MY STORY, YOUR STORY YOUTH MAGAZINE TIMBILA, 2018

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

Review by Alice Meyer

A Poetry of Clarity and Precision

'Radical' is an adjective derived from the Latin *radicalis* meaning 'of or relating to a root or to roots', and it is surely the most apposite term with which to describe Vonani Bila's latest collection of poems, *Bilakhulu!* Physical, concrete, contextualised: the book speaks through visceral rhythms and lucid description in order to capture Bila's heritage, lived surrounds and own artistic journey. Bila's past work has dealt with a wide array of South African and international affairs. Often speaking with a public voice, he has addressed writing to Mandela himself, decried violence in African countries such as Rwanda, called colonial powers to account and supported transnational Third World socialism. By contrast, *Bilakhulu!*'s vision is far more focused and precise, zoning in on the environ of Elim, Shirley and the historical background of Bila's own family tree. Here, the poet's greatest achievement is to intuit a rich and unexplored local terrain through dramatising its characters and valorising the political depth of their personal experience.

Bilakhulu! is comprised of seven narrative poems, each detailing specific events in the life of Bila and his immediate community. The book traces Bila's own path to intellectual maturity, including his education in Economics and Business Economics at Tivumbeni College in the early 90s, and his travels to read poetry in countries all over the world such as Finland and Ghana. Other poems sketch the lives of Bila's family members or relate noteworthy stories of local personalities. Thus "Missing" speculates upon the unknown whereabouts of Bila's lost cousins Daniel Makhubele and Joel Hon'wana, while "N'wa-yingwani" tells the tale of Xiringa, a young man native to Elim who was forced to leave the village after killing a white farmer who mistreated his aunt. The collection is distinguished by carefully plotted and well-thought-out experiments in prose poetry, often through pieces of substantial length such as the final poem "Autobiography" which is 24 pages in total. Throughout *Bilakhulu!*, Bila controls and sustains the vitality of the longer form by working through a range of tones, registers and themes.

"Images from Childhood" and "Ancestral Wealth" are well suited to further elucidate the style and structure of Bila's latest poetry given the acuity with which it portrays his immediate locale and the manner in which it knits individual realities to a larger social whole. "Images from Childhood" opens *Bilakhulu!* and, as the title indicates, it explores some of Bila's earliest memories such as his schooling at Shirley Primary and later Lemana High:

> winter days at lemana high
> white teachers opened windows
> for the chilly air to freeze our toes
> the same teachers who were paid
> a tolerance bonus to teach a black child.
>
> v
>
> the wooden electric pole behind our house

planted in the family cemetery
cables of fire trapping swallows and owls
turning mischievous monkeys green
cables of modern fire that galloped kilometres from town
to supply a certain dombani, victor, magantawa
and bernard with warmth
bypassing our darkness and the smog.

vi

the graves under water
the colossal deep dam of death
that the big man dombani built
where we swam naked in summer
our rags drying in thorn trees
i remember
dombani the hefty burly-surly man
clad in khaki wear and veldskoene
the man with a bloodthirsty temper
wielding a rifle
on horseback
at sunset
cracking shots in the air
reptiles and porcupines retreating to holes
riding around the dam
watching for the black boy
to raise his head above water
to fire with delight
to crack the boy's skull
to halt his breath
or to just see the little boy consumed by water
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
but it's for sailing white men in boats
who catch fish
even when drunk.

These lines work through a series of Bila's memories in order to convey crisp and unaffected portrayals of his youth. One hears of the way in which white teachers were paid a 'tolerance bonus' for the supposed trial of teaching black students and also of the manner in which Bila's family home was systematically excluded from having electricity by being left in darkness and 'smog' while wealthier inhabitants of his area attained the privilege of warmth. Here, memory is neither private nor self-centred and the writing pivots upon factual observation. This is a poetry that seeks to record rather than reminisce and lines are not introduced through use of an egoistic 'I' but begin with depictions of places, spaces and people. Syntactically, it is the external world of 'winter days at lemana high', 'white teachers' and particular objects such as the 'wooden electric pole behind our house' that are foregrounded. Despite the poem's fixedness upon real figures and events, "Images from Childhood" retains a dreamlike quality through juxtaposing disparate experiences which are introduced without any explanatory scaffolding. The most striking memory is that of the large dam

in which Bila used to play with friends and family as a young boy. The site is introduced as a 'colossal deep dam of death' built and owned by the economically privileged Dombani and it embodies the asymmetrical power relations between the rich and the poor. Indeed, even though black youth enjoy merriment in the dam's waters, it is ultimately not a place where they can embrace carefree naked swimming. Notably, its depths are in fact a kind of graveyard where innocent children are shot by a cruel master. It is made apparent that the childhood of the disadvantaged cannot be sheltered or protected but is marked by oppression, humiliation and fear.

The above excerpt's rhythm underscores the gravity of the ordeals undergone by the young black boys. Here, the accretion of adjectives, such as 'colossal' and 'deep' impel the reader to pause in a fashion akin to the way in which the breath of the young black boys is stopped by bullets. Similarly, the structure of Bila's statements forces one to halt and more fully comprehend the basic injustice of the circumstance portrayed. Prose-like statements such as: 'to fire with delight/ to crack the boy's skull/ to halt his breath' are broken into short lines which instantiates a foreclosure of poetic rhythm. Baldness and simplicity of diction throw one back upon the underlying reality behind language and accentuate an atmosphere of reflection. Rather than deploying highly wrought or melodramatic vocabulary, Bila's narrator sparsely details a world in which the pleasure of the powerful is bought at the expense of the weak. Verbs such as 'fire', 'crack', 'halt' and 'teach' are easily digestible and gain their resonance and depth from the fact that these simple actions have sobering and life-altering consequences. Bila's writing is infused with the heavy responsibility of language and his poetry is confident enough to imply that words can convey truth and that this truth is able to pass its own political and moral judgement.

"Ancestral Wealth" is a tribute to Bila's father, Risimati Daniel Bila, who died in 1989, and it is one of the poems that best encapsulates Bila's ability to interweave private emotion with questions of social well-being. The extract below effectively captures the extent to which the piece explores both the hardships of Risimati Daniel Bila and those of a broader rural reality in Elim. In the following scene, one hears the narrator, who is presumably Bila himself, being taken aside by his dying father as he outlines his will:

> You sat on your three quarter bed
> Wearing that brown striped t-shirt from Pep stores
> Eyes fixed on the old leaking zinc roof
> Then you paged through the Old Mutual policy document
> And you said:
> *Mhana Oom* (he called me Oom)
> *Lwangu leri i ra khale* (The roof is old)
> *Switina ndzi xavile* (I have bought the bricks)
> *Kambe a swi nge eneli ku aka yindlu ya kahle* (But they'll not be enough to build a decent house)
> *Loko va ku nyika swimalana swa mina swa phenxeni* (When they give you my little pension fund)
> *Vumbu yindlu* (Build a house)

The last living wish of Risimati Daniel Bila is to have a respectable house built in his memory. The humility of Risimati Daniel Bila's living conditions and the modesty of his pension fund express the trials of his own life, which involved performing some of Elim Hospital's most difficult practical tasks such as taking patients into theatre and scrubbing floors, all for a paltry salary. The moment in which Bila's father relates the dying request to his son is portrayed with penetrating exactitude. Deft descriptions such as the observation of the father's 'Pep' t-shirt forge an inimitable immanence of expression. Indeed, the mention of one of South Africa's best-known cheap clothing brands is

painstakingly meticulous, setting a scene of understated poetic realism. In a similar line of thought, the instructions of Bila's father are related in Xitsonga, which allows the reader to make contact with the cadences and speech patterns of people in the community of Elim. The inclusion of local language grants the narrative an authentic texture and allows for an intimacy with Bila's father's 'last night' on earth.

Notably, "Ancestral Wealth"'s close attention to Risimati Daniel Bila's poverty, and testing living conditions, passes comment upon issues of infrastructural failure and resource scarcity in Elim as a whole. In this regard, Risimati Daniel Bila's personal ordeals are depicted as interlinked with the more general inadequacy of medical care at Elim Hospital:

> Papa, you came home to rest forever
> Because the groaning and wailing movie never stops in the hospital
> Some pale-faced patients urinate in coffee mugs and plates
> The very same mugs they use for coffee and tea
> Some patients jump from the bed like impalas
> Tearing drips and tubes away
> They race around the ward wearing the catheters
> Bubbling with urine tea

Bila's narrator spurns politeness or delicacy of tone by openly discussing the unacceptable standards of hygiene at Elim Hospital where patients are forced to drink tea and coffee out of the very same vessels in which they urinate. One is made to feel not only that Risimati Daniel Bila cannot cope in this environ but also that the hospital is uninhabitable for anyone aspiring to a basic level of human dignity. The section offers powerful political critique and the simile likening frenzied patients to leaping 'impalas' is particularly strong writing. Here, conventional English idiom is subverted and a novel expression is established for the madness and fear that overcomes many people when desperately ill or close to death. The poet's idiomatic flair allows a sharpened view on the everyday health battles towards which many have become numb or apathetic. This startling comparative language proves that poetry committed to tackling social immiseration need not come off as flat-footed but can be surprising and even exhilarating.

The conclusion of "Ancestral Wealth" signals the extent to which Bila's writing is embedded in the unfolding events of his own living world. In this regard, the poem concludes through describing the act of honour and homage that Bila has paid to his father through erecting a tombstone in his memory:

> Papa, I know it took us twenty years to erect your tombstone
> All along the wind was blowing you away
> The sun was burning you
> Your pillow was your hand
> But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace
> Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts

The above section deploys an unconventional bricolage of linguistic registers as is evident in the lines, 'The sun was burning you/ Your pillow was your hand/ But now Bila, Mhlahlandlela, rest in peace/ Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts'. A lyrical and tender address describes the way in which Risimati Daniel Bila's earthly remains are finally given a place to rest after twenty years of dwelling amongst natural forces such as wind and sun. Contrasted with this philosophical, and also physical, meditation on rituals of burial and commemoration is the injunction: 'Do not open the grave and come home wearing shorts'. The picture of a jauntily dressed

man arising from the grave dressed in shorts is not straightforwardly literal and hits a note of the bizarre. The image presumably arises from a particularity of Bila's own self-expression or the society in which he lives and it has the effect of injecting the English language with new potency. A dissonance of tone compels attention to the story at hand while also suggesting that seemingly unlike realms such as the beautiful and the absurd, or the dead and the living, are closely intertwined. In this respect, "Ancestral Wealth" is representative of Bila's sustained ability to yoke together a wide range of subject matter and literary styles in extended narrative form.

In conclusion, *Bilakhulu!* is a book able to traverse an impressive spectrum of human experience and political content. In this regard, the lines from the final poem "Autobiography" gesture to the scope of the poet's work: 'Though I possess no clattering wheel/ Or a bike spoke and chain/ I've lived like a swallow –/ Weaving nests across the mountains and oceans'. Indeed, Bila's gifts of empathy and observation allow him to navigate vast regions of emotional and social terrain through concentrating upon the multivalent aspects of his own background. The poet's imagination weaves inspired and engaging narratives of individual and society, delicately recording circumstances of life in Elim. The writing pioneers original use of narrative, idiom and epithet in order to craft a poetry that celebrates the minutiae of local culture while always acknowledging and aiming to redress its imbalances.

****