Interviewed by Alan Finlay
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PHILLIP ZHUWAO was born near Harare, Zimbabwe, in 1971, and spent his childhood moving with his family, who were evicted from several farms, finally settling in Kuwadzana, Harare. His collection of poems, *Sunrise Poison,* and his two novellas, *See the Barbarous Lands* and *Iron Fleece,* are to be published in 2003. He died in Harare in 1997.

Book of poems published:
The Red Laughter of Guns in Green Summer Rain
(chainpoems written with Alan Finlay)(Dye Hard Press, 2002)

Where do you come from?

I was born on a commercial farm in Zimbabwe in 1971. Along the Mabunt road, near the white Rhodesian barracks. It was a commercial farm belonging to an Afrikaans man – a tobacco farm. All along the Lamakonda road up to Banket they grow tobacco. I was born there, in a little mud hut with a thatched roof. My mother came from Mozambique and my father from Barotseland, Zambia, from the Lozi tribe. His family all migrated to Zimbabwe in the late 1950s, to look for greener pastures. After he was educated in Zimbabwe, he came to South Africa to work on the mines. He came back to Zimbabwe in the late 1960s and married my mother. My family lives in Harare now. I have three brothers and three sisters.

When did you first start writing poetry?

I started seriously writing in 1990. Before that I'd written bits and pieces, but I didn't think of it as poetry. It was something like copying. I copied Japanese haikus, James Joyce, Gabriel Okara, but mostly Dambudzo Marechera.

What do you like about Dambudzo?

He says the truth about everything – the way we see life, those near us, our society – the truth that comes from the heart. But now I know much more about life than to copy from Dambudzo. Where I write from, it's my own experience, personal experience. What I've seen. What I've felt. My relationships with people. My loves.

Do you always write from the self outwards?

Firstly the self. I'm much more interested in the self. I'm not interested in the ordinary man in the street. No. The ordinary man doesn't interest me. Some people say my writing is selfish. But I have to take care about this personal thing before anything broader.

You write with very strong images...

I imagine a lot. I've got a lot of fantasies. I think this came because of my short-sightedness. I mean I couldn't see what was happening. I couldn't see the real thing. I couldn't see the flowers, everything, the knives. So I'd imagine a lot of things in my head. I only got glasses recently, most of my life I could see almost nothing. In class I could see nothing on the blackboard, so I failed my exams. I had to live in my mind. I'd see things in my head instead of seeing the real things.

And your nightmares?

They started where I was born, on the commercial tobacco farm. We had migrant workers from Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and there was a lot of talking about witchcraft, hyenas, people dying, graves, cannibalism. I grew up being afraid of the night and the darkness, closing the doors fast at night, being fearful of sleeping alone. Then my grandfather started punishing me whenever I got naughty by throwing me into a cattle kraal. This affected me subconsciously so that whenever I dream, I dream I'm being chased by bulls. I had the same dream last night, being chased by bulls. Then at the end it was lions. It's quite frightening. It came from my early childhood, my grandfather trying to frighten me with bulls. Now it is affecting my whole life, I can't spend a week without dreaming about black bulls running after me, snorting after me. The other thing about my nightmares is pits. I always dream of somebody throwing me in a deep black pit, an endless pit.

Have you ever written about this?

Sometimes I write about it, but not much. I'm scared of writing about it. I wouldn't like people's judgement when they read about me, about this. So I don't write much about it. But when I do people get scared. People start asking me questions about death. They start asking me why I'm so fascinated by death, bulls, pits, graves and all. But it's something that began in my childhood, when I was young. It's still something that's within me, something that's still torturing me in a way. I'm thinking of writing about it but I'm scared of how people will take it.

You don't have to publish it . . .

Ja. Maybe by writing it, I will get exorcised. It will be like breaking something. But then the whole thing is so scary. I think sometimes by writing it it's like keeping the whole thing within me. So I try to keep away from it sometimes, and at night it comes back, scaring me.

You're in the process of finishing a novella?

Ja, I'm about to finish my book *See the Barbarous Lands*. I guess in a month's time it will be ready. This book is everything about my life. It's everything. Once I finish writing it I guess I hope to be free. I've got no hopes about it but I think I will be free after I finish writing it. I'm telling something that had been captured within me, imprisoned in me. Writing it out is a big exercise in myself, in my soul. Although I think some people are going to get angry when the book's out. I don't mind. A lot of people are going to feel betrayed – friends, members of the family.

You've read very widely. Which writers attract you the most?

What they call anarchist literature. Fascist literature. Rider Haggard. Céline. Ezra Pound. Nietzsche. A few people wonder why I'm so interested in these writers whilst I'm black. They wonder why I like reading Rider Haggard when I'm black. They don't know. I can't explain to them. It's really difficult to explain. It's like when I read these writers I feel there is something between us, something we both understood. Something the people have never got to understand. I feel a sort of brotherhood with them. Writers like Céline and Dambudzo.

You'd call Dambudzo a fascist writer?

Some people would call him a fascist writer. Really I don't know what a fascist writer is, but I've seen him being put in that category, as a fascist writer, as an anarchist. I don't really know what an anarchist writer is. But I associate myself with those kind of writers. Those who, by telling the truth about their perceptions, get betrayed, ostracised, removed from society.

Why do you think Dambudzo was ostracised?

Because he didn't live up to the society's dreams, society's hopes, the family's hope. According to the black family, once one has finished school, once one has finished university education, one should get a job, marry, buy a beautiful car, a beautiful house. But he didn't do that and society and his family felt betrayed. Suddenly they threw him out of society. But we can't live up to all these aspirations of society. We can't all marry the beautiful girl. We can't all own a beautiful BMW. We've got different destinations, we've got different karmas. I think that's the problem with my career as a writer also. My family hope a lot. They thought that by educating me and my being clever and all that, I ought to do something for them. A sort of repayment for their troubles. But then I discover I can't. I've got to live up to my own fantasies, my own poetry world. They say I'm not responsible, I'm selfish. This I don't understand. They say my poetry comes first, before my family, before my friends, before my career. So at the end I'm damned.

In black African society they are suspicious of a man who writes poetry. They don't trust a man who writes poetry. They think a man who writes poetry is a queer. So it's very difficult to go around parading yourself as a poet among the black people. It's like they start staring at you, trying to find out how you are queer. Everybody starts raising eyebrows, asking how much you earn through writing poetry.

The same for a poet in white society . . .

I think white society understands the poetry world, the art world, much better than the black. Although poetry has been in the black society for a long, long time. Oral poetry has been a mediating instrument for the black shamans. I don't know why today they don't respect black poets, are suspicious of black poets. I think it has something to do with having a regular job. Being a clerk, a lawyer, a doctor, an accountant. They can't understand why one could aspire to be a poet.

Once you're a poet you're on your own. And you're alienated even from other poets.

That's true. That's everywhere.

Still, a lot of people take Dambudzo to heart. A lot of young poets.

Because there's never been a poet like Dambudzo in the literary history of Africa. He was much more powerful than Ngugi wa Thiong'o, than Chinua Achebe –

What about Okigbo? Okigbo's got lots of power . . .

Ja . . . but not as radical as Dambudzo. Okigbo has got a lot of American power and all that. But not as Dambudzo. Although Dambudzo's power was a bit British. Okigbo sort of wrote for the people, whilst Dambudzo wrote for himself. Most African poets write for the people. For ideologies. For the government. For tribes. Like what you have here – Zulu oral praise poetry. That's what most black African poets do. Few write for themselves.

So in a sense your poetry is actually a betrayal of the oral tradition?

Ja, I would say so. My poetry's something to do with me. Not with the ordinary man in the street. Not with my friends. I sometimes think I'm like Céline. I'm much more interested in myself, in my pain, in my sufferings. I always think that my pain and my sufferings have been much more greater than the man in the street. So I'm no longer interested in other people's pain. Like once, one person asked me what I would say if I was ordered to go to war. And I answered "bullshit!". I mean I can't go to war and fight for anyone. I don't think I'm even patriotic. I don't think I could call that a selfish perspective. It's something that has been between me, where I grew up. One had to fend for oneself.