

# "light before midnight"

A collection of poetry with reflexive documents regarding both  
the writing process and the writerly influences on this work.

Kelly Dyer

203514233

This creative manuscript is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of English (Creative Writing).

Faculty of Humanities, Development and the Social Sciences:

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I affirm that this manuscript is my own work and that all acknowledgements have been  
properly made.

Signed:  .....

Date: 23/03/09

## DECLARATION

Submitted in fulfilment / partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Masters ..... , in the Graduate Programme in  
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Durban, South Africa.

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations,  
references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being  
submitted for the degree of ..... in the  
Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of  
KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa. None of the present work has been  
submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

Miss. Kelly Dyer  
Student name

23/03/2009  
Date

# **light before midnight**

**Poems**

**Kelly Dyer**

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New Coin (2007): "Hear me", "Bird"; Fidelities (2007): "On driving past", "Berg wind";  
Fidelities (2005) "A.M. 1".

**For the love of language.**

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light before midnight



'But in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story – and there are so many, and so many – stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, death, and so on; and none of them are true. Yet like children we tell each other stories, and to decorate them we make up these ridiculous, flamboyant, beautiful phrases. How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably. Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then enormous clouds come marching over the sky, tattered clouds, wisps of cloud. What delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then.'

Virginia Woolf *The Waves* 1994: 188

For your Journey

Bowl of light for you  
Cup of grace  
Armfuls of past  
Some clay

Sun at your back

Hand of ashes for you  
Tree of wisdom  
Oceans of calm  
Some sand

Wind in your face

## Early days

Today there are no trains  
and the world is only still  
with wind, not roaring engines  
or clanking tracks.

The sea is a flat slab.

It may rain.

Here, there are no swallows  
to dodge the wet bullets of  
falling sky. Only crows or  
mynahs. No ravens.

Only louries or orioles,  
gurgling together their  
cry to the light.

There are no swallows here,  
murmuring murmuring in  
swelling waves of dance.

They are too far north to see.

Too many borders cross the  
distance between us, this  
subtropical menagerie  
and that cold stark sky  
silhouetting birds.

A.M. 1.

The woman of the bed sits on the stoep.  
She has never been up so early that  
It is late. She has never actually heard  
Trees speak.

The woman of the bed's nose burns to  
Blue, the cold claws her hands. It is a  
Winter's morning, that is why. Why  
She got up so early it is late, because  
The moon told her to, and displayed its  
Mocking light for her in thanks.

The woman of the bed got up so early  
It was late many mornings then. She  
Weathered changing light, overheard  
Enough of other's secrets, to keep her  
Quiet for a time, on the ready  
To listen, to steal.

The woman of the stoep grew  
Weary of the woman of the bed's  
Prayers, and slept little then.

A.M.2.

The woman of the bed sits on the stoep.  
It has been over a year since she watched the sun rise  
In the large windows of the house across the valley.

She chews noisily while there is no one to hear,  
And observes the aloe vera gone wild and dying.  
She chews what she sees, and dreams.

She dreams of bed. She dreams of the moon – how it would fit,  
Just so, in her stomach if she swallowed it.  
How it would return her voice to her, by warming her throat.

The woman of the bed, for whom the moon sank too soon,  
Sits on the stoep and sees and dreams while she chews.  
She thinks she will rise earlier tomorrow, to eat the sky.

## Distance

I woke under the weight of the sky this morning.  
To the wetness of my slick tongue behind my teeth,  
to inland quiet deeper than sea. I woke dreaming  
of that sea, like an urchin,  
or a pearl.

I am a pearl.

You could swallow me.

'Writers too, are little different from those amateur diarists of the climate, notating a world of insatiable flux. They too, are forced to annotate the world over and over, hoping against hope that somehow, somewhere, one day, it will all add up; that instead of just weather – all that is variable, never constant, never quite the same - there will be, on the page they've just written and abandoned, the world.'

Stephen Watson *A Writer's Diary* 1997: 126

Waiting

*The night before:*

Pervasive light glowing  
Phosphorescent, quiet  
Rising moon, each hour  
A bird in flight in the  
Distance

*The morning after:*

Breadcrumbs for poor  
Birds, leaking pots  
Of plants, each word  
A sun with my  
Eyes closed

*The same evening:*

Still no answers



## The stolen voice

Someone cut out my tongue in the dark.

Was it at night's darkest pitch that they climbed into my mouth?

Or during the half-light hours when the cats stretch and clean, that they  
wrenched the final tendon from my belly?

What if they swallowed it, and my voice is now their own?

Is their mouth now full with the weight of restraint as mine once was?

Can they taste silence like acid on their palate, the thick phlegm  
of accumulated questions in their throat?

Do they speak in many voices?

Do people hear them, and listen?

The one who stole my tongue must listen, with their ears and with their bones.

For I too can sneak and steal and sever.

I am a huntress in the dark now and do not sleep.

I too carry a blade that cuts.

However heavy my tongue, however quiet and restrained, when it muscled  
out a vowel it was a loud poet's howl that echoed.

It was my own and I will find it.

## My fugitive song

1.

My heart is nearly old enough now  
to bury, heavy, under layers of slick wet mud and lime.

It is nearly time now, for rest between the beats, for leaves  
of memory to settle, for sleep to steal away, even peace,  
grasped at, clung to, like thread or air.

It is nearly time for this slick wet heart to sigh, for night to breathe into day  
and blow out flame.

2.

I am alight. I am in the evening.  
There are two moons: in the sky and in the window, just peering  
over the treetop of my nest, watching eyes, waiting.

The night sighs. It smells of earth and oil.  
Sounds like silence stretching.  
Feels cool and green on this suit of skin.

I will hold onto this colour in falling from light and into sleep,  
where I am a bird and the sky is wide.

3.

Would you believe I am a bird and the sky is wide?

Would you believe I am a bat and my shadow is longer  
than night? That during the day I am a star behind the light.

Would you believe that my lungs were halved with fright?  
That I am barely alive, that trees breathe for me, that I can  
be quiet and small, that really these eyes are scabbed over  
and afraid to see.

My shadow is longer than night.

## Voices

*Slow down, she said from somewhere small inside her  
Somewhere shaped like a star, or a crescent moon, let's stroll.*

*But a stroll is like soup and it is biting dog cold, I roared from  
the heart chasm near my larynx.*

*Yes, but not any soup. Like chicken broth, her small voice agreed.*

The blood in my ears rushed out of the darkness and onto the road.

*You are as thin as a stroll to me these days.  
I like you more when you are away.*

She stepped in a puddle of my blood on the road.

## Bird

Barbet, my head as red  
as poker-eyes in flame-tree  
spray of curls,  
in twigs of thought.

Messenger, my heart as black  
and beating beneath  
this feathered sheen façade.

Totem, peck this wooden head  
to splintered nest for you,  
weave the map that is me  
between and through.

Scream us into quiet,  
into pockets of noon, the breath  
of morning heat still rising.

Scream me into there  
Barbet, from here,  
from this hair, this chest:  
wide open black heart of mouth.

God's heart

Out of my mouth I take my heart and my bitterness towards you.

I take them and place them gentle, gently on the table.

My heart the dry-blood muscle colour of an organ, the texture of putty, weighing a handful of sand,

and my bitterness, first the reeking odour of manure, then its gravel surface, as heavy as marble, as much as one could bear to carry.

And I ask god, what to do, now that these two have become one another, my heart marble, my bitterness a muscle, subject to reflex.

God does not say pray.

God's bitterness outweighs my own.

## Open heart

*"At least I know with sure and certain knowledge that a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened." - Camus*

My heart murmured at a thick flush of cloud at the world's edge, when the luminosity of the air stopped my throat and stilled my tongue. I knew then that words are silt and silence water.

It ceased when still enough I saw for the first time the thin fleece of blonde hair, lining the wet of her upper lip. The ache in my fingers to brush the sigh from that place, of calling.

My heart first opened on escape to an ocean so flat as to float away in the chrysalis of light from which we came. I sat with gravity at the sight on the sand, and wept then, like a man.

'The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers.'

Virginia Woolf *The Waves* 1994: 202

## Water 1

If the water would congeal in my  
throat my thirst would be quenched.  
If the water were hot I would be warm.  
If I could be blind in the dark, if my sweat  
and my milk smelled less like an animal, I  
would be safe. If I had no smell they could  
not trace me. If I was less thirsty they would  
not hear me panting like a dog in the dark.



## Water 2

I will build a fire under the sea  
to warm the water, a wall of balanced pebbles  
on which to stand to see the steam from  
the rugged surface of flotsam,  
that has become my subterfuge.

## Thirsty man and broken water pipe

Man has legs in road  
Man has gritty pavement palms  
a koi mouth, pursed  
then sounding night  
then suckling.

Man is thirstier than skin.

Man's skin is corn-ground  
crumpled into hide  
Man with gritty pavement palms  
Man whose feet are rocks  
whose legs are in the road  
drinks deep to belly  
drinks to bloating  
so he is a whale  
or a porpoise,  
the sea.

Man is ecstatic  
Man is black and slippery  
shiny wet  
Man tastes iron –  
proboscis tongue a pipe  
Man holds up traffic  
for his thirst, to play.

## North Beach

Ours is girlish-boy pleasure  
coloured blue,  
salt tasting.

Our glee, expansive and  
rolling, meets the sky  
the fifth day of each week.  
It head-over-heels,  
gathering shore,  
tumbles into shallow end  
of lolling tide.

We are jellyfish and wide,  
each limb a tentacle,  
a sword, a wand.  
Whole ocean is home,  
all of air our own, and  
we are swallowed.

We are half-alive fish,  
flapping, gulping,  
each second, becoming, in  
glibness of the frailty of flesh.

Our girlish-boy pleasure  
momentarily knows us  
as its own.

## Mr Fish

You went for an HIV test, for me.  
You wouldn't have gone for yourself.  
It was a Wednesday, raining.

I was in a movie while you tramped  
around from first one clinic, then to  
another, that tested men. That tested  
men on Wednesdays.

You went for an HIV test, for me,  
while I was in a movie. While I was  
in a movie you said they pricked you  
first, with a needle, cut you then, with  
a knife, and condemned you lastly, with  
a spear. 'No blood,' they said.

'A fish,' you told me.  
'Cut me yourself and see.'  
I said I was afraid of blood, it made  
me faint. You said, 'I must be the fish  
for you then. We must be perfect for  
each other.' I said, 'No, seriously?'

You said you would show me yourself  
the next day, the letter in the envelope  
they gave you. The one they gave you  
which proved you were a fish, that I was  
at the movies, that we could go swimming  
together, in the rain.

Sketch from outside

Outside,  
the rain still beating  
and insistent.

Inside,  
small white breasted girl  
listens, over the ceiling  
fan, beyond the page,  
to the repentant sky,  
singing ground.

Toulouse would have her  
just so, in the lamplight.

'Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room.'

Virginia Woolf *The Waves* 1994: 85

## Corner Café

A man at the table  
next to me today,  
told my story,  
although it  
was his own,  
and I was  
listening.

From Corner Café

Dark man and lighter boy  
faces close as breath,  
smiling.

Boy lowers head to chest  
of man (pressure on his heart)  
then ducks away as quickly,  
to cross the road, arms  
windmills in the air.

Man reaches out to pull boy  
back by a thread from  
crossing.

## Courting

We sat with our ears open to flocks of birds  
beating the sky, to the tin roof warm and expanding,  
to the wind in the whistling jacks,  
and voices laughing.

We stood with our eyes open to an abandoned  
house in the valley – from which you stole a window as a child –  
to the green-grey glint of still water in the distance,  
to a sunbird, that saw us.

The sunbird that saw us gestured and dipped.  
'I wonder,' you said, 'what he wants?'  
My eyes averted, I suggested he knew  
where the honey was.



## Meagre offering

Ether I have for you  
and condensation:  
a heavy sky lipping  
the lids of my eyes with light.

Salt I have for you  
in my palms and under my tongue,  
residue of the sea that ran  
through me to its source.

A damp coal in my chest,  
hoarsely coughed into my hands,  
ash the colour of night  
crushed from rock,  
my red heart flattened under foot  
to soil.

All I have for you is fingers to paint  
my heart's dust upon your brow,  
wet breath to breathe into  
your ear the sound of the  
sea that ran through me,  
and salt to taste.

Once

*To James, who first introduced me to Nietzsche's theory of the orgasm as death.*

A hundred times or more, the entry, and exit.  
And you: the only one allowed in more than once,  
maybe, ninety-one times out of the hundred.  
Ninety times rampant and eager you were  
satiated, then slept. Ninety times, I counted the  
pulse behind my eyelids till it slowed. Once,  
you fell asleep inside me, warm with momentum,  
and I waited, waited until you came to life  
again – and I was ready for you. That one time.  
That time I tasted the sweet-deep-death of us  
from which I am still swimming.  
Towards the light. Back to life.

Untitled

1.

Months after your having  
confessed your love for her,  
I still have the urge  
to lift my leg to the  
wheel of the very bike  
that took me to bed  
with you.

2.

'Hear me, I can't love you,'  
to which you responded  
like a temper-tantrumed  
child by storming out.

3.

As with each of them,  
you too shall be considered  
in time.

'a chunk  
of unburied poetry,  
found a tongue and a tooth.'

*Landscape* Paul Celan, *Selected Poems* (translated by Michael Hamburger) 1988: 243

## Blind rise

You wanted to see what I see.  
Taste what I taste. Hear what I hear.  
You wanted all of me.

I gave you five discs of music  
to listen to on Sundays, when  
you allow yourself to feel something.

Too loud you said, too many instruments,  
and voices, and noise. Too much to take in  
all at once.

I thought as much, and turned a blind and tasteless eye to you.

Years later . . .

I called you and you came,  
striding towards with your hat in hand.  
The same hat: softened leather, the colour of veld.

You came with your comfortable skin,  
with your stories,  
with music round your mouth.

I told you all you are now is symbolic.  
You flung your head back laughing,  
and I too smiled.

I smiled and my heart that was a hive quietened to a murmur.  
My belly of birds settled to nest.  
My hot head of embers smouldered to ash.

You flung your head back, laughing, and when I smiled, you knew.  
You came, seeking, and found a woman, a fire, a forest, the sea.  
You came and found quiet smoothed like a stone in my palm.  
You found stillness like a pond where ice-eyes once were.

I called and you came, and you knew, yet you left,  
and I let you.

Michelle

Half moon rising above  
black bank of cumulus, now  
and again the humid amphitheatre  
lit alive by lightning. I invited  
you and you came. Too briefly.  
To say when I wished you well  
on leaving, that we are strangers  
still, that I don't know you.  
That all you are is hungry –

If so, well then, you underestimate  
my appetite also.

## Men, and women

Always, there are men:  
working, walking  
waiting, and taxis:  
white, yellow,  
red, to take them and  
their whistles and  
jibes away, from the  
women, passing by  
in defiant silence.



If you asked

If you were to put the  
barrel of a gun to the  
soft pulse of my temple  
and make demands of me  
I would say *shoot something,  
over there*, so that I know  
your gun is loaded and I am  
not being threatened by a  
coward, or a con. And if  
the gun did fire and you  
proved yourself a man and  
a coward nevertheless  
I would say to you *why  
harm me when you can  
ask for what you want  
and I can give it to you  
freely*. And if you agreed to  
this trade of life for goods  
and asked me for my  
shoes I would say, *here,  
have them*. If you wanted  
then, the clothes that  
covered my breasts and my  
back and my legs and my  
genitals I would offer them  
to you as if they were  
always yours, and I was  
returning them. And if  
you took all that I owned  
at the time of our meeting  
and I stood before you  
naked. If you liked what  
you saw and you asked to  
enter me, to have what is  
inside that I could not  
take off, I would say  
*you forget when we  
agreed that you could  
ask and I could answer  
that I could also say no.*  
*For my pride you will  
have to shoot me. And*

*I will savour the taste  
of lead and blood in my  
mouth. Then you can  
have me, outside and in.  
My warm corpse.  
My quiet temple.*

'But my life, oh, my life, had been a constant search for an enormous dream in which my sallow creatures and animals, plants, chimeras, stones and minerals were in a pre-established harmony, a dream that is forgotten because it must be forgotten, and is sought desperately, and only sporadically does one find its tragic fragments in the warmth of a person, in some specific situation, a glance – a memory, too, of course, in some specific pain, some moment. I loved that harmony with a passion; I loved it in voices, voices. And then, instead of harmony, there was nothing but scraps and tatters. And perhaps that alone is what it means to be a poet.'

Aleksander Wat in Stephen Watson *A Writer's Diary* 1996: 100

## Friend

Woman: you are an arm's and leg's length.  
You are infant's skin and the gentle lick of curls.  
Lady: you are cat's eyes behind prim frames,  
the elegant drag of a cigarello,  
you are pencil-thin lips and a madonna's poise.

Yours is a red, meat-eating man.  
His is a shy smile, loud laugh, belly full.  
Yours, woman of books, is a man of land.  
Each season he claims his harvest, he yields.  
And yet, and yet . . . I find no space for you in him.

## Vertigo

He thinks because  
he's tall he suffers  
vertigo, like the  
trees  
leaning.

When I ask him *what does  
the sky smell like,*  
he tells me:  
wet earth  
and steam.  
The higher you rise  
the more dense  
the scent,  
moist with the altitude  
of silence.

*And what does it feel like?*  
I ask. He says:  
Like making  
your way  
to the surface,  
while the weight  
of the  
atmosphere  
erases  
your edges.

*More!*  
I see: Degrees  
of light through  
shattered sky.  
Light like  
frozen shards  
of water.  
Patterns in  
the sand, like sea.

*And?* Ceaseless movement,  
the ebb of the tides  
quick in the dark,  
when the falling to sleep  
is faster.

## Falling

We fell,  
mother's mother, mother, and I.  
It was light and the world was reeling.  
In our dizziness mother's mother  
lost sight and mother lost grip,  
of their men, and their seed.

We fell,  
And in the slipstream smelled  
aftershave, star anise and coffee – brewing.  
We closed our eyes to dream our  
falling into a beginning, and not an end.  
We envisioned the softest landing.

We fell,  
and on landing recognized each other,  
and that they were gone. We sniffed the  
air for cinnamon or tobacco. We smelled only  
our own breath on ourselves. Mother's mother  
could rest then and mother set off in search.  
And I? I am still finding a man and his seed,  
from whom to take what I need,  
and leave.

## Traces of him

They can smell me  
like he could smell  
you, mother.

These men with children  
whose wives have  
left them. It's like,  
they can smell  
the traces of him –  
and his four children –  
who you married.

In my hair,  
on my skin,  
as I do what  
I do, as I come  
and go.

They can smell me  
on the seats I've  
sat on. In the water  
I've drunk. In the  
space I've moved in.  
And they want,  
with words, and  
gestures. With their  
eyes they smell me,  
wanting.

Smelling.

Wanting what would  
never please them.  
The mothers of their  
children, back.

## On driving past

I drove past a man  
in his car with a vacant stare.  
His hand was to his mouth  
and I swear he could smell  
eucalyptus, nicotine, or his  
daughter on his fingers.



House sitting 1

Breath in your walls  
in your sheets  
heavy bed  
Buddah,  
in the light  
laughing  
from the balcony  
onto the street  
over the traffic  
and the trees breathing  
Breath  
into my mouth  
as I sleep  
into my cunt  
as I come  
quietly  
like you  
in the other room  
at her fingers  
in the dark  
laughing.

'That mouth that hangs from the thread of its breath.'

Samuel Beckett in Stephen Watson *A Writer's Diary* 1997: 123

## House sitting 2

Skulls in the corners  
Children in the walls  
between the bottles -  
levels of heavy liquid  
rising to their mouths  
Moths

Birds out your open  
window by the bath,  
the closest to the sky  
I've been,  
naked and wide  
in the light of the  
tiles, as embryonic  
warm in water  
as in sleep  
Sleep in your  
bed with high  
legs, the bed  
where he raises  
you to smiling  
between  
the cats.

Awake

The head on my legs  
has the weight  
of dead sleep.

The head on my legs  
is attached to the bulk of  
a body, breathing, belly-full  
with skinks and digesting birds.  
Full with green water from  
the dirty pond, with grass,  
shredded by loose teeth and gums.

The body on the bed whose  
head is on my legs, is dreaming  
and warm, running towards dawn  
light and cool morning.

## Suggestion

bald head i'd hold  
you if you'd let me

stone eyes i'd sit with you and stare

heavy hands held, i'd be shy

## Presence

I am a landscape, love –  
a stretch of desert in the heat,  
and you are my hot flat soles  
covering the distance,  
and my shadow.

I am a landscape and you are my temple, love –  
the silent halls of my mouth,  
my palms on cool stone.  
I am your breath and  
you are my scope,  
love.

'Certainly, one cannot read this poem without effort. The page is often corrupt and mud-stained, and torn and stuck together with faded leaves, with scraps of verbena or geranium. To read this poem one must have myriad eyes, like one of those lamps that turn on slabs of racing water at midnight in the Atlantic, when perhaps only a spray of seaweed pricks the surface, or suddenly the waves gape and up shoulders a monster. One must put aside antipathies and jealousies and not interrupt. One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound, whether of spiders' delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of water in some irrelevant drain-pipe, unfold too. Nothing is to be rejected in fear or horror. The poet who has written this page has withdrawn. There are no commas or semi-colons. The lines do not run in convenient lengths. Much is sheer nonsense. One must be sceptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade soot, bark, hard accretions of all sorts. And so let down one's net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry.'

Virginia Woolf *The Waves* 1994: 157

## The people and the poet

### *The artist and the poet:*

You were a casuarina tree,  
because of your whistle,  
and your height.

You would rub your eyes deep  
into their sockets, till you saw spots  
blue black green coming at you  
when you opened them again.

You smelt sweet like a child,  
but wanted nothing from me.  
You had the cane fields, the sea,  
the coastal forest, where you hung  
your noose for them to find you.

*The widow and the poet:*

(You who could paint stones beneath  
the water that I could pick out  
to put under my tongue.)

You were a fish first –  
a lithe-skinned, cleaned  
of scales red herring.  
They could not resist you.

When I met you you had found  
a second skin, white meat also,  
sun burnt crust: sea  
creatures you two.

When he died you flip-flopped  
onto the sand and dried:  
were too heavy a  
whale for me.



*The inyanga and the poet:*

Black man whose skin  
familiar enough to me, was  
charcoal some days,  
ebony-polish others –  
when it was cold, mostly.

Man of prophecies who longed  
to touch me as his bride.

Man of visions whose eyes hung like  
moons in his face, while quoting  
Joyce, devouring Nietzsche. Who  
mastered the eloquent tongue of the  
white mind before me.

## Reunited

The last one left, I saw you the other day.  
We scaled the shore while children stared  
enviously at the freedom of our contrast.  
We spoke of voices in the dark.  
Eyes under water.  
Of ancestors.

We walked barefoot through memory.

'Lay those words into the dead man's grave  
which he spoke in order to live.  
Pillow his head amid them,  
let him feel  
the tongues of longing,  
the tongs.'

*In Memoriam Paul Eluard Paul Celan Selected Poems (translated by Michael Hamburger)*  
1988: 95.

## Letters and replies

*To you,*

How are you man-friend?  
Are you happy, in love? Are you living your best life?

I still hear your laughter these days, vibrations in my heels.

Love and light precarious soul,  
Woman of the bees.

*From you,*

I am here. Scratching beneath the frosted water, finding things  
I hadn't realised I was looking for, which were submerged.  
I realise now how close I've held them all these years,  
and am learning to let go.  
I'm tired of clutching at the past, you know. It slows one down.  
So I am here, empty handed, for the first time in a while.

Sincerely,  
The albatross (around your neck).

*To you,*

Empty handed, scratching man, the past drones in my full hands.

I am still in the same place that you left me. In the same body, drawing patterns in the dirt  
with my stubby fingers that you'll remember well.

I still watch the ants eat the crumbs that I have left for them.  
Still talk to the birds that eat the ants.

And in between all this, like a good woman I wax my dreaded hair often, so as not to appear  
ghoulish, or obscene, and offend.

I forget as soon as I remember that I was alive once, that we were young and alive and wore  
the eccentric colours of fish. I remember as I forget to remember that there are seasons for  
these things. That I prefer the fall now, without you.

Rick

Last I saw you – a week or two now –  
you climbed a chair with a broom  
and rake in your hands. To pull  
an avo from a low branch.

It was green and clung. You said  
you would watch it ripen.  
You would time gravity's pull.

When I sat the other day,  
outside, for the first time.  
A plaque on a nearby knobbed  
trunk read: *Ricki, 08/03/08.*

I thought then, of gravity.  
Of leaves, falling.  
Of ripe fruit.

Today I watch as they pour  
chlorinated water on the  
flowers at your grave.

## Grandmother

When he died she promised herself three things: good coffee,  
butter, baby-soft,  
2-ply toilet paper and  
an overseas vacation every year.

But still she re-used the water in the sink five times,  
never throwing out a container or plastic packet that could be used again:  
to pack, to store, to serve, to freeze or wrap, to seal or keep.  
She did her face up first thing every morning, each day. In case of guests, she said,  
until her lungs collapsed.

## Berg Wind

Time is dying  
I feel it slack and weighty  
against my breath  
In the perfect roundness of fruit  
In birds falling from the sky  
in anticipation of dust

A wind has picked up to hurry it on  
and it is warm and restless in leaves and hair  
Curtains insist on billowing  
The hounds circle anxiously,  
the years dropping off them in  
great big clumps of sound:  
whining or yelping insomnia

No one dare sleep through this passing  
We are to bear witness

## Stockville Valley

Half-way down,  
the house on the right,  
at the bend in the road.  
The one with the pink walls, flaking.  
The one with the shrine which the thin  
man in baggy pants adorns each morning  
7.30, on my way to work. The man from  
whom I learn in glimpses, how to prostrate,  
and pray.

'We have to search the world with the inner hunger, the avidity of a Platonist for the real, if we are even to see the surface of this world.'

Stephen Watson *A Writer's Diary* 1997: 16



Motor Licensing Bureau

On the barrier separating renewals from fines, a sign:  
Customary marriages now legally recognised.  
Monogamous, or polygamous.

Word call

What's over after solitude is a heavy hand, and head.

What remains of ecstasy are two dead legs.

The legacy of this corpse will be a hundred-dozen words,  
like a line of angered ants in want of water at the ocean's edge.

*One of the two*

Who was it that stitched  
language to the underside  
of my tongue before I could  
breathe?

Was it you, father, with your  
tan skin and world-words  
like: halva, dolmades and  
afko-lemonie, sung to my  
new ears with your body  
when you were home?

Was it you, mother, in the  
silence between your stories  
of his stories that turned my  
ear to the sky? Drunk on dark,  
which of you taught me so  
early of the warm star murmuring  
in my mouth, the air outside,  
catching on every inhale?

Which of you taught me the  
craft of the instrument of silence?  
Pause by pause, the discipline of  
the breath's lust for greater clarity  
of sound: long and deep in  
the throat humming?

Who was it that set my  
eyes at a pitch, grave and  
awake? That filtered the  
laughter from my blood so  
that I rush a more sombre  
pallor than the thick still  
ocean of the company I keep?

Which of you held my hand  
to light the match? To light  
the fire that set the water  
boiling? Was it you, mother,  
father, who exhaled ghost  
breath between my gills?

Fish of the galaxies, you  
spawned me in the smoke  
of your fire that rose to the  
moon like a chant.

Thank you.

'Words and words and words, how they gallop – how they lash their long manes and tails.'  
Virginia Woolf *The Waves* 1994: 66

**On the writing process**

## **Intertextuality**

'I am only one of many loci in the universe of stories' (Skinner 1984 in NELM: 36).

One of the reasons I am so grateful to have taken the time to write a reflexive document alongside and in support of my collection is that it has aided in my vocalisation of who or what it is that I respond to in my poetry, as well as who and what I am desiring a response from.

I have always been aware that what I read changes me, influences me, and yet this awareness has remained subtle and largely semi-conscious until now. My extensive reading on intertextuality, where I have investigated theorists like Saussure, Bakhtin and Kristeva, has given me invaluable insight into what it is that I have been aware of all these years. Graham Allen, in his book *Intertextuality*, puts this succinctly when he says, 'Reading is a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext' (2000: Intro). Although when theorising about intertextuality the above mentioned theorists were referring to fictional texts and not poetry, I feel the essential elements of their philosophy are transferable to the poetic genre. Indeed, this is so because, 'Literary systems hold a similar structure to language – creations are not the product of the author's original thought, the work is not a container of meaning but a site for/in which 'a potentially vast number of relations coalesce' (12).

It is in light of the above notion of intertextuality (and therefore, intersubjectivity) that I would like to describe my collection as multi-vocal. By multi-vocal I mean two things, one meaning pertaining to the theories of Saussure and Bakhtin, and the second to the philosophies of Kristeva. By multi-vocal in regards to the former, I mean that each of the poems in my collection has its own voice – as a result of register, tone, style and diction. My collection can therefore be described as polyphonous, meaning literally, 'the simultaneous combination of parts or elements, or their voices' (Allen 2000: 22). Over and above this

polyphonous chatter however, my own voice as a poet (characterised by a particular style) combines and converses with the voices of all the poets and novelists that I have read and responded to in my reflexive writing. In this way Bakhtin's term heteroglossia serves to capture the intertextual multi-vocality of my work. *Hetero* stems from the Greek word meaning 'other', *glot* from the Greek work for 'tongue' or 'voice', and so heteroglossia can be defined as 'language's ability to contain within it many voices, one's own and other's' (29). In this respect, my poetry, like all writing, is dialogic. Bakhtin accurately conveys what I mean by dialogic when he says:

'The word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another' (1984a: 201 in Allen 2000: 27).

I have always written with an awareness of the dialogism of my language. Maybe my awareness of the influence of reading has always been an awareness that the world and words, were already inhabited and that to use language in an original way, in order to make words new again, and in order to make sense differently, required skill. This said, my work expresses a state of being. My poetry is merely an attempt to put words to my perception out of respect for what I see, also to some extent, in order to deny and simultaneously feed that tendency towards pessimism in me. I see until seeing kills me. I see until I find beauty there – so that I ache to be both alive and witnessing, and both dead and distant, not the beautiful thing itself. If it so happens that I survive this aching, and that the sense I make with words is fresh and alive, then I know fully that the time and energy invested in this craft called poetry, is why I am here.

And yet however and for whatever reasons I write, I cannot forget that the dialogism of the language I use is specific to a particular context. The fact that my poetic influences are mostly South African poets, the fact that I am South African, that my country was a colony, that we have suffered oppression and achieved liberation, means that the context I am influenced by, the poetry, the literature, the very language I write in and with, speaks back



to and from this history: the intertext. Part of my concern with multi-vocality in a South African context in particular, is that in being a young poet post 1994, my identity is not tied up with 'a cause', my voice is not calling in unison with others for great change or recognition. Instead, my subjectivity is fragmented and multiple and I experience myself as consisting of traits of all people, of different races, cultures and creeds. My experience is not only of language but of myself as dialogic also.

Tatamkhulu Africa in an interview with Robert Berold in 1997 commented that, once you admit to yourself that you are all people, you have no armour between you and them, the world (Berold 2003). Perhaps he has a similar experience of containing many people, all people, in himself. Andrew Verster also, is quoted as saying something of similar resonance, 'We are all many people in one body, in one skin. Who knows what mysteries hover in our DNA? We are, as a country, searching for an identity. It will eventually emerge from the multitude of different histories that trail behind each of us' (2007). Kelwyn Sole, coming from the same place but from a slightly different angle adds to Verster when he says:

Growing up in South Africa has shifted, fractured my personality into a certain shape, and I can do no other than write from that personality. There have been many factors that have helped shape my identity. And although this particular 'shape' belongs to me, I would generalise to say that all of us in this country have been moulded and fractured, in our various ways and as a result of our various circumstances, by the experience of learning to live here (2003: 35).

In light of the South African literary past from which I have emerged and the role of poets in that past, it has always been a concern of mine that my poetry is not political 'enough'. Unlike the work of older more established poets I admire, for instance, Lesego Rampolokeng's *Bavino Sermons* and Antjie Krog's *Down to my last skin*, I cannot speak of Apartheid's silence and blood or The Truth Commission. I am of the next generation, the generation these predecessors fought for. To some extent I feel I owe it to them to be a protest poet, but I am not. I am not and yet I am. Poems like "Mr Fish" and "Stockville Valley" are deeply political, in terms of conversations and interactions particular to this place and my people, who are part of me and who I am a part of.

Sometimes I forget that the political is inextricable from the personal, and that one does not have to write about 'politics' – in its literal sense – to write politically. In writing as a woman, as a white woman, as a young person, as an educated individual, as a heterosexual, I am positioning myself and being positioned by my readers, inevitably. It is in respect of this that I agree with Rampolokeng when he says that poetry is a cultural activity (Berold 2003) and in light of this also, that I agree with Douglas Reid Skinner's comment that good poetry is identified by whether it transforms its context by transcending it, 'not in the sense of leaving it behind, but in the sense of enabling the context itself, by extending the context geographically and temporally' (NELM: 43). My collection then, is merely one voice in the conversation that is South African poetry. More particularly, my collection is one voice in the current dialogue between young South African poets today; those of us who bear the cross of our forbears while moistening the throat of the voice of our children.

Kristeva believes that not only are texts and words continually in conversation with each other, creating a web of intersubjective, dialogic meanings, but that there is a dialogue happening all the time, between the primal and socialised voices within each of us.

'The subject, for Kristeva, is thus split between two signifying fields. The symbolic field involves socially signifying language operating under the banners of reason, communication and the ideal of singularity and unity. The semiotic involves the 'language' of drives, erotic impulses, bodily rhythms and movements retained from the infant stage prior to the subjects' splitting during the thetic phase' (Lloyd 1993: 49).

Central to Kristeva's conceptualisation of the semiotic is the chora, a word taken from Plato's *Timaeus*, which means, 'receptacle'. This receptacle or chora is 'unnameable, improbable, hybrid, anterior to naming, to the One, to the father', and is heterogeneous in disposition (1980: 133 in Lloyd 1993: 49). Kristeva posits that as adults we do not lose completely our relation to the fluidity of self, prior to language, logic and the fixing of identity and subject position. She claims that it bubbles up in poetic language, disturbing the monologic order of the symbolic field and dismantling stable meaning, communication and notions of singularity, unity and order (1993).

Parallel to her division of consciousness, Kristeva describes the polyphonic text as consisting of the genotext (the part of the text emanating from the 'drive energy' or unconscious, using language from the symbolic order to be heard), and the phonotext (the text bound up with language, communication, structure, a singular voice and a unified subject). In this way, Kristeva's work places a psychological dimension onto Bakhtin's analysis of the polyphonic text, dialogism and heteroglossia. In this way, multi-vocality can be identified as operating not only between texts but within them.

Why do I find this so fascinating? Of what relevance is the above exposition? Kristeva's theory has gone some way in explaining for me the mystical element of writing. By mystical I mean how it is that as a poet I at times experience moments of maddening inspiration, how sometimes it is as if the words I write, the language I speak, I have breathed in with the ether. Yes, obviously there is skill and craft involved in writing, and practice of course, goes a long way in refining one's talent, but sometimes also, the words just come, from somewhere inside one for which there is no biologically reductionist title. It is from this place that one's voice as a poet originates, changes and matures, and it is to this place, that when poets are barren of words, they attempt to return to, to access or to summon.

It is perhaps why so many writers, poets and artists are introspective, permanently navigating the tightrope of metacognition so as not to fall into the abyss - the abyss of irrational desires, of equal and unbounded joy and sorrow, of passion, where I believe language is created, where resonance sounds from. We are reliant on this fluid, darker half of ourselves because it is from this tempestuous relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, the symbolic and the semiotic, that each poem *should* come and why, each poem while sounding with the unmistakable and characteristic voice of its creator, speaks also with its own voice, speaks originally.

Beneath individual consciousness there are 'profound depths' to be explored – 'to hear vague, ancestral sounds of boughs creaking, of mammoths; to indulge impossible desires to embrace the whole world with the arms of understanding' (Lloyd 1993: 158).

## Time and memory

'Writing has the power to overcome both the loss of the past and the fragmentation of the self. By bringing the "severed parts" together, we are able to internalise the past in a way that allows us to move on into the future' (Woolf in Lloyd 1993: 160).

I write because words are the closest I can come to experiencing an event wholly. Life is inscribed onto my retina in the wild calligraphy of metaphor, in the bloody ink of personification. In my writing on real-life events (rather than emotional/abstract reactions) I have always thought that I was recording life as it unfolded, as it happened around me, that my writing required of me that I 'be' present in time, in order to catch the instances, the seconds in which stories unfold before they pass unnoticed by any other eye. Lloyd captures accurately the concept of time that I imagined I was after when he says,

'The present, in abstraction from the mind's attention, collapses internally into a non-existent future and an equally non-existent past, on either side of a durationless instant in which nothing can happen. We are left then with a paradoxical passage from non-existence, through a fleeting, existence-bestowing 'present' into non-existence again. The only time that can be called present is an instant – that cannot be divided even into the most minute fractions' (Lloyd 1993: 22).

Indeed, I am still aware of time's swift movement and my need to see, but I have realised on reflection and as a result of extensive reading on the nature of time, that it is my memories of events, of instances, of how I felt, of what I smelled and tasted and witnessed at the time, that I have always and will always, only be able to record. This is the case even if I am sitting prepared and ready, pen in hand, making poetry at the time of its inspiration, e.g. the poems "Corner Cafe" and "From Corner Cafe" which were written while sitting at my 'local' working and watching the world. I do not think and write simultaneously. I think and on remembering what I thought (even if a second before) write down what I remember. St Augustine, during his reflections on the nature of time and 'self' once wrote that it must be his mind that was measuring time, that 'everything that happens leaves an impression

which remains after the thing itself has ceased to be. It is the impression that he measures, since it is still present when the thing itself, which makes the impression as it passes, has moved into the past' (1993: 23). Also, although I may not always be physically holding the pen and writing at the time of the experience, I am making sense of the experience in words. Much of my editing takes place on the rough ledger paper of my mind before I approach pen and notebook. By that time it has been written and re-written, formatted, broken up and rearranged in my mind. When it comes time for me to record the event, the original experience is relived as it emerges on the page. It is then that I compare the accuracy of the description to the actual event, and only sometimes decide to cut and paste, or delete.

Consider for instance, the poem in my collection, "A.M.2". I wrote "A.M.1" in 2005 and numbered it specifically, knowing that I wanted to write its sequel. I have written and re-written it in my head over the last three years and it was only in May 2008, that I sat down to put my thoughts to paper. The poem came out fully formed, rounded, clean and seamless, a testimony to time.

'Writing brings form out of formlessness, to construct individuality. Through writing one has to make complete these fragments of being which stand out from the rest of experience. The world takes on the format of a work of art in which we participate: 'We are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself' (1993: 159).

## Place

'In the aesthetics of naming...the land frequently becomes the person, and becomes part of the body's text; the social and the historical self is perceived through the land' (Gunner 1996: 120).

Simmel, in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, says, 'the city exacts from consciousness a much higher degree of discrimination, changing the sensory foundations of psychic life. Coping with it demands the ability to cope with rapid crowding, of changing images, the sharp discontinuities, the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions, without being completely atomised internally' (Lloyd 1993: 9).

I adamantly believe that as much as what I have read, whether poetry, fiction or theory, has influenced my writing, the physical space in which that writing has taken place has had as much or more of an impact on the style and content of my poetry. Having lived mostly in the city of Durban throughout the writing of my collection, the quote by Simmel goes some way in helping me understand firstly, my preoccupation with fragmentation and wholeness, and secondly, the nature and form of my writerly medium, namely, poetry.

The pace of city life, indeed, the bombardment of people and vehicles, sounds, smells, colours, shapes, scenarios, interactions, ethnicities, cultures and characters means that even while walking down a street one is processing these sensory stimulants at a rate that far exceeds digestibility. And yet, as suggested by Simmel, it is the adaptive 'higher degree of discrimination' that serves as a resource against the complete atomisation of the consciousness of city dwellers. Also, as suggested by Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 'the self's capacity for reflection, saves it from complete disintegration into the fragments out of which its patterns are formed' (Lloyd 1993: 9).

What I appreciate about Baudelaire's comment is that, while our capacity for discrimination and reflection 'saves us' from complete disintegration or atomisation, what is left or formed as a result of these adaptive mental resources, is not an entire consciousness, but a

fragmented one. It is the translation of this fragmented consciousness as a result of environment, into the medium of poetry, which intrigues me.

While the thematic content of my work is at times obviously reflective of the life of a city dweller, as in my poems, "Thirsty man and broken water pipe" and "Motor Licensing Bureau", it is the dispersed, condensed and photographic-like quality of poetry in general (especially in my work – with my focus on the instant, an interaction between two people witnessed in passing for example) that is evidence of a fragmented way of making sense of the world. It is to the overstimulation of city living, that I attribute both the fragmentation of my consciousness and my creative medium, poetry, and it is in light of this that I view each poem in my collection as singular, defined and tight. It is in light of this also, that I find the psychic urge to assemble a collection of poetic (fragmented) works, to make something whole, to make a story out of, to put together again, a form of nostalgia towards a more unitary consciousness.

## Audience

'The most crucial aspect of language, from this perspective, is that *all language responds to* previous utterances and to pre-existent patterns of meaning and evaluation, but also promotes and *seeks to promote further responses*' (Allen 2000: 19).

As far as I can determine there are two types of audience, imagined and literal. The imagined audience is the person or people who one is addressing at the time of writing a poem. This audience is complicit in setting the tone, the style and the register of the poem and acts as the equivalent of context. This is the audience one is responding to. It is not always easy for the poet herself to identify who her audience is and the exercise involves enormous amounts of self-conscious reflexivity. "Untitled" for example, is a poem that I initially thought I had written for the people it is about. On reflection however, when I admitted to myself that they could never read it, that I would never give it to them, I realised that although the poem may have been addressed to them, it was written *for me*, as part of a process of catharsis and clarification as to my feelings towards them. They were therefore my imagined audience at the time of writing, but will very likely never comprise members of my literal audience of readers.

In my own experience I have always considered audience secondary and it has operated unconsciously in my work. On reflection however, I have realised the demands of audience, the expectations they put upon one, or rather, which one allows them to put upon one self. By this I mean that, whether a poet's audience is herself, her internalised critic in the form of her parent figure, supervisor, the public or her lover, whether her audience comprises members of the same or the opposite sex, a similar or different race, religion or culture, whether it is her god-force or the walls of her writing space, the determining effect of audience is vast. An imagined audience permits or restricts, accepts or condones, encourages or criticises. It can serve as one's license and liberation, or one's nemesis, even both at different times. Indeed, Ted Hughes was once quoted as saying that the progress and success of a writer, is characterised by those instances when he has outwitted his own police system (Burroway 2003).



I have learnt through the writing process of this thesis however, that reflection on and identification of WHAT and/or WHO one is writing to or for, and WHY, is a vital aspect of managing one's craft. Also, that most often, we hide our intentions, our motivations, even from ourselves. A poem like, "One of the two" for instance, which is about my parents, took immense amounts of simultaneous self-control and self-liberation to write. The knowledge that my mother will very likely one day read this poem, immediately set up a censor effect upon what it is I wanted to say, how honest I wanted to be, or could be, in case of offending her. Every poet knows this struggle of walking the fine line between consideration for her subject, or audience, and the need, the absolute need, to write what must be written, for one's own sake, as well as the poem's.

As a Masters student in the University environment, one's first experience of a literal audience comes in the form of one's supervisor. Kobus and I are in agreement that, to a degree, a poem becomes something else, that it goes out into the world and becomes 'other' to the poet, once it has been read by someone other than he or she who wrote it. Before then it is the property of the poet, it is her treasure. Once a poem is shared, one can no longer be precious about it. This is the knowledge I gained, as a result of my participation in the Creative Writing Honours Programme in 2007. Karen Press confirms this when she says that a poem comes from the poet but then becomes itself, so that the poet must work to perfect the craft of this 'thing' (poetry, and 'a' poem) for its own sake, not for her own sake (Berold 2003).

Burroway also speaks of this crafting process, though from a different angle, 'When you write about an experience you cast it in a new form and thereafter furnish it with a new purpose' (2003: xxii). The craft, the hours of editing and refining a poem, are part of the process of discovering what the purpose of it is, and then, 'making it 'work'... making it meaningful for the reader who is your partner in the imaginative act' (xxiii).

This considered, one's supervisor serves as a mediator between oneself and the other literal audience: the world (the critical and fickle public of other poets and readers of poetry). The audience one is seeking a response from. Kobus has helped me determine which of my

poems 'work' and which of those do not. He has helped me define what a poem that 'works' means, how a poem that reads as fluid and seamless feels (in the reader's mouth and psyche and body) different to a poem which is contrived and overworked, in which the stitches and joins between words and stanza's are too self-conscious and transparent, like barbed wire to the tongue, dust to the eye. Kobus' alternate lens has helped me differentiate between a sparse poem to which stringent editing, cutting out and back and discarding must be applied, and more verbose and rich- in-language (but not always as rich in meaning) poems where editing is more tentative and more about selective discernment than elimination. Having another eye and ear applied to my poetry in the student-supervisor relationship has prepared me for alternative interpretations of my work. This preparation has almost always resulted in my poems becoming more aware of themselves, so that they are more certain and sure of where they are going.

How is it that I speak of my poems, indeed poetry, as if they were persons capable of self-reflection?

This is where it becomes difficult talking about poetry with someone who is not poetic. It is like expressing one's appreciation of abstract art to a mathematician who sees beauty in form and logic. This is because poems are alive. The words from which they are phrased are alive. They are energetic and moody and independent. They are animals to some. Friends to others. They are born and are capable of inspiring, destroying and death, dying themselves, and helping others decide.

This may sound preposterous to some, like esoteric or philosophical drivel to others, but there is a sense when one is writing poetry that one is in communication. The making of a poem, and here I am talking of the actual writing, the stuff of the page rather than the poem's inspiration, is a two-way process. One writes what one sees, or hears, or believes about a person, one's self or a situation, yes, in the style that is characteristic of one as a poet, sometimes, but also in a particular format, with a particular register - all particular to The Poem. And although I am not ridding the poet of all influence and agency in the matter, it is The Poem that dictates to the writer – almost as if she were the poem's vessel or medium into the world, onto the page, out of the mouth – how it wants to be. It is about

listening for the voice of each poem, which is not something the poet decides. The poet's decisions, in editing and crafting a poem, are not her own. They are the poem's. And if in a sense, once the poet has heard it she is obedient to the voice of the poem . . . that is when a poem acquires 'soul', the magic that both startles the poet who 'produced' it, and irrevocably moves the reader to a confusing place of faith.

**On my writerly influences**

## Reading

'... In that peculiar way that writers read, attentive to the peculiarities of the language, soaking up numerous narrative strategies and studying various approaches to that cave in the deep wood where the human heart hibernates' (Alen Cheuse in Burroway 2003: xxiii).

I write because I read. I write because when in the womb my mother spoke to me, told me stories, laughed language onto her belly. Laughter, language that trickled through her navel, down her throat, into the embryonic fluid in which I thrived and drank down thirstily, to quench the fire that was ignited inside me on conception, that I was born with, on emergence into the world. I write because as mitosis took its course and I divided and grew, as my awareness developed and I encountered the world and its people and their stories, I moved away from egocentricity and into the grand narrative that is humanity.

Something strange happens to a writer while reading – an activity I have been immersed in over the last few months of writing this thesis. I can discern three simultaneous levels of experience in reflection on my own reading process. The first of these is reading at the level of appreciation, aesthetic enjoyment, reading for reading's sake, for the love of language and sound, image and character – how these are enabled through particular arrangements of words, different styles. It is at this level that one is carried away, emotionally, imaginatively, into worlds and lives and minds other than one's own.

My second level of reading is from the perspective of a writer in continual want of refining her craft. I therefore wear a critical lens, a pair of discerning, dissecting, analytical spectacles that read for the writer's skill, inspirations and influences, the writer's choices and achievements as well as areas of neglect or apathy. This reading is both interruptive and complementary of the first and directly related to the third.

My third and last level of reading is that of challenge, as to how I could have written what I have read differently, or better. It is also the lens through which I refine and reinstate my own style. If my critical reading has proffered no errors, flaws or disappointments, it is

usually from a dark place of envy of the author and regret at my own lack of originality that I set the standard bar higher for myself, upping my game so to speak. If I am disappointed, however, and if my reading of the text has left me wanting, unsatisfied, then it is with a bloated sense of satisfaction that I reflect on my own accomplishments as a writer, knowing full well, however, that the appreciation is completely subjective, the industry fickle, and that complacency is for the weak.

Another part of me reads with the sweet knowledge that on some unconscious level a process of assimilation is occurring. In fact, this pleasure is all pervasive in every aspect of my life, from walking down the street, to having a conversation. By knowledge of assimilation I mean that I know, even at my most dull and uninspired moments, that every action and experience is adding to, making, and changing the schema with which I already perceive the world, and that out of this metamorphosing process comes the stuff of poetry. It is for this reason that I know to wait when I am 'flat and uninspired', for the moths of thought to drift and settle before they can be observed in detail by study, etched back into life by the flight of the pen across page.

I write to keep myself alive.

**Karen Press** *The Canary's Songbook*

*The Little Museum of Working Life*

*Home*

How do I explain how my experimentation with language has been put to retrospective shame subsequent to my reading of the poetry of Karen Press? How do I even begin to explain how my work will never be the same again, because I will never allow it to settle into staid formality or tired clichés? It is for reasons such as these that I read. That I must. Write. Although I have only really discovered Karen Press' work mid-thesis, I can undoubtedly call her an influence on my poetry, as she will continue to be throughout my writing life, I am sure. Our work is not dissimilar in content or style. In fact, it feels as if she snuck inside me somehow, some time, and plagiarised my script. Only she has explored more deeply and has taken greater risks, she has lived longer and been exposed to more and richer life experience. She has listened more quietly, and she has taken poetry further, language further, words further and further and out. This is where our work is dissimilar. She is one of those *re-inventers of whom I have written and at times I have deeply feared that I would not know how to undo what she has done to me.* Her language is so wide a sky that at times I have feared that I would float beyond the here, to a place where no one could find me, or understand. She has guided me through an exorcism of old bone sounds.

In my work with Kobus we have often spoken about what makes some poems work and not others. As mentioned elsewhere one of the characteristics we have identified is a poem that reads as seamless compared to one in which the stitching of ideas is snaggingly evident. Another characteristic of a poem that 'works' is one in which the poet is present. By present I mean that the poet has given herself up to the creation of the poem and that the breath of her efforts is behind and between each of the words she has so carefully chosen. We call this her soul. And how do we know when it is there, when she is present? The only explanation I can offer is that a metaphysical change takes place in the reader. A chemical shift. A stirring. Perhaps emotionally, perhaps psychically, but most definitely physically. . . in the hairs on one's arms and the back of one's neck, in one's gut or in the soles of one's feet. In the opposite extreme, Emily Dickinson once described the experience as feeling as if

she were having the top of her head taken off. It is the same feeling the poet gets on having found the perfect, the right, the most accurate and fitting words to say what it is they want to say. It is the experience of movement beyond words, of 'ringing true' (Burroway 2003: Xxii) or the 'deep song' (NELM: 226). Karen Press leaves no stone-word unturned. She is as present in her work as braille.

Karen Press undoes and displaces our assumptions of what poetry is by bringing the outside in. She incorporates lists, dialogue, sums and letters into her work in such a way that the traditional forms of poetry are delighted in their expansion. She plays with rhythm, hence breath, and with structure, hence vision. The white of the page is rearranged, the rectangular format of the page is broken and rounded more fully with words bursting and escaping, snippets of conversation, an equation, the last item on a shopping list of desires. I had begun to do this myself before being introduced to Press' work, instinctively, out of the need to have fun with language again, like when I was new to poetry, a young poet . . . which I still am, will always be. My experimentation was tentative and I took the first drafts of my work, poems like "Grandmother" and "Letters and Replies" to Kobus who said, 'More!' and 'Here...', handing me Press' collection *Home*, handing me Heidi Kruger's *Lush: Poems for four voices*. And so I began my journey backwards in order to move forwards.

In an interview with Robert Berold in June 1993, Karen Press said, 'I have no sense of being part of any community that is a public community – in this place or in any other place, and really my sense of my own being here and of other people's being here is as little and as powerful as that space that one person can occupy in the world' (Berold 2003: 19). I do not know if her opinion on this has changed since '93. I would like to say in response to the above quotation, however, that whether Press believes or feels herself to be part of a larger public community or not, by having her poetry published, by having it read and hence, by exposing that solitary child in herself, she is undeniably a part of something larger, a community of readers, of writers, of seekers. She is not alone, for I have heard her. I hear her. When she speaks.



**Joan Metelerkamp** *requiem*

*Stone no more*

*Into the day breaking*

*Carrying the fire*

I will refer mostly to the collections *requiem* and *Stone No More* in my discussion of the influence of Metelerkamp's poetry on my own. *Carrying the fire*, her most recent collection, is of the adventurous and experimental ilk similar to that of Karen Press, a style that I am only just beginning my exploration of and which, as a result, will be but has not yet been an influence on my writing.

*Requiem*, to me, is of a stream-of-consciousness, regurgitative style that is as frantic and panicked as a sleepless night of dreams. Each poem is an onslaught that, although written as an individual piece, must be read in relation to and together with the other poems in the collection, in order for it to make sense. If digested in this way – the only way I as a reader knew how – the collection reads as a narrative, is visualised as an image. I am uncertain as to whether this was Metelerkamp's intention or not, but the fact that she has broken the collection mid-way with an interlude, and has concluded with a Sanctus, bears testimony to her knowledge of the exhaustive and continuous nature of the collection.

In my proposal for this thesis I indicated the desire for my collection to be considered a narrative of equal status to prose, fiction or a script. Whereas 'a narrative poem' is traditionally considered epic, historical and plot-driven (linear) I proposed that the definition include poems about instances, details or observations that tell only the story of a moment, a mood or an interaction and in a sense, could be read as sub-stories. In effect, through the form of a collection then, it would be possible for a poet to represent herself in the form of a more unified, if not narrative-like structure, than fragmentation implies. The poet, through skilful use of devices such as image, voice and metaphor, could potentially resolve the conflict between the many voices of the individual poems (sub-stories) into a persuasive 'authorial' voice that would be heard and felt as the pre-eminent presence in the aesthetic whole of a collection. Lloyd goes some way in articulating this capability of narrative when he says, 'In virtue of its form, narrative brings together fragments of temporal experience,

allowing them to be grasped at as a unity. Narrative transforms the inchoate sense of form in our experience of temporal fragments into poetic universals through which we come to understand our experiences of the particular' (1993: 12). I believe Metelerkamp achieves this objective, consciously or not.

It has occurred to me also, that the stream-of-consciousness, dream-like quality of Metelerkamp's work feels like introspection taken too far to me. At times she has overstepped that precarious edge where introspection becomes dangerous, where audience becomes obsolete, and where one's work is cathartic to oneself but is too personal and not translated enough into common themes, symbols and attitudes for the reader. A quote by Schumann at the outset of *Requiem* reads, 'A Requiem is a thing one writes for oneself.' Indeed, but it is in such cases that writing can lose its accessibility. I tend to agree with Angifi Dladla's view that the most difficult and thrilling part of being a creator is to be invisible as the creator in one's work (Berold 2003).

In *Stone No More* Metelerkamp's poetry is more structured, no, more formal rather, in that the poems read independently of each other and are visually less fractured and scattered across the page. They are more contained. Continents perhaps. It is not this that makes the collection work (and hence more influential and effective) for me more than the last however. It is the theme of place that runs through the poems in this collection, which resonates with me. It is a theme I tackle too, in my own writing. Home in terms of a place, in terms of a country, a city, a suburb, a neighbourhood or one's residential abode. Home in terms of a person, or people. Home in terms of a place in oneself. How the exterior becomes interior and vice versa. Poems like "Portrait" and "Space of the Imagination" capture for me, firstly, the conflict between one's dissatisfaction, one's claustrophobia amidst the familiar and one's desire for somewhere, anywhere, other. Simultaneously they capture for me one's obsession with noting, with naming and boasting of the charm and character of a place that is reflective of oneself, that made one oneself. In describing place then, in telling it and naming its rich textures and secrets, the poet is both inviting the reader to know herself, and also, pleading with her to save her from herself.

Secondly, the proliferation of place, and hence, identity markers within this collection, and the similarity of this feature to my own poetry, has caused me to question the limitations and advantages of this device. Take for instance, the extracts below.

weaver's pendulous nests, erithrina,  
dust; nights, skin-deep  
sleep, never enough to let the muscle  
go, let alone....

(“Space of the Imagination”)

It is a warm November Saturday.  
The morning is here. She lets in the light.  
Chelmsford Road. She knows its contradictions  
well: towards the dip, thorny many-stemmed  
Chatachme aristata; umkhuhlu;  
Albizia...

(“Portrait”)

In one sense these place names, plant names and street names, conjure up an intimate and familiar environment for any South African, especially from Durban. But in another way they function, potentially, to isolate any reader not from the locale described. How is someone who has never heard of an Albizia for instance, supposed to see and smell and feel one if all she is given is its name? While the use of pronouns can serve to situate a poem for the reader, they can also serve to disorientate her. And yet, it depends on the reader really. If she reads poetry as I do for example, she reads for the essence of a poem, she reads between the words, the lines, the stanzas, and an unfamiliar place or name is nonchalantly overlooked, is irrelevant if the poem does what all poetry should do: if it moves one beyond words. Robert Berold calls this movement beyond words to the hairs on one's neck 'the deep song at the heart of poetry' (NELM: 226), and Janet Burroway also, calls this experience of language that is original and imaginative, 'ringing true' (2003: Xxii), which conjures up a delicious image of syllables and consonants jangling together to produce music.

**Antjie Krog** *Down to my last skin*

*Body bereft*

It was in high school, in about standard eight, that I began writing poetry. And it was at the end of matric that two of my teachers, who were also mentors, gave me the gift of Antjie Krog's *Down to my last skin*, in farewell. This collection has therefore played a fundamental role in my development as a poet. To me, Antjie Krog is the Toni Morrison of South African writing – in that both writers share the same power to evoke.

I can identify Krog's influence on my work in three main areas. Firstly, I realise in retrospect that I learnt to *mimic and master form through my reading of her poetry*. By *form* here I mean her careful and tender choice as to whether to begin each line with a capital or small letter, the length of the line, the use of direct speech which lends the poem authority and assertiveness. Each of these choices influences the tone and register of one's work. Even when throwing in a curse or an insult, when punctuating a stanza with a jibe, Krog's poetry reads with a formal, almost classical voice that displays a confidence in the words she has chosen, in their placement and their message. See my poem "One of the two". There is no need for clever tricks or scattering of language across the page, in order to disrupt and renew. As a result, Krog's work, and indeed my own, may be criticised as too constrained or staid – in terms of style – in comparison to the work of Karen Press or Joan Metelerkamp for example. I believe it is content though, always content, that one comes back to, which is all one is left with. And that, more often than not, less says more.

It was Krog who introduced me to the possibility of metaphor and simile. Who made the world come alive again. I hear keenly the resonance of Krog's work in my own. For example, her, 'I saw the day dying like a bird on its back' ("Sonnet (tonight)") and 'the double hibiscus groans desperate and red in the dark' ("The day surrenders to its sadness"), rings with the same music as my own, 'wide open black heart of mouth' ("Bird") and 'you were too heavy a whale for me' ("The people and the poet"). I believe that what Krog has mastered in her use of metaphor is what Burroway refers to as the principle of 'making the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (2003: 13). The craft of metaphor is about how taut one can make

the tension between the likeness or difference between two things, how subtly one can craft the resonance between the essential or abstract qualities that two objects or ideas share. This comes with play, practice and constant refreshment of the senses, in order to see the world as new again.

It was Krog who gave me permission to use the body in poetry, so that its tastes and smells and textures, its flesh and length, were expanded out of the realm of the intimate, the obscene and the silent, into the realm of poetry. Krog manages embodiment masterfully. It is through her management of embodiment that she translates wifehood, motherhood and hence politics in such a way that, despite my not being able to relate to such positions as yet, what roars over and above these voices is the tongue of a woman, the tongue of a woman that will not be cut out, who is certain and sure in her fury and her sex. The voice of a woman that is all women. The voice of the woman I once was, who I forgot, and am becoming again.

**Rustum Kozain** *This Carting Life*

The greatest lesson Kozain has taught me is pace, to hold an image across four lines of a stanza in such a way that they are read with one breath. He does this through enjambment, tactical line breaks, through the use of only the most vitally necessary words – words with sounds that carry the poem. As a result, Kozain has taught me about the intricacy of form. Kozain is one poet for example, who I have reached for in encouragement by Kobus to play more, to be more daring, to listen to the sounds of words differently...and hence, to translate them differently onto the page. Only an example will encapsulate what I am trying to convey, and the courage it takes to do what Kozain does.

For instance, these three stanza's from "Talking Jazz":

Even quick the bass was gentle  
then. And sometimes sluggish  
like a fish brooding under the skin.  
Or sometimes like rows of sand

left by wave upon wave  
of thick sound  
rounding in on us.  
And sometimes, just sometimes

the sax hit its high note  
immaculate  
free  
of time.

There are a number of other devices of which Kozain makes frequent use and which, through reading and active engagement with his work, have helped me hone my own skills in these areas. One device is the use of direct speech, where a poem addresses the reader,

usually someone particular that the poet has in mind. See for example, my poem "One of the two". Another device is numbering a collection of poems similar in theme so that they speak to and follow on from each other. I don't know how Kozain writes, and if he begins writing with a theme in mind or simply finds that a number of his poems are woven with similar thread and in fact complement each other. I know that the latter characterises my own process of writing poems as described above (see "The night before").

An area of interest and conflict for me, which in retrospect I have attempted to manage too consciously (see "The night before" for an example of this), is that of time, the mystery of it, the tediousness of it, its fluidity and fracture. I think the problem in my deliberation over time is that I have tried to approach it thematically, rather than, like Kozain, weaving time into my work, inadvertently and subtly. Kozain moves across time in his poetry as if his stanzas were continents and he were shifting zones. From 'Spawned in a sea of single malt...I will not die ashamed', to, 'Tonight there is no wind', to, 'Father I will one day leave', to 'Nine miles today, father' and on and on and on, Kozain's work with the flux of time is that of a craftsman. I am learning from him, with the eagerness of a colt.

**Mzi Mahola** *Dancing in the rain*

Mzi Mahola has in some ways influenced my work immensely, and in other ways not at all. I prefer Mahola's shorter poems, which for me are more effective in capturing concisely what it is he really wants to say, and yet this is a tendency in my own work so I am biased. But also not because the longer, in fact, extensive narrative poems of Rustom Kozain for example, can hold my attention throughout the duration of their reading. Let me pay Mahola both a stinging compliment and an insult simultaneously: his work excites me more when he has written less.

It feels for me at times, in Mahola's longer poems, that he captures something so strategically, so beautifully, and then before I know it he has moved onto something/somewhere/someone else and I have not been granted the opportunity to explore, to delight, to grieve in his use of language, the cleverness of it, before it is lost in unnecessary words. When Mahola does allow us a breath of his magic, in his shorter poems, and indeed, in the opening stanzas of his longer poems, it is the magic of the mundane, the ordinary and unnoticed-by-most in a way similar to Kobus, that takes one aback. What I am talking about here is the craft of the opening line/stanza or statement-like style of writing that I admire in the work of others and pay careful attention to crafting in my own poetry. Here are some examples:

From "Strange Things":

A man followed a madam  
Into a house...

From "Too late":

Let those who may  
Hold the devil's hand  
And learn his ways.



From "Next Time Use a Rope":

He lived fatherless  
For thirty-five years.

To me, this device of the introductory statement serves to set up the scene of the beginning of a story, planting a seed in the mind, in the mouth of the reader, so that she is hungry for more.

In a similar yet paradoxical way I have learnt and employ another device of Mahola's, that I call, the last-free-stanza. The last-free-stanza tends to break the format of the poem to which it is appended, as well as bring about a shift in the meaning of the poem, usually revealing the twist in the tale or curtailing any imaginings the reader may have meandered off on during their reading of the poem. It serves to catch the reader out, to take her breath away, to bring her back out of language and into meaning. An example of this in Mahola's work can be found in the poem, "The Same Procession":

He looked up the street  
And saw a procession.

Scratching his beard  
He went inside the house  
For a camera.

When he came out  
And focused on the target  
Through the eye of the camera

He saw the same procession.

## **Stephen Watson** *A Writer's Diary*

Watson's diary has felt like a companion to me throughout the process of writing this thesis. It has felt as if we were in dialogue, he and I. Watson articulates for me processes that are familiar and habitual, which I have always been aware of on an unconscious level, but which I have never summoned to the surface in order to sit down and write about. For instance, he eloquently describes what the life of a writer requires – in terms of discipline and self-consciousness; as well as what being a writer involves, inevitably – self-sacrifice, deep and often painful awareness, diligent practice of the craft of writing and constant exercise in striving further, for more, better...accuracy and novelty. Consider for example, the following as examples of his articulation of the creative, generative process.

'For words to be new-made, even though they themselves may be ancient, they have to be fetched from nothingness or from that place of inner emptiness that precedes creation. The poet cannot avoid encountering this nothingness (which has to become something) inside himself; nobody but he can undergo this encounter. Often, nothing else but nothingness will make his words ring true' (Watson 1997: 16).

And, 'This always coming to the verge of some aspect of the world whose reality leaves you helpless, sick at heart, scandalised, defeated – this, too, is the most basic place from where your poems come' (20).

This drive to reinvent, for novelty, that both encourages and kills, is something that I have spent much time mulling over, and is a topic that Kobus Moolman and I have returned to often. I am familiar with it in my own work. He is familiar with it in his. Karen Press describes it as existing on the edge of some sort of understanding, as pushing out further and further into a darkness that she does not understand (Berold 2003). Antjie Krog, Michael Ondaatje and poets that I have read but not referred to in this thesis, like Lesego Rampolokeng and the American poet Anne Carson for example, are familiar with this compulsion. I believe it is an urge all the more difficult to manage for writers who seek to make language new again, to seek to find renewal in their work with words that have been churned and measured

throughout the centuries. Introspection is one way in which I have sought and found renewal and is a source I believe many creators turn and return to. It is a treacherous exercise that requires almost inhuman rigour and persistent navigation. Watson describes this introspective journey as psychically risky for the poet, in that he 'has to negotiate that infinitely fine line beyond which meaning dissolves in chaos and before which meaning subsides in cliché. No wonder he should live then, in a kind of dread' (Watson 1997: 16). Kelwyn Sole describes it as the struggle not to die (Berold 2003), and Lesego Rampolokeng adamantly believes that one has to come to poetry from within one's self, rather than moving from the outside in (2003).

Kobus and I have often challenged each other as to how best manage the conflict between renewal and survival. My toolkit, I have learnt, is a spiritual philosophy that facilitates balance, the mastery and conscious isolation of the drive to lean too far forward, which it is my challenge to acknowledge and mindfully overcome. Maybe it is this harnessing, the resistance of such urges that serves as its own inspiration and challenge. My own experience of this resistance is one of vicarious witnessing of others pursuing their own regenerative and often destructive ends. Although I am passionate, alive and immersed in the events and experiences about which I write I am also deeply seated in my distance from the subject, intentionally, so as to remain cognisant of what it is about the event or experience that so appeals to me, so moves me. It is this way that I am able to place primacy on the creative process, the mystical experience of creating an entity that will go out into the world alone . . . and conjure up the very mood and atmosphere that I have witnessed and transcribed for the reader.

For me, this witnessing and transcribing process requires isolation, an almost meditative listening and watching and recording which has become a way of life. Watson best articulates this for me in his writing on the isolation of the creative individual in a way that is honest and poignant and true.

'Don't delude yourself: writers would create their own exile even if everything contrived to make them feel thoroughly at home in the world. Eliot: "The arts insist that man shall dispose of all he has, even of his family tree, and follow art...they demand that a

man be not a member of a family or a cast of a party of a coterie, but simply and solely himself."

And that oscillation in the writers life between moments of marginality and moments of community. You too have had to marginalize yourself in any number of ways in order to generate that fruitful asynchrony between yourself and the world. The creative work then becomes (at least on one level), the work of resolving all that asynchrony entails. The writer belongs to the world; but only by belonging to himself first of all. (In some cases, doubtless, last of all as well). And this is, in good part, his ethical problem as a human being, and as a writer' (Watson 1997: 48).

Watson articulates this meditative isolation also, in his descriptions of his relationship to the earth and the environment.

'Can there be a poetry without the earth, in which, finally, "word" and "earth" are not two parts of an indivisible whole, words which are in the deepest sense coterminous. Art may well feed off other art, but in the end we have no other point of reference than that which underpins it all: the earth. More than this, it is through the organic that myth is repaired. It is, moreover, to feel the reality of an ancient faith: the belief that either behind or within these physical features of the world there is something else, a presence that, with long and careful observation, can actually be apprehended' (1997: 36 - 85).

In reflection I have realised how vital my relationship with the earth is, to my will...to live and to write. I have realised that my desire to be in and surrounded by nature is synonymous with my appreciation of the solitary, my unquenchable desire for it, for what happens when one is alone, for how it changes one, and how it forces a deeper level of enquiry into oneself and the world, that for me, inspires play and risk-taking with language and hence, new and different poetic forms. So few people are able to be alone and to partake of dialogue with themselves. So many people are afraid of themselves, of what they might find on self-enquiry. If you sit still long enough the birds forget your presence. You notice shifts in the weather, the moods of places and people. You notice presences that you wouldn't normally. I observe that people talk to distract themselves from themselves and

each other. I find this unnecessary. I find it necessary to see and to hear and to record and to read and to remember and to play, in order to reinvent.

Some might call the gluttony and absorption of the world described above, voyeurism. I prefer to call this 'a state of being', or 'being' 'present', and think of it as the form of bearing witness I described above, which becomes a way of life, a way of perceiving the world that contributes, perhaps, to making one person a poet, and another, not.

Watson holds a similar view:

'Modes of perception: there is a way of seeing which is no more than a registering of certain presences, though no less conscious for being no more than this. It is one of the forms of contemplation and it has its value, perhaps above all, because it serves to make reality real. Peter Handke, the German writer, speaks of a paradisiac state in which "one only wanted to look, in which looking itself was a kind of knowledge"; when the most ordinary and everyday things assume a significance lent to them by the "inner world". And Schopenhauer, celebrating that man in whom the will is finally overcome and silenced, speaks in a beautiful sentence of how such a person is now left "only as pure knowing being; as the undimmed mirror of the world"' (1997: 96 - 97).

**Kobus Moolman** *Separating the seas*

*Time like Stone*

'No utterance exists alone' (Allen 2000: 19).

Kobus Moolman is both my supervisor and a poet I deeply admire. In talking about Kobus' poetry and the influence his words and play with language has had on me, I may just as well be talking about Kobus himself, the poet, and the influence he – who is his poetry, whose poetry is him – has had on me over the three years that I have known him.

Kobus handles words like globes of glass in the mouth. Of all the lessons he has taught me I think the greatest is not to overindulge common poetic devices like metaphor, simile, alliteration and personification. Or, if I am intent on overindulging, then to make new the idea or combination of words upon which I am insistent. To scour cliché right out of my vocabulary. Through a process of example and correction I believe I have learnt to use such devices wisely and originally, as if they were new toys that one must be careful with. This has been a process of trial and error that has led me more specifically, towards finding, firstly, the voice of each poem, and secondly, my own voice as a poet. One of the cardinal rules of writing poetry, and very likely writing in any genre, is that once you have found the voice of your poem, the rest follows.

How so?

By bringing to consciousness an awareness of the choices involved in writing that I as a poet have for a long time taken for granted, I have been able to battle and break through the sentiment that so often clouds one's critical judgement of one's own work. By being more ruthless in my editing I have gained selectivity and refinement and have as a result, been more able to emulate the sparseness and poignancy that I so admire in Kobus' poetry. An exercise as simple as listening to where a line should be broken in order for the poem to say what it must, in order for the last word of the first line and the first word of the next to mean what they must, has deeply and irrevocably altered the quality of my work.

Kobus' keen eye for detail in the world and her inhabitants, their idiosyncrasies and interactions, has encouraged the opening of a more watchful eye in myself also. His ability to conjure the mood of a place, an interaction or a person with language inclusive of the ordinary and the mythical, serves as a platform of inspiration for me in my own writing. Consider for instance, his poem "The dream":

He wakes up, still almost asleep,  
with the feeling for a woman warm in his blood.  
He will not know what to do  
the whole day long; coffee or cake,  
tea and a slice of toast –  
it will make little difference.

He is a name in a story, he knows.  
A man who walks under a spell,  
like a traveller, unknowing, through a valley  
of green rivers and willows  
where the waters are a song he has forgotten  
but cannot remember when.

He wakes up with the song in his blood,  
the song of a woman he will always forget.

This capricious tendency to observe and record, to notice and see and dictate to the page the atmosphere of a moment, of a lifetime, is a compulsion I too share. Kobus' work and my supervision under him have highlighted the dual creative processes that take place in a poet. A sort of double vision, a seeking out of poetry in life, resulting in found poems, poems that have been wrenched out of and acquired from life, in that persistent and desperate state of needing to write. And then, poems that one notices, per chance, while seeking, while living, perhaps during the living when one is not seeking. Notice more adequately capturing the chance-like quality of witnessing, producing poems that were always poems,

even before somebody wrote them, as if they were plucked rather from some collective memory or melting pot of an imaginative past.

There are two other processes, and their products, that I identify with in Kobus' work. I am not sure whether I identify with them because when I read his poetry for the first time I realised, ah ha, someone else does this, or, whether it is because under Kobus' tuition, I have mimicked some of the qualities of his work unconsciously.

Firstly, there are definite themes that run through both of Kobus' collections, some of which I too deliberate over and return to, like silence, solitude, time and place. And these are usually conveyed through recurrent images, like stone, dust, the sea, the moon, the wind and the sky. There is only one explanation that I can offer as to why it is that a poet, Kobus, or myself, would habitually return to certain words, no, not the words...the things that the words as signs represent, the signified – out there, in 'real' life. For when one finds something outside of oneself that so accurately, so perfectly interprets one's internal state in a way that will, possibly, make sense to others, one has found a token that as a writer, can be used as an invitation to the reader to understand. And so begins a process of fixation and examination as to every nuanced aspect of this gem, until one has emptied it, until one has emptied oneself of it. And it is as a result of this process, fortunately, that the reader who has intimately tracked one's thoughts over time, comes to know you, as she knows herself, and hears your voice as distinctly as the echo that returns to her when she too enters the reverberating halls of introspection.

Secondly, maybe out of a desire to escape the subjective stem of introspection, so that one is not felt as too overbearing as the writer and space is made for a wider audience, Kobus very often replaces the personal pronouns 'I' or 'Me', with the objective 'The/That man'. While redeeming a poem from seeming less like a confessional, this method simultaneously forces the poet to explore further, now that she is free of herself, and can become any woman, out there. See my poems "A.M. 1" and "A.M. 2", as examples of poems where I too have shifted pronouns for a more effective result.



## **Postscript**

Now, I have taken out my eyes and my tongue. I have pinched off my nose and my ears and cut off my hands that held the pen while writing the truth. Now, I release out of every wound shoals of little fish that scatter into the world, dark and wild. And they shall multiply. And I shall heal. For they have taught me how to grow again. As they have taught me how to sacrifice, and how to share.

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