

Interviewed by Joan Metelerkamp

When did you start getting interested in poetry?

When I was at school. I was not particularly interested in poetry until I was studying for matric, when one poem — it was Milton's "Lycidas" — suddenly came alive for me. It was like the universe opening up — I could hear these symphonic sounds. I didn't know what the poem meant, and I didn't even care, I could feel its power and its beauty. I read it over and over again until I memorised it. There was nothing in my English classes which had prepared me for an experience like this.

So then you went to university with this . . .

I went to university, but, you know, emotionally I was very infantile, about two years old, though I had a reasonably convincing adolescent mask. I was studying engineering, but another part of me was very confused, whirling around in my unconscious, which I tried to anchor in poetry.

Did you talk about poetry to other people?

Yes and no. I wrote poems (poems I was reading, not my own, I hardly wrote anything then) on the white tiles of my bathroom. It was, as I said, an anchor in an unsafe world. I read poems to Denis Hirson, who was my next door neighbour, and to my girlfriend, who I was trying hard to turn into my muse. I was out of touch with the 'real world', but what was the real world? In the white suburbs where we grew up, the undercurrent of violence was never far away. The police would raid the backyards and my parents said nothing. Maybe they thought they were protecting us. We were living a lie and nobody was telling the truth. But poetry, like the Lorca I found in the Hirsons' vast bookshelves next door, was telling me a truth I wanted to know about. Just the ring of the authentic voice was enough for me. I memorised poems and repeated them to myself, like mantras. Most of the time I didn't know what they meant, I just wanted them in my life.

Were you ashamed of your involvement? I mean, it feels as if this were some clandestine activity. . .

It was --- a secret life where I could feel my feelings. I knew it was something linked to a deep need in me. At Wits University I wandered into some English poetry lectures and thought — this has little to do with my experience of poetry. Ezra Pound wrote that a book should be like a ball of light in the reader's hands. That made more sense to me. I spent hours in the Johannesburg Public Library going through the poetry section. That's where I discovered William Carlos Williams, George Seferis, and Arthur Rimbaud.

You were lucky to find what you were looking for.

Not really, I knew what I was looking for, which was the intoxicating experience of being transported by a poem. I knew very quickly if a poem gave me that experience. I read essays poets wrote about each other, that guided my reading. After a few years of this, I'd become immersed in modernism. Later, in psychotherapy, I traced these searches to my own story. Perhaps it was not such an unusual story. I came from a family where there wasn't much love, but I was nurtured by a black woman. She was there consistently, from when I was born right up to my student days and beyond. When I was a baby she carried me on her back, and gave me a lot of warmth. I shared her food as she chatted to her friends sitting on the street corner. She wasn't a complete mother, she couldn't be, because she couldn't stand up for me against my parents, but she saved my life. I have a vivid memory of being strapped to her back, with her and another woman ironing clothes and singing, Sotho hymns vibrating through me, the smell of the iron, the highveld winter sun streaming through the kitchen. It was safety and bliss, which I have always associated with song and sensual warmth because of her. That survived in me and I nourished it with poetry.

I spent a long time in my adult life searching for that warm place, in poetry, in music and in relationships with women. Modernism gave me music. I was very attracted to musical poems, like Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Pound's *Cantos*, and most of William Carlos Williams, even though I couldn't really follow the arguments of the poems.

You might have come to the poems through music, but by the time you'd memorised them, you'd got to the meaning, in your own way.

Yes, the meaning was registering somewhere, but I trusted the music. It helped me to get into Pound's *Cantos*. However obscure *The Cantos* were, their music was not obscure.

Why didn't you take up music yourself?

I had some traumatic experiences. One was my father smashing my guitar to pieces because I was playing it while he was talking on the phone. Poetry was safer, it was dismissed as harmless I suppose. It was silent. Its power was a secret. It was a lifeline for me which I didn't want anyone to tamper with.

And these days?

These days it's different. I'm not so split. I'm mostly free of my prison. The music and the meaning (whatever that means) happen together for me. I can live my poetry out in the open. And I've finally got over my music traumas, I'm learning to play the double bass.

I'm involved at the moment with discovering myself as a Jew. My parents denied their Judaism, so a whole rich culture was denied me. But it's there, in my genes and my unconscious. Probably looking to books for the truth is where my Judaism surfaces. We are, as Jabés said, people of the book.

Not just the bible . . .

Since I was a student I've been carrying around my own bible, made of poems. It's the gospel according to Vallejo, Jabés, Li Po, Amichai, Tsvetaeva,

Sharon Olds and other poets, some of them South Africans. A shifting collection of sacred texts, which has become a mirror for me. Within this the *Ching* is the central spiritual text — it too is made up of poems or poetic fragments.

You've read an enormous amount in translation.

I started to realise, even at Wits, that the twentieth century had given birth to a huge range of poetic forms. These came out the shocks of history, the violence of the century. The first world war changed everything. There was very little in English poetry to match the passion and risk-taking of poetry from Spain, Russia, France, Greece, Latin America and Africa. I felt differently about American poetry because Eliot, Pound, Williams were my route into modernist poetry. I find it difficult to read Eliot and Pound now, their conservatism depresses me.

What about Hughes? And Heaney?

Well they just didn't do it for me. Some years later I got into British poets who meant more to me — the Welsh poet David Jones and the Northumbrian poet Basil Bunting, and poets like Tom Pickard and Ken Smith — but again it was mainly through the music in their poems. Most of the British poetry I found — I don't know —

-- too tight? Lacking the breadth of vision you were after?

Yes. Whereas European poets had a wider and deeper emotional range. The Penguin Modern European Poets series, edited by Alvarez, was appearing when I was a student. The volume *Four Greek Poets* — I remember reading it from cover to cover sitting on the lawn at the university. It had Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis and Gatsos in it. It was sensual, surreal and ecstatic, at the same time grounded in the land and in the political realities of Greece.

It's interesting for me that the poems in your first volume The Door to the River contain elements of both narrative and concentrated image. The narrative isn't a distanced narrative, from an omniscient point of view. Every now and then the pure lyric will emerge — like the poem "angel", from your most recent volume. But even in this frugal, concise imagist poem there is a narrative element: as soon as you mention turning the corner to Claim Street, you're grounded. . .

I think that Cavafy and Seferis helped me to see the historical and the lyrical together. After Wits I went to Cambridge University, in the early 70s, where I met two American poets, David Lehman and Lawrence Joseph. They were as passionate about poetry as I was. We read poetry furiously to each other. They introduced me to poets I didn't know. Joseph raved to me about St-John Perse and Camus' essays. Lehman had come from Columbia, the New York of Ashbery, Koch, O'Hara, poets who had turned to European rather than American poetry for inspiration. I think my out of touchness with reality scared them somewhat. I had a primitive sensual consciousness, even though I felt so deprived. Poetry provided a tenuous link to reality.

In two years there I got just enough distance from South Africa to realise that I had to move out of my trapped world. I started working in NGOs soon after I

returned in 1973. That took me across the apartheid line, and once you do that, you can't come back. It was difficult, I didn't belong to white South Africa and I didn't belong to black South Africa either. I just knew somehow that white privilege wasn't worth the psychological distortions that it demanded.

In 1976 I was teaching in Soweto. I was there on 16 June in the hurricane of anger provoked by the police shootings. My life was saved by students from my school who locked me away in the bookroom. They said that if students from other schools saw me, a white person, they'd kill me. That compassion, in the midst of that anger, changed things for me permanently. I felt I would carry on working with black people no matter what. I joined EDA, a small rural development organisation on the margins of the left.

You didn't want to become a political activist?

I was too scared to. But underground politics wasn't for me. Politics is about power, there's no room for confusion. My experience with the white left in the 70s was not happy. They seemed to be so certain of everything. As Jabés wrote in *The Book of Questions* "Do not confuse justice and truth. Justice is done in the name of truth. And truth remains to be found."

I remember reading Rimbaud while in England. I came across this line "Men were gentle because they were strong." This one sentence gave me a lot. To understand that there was another kind of maleness, one that was stronger than the bullying egocentric kind. Of course, I still haven't got rid of the patriarchy in myself, even now.

How did you respond to South African poetry at that time?

To me the criterion was -- and still is -- is the line memorable? You cannot say that you like a poem and not remember a single line of it. In the 70s I found only Gwala did this for me, and Jensma, and Sole's early poems. I'm talking about poems on the page. *Staffrider* appeared on a wave of popular energy, and there were some remarkable poems in it. It came out of a context of township readings, a highly charged cultural activism where political expression was banned. In the 70s Gwala, Serote, Madingoane were forging the language into their own needs. I got to hear and appreciate that angry voice. It was poetry with a living urgency, with a real audience, a living oral tradition being turned into strong political poetry. I heard it because I'd begun to feel connected to the struggle too. But I couldn't really be part of it, it was the black experience. Only much later, in the early 90s, could I think of myself as part of 'we', both as a person and a writer.

When you became a father and a husband, how did it feed into your life and poetry? Your poem "A simple love" explores the problem of a split, it describes how you gave time to poetry by switching off to other people's reality.

I don't think one has to make a choice between poetry and other people, but then, in the mid-70s, I was close to psychosis. I was living between two worlds, and it didn't feel as if I could do much about it. I lived with words and images in my mind all the time in ways that weren't very functional to being a husband and father. I don't feel the same now. I don't see that poetry has to take me away from the world, rather it puts me more into the world -- the world becomes more and more a text or an oracle. But then poetry was still a

survival mechanism for me, it was unconscious, so I hurt people close to me. I knew I was in trouble, that's why I went into psychotherapy.

How old were you?

I was 30 years old by then, walking around completely involved in poetry but not writing. I'd written about five poems in ten years, yet my identity in my mind was as a poet. I'd met a therapist who I knew could take me on. She lived in Grahamstown. So I moved there. That's where I wrote my first book.

What made you finally sit down and do it?

My therapist asked me a very simple question: If you're a poet, where are the poems? She confronted me with the fact that it was easier going around being a potential poet than writing poems. So I took the risk and experienced the relief of writing, of bridging the distance between my soul and the world. It's very compelling. I worked at it, writing one or two poems a day for about a year. And in the course of that I discovered a lot about form. I was finding out the dimensions of certain experiences.

To make your own connection, on a different level, a level which brings you closer to your own reality: that is the antithesis of psychosis, it is integrating.

César Vallejo was very important to me during that time — I found in him a poet uncompromisingly meeting reality, distorting his own syntax where necessary, a poetic logic so clean that it carried right through his obscurity. I was more and more drawn to poets who were able to go into irrationality, the unconscious. That's where I wanted to go. I knew my truth was in there somewhere.

You didn't have to protect anyone against what was going on in your psyche, so you allowed yourself to be vulnerable.

Yes but I did hurt and confuse people I was close to. I was projecting all kinds of anima and muse stuff. You can't fuck the muse. I've tried: it doesn't work. The muse is a goddess and she will abandon you if you don't respect her. It's an occupational hazard for poets, mesmerised as they can be by beauty. The same with the anima, the inner woman which Jung calls the bridge to the unconscious. The muse murmurs through language, the anima is within. I'll be trying to understand these things for a long time.

When did you know that you were a poet?

It was while I was writing "The Way Back", my first longish poem. The poem was a lyrical story of where I'd been, and at the end I found myself by a river, with the light falling over tall trees, and this heron fishing, bright in the sunlight. It ends:

The heron becomes a storyteller fishing for his embroidered tale.
The story is bright. He will tell it thread by thread.
He goes home now. Not to a home, but a gathering.

Not to a home but a gathering — what did it mean? I didn't know, but the words insisted on being exactly those, they just wrote themselves down. It

was scary and thrilling and satisfying. It was the first time I'd experienced in my own writing that kind of muse-energised flow.

You said earlier that you preferred Gwala's poetry to Serote's. Perhaps you can say more, it might say something about your poetics.

Well I have a certain attraction to the image and to associative poetry. I've always been less interested in conceptual poetry and in poems that circle round a fixed subject. I liked Serote's early poems because of their articulate anger, but I never found them as striking as Gwala's. For me Gwala got into the texture of things, his work was grounded.

I take a 'grounded image' to mean a reality which we recognise immediately, not a literary image. Also, perhaps, because it's rooted, it takes us somewhere new.

Well let's read a Gwala poem – "Night Party".

Saturday evening
Berea Road Station
the 1044's long been gone.
By the time
I touch Mpumalanga
at Zero-One-Thirty Hour
got to zwakala
into this wholenight gig;
Winwood and Capaldi
create Traffic on cellophane
in a world
already bored
with riches and hobos:
the same vile wealth
that drugged Jimi Hendrix
out of Life,
the same nourished want
that starved the sax bit
of Charlie 'Bird' Parker
to his grave.
By break of Sunday's dawn
with scanted
crooked
chimney smokes
straightening me home
the eagles have already
flown in.

The images are clear and cinematic, the language moves, he commits himself to the specific. His anguish is that capitalism can and has destroyed black genius (his own included, no doubt). The poem changes gear right at the end to the powerful metaphor of the eagles.

You like to read poems aloud . . .

About the time *The Door to the River* was published, my friend Wally Gilbert and I started a business manufacturing wooden toys. He was a self-taught mechanical engineer. He was the first person I met with whom I could have an open-ended conversation on no fixed subject, and we spoke for hours on end. I read a lot of poetry to him, both my own and the poems I liked. My second book *The Fires of the Dead*, which came out in 1989, was dedicated to him. He had died the year before. The book looked both outwards and inwards. Things were dark in the late 80s, repression became cruder, PW Botha's thuggish government was getting desperate and killing people everywhere. In Grahamstown the police set up a searchlight at the 1820 Settlers Monument and beamed it across to the township so the casspirs patrolling there could see better.

In your 1999 volume Rain Across a Paper Field, although there is a thread of narrative, the concentration is much more on pure lyric.

Possibly the style in this book is too pared down. It came at the end of ten years as an editor. I don't think I can go any further in that direction. I need to go into new territory after this. When you are virtually a full time editor, reading other people's poems every day, you can become too flooded with words to hear your own lyrical impulse. That's why I've stopped editing poetry.

Yet a poem like "the return" has a lot of surreal images as well as narrative ---

Well it's more grounded, to use that word again. The lyric impulse is there, but it gets further, to a kind of spiritual place, probably because the poem is grounded in political and psychological realities. That poem was a moment of real clarity, almost a revelation, that there is a future, a future after global capitalism, and that that future is beginning already.

Your poems are not only rooted in the immediate physical, but also in the immediate psychic, so they feed your own integration

I usually write because I have to.

But a good deal of your creative energy went into editing New Coin for ten years. How did you tackle it? What were your criteria for selection?

When I took on *New Coin* I wanted to follow the example of Jerome Rothenberg, who'd put together some excellent anthologies in the 70s. One was *Technicians of the Sacred*, a collection of 'primitive' poetry transcribed mostly by anthropologists, with avant-garde twentieth century poetry alongside it showing similar themes and forms. Another was *America A Prophecy*, which he edited with George Quasha, in which some canonical American poetry was put together with more marginalised poetries, like sermons, blues, Shaker ecstatic religious poetry, homegrown surrealists, etc. I thought I could find similar marginalised poetries in South Africa, non-literary poetries if you like. So I was on the lookout, among poetry being sent to *New Coin*, for work that took emotional risks, or reflected the surrealism that surrounds us in South Africa. And I found it and printed it, even if the writing was sometimes clumsy.

I got into correspondence with everyone who sent in poems, trying to give helpful criticism, recommending poets for them to read. There was a certain

inappropriateness about this at times, and some arrogance too on my part, but mostly people appreciated the feedback. The first few years were hard, there was little coming in that I really liked. You can't print only what you like, you have to fill up a quota of pages. The more important thing is that I didn't print anything I didn't like. This made me some enemies right away, but there was nothing I could do about that.

In a way you generated the poetry you believed to be there. Had you not had that vision to begin with, these voices would not have emerged.

It's true in a way. I can think of one poet, for example, who had given up writing for some years. I contacted him and asked him to clarify something in one of his old poems, and just because of that little encouragement, he started writing again, and hasn't ceased. *New Coin* got its own momentum, and the poetry started cooking. The juxtaposition of different styles and genres helped it cook further. Many of the linguistically innovative poets were black poets: Rampolokeng, Motsapi, Nyezwa, Zhuwao, Muila, Dladla, and others. Why nobody in academe (with the exception of Kelwyn Sole) has registered the importance of these poets is beyond me. It really makes me wonder whether these professional literary people are able to read.

With poems written out of necessity, you can recognise them immediately. They usually have an idiosyncratic but coherent vocabulary, unique forms, a taking on reality at several levels at once. It doesn't matter how much or how little education the poet has had, the signs are unmistakable. And always there is a hunger for reading. Phillip Zhuwao, with a primary school education, had by his early 20s, in the literary barrenness of Harare, read Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Rimbaud. The necessity to write takes over the poet's whole being, and it is often experienced as both a gift and a curse.

It's frowned upon to look at it like that, especially in academe.

Because it's dangerous. To so inhabit imaginative reality and express through your mind and body things which almost overwhelm you, is not easy. And they are not nice things either, much of the time, they make demands on the reader and people reject them. Most of these really committed and brilliant poets get no recognition at all. We're living in a society which denies ecstasy and denies pain, poems too are consumer commodities. Plus there's the decline in reading in general. It's not surprising that poets and other artists retreat into alcoholism, consumerism, academia, or some other suicide of the soul. To survive creatively you really have to believe in yourself.

You've said, regarding New Coin, that you were prepared to publish some and not others – again, how did you make the choices?

If a poem did nothing for me then I couldn't print it. Of course I made some mistakes, rejecting some poems because I wasn't open enough to them. My sense of poetry broadened as time went on, but the criterion remained the same — the poem had to move me or engage me. I couldn't go by the writer's reputation, I had to take it poem by poem. It becomes like one big found poem, even though you find it in your postbox. And you've got to put each issue into an order dictated by its own logic, which is always different. Editing puts you in an impossible position, because you are custodian of a limited publishing space, so whatever you do is going to be unpopular.

And if you apply these criteria to yourself as a poet sending your own stuff to a magazine?

I try to live with a poem before I send it anywhere. Then I read it to people. They don't have to be literary people. By reading the same poem to different people I hear see if it retains its energy or if it runs out of steam after a few readings.

So you have to trust what you feel about it, there's nothing else really to go by?

What else is there to go by? In some ways it's worse when you've published a few books, when you're semi-wellknown. The South African literary world is tiny, and people are too polite about each other. Or they hate each other. That's why it's impossible to find reviewers. Nobody wants to say what they think or offend their friends. If they concentrated on the poems rather than the poet it would be better for everyone.

You've conducted lots of writing courses. Do you find them useful for your own writing?

I'm beginning to think that teaching people to read is more important than teaching them to write. Poets should know international literature and the literature of the past, at least know what resonates with them. If you teach writing you have the opportunity to introduce a writer to poets close to his or her own voice. Next year I want to work on a project with Mxolisi Nyezwa with rural writers in the Eastern Cape, which will establish libraries and small magazines. We will ask the writers to research what should go into those libraries, in both Xhosa and English.

You believe in the necessity of publishing: what do you think about marketing?

Your text goes out into the world looking for its reader. It comes from your heart and reaches someone else's heart. It's a mysterious and magical process which justifies a lot of the work of writing. I believe poems reach their readers no matter what. Marketing can help but the process happens more subtly than anything that marketing can bring to it.

So to return to your own work: what are you working on now?

I've just finished a biography of the Lesotho agriculturalist and novelist JJ Machobane. I've started writing my own story, partly poetry partly prose. Maybe this will allow me to integrate the past. It's hard to expose one's own shame and humiliation, but it's necessary. In capitalism we're all involved with shame.

How are you going to maintain your poetry?

I'll try to be honest with myself, pray to God, the muse and my guardian spirits to engage deeper.

You mention God in South African poetry and people think you have ideas of grandeur, especially people in academe.

But poetry, as Gary Snyder has pointed out, is a continuous line from the shamanistic, when healing, dance, chant, divination and poetry were all one thing. And poetry gives voice to the non-human. All poetry that endures is a form of magic, an illuminated language.

Do you have any sense of the poet's task, the poet's obligation? Denise Levertov, for example, has a clear sense of the poet's has a duty towards poetry.

We all have a duty to use and practice our gifts, don't you think? No matter what they are.

In two of your major poems, "The Way Back" and "the return", you write of language being translated from silence or born from silence. Why is this important to you?

I don't know. To reach silence is like touching some absolute ground. I know that we never escape from language but if I spend time in silence -- I am speaking for myself -- I can experience emotion more clearly. The spirit or muse of non-verbal poetry is real for me. In my poem "testimony" there is a part which goes:

where the oxalis hides
under streaked clouds
that's where to find your voice
silent one

where the herb smell
permeates your clothes
when the earth is bare
and nothing flows
that's when your voice calls
silent one

You're now putting together an anthology of the ten years that you edited New Coin. Do you have any plans to continue as a poetry editor?

No. Editing has been a long detour. I learned a lot, both about poetry and about South Africa. But it has been a detour. I need to get back to silence, to beginner's mind, and write.

I'm impressed by your sense of continuity.

Well I'm an African by now. Africa endures. We still help our neighbours, no matter how poor they are. We act communally. I can't see any of these things being destroyed. I'm putting myself with the poor people of Africa. We are going to survive.

Being a poet is only partly to do with language. The rest is about facing yourself, listening to yourself. When I'm not honest with myself my poetry is weakened and no amount of skill can rescue it. More and more I believe the only way to continue as a writer is to go with risky creative choices in your life as much as in your writing. They become one.