

**REFLECTIVE ESSAY: LOOKING FOR DERRICK**

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Reflections on memory, exile and betrayal and integrity in the writing of *The Secret Song of the Rain*

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...I would arrive sleek and young in that country, my country, and I would say to that country whose clay is part of my flesh: "I have wandered far and I am coming back to the lonely ugliness of your wounds."

**Aimé Césaire**, *Return to my Native Land*

Tell us of infinity  
How the universe lives in us  
Tell us which stars bear our names  
So that we no longer have to fear the night  
- **Isabella Matambanadzo**, *Invocation*

Sometime back, I had to address a class of fifth and sixth graders at the Pretoria Muslim School in Laudium, an assignment I accepted with excitement and dread in equal measure. I wished to tell them about a life, give some autobiographical detail, about a younger me joining my age-mates to seek work in Durban during school holidays. This was in the late 60s, early 70s, when we were ignorant of what the world had in store for us. We came from poor families and the only way we could help our parents continue paying for our secondary school education was via vacation jobs. The luckier ones among us found easy jobs as gardeners or as spanner boys on construction sites. Four of us ended up with tougher assignments. We worked at the docks, chipping paint off the decks or dangling on planks, applying industrial coating to the steel plates of a ship. I remember how we were less concerned about the dirty water swirling more than a hundred feet below than about our blisters getting stung on contact with the paint. But we were young. In addition to dreams of independence that money would provide, we could also imagine the envious looks we'd get from our schoolmates as we'd get decked out in Viyella button-down shirts, Levi's jeans and Converse sneakers.

But tragedy struck. One of our young friends died in the engine room. Because he was the leanest of the gang, Derrick was the one who had to slide inside a narrow horizontal shaft to scoop out globs of ancient gunk clogging the gears. Midway through his task, he got stuck. We could hear his muffled cries but could do nothing to help. We were hastily summoned to the deck and off the ship. Standing on the wet concrete pavement, we saw a flurry of activity. Then a covered stretcher was brought out. We knew that it was Derrick. We had all sought freedom, pocket money and an ability to finance our own education. We learned, at that young age, that freedom came at a cost.

There's an element of guilt about Derrick. We used to tease him because his father was what we derogatorily called an iNyasa from then-Nyasaland, now Malawi. And he was darker than most of us in complexion, lean, wiry, paradoxically a hit with the girls. Perhaps we envied him without admitting this to ourselves. And so, when he

died, some of us remembered our wickedness; would he have come with us if he hadn't really wanted to prove that he was one of us?

I wanted to tell this story to the students, perhaps to use it as an analogy of the price people paid to bring about freedom in South Africa, but something stopped me. For one, I realised there and then that I had suppressed the detail around Derrick's death beneath layers and layers of wilful forgetting. I hadn't quite worked out how Derrick was extracted from the shaft – and, knowing what I now know about the value of black life in those years – I wondered how the news was broken to his mother.

I'd have had no qualms about relating the story of Derrick's fate to adults, for, with them, I can claim a shared experience, good or bad. Young people, who have the power to snub by simply switching to a different frequency, leaving the interlocutor floundering like a guppy, are a different prospect altogether. While examining you with the intensity of scientists probing a particularly perplexing specimen, they are also wrestling with their own confusing universe of multiple distractions brought about by peer pressure and technology.

But a more pressing reason for my hesitation to address younger audiences comes from an apprehension – an admission – that we've stuffed it up royally for the coming generations. Derrick's story would have raised questions about what was done to ensure justice for him and his family. Were there any reparations? My only homage to Derrick and his family was to write about the pivotal event as a slightly fictionalised account in a short story.<sup>1</sup> Even today, the nature of his death still ranks as proof positive of the impotence of adults when it comes to protecting the interests of children.

As of this writing, the country is in the throes of what sociologist Emile Durkheim termed as anomie,<sup>2</sup> latterly analysed by Frantz Fanon to characterise a state in which all of society's previously common norms and values disappear or disintegrate. Notwithstanding the huge mountain that the present government had to climb to roll back the centuries' old depredations wrought by successive colonial and apartheid regimes, there is something indefensible about their timidity and aversion to reversing the inequalities and iniquities of the past. The differential between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor has risen so exponentially that this – our society – has

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<sup>1</sup> Langa, Mandla, 'Zizi', *The Naked Song & Other Stories*, (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1996), 18

<sup>2</sup> Serpa Sandro, Ferreira CM. 'Anomie in the sociological perspective of Émile Durkheim.' *Sociology International Journal*. Vol 2 Issue 6-2018. <http://www.medcraveonline.com/SIJ/SIJ-02-00121.pdf> (accessed February 23, 2020).

been cited as the most unequal in the world. And the most dangerous. In all this, it is the young who are the most vulnerable.

It is for this reason that I have a great interest in stories that involve the young; stories that are told about the young and by the young. Because, for any society – or even a civilisation – to survive and regenerate itself, it has to allow the voice of the future to reign supreme. A people will never be vanquished if they fight tooth and nail to ensure their regeneration. That is why there is something short-sighted about thieves and brigands – a breed protected by political power – who amass their ill-gotten loot in preparation for the bitter winter ahead.

The benefactors of this plunder are, notionally, the children of the new masters of the land. In his essay, 'On Violence', featured in his seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes about the

[s]poilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's national governments [who] organise the loot of whatever national resources exist. Without pity, they use today's national distress as a means of getting on through scheming and legal robbery ... they proclaim the pressing necessity of nationalising the robbery of the nation... the success of their depredations is swift to call forth the violence and anger of the people.<sup>3</sup>

Oftentimes, when charged with massive crimes and misdemeanours connected with state resources, offenders favour the excuse that it was all for the children. This makes children guilty by association. What is overlooked is how the justification ends up jeopardising the lives of those vaunted children. The transgressors may live long lives, but they are finally succeeded by their charges. And the wrath of the wretched of the earth does get visited on the newer generations.

At the school in Pretoria, I looked at the scrubbed, optimistic faces of my young audience, who expected me to share with them the role of the arts in the liberation struggle. To empathise with the students – called learners in today's parlance – I aligned the social and political histories of Africa with those of Europe and Asia, especially the

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<sup>3</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 12.

transcontinental region called the Middle East with its dominant Islamic religion. I alluded to the congruity between our struggle against apartheid and the Palestinian intifada against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. In both struggles, even though separated by thousands of kilometres and all that water, there is no discounting the crucial role of the arts to galvanise rebellion. I recounted the inspirational role of poets and writers such as Dareen Tatour, who was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in an Israeli jail or under house arrest for her poem, 'Resist, My People, Resist Them'.

Resist, my people, resist them.

In Jerusalem, I dressed my wounds and breathed my sorrows

And carried the soul in my palm

For an Arab Palestine.

I will not succumb to the 'peaceful solution,'

Never lower my flags

Until I evict them from my land.

I cast them aside for a coming time.

Resist, my people, resist them.<sup>4</sup>

Much earlier, and more enduringly, there was Mahmoud Darwish, whose lyricism has long been irreversibly intertwined with the Palestinians' spirit of defiance and resistance. His poetic talent emerged when he was a youth still in school. He was merely six years old in 1948 when he became a refugee and grew attuned to the importance of land and home when he saw the destruction of villages to make way for Israeli occupation. If you're sensitive to your surroundings, as Darwish was, a lot has already imprinted itself on your mind. And you cannot be blind to the suffering and struggle of your parents. And there is nothing as disheartening for a child than to witness the disempowerment of a parent. That shakes the child's faith in humanity and leaves it with a sense of great desperation.

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<sup>4</sup> Zimet, Abby. 'Resist, My People, Resist Them: Poetry Is Not A Crime, Except for Palestinians.' <http://www.paxchristi.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/06-Resist-My-People-Resist-Them.pdf> (accessed February 12, 2020).

It is of this desperation that Darwish wrote so eloquently. But for people living with daily acts of dispossession, desperation becomes a spur for action, the way adrenaline spurs the body towards unexpected feats. In his book-length poem, *State of Siege*, Mahmoud Darwish alerts the reader to the everlasting relationship between occupation and resistance, where: "To measure the distance between being and nothingness soldiers use the scopes mounted on their tanks...We use our sixth sense to measure the distance between our bodies and flying shells."<sup>5</sup>

One only has to look at the impossibly grisly images posted on ubiquitous platforms showing broken bodies of children in Yemen, Syria, Gaza, Mali or any of the hotbeds of carnage to understand what Darwish meant about measuring 'the distance between our bodies and flying shells'. It is an eloquent warning about the constant dangers lying athwart the road to the future. It is a road that, in the natural course of things, the adults are fated to walk, and as in a relay race, leave the remaining miles to the sturdy legs of the new generations.

One of the paradoxes – or aberrations – of our contemporary lives is that, with the advances in science and technology, where knowledge that sustained societies millennia ago has been excavated and put in the public domain, we have not yet managed to quell the primeval instincts to destroy. I was reading somewhere that, contrary to the belief that, for instance, medieval societies practised cruelty on their children, the reverse is true. Even though there was infant mortality, this was rarely as a consequence of parental neglect, or wilful wickedness; it was mostly due to diseases and epidemics that affected the vulnerable, before the discovery of antibiotics or modern remedies. There were measures to accommodate orphans and offspring of parents too destitute or poverty-stricken to fend for themselves and their charges.

In those early years, there were wars and, inevitably, children suffered and were invariably counted among the casualties.

At the end of World War I, US President Woodrow Wilson, promised that 'this will be the final war – the war to end all wars,'<sup>6</sup> the assertion earning him a permanent place among leaders capable of issuing quotable quotes. Expressed more than 90 years

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<sup>5</sup> Darwish Mahmoud, *State of Siege*. Trans. Munir Akash & Daniel Abdal-hayy Moore, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ratner, Paul. 'How President Woodrow Wilson tried to end all wars once and for all.' <http://www.bigthink.com/politics-current-affairs/president-woodrow-wilsons-vision-for-the-league-of-nations-still-inspires> (accessed February 24, 2020).

ago, this optimistic sentiment was of course belied by another, more devastating global conflict, World War II. Since then, almost all parts of the globe have been touched by the deadly hand of conflict that results in mass killing.

Gleaned from various sources, a 1996 Unicef report on the condition of the world's children, titled 'Children in War', states that contemporary incidents of 'warfare have significantly heightened the dangers for children. During the last decade, it is estimated ... that child victims have included: 2 million killed; 4-5 million disabled; 12 million left homeless; more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents.'<sup>7</sup>

Accompanying the Unicef report is a photograph of young conscripts in a Myanmar parade marching with their outsize M-16 assault rifles at port arms. There is a uniformly blank expression on the youngsters' faces that made me wonder if they understood the instruments of death in their hands. Increasingly, in conflicts in various lands, children have been fielded as soldiers, in contravention of the UN provision that children should be protected from military conscription.

This was long before the dire state of affairs brought about by newer conflicts, the worldwide economic slump of 2008, the rise of ISIS, mass migration, outright racism and the hardening of attitudes against immigrants in Europe. All of this has resulted in countless deaths of the underprivileged and destitute, emblematised in the image of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy of Kurdish background who drowned on 2 September 2015 on the Mediterranean Sea. It was long before the unrecorded and unrecordable African deaths at the hands of terrorist organisations, from Boko Haram in Nigeria, to Al-Shabab in Somalia, to the scourge of Jihadist slaughter in parts of West Africa. In all these situations, children are casualties, as they also now find themselves separated from parents or guardians in detention centres courtesy of the state-run xenophobia of the Trump administration in the United States. In their quest to reach the promised land, these children and their parents are fated to discover that the road to paradise is paved by the fires of hell. Those fires are about the bewildering absence of children's voices, the fact that so much done around them, against them and for them, takes away their agency.

It is this hell that I sought to probe when I began to conceive a novel, set in Southern Africa, about the fate of a 14-year-old boy of Zambian and South African

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<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, 'Children in war': The State of the World's Children 1996. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc96/1cinwar.html> (accessed February 22, 2020).

parentage, from the last years of political exile of the African National Congress, that is, the 1980s, to the dawn of liberation in South Africa in the early 1990s. Stories of children born of mixed marriages, that is, one parent who is an exile and the other a local in the host country, are few and far between. The sensibility of straddling both worlds – one safe, nurturing and routine and the other, fraught with danger and potential deprivation – is rarely explored.

In creating my main protagonist, Joseph Mabaso, I went back to the years of exile in Lusaka, Zambia, and recalled the state of insecurity and distress that affected my compatriots, the depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress, especially with those who had survived conflict situations, either as combatants against UNITA on the Eastern Front of Angola or as underground operatives executing missions inside the country under the auspices of Umkhonto WeSizwe, colloquially known as MK. Many of these were people of impeccable reputation, dedicated to the cause, most of them willing to sacrifice their own lives. Their children – and this was my interest in writing the novel – straddled the duality of being South African Zambians, going to local or international schools, ending up assimilating into Zambian culture while maintaining their South African identity.

One of the peculiar habits these children developed was in communication. At play among their Zambian counterparts, they would converse in Chinyanja or Chibemba, as the case might be; as soon as their South African parent or another adult came within earshot, they would change almost unconsciously into English or any of the indigenous South African languages. I was fascinated by this code-switching, which could also be deployed as a means of secret communication among the kids, to hide meanings from their elders.

I had read some of the literature that dealt with young people negotiating life in conflict situations. Most importantly, there are parallels between Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* – a novel about Kenyan society during the war against British settler colonialism – and South African society under apartheid. Prior to independence Kenya practised the colour bar, a caste system evolved to separate not only the races but create a pecking order even among the nationalities themselves. South Africa aroused international scorn with its system of apartheid, which some wit compared to the separation of garments for doing laundry in a washing machine. Your whites first, and then the mixed colours and your black garments last. At the bottom of the racial totem

pole – to use a different metaphor – are the blacks, above them the Indians and coloureds, with the whites at the apex.

Ngugi's young hero, Njoroge, grows up at a time when his age-mates are joining the Mau Mau fighters, much like Joseph in my novel, who willy-nilly ends up with an MK guerrilla unit. A dreamer, Njoroge sees the injustices the settlers have visited on his people and is dismayed by the absence of common purpose among the opposition. He is also conflicted because of his friendship with a son of one of the landowners and is hesitant to throw in his lot with the nationalist fighters. His embittered elder brother, Boro, had terrible experiences in World War II, in which he fought on the side of the British. Seeing the British as the incarnation of evil which must be resisted, Boro is perturbed by the disunion among fighters. His words might as well have inspired the ANC's commitment to freeing Mandela from prison. Boro observes that 'all white people stick together. But we black people are very divided. And because they stick together, they've imprisoned Jomo, the only hope we had. Now they'll make us slaves. They took us to their wars, and they killed all that was of value to us.'<sup>8</sup>

A few writers on the African continent, most memorably two Ghanaians, Kofi Awoonor in *This Earth, My Brother* and Ayi Kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Why Are We So Blest?* explore the theme of the return of black servicemen from theatres of wars in which they had no business fighting. They come back to an internal personal wasteland without access to social services, counselling or even a recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder. These wars have taught them violence, which they internalise and unleash, in extremely pressured moments, on their loved ones.

The world literary community was shocked and saddened when, on Saturday, September 21, 2013, Kofi Awoonor died at Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Mall following an Al-Shabab attack that killed over 60 people and maimed over a hundred more.

Typical of almost all young people growing up in exile, my character Joseph has been exposed to violence. Often, it wasn't the direct violence that leads to bloodletting or death, but the subtle, unstated violence of men imposing their will on women, the strong on the vulnerable. It was in innumerable cases of poverty, disease and squalor affecting the lives of normal citizens, some of whom also lived under constant threat of

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<sup>8</sup> Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi, *Weep Not Child*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1964), 82

attack by a superior force. Joseph comments on the plight of market women who have to eke out a meagre existence, selling wares, being harassed by police and political thugs who try to gang press them into supporting their benefactors.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, some of the South African exiles in Zambia were blithely unaware of the burden the country shouldered by hosting Southern African liberation movements. The President of the ANC, Oliver Reginald Tambo – perhaps the best president South Africa never had – lived at the State House as Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda's permanent guest. As had Joshua Nkomo, the leader of the Zimbabwean African People's Union, a sister organisation to the ANC. Etched in the collective memory of Zambians was the episode in April 1979 when Rhodesian security forces drove to Nkomo's house, which was just behind the Zambian President's official residence near the Lusaka Golf Club, and burst into the heavily guarded compound, firing bazookas and grenades. Nkomo escaped by the skin of his teeth. The attackers were repulsed, and their grisly remains exhibited during a conference of the Non-Aligned Movement then underway in Lusaka.

A significant section of the exile community lived among the locals, a security measure that ensured that people would not be isolated and rendered vulnerable to bombings, as happened to exiles and refugees in ghettoised dwellings. Which of course doesn't mean that the security agencies of the Pretoria regime didn't try; for instance, one of the ANC representatives, John Dube, a.k.a. Boy Mvemve, was killed by a letter bomb in February 1974, the same year, incidentally, when the black consciousness student leader, Ongopotse Tiro, was killed by a parcel bomb in Botswana. (A detail: the explosion was so powerful that it warped the metal fittings in the house). Working hand in hand with their Rhodesian counterparts, the apartheid South African state was hell-bent on destabilising Zambia. Led by the hawkish President P.W. Botha and General Magnus Malan, whose CV boasted bombing and killing over 600 Namibian refugees in Kassinga, Angola, the military-security complex launched sabotage missions on railways, roads and bridges and telecommunications and power, weakening the already vulnerable Zambian infrastructure. There was an economic stranglehold that tampered with Zambia's goods and services and manufacturing base, depressing the price of copper, Zambia's chief export and foreign currency earner.

The destabilisation efforts could not have had a measure of success without the industry of informers who reported to their handlers in South Africa. The unforeseen consequence of the mass exodus of the June 1976 contingents that went on to swell the ranks of the ANC, for instance, was that the traditional vetting and screening methods of the ANC could not fully process the volume. The South African Special Branch fielded its own agents, infiltrating them into the ranks of the ANC. It was this knowledge, that the ANC was heavily infiltrated, which led to Zambia tightening its own intelligence apparatus. Zambia was also vulnerable to syndicates from then Zaire and South Africa, racketeers called *kabalalas*, who smuggled cars and drugs, and conducted armed robberies. Zambian officials shared their intelligence with the ANC and, at certain points, conducted *shishita*, cordoning off wide areas of Lusaka in search and seizure operations. These would net illegal arms and assorted contraband. In one such *shishita*, the Zambians unearthed a network of South African spies.

An environment of suspicion and paranoia pervaded the ANC where its own under-resourced intelligence organisation, nicknamed iMbokodo – the stone that grinds – conducted its own investigations, flushing out people suspected of being spies, most of them being brutalised by the more zealous of their erstwhile comrades, invariably being sent to Quatro, the prison camp in Angola. Here they were subjected to treatment comparable with that meted out to POWs in Japanese prison camps during World War II. Some died in the hands of their captors. Others lived to tell the story, their account even more bizarre as it revealed an aspect of our lives, which we would have wanted to keep well hidden, even from ourselves. The warders charged with overseeing the punishment of their one-time compatriots were themselves pressured to suppress their own human instincts. To show mercy would have earned them the unwanted label of being soft on enemy agents, leading others to draw the conclusion that they were in league with the lowest manifestations of disloyalty. There is an analogy here with James Baldwin's account of the schizophrenia of black officers policing a ghetto in Harlem, where an officer 'can retreat from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature'<sup>9</sup>.

The brutality the warders would have wished to inflict on their tormentors thousands of miles away in Pretoria, gets deflected to the putative enemy agents in the

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<sup>9</sup> Baldwin, James, 'Fifth Avenue, Uptown,' from *The Price of the Ticket*, (New York: St Martin's/Marek, 1985), 211.

prison cells. All this takes place in the arid desert of distance, unfamiliarity and absence of emotional support characteristic of exile. This is evocative of a passage in *The House of Hunger* by Dambudzo Marechera:

The scarred hand of exile was dry and deathlike, and the lines of its palm were the waterless riverbeds, the craters and fissures and dry channels scoured out of the earth by the relentless drought. My own hands, with their scars and calluses and broken fingernails, sometimes seemed to belong not to me but to this exacting punishment of exile.<sup>10</sup>

Recently, I was reunited with a Namibian friend of mine, Oiva Angula, with whom I had studied journalism in Budapest, Hungary in 1983. There were about sixteen of us, a motley crew of trainees from Africa, Asia and Latin America, at the Nemzetközi újságírási iskola, on Kápolna Utca. I remember the snowbound walkway from the street to our lodges, where you'd see one of the Palestinians, Salim Al-Hamadi, teasing his Syrian compatriots; we learnt later that Salim had been one of the PLO fighters when the Israeli army laid siege to Beirut in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. From the Lebanese journalists in our group we learnt of the notorious three-day massacre in the refugee camp of Sabra and Shatila, which was carried out by militiamen linked to the Phalange, a right-wing political party of Lebanese Maronite Christians that was allied with Israel.

Even though almost all of us came from a troubled part of the globe, we appreciated the moments when we could marvel at the wonders of nature. We'd take the metro from the Batthyány Tér to various parts of this incredibly beautiful city. In his book, *Swapo Captive*, Oiva – whose nom de guerre was Sheehama, while mine was Rufus Khoza – details some of our experiences:

On weekends, my friend Rufus Khoza [c'est moi!] – and I would board the metro, which I was interested to learn was continental Europe's oldest, and visit the beautiful St Stephen's Basilica and the Budapest City Park, which has a pond that turns into an open-air ice rink in winter.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Marechera, Dambudzo, *The House of Hunger*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1978) 125.

<sup>11</sup> Angula, Oiva, *Swapo Captive: A Comrade's Experience of Betrayal & Torture*, (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2018), 82.

That image of an ideal world was soon shattered. When Oiva went back to Angola to continue his stint as a political instructor of Swapo's military wing, People's Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), he was accused of being an apartheid spy and traitor and became a victim of a series of purges within the organisation. The torture was horrific:

Each time I denied the false charges, my body absorbed a gauntlet of blows and kicks. I was lashed with sticks, like knives cutting through meat, until I was soaked in blood. I screamed, screamed and screamed, but they would not stop. To silence my screams, rags were stuffed into my mouth.<sup>12</sup>

This torture was an everyday event during his four-and-a-half years in the *omalambo*, the hidden pits in Lubango, Angola. When I met him, 36 years later, he was still the same optimistic and quick-to-laugh Sheehama who could charm Cuban chicas at the Zugloi night club. But it was in his eyes that I saw that something had been extinguished. I hoped it was a sign of aging and not a confirmation of a dictum that the revolution eats its own children.

The theme of betrayal has always been at the front of my thinking, given the history of my family and what I've seen in the context of the liberation struggle – or even in interpersonal affairs. I found Joseph's story a useful vehicle for exploring this theme. My starting point is that the liberation movement is akin to family; sociologists and criminologists have provided ample instances of how abuse and betrayal become even graver when they happen in the context of family.

Joseph's father, Sobhuza, is an underground operative, in fact an assassin, one of those unacknowledgable features of any liberation movement for whom the concept of plausible deniability was created. Assassins, however much they ply their trade in service of humanity – an ethical contradiction – can never be embraced by their patrons. Sobhuza, then, is a shadowy figure weaving in and out of the family life, on the surface a

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 103.

bon vivant generous to a fault, in private – and more darkly – someone who unnerves immediate members of his family. He tends to be more present in his absence.

He disappears, as is his wont, but since this time it's after an altercation with Joseph's mother, Chanda, this latest disappearance leaves the family unsettled. Suspecting infidelity, Chanda goes out looking for him. Worryingly enough, nothing is heard from her, catapulting young Joseph into immediate adulthood, where he skips the traditional ceremonies of initiation. He starts his own investigation, reasoning that wherever they might be, his parents must be together. This forces him into the hidden world his father inhabits – the world of exiles. In meeting the guerrillas at a safe house, he is saved from danger by his ignorance, innocence and youthfulness; he disarms them, causing them to see their younger and more optimistic selves in him. They are ambivalent about helping him in his quest, knowing how perilous their existence is and therefore not wanting to bring him within range. They also have their own revolutionary crosses to bear. They have a mission to carry out inside the country. On his part, even though Joseph misses his siblings and the extended family headed by his matriarchal Gogo Mulubwa – who has her own past in the anticolonial struggle – he suspects that a normal life, the halcyon days of Sunday get togethers, is over. He has to find his ma and papa. They are the anchor, connecting him to his own sense of safety. As it turns out, he indulges the need for belonging by insinuating himself into – and finally embracing – the fellowship of freedom fighters.

I was among freedom fighters, in exile in Lusaka, Zambia, when I learnt about the death of my elder brother, Ben, who was shot dead on 20 May 1984, in his flat in the then Natal Province's capital and second largest city, Pietermaritzburg. As a committed member of the ANC, I knew the cost of being opposed to the policies of the apartheid state. My brother, who'd been detained on numerous occasions, was active in the United Democratic Front (UDF). Earlier, in the heyday of the black consciousness movement in the 1970s, he had been a general secretary and publications director of the South African Students Organization (SASO) and had been detained together with Mapetla Mohapi, who was later killed in detention. And so, I reasoned, Ben's death could be credited to the shadowy workings of the more murderous arm of the Special Branch.

I waited for the ANC to release a statement condemning this act. As days went by, I started feeling uneasy. Then my other elder brother, a prominent member of the bar,

Pius Langa, arrived in Lusaka to find out from the ANC what was happening. It transpired that Ben had been shot dead by two members of MK, the armed wing of the ANC, which had also trained me in military knowhow. One of the gunmen, Lucky Payi, whose nom de guerre was Sihle, was a homeboy from KwaMashu, a township 20 kilometres to the north of Durban, and had been the youngest in the platoon when doing our military training in Malange, Angola in 1981. Because of his youth, and also because I was his political commissar, I took him under my wing, guiding him towards being a more accomplished political soldier. Three years later he was inside the country, a fully-fledged guerrilla on a mission together with an older operative, Siphon Xulu. The mission was to eliminate one Benjamin Johnson Langa, 40, accused of being an enemy agent working for the apartheid regime. Soon after they carried out this act, the two assassins were arrested, for reasons that included Siphon Xulu's braggadocio.

My brother Pius faced some hostility from one or two senior leaders of the ANC who had bought into the legend that Ben had been an enemy agent. It was only when ANC President Tambo ordered his lieutenants that they do a deeper probe that Pius could find some co-operation. He was the President of the National Association of Democratic Lawyers (NADEL) and had pleaded with the state – which, following a speedy trial, had sentenced the men to death for murder – to abolish the death penalty. To no avail. Much later, it transpired that the men had been duped by an apartheid agent embedded in the ANC's special operations in Swaziland. Nicknamed Fear, Edward Lawrence had conducted a number of operations on behalf of his apartheid masters, which had resulted in the deaths of comrades. When finally arrested and detained by the ANC, Lawrence died in ANC custody. In essence, this death left more questions than answers, leading to the conclusion that his death was to silence him from pointing out the bigger enemy agents in the highest councils of the ANC. Speaking on behalf of the ANC at the TRC hearing on this matter, former president Thabo Mbeki apologised for the killing of Ben Langa. The Pretoria regime had, in one fell swoop, managed to extinguish three lives that could have been an asset to the liberation struggle.

In crafting the characters that would make up my project, looking back on the past that has given me a glimpse into the workings of the human heart, I couldn't help but marvel at certain piquant flavouring added to life's journeys. Edward Lawrence, the man who infiltrated the liberation movement and destroyed lives, was a somewhat likeable person, charming in an anodyne manner. Slight with a coppery skin and shy

smile that exposed uneven teeth, his diffidence would never have triggered any alarm bells that he was a master schemer. I met him on 11 October 1976, the evening of my arrival in exile in Gaborone, Botswana. I was still funky from the travel, which involved crossing a river, trudging the arid and dusty trail from Pitshane-Molopo before getting a lift from a cleric and travelling by train from Lobatse to Gaborone. Friends took me to this house in Extension 4 to meet two comrades who'd just got married, Eddie and Jessica, who'd soon be leaving for... it wasn't disclosed; in those years of secrecy, the less you knew the better. Seeing this romantic couple, two people who were glowing with love, I dedicated a poem to them, wishing them a long life full of blessings.

Joseph, in the story, comes across a gallery of actors. He makes friendships but keeps a deeper part of himself closed off from people and does not encourage intimacy, even when he knows he must depend on the people he meets. Everyone – no matter how long it takes – is a vehicle towards his attainment of a certain objective. He doesn't know this, but this is a trait he shares with his assassin father. The watchfulness is from his mother, Chanda, who must have intuited that the man in her life is complex. As he moves into South Africa – apartheid South Africa – with the insurgents, he keeps himself in check by constantly referring back, in his mind, to the life he has left. He listens to the nostalgic sounds of schoolchildren at play to remind himself that he is still part of that fellowship. Even in places – and scenes – of horror, he retreats into the child within him to temper the intensity of what he should be feeling. In a word, then, he relies on the rescuing power of memory.

It is in recognition of memory that this essay begins with an epigraph by Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet, playwright and politician, cofounder with Léopold Sédar Senghor of the Negritude literary movement. Césaire's epic poem, *Return to My Native Land*, was once described by Andre Breton as being nothing 'less than the greatest lyrical monument of this time'<sup>13</sup>. It has a certain poignancy for me, as would for Oprah Winfrey, perhaps, a painting called 'To the Highest Bidder' by Harry Roseland. This painting, which she has owned for more than 30 years, depicts a slave woman on the auction block holding her daughter's hand, harking back to the bleakest and most shameful

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<sup>13</sup> Breton, Andre, 'Review: *Return to My Native Land* by Aimé Césaire'. <http://www.archipelagobooks.org/book/return-to-my-native-land/> (accessed February 12, 2020).

period in the history of the United States. For Oprah, it's a reminder of where she comes from 'every day of [my] life...because I never want to forget it.'<sup>14</sup>

The memory of where one comes from, which is inextricably bound up with what one has experienced – or endured – informs the story I have chosen to tell. Césaire's epic poem, delivered in language at once visceral and dazzling – *the lonely ugliness of ... wounds* – speaks to the episodic plot structure that governs the project. The central character ends up being a wanderer in search of something, of places or people, that correspond with his notion of home.

The conundrum facing any writer is not unusually how to begin a piece of work, especially extended prose. A novel begs the question: What is it about? At first, angry and disgusted by my countrymen's shameful performance in unleashing xenophobic violence against immigrants, I saw my project as a polemic against intolerance. Even before starting, I knew that anything conceived in anger was bound to be a disaster – and the shelves of libraries of the world groan under the dusty weight of unreadable jeremiads decrying this or that injustice. This, for the simple reason that, while there are myriads of pamphleteers, there are few novelists.

As a character, Joseph proved stubbornly resistant to being extracted from the creative ether and translated onto the page. For instance, he refused to come alive and co-operate with being placed in Zambia, a terrain that bore the brunt of destabilisation by South Africa at a most fluid time in the history of Southern Africa. Finally, when I had moulded him in clay, I had to give him the language befitting his age and milieu. The Chinyanja of the mid-1980s is different from the Chinyanja of 2018 or 2019. I was fortunate to have as a neighbour a Malawian, who speaks Chichewa, which is the same as the Chinyanja spoken in Zambia; both Chichewa and Chinyanja are called 'the language of the lake'.

But this language, its register, was important in the writing, because I wanted Joseph to think in the language of his mother, Chinyanja, and in the languages of his father, isiZulu and English. Intentionally, I wanted the reader, who might be snobbishly accepting of phrases or even whole passages of French or any of the Romance languages, featuring boldly in English texts, usually without translation or context, to

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<sup>14</sup> Whitaker, Lenyon, 'Oprah keeps this one thing in her house to keep her grounded'. <http://www.metro.us/entertainment/oprah-winfrey-highest-bidder-painting> (accessed February 12, 2020).

accept or wrestle with Chinyanja or isiZulu or Tsotsitaal. I am also of the conviction that all languages are equal, and that the acceptance or rejection of a language is a consciously political act. This makes me think of the Yiddish dictum that a language is a dialect with an army and navy. It's all a question of power. I am in agreement with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's observation in an interview with John Freeman of the *Independent*, on 11 August 2006: 'It is not a balanced equation if all languages must come to English to mean something.'<sup>15</sup>

A friend of mine, Professor Harry Nengwekhulu, also a former ranking member of the BC movement, once commented on the dynamics of language. He said that fear and respect also condition our attitude to language. During the late 1950s and early 1960s in the US, very few American fifth graders were unable to spell Nikita Khrushchev's name for the simple reason that the Cuban Missile Crisis meant that the leader of the Soviet Union was an important enough person whose name was etched in the collective consciousness of US citizens. The traditional and ages-old master-servant relation between white and black South Africans has created a great ignorance, on the side of white people, about their black countrymen and women. The whites' distance from and ignorance of the black languages – and not vice versa – rob them of valuable insights and nuances about a major section of the population with whom they share a country.

In the company of guerrillas, Joseph grapples with the language of struggle: what is a guerrilla? A terrorist? A freedom fighter? What drives people out of the comfort of hearth and home to take up arms – puny rifles and grenades – against a powerful, well-resourced and infinitely more brutal force? What makes women, like Sis Violet, who should be at school or working to nurture their families, or fulfilling traditional roles women of Africa are expected to fulfil, devote themselves instead to a political struggle? Who are these outliers who speak in their own language, who have many languages from various training camps of the world, whose intelligence and incisive life-and-worldviews would have made them an asset in a lecture room? The assassin: his father. What force is behind these men and women of violence? What is the violence that they have to confront?

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<sup>15</sup> Freeman, John, 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o: The language of liberation. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/ngugi-wa-thiongo-the-language-of-liberation-411316.html> (accessed February 19, 2020).

In his introduction to Michael Raeburn's *We Are Everywhere: Narratives from Rhodesian Guerrillas*, James Baldwin makes the point that

Violence is not new to Africa... Every colonising power in Europe has used violence without the remotest scruple. What is new is the violence of the attack on the white man's self-esteem, the white self-image...[where they] believe that they are the authors, and custodians of civilizations, and that they are to be revered, and above all loved, for having played so noble and indispensable a role.<sup>16</sup>

In the character of Sobhuza, Joseph's father, I intended to show the inner workings of anyone, guerrilla or assassin, when reviewing the impact of their handiwork on the lives of others. The others could be survivors, friends, families or relatives of the deceased. I believe that those using violence to enforce political compliance do so from a conviction both that they are obeying orders and that their cause is just. What informs that notional justness could be anything, revenge, religion, honour – anything can fuel passions that result in loss of life. In the political realm, however, a killing is preceded by a lot of thought – and planning. In Sobhuza's case, he sincerely believes that the target he is assigned to eliminate is legitimate. Like Xulu and Payi in my brother's murder, he believes that, since the order has been given by a revered representative of the ANC, itself mandated to act in the best interests of the struggling masses of South Africa, it is by extension willed by the people of his country. His undoing, the internal collapse, comes when he realises that personal interest has effectively trumped the will of the people and blasphemed the sacred covenant between the liberation movement and the people in whose voice it purports to speak. As in a family afflicted with instances of abuse, there is nothing more insupportable than the betrayal by loved ones.

Music, song and chanting – poetry – play a role in accompanying the telling of the story of the African struggle, providing a soundtrack to the drama that has unfolded from the day the first coloniser set foot on the soil of the continent. Joseph sees this incorporated in the performance of soldierly functions. 'Soldierly' here to mean not the

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<sup>16</sup> James Baldwin, introduction to *We Are Everywhere* by Michael Raeburn (New York: Random House, 1979), xiii.

strictly martial but those exploits aimed at beating the odds, people soldiering on, bracing themselves against buffeting winds, ensuring survival for another day of struggle. These songs become a rallying cry, an affirmation, sometimes a call to prayer. They feature strongly in funerals.

Joseph witnesses these performances and wonders about the circumstance of those people whose deaths cannot be mourned. It is in Sobhuza's letter of contrition after he has killed a woman he had no business killing, that Joseph pays attention to the fate of the muted survivors. Muted because the dead are casualties – collateral damage – in the eye of a different storm. In the case of my dead brother, I learnt that our family had to grit its teeth as people sang disparaging songs about a dead informer and lauded the killers as suitable candidates to be honoured in the pantheon of heroes. At night, however, there were visits from friends of the family, some from the church. My elder sister's colleagues still held the view that – since the voice of the dead one is muted and it's impossible to know the truth in the season of pervasive lies – they would hold onto their own memory of the deceased. Perhaps one day Ben would speak for himself. These sang different songs, not of defiance or exhortation, but, simply, songs aimed at helping my sister through a storm. The story took me to a few lines of a poem, 'a mending season', by Natalia Molebatsi:

women like you give and give and give  
their last breath to ignite fires called revolution  
even when they force-fed you the rules of silence

you fought for your story to be told  
in the season of your voice and inside your body  
reside the melodies of your people<sup>17</sup>

I had thought of using an allegorical style to tell the story of Joseph, where I would take cover behind a form that reveals while obfuscating through fictionalising the reality of what happens or could happen in the context of the evolution of our country from its disreputable past to its wobbling present. I

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<sup>17</sup> Molebatsi, Natalia. 'A Mending Season.' From *New Daughters of Africa*, edited by Margaret Busby, (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2019), 701.

had just finished reading *The Man Who Couldn't Die* by Olga Slavonika, which is less an allegorical rendering of the post-Soviet Union Russia than a satire. It's a story of the wife and stepdaughter of a paralysed veteran who conceal the Soviet Union's collapse from him in order to keep him and his pension alive. In the introduction, Mark Lipovetsky observes that Slavonika's style

fused the lessons of traditional realism and radical modernism [where she] is attentive to the everyday life of poor and socially marginalised people, especially women. On the other, she enlarges the details of their ordinary existence with such a powerful 'microscope' that they turn into surreal symbols.<sup>18</sup>

But I soon came to realise that it would be hard to recreate a fictitious world that would enable the full range of Joseph's adventure, especially since location plays an important role in the story. A made-up place would have required leaps of imagination I wouldn't have been able to summon. And so, I settled for the realist mode, places I knew or those that could be researchable. I was satisfied with the choice I made as the story unfolded. And as every act of writing is a journey of self-discovery, I bumped into ghosts from the past, personalities whose significance I had buried deep in the folds of memory. For the simple reason that I believed that some of the deaths – violations and excesses – could have been avoided if people had been a lot more careful about the lives of others. The realist mode also called for a certain amount of discipline insofar as confining the action of the story to specific timelines; the figures, political or otherwise, necessary to the narrative exist(ed) within a finite time frame or milieu. For instance, there's no way I could have fashioned a Mandela stand-in. Or an OR Tambo. One of the mistakes I was quickly warned off concerned the Johannesburg of Yeoville of the late 1980s, which I had depicted as a Bohemian, multicultural hub peopled largely by immigrants and awash with drugs and sleaze. I soon realised that setting is very important. Anything that doesn't ring true puts the creative work at risk.

Here, I was reminded of a seminar in screenwriting, which I took some years ago, on the advice of one of South Africa's celebrated actors and writers, the late John

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Lipovetsky, introduction to *The Man Who Couldn't Die*, by Olga Slavonika. Translated by Marian Shwartz, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), ix.

Matshikiza. Conducted by John McKee, the crusty doyen of screenwriting, it was held in the hallowed halls of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, in Pall Mall, central London. Lecturing on elements of setting, McKee said that setting must match the social milieu. 'You can't, for instance, write about a race riot in Beverly Hills, for the simple reason that residents of Beverly Hills are too busy shopping to have a race riot.'

Our country has not experienced a race riot, not yet; it has however been plagued by outbreaks of xenophobic violence. People like Derrick's father, Mr Jackson, would probably be targeted, not unusually due to their darker complexion, which identifies them as being from 'out there.' I'd thought of using xenophobia as a central plank to my project and, in doing so, enlarging on the fate of children born out of relationships between exiles and their partners or spouses in neighbouring countries. In debates about the origins of our brand of xenophobic violence, which flared up most dramatically in 2008 and gave us a lasting notoriety in the image of The Burning Man, the Mozambican Ernesto Alfabeto Nyamuave, the children discarded in African capitals crop up like a rude guest at a banquet. There is a school of thought that some of these children traverse the inclement terrain of Southern Africa to find, usually, their fathers. In most cases, the fathers have moved on and are happily ensconced in other relationships with newer, less awkward, sets of offspring. Their questing children's bewilderment increases when they discover that their fathers have other names. It arouses in them a sense that these men have so sloughed off the skin of their past that they have become unrecognisable. They have no intention of coming face to face with their past. If the past unions produced children, then those children belong to an unacknowledgeable world, a void, a darkness. They have to fend for themselves, in a land where nobody knows their names. They end up in shelters or sleeping rough under bridges, to be exploited and sexually assaulted – and sometimes on mortuary trays marked *Anonymous*.

Although Joseph doesn't know what his fate will be, he has to contend with a malignant prophecy. While he's resolved to leave Botswana to go and look for his parents in South Africa, he is faced with the malice of Mr Chikwedere, a poacher and trader in wild animals who has effectively kept him imprisoned. 'You *think* your parents are in South Africa,' Mr Chikwedere says. 'Your parents are probably dead as we speak. South Africa is a violent country.'

Unstated in the story, although lingering at the back of his mind, is Joseph's feelings of inadequacy as a young man in that he hasn't fulfilled the traditional rites and rituals that determine a boy's initiation to manhood. The question is suggested strongly when he watches Sis Violet's assumption of leadership, where she reverses the traditionally male leadership role by taking command of the guerrilla unit. His embrace of the possibility of being a casualty of the vaunted South African violence is his own acceptance of his initiation into a state higher than mere boyhood, when he dons the garb of combatants. He is a soldier. Later, in South Africa, walking the mean streets, his evaluation of them, of possible crime, is measured and not informed by panic.

I suppose, if I were invited to the Pretoria Muslim School again, I would be more courageous about telling them Derrick's story, how he is resurrected in Joseph, and how he is as much a part of me as he is of those girls, too. I would tell them that even though young, Derrick was very brave, for he had forged into that gunky darkness to scoop out the grease with the sole aim of saving his family. He must have been aware of his father, a proud, rigid man always in a black suit like an undertaker, who was simply known as Mr Jackson, and who had no siblings because he was an iNyasa – and in the eyes of the township of KwaMashu amaNyasa couldn't have had relatives. Derrick, then, must have wanted to get an education and lift himself – and his despised father and mother and younger brother – from the mire onto steady rock.

But that was not to be the case. In the gap between birth and death, aspiration and frustration, there is a tension that bears exploration and imagining. It's a gap about a curiosity we all must have about what could have happened had the lives that were cut short been allowed to go the full course. Where this country would be had all the tongues stilled by unjust laws and imprisonment and exile been enabled to shout from the rooftops to caution the errant and stimulate the creative of the land. To lift every voice and sing, as in the memorable lyric by James Weldon Johnson, '[for people to] march on, until victory is won.'<sup>19</sup> I believe it is the role of the artist to *will* that world into existence. If not for the now, then certainly for the future.

The project *Secret Song* suggests a relay between generations. The exiles of the 1960s had to leave the stage after handing the baton to the 1976 generation. These

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, James Weldon. 'Lift Every Voice and Sing.' From *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry*, Edited by Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: Mentor Books, 1997), 75.

were more militant. They gave the liberation struggle a shot in the arm. In their forays back into the country as freedom fighters, they used the routes charted by their predecessors. There exists an archive, one documentary, the other in the unwritten codes between peoples. While we have archived all that information which helped us – the Josephs of the world – to transcend borders, we still haven't popularised it enough for it to become a bequest of the new generations.

The youth and the older generation would perhaps find a meeting point in sharing stories. From my end, I would offer to the young students some of the solutions Joseph found in his quest to find his parents and, much more importantly, how every quest needs courage. Joseph had a mission and drew strength from a ragtag army of guerrillas whose audacity and belief were bigger and louder than any of the ordnance in the armoury of a well-resourced enemy.

I see my project as part of melding history with memory. Of ensuring a sharing of something that has sustained South Africans 'from that fateful day in the first week of February 1488,' – as Neville Alexander has eloquently put it – 'when the first Khoer herder threw the first stone at the Portuguese buccaneers commanded by Bartolomeu Dias in the Bahia dos Vaqueiros (probably Mossel Bay) until – more than 400 years later – the day on which Chief Bambatha was killed in April 1906.'<sup>20</sup>

When I reconnected with Oiva Angula, my Namibian friend, I told him of a visit I had made earlier last year to Platfontein – a settlement for a community some of whose members were used hideously by the SADF in its murderous campaigns against Namibian people under SWAPO – where I witnessed the beginnings of a resurgence of nationalism of sorts. In an event organised by the Pan South African Language Board, various activities took place. This is where the Nama, Xu and Khwe people were testifying, showcasing the reality of their existence, whose high point was their singing of the national anthem in their own languages. These are languages that have existed in the unmined archive of our land, reflecting hidden consciousnesses, culture, wisdom and a knowledge of informal, undocumented herbs, medicines and structures for preserving the environment. It's heartening that German, Namibian and South African scholars are pooling their resources towards a durable Xu and Khwe orthography. That will make possible books to enrich our understanding of a section of our community

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<sup>20</sup> Neville Alexander, *Thoughts on the New South Africa*, (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2013), 3-4.

which has operated under a blanket of silence. The stories will help us all have a fuller appreciation of our interconnected humanity.

But if there is one thing that has connected humanity, it is the common experience of betrayal, where the meanings of things have been inverted or turned upside down to fulfil a need, not unusually a political imperative. It is this betrayal, or the sense of it, which has created gaping silences in our communication, where we then speak in coded language aimed more at concealing than at revealing. I have always felt the need to explore the hidden meanings, peel this onion that encases our humanity and find the core. The core is usually in the language of young people, whose tongues are still free of the burden of the layers that suppress the facility of truth. In our country, the racial nightmare created by colonialism and apartheid has fostered a common inarticulacy when it comes to truth. The truth that was dangerous in the past, when to speak truth to power was deemed subversive, has become as unsafe in the present because it's now construed as nostalgia for the system that created the repudiated past. The shrewd ones, the mandarins of the past regime, are in league with their erstwhile enemies to provide the citizenry with a vision of an untroubled future. The future, as the old Soviet joke goes, is certain; it is the past which is unpredictable. *The Secret Song* seeks to unburden the interlocutor, the child, to speak his truth as he sees it, using the multiplicity of expressions of the region.

In that long-ago afternoon when I spoke to the students of the Pretoria Muslim School, two girls caught my attention. Seated far to the rear of the classroom, they'd been having a whispered conversation, which only stopped when they saw that I was looking at them. One of them put up her hand. *Are you famous where you come from?* At first, I didn't know what to say and then I told them that I was probably famous in my street. Then the intrepid questioner looked at her friend with a triumphant smile. *You see? I told you, he's not famous at all!* Perhaps meaning to offset the embarrassed murmur rippling through the classroom, her friend, whose eyes danced with suppressed mischief, actually asked a question that elevated the session from the formulaic writer-audience format onto meaningful engagement. *What benefit is there in writing stories? How do they change the lives of people, for instance, the market women of Marabastad?* This loosened the tongues of the other classmates.

'Yes,' I said. 'Stories can change people's lives.'

'How?'

I asked them to give me two or three years. If they invite me back, I will tell them of Derrick and then read a passage from *The Secret Song of the Rain*.

End. Johannesburg: February 29, 2020

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