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complete poems
by Isabella Motadinyane
Deep South, 2016 58pp.

Review by Vangile Gantsho

Reading Isabella Motadinyane's collected poems feels like more than holding a gem in your hands. It feels like tasting the vibrant-wounded-hopeful, s'camtho mesh of Joburg in the 90s. Her poems sound familiar (she sounds familiar), and they are also quite particular to her very distinct approach to storytelling. They introduce the reader to the many voices that are Isabella: a fiery funny woman from Soweto who could hold her own in male-dominated spaces, and a fragile feminine woman who refused to allow her own physical ailments to break her.

> i stitched my speech
> to set my back free
> 'just to let go'
> an angel hanging from a thread
> […]
> there I met a familiar stranger in the mirror
> don't remember the self any more
> only voices calling after me
> on a full moon, under moving shadows
> i left my mark on the floor
>
> ("Shadows and things")

Isabella's poems and this collection of poetry and tributes work on multiple levels: First of all, she writes beautifully. And simply. Her arrangement of lines and the musicality of her words make her poetry a pleasure to move through, even when heavy in subject matter. She moves from the physical to dream-like images that cannot necessarily be touched to capture everyday lived observations.

> pleading pleading
> give me tonight - only tonight
> but softly softly my name lands
> beyond the grave
> mispronounced
> they stretch my next-of-kin's patience
> but can't skin me pinker
> beyond the grave
> leaving me a narrow view
> the blue sky
> pouring soil on my chest
>
> ("Beyond the grave")

Secondly, Isabella introduced something new in the (female) spoken word scene, remnants of which can sometimes (in content but not so much in style) be experienced today. Her grit and cheekiness come through on paper, and completely blow you away if you watch videos of her performances. Catch you off-guard actually.

Stella please come home
I've been to your home
I found your mama there
she said
you left long ago
left her sick
and hungry …

("Stella")

Her fusion of poetry, music and isicamtho; singing poems; and ability to create multiple pathways with words – where different emotional charges are achieved, depending on whether your first experience of the words is with her actual voice or how the words fall on the paper – are in part why Isabella's poetry stands out as something unique, and still feels familiar to the time in which it was shared.

Touting taxi
topsy
turvey
pep talk
from Zola
to Jozi
music background
loud and loud
pep talk
trace
toilet tissue
tracks
van bo
ke bona dibono *I see buttocks*
ke sa bone *without seeing*
beng ba tsona *whose they are*
taxi
topsy turvey
pep talk

("Touting taxi")

Finally, Isabella was an activist. This book speaks to the political situation of her time, and precedes some of the strong feminist rhetoric that is being echoed in 2016 by the many # movements around the violence against black (female) bodies, the beauty of being a brown girl and owning it in a world that would have you hate yourself and the impact of poverty on the quality of black lives.

They nailed her
pink nails oozing
they dragged her
reshuffled her
off the ground
pinned her tongue
hanging loose
blood pool flooded
to dry up heavens

Nonhlanhla is gone

("Nonhlanhla")

sefahleho sone
botjhitja bo kgatlang mahlo
re bone mesebetsi ya hao
naheng mona
ba reng
o sekobo
ke baikaketsi
ba lese ba iphore jaalo
shine bright sunbeam
hoha

("Hoshe ngwana")

Hungry violent boys crack
a blue movie sound track
weaving seeds of sin pact
counting one two three
they keep their dreams intact
against cracked walls of fate

("Hungry violent boys crack")

The politics of translation is always complicated, and [in his translations] Lesego Rampolokeng weaves a fine balance between accuracy and finding an English equivalent that creates a new poem while preserving the authenticity of the voice of the author.

women's tears gather
night and day
a black fowl
has entered my house
child mother father
it started with the dog outside
it has now reached the baby

("Red helmet" – translation of "Tlopo kgubedu")

The tribute *Stomach ulcer complications: Isabella Motadinyane (1963-2003)* by Isabella's partner, Ike Mboneni Muila, is a sincere and heartfelt conversation that gives the reader a sense of how much Ike loved her, and what a carefree spirit she was, even when in so much pain.

> to me she was such a strong sister soldier and fighter who does not easily bow down to minor pains then she would curl up in bed next to me giving me squeaky sound of ehchu…farting and laughing hysterical when i ask her why was that she would tell me the pain is gone out with the fart we would both laugh hysterical…

It also briefly gives insight to some of the complexities of being raised in black (township) South Africa, without imposing any judgement. The reader may do with this knowledge what they will, because this book is about Isabella and not about the politics of politics.

> she told me she won't live long because of her stomach ulcer complication. she told me her mother took her to a family planning clinic for sterile and birth control while

> she was a young school kid for fear of unwanted pregnancy she told me her tubes got blocked and that led to her life threatening situation… stomach sore pains which would finally take her life.

This book of collected poems is a beautiful tribute to an otherwise forgotten South African voice. And to an important vibrant time in the history of South African literature, before the wave of Def Poetry and slam Americanism influences.

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