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***Bilakhulu!***
**by Vonani Bila**
**Deep South, 2015 95pp.**

**Review by Alan Finlay**

Nazim Hikmet's 'Autobiography' is a poem that is often used in writing workshops to encourage poets to engage and frame their personal histories in an associative way. It uses time – but not in a way that is melancholic or nostalgic – more as an index to move and change and leap from one experience to another. It is robust in its straightforward lines and clarity of energy. It allows movement, and chronicle, but in a way that repeats the necessity of a socially engaged "I" in the present. It is political, too, of course, and it is modernist – part of its directness. It was also written at a time of great brutality and horror, and the poet's own exile and imprisonment from his motherland, Turkey.

All of this makes it a suitable poem to encourage poets to engage and claim their own personal repressions and histories in this country.

In *Bilakhulu!* Vonani Bila acknowledges Hikmet and not only produces a much longer 'Autobiography' that runs to 15 sections, but the book itself can be read as an extended 'autobiography' – and central to this narrative are the classical – and epic – themes of displacement, absence and return.

Images and stories of displacement permeate the seven "longer poems" that make up this book – people go, get lost, disappear, whole communities are historically excluded from the resources around them.

The book opens with an account of forced removals in 'Images from childhood' – a strong, clear poem of fragments from the poet's childhood in Shirley Village, Elim in Limpopo:

> the people of pfukani
> whose huts were uprooted in 1968
> [...]
> because it was time
> to separate vhavenda from vatsonga
> because it was time
> to make way for the white man.

An early awareness of economic displacement is captured in the poem:

> the wooden electric pole behind our house
> planted in the family cemetery
> cables of fire trapping swallows and owls
> turning mischievous monkeys green
> […]
> to supply a certain dombani, victor, magantawa
> and bernard with warmth
> bypassing our darkness and the smog.

Or a different kind of displacement in a vivid account of the everyday dehumanisation of the village children:

> i remember
> dombani the hefty burly-surly man
> clad in khaki wear and veldskoene
> the man with a bloodthirsty temper
> wielding a rifle
> [...]
> riding around the dam
> watching for the black boy
> to raise his head above water
> to fire with delight
> [...]
> to teach him a lesson
> that under the orbiting sun
> the dam is not for naked black boys
> it's not for a speck of village dust

A story of exile – of fleeing and return – is told in 'N'wa-yingwani', addressed to the mother of a man named Xiringa who took revenge of his aunt's death after an attack by a farmer's pit bulls by killing the farmer with an okapi knife and axe:

> body parts chopped to pieces
> flesh stuffed in a black body bag
> & thrown into the levubu river
> but the hungry crocodiles
> shook their heads
> let the white man float away

Having to flee rural Elim, Xiringa's story becomes a tragic retelling of the prodigal son – his journey through "collapsing mine tunnels" and hostels to the "bright lights of jozi" where

> he stood over the glinting high-rise building
> like a discerning man and declared:
> *hillbrow is awash with fresh swaying roses*
> *beetle-like rural girls use cowdung as body lotion*

The "fresh swaying roses" leave him with Aids. He returns to Elim to

> […] lean on guva the village wife, broke & broken
> once a ubiquitous *pantsula* of flair
> he came home a mere bundle of bones

'Missing' (dedicated to the poet's "cousin-brothers") is another poem that feels thematically central to this book – the displacement here is absolute, the cousins disappear completely, and there is no homecoming.

In the poem "we are still searching for you/ even under water/ in the passing of flies" and the poet's anguish is palpable: "my brother Daniel, my brother Joel, come home!":

the whirlwind howls in your mugs
your seats around the table are vacant
maybe where you are it is raining & cold
your toes wet without shoes

The absence, the missing, the lack of homecoming – the lack of a return to either place or ancestry – troubles the poet. When he gets detained at Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Kenya because of a tatty passport, he prays:

don't keep me in this dungeon for good
my fiancée is pregnant with young Vonani Bila
i don't want to follow in the path of my brothers
those who miss the road to Elim

The 36-page 'Autobiography' is, in many ways, in direct conversation with Hikmet's poem, and Bila sets up tensions with the idiom of Hikmet's 'Autobiography' as much as it draws from it for inspiration. Like Hikmet, who writes he has "slept in prisons and in grand hotels", Bila "grew up in a mud hut/ … Slept on the itchy *majekejeke* mat on a cowdung-smeared floor" and later "sat in armchairs … and walked on red carpets".

Yet while Hikmet writes "I never once went back to my birthplace/ I don't like to turn back", Bila does choose to turn back, and there is a sense that – despite his own "leaving", whether to college, to the brothels of Hillbrow, or through the local and international travels that both his activism and poetry bring him ("Poetry has been my passport to countries around the world") – he never leaves his birthplace "here in the backwoods/ With the common people/ Warming ourselves around bonfires". He has published his poetry anthology *Timbila* from his home in Shirley Village since the 2000s, and recently established a writers' retreat there, a dream he has held for many years.

It is this home, this community – "this road to Elim" – that is under threat from within in the 'Boys from Seshego', the relentless criminals of post-apartheid poverty. The poem describes the essential helplessness in the face of the "mindless wolves" who turn on the community and

[…] enter suburb after suburb
house after house
shack after shack
[…] shepherd the workers, your sheep
& shear their wool in winter

Finally the poet – outraged – declares: "boys from seshego, if you come again/ i'm going to phafuri, the heartland of real sangomas/ … swarming bees & horseflies will sting your eyes & balls".

The poet's response – a sense of desperation and recovery – is interesting in terms of his final return, his communion with his ancestors at the end of the book, where he writes: "I'm no longer scared when I see prophets" and "It's my turn to remove the teeth/ Of lions and jackals growling on my stoep".

Part of this journey to a place of (for the poet) necessary communion is felt in 'Ancestral Wealth' – a poem about the life, death and final burial of his father – and again in the final two sections of 'Autobiography'. While the book includes a dedication to the genealogy of the Bila clan spanning

several generations – and the book's title is a praise and honorific to the poet's clan – in 'Ancestral Wealth' he writes:

> Saturday 26th September 1989 we hid you
> In this sacred ground where shoes are taken off
> It's not a cemetery for commoners
> […]
> It's the Bila gardens, within my yard

and

> Papa, you came home to rest forever
> Like Dayimani your father
> And Jonas your grandfather
> And Makhayingi your great grandfather
> You came home to rest forever

While "[t]he ZCC [Zion Christian Church] *mokhukhu* men danced in khaki and *manyanyatha*",

> *Under these tall thorn umbrella trees*
> *My ancestors rise and hold hands*
> *They sing in unison*
> *Dance in rhythmic step*
> *Around the fire*

"Something was clotting my chest/ Choking and gasping for breath", the poet writes in 'Autobiography'. And, following his father, "[t]hat's why I cut my dreadlocks and a beard/ Followed the ubiquitous star of Mount Zion".

This conversion does not signal a retreat from his political activism. The transfiguration, for the poet, brings him closer to "Marx, Engels and Lenin/ … one with Fanon, Garvey and Biko". But while his heart is still with his comrades in struggle, "Marxism and Black Consciousness are good but not enough", the poet writes, "I need protection from my ancestors and God".

On May Day, while the "proletarians and peasants/ The reds and greens/ Anarchists and gays/ … Marched upright/ ... I was not there". Instead,

> I wear a khaki button-up jacket and cap
> I dance *mokhukhu* with the strong army of men

Here, for the poet

> The earth trembles
> I leap up and down
> Stamping the ground hard with the white *manyanyata* boots

*Bilakhulu!* is a remarkable collection. It is rich in narrative, and in social detail. It shows how poetry can be used effectively for a kind of anthropological account of experience, to build social and personal narratives that might not otherwise be recorded, and in a multivalent way that one does not find in historical texts.

I have focused on the narrative of going and return, but this obviously leaves out a number of other recurring concerns for the poet. Education – what its value is, who has access to it, who is excluded – is another, albeit ambivalent, theme for Bila, who now teaches English Studies at the University of Limpopo. In "Why I am not a teacher" – a poem which introduces a sense of humour and lightness that is felt elsewhere in the book, and which contributes to the mix of emotional currents that help sustain the long poems – he says, "the old men and women students were cowards/ they didn't like to toyi toyi or throw stones/ … they were at college to learn/ but learn what?" Similarly the boys from Seshego are addressed directly at the end of that poem: "the shit job you've created for yourselves/ whose only qualification is cruelty".

The steady image of the matriarch is also present in this collection. In 'N'wa-yingwani', the narrative turns away from Xiringa's return, to the hardship and endurance of N'wa-yingwani, who watches her daughter-in-law die from Aids (Xiringa has "long pumped her with the poison of a social virus"), and then her grandchildren contract Aids too. Finally, at her end in the hospital, the poet comforts N'wa-yingwani:

> i look into your sunken eyes
> & the weary look you wear
> & the furrow lining your brow
> [...]
> i hold your cold hand & feel the heavy silence

In the acknowledgements – drawing on many of the forces running through this book – the poet thanks his mother's "unparalleled ability to remember matters of rich social and family history without any scholarly reference to any journal … Although she doesn't yearn to be called a poet, her voice is defiantly present in these poems".

The phrase "defiantly present in these poems" is telling. His accounts give (defiant?) voice to the dispossessed, not only by historical economic, social and other disadvantage – or in terms of his community and clan – but in terms of language, and publishing too. Bila's work in publishing young black poets through *Timbila*, asserting "one poet one book", in the language of the anti-apartheid struggle language is relevant. As is his use of Xitsonga in his poems, and the five-page glossary of Tsonga and other African-language terms at the end of the book. This is another way of reclaiming land, of speaking defiantly out against displacement. "In my South Africa, in my Xitsonga, my books are foreign/ And there's no library or bookshop to keep them safe in my village" ('Autobiography').

Yet there is something so clear and epic in the narrative of going and return, whether in the retelling of the story of the prodigal son in 'N'wa-yingwani', or, echoing Penelope's abstinence in *The Odyssey*, in the image of the poet's mother who, after her husband's death, is captured this way by the poet-son in 'Ancestral Wealth':

> Since you left, your wife has remained in the house
> I've not seen a man sitting on your chair
> It's still your house
> Full of trees and vegetables

Epic hyperbole is also used throughout, whether in adjectives such as "immortal" or "teacher vulture" (both from 'Autobiography') or ideas such as "as you wrestled with the monster" ('Ancestral Wealth'), or "the death monster groans feverishly in her lungs" ('N'wa-yingwani'). Even lines like "the whirlwind howls in your mugs/ your seats around the table are vacant" ('Missing') feel like they contain something of the vivid hyperbole characteristic of epic poetry. (No doubt the poet is drawing

on and modernising the African epic style too – but those more familiar with this tradition would have to say how.)

This is offset against the poet's sociological and political concerns – in fact one feeds and gives voice to the other. I will, the poet says at the end, in 'Autobiography', be a "collector of tales in taxis and buses and aeroplanes" but also "[w]alking the paths of my village upright/ … A collector of myths in rivers and mountains and forests". "I will", he writes, "be standing, an immortal word warrior".

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