Excerpts from
Rough Music, Selected Poems 1989-2013
by Ari Sitas

Deep South, 2013

From ***Tropical Scars,*** 1989

Our little tropical scars

Night parades people on the promenade
But in the narrow streets skirting the fanfare: howls.
Oh yes sister,
I heard them and registered intensely
I, fumbling-through,
a drydock mariner restless:
listening and on drunken night playing the sailor from Tangiers
entering your life, tattooing mirrors
and was gone
with the room spinning around your disconnected fan
scrambling-out in the maze of palm, of pine of plastic
with all this texture spinning
and inviting me
to the whiskeyed life of a decade
torn down there, unconscious of the unprostituted
lives upon the hill
eager to make a bookladder to the top and
page by page to climb there

And I was told that –
From the hill my dear on a clear day you can see the class
struggle forever
on the hill my dear
lives get caught in these damp afternoons
and it's too hot my dear to read Frantz Fanon
you are condemned to consume
to suffer the melancholy stalking of shopping-malls
but to consume in taste nevertheless
skating past the torpor of palm trees and video vistas.
My dear Zigmund Gumede
I bring you these tropical scars
an overripe mango
bruise marks scars sensations
and feelings and stitches and eina…
each day a fingernail scrapes off the miniscule scabs
I bring you these tiny, our little tropical scars
and you speak of the fragrance
of summer afternoons
and it hurts.

The valley rattles its nighttrains like springs
and we lay
listening to prerecorded love-sighs
there is no love left in the city
there are trees
bowing down
in their humble obedience of storms

there are people
felled
the dawn's street cleaners sweeping leaves and dreams
and eina…the sun arrives
in shorts and boxing-gloves.

Cartoons: yes, cartoons
a city of commix and shuffle
eim gonna twisja nose, twist-twist
eim gonna boink joface, boinkoboink
eim gonna poo-pooh your therapist
ja what?
jaa whaat?
but dear Zigmund Gumede when I say good morning to
myself the mirror scowls back, and I have this need to
express myself, good morning how am I, and to learn to
adjust to this cruel, this, this, this. Eim gonna poo-pooh
you therapist if you gonna boinkoboink my face.
And the sun shines in shorts and pummels with boxing
– gloves, over and under tko.

Dear Zigmund Gumede
and they say from the hill on a clear day we can see the
class struggle forever
but how? all we see is this mirror
the scowl
and we bring you our tiny tropical scars
to crochet around them a meaning
to let us possess a large enough meaning
to cover the cracks
good morning how am I dear Zigmund Gumede

And I looked down the hill
a film of mist
spliced-through by factory chimneys
and the mirrors and sun rays reflected spiked at my eyes
and I looked at my bookladder
page after page soaking in sweat
and I tore out a page and fashioned a wing
and I tore out one more to fashion another
and I took my gadgets and roughed up my hair
and drew myself an overextended Might Mouse tail
and I flapped off the precipice
in search of the swamps
down below
to gather mud-words
to mould again
dreams of slime.

Evening tides

When the sun sets behind KwaMashu and further back
past the thousands of hills
and the cattle are herded
and the children are rustled inside
and the mothers count them again removing
thorns, lice, birdshot
with caring hand

and we feel alongside our shoulders making sure that our head
still weighs our neck down right through our spine
and the descending grey disappears the sharkfin,
the boatyard, the casspir
we are left with only our fiercer loves
and the sounds of hooks that we tear out
from each other's hearts.

From ***Songs, Shoeshine and Piano,*** 1992

The Monkey-Tree

We are plucking out the fires and our arms
are scabbed
the healing of wounds has been proclaimed

So we sit dear friend under the monkey-tree again –
have a pawpaw
the war has ended
let's go shoeshine and piano
we go

when the monkeys come
the dogs go yaowling
when the monkeys come you go
come
under the monkey-tree
again
my friend
let's talk
and then shoeshine and piano
we go

we used to laugh and throw stones
and flap about dancing, left foot up and, then the right
and listen to our visions on your box of wires
under our tree
we used to say we need a new kind of tree
to nestle our passions
like a palm with its obscene genitals at bloom
and better, a paw-paw pole added to feed our tribes
and thick tarzan ropes to swing from and bellow

and broad enough to hang a hammock
to sway our sherrywined heads
and space to leap left foot up and, then the right
and this we called our 'monkey-tree'
our mast our rudder and off we go
sugar and spice and spike
shoeshine and piano we go

and we sit here again after so many short years
so have a pawpaw
feel its bark now

and now, when the eastern storms excite the birds
and in spring
when the pollen and scent
make you scratch, or sneeze or cry

there is fear in the air
and then the monkeys return
drunk from all the perfume
and the first crescent moon
distorts all the people
(there are horrid people near the sugar silos
don't you go there at night
all sugar sending places are hot
all hot places have perfumed and rugged crowds
and those who peg do not return to haunt you
and if they do you can't remember them at all
so they make futile noises just to scare you
and then the monkeys return drunk
and you forget them
and you shake the tree
and they show you their backsides
and you tremble inside
and you go)
come

then umngani wami, I must tell you
everynight at around sleeptime these four women come
out in dark saris and wail
they send shakedowns down the spines of dogs and
humans scuttle to hide behind their comforts
they could be singing an ancient lovesong of course
but no one cares
pain is pain
scabs are scabs
they will surely be silenced, don't go

Umngani wami, stay, it's safe here these days
I gathered your toenails and the expulsions that grow
through your scalp like hair
and mixed out of it the most potent brews
so you're safe
don't go
help me
to gather my memory that scattered
there were hairdresser of librarian,
they had plaits
they started blonde in my dreams but turned to
orange

and I remember holding orange tufts
in my teeth and my outstretched hand
and I remember in my pocket: baboon livers and teeth.

Something happened when they tore at
the sun's roots
and carved things out of its bark

and its sap was sweat or cancer

shoeshine and piano we go
in with the burrowing termites we go
come
there’s peace at last.

from ***The RDP Poems*** **(2004)**

Black Mamba Rising

I

Walked
past Clairwood
and the back road
by the railway track
where the Local met
to change the world
and count who was alive

the building:
dirty-white as
dilapidated as it should have always been
the clothing sweatshop on the second floor
still, uncleaned windows from 1966
and the bare staircase
where we had to negotiate a wheelchair – three flights and a
twisted back
and a goat –
to cut its throat for protection
and eat it with the guys
the goat: still owns a stain
in the emptied hall
with its leaking lavatories

from the fire-alarm exit
the eye sees the only change:
a dozen women and their stalls by the
railway entrance:
one tomato, two orange and a piece of cloth

II

What happened to Qabula?
It is hard to get news, about Qabula.
The walk to the taxi rank, past Clairwood
to Mobeni might help:
asking his nephew, does not help.

He stares at you, and you can see the gun
on the inside of his leather-like, almost grey-jacket
surrounded by the guys who bleed the line from
Pondoland to the factory-gates
who serve the line, from the dagga plantations to Bambayi
taxi warriors who char the backs of HiAce scabs.
Tell the *umlungu*, he says, that I know nothing.

I drop the right names – his father's from Port Shepstone
his uncle's who died of the virus in Umzumbe
his friends' who fought the zombie-keepers at Kokstad.

Sitas, he says, I used to know you
through your words
but we do not know you, now
Qabula is my father now, since my father died
and he has the say of our inheritance
he is finished with your nonsense.

I lie about a film and money and
possibilities!
Capetown, he says,
looking for a job, you will find him
in Pondoland this Christmas
Now go to Hell.

III

Spoke to Mattera and he said,
let's speak to Mzwakhe
and to Kunene
you heard, we need to do something about Qabula
he has had a stroke. Paralysed.
Holy Cross Hospital. Bitter. Angry.
Nise said, we need to do something about his wife
she is on the brink of despair.

I push the CD inside the machine
and there is Mbuli's voice declaring
peace on KwaZulu Natal; but the real
voice? Vodacom. cell-phones

Walkietalkies – Mzwakhe-man
you have been stealing sugar from our tea, man?
Redistributing cash from our democratic banks?
We need cash for Pondoland, man. Could you help
at least for now man? No chance – they froze me up!

IV

Telephone wire.
My words faster than the people cutting it
off the phone-line, copper wire good for trade and craft!
My words make it, survival of the swiftest –
"Hello. uMi, lo?
– Excuse me sir, I do not understand
uMi, lo?
Your director, uMi, man
You mean Mr Michael S'dumo Hlatshwayo!

Yebo.
He's busy. Phone again, next week
Can I leave a message?
I am afraid, I do not have a pen handy sir
Fakofu.

V

"Hello, ma"
Quick word past the copper pliers
uNise, she's there?
No she's gone.
Where?
Dead.
What dead, are you crazy?
She was on hunger strike and died of complications
What hunger strike? I was with her yesterday!
We were all together, yesterday, sir, but today?
Why didn't she say to me she was on hunger strike?
Oh she left a note with your secretary sir.
Why was it not in the Press?
You tell me sir, you are the intellectual, after all.
From now on, call Ms Sibotho

VI

uMi, man
quick word past another set of pliers.
Yebo, mfo.
We need money for a coffin and money to get to Qabula in
Pondoland
We are frozen man.
There is an investigation
into 3 million unauthorised cash
I don't even have a salary for this month.
We only have a small budget for Tourism

VII

Hello, Sawubona, Dumelang
Welcome to Durban
We are here to please and smile
we can do poetry in your room
give you souvenirs of our smiles and scars
we can dress dashiki or leopard leather
to maskanda or mournful howls
show you our lovely teeth
our words can gumboot through your brain
our mambas rise or crawl at your wish
welcome to Durban
we poets know how to smile at our keepers keep.

I will personally take you past Clairwood
where we used to meet and count
who was alive!
Love you all, love you all
goodnight.

From ***Insurrections,*** **2012**

Ghosts of the Quarry: Insurrection

Too tired to march
Too weak to holler
Too weak to bellow
We sat by the stacks of solid waste
And moved our little finger: so

The sky cracked a little
We ate lime from the quarry that night
There was a crescent moon
Throwing stones, waving banners

We were hungry

Too tired to march
Too weak to holler
Too weak to bellow
We sat by the stacks of solid waste
That's where they shot us

We are the ghosts
of the quarry
limestone of crescent moons
and at night
hauling buckets of stiff phutu
through your dream
: insurrection

From ***The Vespa Diaries***

Marikana

The digital images fold as the TV screen tires
The cops, rifles in cabinet, past their third beer
are edging towards bed
The night is quiet as the smelter has been closed,
the only music is of the wind on razor wire
the ears are too shut to hear the ancestral thuds on goatskin
humanity has somehow died in Marikana
who said what to whom remains a detailed trifle
the fury of the day has to congeal, the blood has to congeal
I reverse the footage bringing the miners back to life
in vain, the footage surges back and the first bullet
reappears and the next and the next and the next
and I reverse the footage in vain, again and again in vain

The image of the man in the green shroud endures
Who wove the blanket and what was his name?
There are no subtitles under the clump of bodies, no names
stapled on their unformed skull
A mist of ignorance also endures, a winter fog
woven into the fabric of the kill
The loom endures too, the weaver is asleep
The land of the high winds will receive the man naked
The earth will eat the stitch back to a thread
What will remain is the image and I in vain
Reversing him back to life to lead the hill to song
In vain, the footage surges back
another Mpondo, another Nquza Hill, another Wonder Hill
the shooting quietens: another anthill

My love, did I not gift you a necklace with a wondrous bird
pure royal platinum to mark our bond?
Was it not the work of the most reckless angel
of craft and ingenuity? Was it not pretty?
Didn't the bird have an enticing beak of orange with green tint?
Throw it away quickly, tonight it will turn nasty and gouge
a shaft into your slender neck
And it will hurt because our metals are the hardest –
gold, pig iron, manganese
yes, platinum
Humanity has somehow died in Marikana

What is that uMzimu staring back at us tonight?
Darken the mirrors
Switch off the moon
Asphalt the lakes
At dawn, the driveway to the Master's mansion
Is aflame with flower, so radiant

from the superphosphates
of bone
of surplus oxygen and cash,
such flames, such a raw sun
such mourning by the shacks that squat in sulphur's bracken
and I wait for the storm, the torrent, the lava of restitution
the avenger spirits that blunt the helicopter blades in vain

these also endure: the game and trout fishing
of their elective chores
the auctions of diamond, art and share
the prized stallions of their dreams
their supple fingers fingering
oriental skins and their silver crystals
counting the scalps of politicians in their vault

The meerkat paces through the scent of blood
I want it to pace through the scent of blood,
she is the mascot, the living totem
of the mine's deep rock,
the one who guards the clans from the night's devil
she is there as the restless ghosts of ancestors
by the rock-face
feeding her sinew and pap
goading her on:
the women who have loved the dead alive
the homesteads that have earned their sweat and glands
impassive nature that has heard their songs
the miners of our daily wealth that still defy
the harsh landscape of new furies
the meerkat endures –
torn certainties of class endure
the weaver also endures: there –
green blankets of our shrouded dreams
humanity has died in Marikana

The strike is over
The dead must return
to work