

Shadows on the Wall

Snapshots from a Beloved Country

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South Africa is a country you continue to miss, even when you are there. I remember Henk van Woerden saying how he was always torn in two – when he was in Cape Town he missed the Netherlands, when he was in the Netherlands he wanted to get back to that country at the southern tip of Africa as fast as possible.

Where better to look for a country's soul than in its art, and especially its music and literature? When I am homesick I often reach for poetry, especially Afrikaans poetry, not just because Afrikaans is closely related to Dutch but also because it has so much beautiful poetry, work that could only have been written in South Africa. From prose writers like Etienne Leroux and Koos Prinsloo to contemporary writers like Marlene van Niekerk and Eben Venter, something filters through in a lot of Afrikaans literature that is left unspoken in history books, or in emails from friends – the extremely personal and complex relationship with an equally complex history, in concentrated and therefore sublime form. A militant vulnerability. And the urge to define your place in that magnificent political, cultural, social and immense landscape.

There is an extra dimension in a lot of Afrikaans poetry – raw emotion, feelings of guilt, and that exasperating authority against which you are powerless, the expression of the hell within the paradise. My love for it began with D.J. Opperman, a poet who showed that combining art and commitment goes without saying, as it does in so many parts of the world. Not forced, or preachy, but explicit, embedded. Moving examples are 'Jorik's Diary' ('Joernaal van Jorik') and 'Flowers and Disarray' ('Blom en baaierd').

Ingrid Jonker's poem 'The child shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga' ('Die kind wat dood geskiet is deur soldate by Nyanga') is famous. At the time it was unheard-of for a white woman to get involved in politics and write a poem about a black child. A towering figure like the writer Breyten Breytenbach shows involvement too. No crystal-clear poetry but associative rebelliousness, even during the years he spent in prison, from 1975 to 1983. 'Obscure' and 'cryptic' work, but courageous and powerful for all that. 'The black town' ('die swart stad') from *Cold Fire* (Kouevuur, 1969), for example, begins with '*resist bitterness, black child, whatever you do,/that and you mustn't dream either*'. Years later in the anthology '*I'lyk*, 1983), the imprisoned Breytenbach addresses his people, the Afrikaners, in the threatening and prophetic '*they will come*':

*your walled enclosures will be breached,
your streets be full of shuffling feet,
your posh neighbourhoods ring with the trumpets of children's voices,
your apartment buildings sway on their foundations
and you'll not see the changes coming;
you'll choke on your chicken legs and, spluttering protests,
spill whisky down your shirt
as your structure of security and authority, all you've taken for granted,
will suddenly prove to be only illusions;*



Bokkie.
Photo by Viviane Sassen.

Breytenbach seriously calls into question the notion of art and words as the last legitimization of the ego, there is no fear of the outside world, no 'ivory tower' in his work. Even in his earliest poems, certainly in *A Season in Paradise* (*'n Seisoen in die Paradys*, 1976) or the collection *To paint a sinking ship blue* (*Skryt: Om 'n sinkende skip blou te verf*, 1972), he reacts unambiguously to government policy and South African society. His involvement with underground resistance movements meant a step straight into adventure and danger, from which traditional poets usually distance themselves.

The bold posture Antjie Krog adopts in her work is well known. Intensely passionate involvement – not for nothing is a recent book entitled *Begging to be Black*, while *Colour Never Comes Alone* (*Kleur kom nooit alleen nie*, 2000) is a heart-wrenching snapshot and x-ray of South Africa. Two series, 'diaries from the beginning of the twentieth century' and 'diaries from the last part of the twentieth century', consist of fragments of recorded stories, testimonies, like the heartbreaking unnamed poem no.9, a fragment that's taken almost word for word from *Country of my Skull*, Krog's commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission:

*My son sits on the steps by the front door
cradling his father's head in his hands
both of them covered in blood
over and over again he screams:
"Daddy talk to me!"
He's 21 years old today
and I still wake up in the night
hearing him scream: wipe the blood
wipe the blood from my father's face*

The first time I read this poem I had tears in my eyes, something that seldom if ever happens to me when I read poetry.

One of the most recent highly committed poets is Charl-Pierre Naudé who, in 'Two Thieves' ('Twee dieve') from *In the Secret of the Day* (*In die geheim van die dag*, 2004) brilliantly charts the naked fear of 'the Other'. A poem about paranoia and suspicion:

*Everything that's mine, I lost that day.
Robbed, stripped of everything, a complete surprise.
By two strangers, a young woman and a little girl.
The neighbourhood has been alerted to this new tactic.
They use innocents and attack you from behind.
I heard the quiet knock at my front door.
Like a visit from the other side of the great divide.
Testing, of course, whether anyone's at home.
I listened for the burglars, a bread knife in my hand.
Till that crystal sacrament, that laughter, disappeared.
Fluttering, like two doves escaped from a side-pocket.
But I kept my guard up. That's what I don't understand.
I took the warning seriously. I knew they would come back.
But none of this helped against their deceit.
I opened the door, the knife behind my back.*

*They'd nearly given up, the woman said.
 Her daughter wanted a leaf from my tree, because it's silver.
 I looked beyond them for the danger
 lurking behind them, the reason for their trap.
 Poor as church mice they were, but richly decked with smiles.
 Ask God for a leaf, it's his tree, I said gruffly.
 Another man wanted to shoot us, the child said proudly,
 blessedly unaware that then she'd have been dead.
 I watched them walk away, wrapped in their sounds.
 Mother and daughter. With their leaf, their miracle.
 Nobody attacked me. Nothing more happened.
 Those two thieves stripped me of everything.*

In the last couple of years a lot of new blood has coursed through Afrikaans poetry. The accomplished, somewhat 'older' poet Gilbert Gibson (1963), with his collections *Tree Place* (Boomplaats, 2005) and *Kaplyn* (2007). And the relatively young and already much lauded poets, Danie Marais (1971), Ronelda S Kamfer (1981) and Loftus Marais (1982). The last three grew up mainly in post-Apartheid South Africa, but have been confronted with the after-effects of the period - violence, suspicion, unemployment, lack of direction and the distant rumble of the old nationalistic order. In their poetry, too, I find a blueprint for 'a' South Africa, not just for a poetics. Making statements is perhaps naive, but writing still means taking the measure of the everyday experience of reality, so you could describe their poetry as narrative, with a clear autobiographical streak.

In Danie Marais's poetry the everyday social reality of South Africa is just as much a part of his personal story as Table Mountain or Johnny Cash. Everything fits in these poems, especially in his second collection, *Even if the Moon's a Misunderstanding* (Al is die maan 'n misverstand, 2009): pop culture, literature and family. In 'History Lesson', for example, which is a narrative poem about a teacher (presumably the poet himself) visiting the African Window Museum in Pretoria with his class, a poem that nicely demonstrates the role played by history and origin in a country with a colonial past, a country with a diversity of skin colours, cultures and languages. A poem that reflects the new South Africa's search for an identity, with verses like:

*There's a dignified black woman
 with big health-service specs and a mop
 who explains in stern Afrikaans
 when you ask her in English
 where the toilet is.*

At the end the guide asks the children which is the oldest artwork. A little black boy answers, pointing to a bust of Isa Steynberg, daughter of the sculptor Coert Steynberg: *'The white lady who came with the boat.'* And suddenly the poem is about inheritance rights - who is South African and who isn't. The whites who were born there, do they belong there, too? *"It's the oldest sculpture here, / but it is not quite that old," the words come hesitantly, / then he thinks for a moment / and suddenly vehemently - and not only on Isa Steynberg's behalf - says // "But this... this white lady did not, did not, come with a boat."*

Another similar example is 'Uncle Thys and the children of Mamelodi', in which the poet tells of Uncle Thys, a man symbolic of many white Afrikaners under the new ANC government – he's lost his job and lost his future, because the black population must finally get a chance, even if, with all the dismissals, the baby often gets thrown out with the bathwater. "Yes, says Uncle Thys, / this country is difficult now." Marais' poem 'There's an old woman lying in the rain' seems like a sequel to Naudé's 'Two Thieves'. This poem, too, is about fear of the unknown (coloured and poverty-stricken) fellow human being:

*I go in and ring my friend Clive.
He says: "You just mustn't,
like a bad whitey,
go phoning the police.
If they bother to come,
They'll only rough her up
and dump her somewhere.
Then she'll have trouble tomorrow
finding her way back.
She'll be alright."*

"But say she freezes?"

*"There's plenty of alcohol in antifreeze –
hobos don't freeze in the summer.
Give her a stiff drink."*

Photo by Viviane Sassen.



The poem ends with a typical description of the current situation in white South African suburbia:

*While my wife lies in the bath,
our baby slumbers blissful
and in front of our house
an old woman's lying
in the cold rain.*

A different view of the present juncture can be read in Loftus Marais's poetry debut, *Generally standing closer to windows* (Staan in die algemeen nader aan vensters, 2008). His sexual orientation colours every experience. Cape Town, for example, in 'Welcome to Cape Town', becomes a bulwark of lonely (homo) sexuality, an unglamorous city in which one wanders aimlessly, without either personal or shared history: '*effeminate reptile-men, photosensitive/pale-skinned in raincoats, waiting in darkrooms, winks in bars/ here they come splatters and rolls like quicksilver/ they dream of big game hunters, cowboys/ rugby players, firemen, lion tamers - /welcome to the city of the test-tube babies/ who've grown up now/ here no-one knows their father.*'

The South African landscape, so often romanticised, is described here in terms of femininity and physicality – the landscape goes through a coming-out, as in 'Blue Gum Tree': '*on a plain outside malmesbury/ stands a blue gum tree like scarlett o'hara/ against a boss - a foreign vivien leigh/ hair rustling in the breeze/ her contours the brush strokes / flatter her focal-point position/ in the magnificent vertical/ composition of the window*'. Like Breytenbach, Marais addresses the forefathers in the brilliant final poem 'A lovers' quarrel with the farmland': a battle with the past, drenched in Afrikaner symbolism and traditions. Everything comes together here, both the youthfulness and the homosexual identity, and with them the twofold struggle against taboo and conservatism:

*Me, blame? confused? or just blown away? Your blasted width is to blame
but bring it on, whip up those winds from under your cliffs and give it all you've got
my heart's got four big farmhouse chambers, room for contradiction
in the bedroom with its dirty sheets and retro chamber pot
hang a landscape portrait
realistic, and gay.*

A magnificent, personal conclusion, including the last word – 'skeef' in Afrikaans, which means both 'crooked' and 'gay'; the last word of the collection and therefore a double statement: I am gay, and I don't give a damn about the Afrikaner tradition.

The poetry of Ronelda S Kamfer (1981) has broken completely new ground in Afrikaans – the depressing life and gang culture of the area known as Cape Flats, just outside Cape Town. Kamfers debut, *When sleeping dogs* (Noudat slappende honde, 2008), is raw and straight from the heart, 'true to life' as they say, but nevertheless the language and composition are masterly. The poems are set in the notorious Cape Flats, with their murders, rapes and unemployment. The image the reader gets of the brown community on the Cape Flats is extremely depressing, which is why it is totally lacking in any lyrical tone. The poet mainly tells stories, which are gripping in their powerful imagery and irony, a

salve for all the misery. 'Little Cardo' (Klein Cardo), for example, is about a little boy who falls victim to a shoot-out between gangs:

*The evening before Cardo's first day
at the big school
the Schoolboys stopped him in his tracks
Cardo was looking out the window
the bullet sat in his throat
his mother didn't cry
the politicians planted a tree
and the Cape Doctor uprooted it
and threw it where the rest
of the Cape's dreams lie –*

on the Flats

A nice point here is the contrast between the politicians and the 'Cape

Photo by Viviane Sassen.



Doctor', a strong south-easterly wind which is credited with blowing away pollution from Cape Town.

In her moving poem, 'an ordinary Monday morning' ('n gewone blou Maandagoggend'), the reader is treated to a day on the Flats, where there is no hierarchy between trivialities, murders and madness. It is exactly that lack of any order of priorities that gives the poem its impact, as can be seen in the final verse:

*by first break there was a dead body in School Street
a miscarriage in my class
an extension for biology homework
and a white woman who ran screaming down the street
asking the Lord
"where was Joseph when Jesus was crucified?"*

This poetic genius has had to overcome a great deal: the prejudices of the white reader, the strange, disapproving glances of her own community and the oppressive everyday environment. In short, a serious inferiority complex. No wonder, then, that her poems have titles like 'OD1', 'OD2', 'Watch out for depression' ('Pasop vir depressie'), 'Forgive me but I'm Afrikaans' ('Vergewe my maar ek is Afrikaans') and 'bipolar honey'.

In 'I'm looking for a gold star' ('ek soek 'n goue sterretjie') the subject is Kamfer's dilemma – through her writing talent she has managed to free herself, more or less, from the hopeless situation of poverty, drugs and violence. But is she accepted in her 'new' world? That of the white urban Afrikaner? Who can say. If nothing else she has betrayed and distanced herself from her community, a community full of self-hate.

*I'm looking for a gold star
a well-done puppy girl to emphasise my dignity
and then I'll look for a hero to show me the way
dyslectics don't have to read the map
and when I'm the one in that part
I'll go back to the farm*

*a farm kid's like a billy-goat
only knows one level*

*then I'll climb on an empty beer crate
and tell people about the world outside*

*and while I'm standing preaching a stinking drunk uncle
will curse me and say: you're just a native
with a gold star on your forehead*

*don't come to us with your fancy poems
go and tell those so-said sad stories of yours to the people
who make the rules
you already smell like them anyway*

It's as if you can hear the young and forceful Antjie Krog again, but with a different background. It is fearless poetry by a poet who has nothing to lose.

When I'm homesick for Cape Town and South Africa, I often look at old photos, or I write to my friends – or I read some Afrikaans poetry, which conjures up a world that exists at least for as long as the poems last. Brilliant, multicoloured and distinct poetry. Poetry that translates everyday reality into an intimate and deeply personal experience. ■