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Flown Away: Eva Bezwoda's Life, Death and Poetry

Eva Kowalska

ABSTRACT

Eva Bezwoda was a prominent poet in the 1960s and 1970s, who contributed to several South African journals, as well as publishing *One Hundred and Three Poems* in 1973. Her death by suicide three years later seems congruent with the themes and preoccupations of her work, and was a loss to South Africa's literary culture at the time. Despite critical attention to her work, after her death her legacy seems to have been forgotten, and her poetry neglected. In this article, I outline what is known of her biography, with a focus on her most productive years as a writer, and the development of her career in relation to recurrent motifs, prominent themes, and relevant details from her poems. I consider the critical reception of her work and engage with archival material, including correspondence from the year before her death with Ad Donker and personal responses to her death by Sheila Fugard and Lionel Abrahams.

KEYWORDS

Eva Bezwoda, Eva Royston, Lionel Abrahams, Sheila Fugard, Ad Donker, South African poetry, South African literary journals

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Eva Bezwoda, who also wrote under her married name of Eva Royston,[1] was a prolific poet and a unique voice in South African literature of the 1960s and 1970s. Her work is modernist in style, confessional and introspective in tone, with a melancholy aesthetic, psychonanalytic interest and a particularly vivid use of imagery. Among the recurrent themes in her writing, there is a preoccupation with darkness, stillness and an escape from life, which speaks to her death by suicide in her early thirties.

In this article, I trace Bezwoda's literary career and the available details of her biography, with a focus on her most productive years as a writer. I also look at the critical and scholarly reception of her work, as well as some of the responses within the South African literary community to her death, with specific reference to correspondence and other personal writing by author Sheila Fugard, editor Lionel Abrahams and publisher Ad Donker. In doing so I aim to demonstrate that although she was a strong writer and a frequent contributor to many local literary journals, and her work received a significant amount of critical attention at the time, she and her legacy were not well served by her editors, and others of cultural influence around her. Soon after her death, and partly due to the shift in focus in South African literature towards the urgently political, her work fell out of print and out of circulation. As a result she was omitted from retrospective canons and histories, and to a large extent from scholarship.

While gender politics, the circumstances and thus priorities specific to South African writing and publishing in the 1960s and 70s, and the more interpersonal politics of editing and publishing all play a part, none of these alone account satisfactorily for Bezwoda's stark absence in South African literary history, given her relatively prominent place within it during her short life. This account is a sort of archival recovery: of the writer as well as of her poems; of the remarkably different responses to – and conversations between – other literary figures close to her in the aftermath of her death; as well as the more formal contemporaneous critical responses to work, which far outweigh the very little scholarly attention her poetry has received since then.

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In 1976, having heard of Bezwoda's death in January of that year, Sheila Fugard wrote an obituary. The two would have been familiar with each other's writing, having published in the same journals for a decade; Fugard indicates that they had become friends (Fugard, personal correspondence 1). Fugard's piece is heartfelt and sympathetic, emphasising Bezwoda's writing and contribution to South African poetry.

In August 1976 Fugard sent it to Lionel Abrahams, former editor of the journal *The Purple Renoster* which he had founded in 1956 (Becker 5). Abrahams was also the editor and publisher of Renoster Books which had published Bezwoda's *One Hundred and Three Poems* in 1973, and by all accounts a friend and mentor to her. In her accompanying letter Fugard asks Abrahams to consider publishing it in the annual *Quarry*, which he co-edited with Walter Saunders. She adds that if he does not find it suitable for *Quarry*, she might submit it elsewhere. Fugard was concerned about the possible "inadequacy" of her tribute and its potential to contribute to any sensationalism about Bezwoda's death, but states that "it's simply something I felt I had to write" (Fugard, "Ms of obituary" 1).

The obituary, titled "A Hollow Laugh at Death" opens with "Eva Royston is dead. Suicide. A tragic pact with death" (2). She compares Bezwoda to Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Ingrid Jonker, on the basis of both the nature of her death and the thematic and stylistic qualities of her writing. Fugard notes that "Eva, Robert Royston and myself wrote poems in the 1960s that reflected the fragmented inner world […] tortuous, and often revealing poetry" (2). She adds: "Eva throbbed with a flamboyance and vitality. Words spilt over onto paper. Poetry flowered in dark whorls and calligraphies of inner adventure" (3).

These dramatic opening sentences were perhaps the 'sensationalism' Fugard was concerned about (although in reality Bezwoda's death was largely unremarked outside of the poetry community in South Africa). But she continues calmly and insightfully to comment on Bezwoda's life and work, and the poetry scene and critical reception into which she wrote, noting that "in the seventies, when male poets were fusing the landscape of South Africa with personal identity, together with the clamour of black poets, the sixties seem insular and introspective" (2). Yet this inward gaze, and the insular, solitary space are what characterise Bezwoda's poetry. Thus to some extent her work, consistently personal, aesthetic and apolitical, was possibly limited in its reach to a South African readership and, by the mid-1970s, to publication.

Fugard writes about Bezwoda's failing mental health, ambivalent or troubled relationships with her art, her country of residence, those trying to help her, and attempts at salvage: "[She] turned from poetry, as she did from Africa, pursuing forms of psychotherapy. Her therapy sessions with R. D. Laing were stormy. Her attempts at being a therapist herself were bizarre. Her marriage failed" (2). To some extent, these troubles – the ambivalence of South Africa, the cult of therapy and especially the influence of the unconventional Laing, who was both lauded as a revolutionary voice of anti-psychiatry and remembered as something of an autodidact and bully

(Day and Keeley 3) are as bound to the 1960s as was Bezwoda's solitary poetic style. Fugard continues: "Eva returned home on a visit last year [1975]. She was thin, and tense. She haunted the past of the vanished sixties. A past that had been usurped by the actively engaged poets of the seventies. The dialogue with Africa, always tenuous, had become meaningless. She returned to London, a bed-sitter and a fatal overdose" (Fugard, "Ms of obituary" 2).

Abrahams's actual response to Fugard regarding the obituary is not archived. However, her letter back to him in September of 1976 strongly suggests that he not only declined to publish it, but also advised her against sending it to other editors. From her response it is clear that Abrahams indicated that Bezwoda's husband, Robert Royston, would have to be consulted about its publication; and furthermore, that her statement about the death being a suicide was a questionable assumption. In essence, Abrahams seems to have questioned the validity of Fugard's claims and Kowalska's position in writing it to such an extent that she wrote back:

> About the piece on Eva, I really feel it is best to simply scrap it. I don't think it's sufficiently profound to warrant a correspondence on my part with Robert who will naturally be very sensitive […] I was told that it was suicide by Ad Donker and that is where my information comes from. The piece was really written simply out of a feeling [about] the validity of Eva's poetry, much of her life that was in a way abused, and the scant attention paid by most people to what she wrote.
>
> It's enough that you have read it and made your very lucid points. So please just scrap it, and for me it simply remains a piece of private writing. I certainly won't circulate it further.
>
> (Fugard, "Letter" 4)

Fugard's obituary of Bezwoda might have been imperfect; nevertheless, it was factually correct about Bezwoda's death, and none of it comes across as insensitive, dubious or otherwise inappropriate. With his letter in response to Fugard's text missing, Abrahams's reasons for silencing Fugard in this matter are indecipherable. It is apparent, though, that Fugard cared enough about Bezwoda's poetry to make it the focus of her tribute, and realised that if not published, circulated, promoted, or written about with some urgency, Bezwoda's poetic voice would fall by the wayside, given the turbulent times South Africa and its literature, was undergoing. Fugard tried to intervene, but was inexplicably rebuked, and retreated.

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1982. 15. 12. 10

"A HOLLOW LAUGH AT DEATH"

Eva Reyston is dead. Suicide. A tragic pact with death, [redacted]. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and our own Ingrid Jenker are among the women poets who have taken their own lives.

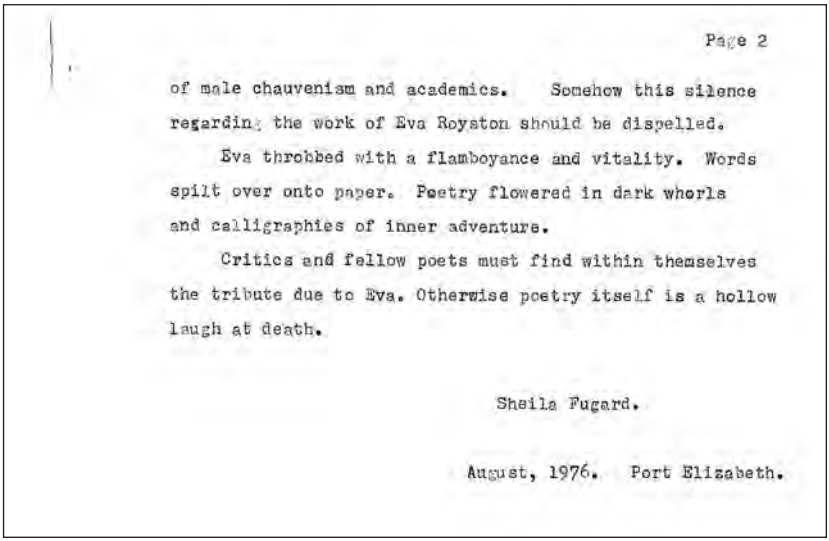
Eva, Robert Reyston and myself wrote poems in the sixties that reflected the fragmented inner world. We drew our knowledge, unconciously, from the confessional poets - Sexton, Robert Lowell and Theodore Roethke. Tortuous, and often revealing poetry.

In the seventies, when male poets are fusing the landscape of Africa with personal identity, together with the clamour of black poets, the sixties seem insular and intrespective.

Eva was a woman and a poet. She turned from poetry, as she did from Africa, pursueing forms of psychotherapy. Her therapy sessions with R.D. Laing were stormy. Her attempts at being a therapist herself were bizzare. Her marriage failed.

Eva returned home on a visit last year. She was thin, and tense. She haunted the past of the vanished sixties. A past that had been usurped by the actively engaged poets of the seventies. The dialogue with Africa, always tenuous, had become meaningless. She returned to London, a bed-sitter and a fatal overdose.

There is a terrible omission on the part of those who care for poetry. Eva left a single volume, "One Hundred and Three Poems". It was tepidly received by the rumbles



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of male chauvenism and academics. Somehow this silence regarding the work of Eva Royston should be dispelled.

Eva throbbed with a flamboyance and vitality. Words spilt over onto paper. Poetry flowered in dark whorls and calligraphies of inner adventure.

Critics and fellow poets must find within themselves the tribute due to Eva. Otherwise poetry itself is a hollow laugh at death.

Sheila Fugard.

August, 1976. Port Elizabeth.

In fact, very little is known about the details of Bezwoda's life. Her surname might be of Polish origin, but the family came to South Africa from or through Austria, where Eva was born, and she spoke German at home as a child. Her contributor's biography for *The Lava of This Land*, an anthology of South African poetry edited by Denis Hirson and published in 1997 states that "Eva Bezwoda was born in Vienna in 1942, arriving in South Africa at the age of eight" (325). According to Abrahams, "her father died in a fall on a mountain and her mother continued living in Durban" (Abrahams, "A Reader" 313). James Fox, ostensibly summarising from his own interview with her for a profile in the *Rand Daily Mail* cites her as "a graduate of Natal University" and "a sometime teacher" (Fox 8). *The Lava of this Land* bio also states that "she taught English and German at the University of Natal" and that "*One Hundred and Three Poems* (1973) records the inner struggle that led to her suicide in 1976" (Hirson 325) which suggests that retrospectively, her death has been linked to her poetry in a lasting metaphorical logic. She married journalist and editor Robert Royston "around 1968 or '69" (Abrahams, "A Reader" 313). There is little information available about Royston, beyond his work on *The Purple Renoster* and Renoster Books, his single volume of poetry, *Firedance* (1973) and compilation of one of the first anthologies in South Africa of work by Black poets, titled *To Whom it May Concern* (1973).

As far as can be ascertained, Bezwoda's first published poem was an untitled piece which appeared in the winter edition of the *Purple Renoster* in 1966. It is a study of observation, as the speaker watches the person addressed, always noticing what is seen at a remove. It reads:

> I always look at your face
> Just a moment too late
> When I look
> The turmoil of colours and sounds
> Has gone; the volcano has already
> Put out its tongue at heaven, and
> The explosion has reduced into
> A white dust.
> When I look, your eyes
> Baptise a chair as a chair
> Or look level out at a blue horizon
> Where you watch the little unexplained white speck
> Disappearing into the blue,
> When I look at your face
> The blank startled look of the being
> Between sleep and waking has gone;
> The epileptic has ceased to jerk
> And resumed his normal movements and work.
> When I look at your face
> I always know that it is too late.

The poem is quiet, watchful, uncomplicated except for its very specific focus on the sequence of perception: the object, the viewer, the writer.

In 1967, aged 25, Bezwoda was mentioned in an article by James Fox in the *Rand Daily Mail* as "a young poet whose work immediately tugs at the mind" (Fox 8). In the same year, *Purple Renoster* 7 published four of her poems: "Refrain", "Here Are the Buildings", "Totem" and "Steppe". Congruently with the dual meaning of its title, "Refrain" makes extensive use of rhyme and repetition, as in the refrain of a song; its repeated plea is to refrain and "Please please release and cease" (5) and free the speaker from an imagined underwater world, from Hades, from darkness and "the coal-shute of the night" (29). "Here Are the Buildings" is a nocturnal cityscape. "Totem" and "Steppe" augur in the thematic and imagistic preoccupations of much of Bezwoda's work, and thus might be said to indicate the direction her work would take and the assumption of her mature voice.

"Totem" is both Freudian and sensual, with the desperate vitality of "life […] stricken and wild/ Like a trapped rabbit" (9–10) and the first instance of the streaking blood and birth imagery as flashes of violence in her poems: "a carnation glows red/ Like a blood clot at my feet" (25–26). "Steppe" introduces the animal metaphors of her mental illness: "my madness comes prowling round me/ Like coward wolves" (3–4) and the longing for what might be read as the stillness of death, which haunts much of her work: "I long to fold myself/ Into a warm snow drift/ Where a moist darkness/ Will close/ Over the triumphant baying of the wolves" (36–41).

In 1967, a different poem also titled "Totem" appeared in *Wurm* 7. This one also explores the imagery of the subconscious mind and is directed at someone or something yet unburied which "Still [thrusts] up/ Like a tough wiry root/ Through the rubble and brick of my memory/ And bloom[s] in unexpected places" (2–5). To this memory the speaker is "compelled […]/ Like a bird battered to the sea" (19–20). It was accompanied by "Ebb" which marks the introduction of her water imagery, another long-lasting motif to emerge in this period. All of these poems are novel and engaging, with fresh perspectives despite the recurrent themes and motifs, and sometimes with a wry sense of humour.

"When I Wake in the Morning" (*New Coin*, 1968) creates a floodlit view of a disoriented, dreamy space, contrasting the daylight reality of the world with the dark waters of dream imagery:

> When I wake in the morning
> My room is white
> As though I found myself sea-wrecked
> On a pale dry beach
> And the massive night-song of the sea
> Is now only a drowsy receding hum.
> How can I live in a world of light
> Keen as the glaze from mirrors or sand,
> Trapped like a spider
> Along white sheets of wall?
> Birds' shadows have passed through my room,
> Too swiftly for me to grasp.
> Yet I still hold the night's aftermath,
> Clusters of bright images
> In a fecund landscape
> And I can yet feel the sunken reaches
> Of my sea vibrate,
> As though huge whales
> Threshed at the flat shore.

The poem is all contrasts: between waking and dream, sunlight and water, the "massive", "huge" sounds and shapes of the oceanic reduced to a "receding hum" amid right angles, bleached whiteness and stark reflections.

Bezwoda continued to publish a steady handful of poems a year in journals such as *Wurm*, *Bolt,* and *New Coin*, as well as in the newspaper *New Nation*, throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. While her work was intimate in subject matter and confessional in style, her personal life seems to have been kept very private. A few of the poems offer insight, but these are mere glimpses, and reading anything biographical into them ventures into conjecture. Nevertheless, treated carefully, these details are of interest.

For instance, the untitled "Don't Go into the Wood at Dusk" which appeared in *Wurm* in 1968, like the steppe wolves of "Steppe", uses imagery suggestive of a European landscape and delves into a mythology arguably bound to European fairy-tale and archetype, or what Bezwoda termed the "primal" space (Bezwoda , "Author Bio" 91): the circling wolves, the dark forest, the witching hour. "Don't go into the wood at dusk" (1), the speaker warns, because that is when "dark mist weaves/ A hallucination between the trees" (3–4). Throughout the poem, the details of the forest: the "swan-necked lily" (6) "the woodbird's high note/ That tempts you to stumble onwards/ Over the moss" (12–14), "the poisonous blue glow/ Of wild berries, glimpsed through the bracken" (16–17), "night and cold" which ambush wanderers "Like robbers" (25–26), "dark arcades of boughs and leaves" (28), "the last yellow daffodil" (31) are all more native to the European than African wilderness, and create an atmosphere in which the myths and tales of that space are inferred, that of "a spellbound wood/ With a mossy path that may never lead the way out" ("Waiting for You" 21–22). In "Mother You've Been Sitting on My Tongue" the plants that she chooses to illustrate discomfort are "nettle" (15) and "thistle" (19), flora endemic to the northern hemisphere.

Probably in the late 1960s, the Independent Cultural Association presented "An Evening of New Poetry". The date and venue are, curiously, not mentioned in the programme. The evening featured thirty-five poems by prominent South African poets, including two by Bezwoda, still using her maiden name: "Wouldn't You Like to Die"' and "I Met You Again". It seems to have been quite a formal presentation with the poems read, not by the authors themselves but by performers, accompanied by music, all arranged and directed by Geoffrey Haresnape and Joseph Sherman.

In 1971, the newly established *Classic*, under the editorship of Sipho Sepamla, published a series of six poems by Bezwoda focused on South

Africa, or perhaps Africa in general, two of which were subsequently included in *One Hundred and Three Poems.* The poems are impressionistic and as always, given to tactile and visual simile and metaphor. What sets them apart from most of Bezwoda's work is the consistent outsider-insider perspective, which brings about a tension between the insights of a unique perception, and the alienating, insulating force of social fissures, political frustration and cultural unbelonging. She writes of alienation: "What strangers we are to the world/ Which is more unknown to us/ Than the changing speech of a river" ("Strangers" 23–25) and anxiety: "And those who saw the signs/ […] imagining portents in an explosive stutter/ And seeing guilty dreams behind closed eyes" ("Signs", 25–28). She asks for communion in "Give me the Wafer of Your Words". In an untitled poem, she speculates about "What can save Africa now?" (1) but the answer is only a postcard description of Africa as the speaker sees it, either timeless or stagnant with "Babies strapped to backs/ Men trudging along the road to nowhere/ Women bearing pots" (12–14).

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In April 1973, the editorial of *New Coin* announced the publication of *One Hundred and Three Poems,* explaining that "we have published some of Mrs Royston's poems under her maiden name of Eva Bezwoda" (see "Editorial", 3). The book retailed for one rand and 75 cents a copy (Rose 19). But the printing of *One Hundred and Three Poems* had not gone well. In a letter dated 11 January 1973, Bezwoda, Royston and Abrahams, on a Renoster Books letterhead, complain to a Mr Greenberg of Polygraph Ltd, which had handled the printing and binding of several hundred copies of the book. They mention the use of inferior quality paper, under-inked pages and smudging (Bezwoda, Royston and Abrahams 1). It is not clear from subsequent correspondence whether the printing costs were discounted or better-quality copies printed and in what quantities; the volume has in any case been out of print since the demise of Renoster Books, around 1974 (Abrahams, "A Reader" 315).

The chief criticism the book might be subject to is that it was over-inclusive and under-edited, and perhaps that the poems tended to be excessively punctuated. Nevertheless, as the back cover copy succinctly states, "she writes from an experience of inner emergency yet commands a rare eloquence; she never loses her clarity or her sense of beauty" (no author, cover copy).

The poems are organised around motifs including fire, water, stone and statue, memory and the subconscious, madness and death. In "To Be

Picked Clean", the body becomes secondary to the mind: "To be picked clean/ The futile flesh gone; a skeleton of thoughts,/ Dancing./ The picking of my flesh/ Was like stripping a bush/ Of its ripe berries" (7), and in the last two lines, passive and active voice cross over each other, so that the passivity of "the picking of my flesh" becomes an action, "stripping a bush".

In "How the Moon's Radiance" a similar dynamic emerges, and the speaker's agency seems to be taken up by another, yet her voice gains strength from this: "the moon's radiance/ Ate me up like radium (2) but "the moon made me think/ Of women […]/ Who look at their souls steadily/ As in a pocket mirror" (9–12).

Many of the poems make use of water imagery, awash with tides, shores, currents which are both compelling and cleansing. In these, the speaker seems frequently to be spellbound; she is drawn to the oceanic and frightened of its power, as in "The Sea was a Hard Blue Eye", which evokes the landscape of the Natal coast:

> The sea was a hard blue eye.
> I stared at it, remembering your eyes,
> Remembering the steely surface of your face.
> The sea was a sharp blue eye
> And the wind whipped the sugar-cane
> Into a frenzy of green hair,
> Writhing sea-weed about it to become
> Landrooted mermaid.
> Sometimes remembering petrifies;
> So I became a hard little pebble
> Waiting for the tug of the tide.

Wandering throughout the collection is a mother figure, who, through her frequent, inconstant presence becomes familiar to the reader. She is repressive, controlling, holding the speaker back and inhibiting her voice, for instance in "Mother You've Been Sitting on My Tongue": "My lips are exhausted/ In service to you./ Too much I've talked/ In pretty pictures/ And formed your glib words" (2–15). In "Mother I See you Beside Me", the mother figure is "Snipping me into the dress shape you want,/ Knitting me into your fine woollen cloth" 2–3). The mother cleans, orders, contains. "You mow my lawn" the daughter-poet complains, "How it hurts my green spikes" (14–15).

The imagery is often striking, and the central dynamic is between themes and aesthetics with the work being characterised by a resplendent

melancholy, and slightly surrealistic or dreamlike perspectives. In "The World has Slipped", the perspective is cosmic yet intimate:

> The world has slipped
> Like a skier on snow
> The world lies bandaged in frost
> And the ache is forgotten
> Like crutches on which snow-flakes
> Have fallen. We dream oblivion
> As an old prisoner
> Dreams freedom" (1–9)

In a sequence of three poems addressed mockingly to a psychiatrist, the speaker is antagonistic, and revels in the depth of her disordered world: "You've ventured this far, psychiatrist" (6) she taunts; "further, the water's dense and deep/ You'd be out of your depth there/ It's fishless and solitary/ Dense and deep" ("You're Out of Your Depth" (7–10).

In "They Said You Were a Psychiatrist", she calls the doctor "a dull sponge/ Trying to soak in seas of unheard beauty./ Mysterious fish amaze you. But you give nothing but brine" (8–11), suggesting that the dynamic is skewed, her madness worth more than the doctor's remedy. In "Come with Me for the Last Time, Psychiatrist", the tone becomes threatening, the mood violent, the speaker both the murderer and murderee within a dream-like, shapeshifting scene. In full, the poem reads:

> Come with me for the last time, psychiatrist.
> I'll show you this lily whose throat
> I'll cut.
> See, the white lily is spotted, blemished;
> I squeeze against the white chalice;
> It becomes a goose's throat I'm pressing;
> The animal tries to lift its bony white wings over us
> Panic makes its eye run
> The knife isn't strong enough
> For the cords in its throat
> Still the blood gushes out
> And psychiatrist, watch, see how things die.

This dual positioning is also used in "I Can't Keep the Wolf from My Door", in which the figure of wolf as symbol of madness from the earlier "Steppe" is revisited. The speaker begins wryly, with "I can't keep the wolf from my door–/ I mean my own special brand,/ The mental howl" (1–3).

But then she accesses a personal mythos, and the madness is transformed into a source of inner strength rather than dysfunction:

> Once when the air was like silk
> A silver wolf and I ran together over the earth's space.
> Loped together like elastic in the wind,
> Felt joined in one wolf body
> Then sang aloud at the space
> Where our wolf shadows should have followed us
> But didn't;
> Returned home
> Carrying the moist night in our paws and pelts
>
> (6–14)

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Despite both Fugard and Abrahams retrospectively registering a "tepid" (Fugard, "Letter" 3) academic and critical response, the book received attention not only from some the literary journals familiar with Bezwoda's writing but was also reviewed quite extensively in the mainstream press.

The *Sunday Times* review of the book engages with the poetry in the most depth, quoting extensively and in detail. It comments on the "facile, fragmented style of today" in contrast to the "remarkable" subject matter of the poems and their treatment of "thoughts" which are "normally beyond human expression". The reviewer adds that "to follow her in her mental and spiritual gropings, through her descents into the flesh and its torments, and in her resurrections to light and air, is a rich and disturbing experience" (no author, "A Rich" 5).

In *New Nation,* Michael Fridjohn wrote that "Bezwoda works beyond old ideas of thought and technique" and that while not flawless, the book was notable. Reviewing Bezwoda's work alongside collections by the British writers Elizabeth Jennings and Alan Brownjohn, he felt that "*One Hundred and Three Poems* is the richest of the slim volumes reviewed here" (Fridjohn 28).

The *Pretoria News* ran a favourable review with the mysterious byline J.C.T., which mentions "fresh and sharp" writing and "strikingly vivid" imagery. It finds an overarching structure in the proliferation of (often untitled) poems in the collection, but, signalling the preoccupations of the times, notes that "a small group of poems on South Africa and race brings up the rear as a kind of appendix" (J.C.T. 23). To some extent, there is an awkwardness to this placement, as well as the underlying ambivalence

of the poet's relationship with South Africa, which echoes that of the six poems published by *The Classic* in 1971.

The insistence on the political is echoed by Stephen Gray in the *Star,* who notes that "at first [*One Hundred and Three Poems*] seems to have nothing to do with anything – it is certainly not connected with anything that might be fermenting in South Africa" (Gray, no page). The political box ticked, Gray goes on to write of the book's "intensely personal" nature, its "emotional charge", and describes it as "a vast, sensuous, pain-ridden composite, keyed by nervous pressure to burning point, allowed to cool a little way into one hundred and three offcuts" (Gray, no page).

Robert Greig reviewed the book twice, for the magazine *To the Point* in April 1973, and for the literary journal *Bolt* later that year. In the first, he noted the "laconic ferocity" of the writing, and noted that "the last 20 poems are particularly good" (Greig, "Two Women" 56). Interestingly, the last 20 poems in the collection include the eight or so poems "about South Africa and race" (J.C.T. 23) which another review had considered awkwardly placed and ill-fitting. In the second review, he is far more critical, calling the poems "short and soggy" and their author "too immersed in her suffering to write poetry", which he off-handedly declares is a common trait in women's writing (Greig, "Suffering" 37).

In her doctoral thesis, titled "Stranger in Your Midst", Cecily Lockett accounts for the dissimilarity of Greig's reviews by considering the nature and audience of the respective publications. She writes that "the difference in tone between the two reviews may be attributed to the fact that the first … appeared in a general readership magazine" whereas the second was for *Bolt,* "a small literary magazine published in the English Department of the University of Natal (Lockett 254). Furthermore, she suggests that "the *Bolt* review reflects its writer's conscious attempt to display a knowledge of 'good' poetry in the academic context" as well as voicing a general disdain for women's poetry which she considers "pervasive" in South Africa at the time (Lockett 254). Lockett's doctoral work on women's poetry in South Africa takes a " gender perspective" (Lockett i) which includes a critique of traditional androcentric norms in South African literature, and a gynocritical reading of several poets, including Bezwoda.

The *Eastern Province Herald* ran a review with no byline. The reviewer was unimpressed with the book, but took notice of the cover artwork, which is a woodcut print by Wopko Jensma, describing the image as "a sea-urchin with a cloven hoof, an antlered foetus, a plantigrade worm, all in one agonised African design" (no author, "Expression" no page). Jensma was a poet who pioneered a formally innovative writing style characterised by code-switching across South African languages, a

fragmented, shape-shifting aesthetic and interplays between graphic and written forms. He was also a graphic artist, making woodcuts and other prints, which were often featured in journals such as *Ophir* and *Wurm* as cover art or fold-out posters. His designs feature amorphous, playful hybridisations of animal and human forms, African-influenced patterns, and make unusual use of symmetry and negative space. *One Hundred and Three Poems* also featured a poem which describes the seahorse-like cover image more kindly than the *Eastern Province Herald's* arts critic. Bezwoda writes: "I saw you on the far wall of an art gallery/ Frightened, not so much riding waves/ As clawing the wall" (1–3). The speaker feels an affinity with the creature and "felt you ought/ To belong to me. I hoped you'd find peace/ On our livingroom wall" (6–9). But the seahorse, "blubbery and wet" (13) did not "want/ To stay" (18–19), though it was chosen for the cover of the book. The review goes on to state somewhat dismissively that Bezwoda's writing reveals "a nightmare world, perhaps not worth contemplating, except that we all inhabit it. Certainly Miss Royston is not given to honey-tongued sentimentalities; but one can't help suspecting that she gets quite a kick out of moaning at the futility of everything" (no author, "Expression" no page).

In the *Rand Daily Mail*, Brian Rose asserted that "[Bezwoda] belongs to the mainstream of English letters – without becoming precious in cosmopolitanism or undignified in her South Africanism" (Rose 19). This again highlights the preoccupations of South African literature and criticism at the time, and the constant positioning of itself in relation to the rest of the English-speaking world. He further notes the "consistency of the craftsmanship and the insight that is so apparent in so many of these poems" (Rose 19).

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By 1974, Bezwoda and Royston were living in London, where she seemed to be writing prolifically amid what might be seen as signs of unravelling. Royston wrote in October of that year to Ad Donker that "Eva is writing a great deal of poetry and has put together another three volumes […] she has submitted her poems to many of the local magazines and has so far been accepted by three" (Royston, "Letter" 1). In June 1975, Bezwoda herself wrote to Donker about the three book manuscripts, to be titled "Symptoms of Change", "The Unremembered Foetus", and "Omens".

Earlier correspondence between Bezwoda and Abrahams indicates that "Symptoms of Change" was planned, going so far as a draft table of contents, but never published (Abrahams, "Provisional" 1). Of "Omens", Bezwoda writes in the same letter to Donker that "I think [it] is probably

the best (very mythical)" but also that "I haven't finally typed [it] out yet" (Bezwoda, "Letter June 1975" 1).

It seems that Donker urged patience and editing in his response and suggested that he would prefer to publish one volume of selected poetry, rather than three books of all her recent work. Bezwoda seems to understand but is remarkably driven at this point. She concedes, somewhat petulantly, that the focus of poetry in South Africa has shifted: "nobody wants to hear the woes and ecstasies of the whites; the fashion is all black poetry" (Bezwoda, "Letter Aug. 1975" 1). While her response to this perceived rejection might come across as shallow, it is not inaccurate; the revolutionary 1970s in South African writing had no space for psychic explorations and modernist introspections. She agrees to cut the three manuscripts down to a selection of 58 poems and to wait a year or so for publication through Donker. But in the same paragraph, she writes that she has sent him the manuscript of "Omens" already, and that she has since written enough for a fourth volume (1). She ends the letter by mentioning that "I['m] coming alone to South Africa, for three months, and will be staying in Johannesburg over October[,] November and maybe December" (2).

On this letter, Donker made and initialled a note in pencil: "Eva's last letter to me. AD" as well as note in pen to "phone Lionel who has 3 ms of Eva R" and what appears to have been Abrahams's phone number (Donker, annotations on Bezwoda, "Letter Aug. 1975", 1). However, Donker's archived correspondence shows that this was not quite the last letter Bezwoda sent him; perhaps he meant that it was the last substantive letter. There are two more, dated as late as September 1975, outlining travel plans and the possibility of Donker visiting her and Royston in London.

At this juncture, it is perhaps worth questioning why, if three manuscripts did arrive in South Africa from London, and were in the possession of Abrahams, or were handed over to Donker, nothing more became of them. The last poems published in *New Coin* in 1975 were probably submitted by Bezwoda herself; how "I'm Saving These Coins" came to appear in the 1977 issue of *Quarry*, which was her last poem published in a literary journal, is unclear. Thereafter, her work did not appear in any literary magazines, even though three potential volumes of poems, and the occasion of her death, might have provided both material and impetus. The quality of her later work suggests that there would have been something in these that would have been publishable. Lockett mentions a 1977 volume titled *Leave-Taking* apparently "published privately after her death" ("Stranger" 252), but I have been unable to trace this publication.[2]

It seems from accounts by both Fugard and Abrahams that Bezwoda came alone to Johannesburg as planned, returned to London earlier than expected, and moved out of her marital home sometime during the winter of 1975. By then, she found the South African poetry scene to have shifted in focus in a political direction she could not readily relate to. Nobody seemed to want the four manuscripts she had written but apparently did not have the focus to revise. She and her husband, having emigrated not long before, would have been comparatively alone in London; her therapeutic relationship with Laing had ended badly. Abrahams recounts that both Bezwoda and Royston were interested in psychoanalysis and the particular forms it took in the 1960s, and that Laing was "one of their chief cultural heroes" (316), but that their interaction with him was problematic:

> At first they came to him as clients or patients, but very soon he seems to have accorded them the standing of protégés, Eva more particularly. Her writings […] interested him, and she understood him to be promising her some form of publication and of work. Not only were these hopes dashed but […] when she protested about the breaking of his promises Laing, misapplying his imagination and psychological insights, turned most cruelly upon her […] She gave reign to her fierceness and no doubt succeeded also in savaging his feelings […] but it is certain that Eva emerged from his hands deeply hurt and embittered.
>
> (Abrahams, "A Reader" 316)

At around this time, Bezwoda sent or gave in person two poems to Guy Butler. The manuscript is undated and without annotation or a cover letter. However, the subject matter of both poems, and the intense, somewhat more compact writing style matches that of her later work. "To R. D. Laing" is a seething, bitter poem, in which the speaker enacts a brutal symbolic killing of an unnamed author or authority:

> Blood dripped from the print
> His head was gory, he had no eyes
> He who had written the book had
> Destroyed himself to the nails
> And I stared into the black snarl of his mouth
> Which couldn't speak any more
> The book left blood in my bookcase
> In the morning he had gone out
> And hung himself from a thorntree
> Then I threw the book away.

The symbolism of the poem, along with the direct address of the title, and some knowledge of the falling out between them, suggest a settling of scores, with the speaker of the poem ultimately "[throwing] the book away" and having the last word.

The second poem, "For Robert" is addressed to her husband, and is more ambivalent, a troubled love poem. It begins not unlike her first published poem from 1966, and as such indicates a curious correspondence, both between the speaker and the addressee of both poems, and between the start and end of Bezwoda's writing. It starts with "I've watched your face/ Seen the rivers in it" (1–2) and goes on to describe the man and the wear of time on his features and the intimate familiarity of his body, and ends:

> And now I cut
> Your silhouette from me.
> The riverbeds are dry
> The lightnings of your eye
> Are stored
> In a dangerous jar
> (15–20)

After a long-term preoccupation with death, with being 'gone' from the physical world in her poetry, a history of hospitalisations and treatment, and the rising crescendo of desperate productivity and restlessness in her last letters and poems, her suicide in January of 1976 would have been a shock to those around her, but not necessarily a surprise. "Incoherences", published in *New Coin* in 1975, along with five other poems, might give some insight into her state of mind in that last year. In this poem, the speaker is drawn away from life, subtly yet strongly. The "small strands" binding her to her partner, and to her life, give way, and she is compelled towards an oceanic darkness into which her death is an inevitable disappearance:

> In the night, I hear the thin webs breaking
> Fragile as nails or split hairs,
> Small strands that tied me to you.
> And you, love, are sleeping
> While I am drifting out to sea.
> I have been almost drowned before
> But you hauled me back from the troughs
> And breathed life in silken threads
> Into my lungs.
> But I fear tonight you can't help me
> The sea is sucking me back in a long gulp

The wind mutters my black childhood,
Then disperses it.
Wave voices are calling, urgently calling.
In the dry morning
You'll hear only the monotonous mutters of the tides,
The incoherences that I left behind.

Although the imagery of her imagined disappearance is frightening, with the ocean "sucking me back in a long gulp" the tone is eerily calm, perhaps resigned. She terms what she leaves behind, presumably including her writing, as "incoherences", yet this poem, like all of her work, is articulate, and troublingly clear in meaning.

The 1977 issue of *Quarry* featured "I'm Saving These Coins", a darkly scheming poem which begins with a quote from the work of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva: "And I am saving these coins for death/ For Charon, the price of Lethe" (Tsvetaeva in Bezwoda, "I'm Saving" 32). The text suggests that no matter the force and fullness of life, the speaker always holds back "a few dark coins" (16) so that she may yet choose death.

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In 1986, ten years after her death, Abrahams published a biographical sketch entitled "Eva Bezwoda: A Memoir" in *Sesame*, of which he was the editor. It was later included in *Lionel Abrahams: A Reader.* The short memoir is sympathetic, though it focuses on Abrahams's impressions of Bezwoda rather than on her work, and is problematic in parts.

He writes that Bezwoda studied at the University of Natal and "took Honours in English, an interesting option by one who had immigrated from Austria as a child and still spoke with a faint trace of an accent" (Abrahams, "Eva" 36). It is unclear why Abrahams thinks that the study of English literature by someone whose childhood language was German is unusual, given that so many students of literature, and indeed writers, are bilingual, and accent is a poor indicator of a speaker's knowledge of a language.

He devotes paragraphs to her mental illness, and to her physical appearance, which seems somewhat inappropriate, at least when read from a contemporary perspective. Abrahams writes that at their first meeting, with her husband and mutual friends "I was decidedly moved by Eva. It was a combination of my sense of the malady that required her to return to Tara at the end of our afternoon, and the quality of her looks. She was very fair and plump, and her face was softly, vulnerably beautiful"

which, to him, "bespoke serene passivity and sensitivity" (Abrahams, "Eva" 36). Concerning her professional life, he notes condescendingly that "sporadically, she worked at one job or another" (37), including editorial work for the *Purple Renoster*. Midway through this discussion he mentions that "from time to time over the years her girth, particularly at the thighs, varied conspicuously between slender and heavy" (37). He describes her speaking voice as "musical […] but always with something subtly unready in its sound, something broken (Looking for an image, I picture someone who has come out of doors in a nightdress)" (38) which is both a disempowering description and a peculiarly romanticised, eroticised image.

One wonders whether Abrahams considered it crucial to consult the widower Royston about the appropriateness of publishing these sentiments, as he had considered it imperative that Fugard do concerning a piece that managed to both mourn and celebrate Bezwoda as a person and a writer, without exoticising her accent, discounting her career, or dwelling on her appearance.

Abrahams describes Bezwoda's early poetry as containing "triumphs of insight and beauty and passion and power" and the poet as "thoroughly original in her voice and vision" ("Eva" 39). But he denies her agency in the writing of her own work, stating that "'creativity', 'voice', 'vision' […] have connotations that don't quite apply to Eva. They suggest active control, […] a functional differentiation of parts" whereas "the feeling one got from Eva's poetic eruption was not so much that she was writing as that she was being written with her whole being […] was being given over, surrendered, to an impulse to express" (39).

These statements are perhaps not as complementary as Abrahams had intended. There is evidence to suggest that Bezwoda was very interested in psychoanalytic theory and practised automatic writing as part of her creative process. But it is limiting to suggest that her work arising from such interests and practices was not actively and intentionally written. Of her own writing style and process, she wrote in 1970 that she "tries to evoke disturbed, clouded and alienated states of consciousness", that her poetry "stems almost exclusively from spontaneous inspiration" with a formal reliance on "metaphor, simile and very concrete, vivid, graphic imagery", with "words […] used lucidly as tools" (Bezwoda, "Author Bio" 91–92). This suggests a far more intentional, precise approach than the haphazardly romantic one ascribed to her by Abrahams. In fact, this divergence between the two descriptions of her writing process, and the two different approaches to ideas of inspiration and writing tools or strategies, indicates something of a misunderstanding of Bezwoda's work

not only by her editor, Abrahams, but also by some of the critics who reviewed *One Hundred and Three Poems*. Her modernist, experiential, solitary poetics were at odds with the direction South African literature as a collective was taking by the time her first book was published. Fugard's observations suggest a clearer understanding, both of the poetry and its mismatched audience, but they went no further than Abrahams's rejection.

Abrahams was a beloved and influential figure in South African literature of the time, as evidenced by multiple sources including Jillian Becker's "Lionel Abrahams: A Voice for This Season" and the many tributes published after his death in 2004, such as Marcia Leveson's obituary in the *English Academy Review*. His standing in the South African literary community then, and its history retrospectively, is undisputed. However, from such a position of esteem, both his silencing of Fugard's obituary and the uncomfortably physical focus of his own writing about Bezwoda draw the dynamics of such relationships and roles into question.

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In 1994, Workbench Press in Johannesburg published *Poems*, a short posthumous collection of Bezwoda's poetry, with no introduction or sign of the editor's identity, and with cover artwork by the artist Kim Berman. Dan Wylie's 1995 review of *Poems* describes it as a "pamphlet" of twenty poems, and comments on their "astonishing power and authenticity" (7), but beyond that, there is no evidence of critical interest in the volume. The poems are most probably gathered from her later work. They employ the same intimate yet lonely tone so characteristic of her writing, and are also rich in bold, associative images and visually evocative metaphors. The poems are poised and refined, hauntingly melancholy in mood and impatient in temper.

The poems are generally less punctuated than her earlier work from the 1960s, but the first words of each line are still capitalised, regardless of fullstops or run-on lines. Many of the poems make use of animal and especially bird imagery, and the primeval forest and the flow of water are also mentioned. Deliverance, absolution and reconciliation, as well as a letting go and freedom from the physical world are the prevalent themes, as is a sense of isolation and loneliness. For instance in "I'm Kin to No One", she writes: I'm kin to no one/ I flow like water./ My madness has widowed me" (5–7); "My madness blooms like coral again/ And I know nothing. I revel/ Like a fish in a bowl of wine" (10–12).

In "Deliverance", the speaker asks "You on whom we meditate" (1), "to whom my thoughts fly/ Like birds, then migrate" 6–7) for deliverance.

This is to take the form of a disembodiment, a casting off, as swift-like "bodiless I plunge/ Off the sheerest cliff" (16–17). The same idea is more abstractly echoed in "Amputation": "my thoughts, the fleshless fuses/ Singing shrilly,/ The unclassified wings" (18–20). The metaphor is continued in "Here We Lie" in which the speaker muses from the grave that "The flesh was only a dream and a bad dream at that" (10) whereas in death "like a swallow, I've flown away from my body" (7).

"Quieter" is an introspective poem. In it the speaker reflects that "Over the years I'm growing quieter and quieter./ Once I was an angry scream,/ Once I was a royal I/ I couldn't hear for my own yelling" (4). The sentiment expressed seems to suggest that this poem, and by inference the rest of the collection, is later work from the mid 1970s.

In "The Flowering Prophet", the lines "Plant me in December./ I fall upon snow/ Rank with cold/ I grow" associate December with winter, suggesting her Austrian childhood, or indicating that the poem was written when she was already living in London. Two of the poems, "Haunted the Mountain" and "Your Fall" might be interpreted as dealing with her father's death. In "Your Fall" she writes:

> It tasted like a bud in my mouth.
> Your fall was so loud and so long
> The water quivered and received your scream
> And returned it to me.
>
> I bear the scar of your scream.
> At night it gathers itself and becomes
> A man again.
>
> (1–7)

Bezwoda's work is briefly mentioned alongside Ridley Beeton's in a 1976 Master's dissertation by David Adey titled "Themes in South African English Poetry Since the Second World War". In her doctoral thesis, Lockett identifies "anger" which was "gender specific" as the root of Bezwoda's depression. She argues that "her examination of her own psychological condition produced a heightened awareness of the kinds of gendered oppression that a woman might encounter in her life" (252). Lockett's discussion focuses on Freudian readings of a selection of poems from *One Hundred and Three Poems,* which certainly do lend themselves to such an analytical reading. But possibly using the poems as "expressionistic and powerful as psychological statements rather than as aesthetic artefacts" (253) seems somewhat dismissive of the poems' primary existence as art, rather than as evidence of a troubled psyche in a problematically gendered

society. Thus while her study of Bezwoda's poetry is valid, it is limited by its severe agenda.

Lockett also edited *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry*, which featured a few of Bezwoda's poems. "Unheeding They Scrambled" was included in *25/25: Twenty-Five Years of English South African Poetry* (edited by David Bunyan). *The Lava of this Land* (edited by Denis Hirson) included six poems from *One Hundred and Three Poems*. Also from *One Hundred and Three Poems*, "A Woman's Hands Always Hold Something" ("A handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea/ My hands are tired of holding/ They simply want to fold themselves" (2–4) has been included in some high school and undergraduate teaching materials, ostensibly because it lends itself to discussion of gender roles and norms. Beyond this, there seems to be relatively little attention paid to her work, and no further scholarship of it to date, suggesting that Fugard's warning, that the "silence regarding the work of Eva Royston should be dispelled […] Otherwise poetry itself is a hollow laugh at death" (Fugard, "Letter" 2) was astute.

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I have tried to reconstruct what is known of Bezwoda's life and the years leading up to her death, which seem to have been her most successful and prolific in terms of her writing, but evidently increasingly troubled. I have looked at her life and death as much as possible through the prism of her poetry, on the premise that it affords insight and some measure of fullness to the rather skeletal facts of her biography. At the same time, reading systematically through her published work has afforded some perspective on the development of her style, and allows speculative dating of unpublished pieces and posthumous publications. The critical material is mostly restricted to reviews of *One Hundred and Three Poems*, and scholarship is insubstantial. This in itself is telling of the poetry readership then, and the canonisation and research priorities of South African poetry and literary studies since. This relates, perhaps, to broader concerns in South African literary culture as well as literary studies around the politics of publication, scholarship, archival practices, curated histories and lost voices, which go far beyond the scope of this article.

All the archival material referenced in this article is located at Amazwi South African Museum of Literature in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). The nature of such research necessitates a level of incompleteness, as the letters, manuscripts and other documents preserved in repositories do not tell a complete story, and omissions and gaps must

be left to stand silent, rather than filled in by current perspectives and eagerness for a complete narrative.

Nevertheless, it became apparent to me when sifting through the documents pertaining to Bezwoda preserved in the papers of Abrahams, Fugard, Donker and others, that a narrative of her prominence and disappearance as a writer, parallel to her vivid presence and stark absence in life and death, does emerge. Furthermore, the dialogue between Fugard and Abrahams, as well the contrast between their two divergent views of Bezwoda and her poetry, is illustrative of the time and place in which they were produced, as well as of the dynamics informing publishing choices and options, the giving of voice and retention of control, which belie broader conversations about writing, publishing, and reading, and the unseen lives of texts.

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ENDNOTES

1. For the sake of consistency, I refer to the poet as Eva Bezwoda throughout the article, except when quoting authors who refer to her as Eva Royston.
2. Lockett's discussion of Bezwoda's work only features poems from *One Hundred and Three Poems*, and *Leave-Taking* is not listed in the bibliography of her thesis, which suggests that she knew of it but did not access it.

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