace
That marked the end of a happy family.

My uncle gambled our property away
My mother chopped fish, scraped for a living
My sister disappeared like mist
Now she sighted there but nowhere found
I really miss my sister
I slipped out of the school system.

I tried to be a fisherman like my father
I joined the boats to run errands
The boats rocked and I got sea sick
In a dream I saw my father
Gasping for air in the raging cold Atlantic waters.

Here I am alone, moaning and crying

And then when the sun sets behind Table Mountain
And leaves me on the jetty
I look at moored boats
I seem to hear my father's voice saying:
Hold on my son, I am coming home.

They Hanged

One cloudy day we were at it again, breaking stones
We were at it again crushing stones
We were at it again pounding stones to grit
We were at it again, pushing wheelbarrows
We were at it again, shovelling sharp shards of slate stone
Were at it again, wielding heavy hammers.

Rows and rows of figures, humped,
Sat on cold flat stones
Holding a rubber ring in one hand,
Swinging a hammer up and down with the other hand,
Cleaving stones
Crushing stones.

In the background, a huge compressor ceaselessly droned,
A tall warden sauntered around, proud to be in charge of
Tens and tens of stone-breakers
And then a Dakota DC military plane landed
And the crushing of stones continued
And the compressor droned on.

And then, a convoy of vans and sedans entered the compound
A troop of officers, with staff in hand, alighted
Heels clicked. Salutes were made
The compressor whooshed and went silent
The hammers went quiet
Names were called out, and they came out.

Our compatriots were removed from our midst
They were loaded into vans, driven off from us
They were bundled into an aeroplane – an instrument of war –
By us was heard, climbing, bellowing like a slaughter ox.
It circled and circled and disappeared into the vast Atlantic sky
Months later, it was confirmed to us: they were hanged.

Hanged
Were
They
In
Pretoria
Buried
They
Were
In PRETORIA.

Earth Tremor

We were political prisoners in the hands of the enemy
We were charged for fighting the hegemony of the herrenvolk
We came from all walks of life, bound by the desire for freedom
We were not afraid of the oppressor, the oppressor feared us.

We were prepared to challenge any threat by the system posed
We endured physical torture
We withstood psychological manipulation
We challenged injustice

And yet, one night, we tasted fear as nature her anger
Unleashed ...
An earth tremor struck.
Prison foundation trembled and cement plaster tumbled.

Metal plumbing rattled. Asbestos gutter plummeted.

From the floor dust billowed
Firm earth shook. Prison bars rattled.
And then absolute quietness reigned
Another tremor came. And screams for help broke out.

Terror gripped all inhabitants as
Tremor of the earth continued to shake foundations
Warders were nowhere to be seen
Some kept shouting from the towers.

No sleep came that night as we narrated what we felt
When the first tremor hit
And what some did when the second tremor hit –
They rushed to the double locked doors
 Survival mode had kicked in.

For months about it we spoke
And many 'What ifs' by us were said
And like caged animals in a zoo
We wished not to die.

29 September 1976 at 20:03:33

Stone Breaking Work

Ah Yeep one two Ah Yeep ah one two
Thud! does hammer
Grrrrr goes drill
Hooha groans man

This is Robben Island hard labour
Crookedly twisted and bent are human figures
Huge sharp slate boulders are carved below sea level
Hauled out to the dressing area.

Pick axes go up and down
Sweat drenched clothes cling to the body
Work goes on like ants gathering food for winter
We worked like slaves all day

This was routine labour:
Stone breaking, stone crushing,
Stone chiselling, stone loading

Stone breaking work
Boulders chipped to slate
Slate pounded to grit
Grit ground to dust

All this happened while the enemy played psychological
games:

War frigates doing mock battles
Aging Shackleton war planes flying
High speed Impalas and Mirages fleeing past

All happened while we ignored that
But we crushed stones in Robben Island Prison

Kiwi Fever – Robben Island

A warder warned that a dangerous disease was coming
It was called Kiwi fever, bird-fever from Australia
No prisoner was going to escape it, he said
It is fever. It is dangerous. It is fatal.

It came. It felled us.
Like logs in a tinder-yard we lay
The hospital was filled to capacity
Communal cells served as field hospitals.

Humid, fetid air hung heavily in the cells
Those who recovered volunteered as care-givers
Sponging and washing the frail.
Each one saves one: fever for us all.

The weak were fed.
The weak were carried to the toilet
The strong slept in snatches
The strong worked endlessly.

Pills and pills popped:
Beserol and Dolorol, Streptomycin
And all Broad-spectrum antibiotic tablets
And the fever spread like wild veld-fire.

For weeks it attacked, for weeks we fell
And recovered. 'Go to work, get fresh air
Stay inside and get the fever.'
And then, it stopped. It was over.

But surprisingly, few succumbed to it
Less than ten prisoners died.
Miraculously we survived
The Kiwi Fever of the late 1960s.

Boer Poet

It happened on Robben Island Maximum Prison

He was tall and well built

He was a senior officer

Kommandant of Binneplaas Always shouting in Afrikaans

With a stentorian voice

He would impose his presence

Rumours were flying

A university drop-out he was

In an arrogant tone he would shout:

Ek stuur jou kwarrie toe

Waar jy groot klip kliep

Kliep klip Kleiner klip

Kleiner klippies fyn klip

Fyn klippies tot stof klip.

El Nino Sunset

The sun was setting
The rain was falling
It was a phenomenon of rare occurrence
Sunset and rain

Brass-bright glare shattered the firmament
While raindrops boiled and pattered
Snaky-glass water flowed
While the back-wet tar smoke
Straw-straight droplets pierced the earth-exploded

Huge black shadows tarpaulin-like covered
The mountains while sunshine lit the trees
It was phenomenon of rare occurrence
Dark shadows and green-lit trees
Sunset and rain

In the east, a full rainbow arched the sky
Bold and clear, transparently colourful on roof-tops
It was a phenomenon of rare occurrence
Sunset and rain, and the full, bold rainbow hovering
Against a greying-brown firmament
Raindrops exploding, water gushing, sun settling

Still it fell, still the invisible sun dominated
Still it soaked: no thunder, no wind, no hail
Still it fell, harder and faster yet gentle

Homeward-bound people walked through it
Late-shopping children dashed through it
Speeding cars whooshed through it
Still it fell, sunsets and rain
Darkness came, still it fell

The stubborn rainbow defied the night
It held itself up against the electric lights
The lights were horizontal, it, a vertical pillar
A broken pillar of rainbow at early night
It was a rainbow of rain of night
It was a phenomenon of rare occurrence
Rainbow and sunset and falling rain

The sun has set
The rainbow is gone
That was a phenomenon of rare occurrence
Sunset and rain
It is night
But the rain is still falling
Gently dropping from the dark sky
Far, far away lightning zig-zags repeatedly
Lighting the sky momentarily white
Huge clouds balance of white sheet
And darkness again

The night has come
The rainbow is gone
It was a phenomenon of rare occurrence
Sunset and rain

Still the rain falls
Thunder rumbles far
This is a phenomenon of rare occurrence
An incessant rain fell deep into the fearful night

6 December 1997

Cosmos Flowers

The autumn
morning was misty and hazy
the road
to the eastern cape was long
the free state landscape was great
and to the left and to right were
rows and rows of beautiful cosmos flowers stretching far away

My car responded well
It cruised along the long long road to Rode
It cruised to the winding hazardous roads of eastern cape

The straight undulating free state
Roads beckoned
The spitz kopjes studded the land
Whilst the flat-topped mountains merged with hazy firmament
Huge cumulus autumn clouds forced their way to the sky

I had to guard against the long road mesmerisation
never you mind I have company
And
The hazy autumn weather was soothing
And
The beautiful cosmos
Wild cosmos flowers adorned the labyrinth
Of flat-land cosmos
Cosmos beautiful cosmos flowers a world of their own
Clearly colourful along the national road
Maroon red pink purple and white cosmos flowers nearby
But lines hazy lines of cosmos stretching far away
Into the by-ways
And farm-roads
Cosmos wild cosmos flowers adorning the land
And
My long driving to the charming hilly dreamland of the eastern
cape
In the company of beautiful cosmos of the open veldt.

9 April 2009

The Invaders

A new kind of bird has invaded us
It is voracious it strips plants naked

Stealthily it eats paw-paw on the lee side
Fooling you to watch a swollen gourd, yet empty in the inside
Touch it, it melts in your hand
That is the invading bird for you

Not that I'm aves-xenophobic
But
This cacophony of foreign birds sound
Morning and night

Leaves me uncomfortable
Where have all known birds-sounds gone to?

I long for the tswere sparrow sound on an early autumn morning
I long for mokuru dove sound on a monotonous summer day
I long for the tjetjetjerre sound ok kgaka guinea fowl

Or

The kwe sound of the lonely mokowe

Not these scary eerie haunting sounds of unknown birds

Some sound like a tiny chameleon trying to scare its attacker

Others like a person calling for help from a deep gorge

Some like a compressor releasing air

And what about black birds which sound like sea gulls in the
inland?

And what about these charcoal birds perching themselves
defiantly rooftops?

and what about these which wail in the moonless night?

Birds not owls wailing in moonless night?

I am scared

I am worried

I feel rootless

Where have all my childhood birds

Gone to?

I long for a walk in the veldt with

The yellow weaver busy at work

Sparrow cantering about

Dove coo cooing.

28 April 2009

The Road

I have stood here several times
Never able to cross this gaping chasm
I have stood here several times
Always envying those green fields and valleys deep
Is it real? Is it a Dream?

As I struggle on, I see signs known to me
And beacons beckon me to come
Flickering lights guide me night
And by day I follow known routes

The road twists and turns, and is swallowed
By huge, dark and tall trees, possibly a river a ravine deep
Somewhere up the hill it is red like raw meat
Yet straight like a loaf of bread yes the road

One day, maybe, I shall find a way
Around the gaping chasm
I shall by-pass it and look behind at it
And never look back again

25 July 1998

Full Moon

A full moon is staring at me
Through my door, through the security bars
It is a full moon
Round, bright, cold and translucent

The moon is full
Rotund, regal, lonely and big
Yet, and yet all around
Artificial lights compete with Mother Moon

Yellow electric lights splash thin needles
Town and city lights flicker-flicker fast
Small stars, real stars horned and thorned
Attempt to establish their presence

The moon is full
The moon moves
Undetected yet rising
Up, up, up the Full Moon

At midnight it will be high
Still regal and majestic
If it meets the clouds
They'll honour it with a colourful halo

The moon is Full
The moon rises
The moon is bright
Sending a dim solid halo.

12.11.00

Violators 1

Going, Going, Gone

This beautiful mountain scenery will soon be gone

Oh this hungry stone eaters!

This beautiful tree-bedecked mountain

Will soon be bone-bare-stripped white by these hungry miners

Our mountain, our heritage will soon be gone

Our trees; morula, mmilo, moumo le moshabele

Huge and majestic will all be gone

Gone, forever extinct, destroyed by greed

Who permitted these violators to mine mountains?

Who ever permitted such a crime to be perpetrated?

Yes gone is our beauty

Gone is our heritage

Gone is our soul

Creative zone 25 October 2001

School-Girl Mother

I see her every week-day
Dressed in her school-clothes black and white
With a baby on her back
And a bag in both hands
A school-bag in one
Any baby-clothes bag in the other
She is school-girl mother

With a frown on her forehead
Without a smile on her lips
She slouches on in shiny patent shoes
Sometimes she puts her bags down
Fixes the huge towel that binds the baby
Onto her back
She obscenely bends to settle the baby
Then lifts the bags in both her hands
And proceeds to the baby-minder

In front of her are her age-group
Carefree and gibbering, laughing
And talking, walking with light yet short
Steps in gyms and scholar shoes
They talk, joke laugh oblivious of
The school-girl mother or rather
Minding their own business

This is a countrywide issue
School-girl mothers
Carrying babies on the backs
Some are sophisticated they push
Prams, books and baby in prams
They are school-girl mothers!

20 October 1997

Time Served

A clarion call was made
And young and brave we come
To take up arms in a revolution
To bring an end to oppression
And before even we started
The adversary his move had made
In droves we were rounded
And in prison we got impounded

For fifteen years
On the Island I was chained
Time stood still years rolled by
Contourless landscape I lived in
Blurred and languid fifteen years served I
Grotesquely by merciless mist of time
My life was ensnared.

Time stood still while
We were chewed and churned
By our captors.
Time stood still
Today like yesterday
Yesterday like tomorrow became
And all the days of the year were the same
And the world turned on its axis
And the wheel of time revolved.

Leaders after were toppled
Nkrumah, Ben Bella and Sekou Toure
We on our side
While others were on the oppressor's side.
Man landed on the Moon
Plastic replaced brown paper
I drilled rocks, blasted them bare handed
Dust billowed and mixed with mist
From the raging Atlantic
And I served Fifteen years on Robben Island.

Time Blurred Time

In the hands of you adversary
Time loses its meaning
It is static
Today a moment ago is like yesterday
Time is foggy, misty and contourless
The future is a vague yet rosy expectation

Thud thud thud thud
The sound of a heavy hammer
Is as regular as piston
Labour is rhythmic
It follows the pace of a
Memory of work done at own volition

Doom Doomdoom Doom Doomdoom
Up and down goes small hammer
Chips and splinter, shard sharp fly
Down and up goes that hammer
The pounding monotonously proceeds
The warder is on his regular beat.

Young boorish and bored
With a revolver on his hip
A back-veld youngster
Is included to torture
Abuse and pester
Human much much older than him.

He was watchful in the morning
We were energetic on arrival
He is bored, we slow down
Thud thudthud thud thudthud
Boom boomboom boom boomboom
Sound and thought and daydream rolled in one.

A Rainy Morning Indoors

There is a subdued buzz around
No team has gone out to work
That horrible winter weather is back
Fifty souls are locked in the cement cubicle

No sun will shine today
Sea gulls mew outside
Inmates cough intermittently
The wind howls and blows in gust

Rain-clouds race eastwards
Mist turns and twists among trees
Otherwise all is quiet, quiet
No car sound, no dog barks, no baby cries

It is like that
It has been like that
But it won't be like that forever
Freedom will come our way

The papers said it
The boys are doing it
Support is coming
We shall be free when they return.

Exhumation – Up Close

His neck got broken when he was hanged
Further broken when his body into a coffin was
Forced
At exhumation years after the crown of his head
First appeared shaped like a boat-shoe
The crown was an oval object never seen like that before
except by the tormentors
Who had always pored over victims head from turrets and
catwalks above
Yes he lay in the dark grave
His skull was white in the dark hole

Scrap scrap went the mini trowel
And flip flop went the tiny brush
The collarbone and then the ball and socket
And then the ribs cervix, femur knee cap
The femur and tibular and then the
Phalanges got exposed white as a white bone would be
And then a full bent skeleton was exposed!

It was him once the tallest man on Robben Island prison
Once the man with no sandal size

As the morning mist grotesquely twisted
And dissipated
And the February sun weakly rose over the
Blurry Meintjieskop and the Union Building,
Revolutionaries young and Veterans old sang
For the resurrection of their heroes

The city of Pretoria was blanketed by a heavy mist
Reminiscent of Robben Island
Where our heroes had been stolen.

For Four Decades and three years
In graves unknown to the relatives
The heroes lay.

Exhumation – Closure

We watched the act of exhumation
With sadness in our hearts
In gloved hands they deftly worked
Never a word uttered.

Slowly and patiently the soil they scooped out
And on a clean tarpaulin they laid it
Indeed the soil from the grave was sacred
And those interred were heroes

In murmurs and whispers we elders spoke
In song and dance the young ones charged
And in a sombre mood we all sang
Senzeni na eAfrika Senzeni na eAfrika
From Rebecca Street Cemetery

24 February 2010

Unveiling Of A Tombstone

Tribute to Albert Nontasi Shiweni

Greeting to the House of Phalo

Greetings to the House of Bawo

Here I stand to testify

How the odds defy.

Here is stand to tell. How we survived hell

I stand to tell tales of torture

To tell how we faced the vagaries of nature

All this was a long time ago

It happened a long time ago

We were serving sentences on Robben Island.

A military plane touched down to land

It was a twin turbo engine Dakota.

They came for crayfish-catching quota

 We assumed falsely.

It landed as it usually did

 And then roared

Into the sky with our compatriots
Left us guarded by idiots

One day we heard
They had been hanged
In Pretoria

This was very sad
and
This was a long time ago
but
This seems it happened yesterday

Time passed
Rulers changed
Atrocities were investigated
And then
Forty-three years later
They were exhumed
From Rebecca Street Cemetery.

We were there in the Cemetery
We sang: Senzeni na eAfrika
Senzeni na eAfrika
That was a long time ago
In Pretoria

And now after a long time we unveil his Tombstone

Far away from Robben Island
Where he was taken
And far away from Pretoria
Where he was hanged and buried.
And in Comfimvaba
The remains were reburied

I was there when the remains were exhumed
On 24 February 2010
In Pretoria Rebecca Street Cemetery
There we sang Senzeni na eAfrika
That was a very long time ago.
I am here now after a very very long time
I am here in Cofimvaba
To unveil his Tombstone
Very far from Robben Island
And very far from Pretoria
And I still singing
Senzeni na eAfrika
Senzeni na eAfrika
Senzeni na eAfrika

The landing strip on Robben Island
Is neglected and abandoned
You will say I am senile when I point it to you
It was a landing strip
The Dakota aeroplane is retired in Swartkops.
Pretoria

All this was a long time ago
Shiweni was taken from Robben Island

Gently the bodies of the victims were reached
and

By midday the process ended amidst tears and
sorrow.

The final removal of the remains
Was to the Investigating team left.

Emotionally drained the Veterans commiserated
while the young revolutionaries

Chanted ALUTA CONTINUA!

Aluta Continua! Aluta Continua!

*24 February 2010
Rebecca Street Cemetery
Pretoria West*

Voices

Shreds of flitting conversations
Are strewn about the night as
Reveller dash from rowdy party
To another such heady party

We are free
Free to go anywhere
Any time to talk any how
To drink dance and doze

This is not the life envisaged
When revolutionaries sacrificed
Their youth for the liberation
Of a country from foreign domination

Real prosperity thrives when there is time
To work and time to rest and no party time
Yet our new found liberty
Seems to be for a new privileged minority

The majority starves
The minority rolls
On the lap of luxury again
The majority is in a state of penury
The public railway network exists no more
A private railway carries minerals to the port
Curious inland urchins wonder at the long
Goods train that endlessly rattles on

Minerals exported: Gold, silver, platinum
Coal, Bauxite, copper, iron chromium.
Diamond, oil, manganese, vanadium
All belong to a minority for a millenium

A stranger robbed us of our land
While we greeted him by hand
And with a smile your hand he grabbed
Serve me and be rich he whispered

Huge masses of humanity
Marginalised remains
Few individuals amass
Chucks of resources

Rich arable land
Is desecrated
Heaps of rich red soil
Excavated in search of minerals

Afforestation reigns supreme
Ploughfields turned to sport
Quad bikes and land rovers
Raise dust where once thrived sunflowers

It is the scent of money
That befuddled the mind
To sink into selective amnesia
And forget the oath to serve

We speak in tattered voices like
From a passing car cruising through
The turbulent night and the day will rise to
A voiceless people texting fake news

No this is not what the
Revolutionaries fought for.
But who blunted and numbed them?
The love for Money did.

The Call Of Azania

A clarion call has sounded
Calling on all young and old
To take arms where
African heroes left them
To fight and free Azania

We answered Azania here we come
To dislodge every square inch of Africa
From the settlers Yes they
Came and we welcomed them
Assuming they were stranded humans
Unbeknownst to us settlers were they

Come fight and free Azania
And wrench the riches of Mother Africa
And feed her wretched children
Beware
African child
Fight for what is yours

Dislodge every square inch of Africa
From the clutches of the settlers
They Came from Europe and settled
In Africa and in Africa they are still settlers

The riches of Azania belong
To the children of Africa
Remember Africa is for Africans
Azania is for Africans
Africans for Humanity
Humanity for God
As a settler
Is a settler
Is a settler

The riches of Azania
Shall be exploited by Africans
Extracted by Africans
Processed by Africans
Priced by Africans
And sold to the world by Africans

Rise the giant of Azania rise
Rule the leaders of Azania Rule
Work Tirelessly Azania work
Clothe the children clothe
Feed the children feed
Protect the children protect

Respect the women of Azania respect

Sing Africa sing

Serve Africa

Serve Azania

By The Coast

By the coast I shall walk on my own
Before I am forever struck by blindness
That might lead me into madness
Barefooted the conch I'll crunch
And dry shale shall my toes chafe
Myself shall on damp sand lie

These pleasantries I was denied
When a prisoner I was detained
On notorious Robben Island
And now permission to land
There in time I must seek
In days equaling a week

I will land there with my itinerary
And walk about as a Visionary
And visit the coast east of the abode
Where Robert Sobukwe alone
Stayed as a Prisoner
By a Special Law.

I want to visit the lighthouse
That was out of bounds
To seek the fog horn station
That banished all sleep
And visit the aerodrome
Where a military Dakota aeroplane landed
To take the heroes of Ntlonze War of
Liberation To be hanged
In Pretoria

Yes By the coast I'm going to
Stand and face the raging Atlantic
Ocean and stare at the endless
Vast sea view of the horizon
As I did when building
Dykes to stem the tide
To reclaim land
So as to mine the
Bluestone that renewed
The settlement for the
Guards to live in comfort
While I slept on the wet
Cement floor that was
Dried by the heat from
My cold shivering body.
By the coast facing Cape Town
I will sit as never allowed
And watch Table Mountain as it

Changes it colours throughout the day
I will sit and stare but not steal
A glance as in the dark days
Of Oppression

I will sit by the coast and wait for sunset
Which I never witnessed in My fifteen-year
Stay and also wake up to watch the sunrise
From some vantage point
Whenever I go I watch sunrise
And also smell the fresh fragrance of sunrise

I will return home
On a clear day
To view the vast expansive
Majestic Ocean from the sky
And lose myself in the infinite space
As northbound we shall fly
Back to the places where I Grew up and
Gambolled over rocks and puddles
Where I shall resign
Myself ere I am
Enfolded by blindness
Before I soar to the Unknown

To A Dead Snake

Pity on you who crawls on her belly.
Immobile and grotesquely out-of-shape.
A compressed rubber outsole-boot
Cut short your graceful slither life.
With unprovoked anger man crashed
Your belly never giving you a chance
To strike back against him, in self-defence.
His ever-watchful eye spotted you

Your glistening sheen harnessed
From the low western sun
And your silent slithered motion betrayed you.
He continued the war declared in the garden
of eden
They called it the fall of man
You were just a messenger caught
In the crossfire of a war:
Dispossession
versus Repossession
Creator versus creature

Now you poor Snake lie
Lifeless in the road.
Your killer had no decency to bury you
Or throw you in the bush
For others to feed on you
To maintain the food chain

Staying Awake

It is 3 o'clock in the morning
And the world is asleep
Except for a lonely car that purrs
Along the empty dark street
With its headless masts of
Erstwhile tall streetlight;
Sleep is just not there
I wonder where it has gone to.

When I lose my temper
And rant like a mad man
At least I know where to find it:
(Because none picks up lost temper)
In my sober self.
But when I lose my sleep
I know I will never find it.
It is vanished for good.

Horrible thoughts
Haunt my awakened self
Filling me with myriads of
Unfulfilled and lost treasures
And bank accounts in the red
And missed opportunities
Which are but thoughts
Sans implementations

Unpublished poems and treatise
Lie trapped in discs
Or turn yellow with age.

'The world is an oyster for you
To take', but what is an oyster?
How does one catch an oyster?

Yesterday I saw a mad young man
Walking the township street with an
Aeroplane model perhaps he wanted
To be a pilot when he was young

I wanted to be a farmer when I was young
But ended on misty Robben Island because
I attempted to wrestle the land
From the settlers

Now I cannot sleep
My lean ration of sleep
Is depleted at 3 o'clock everyday

At 3 o'clock every morning
When the world is
Asleep
I am wide awake

I am sleep-deprived
Like on Robben Island
When the fog horn
Incessantly
Tore my sleep to
Shreds
And left me
To the wailing sound
Of a single sea gull
That was left behind
When migration to the
North occurred.

All this was a long time ago
Now at 3 o'clock
I am still awake

The Stench

A Stench of drying
Flotsam spewed by
A clogged sewerage pipe
Chokes the dank air

My chest burns
I expectorate a dry cough
My head aches
As I inhale crude foul air

There was a downpour last night
Lawns are bedecked with
Human excreta that
Should have ended
At the waste water treatment plant
Carried there by a mega capacity pipe

Smell, Stench, offensive odor
Hangs in the aftermath of
Good summer rainfall
There is no one with skill
The infrastructure to
Maintain
Thousands are idle at home
Unemployed

I long for the day
When the media
Shall parade the
Last ten young persons
To be absorbed in a
Meaningful labour market

A Fable

Once upon a time
In a place somewhere in Africa
A ruler brought
All brilliant brains together
To chart a strategy
To create jobs for all
Able bodied people.

The brilliant minds
Created respectful jobs for
All

The light shone day and night
All young people went to work
Everyone became someone's keeper
The citizens serviced the country
The shrills of playing children filled the air
On Sundays people flocked to church
The country prospered

Prosperity bred contentment
Contentment made Happy people
Happy people made a Happy nation
Colourful carnivals, paraded the grounds
Choreography, traditional dancing,
Music and mirth filled the air.

Drums were beaten non-stop
They beat the drums
The drums they boomed
The boom the air it filled

Local bread was baked
Scientists freed energy they milked
From the sunlight
Water they siphoned from morning dew
More energy from lightning they trapped
And petrol from dung they made

Yonder mountains with fruits were loaded
Rivers flowed with clean water not sewage
Parks were made safer
Night hosted parties
Road rules were honoured by all
Students drank bottled water not liquor
Men protected and loved women
Fathers told their sons stories of chivalry
Mothers to daughters secrets of motherhood told

The ruler was never seen in public
The emissaries kept him busy
Bringing sages him to counsel
Messengers send out
Subjects to brief on progress
Thus far made

Everybody lived happily Ever after.

Elegy On Demise Of Unknown Prisoner

Oh listen my people
To the story about a lonely man
Lonely and sick among strangers he lay
Strangers who him no ill will bore
Yet them with suspicion viewed

Expressionless stared he at barred window
Hazy with misty bleak morning
His raspy belaboured rhythmic breathing
Like air escaping from miniscule holes
A narrow space between bunks

This man in prison hospital
To no norm conformed
Unto himself the man the law became
Even in sickness he stayed the same
But his mate with care and concern
His stubbornness deterrent never were

The orderly his medication brought
Flatly it he refused to take
Childlike is how he ate
Dreamlike is how he stayed
Sleep he avoided
His head he always bowed

He was known only by his clan name
His family has status and fame
He narrated when still could talk
Now he is so weak he cannot walk
His last wish is to be buried
In an enclosure of ngconcolo Reed

He barked his objections at assistance.
With him nothing was wrong in any instance
To the bathroom he crawled.
On the floor he lay contorted
He blamed everybody for cruelty
He accused others of insanity

He sighed among a cacophony of snores
The insomnia was caused by bedsores
Yet no chisel-calloused hand
With methylate-scented band
His sores would bind
His teeth always he would grind

About distant vast plains
He hummed sad refrains
By their names the oxen he called
Down the corridor his voice tumbled
His body shook as with fever
And then he went quiet for ever

With the strength of a warrior
He stood staggering like a sailor
Calling himself by Matuba
The great age-group regiment
That conquered the escarpment
In the days of Tintibane Ruler of the Plains
He gyrated and shouted:
'I am on my way to the world unknown
The clouds are calling me now
The stars will lead me with their soft light
Come dark night
Hide me in your warm
Folds against the scheming cold
Hide me from my enemies
As I traverse the thorn-fields of
The pricking Makgalo trees
I am going to meet my mates
My commander, Thunder, to lead me
To the insurmountable heights

The dark promontory on the horizon
Is the beacon to my destination
That red winding road is leading me home
To the right of that Basotho-hatlike dome
I shall pass and into gorge I will perish
And from prying eyes vanish

Far away I am soaring
Southward bound my way leads
My sandals I have fastened tight.
And the journey they are right
The warriors are beckoning
They see me coming'
He shut his eyes
His breathing became almost
Unnoticeable
His lips said a mantra
His hand he tried to raise
Limply on the bed it fell
All went quiet
Save for the seagulls
That gave that eerie song
So unlike the soothing cooing doves at home

Out of the ward wheeled was he
The door of no return opened and shut
Gone from us is he
Who was next we never could guess
To enter that door and forever be gone

This man of death afraid never was he
The route to eternal rest he saw
Death to him was an arduous journey
Rest he was to get among his peers
He freed himself from prison shackles
On the way to eternity he mumbled a mantra

Hard Labour On Robben Island

First day of hard labour
Was a precursor of prison life
In the hands of the oppressor
The July weather was hostile
And the warders were sadistic
Shouting and swearing
Like morons goading stubborn mules.

Our time we took
The situation to study
The first task was easy
We used pick and shovel
To dig and pile lime.
Easier said than done.

Up and down went the picks
Like in a World War 2 movie
Shovel the lime into a heap
Pick and dig again

Shovel the lime and white dust flies
Lands on your head eyes clothes
We looked like ghosts
Pick shovel
Shovel pick
Till the day is done
Back to the compound we trudge
Tired and blistered
You wash
Soap refuses to lather
Such was the water

Night without dreams comes
It's morning
And back to the lime mine we troop

Blistered hands peel off
Back hooped like prehistoric
Creatures and warder commenting
Sarcastically
'Kyk hoe loop hulle soos outas
Hulle buig soos ou hout'

We reach the lime quarry Again we start
Pick shovel
Shovel pick
A rhythm evolves
We hum Shosholoza

The work song like slaves of yore
We sang slowly
We worked slowly

Lunchtime is.
And we queue
Ration of maize kernels
And a weak white beverage
Never tasted before is served
We lay in positions like dead soldiers
Limb and joint tired
Signal sounded up we stood
And to the lime pit we sauntered
Pick and shovel once again
Death choking dust billowing
The energy is sapped
The speed is slowed

Lock up time
We are all in the cells
Not a single person remains outside
Everybody is inside

A lone voice is heard
From watchtower one
And another
From two
And another

From three
And another
From four
And then quietness
The night had come

And then
The thudding
And moaning
Of the ocean
And the distant purring
Of fishing boats
And the
Quietness
Except for the
Wailing sound of
Seagulls

You are left to
Your thoughts:
Longing
Hope
Regret
God
Self

Into sleep
Sinks sore
Body

Spare Diet

The weak sun shot a beam of light
Through the grey morning mist
And in a flash disappeared
At speed of a camera shutter
The bars came and went
They were on the concrete floor

On the floor laid I
With my back to the wall close
I tried the bars to reach
No they were no longer on the floor
They were fixed on the wall like always

Three-day-spare-diet punishment
Famished and hungry me left
My empty stomach its rumblings squelch
My body odour dream I eat bars
Not prison bars but chocolate bars

Measured boot-beat comes my way
A contorted peak-cap face peeps
It orders me down to sit
I am weak and remain supine
The boot-bat slowly fades down the corridor
I fear he may return with a troop of torturers

Sketches

Canton 1: Flotsam And Jetsam

The sea is surfeit with it
It's Flotsam and jetsam
Dirt from the Ocean
Spewed by the sea
And lying on the coast

The most sought after on Robben Island.
Is the marine ropes
Colourful but strong
Into strands is separated
Then transformed into
Anything imagined

Laces belts and bags
Artistry in its best
The power of imagination par excellence

Canton 2: Earth Tremor 1967

All was quiet
Everything went still
As usual
Preparations for sleep were made

And it came
The thudding sea
Foundations shook
Dust filled the cell.
And prison bars rattled

Cold water boiled water in the sink
And then quietness
It started again
Prison floor shook
Men screamed for help
But no help came

It was indeed an earthquake
Of tremendous magnitude
It was confirmed the following day
We were lucky
No prison building collapsed
And no prisoners got hurt

That was the earthquake
In the Western Cape

We were prisoners on
Robben Island
The year was 1967

Fear suppressed has a metallic taste
That is what we confirmed
As we narrated the
Reaction of the fateful night.
Prison breakfast had a bland taste
We directed our anger at authorities
For being callous and unconcerned.

Canton 3: A Young Warder Died

These inexperienced warders
Like prisoners they were treated
Shouted at
Ordered to beat common law offenders
Encourage to earn their stripes
From a number of successful cases
Against prisoners

One young warder had enough
He blew himself up with a
Metford rifle .303
He placed the muzzle
Beneath his shoulder blade
Pulled the trigger
And zing went the bullet
Which exited through his neck

A coloured prisoner
Commiserated
'Hoe Kan so a Klein
Lanie homself last sterwe
Jislaaik Bang Zing gaan dit
Die Jong man sterwe
Nei man God genade
Dit mag nie so wees nie
Wat van sy ouers?

Ek se djou my broe
Lewe is valuable
Of Wit Swart Poqo Kumanis
Lewe is Lewe my brother'
So Commiserated
A common law offender
About a young warder
Who committed suicide
With a service high power rifle
On Robben Island

The Political Prisoners protested
Against being guarded
By armed warders

On Robben Island all Prisoners
Were Black
All warders were white and male

Canton 4: The Premier Is Dead

September sun was hot
Very hot indeed
We sweated as we uprooted
Eucalyptus trees
To make way for building
A corrugated structure
To avoid overcrowding.
The siren wailed
Dogs barked
At the handlers they tugged
Siren wailed and wailed
All work stopped

Prisoners escaped
No not on Robben Island
Fire no no fire
Then what
Nothing

Work proceeded
Till knock off time

At the compound we learned
The white premier is dead
Stabbed severally
Stabbed in the tight security parliament
Stabbed stabbed several times

There was subdued jubilance
Excitement was contained
Till we were on our own
We celebrated his death
The chief architect of
Apartheid

Explanatory notes and translations

1. A Summer Day

Robben Island was a prison for political prisoners during the apartheid era. Nelson Mandela, Robert Sobukwe, Govan Mbeki and other leaders of political organisations were incarcerated for years on the island, together with hundreds of members of their organisations. It is now a national heritage site.

2. Winterveldt

Winterveldt is an informal township that was incorporated into the Bophuthatswana homeland during the apartheid era.

Moiletswane and Shekunyaneng are townships with very small populations in North West province.

3. Return from Prison

'Chommies' is a slang word for friends.

4. Unveiling of a Tombstone

Aluta continua is Portuguese for 'the struggle continues'.

5. The Fugitive

Manaka is a Tswana word meaning horns.

6. The Karoo – Again

The Karoo is a semi-desert natural region in South Africa.

The Cape of storms – or Cape of Torrents – is the name given to the coast near Cape Town in the Western Cape, which experiences violent storms. The name was given to the seas by the first Portuguese explorers to round the Cape in the 1480s.

7. Just the Karoo – a Place

Langsteel is an Afrikaans word meaning long-stem.

The tsamma melon is found in central, western and southern Africa.

8. Monologue Persona 1

Roelandstraat, Bellville, Pollsmoor, dePaarl and Klien Drakenstein are prisons in South Africa.

9. Canton 2: Earth Tremor 1967

The earthquake's epicentre was in the Western Cape towns of Ceres, Wolseley and Tulbagh. The effects were felt far and wide.

10. Earth Tremor

Herrenvolk is an Afrikaans term meaning master race.

11. Stone Breaking Work

The title of the poem is a reference to labour done by prisoners on Robben Island.

12. Boer Poet

Kommandant means commander.

Binneplaas means courtyard.

Fyn klippies tot stof kap means to chop small stones into dust.

13. El Nino Sunset

The El Nino sunset was experienced by the poet during a 20 kilometre drive home.

14. Cosmos Flowers

Spitz kopjes are islands among grass plains.

15. Time Served

Nkrumah, Ben Bella and Sekou Toure are African political leaders.

Exhumation – up Close

Meintjieskop is a hill in Pretoria on which the Union Buildings were constructed. The latter is the administrative capital building of the Republic of South Africa, and also houses the offices of the president of South Africa.

16. Exhumation – Closure

Senzeni na eAfrika is a struggle song which was mostly sung during the apartheid era. In English, it means 'what did we do as Africans in this continent'.

17. Unveiling of a Tombstone

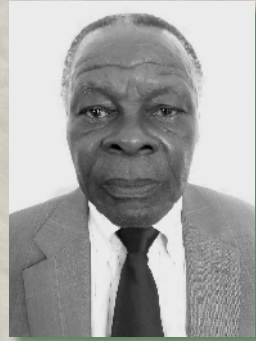
Albert Nontasi Shiwani was a freedom fighter and a member of the Pan African Congress from the Eastern Cape.

The House of Phalo refers to the kingdom which was led by King Phalo kaTshiwo, who was the king of the AmaXhosa nation from 1736 until his death in 1775.

Rebecca Street Cemetery is one of the oldest cemeteries in Pretoria.

NEVER LOOK BACK: A COLLECTION OF POEMS

Molefe Solomon Mabuse's political consciousness was stimulated by the harsh realities of apartheid, when he witnessed forced removals, the effects of betterment schemes and the banishment of traditional leaders. In the wake of the Sharpeville massacre, he joined Poqo, the underground military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress. After his arrest for participation in Poqo activities, he was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on Robben Island. This diverse collection of poems covers subjects ranging from the torture and humiliation experienced during imprisonment, to descriptions of sunsets and earthquakes, and tributes to marula trees.



Molefe Solomon Mabuse



military veterans

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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

ISBN 978-1-991248-02-2



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