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Lament for Kofifi Macu
by Angifi Dladla
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Review by Alan Finlay

Lament for Kofifi Macu is Angifi Dladla's second collection of poems in English and the title poem – which narrates the searing yearning of a young girl who longs for the return of Kofifi, an activist murdered by his handlers in exile – signals some of the central themes and stylistic devices in the book. The "lament" is not just the girl's, but also the poet's – for himself, and for those the poet speaks for in these poems, whom he calls the "double-wounded", those betrayed by the new political and business elite post-1994. "Almighty Father,/ Healer of the double-wounded,/ hold this hand – charred/ in this freezing freedom", the poet writes in 'Prayer of the Wounded'.

Dladla draws on different poetic forms and techniques – narrative, lyrical, eulogy, free verse, the impressive use of identical rhyme, the litany of praise poetry etc. – with frequent shifts in register, and in implied reader or audience, sometimes within the same poem. He is also a playwright, and I find this influence on his poems particularly interesting. This is most obvious in 'Marikana Chorus' – a short, powerful three-act play in verse – but it is suggested elsewhere in the dramatisation of interactions between characters in his poems, the elevated patterns of speech some are given, or shifts in the reader-audience dynamic.

In 'Lament for Kofifi Macu', the "I" in the poem is the girl:

> He gave me a kiss, at Balfour station
> a bye-bye kiss. The train took him
> away to June 16, away for June 16.

While it is unclear from the poem if Kofifi is a real or imagined character, the symbolism of June 16 as the date of his disappearance is placed in deliberate counterpoint to the date when an anonymous letter arrives informing her of his murder – election day, 1994. The device of the letter is used to dramatic effect, and I can imagine the final lines of the poem being uttered by an actor on a stage, turning to the audience, finger pressed to his lips … "Shhh" …:

> 'Dear Mrs Macu,
> I hate to confide this to you:
> They purged him, with scores
> of others in exile.
> […]
>
> Shhh … those who gave the orders
> have hidden this from God.
> […]
>
> Yours anonymously,
> Shhh.'

Those responsible for the "double-wounding" are exposed in consistently unflattering ways as Dladla shows the disconnect between the suffering of the people and those in power – the result of sheer insensitivity, corruption, shallow ego, or just plain evil. Many characters – including the poet's stepfather who tries to poison the poet as a young boy – are not good people in this book.

In 'These People' the poet is invited to read at Emperor's Palace – a kitsch, superficial entertainment centre and casino – "They looked above my head,/ these people with their teenage concubines./ I greeted them – into space they stared/ jangling keys – these big cats". The poet performs and

> Everybody stood up:
> The emperor and empress;
> kings and queens,
> presidents and first ladies,
> jesters and praise poets. Even
> diplomats clapped hands
> and jostled for a feel
> of my appliquéd jacket
> and my signature beret.

"Then …" he continues, "these people/ remembered me vividly./ For all to see and hear,/ they shook my hands,/ kissed 'Mcna-mnca' and hugged me". When the poet bemoans the state of arts funding they leave him with empty promises, handing him their business cards ("'Now please,/ Comrade Poet, email all,' they crowed"), but never replying when he sends them emails and SMSs. "You sense something, something wormy/ about these people?" he asks; again, almost an actor's aside to the audience in a play.

In 'Marikana Chorus', the entire first act is given to the monologue of the Commissioner of Police who arrives with her ensemble, addressing the miners before the massacre:

> O you misled strikers, wearing blinkers;
> stop assembling on that privately-owned hill
> brewing up division, friction, ill will.
> […]
>
> Constipated illiterates, glutted with loaves
> of cockle bread, you fart around our hill, around
> as if cockroaches have encroached onto your ears.
> […]
>
> Mark my word, you'll face the might,
> the might of the People's Police Force.

The monologue ends, like the massacre itself, in an orgy of violence and madness, with the syncopation of mayhem and gunfire collapsing into a kind of self-satisfied orgasm:

> Shoot the magodukas, shoot merafes,
> execute these fucken migrants!
> […]
>
> Bham-bham! Qhu-qhu! Boom-boom!
> Ra-ta-ta-ta-ta …!

We aimed, they fell, they glutted
the morgues.
Aha-ha-ha-ha …!

Clearly it is not the people who are being protected by the People's Police Force. "They say I'm slow, don't they know how long/ it took poor whites to be part of the ruling class?" he writes in 'Prayer of the New Black Man', "what they envy are my fatted shares".

Community, in Dladla's vision, has been utterly desecrated in today's South Africa:

Today all denizens are outside,
shifting with scanty shades.
Half naked kids play in makeshift streets
that lead into syringes, as if to the shades.
[…]

No latrine, no tap, no shower.
Kids shit like rats, women like cats.
The place smells of refuse, fermented beer
and carcasses of dogs and cats.
('A People's Constituency')

Though free, the poet suggests, people are forced into lives that are little better than a neglected dog's at a shebeen:

Not a tongue out, not an ear up;
just lying, head on splayed paws.
Not a lick, not a wag, not a swap;
just there, though not in chains.

He is used to the ways of drunkards;
used to extras – hobos slinking bonewards.
Only when a spray of their urine gains
him, does he whimper and inch backwards.
('Dog at a Shebeen')

There is little dignified life (or death) for this dog in such a liminal state of existence – "There is something of a sting/ about that cry, that inching;/ something haunting, wringing/ about his rheumy eyes".

That the final act of 'Marikana Chorus' is entitled "Remembrance" is telling. The act opens beneath a statue of Mgcineni 'Mambush' Noki – the miner in a green blanket captured so iconically in news photographs.

How suffering can be made visible, and through this allowed some form of rest/restitution, is a recurring theme for the poet. Addressing the invisibility of suffering – a parallel can be drawn with Kofifi's disappearance – involves reclaiming both personal and collective memory. History cannot, literally, be known when there are secrets – when it remains defined in terms of those in power. Through the statue of Noki, what is memorialised, and how, is contested by the poet.

Who will remember for us? And on what terms? Even in death, a final rest is compromised. "*Who'll bury us?*" the poet asks – "*Who'll close our eyes?* […] *We hoped they'd be the ones*" ('Who Shall Bury Us?). Perversely, it is only "Minister Hodoshe" who is "chanting, 'Adopt a corpse,/ embrace ubuntu!'".

Language has been central to so many struggles in South Africa, and the poet's use of isiZulu in his poems is relevant in this book, as is his suggestive use of alternative/earlier names for sites of shared meaning – e.g. "Leper Island" for Robben Island or "Kgalagadi" for Kalahari. In 'The Birth of Phola Park', we are told that the original name of the squatter camp was Dunusa Park, or "Protrude-Your-Buttocks-Park", an open space where people from the nearby hostel used to "cleanse and detoxify their colons", and here and elsewhere I found the notes on the poems with translations and other information indispensable to the reading of the poems.

But this act of reclaiming can be uncertain. Language remains entrenched in its relationship to power. In the poem 'Sailing to Leper Island' – the notes say "Africans called Robben Island by this name because lepers were exiled there" – the poet's litany of remembering political heroes imprisoned there on the way to the island is cut short, at the end, by a reassertion of the binary language of apartheid: "'Welcome to Robben Island:/ We serve with pride!/ Ons dien met trots!'".

While I think the poet's lament, like Kofifi's story, is that history is inevitably incomplete and so loss needs to be negotiated, his concern in these poems is the relationship between this incompleteness and power.

Truth-telling is a necessary part of this. If the letter, arriving on election day, offers a tentative, bitter-sweet closure to the girl's grief, her suffering is surely to continue. While her lover's fate may now be known, his killers are not, nor can Kofifi be buried and achieve his final rest. In 'Prayer of the Wounded', there is "no healing in our lifetime!" when – in this instance at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – the "death-monger there/ remains poker-faced with his truncated tales".

The restlessness in this book – the denial of rest, and its relation to memory – is also a personal one. In the poignant poem 'I Failed My Children' – which is also a moving response to the current land question in South Africa – the poet cannot tell his children how, despite their pressing, he cannot take them back to the place he was born, "now a potato farm":

> Who could return after bulldozers,
> storm troopers, rottweilers bundled us
> in trucks with our cats, dogs
> and broken furniture to far-off locations?

Gone, too, are the "ancient" family photos which have been destroyed – and family members who might have shared stories and memories have died. Nor is there a written record of memory ("our books"): "We could not write about that." "These kids do not see/ that part of me is dead", the poet writes.

What rest is possible, confronted with such a level of dispossession? And when the (restless) search, as the poet contends, leads to madness? In 'Belated', in an echo of the emotional fate of Kofifi's lover, the young man from KwaThema pushes past the mourners at every funeral to see who has been buried, to see if it is the one he is looking for: "It's not him in the shoe!" he "wails" (again, the dramatic effect of Dladla's choice of words). "At all funerals/ in all weathers/ for all eternity" he does this, only to retreat to an "anthill" and turn "into a mongoose/ sentinel of the Kgalagadi".

This is a despairing – and often angry – book by one of our elder poets. I am struck by how similar themes – betrayal, disappearance, home, land, memory, language, community – drive the recent work of a poet such as Vonani Bila.

Is there hope, in Dladla's vision? I am not sure, even though he offers moments of (remembered) intimacy, transcendence and hope navigating the "lament" that is at the centre of this book. A kind of hope is also there in an important aspect of this collection: the poet's encounter with spirit guides in various forms such as the voices that save his life from poisoning by his stepfather as a child. Are these kinds of madness? The poet doesn't think so, and his life is saved more than once by "Someone, or, this presence" ('Someone').

The rituals of community (and language) offered by theatre, poetry – the theatre of poetry? – also appear to give some respite to the haunting. It is here that Dladla's work as playwright, director of a community writing project, writing teacher, and grassroots publisher of school and prison newspapers and anthologies define his activist perspective of community. It is also why the empty praises and promises of funding by "these people" who "have no vision" are dangerous to the artist's psychic survival:

> I mourned about proposals
> getting lost in the labyrinth of funding,
> 'Obstructing non-praise poets
> effects death of a language –
> garroting of our humanity.'

The final poem, 'Visitation' (a poem that has been performed by a community theatre group) suggests this regenerative power of ritual. This poem enacts a communal voice, a gathering:

> We come from the ancient kingdoms
> We come from Kush and Ta-merà
> We come from Aksum and Punt
> We come from Mali and Ghana
> We come from BuKongo and Azania.
> […]
>
> We have come to your festival
> We have come to celebrate poetry
> We have come to celebrate storytelling
> We have come to celebrate performance.
> […]
>
> Let miracles begin,
> let life prevail,
> let stories roll,
> let drama flare up,
> let poetry explode,
> resound …!

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