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Instead of a photograph – Phillip Zhuwao in Honeydew 1995

1.

When I got home from my new job selling books for a publisher, I saw that Phillip had left me a note: “Fred Bila phoned to ascertain whether Bleksem got his poems.” I was editing a little poetry journal at the time called *Bleksem*, and Vonani (he used to publish as “Fred”) had called. I was to “contact him about decisions concerning publishing in the magazine.”

It’s nearly twenty-five years later. I find this again in my folder of stuff carefully kept from my time with Phillip, slipped into a big ochre envelope I’d retrieved from a storage crate in Strydom Park.

The chainpoems we wrote together are there too, most of them written on large A2 paper salvaged from my grandparents’ office where they printed a religious magazine – it was their photostatting machine and lightbox I repatriated to make *Bleksem*.

Also in the folder is a printout of fourteen of his poems, provisionally titled “The door closes all the darkness in”; the letters he had sent me; an i ching reading marked “Phillip”; his CV; a poetry pamphlet we made; and a self-addressed envelope with his address in Harare: Stand 4176, Section 5, Kuwadzana.

I first read the handwritten manuscript of *Sunrise Poison* in 1993 over a lunchtime beer at the Graham Hotel in Grahamstown (now Makhanda). I was working at the Power Station, a cluster of handcraft co-operatives set up by Robert Berold. They did beadwork, silkscreened fabrics, and made ceramic mobiles, mugs, tea sets and plates that were painted by women from Rini, the local township, in brilliant, crude animal designs. I paged carefully through the manuscript, on rough, recycled paper, stitched at the side with a piece of string.

Phillip and I met in July 1995. We were both the same age, 24. Robert, who was editing *New Coin* at the time, had brought him down to Grahamstown to read with South African poets at the National Arts Festival, Ari Sitas, Karen Press, Joan Metelerkamp, Seitlhamo Motsapi amongst them. It was the festival when Motsapi announced he wasn’t going to write poetry anymore – I remember Colleen Higgs arguing with him about this up at the Monument Theatre. The SABC recorded the readings, and I think broadcast them. *New Coin* released them as a cassette tape.

When I met him he was leaning, one foot raised, on a simple T of wood, a bandage wrapped round the hilt to keep it comfortable. It looked like it could have come from a government hospital in Harare.

I never really got how he hurt his knee – the story was something about a manhole, at night, after some drinking. He showed it to me once, and it looked swollen and seeping. It never healed properly while he was in South Africa.

But it meant everything happened in slow motion with Phillip. I had to help him up onto the stage to for his reading. Afterwards I helped him down again.

He spent about a month with Robert on his farm, who then asked me if he could come stay with me in Honeydew, a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

Honeydew was a patchwork of smallholdings (we called them “plots”) where I had grown up – crooked peach trees, rusted barbed wire, cows, horses, dogs, and scraps of open veld. In my teenage years my father made a lot of money building and managing shopping centres, and bought a five-acre piece of veld just above my grandparents’ place where we’d lived until then. He built a huge house of thatch, with paddocks and stables, a tennis court and a cool, glittering pool where I did laps.

After varsity I returned to the house, abandoned after my parents' divorce, with a dream of flipping everything over like compost, to expose the worms and warm, claying of mulch – changing everything – starting a self-sufficient commune, with vegetables and organic gardening.

I watched everything return in abundance, the weeds, grasses, beetles, the butterflies, the waterberry tree that burst beneath the overflowing borehole tank. (This didn't impress the woman my dad had hired to look after the horses: she shook her shrill finger in my face through the car window: "Do you know how much this house cost your father to build!")

It was after this that Phillip came to stay. The woman-who-looked-after-the-horses was gone, and most of the new tenants who'd moved in were more interested in acid trips and jamming Led Zeppelin down at the stables than paying rent or sustainable farming.

"Why don't we turn this into a rehab?" one of them said seriously. He was sitting upstairs with a stranger who he said was in recovery, wizened, staring helpless, but there for one last toke.

The first thing Phillip did when he arrived was hand me a copy of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* – Take it, he said, I don't need it anymore.

2.

We wrote the chainpoems over a number of weeks, each night sitting down with our beers, saying, right, let's go. For one or two we started with an idea or a title; for one we said, okay let's make every line rhyme with "head" (the results were "red", "weird", "dead", "bled", "stomach", "bread", "mad", "shade", "bad", "sad" etc); but for most we just wrote whatever we wanted to, folding the paper over the lines we had written, and handing it back.

I'd half-read Octavio Paz's *Renga*,¹ which in part provided the inspiration, but this was more a game of chance, a vague memory of 'consequences' I'd played with my sister when we were little. Phillip and I didn't use any structure, we just covered the last line we wrote, so all you got handed back to you was a blank page, and knowing what you had written before.

Afterwards we read the poem, like animal bones spilt across a mat.

His had more continuity between the lines. Mine were trying to accept whatever came into my mind – first thought best thought, Ginsberg said.

We wrote 36 poems this way. Sometimes the synchronicity surprised us – like the chance unfolding of the surreal in one poem ("The party"),² when a telephone call to the police is immediately met with the line "my conch is not guilty for blowing the wind". Or when both of us wrote about fishes and cities in "The rains weeping for you":

Me:

In the city's face
we hide behind our shoulders
with dry tongues
and the tangled
fishing-nets of despair

Phillip:

Brown rivers cross this city, its wide-eye fishes
ogle at your crossing;
When you drown
Grey-dawn fishes have hopes for you
stepping stones vanishing for me

¹ I don't remember if I knew about projects such as *Exquisite Corpse* at that point – cut-ups, sure – and it was also about that time when the local performance poetry troupe Botsotso Jesters started writing their collaborative poetry.

² I've used the titles from the original chainpoems in this piece.

We also recorded his poetry – on my little Fostex four-track. “Miriam! Miriam!” Phillip called down the microphone.

Once Chris Letcher, a good friend from varsity, popped in and played guitar softly while Phillip read one of his poems. Even Tim recorded crazy stuff with us – I’d met him on a crocodile farm backpacking with my girlfriend up to Dar es Salaam, and he had wandered down to stay. He *zoinged* randomly on the synthesizer with whatever sound he found, in between hopping around the lounge with a bottle of beer in his hand. He gave me a look the next day, stirring a stew, when he realised this was not going to be a one-night project.

I didn’t think Phillip was a great reader of his own poetry³ – but I don’t know what I was looking for. “Night falls, be here”, “Be here, night falls”... I asked him to read it again and again. Until we gave up –

But that was Phillip, there, on the four-track, with all those mashed up sounds and Chris, cross-legged, quiet in the background.⁴

We did an interview. Phillip grew up on a tobacco farm outside Harare, amongst migrant workers from Malawi, Zambia and Mozambique. “There was a lot of talking about witchcraft, hyenas, people dying, graves, cannibalism,” he said in the interview. He had six brothers and sisters. His mother was a *n’anga*, the Shona word for sangoma. It seems she abandoned him early on, and he didn’t know where she was.

Phillip aligned himself with the poetry of Dambudzo Marechera. He’d also read Rider Haggard, which surprised me. He said he would never go to war to fight for anyone. “I am a lot more interested in myself, in my pain and sufferings...I don’t think it’s a selfish perspective.”

While he once looked up to Dambudzo, he felt he had become a better writer than him.

His father sounded severe. I think he was an ex-military man, although I didn’t ask him further. His grandfather used to punish him by throwing him into a cattle kraal. It had left him with terrifying nightmares of being chased by black bulls, and of bottomless pits which he described as “endless”. “The next thing about my nightmares is pits. I always dream of something throwing me into a deep black pit,” he said.

Phillip seemed drawn to death, even while he feared it.⁵ He told me that if a psychologist knew what was going on inside his head, she would “run a mile”. He said that he needed to “exorcise” the spirit of his mother – it sounded like he meant it literally – and said that he needed to do that before he could write properly.

A lot of Phillip’s trauma came out in the chainpoems, sometimes showing a vulnerability that I had not seen in his other poems:

I’m scared of going into the darkness
 I’m scared of being forgotten
 I’m scared of flowers growing from my chest
 and the laugh of bees as I struggle to rise

³ We read his poem *Sunset* to schoolchildren once – a teacher-friend invited us. I presume we read other poems too, I don’t remember. Maybe it was his accent, but he read, and the children listened but didn’t respond. So I read the poem, as clearly as I could. I really wanted them to hear how beautiful it was. Perhaps it was because it was the second reading, but they clapped loudly and really enjoyed it.

⁴ We also tried to record lightning as a sound-effect for a poem. I stuck the mic stand out the window during a huge Highveld thunderstorm that burst across the paddocks. It tripped the lights, silencing the four-track and plunging us into a mid-afternoon darkness.

⁵ I once gave Phillip a tarot reading – I think it was his first one. The final card was the death card. I tried to explain to him that it meant change, or that it wasn’t literally about death. But he said he didn’t like the tarot. He said the i ching was much better.

... I'm scared of having doors closed forever
the key thrown away and my soul inside.

[from "Dark River"]

My eyes opening, black sweat from my hair
Shivering
running for a drink before dawn, the
nightmare laughing in the room

all my windows, doors refusing to open!

[from "Letter to a lover"]

My fingers strangling me, on my knees
Searching in the darkness, God, don't let me
die now, the room, its evil
full of empty bottles, frothing with cunning dryness
drinking the sweat from my soul

[from "Running for a drink at dawn"]

He was direct – and I found it refreshing. He seemed to want to look at his demons square in the face, the graveyards, hyenas, terrible traumas. His world frightened me, sometimes, as much as someone's unconscious can scare you when you suddenly get a glimpse of it. Once we watched a full moon lifting over the paddocks. It's beautiful, I said. "I find it scary," he said. It reminded him of witchdoctors and spells, and his internal horrors.

The matador on the cover of *Bleksem 5* was for him – a way to ward off evil spirits.

Phillip contributed quite a bit to *Bleksem*. Besides the interview, I asked him to write about his experiences of the rituals on his childhood farm, and the result was a mesmerising and vivid account of the possession of a woman by a baboon spirit. It is a great piece of first-hand anthropological writing. For *Bleksem* No. 5, Phillip was credited as a "contributing editor", and I used the piece as the editorial.

He let me use raw extracts from *See the Barbarous Lands*, a novella he had written. He also wrote some reviews – of Robert Homen's and Sarah Ruden's collections and I think Motsapi's book (I didn't use the last two, I am not sure why). He was honest in his response to South African poets, and did not kowtow to other people's opinions.

I also included several of the chainpoems in their more-or-less unedited form in *Bleksem 5* and 6, and extracts of the original hand-written text with the interview.

I had asked him if he would edit a Zimbabwean section for *Bleksem*, and he agreed. He seemed to know a number of Zimbabwean poets, and later encouraged them to send poems to me.

One or two poems arrived – on the same recycled paper as the *Sunrise Poison* manuscript, and in the same cursive handwriting (it made me think that they all learned to write the same way in Zimbabwean schools). I somehow felt disappointed, but I am not sure there was any reason for me to feel that way. I didn't use them, or keep them.

The pamphlet we made was called "Honeydew, hurry", and had a photo on the front lifted from John Lee Hooker's album *Boom Boom* (the 1992 release). I laid it out on my computer. It had three of my poems, and one of his (it was hastily edited, with several spelling mistakes).

Mine included a poem protesting the cluster developments that were starting to be built in Honeydew. It had estate agents "in suits/who arrive like hornets...condoms still flapping/through

their unzipped/zips”.

His poem, “I’ve been walking in my sleep”, spoke about the punishment of Prometheus (bound to a rock, each day his liver picked at by an eagle); Io, the mortal lover of Zeus, turned into a heifer and “doomed to wander”; his nightmares, smiles that became “skeleton horrid [sic] in aceldama field”; dark seas, doppelgängers, and a “dead voice, rotting,/shouting to skies, to God”.

We took copies up through the baking car park at the Honeydew shops, me with long hair dripping, giant beard, old mechanic’s pants, scuffed hiking boots; him on his government-issue crutch, with the dirty bandage wrapped around the hilt to keep his armpit comfortable, hobbling with his swollen knee and short dreadlocks. It felt comical, biblical. (I felt like John the Baptist feeding on the Locusts...)

We left a pile at a Christian coffee shop. I asked the waitress at the till who looked non-plussed – I felt like I had played a three-cup trick on her. The next day they had been removed by management.

It was sometime after this that we met with Colleen and Robert in Rockey Street in Yeoville to catch up. We had just met with the guys from *Something Quarterly*, another small poetry magazine that had sprung up, but with ambitions of making money. The meeting with *Something Quarterly* ended awkwardly after I said let’s work together.

We spoke little to Robert and Colleen, but they were glad to see us. I was living in an intense, fuelled distance. All greasy and tired, in my green mechanic’s pants and hiking boots. Phillip seated next to me, with his golden staff.

The next day Robert came to visit Phillip to edit his book of poems. They sat on the patio, in the thatch shade, paging through corrections. Later he did i ching readings for both of us.

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I got a job selling books (Robert’s help!), and things changed.

Phillip spent most of the time writing on my computer. When I got back he’d written a page of prose, some poems, started on the beer...

We carried on with the chainpoems, but I was restless, torn, my temper flaring. “That job’s not good for you!” Phillip shouted back at me.

He asked if he could include a few lines of my poetry in his new novel – lines I had jotted down about Harare while backpacking to Dar es Salaam.

We went down to fetch more beer from the shebeen run by Catherine who cleaned the house and had watched me grow up as a teenager. She didn’t like Phillip – prejudice against Zimbabweans, I suspect.

It’s okay, he’s a poet, I said.

One night we got really drunk and awkwardly stoned at a party. Driving home I became all tangled up the wrong way in a road works on Hans Strijdom (now Malibongwe). The beacons made no sense to me. “Help me! Help me! I don’t know what I’m doing!” I shouted urgently at Alan in the passenger seat – he was a sort of alter ego friend from high school who had stayed on at the plot after the others left.

We stopped at Clarries, the local Honeydew pub, run by a guy in shorts and flops with the demeanour of a gangster. It had pool tables, slot machines, and the occasional strip show. Phillip and I went in for a last beer, sitting in the corner, the late-night (white) patrons staring at us, while Alan slept on in the car.

The next day we wrote a three-part chainpoem about the night before. Phillip’s lines were laced with anxiety:

Sweet blue of smoke joints being
passed everywhere, this cold biting drunken smiles
of girls holding loose to their skirts, spilling glasses
falling in your hair. trying to remember my fast

disappearing name!
 [...]

dancer in the whirlwind!
 Here no girl dances, only wine flowing in our
 tortured veins

Another beer?

Yes please.
 [...]

Cyan fog is everywhere
 On the girls' breasts
 Their ugly high heeled boots
 Somebody has stolen my brains
 [...]

All these kaleidoscope lights, our car
 the only one
 Sending me mad, thinking,
 I'm perhaps dreaming,
 those hellish joints, Oh God
 Is this heaven or some lousy road home?!

His efforts to get a job in Johannesburg amounted to little. He faxed his CV to Anthony Ward at Facts and Fiction, a new bookshop chain: "Date of birth: 14 September 1971; Ordinary level passes, eight subjects; Poet and writer; First book of poetry being published by Deep South Publishers in Grahamstown towards the end of 1995; Currently co-editor of *Bleksem* literary magazine". I find a note in the folder scribbled with *The Star's* contact details: "Send CV with all writing connections interest in writing, any published material". (He'd applied to be a trainee journalist).

He was frustrated, belittled even, I think. "I have a fax machine in Harare, you know?" he shouted defensively from the dining-room doorway one afternoon.

Once, to get away, I went down to the stables to my typewriter; I hadn't been there for a while. I had a room – with horses shuffling in their boxes on the other side of the wall – where I kept my piano, and a small yellow writing table I had picked up at a second-hand shop as a student in Grahamstown. I typed poems furiously on my Olivetti in red ink, because the black on the typing ribbon had run dry, looking out the window at the night. I was feeling bitter and displaced.

Without any chance of work on the horizon, Phillip grew resigned that he had to go home – and by the end he wanted to.

When he left I gave him one of my dad's jackets that were still hanging in the cupboard after my parents' divorce. It was way too big for him, but he took it politely. I also gave him my father's crutches that he'd used after his knee ligament replacement.

At the kitchen door, he opened up his carry bag, to prove he had not stolen any of my poetry books. I was shocked that he did this, but didn't say anything.

He boarded the train, and it felt like a relief. I told him my girlfriend was pregnant (turned out she wasn't).

"That's great! That's great man!" he beamed out the carriage window as the train pulled away.

3.

We kept up a sparse but meaningful correspondence when he was back in Harare – letters mostly coming from him (I was a poor correspondent). I tried to phone him once, and spoke to King, his

friend, whose number he had left with me.

He wrote tenderly about the plot; my dog Aldous, the cats, the cockatiels, even the neighbour's braying donkey we had baptised "Pavarotti". About listening to Van Morrison, Neil Young, Ali Farka Touré; driving back from the post office after collecting mail with a six-pack of beers, what I was having for supper ("boiling hotdogs?"); the jasmine outside the bedroom window, and the waterberry tree bursting beneath the borehole tank (he'd told me it was a healing tree in Zimbabwe). He even asked about my mother's hip replacement operation ("howz your mum?").

His letters reinvigorated me, reflected a softer light on where I was, gentled my internal aspersions and self-judgements.

Despite his circle of poets and friends (he belonged to a writing group in Harare) he was lonely, and said he had been writing to Robert and Seithamo too. He was excited about the chainpoems being published, asking me to send him a copy (it wasn't ready yet), quoting the lines:

induced to the fall,
the bereaver falls through the eagle's nest,
into the desert of the hornet's valley;
where angels mourn with vanishing cries.

He wanted to write best-sellers, make lots of money, get a "mansion" in suburbia, "keep bees as a pleasure" (a friend had given him a book on beekeeping). His fantasy was "Going home at night to a lovely lovely wife. Smoking a pipe by the fireside talking to my dog beside me a glass of orange juice (Not those dam black labels). Phillip Zhuwao. Esquire. Ever heard of that." He said the thought gave him "the chills".

He was drinking a lot. He told me he was selling my father's crutches for \$8.50 so he could afford a beer (he included a sketch of the crutches on a for-sale flier pasted to a wall, "owner now recovered".) His leg was better he said, although he still walked "like a remnant of the war with a shrapnel in his knee!" He was using morphine too, which I think started when he first hurt his knee: "Hospitals are good for docs and nurses but not buggers like us. The only thing I like there are the beautiful young nurses and the pharmacies where I can bluff it to get morphine!"

He felt trapped in Harare ("Harare is as hell as hell!"), and described the literary scene there as being behind a "Cultural Iron Curtain". He wanted to start a poetry magazine, but couldn't get the funding ("Africa indeed, it's like a jail without windows or doors."). He longed to come back to South Africa, to another Grahamstown festival – and why not? The 1990s was an exciting time for poetry in South Africa.

In what seemed to be a premonition of his own death, he wrote: "That black bull will soon get me. We are so near each other he can smell my fear, His red eyes, his snorting."

"The pit, that deep black thing has been gone some time. Its place has been taken by a bird. A huge monster with piercing eyes. Sometimes I go past deep valleys, gorges, cliffs, mountain, graves, trying to escape. I want to learn to fly, to escape."

He said he found sanctuary in water: "When the bull chases me I jump into deep water. When the great bird chases me I jump into deep water. Even though I can't swim I never drown. I find refuge in depth of the water."

He didn't post his last letter to me.⁶ While working as a radio journalist, I received a phone call from Robert saying he'd been told by Phillip's brother that Phillip had died. '

4.

In 2002 Dye Hard Press published *The Red Laughter of Guns in Green Summer Rain*. The title was Phillip's.

⁶ I later received a copy of it after his manuscripts were sent to Robert by Phillip's family.

Putting the collection together was difficult. I arranged the poems into four sections, with the last poem, “Doro Remudzimu”,⁷ standing alone. I felt a number of them didn’t work, and left out 16 poems, using stanzas or lines (mostly Phillip’s) from some of the excluded poems as prefaces to some sections, and to the collection as a whole. I didn’t do any fine-tuning of his lines, and only once or twice ended a stanza of his earlier when it seemed obvious to do this – stanzas that I thought really didn’t work I simply left out.

The only changes I made to my lines were to clarify a word that I felt came out wrong (except for one line – going back now I realise I changed its meaning entirely). I also took out some of my lines that I thought were junk; sometimes I took out a whole stanza, and just let Phillip speak.

Even with these changes, the poems that I assembled were pretty much first drafts.

Reading it now, I think the booklet is okay, but with distance I can see there were other ways I could have done it. I’d tried too hard to make them work as coherent poems, which was not a good idea. It would have been better to have more separation between the voices, perhaps using the space on the page, or maybe even at times going as far as indicating who was speaking. It would have been more of an exchange then, with the reader invited into the room to read with us as we unfolded the piece of paper – perhaps capturing something of the excitement and curiosity we had.

I also find different things interesting. For example, the way we were challenging each other in the poems: “You give me your beer telling me/ The night is so long and our chapped smiles/are really/reeds in the flooded river”, he said. “Look up! The lonely mountains...” I replied trying to draw him (or myself) out of the darkness.

The addressee is never entirely clear in a number of the poems; sometimes the “you” is not Phillip or I, but the projected “you” of the self. So we were talking to ourselves, reflected through the other sitting there in the lounge together (it is interesting how we started to try write like each other as the poems went on). This shifts over the course of writing the poems, and could be used to organise a new collection.

I would also include some of the 16 poems I left out if I edited the book again.

5.

“Are you sure you don’t have a photo of him?” Robert asked, many years later. It didn’t even occur to me to take one. We wrote our poems, drank, laughed, played guitar, threw the i ching. I kept his wooden crutch.

We became friends for what felt like a short time. We salvaged each other’s loneliness. We were poets, fished out the dark!

But I don’t feel I really knew Phillip – how could I?

My psyche, for a time, felt interlocked with his – there was even something competitive, envious in our relationship. It was something I wanted to rid myself of, that I felt almost afraid of after his death, almost responsible for.

When I moved from Honeydew I took his crutch from house to house, along with the folder of poems and notes.

I was relieved when my kids finally broke it, playing a game of knights or guns with friends in the garden. My son came all shyly apologetically to my study to tell me. I wanted to tell Phillip right away.

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Much later, in 2017, I meet with Robert and Tinashe Mushakavanhu, a young Zimbabwean scholar, for coffee in Grahamstown. I’m there for the launch of my book of poems that has just published by

⁷ The Shona term referring to the brewing of beer as a libation for the ancestors. We subtitled the poem “The Shona festival of beer & lightning”.

Deep South, and for the launch of *Sunrise Poison*, finally published after so many years (funding was much harder to find for publishing a poet who wasn't South African, Robert said). Tinashe, who has researched and written much about Marechera, is enthusiastic about Phillip's unpublished work. He wants to set up an archive of Zimbabwean literature. He is typing up Phillip's handwritten material, and helping to edit his two novellas.

Everything about Phillip's life feels like it's under construction. Who he was, fragments of experiences, his books getting edited, published.

The *Sunrise Poison* launch is happening in a kind of makeshift dancehall downtown. Many young black students and visitors from the Rhodes creative writing masters course are there. The real attraction is the Xhosa maskandi maestro, Inkunzi Emdaka, who is going to sing afterwards. (Mxolisi Nyezwa, who is doing a PhD on maskanda lyrics, has been responsible for bringing him to Rhodes as a resident artist). Everyone seems so alive – spirited.

Robert, Tinashe and I introduce Phillip's book. I don't really know what to say about him, although my memories are vivid. I say: "He did the dreadlock thing, like Dambudzo".

"What's the dreadlock thing?" someone asks from the audience, smiling sharply.

Over coffee I say his mother was a witchdoctor – Robert corrects me, double-checking with Tinashe that it's n'anga. But Phillip spoke about "witchdoctors", so I feel okay. Robert says we should launch Phillip's next book in Zimbabwe, and at the same time arrange a cleansing ritual for Phillip. He would want that, he says.

We still don't have a photograph of him.