

SONGS FROM THE EARTH

poems
by
Mxolisi Nyezwa



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For malcolm and ros

All the poems in this collection were written during the Creative Cultural Dialogue Residency, a three weeks Artists and Writers Residency programme at the Caversham Centre in Howick, KwaZulu-Natal, in 2009. The following poems have been published in my collection *Malikhanye* (Deep South, 2011), with thanks to Robert Berold: "Walking the earth", "To know you", "The road ahead", "Songs from the earth", "The sleepless world" and "The lessons of love". "Lidgetton" appeared in *Malikhanye* under the title "KZN village"; "The road ahead" and "A question about poetry" were combined into one revised poem in *Malikhanye*, while "I want to forget to breathe" is a revised version of "I forget to breathe" from *Malikhanye*.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the staff at the Caversham Centre and my Fellows at the Residency for providing the inspiration for these poems and Kobus Moolman for his contribution of encouragement, insight and editorial skills in the production of this book.

1. WALKING THE EARTH

i am walking the earth
like a man who has just awoken
like an idle boat drifting by
something less crystalline
than a distant star

i have been thinking of my life
as a man who is busy drowning
with no hope of martyrdom
or staying alive

all i can make of my country
is a sulphurous compound
a black room with two gigantic stars
as thoroughly silent as corpses

and during the many storms in my life
what happened?
what really happened?
during the nights
what did i really see?





2. THE STORY OF CAVERSHAM

one day i found a road
that led to caversham
in the gentle valley near howick
i found an endless jar
filled with a sea-shell
that reminded me of home

and during the long
heavy nights
i was alone and trembling
lost in a sky
without colour
or rain or smell or sun

i came to caversham
on a day i hardly
remember
maybe a wednesday
with flowers all standing
in a neat line

i found among the
hard stones
a soldier's coffin
among the silent paths
of caversham
a space with dancing leaves

and in the artist's workshop
someone told us gabi's story
one day she left
carrying a silver tin
and many prints

she left in
the mid-morning
or the midday
the sun shone
like the candles
in lidgetton

* Gabi refers to a South African artist, Gabisile Nkosi, who was murdered in May 2008.



3. MUSA

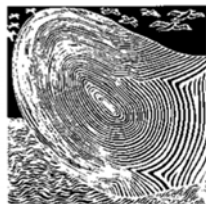
sometimes there is just us, nobody else
no bread, no language, nothing
sometimes we lose ourselves over nothing
haunted by a life that we never had



4. POEM ABOUT NEW BRIGHTON

when i was growing up
there were colourful smells
and isipingo trees in new brighton
from a very young age i learnt
the maddening taste of existence
i trusted no one
no happy establishments
no military shops, no lonely garden





5. HER HANDS

*Dedicated to Gabisile Nkosi, written after
visiting her house in Lidgetton, 04/02/09*

her hands are like two birds in the sky
her hands light a fire and tell a story
more beautiful than the sun

her hands have several wings
one hand is a wing for thunder
the other a wing for rain

i will whisper for my brother's hands
to heal and not to hurt
and not to kill



6. TO KNOW YOU

i want to know you like a flurry of white stones
like a father
or a mother
who keeps looking
and doesn't see
like a shovel
or a young forgotten rose
from a silent garden
like an ant
who sits and thinks
like a city
with no mayor

i want to know you like a piece of tiny existence
a grain
a mole
or a determined chanting
a woman with something to laugh about

I want to know you like a nameless cloth
a mansion
next to the sea
an alchemist of cutting words
but a god all the same
vulnerable
and small

i want to know you like a piece of joyous furniture
like a desk
or a swinging chair
like a simple flame
from one burnt-out house
to the next

i want to know you like the six acres of burning land
on a farm
like grass on a leaf
or leaf on grass
with a trillion veins

i want to find you in running water
the way the poor drink cholera
and tiny organisms
from the earth
which bring death
and despair

i want to know you like a man who lives alone
with no one
in a mountain
with weird instincts
with earth sounds
and with minerals

i want to know you as you are
in your simple dress
in your two shoes

i want to know you like a simple thing
some broken fracture of matter
a doll with no figure
a flurry of rocks
a valley of stones

i want to know you like sadness
sadness for things that go right
sadness for things that go wrong

to be there
and not to be there
in a hurry
like numbers
to be around
and present
like the sun

i want to see you in my pyjamas
and in my gowns
and slippers

i want to know everything about you
every mineral-infested valley
every famous death
every birth
dead or alive

i want to hear you in all my injunctions
and in my eternal confusion
to reach the whitest
snow

i want to see you in my eye's camera
and in my rain
and in my funeral
in my grass

which i smoke during the day
in all my poisoned liquor
which kills me
slowly
and slowly
every day

i want to know you like a woman of many beautiful lines
and wide seas
an animal
which seeks light
and dies instantly

i want to know you like a frightened man
like a comma
in a book
with no green shops
no drunken heroes
with three hundred smoking letters
with simple phrases

i want to know you like a woman of indeterminate curves
and simple sighs
and glorious angles
to eat you like bread

i want to know you like the vulnerable egg
of a female spider
a broken myth
a tiny legend

i want to know you like a simple town
with rolling hills
and inscrutable
dying dynasties
fuming insects
unforgettable
malls

i want to see you like my mother
like a sensitive shadow
like an orange
like a building
with fifty
doors

i want to know you like a place of colours
of pastels
which rise from a canvas
in glory
and confusion

i want to know you without anything on
no reason
no logic
no clothes
with voracious love
with faith
with haste
a woman of lust
and grieving appetites

i want to know you like a letter O
to fit perfectly
in a vase
for the babies of the world
to grow
and to cry
helplessly
like happy angels



7. THE ROAD AHEAD

there are two human forms, two organic species, no more
the rest is cloned from the skeleton of history
what has become of us?
what has become of us?

i wear my shoes in the morning like I'm in a hurry for
something
the tea-cup rests on the table, its shadow long and tapering
everywhere the fruit gives golden or red sulfur
what has become of us?



8. SONGS FROM THE EARTH

i live in a township
in a small red house
next to a shebeen
and a volcanic school
with sad teachers
my woman laughs
all day long
and makes the porcelain dish weep
while a heavy stone
thunders in my forehead
and from every tree
and every branch
dismal songs from the earth
cries of tormented deaths
flash violently
in the sky
like the furious smell
of drugs in the street
at at times
like the roasting
of basalt leaves



9. THE SLEEPLESS WORLD

to Witty

*give of yourself wholly
hold nothing back
for there's a world out there
blacker than a finger
inordinate like rain*

i sleep easy
knowing alone
somewhere
there is always
you

it is a sleepless world
out there
people walk everyday
somewhere
there is you
waiting

the sun keeps rising
in the sky
like a rug
overcome by
the wind

but somewhere
there is you
singing
a zulu song
a sweet conversation

bringing discreet gifts
in small packets

i know
it's only the passing
of time
that gets a grown man on his knees
that brings gaiety
to a kiss

i fight with myself
i talk in simple words
i converse
with bedevilled gods
i chat with converted
spirits

i talk with the material
widows
with existential fires
i stare all day
feeling empty
every day
there is emptiness

the sky is low in the south
the sky is a difficult character
in an angular shoe
the sky is an acrobat
with angry moods
somewhere
there is only you
waiting
just waiting

i know there are things
about the sun
that we don't know
there are secrets
knocking against
each other

hearts that are broken
things murmuring
without tongues

there are novelists
pink nails, courageous
activists, books of fiction
and wilting flowers
there are hands
and unfinished continents

there are words about nothing
transparent eyelids of fishes
craters, terrifying captains
and mysteries with
little salt

i know i must wait for you
under a red star
inside a green house
like a frightened man

but here there are only butterflies
only poles
which lack elasticity
skies
with bloodstains

here there is just dust
to give me company
there is only sadness

but the day will soon be here
and you'll be knocking at my door
forever

for now
i must walk alone
for the street
and its green slimy
ghosts
will not be denied

for once
the street refuses
to calm down
the street has many
murders
a thousand and one
wigs
with dazzling
bow-strings
heartless indecisions
and black knives

like the rising clouds
in the sky
i must follow
the direction of the wind
i must feel my way
around this heart of mine
that is heavy
that sinks into the water
like a stone

why can't i be here
today
and the day after
where there is darkness
everywhere
like in a church
at night
where i cannot be
pardoned
where i cannot run away
like a thief
where i can go greedily
into my cell
like a man



10. WHAT FREEDOM?

i walk around the city with no hope of escaping
 astonished by the landscape
 i have no past
 no blasted light of religion
 my poems carry the inexhaustible hope of gravestones
 of bonfires and cruel religions



11. TO GEOFFREY JOHNSON

on his birthday, 21/05/1950

think of the poor girl who has no home
 think of the boy who kicks a ball in lidgetton
 when the rain falls all over the street
 and muddy puddles appear
 like countless stars over the sky

geoff, think of the people here,
 the ones hunger has made into a caricature
 think of the fifteen young girls in ulwazi
 with puzzled faces and wounded hearts
 as you go back to an america which dances now
 in an age of hope
 with the sound of obama! obama! in the streets of montgomery
 detroit, atlanta, washington dc, chicago, los angeles and miami

but also think of malcolm, think of caversham, think of jabu
 and witty and gabi who had to sleep
 to allow the stars to rise again from our skies
 think of the child in afrika
 as you remember this land of imbalances
 as you remember a continent that stays forever enslaved
 by the frenzied voice of the grave
 defend afrika's wisdom of *ubuntu*
 tell obama afrika is bleeding in bondage
 tell obama afrika's heart for humanity
 pulsates with the children of the world



12. THE LESSONS OF LOVE

i thought finding true love is easy
all i wanted was purity from the women i loved
like the river that opened inside

so whenever they shouted "*she is the girl for you!*"
i would drop everything at once
and sob uncontrollably
overflowing all my drunken sadness



13. THE NAME OF BUDDHA

i told myself a little tale about suffering
i told myself a little stone
eventually everything speaks of another
and when i call the name of buddha
glittering stars appear in the sky



14. NEW MAN

*we will fight fire with fire
where is the gold
the careless bastards
the sons and daughters of thieves*

the gods of all the infernos and explosives
carry handkerchiefs in their hands
the thieves run perplexed toward a jubilant storm
the morons with silver moons
the roses with black knives

we have sixty one conversations for the jse
there are two sides to any story
one for death and for destruction
another for green leaves
the smallest bird

they took away our culture and left a snake with legs
like the dying wings of the sun
the morons drove three nails through textiles
through ports and the mouths of serious animals

they took the gold and left bank notes
with the face of a smiling murderer
they left a trail of bemused blood
they raped the women
and raped the children

but our destruction is not over
we will count the arms of a fast wind
for it takes a long time to tame an angry sea
it will take a long time for afrika to heal



15. WOMAN

i discovered the two doors of the universe in your eyes
i broke free from the janitor's prison
i saw the crates of language
the harbours for deserted ships and lonely sailors

at first the rolling laughter called me
the sky was a ghostly figure
at first there were mournful sounds
like marching people

and through the cracks on the wall
i saw your enticing body
and was instantly blessed

i saw your soft lashes
hard-done by the crevices in your pubis
delicately touched
by your weeping hail



16. I WANT TO FORGET TO BREATHE

i want to forget to breathe
i want to forget to drink from the shebeens
in poor townships
i want to forget to pee
to remember my books and my instruments
which are hard to assemble
which break easily into animals
or stones

i go around the black night
looking for a country
with a blue flag

i want to come back to sacred places
to bodies
with no costumes
to mild contempt
and secret carnivals

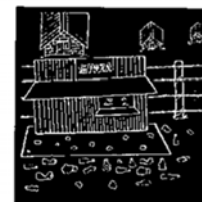
i want the funeral of kings
want to judge the light stroke
that turns left
the billowing tree
that gets smaller and smaller
in the wind

i want to forget to breathe new air
fluorescent light
the safekeeping of satellites and oppressors
the despondent colour of wounds



17. A QUESTION ABOUT POEMS

don't ask me about any of my poems
for i will tell you people are murdered in my country
and their deaths arrive slowly as an illness
as a desolate knock
on a blank sky



18. LIDGETTON

in your streets i saw
the gushing of blood along the railway line
the sudden spilling of petroleum
the cacophony of sullen poems
and discarded minerals
i saw limping birds with grey wings

the houses were raucous with drunken men
the tall lazy streets
clung to drowsy figures
i went past the top of the spaza shops
and heard old withdrawn arteries
longing for silence



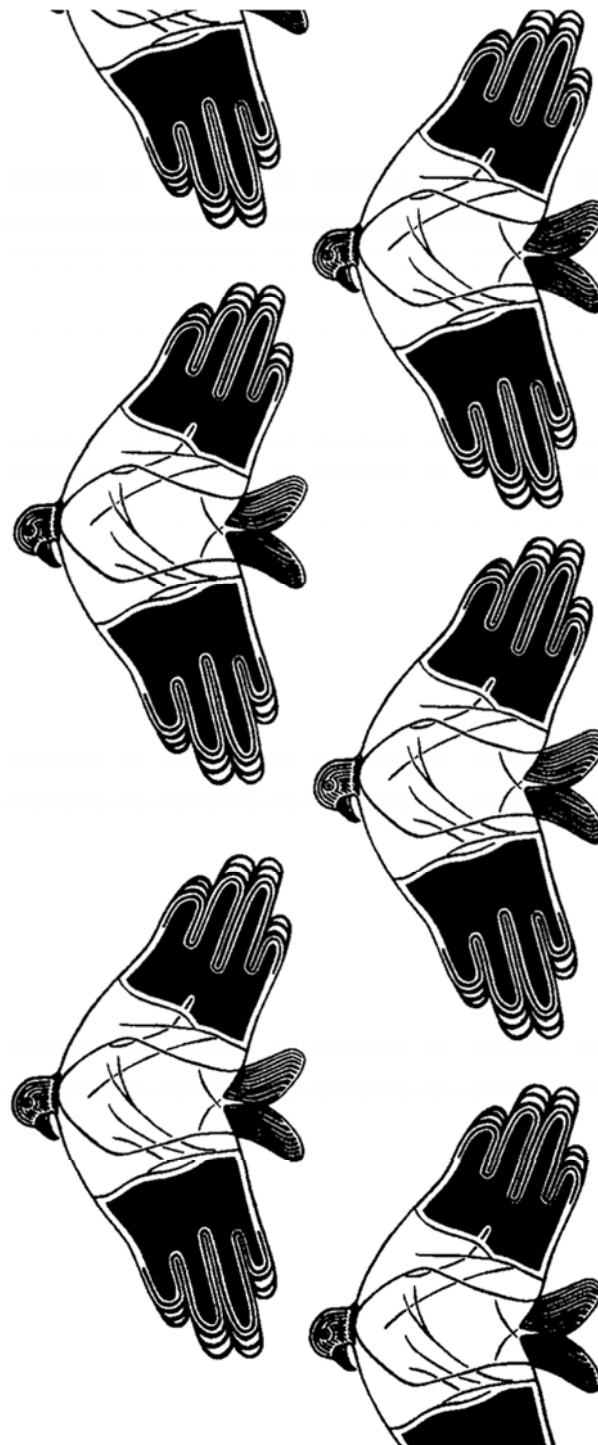
THE POET

Mxolisi Nyezwa grew up in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, where he still lives. He runs a shop and business support service from a steel container in Motherwell township, while also teaching in the Rhodes Masters in Creative Writing course. He is a founder and editor of the cultural magazine, *Kotaz*, now in its 15th year. He has published three books of poems in English, *Malikhanye* (Deep South, 2011), *New Country* (UKZN Press, 2009) and *song trials* (Gecko Poetry, 2000). He has also recently completed a manuscript of poems in isiXhosa. He is a winner of the Thomas Pringle Award and the South African Literary Award for poetry.

THE ILLUSTRATORS

Vusi Zwane has been the resident artist at Caversham Centre for the past five years creating highly skilled and detailed fine art linocuts; working with local youth in the adjoining Lidgetton whilst his images have contributed significantly towards fabric designs of the newly developed Caversham Textiles (www.cavershamtextiles.com). His association with Caversham began in 1993 as a student of the Caversham Press Educational Trust and over the years has contributed towards numerous exhibitions both locally and abroad.

Simphiwe Cebekhulu was an intern at Caversham during the production of the illustrations and where he helped in founding the *Masabelaneni Young Printmakers*, an enthusiastic group of youth from his local community and who attend afternoon skills workshops and during school holidays. Under the guidance and mentorship of Vusi Zwane, his natural artistic ability and unique images resulted in recognition and exhibiting of his work in South Africa and in Switzerland. He has a background in civil engineering having completed his second year in BSc Engineering and has now returned to industry.





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