

# Surviving that place: language and violence in the poetry of Ingrid Jonker, Ingrid de Kok, Gabeda Baderoon and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers.

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No foreign sky protected me,  
no stranger's wing shielded my face.  
I stand as witness to the common lot,  
Survivor of that time, that place.<sup>1</sup>

Witness literature, or the literature of testimony, has been the focus of much analysis in South Africa since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 1996 to 1998.<sup>2</sup> Heidi Grunebaum maintains that 'reconciliation discourse ... places very particular boundaries around what is spoken, written, remembered, represented, mourned and claimed.'<sup>3</sup> In this paper I intend to juxtapose these boundaries with rhythm and poetic formalism, of which Finch writes: 'I can think of no more poignant a model for the paradox of boundaries than the way a vibrant, living, boundaryless poem flows in the consistent, defining shape of its form.'<sup>4</sup> This paper deliberates the paradox of boundaries in a broad sense: how boundarylessness, language and rhythm within poetic form or formlessness gives or withholds freedom to write the witnessing of violence and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Akhmatova, 'Requiem,' *Against Forgetting* ed. Carolyn Forché (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993), p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> For example Antje Krog, *Country of my Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House 1998); Eric Doxtader and Charles Villa-Vicencio eds., *To Repair the Irreparable* (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Heidi Grunebaum, 'Talking to Ourselves: Among the Innocent Dead: On Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and Mourning,' *PMLA* 117, no. 2 (March, 2002): p.307.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Finch, 'Female tradition as feminist innovation,' In *The Body of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), pp. 89–94, 93.

Politically engendered, inscribed violence and state-sanctioned deaths are deeply embedded in the politics and landscape of South Africa and have been at the heart of South Africa's cultural production and representation since the eighteenth century. This paper looks at three contemporary South African poets, Ingrid de Kok, Gabeda Baderoon and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, in order to examine the ways in which they use form, rhythm and imagery to imagine, experience, witness and contain death, while a certain degree of metrical experimentation enables a response to freedom by situating place and people at the forefront of memory. My reading also concentrates on the poetry of Ingrid Jonker whose poetic struggle with subjectivity and observation prepared a path for de Kok, Baderoon and de Villiers to successfully escape the boundaries of reconciliation discourse within relatively conservative poetic and rhythmic structures. These poets personalize allusions to violence in everyday life while the imagery, rhythm and structure of their poems reveal a set of related ideas about violence and language which are particular to the form of their poems.

### **Ingrid Jonker**

Ingrid Jonker was a white Afrikaans poet whose works were translated by her two lovers, the poet Jack Cope and the South African novelist André Brink. She struggled to overcome a fractured childhood overshadowed by the strict, Calvinist-Afrikaner conservatism of her father, a minister in the South African nationalist government. Jonker committed suicide at the age of thirty-two in 1965. The manner of her death (she walked into the sea in Cape Town) coupled with her emotionally expressive, highly subjective and, for the period, unusual poetic imagery and form, assured her an almost mythological status as the South African Sylvia Plath.

Jonker's poems are both attempts at metrical form as well as free-verse poems where the metrical stress is often on important, penultimate words in a line with pattern, structure and breaks in rhythm declaiming or hiding emotion. Images often play with contradictory and ambiguous tones and voices. Jonker tries to place her poetic boundaries around subjectivity by seeking redemption from violence in imagery:

The child is not dead  
the child raises his fist against his mother

who screams Afrika! shouts the scent  
 Of freedom and heather  
 In the locations of the surrounded heart.<sup>5</sup>

‘The Child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga’ had been a constant source of annoyance to Jonker’s publishers who judged it too political to be included in collections of her lyrical works. One publisher would only publish it under the title ‘Die Kind’ (‘The Child’); nevertheless Jonker had to argue to have this poem included in the anthology. Jane Wilkinson<sup>6</sup> finds a positive and hopeful message in Jonker’s resurrection of the dead child in a transformed South Africa as the child strides, without a pass, into the world.<sup>7</sup> I differ slightly in my interpretation as it seems to me that the deliberate rhythmic breaks within the careful structure of the poem present an authentic, internal struggle from which Jonker could not escape. The inability to hold death within a poetic frame allows imagery and emotion to coalesce in, as Brink describes, ‘raw despair.’<sup>8</sup> Jonker objectifies the child to represent a poetic or artistic expression that she could not quite reach: the jagged sentence structure and interruption to rhythm are circuitous. Jonker did not see this poem as political,<sup>9</sup> however contentious it would be for the reader to abolish its signifiers.

The poem is divided into four stanzas, the first three of five lines each, the last of ten lines in which rhythm and form are disturbed to convey the intensity of meaning. Jonker uses rhythmical repetition as a means of emphasis as metre cannot express or contain her emotion. This perseverance of utterance is typical of witness accounts of violence which objectify, list or state, producing evidence to reiterate the veracity of an account to the witness (speaker or interlocutor) as well as the audience. Jonker did not see this event but recorded her personal response to its

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<sup>5</sup> Ingrid Jonker, *Selected Poems*, trans. Jack Cope and William Plomer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 27.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Wilkinson, ‘Re-visioning the Child: Mourning and Survival in Poems by Ingrid Jonker, Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press,’ *Working and Writing for tomorrow. Essays in honour of Itala Viva* ed. Annalisa Oboe, Claudia Gualtieri and Roger Bromley (Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2008), pp. 9–26

<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson, p.13 quotes Ingrid Jonker: ‘Poetic technique...slowly developed like any workman who improves his skill by hard work.’

<sup>8</sup> André Brink, *A Fork in the Road* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p.105.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Cope, *The Adversary Within: Dissident Writers in Afrikaans* (Cape Town: David Phillip, 1982), p.83.

reportage by taking on the role of witness.<sup>10</sup> The poet thrusts her outspoken and rebellious fist at those who failed her as a child, personalizing the narrative: ‘The child lifts his fists against his father’ as well as his mother. Here was a child too who:

is present at all gatherings and law-giving  
 the child peers through house windows and into the hearts  
 of mothers  
 the child who wanted just to play in the sun at Nyanga is  
 everywhere  
 the child grown to a man treks all over Africa  
 the child grown to a giant travels through the whole world  
 Without a pass

Jonker’s ‘everywhere’ child appears to exteriorize the poet, the poet-as-mother and the poet-as-child, with multiple voices alternating as witnesses to death and violence. The child-as-child is witness too, peering through house windows, being present as a silent observer at all family gatherings and legal proceedings, a watchful child condemning the creation of unjust laws to which the poet’s father was a party. The child peering through ‘house windows’ domesticates violence ‘in the shadow of the soldiers/on guard with rifles Saracens and batons.’ ‘Saracens’ was a word used by black South Africans to describe the armoured personnel carriers used by the police, conveying also a hint of infidel warriors. Jonker attempts to universalise her imagery, a bid for freedom, not only from South Africa but also from her own points of reference.

The image of the child is persistently propelled through the violence of the poem to the final words ‘without a pass’ which appear almost as an anti-climax, a denouement after the creation of the child’s ubiquitousness, boundarylessness. Jonker repeats the words ‘the child’ ten times in the twenty-five line poem ensuring a rhythmical insistence on the innocence of the not-dead, dead child who could have ‘grown to a giant’ to ‘travel the whole world.’ Brink notes that as Jonker travelled abroad she experienced ‘increasing *dépaysment*’<sup>11</sup> (homesickness), feeling her self negated by her displacement: neither at home in herself, in South Africa or outside ‘that time, that place.’ She physically distanced herself from family seeking any experience she could to live independently and write. The whole poem

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson, p.13 quotes Ingrid Jonker: ‘I saw the mother as every mother in the world. I saw her as myself...I could not sleep.’

<sup>11</sup> Brink, *A Fork in the Road*, p. 106.

builds towards the final symbol of the restrictive and notorious South African 'pass' which was an identity document carried by all blacks in South Africa, designating compulsory locations of residence and restrictions of movement. By the end of the poem Jonker has become the voice of the child which seems to cry out through the regular beat and metre of sentences abruptly broken by lack of punctuation, pleading to march away from restriction, fear and confinement which lead, it seems to me, only to death. The poem struggles to contain death in an ambiguity of imagery and declamation which Wilkinson interprets as hope, concluding that death 'is not so much erased, as under erasure.'<sup>12</sup>

The language and tone of Jonker's poems wrestle with a desperate randomness inherent in the emotional landscape of her youth which becomes a difficulty in her writing, experimenting to settle on a comfortable poetic form. Jonker cannot quite frame an order on her poetic vision as her emotion runs over her writing. In 'Homesickness for Cape Town,'<sup>13</sup> the city is a 'She' (or Jonker's hidden I) personified as both the child's mother and the poet-as-mother as well as the mother-figure of Africa so beloved of the anti-apartheid poets. Jonker's ten line stanza places the emphasis on the 'She' which opens nine sentences. Here the she-figure is not quite the everyday mother that Jonker could not become but rather a witness to or harbinger of violence and death.

Jonker carefully crafts the sentence structure so that the comforting, though chilling, words of the mother appear to contradict themselves leaving us in no doubt of the child's fear. Simultaneously we are exposed to the poet's ambivalence:

She shelters me in the profusion of her lap  
 She says my throat is not going to be cut  
 She says I'm not being put under house-arrest  
 She says I'm not dying of the galloping consumption of love  
 .....  
 She is my mother  
 With cups of tea she paralyzes Table Mountain  
 And her hands are as cool as spoons

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<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, 'Re-visioning the Child,' p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Ingrid Jonker, 'Homesickness for Cape Town,' In *The Lava of This Land: South African Poetry 1960–1966*, ed. Denis Hirson, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p.18.

The tone and metre of the opening sentences are flat and unemotional with the exception of the repetition of 'she' while the imagery is harsh and dramatic, sitting uncomfortably with the child-like declamations. Again we presume protection and warmth from the parent until Jonker harshly imagines the possibility of child murder as she longs for assurance and knowledge. The city is personified as a mother with 'hands as cool as spoons' who can make tea, a link between the throat as a passage to living and the cut throat of the dying. The sudden insertion of this image insists on its own truth, that fear is real and that ambivalence is deathly. There is tension in Jonker's house-arrest,<sup>14</sup> the house of the desired mother brings with it enclosure, separation, silence, disappearance, death.

The poem contains and paralyzes Cape Town so that the sentiment of remembering becomes suffocating despite a desire to capture Cape Town as the mother protector. The mother figure's protection is all consuming and overbearing. Place is personified as the domestic image of tea-maker, albeit as a mother who is also unknowing and the child who conceals:

She doesn't know I am hungry  
 She doesn't know I am afraid  
 She doesn't know cockcrow and house-arrest are a pair  
 She is my mother.

Having lived with a mother, grandmother and two step-mothers and being a mother herself, Jonker's ambiguity is reinforced by the repetition of 'she doesn't know,' which could be read as failure and despair.

Jonker's *Selected Poems*<sup>15</sup> consist of several lyrical love poems which cascade back and forth between acceptance and rejection, using images of nature and loss to expand her world:

I went to search for my own heart  
 and after I had lost my way  
 in the days that trail by with their leaves  
 ('I went to search for my own heart,' 23).

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<sup>14</sup>House arrest was a common form of detention in apartheid South Africa in which opponents of apartheid were confined to particular places of residence with their movements strictly curtailed and their visitors monitored. Often house arrests involved daily visits to the police.

<sup>15</sup>Ingrid Jonker, *Selected Poems*, trans. Jack Cope and William Plomer, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968). Further citations of this work are given in the text.

There are recurrent images of being alone: ‘they picked me from the others to endure / me in this prison where I stand alone’ (‘At the Goodwood Agricultural Show,’ 14); likewise the constant ‘unreality’ and ‘the rejection / of the world’ (‘On all the faces,’ 17). Her poems hide the self deep within metaphors: in the poem ‘Bitterberry Daybreak,’<sup>16</sup> a broken relationship is reflected in the ‘bitterberry sun,’ ‘the highway’ becomes lost in the twisting ‘tracks’ of ‘words,’ and memory becomes ‘pinewood’ in which to ‘stumble into pain.’ Wooden and stolid, this poem rambles inwards.

In ‘Pregnant Women’ (18), form fails to successfully contain her attempt to universalize her emotion though a singing quality emerges as an experiment with the lyric. Loss is coated in blood. Jonker plays ‘that I’m happy’ (18) as her ‘bloodchild’ is born. She lies ‘under the crust of the night singing, / curled up in the sewer, singing.’ Imagery is violent. Jumping quickly from one thought to another, her predominant mood is distress. Between ‘sewer’ and ‘sadness’ and ‘still singing fleshrose,’ ‘our bloodsong’ builds intensity and despair in an almost operatic crescendo:

My yesterday hangs under my heart  
 My red gladiolus my cradling world  
 And my heart that sings like a cicada,  
 My cicada-heart sings like a cicada;  
 But sewer oh sewer,  
 My bloodchild lies in the water

The song cannot quite hold the lyric as emotion overflows despite containing the musical qualities and metre of a well known verse (‘My bonnie lies over the ocean’). The overall affect of this explosion of imagery is of a very violent red of birth encircling the poet’s fragile heart as she cradles her inner self singing a ‘bloodsong’ of loss and sadness, ‘free from my womb but besmeared.’ The poem is situated in the landscape of her Cape childhood:

I play that I’m a child  
 gooseberries, gooseberries and heather  
 kukumakrankas and anise

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<sup>16</sup> Ingrid Jonker, ‘Bitterberry Daybreak,’ In *The Lava of this Land*, p.16.

but place has been displaced by ‘play’ and ‘trembling’ and appears no more in this poem of pain.

After Jonker’s father ceased to have any contact with her, increasingly depressed and unhappy as relationships failed, content only when being a mother to her daughter, Jonker wrote her own death as a witness to her sense of being censored into silence and negation: ‘I looked down from the mountain and saw I was dead’ (‘Seen from the wound in my side,’ 29). Jonker’s poetic form reaches out to containment and realisation even as she writes what could be her own epitaph in the beautifully evocative poem ‘Daisies in Namaqualand.’ (33) Jonker creates the delicate but hardy, sun-loving and drought-proof daisy as the symbol of exile from her crumbling world:

Behind the closed-up forehead  
where perhaps another shoot falls  
of a drowned springtime  
Behind the shot-down word  
Behind our divided house  
Behind the heart shut against itself  
Behind wire fences, camps, locations  
Behind the silence where unknown languages  
fall like bells at a burial  
Behind our torn-up land

sits the green praying mantis of the veld  
And we hear still half-dazed  
little blue Namaqualand daisy  
something answer, and believe, and know.

The familiar, repetitive technique produces a funereal recitation of death and violence, a place where springtime is ‘drowned’ and words ‘shot-down.’ The censorship of words has grown from ‘our divided house,’ ‘behind the heart shut against itself.’ Images of violence come from ‘wire fences, camps, locations.’ We almost hear the poet’s cry but her exile is too deep, too sorrowful and too ‘unknown’ to reach us. Surprisingly fresh, the contrasting image of the ‘little blue Namaqualand daisy’ startles itself into our reading. This little blue daisy which we can imagine bobbing its new head cautiously amid the barbarism coupled with the solitary pose of ‘the green praying mantis of the veld’ are South African images which seem to appear from nowhere in this roll-call of boundaries, reminders not just of

the continuity of nature but also of the poet's faint glimmer of hope for some reassurance and continuity. The final line has a closure in its structure and beat and a hint of a prayer for peace.

Jonker wanders through the divided torn-up land with her heart confused by the hardness of those in power, hidden 'away in my word' ('L'art poétique,' 35) from the 'violence of a simple recollection / in your drowned hands.' Then, towards the end of her short life, Jonker suddenly and powerfully surprises us once more with her death-laden pessimism as witness. 'I am with those' is almost factual so that it speaks to anyone with its contradictions and shifting voices:

I am with those  
 Who abuse sex  
 Because the individual doesn't count  
 .....  
 with those coloured, African disposed  
 with those who murder  
 because every death affirms anew  
 the lie of life

And please don't forget  
 About justice it doesn't exist  
 About brotherhood it's deceit  
 About love it has no right  
 ('I am with those,' 50)

Who is the poet with? Where do we stand? If the individual doesn't count, and justice doesn't exist, death can only affirm 'the lie of life'. Here her courage fails her; she loses hope, there is no utopia or promise of reprieve: 'my parents have broken themselves off from my death' ('I drift in the wind,' 51) and indeed Abraham Jonker forbade poetry reading at his daughter's funeral. In an allusion to the culture of her father, Jonker finally calls 'my nation' to 'follow my lonely fingers / . . . my Black Africa. . . / My people have rotted away from me / what will become of the rotten nation.' (51) Her detachment and disillusionment drift in the wind; there is no solace, no hope and no joy and in the end only a bitter and tragic exit from her unhappy world as Jonker could not out write death.

Mandela, tellingly, gave Jonker a home beyond her poetry. While 'no foreign sky protected' her, a 'stranger's wing' appeared in the figure of

Mandela who recited<sup>17</sup> ‘The Child who was shot dead by soldiers at Nyanga’ at his inaugural address in May 1994 as South Africa’s first democratic president. That the poet’s tragic death has been mythologised in relation to the difficult passage and symbolic importance of this poem was not lost on Mandela. He selected the poem of a dead, white, Afrikaans woman as a gesture of defiance and resurrection which was part of a reconciliation discourse to verify deeply felt truths as written into Jonker’s poetry.

### Ingrid de Kok

Ingrid de Kok is part of a generation of South African women writers that includes Karen Press and Antjie Krug, all now based in the Cape, who have written about South Africa’s transition to democracy from the perspective of whiteness and privilege. We find a counterpoint to Jonker’s juxtaposition of fear and violence in the language of Ingrid de Kok’s 2002 collection of poems *Terrestrial Things* but without emotional turmoil spilling from the page. This volume has four sections, the titles of which extend beyond the borders of South Africa: ‘Foreign and Familiar,’ ‘A Room Full of Questions,’ ‘Stretched Horizons’ and ‘Freight.’ De Kok moves between place and memory, between testimony and recollection, family and violence, using vivid and evocative descriptions of place to inscribe the loss of liberty, returning in the latter two sections to images of childhood and relationships. Jonker struggled with the poetic process as an attempt to reconstruct a personal emotional response; De Kok’s concerns extend to the process of writing itself as a means of authenticity:

If we go on like this, everyone  
Will know somebody this week dead,  
Watch somebody die, kill somebody  
Or film it, write about it.<sup>18</sup>

We are all implicated in this violence with the stress on the final words of ‘everyone,’ ‘dead,’ and ‘somebody.’ Violence and death reduced to ‘it.’

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<sup>17</sup> There are two You Tube recordings of Mandela’s voice reading part of the poem. It is worth noting that Mandela creates a three to four-part rhythm in his reading conveying a sense of metre. The difference between spoken and written poetic testimony is worth further exploration.

<sup>18</sup> Ingrid de Kok, ‘Today, again’ in *Terrestrial Things*, (Plumstead: Kwela/Snailpress, 2002), p. 35.

In one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Tereus, Procne and Philomela, despite 'finally losing their humanity and being changed into birds,' are not silenced. Horace Engdahl<sup>19</sup> interprets their 'animal cry' as a testimony to horror. De Kok's poems in the section 'Foreign and Familiar' metamorphose animals in the Italian landscape into instruments of death or witnesses to violence and unimaginable horror to the point that the familiar is both strange and 'contradictory.' In 'Italian Cats,'<sup>20</sup> the poet caustically suggests that cats are accorded the rights denied illegal immigrants:

Rumour has it the Italian constitution  
 Defends cats, wherever they live and breed,  
 Against starving and persecution

Here rumour is presented blandly for our consumption with almost a caesura after 'it' and again after 'cats' containing a metrical arrhythmia that appears to point to an irregularity in the Italian constitution. The foreign appears erroneously foreign from the eyes of Africans:

What have we Africans to do with this?  
 With holy water, floating graves and cypresses

The periphery questions the centre as residents, illegal immigrants and de Kok's Africa meet in a perhaps slightly clumsy attempt at dialogue as in the subdued rhyming couplet of dialect and papers which 'never are correct.'

On the Rialto, tourists eye the wares  
 Of three of our continent's diasporic sons  
 Young men in dreadlocks and caps, touting  
 Leather bags and laser toys in the subdued dialect  
 Of those whose papers never are correct

Here I will concentrate on two of de Kok's poems to show how she discloses loss through incidental and random acts of violence. De Kok's opening poem 'Spring custom'<sup>21</sup> begins with twelve line and six line stanzas to depart into eighteen lines divided into an uneven eleven and

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<sup>19</sup>Horace Engdahl, ed. *Witness literature* (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2002), p.13.

<sup>20</sup>De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p.15.

<sup>21</sup>De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p. 11.

seven as if to intensify the violent impact of her imagery. De Kok chills us with the poem's possible image of the poet as 'the wild canary,' kept 'all winter long' in a cage in a cellar. The wild canary is now an imprisoned, domesticated bird that has lost its voice: 'it sings no more.' The poet becomes the voiceless canary who, silent in the 'damp dark,' no longer responds to 'a dose of daily cellular light.' De Kok's portrait is a melancholy one intent on the detail of rhythmic song so that the reader sways with the moving cage as, at the end of winter, 'before dawn' we are carried outside. We see only 'shafts of moving light' and smell soil 'strong as coffee' as outside the cage is 'hooked high in a spreading chestnut.' Here we witness buds and shoots and 'blue sky feathering trees.' Moving between objective narrator and the subjectivity of the bird, de Kok creates a forceful, experiential field of emotions as she ponders the complex, paradoxical meanings of freedom and responsibility in writing as well as living:

The bird hiccups, tests its unpadlocked voice,  
and again, and then soars into song-  
calling, we imagine, its lungs to free its wings.

Embedded in each image is a reminder of something out of tune with the place, a portent or some shadow which arrives with each minute observation: the bird's voice is unpadlocked as de Kok steps back observing that maybe we 'only imagine' the bird-poet is summoning a hidden reserve of strength to fly.

In the chestnut, pert and curious,  
a bird party sings  
without shadow or memory.

Also in the chestnut, an uncaged bird party is free, the poet suggests, to become 'pert and curious' unburdened by memory or illusions. De Kok allows herself a moment to reflect on the process of writing, how 'we project our longings' into the bird conversation 'despite our forebodings.' At this point in the poem we are locked into an uneasy pause which de Kok extends by describing how the scene should appear but for the cause or nature of our anxiety. The poet herself is suspended in the ritual of rhythmical seduction as if an uneasy witness to its charm:

because: there, we say,  
are the trees, spring, and the wild birds

and there, the caged one about to be freed  
and the farmer sharing the sun beside it.

But death enters the poem, violent death akin to the burials in Jonker's 'Daisies in Namaqualand.' We have moved through the poem with this whispering fear, from the cage, the cellar, the 'wooden shutters,' 'the stamp' of the farmer's boots until

... the farmer lifts his gun  
and shoots as many as he can,  
their bodies mostly too small to eat  
though large enough  
to spasm in the sky  
before they fall  
and are collected in a bag  
on this bright morning.

The imagery is strongly reminiscent of Jonker's children, bodies in spasm as they are gunned down. Another rural idyll is not as it seems as man intrudes on nature and its rhythm, the horror reflected in the shorter sentences of the staccato stanza as the small bodies fall. The bright morning is enclosed in a bag of horror. And quickly, incidentally, de Kok places her poem in 'the glittering Tuscan hills' where the cruelty of the custom shatters a tradition of tourist dreams. The poet herself is overwhelmed:

The caged canary,  
shocked rigid  
by the sudden shots,  
smelling its betrayal  
in gunpowder,  
stops singing  
until the following spring.

De Kok personifies the canary's response to violence as an intuitive reaction overcome only by the inevitability of nature's rhythm. She implicitly asks the reader to note her own surprised response to shots fired in a romanticised Italian landscape. After Nyanga and Sharpeville in 1961, South Africa experienced a series of violent riots culminating in Soweto in 1976, with the Marikana Mine shootings repeating state-sanctioned violence in post-apartheid 2012. But we are not in South Africa, de Kok

reminds us, we are witness instead to another custom amid the glittering Tuscan hills. De Kok bears witness to what appears habitual, ritualised death, almost a banality except to the caged observer who is ‘shocked rigid.’ ‘Betrayal in gunpowder’ becomes a universal image that starts to appear ritualistic and natural. For de Kok therein lies the horror: that, as Jonker imagined and Arendt named, from the banal evil can ooze.

De Kok retains this theme when describing the ‘Birds at Bellagio’<sup>22</sup> who ‘except for the undertaker-crows’ ‘expect to die from gunshot wounds/on autumn afternoons.’ The casual rhyming of wounds and afternoons, and the rearrangement of the letters in ‘except’ and ‘expect’ emphasize the simplicity with which violence can change life. Death intrudes easily into the contained scene. De Kok returns to revisit the patterning and structure of her rhythm insisting on a casual familiarity to emphasise the simplicity of observation. The birds disappear

into impenetrable green gloom,  
 their pewter throats sealing song  
 in the trussed cypresses that guard  
 mass graveyards of Italian birds,  
 shot once for food, and then for sport  
 through the venal centuries, in peace and war.

We are in a land of mass graveyards and violence, the undercurrents of venal centuries. De Kok cannot, and has no desire to, shake the past. In these two poems, the poet’s birds assume the symbolic resonance of witness even as the poet remembers that the ‘undertaker-crows’ sneer from ‘elegant branches overhead.’ De Kok places these crows as witnesses too, albeit as perpetrators or watchers, witnesses who reveal only their own underbellies of darkness.

By the time we reach a later poem, the poet spells out the unpredictability of violence and death using anaphora. Death is again reduced to ‘it’ even though ‘its’ reiteration at the beginning of each line reinforces death’s importance. In ‘Death Arrives:’<sup>23</sup>

It never occurs the way one predicts  
 It never does.

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<sup>22</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> De Kok. *Seasonal Fires* (New York: SevenStories Press, 2006), pp. 168–169.

It won't ever disclose the year or hour  
It only contradicts.

The poem holds death at bay with rhyme and simplicity of form. Emotion is restrained despite the familiarity of repetition. I suggest that in these poems de Kok's imagery speaks as witness to the past and present of a global, rather than specifically South African, imaginary of violence and representation. Her poems contain violence through the use of mockery, sarcasm and irony:

Turned out, inside out  
Only safe in the hearse.  
Women and children first.

These are techniques which Jonker could not use to hold subjectivity at bay.

In 'Women and Children First'<sup>24</sup> the success of the last rhyming couplet resonates beyond Jonker as does the rhyming intonation and incantations of de Kok's new poems 'Body Maps' and 'Sketches from a Summer Notebook.'<sup>25</sup> In these poems de Kok embraces the freedom of travel and the joy inherent in nature. These images tell us 'how we too should grow and live.'<sup>26</sup> De Kok's poems press the edges of poetic boundaries as her imagery expands beyond violence, memory and South Africa allowing experimentation with the formal structures of metre, voice and rhythm to convey meaning. She leaves behind the constraints of reconciliation discourse.

### Gabeda Baderoon

To 'grow and live' beyond violence is almost a *lief*-motif of the current generation of South African poets. As part of this generation, Gabeda Baderoon and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers (who were both in their mid-twenties at the end of apartheid) have consciously adopted poetic forms which enable them to explore subjective experiences of South African violence albeit with very different voices and tonal qualities. Like Jonker and de Kok, both poets imbue narrative with symbolism and

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<sup>24</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, pp. 139–186.

<sup>26</sup> De Kok, 'Sunflowers' in *Seasonal Fires*, p.185.

personification using detective-like forensic qualities of slow revelation. Baderoon engages with South Africa's violent past by projecting her experiences into a global imaginary enclosing South Africa in a broader though personal frame. De Villiers faces the violence, encases it in imagery and experimentation, and throws metaphors at us in a daring poetic engagement with the personal.

As an academic working in America and South Africa, Baderoon is acutely aware of critical theorizing grounded in South Africa. She thus attempts to break through the nomenclature and 'entanglements'<sup>27</sup> of South African violence by writing tightly constructed, restrained and controlled poems within a free-verse formlessness. Baderoon's poetry deliberates on the witnessing of silence and repression as constant, violent undercurrents to ordinary life. Her language and imagery is simplified to the point of containing emotion well within the poetic line. Images which would appear symptomatic of reconciliation discourse or the witnessing of overt violence are excluded within personal boundaries of language choice and poetic structure. In an interview,<sup>28</sup> Baderoon both acknowledges the force of apartheid in her life and rejects it as an overt subject of her poetry. I suggest that this ambivalence informs the sense of place and violence in her poetry.

Baderoon's slow disclosure of place departs from the easier identification of politics and violence in the work of many South African poets including Jonker and de Kok. Exploring the language of confession, secrecy and repression that has been part of South Africa's social discourse, Baderoon's poetic tone is bound by rhythmical lines and repetition within simple structures. Her poems signal that transitional point of distance when the past slips inexorably away unless recorded and remembered in minute detail. Detail is punctuated by moments of silence to contain that slippage from the past. When the disruptions of everyday life in South Africa slide into her poems amid the paraphernalia of normality,

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<sup>27</sup> Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Amatoritsero Ede and Gabeda Baderoon, 'Interview: beauty in the harsh lines,' *Sentinel Poetry (Online)*, 37, 3rd Anniversary Issue, (December, 2005), [www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/1205/interview.htm](http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/1205/interview.htm), accessed 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2013. This is an extensive interview in which Baderoon discusses her thoughts about South Africa, poetry, violence and beauty as well as the meaning of apartheid to her, as a black South African.

their casual appearance shocks the reader out of a reverie created by the very simplicity of poetic structure and rhythm. Violence intrudes.

In Baderoon's first collection *The Dream in the Next Body*, the poems are personal, tentative explorations of self and travel to places outside the confines of self-defined boundaries and limits. Disorder is displaced in our imagination as words hint at another world such as in the poem 'Old Story' (DB, 18) where a snake 'throws itself sideways after her, as it must.' In the 'empty' landscape, there is a 'purity of silence' before the whip-fast struggle of woman and snake. This silence always precedes or conceals moments of disruption in Baderoon's poems.

A certain creative tentativeness of expression is offset by a gravity of tone: 'Track memory. Loss lets you see/again.'<sup>29</sup> Baderoon turns loss into the familiar landscapes of everyday objects and memory. Instances of specifically South African vernacular in 'My Tongue Softens on the Other Name,' are paradoxical and unexpected: Kapokbos (cottonwool bush) and witylof (white olive) (DB, 31–32) hint at a South African landscape which softens the 'corner in the lee of the house' where Baderoon's childhood garden begins to grow, however these are two words which signify the unfamiliar to an outsider. Baderoon is comfortable enough with her memories to leave South Africa as a specifically defined place as an absence in this collection, with this poem suggesting that she is exploring how to write about her childhood without being defined by apartheid's violence. To do so, she must grapple with how to describe a South African childhood under apartheid. Place is constructed as family in contrast to Ingrid de Kok's 'Childhood at Stilfontein Mine' where family becomes the paradoxical world of white violence: 'Safest white childhood of the fifties/if your father didn't beat you.'<sup>30</sup> Baderoon places other spaces in Proustian memory so that the past is clearly situated in the sounds, sights and tastes evoked by family and childhood and not essentially in apartheid South Africa. Violence is excluded from the private domain.

Baderoon's poetic world expands in her second volume *A Hundred Silences*.<sup>31</sup> As her inner dialogue becomes more evocative she allows

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<sup>29</sup> Gabeba Baderoon, *The Dream in the Next Body* (Plumstead: Kwela Books/Snailpress, 2005), 28. Further citations of this work are given in the text as DB.

<sup>30</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p.42.

<sup>31</sup> Gabeda Baderoon, *A Hundred Silences*, (Plumstead: Kwela Books/Snailpress, 2006). Further citations of this work are given in the text as HS.

South Africa as a complex geopolitical reality to enter memories of everyday life as her poems translate into remembrances of significance: 'this place on the West Coast' is 'never disclosed' (HS, 'Give,' 9–10) although the fish caught by her father on these fishing trips on the West Coast are particular to South Africa, namely the 'galjoen and yellow tail.' 'My father and his friend' go fishing, Baderoon recalls, 'his days off'<sup>32</sup> always in the middle of the week.' Off they 'drive away,' to become a receding memory even as Baderoon writes her poem, 'they stand unwatched', no-one keeping track of their movements, their days and their time. Baderoon 'wonders about the empty days, more frequent' as if her father and herself both stood in the dark at the edge

of something vast, sea and sky  
 throwing a thin line into the give of it  
 and waiting, silent and waiting,  
 until something pulls  
 against your weight.  
 ('Give,' HS, 10)

Unwatched, in private, unseen except in her imagination, the poet's father is written into history in a specific place and juncture of time in Baderoon's memory. These lines rock back and forth with the peaceful rhythm of fishing while the pun on the words 'weight' and 'wait' gives weight to the poem as the poet steps towards the immensity of an unknown past and future symbolized by the vastness of the sea and sky. This sense of stillness conveys the unspoken and the private, silences in which moments of personal reflection became possible for Baderoon's father amidst the reality of apartheid.

Baderoon cannot completely avoid a South African rhetoric centered on dislocation. Images shift and revolve in her poems so that the imperceptible worlds of childhood and uncertainty haunt her travels abroad. Travelling away from images of certainty she loses 'a centre / To which I can return, / but do not' ('The Call', DB, 15). South Africa is identified through loss—a letter to 'the address' she has 'left behind', the misplaced nutmeg grater 'in another cupboard' 'another place' ('Point of View,' DB, 13). She leaves behind memory and people including her

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<sup>32</sup> In South Africa, 'day off' was slang for time granted at the benevolence and convenience of the boss (master) who was generally white. *A Dictionary of South African English On Historical Principles*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Dictionary Unit for South African English, 1996), p. 516.

mother: 'I fear/ I will never see her again' ('The Call,' DB, 15). She watches cooking shows in a new country 'for the company of colours', the colours of her grandmother's cooking, 'to keep from crying' ('Hunger,' DB, 24). As her self unfolds in the outside world, she tries not to 'fall off the edge of the world' ('The Machine,' DB, 26), 'my every glance a line pulling/against an ancient undertow of doubt.' (DB, 26) She ruminates on the German word 'unheimlich' ('the country after midnight,' DB, 35), 'home but not home / home like the cellar or dark stairwell' (DB, 35). This 'shadow /of loss falling from the future' ('The Forest,' DB, 30) is only named and described briefly ('My Tongue Softens on the Other Name,' DB, 31). The poet remembers her brother digging a garden, the 'tap that has dripped all my life' (BD, 32), her brother sitting on an 'upturned paint tin'

light wells over the rim of the stone basin  
and collects itself into the moon.  
Everything is finding its place

By displacing violence, a slow process of memory and objectification or personification preoccupies Baderoon. As a witness, she acknowledges that what is remembered and recorded will haunt her into the future so that the shapes, colours and form of memory will transform her: 'you never come back/the same' ('The Forest,' DB, 30). Her title poem 'The Dream in the Next Body' speaks of a continuity of place residing in the body which lies next to her, even as the comfort and unity of the 'single, warm hollow' gives way to a 'solitude larger than our two bodies' (DB, 33). Loss and memory collide in the poem 'Taking your hand' (DB, 34–35) in which her gaze is caught by the way Picasso, Miro and 'the 15<sup>th</sup> century Persian miniaturist Bizhad' (DB, 34) drew hands to 'still/tell their canted, formal tales today.'(DB, 34) From her musings on how hands can be composed and drawn Baderoon dwells on the absence of touch from a hand which has one truth: 'It has grown to an age when it can hold/a gun' (DB, 34). This sudden, shocking confrontation is a reminder of violence and lost innocence. Violence is usually a more oblique presence in her poetry. Departures, loss, death and indecision can inhabit objects: a quiet house, a door almost open, a chair at an angle, people are arriving, half-leaving, dying, gone ('The art of leaving,' DB, 39).

The poet captures moments of reality in her emotional gaze. In her poem 'On a Bench near the Glasshouse in the Botanical Gardens' (DB, 42–43) there is no sense of place, rather a garden which could be anywhere

where our minds wander following ‘pigeons and birds’ like drifting, distant dots. From a bench, the poet concentrates on firs and a lake and a glasshouse which form part of the scene of a father playing with two children. From this place ‘everything leaves’, shadows fall, birds fly away, flowers become ‘delirious’, they ‘overwhelm the neat hopes of the planners.’ (DB, 42) Baderoon is interested in those parts which drop and disappear or cling to the edges of memory, the uncertainties that fall like the cropped discards of ‘failed photographs’ (‘Mapping,’ DB, 58). It is the failures with their ‘uncertain shifts’ (DB, 58) that provide definition.

Resolutely she observes how icons of her past follow her into the world, the tiler of her childhood appearing again and again in the mosques of her current geographies. In the poem ‘Contemporary Architecture’ (DB, 48–50) the mosques of antiquity, structures where domes should create ‘a space for love’ (49) give way to the political dimension of violence: ‘Where is the centre, /and where the end point /of its space?’ (50), ‘the homeless grief of young men’s mothers’ (49). Baderoon insists that we consider that ‘To the hungry, inside eye, /its [the mosque’s] beauty grants a place in the world’ (49). She draws this place in the world as a sanctuary for closely observed and finely tiled emotions almost imperceptible in the noise of contemporary media.

Her ‘War Triptych: Silence, Glory, Love’ (DB, 59–61) confronts contemporary global imagery of war to reveal memory and our own culpability. In Part II: ‘Father Receives News His Son Died in the Intifada:’ (60)

He felt a hand slip from his hand,  
A small unclasping,  
And for that he refused the solace of glory.

That small unclasping as the child slips out of grasp and away from life grounds the poem in Baderoon’s insistence on emotional integrity. There is no glory in mindless death and the endless reportage of ‘stories of war’ (61).

In stark contrast to the expressive language of Jonker and de Kok, forceful feeling is rare in Baderoon’s poetry. Given the composure with which the poet selects her language, ‘hate’ in the poem ‘Fanon’s Secret’ (HS, 63) is revealing. The use of Fanon’s name in the title of the poem is suggestive of the violence underpinning colonization while the mind of the

colonized struggles for freedom. Baderoon uses the second person as both singular and plural in short, staccato lines:

you hate  
what is held back  
not known to you  
kept, stolen, enchanted

The word 'hate' appears casually though with tension and by implication violence given the pause at the end of the line. Baderoon suggests hate begins with privilege and exploitation. The grape picker as the poem's exploited subject has an inner life which appears enchanted by virtue of being withheld. 'Kept, stolen, enchanted' resonates as the colonizer's loot in addition to the subject's inner strength. No amount of economic dependence can invade her private world in the same way that:

the woman who cleans your house  
all day is in the places you cannot be,  
touches your sheets.

Baderoon implies that the colonizer or oppressor hates what is held back, namely the dispossessed's boundaryless inner self and inner thoughts. The revelation of this power was Fanon's secret.

Baderoon rigorously explores what reconciliation means in practice as her poems consider how individuals bridge long, historical, often legislated personal divisions, to know someone as she would herself. In these two words 'you hate' the reader is exposed to the tug and pull of Baderoon's father's fishing line, of resistance and protest, control and autonomy growing inside the self as a weapon of destruction to mutuality.

A similar violence implodes casually into the poem 'Terminus, 1978' (HS, 64). The terminus of the poem, with its implications of finality, was located opposite the library. The poem is simply structured, conversational, a narrative with little complexity except for specificity of observation and detail. Baderoon remembers how:

we walked through the door on the right  
to the children's section  
stared at the rows of spines,  
chose three books to stamp

into our cards and sat  
by the small wooden tables.

The reader recognizes scenes of ordinary childhood or depictions of libraries in story books. We follow an innocent child's narrative as Baderoon recounts:

one day a boy chased another boy past  
the librarians and the books and caught  
him in the corner where two shelves met.

The reader is still travelling with our imaginary of childhood, the poet's story a generic one. Rather incidentally:

The second boy stabbed the first in the eye  
and ran out of the children's library.

And the poem ends. The reader is no longer in the children's library of our memory, but in a place of unsettlement and violence. We have left the library except in so far as we have borrowed a book or read a poem whose contents recall violence, distress and disquiet in many forms and formats, or so the poet implies all the while in a conversational voice. This voice creates an ambivalent witness testimony within a conventional poetic border.

This is how it was, says Baderoon, I am simply remembering, listing the facts as they were, and as if to reiterate her next poem is entitled 'This is what I'll remember' (HS, 65–66). This tender poem carefully recalls her mother's death, 'the beauty/of sitting in the presence of dying.' Baderoon remembers:

the point where we turned  
and became open with each other  
our memories held close  
despite the fact that the cold had come  
on time (66)

Compare this with de Kok's memories which are fleshed out with grief and etched with anger and emotion contained in irregular stanzas of questions and disbelief as 'Her doctor says'<sup>33</sup>

Ask your mother now, before she's 'gone',  
So you'll know if your bones will crack.

Baderoon's meeting point is simple: engagement and openness create a place and time where solitude and inner dialogue give way to the warmth and clarity of mutuality, recognition of sharing and intimacy, while de Kok assumes the voice of the doctor to articulate her 'secret rage.' Baderoon's secret is either muted and hidden, or banished and undisclosed in the 'cold' which 'had come / on time.'

Baderoon gradually reveals her past through her parents: her father, we learn, was a tailor who 'loved to see/my mother wear the clothes he made for her' (Fit, HS, 15). She describes 'the mirror in the front room' through which 'you can see the whole room' evoking images of a familial history reflecting the past like a panoptic (16) with 'photographs of different generations, /the same shyness, the same eyes'on display (16). Baderoon asks us to see how life was lived, not inscribed in cliché or the boundaries of convention: her father is called 'pa', the man who 'sat at the head of the table / not talking at supper'<sup>34</sup> ('How not to stop,' HS, 20):

Pa drove us past the house he built  
from which his family was removed in '68,  
never looking again in its direction....  
....  
Pa rehearsed how not to stop, not to get out  
And walk to the front door he made

These last two lines convey Pa's sense of determination to hide the pain caused by the intrusion of politics into normal life, specifically the forced removals of 1968 South Africa, for the sake of the children. Marking a boundary around the year 1968 in South Africa, the poet hints at a distinct South African imaginary remote in some ways from the European and American tropes of dissent and repression arising from 1968 protests. Baderoon writes simply 'pa rehearsed how not to stop,' the repetition of

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<sup>33</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p.53

<sup>34</sup> In South Africa supper was the evening meal, usually called dinner in Australia.

‘not’ recalling restriction and enclosure. Violence<sup>35</sup> intrudes amidst the careful tenderness of tendering and growing, of carving ‘a domino set,’ of feeding the pigeons, of living. These particulars become part of a landscape that ‘is passing into language’ (‘Landscape is passing into language’ HS, 22) as places change through time. In this poem ‘Few people remember those other sounds of night/ as frogs and silence,’ rather, Baderoon implies, memory privileges the sounds of the violence of the past. Silences disappear into history and memory, private life, ‘under the knife, the skin,/the mystery of sameness’ (‘I forget to look,’ HS, 26).

Jonker sublimated her sense of maternal loss in the wrenching imagery of her everywhere mothers and children while de Kok uses the structure of her poems to disclose her emotions towards family in ironic and shifting voices. Through the differentiation of people on the basis of colour, through all the horrors that attend to legislated discrimination, Baderoon’s ‘mother looks back, her poise unmarred.’ This poise guided Baderoon with its familiarity and reassurance, her photograph ‘so familiar I forget/to look at her’. Here again it is possible to do a double reading of these lines—how despite the familiarity of daily contact between people, their familiarity precludes understanding or indeed knowing and feeling. The photograph itself has been ‘straightened’, her mother’s collar ‘discreetly’ folded. Her gaze appears as if ‘someone has called her from far away.’ This distance is symbolic of that between ‘black and white’ (the enforced social separations of the past). But we can also read into this long gaze the distance her mother created between her own inner dialogue and her external world. Like Baderoon, de Kok positions herself within objects as she remembers her father:<sup>36</sup> descriptions of his books with ‘grave truths I cannot access’ take up three eight line stanzas and a six line ending as de Kok reads ‘instead his log books’ to be directed ‘into the sky, his earlier, freer life.’ The books are personified as her father; they ‘ordered his hardwon learning / like a neat, pragmatic wife.’ Both poets develop their parents through detail, conversation and observation within tight poetic forms to move beyond memory, in some way towards a personal freedom of understanding and loss.

This distancing, or observing of oneself from afar is a theme running through Baderoon’s poems. She wishes to remember quiet moments: ‘the notes’ Keith Jarrett ‘is not playing’ (DB, 29) the ‘silence before speaking’

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<sup>35</sup> There were frequent forced removals of whole communities during apartheid.

<sup>36</sup> De Kok, *Terrestrial Things*, p.52

(‘Breath,’ HS, 33). Her observations and ruminations are always tinged with sadness as the paraphernalia of life closely worn reveal threads of the self. The poem ‘A Hundred Silences’ (HS, 49–50) is a meditation on her father tending his garden, his weeding ‘a word for being alone.’ A hundred silences frame Baderoon’s memory of her father. The poet’s evocation of a late afternoon silence with its observed distance of a hundred thoughts creates a sense of eternity, that sudden descent into the heart of stillness in which death and the endless cycle of nature overarches all ‘where the distance ends, like a sheet touching a skin’(49). Confronting death, ‘the completeness of loss, of absence without negotiation,’ Baderoon reaches for her lost pen. To write loss assumes a boundaryless freedom in Baderoon’s poems, beyond apartheid, beyond violence.

### Phillippa Yaa de Villiers

Under apartheid the nature of intimate relationships between people was legislated. To begin with, the colour you were classified was subject to scrutiny and legislation. Marriage across colour lines was outlawed by the Immorality Act as was any other form of physical relationship except in the most brutal or subscribed of ways. De Villiers was born to a white Australian mother and a black Ghanaian father (an illegal union in apartheid South Africa); as such, her parents gave her up for adoption to the white Afrikaans physical anthropologist who had classified her white so that she could be legally adopted despite her brown skin. Thus de Villiers grew up with two white Afrikaner parents who denied her skin colour. De Villiers describes her adoption as follows:

In my case they couldn't decide definitively on my race and felt that because my mother was Australian, my father was likely to be an Aborigine. In this case, they could not allow me to be adopted in South Africa because the political dispensation of apartheid believed that culture was genetic and every culture had its special strengths and weaknesses.<sup>37</sup>

Like her compatriots, de Villiers’ trajectory of life under apartheid South Africa was mapped in terms of skin colour and language spoken. She had no choice but to confront the ambiguities of living a dual life as a

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<sup>37</sup> Phillippa Yaa de Villiers. *Poets on Adoption* curated by Eileen R.Tabios (April 2011), <http://poetsonadoption.blogspot.com.au/2011/04/phillippa-yaa-de-villiers.html>, accessed 10th June 2014.

'coloured' in a white family, with the added complication of being told about her adoption at the age of twenty. She started writing poetry from early childhood. Like Jonker, de Villiers' past haunts her adulthood; while there is some similarity to their writing, de Villiers injects humour, sadness, exuberance and irony into her tone and language. De Villiers is also a performance poet, dramatist and script-writer who like Jonker, de Kok and Baderoon, has won awards for her poetry.

Both de Villiers and Baderoon observe mind and body. They write between observing and feeling, between being in and out of skin, creating those in-between places of freedom beyond violence and boundaries of the mind. Baderoon and de Kok often stand outside themselves, or write of themselves in the second person as if observing their pasts from a long distance, almost constructing photographs with words where 'time is filtered like light' (Baderoon, 'Every room has its silence,' HS, 41). De Villiers embraces her poetry as an adornment that wards off death as she seeks to be as independent as her words so that she can follow them wherever they lead. Silence takes on an uneasy echo of death in de Villiers' poetry where, unlike Baderoon, unspoken words, words buried or hidden become symbols of oppression. Words 'woven to nothing on apathy's loom'<sup>38</sup> ('A safe house is a place of fear,' EW, 54) contain 'the fragile balance of civility.' The maintenance of facades, exteriors and civility of silence creates 'a skin of fear' in the interior world of domesticity which contrasts so dramatically with the chaos and emotion that spills into the exterior public world. In all four poets relationships have soured due to enforcement of some kind and blossomed with freedom, be it of self-discovery, language, giving birth or travel. The body and pleasure become entwined with thought, as:

even if the mind forgets,  
the skin remembers:  
the organs keep a record of their guests  
(de Villiers, 'The Quiet Conversation,' EW, 76)

Skin begets skin and so as a physical presence the body is freed from the mind. This disassociation is also a means of banishing violence.

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<sup>38</sup> Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, *The Everyday Wife*, (Athlone: Modjaji Books, 2010). Further citations of this work are given in the text as EW.

Several South African poets<sup>39</sup> have remembered or acted as witness to the Sharpeville shootings in their poetry: de Villier's Sharpeville poem 'Sixty-nine bullets (for the Sharpeville 69),' (EW, 56–58) consists of a list of thoughts, memories, jottings: 'I was on my way to the shop,' begins the 69 sentences for 69 bodies reminding us that:

...death is personal  
 Very personal  
 Each death as unique as birth  
 with its own portents  
 And banalities  
 Who will fetch the baby from the crèche?  
 Who will tell my mother? (58)

De Villiers suggests that the banality of the everyday hides the portent of death. The art and literary historian Didier Maleuvre regards lists as a refusal 'to betray [their] object.'<sup>40</sup> The very objectification of naming or cataloguing prevents a discursive interpretation because the list exists 'before narrative' can arrange and create. Creating an authentic personal statement as witness to state-sanctioned violence appears to demand simplification of language as lists of experience often 'weave in and out of language'<sup>41</sup> to retain their authentic meaning. 'Sixty-nine bullets (for the Sharpeville 69)' carries the gravitas of oral history or testimony but from within the stray thoughts of victims or observers.

In her poetry, de Villiers shelters children as a mother-figure of love keeping them safe from death by inscribing them in words. Her son is her 'favourite poem' ('Origin,' EW, 20) so not surprisingly she explores the meaning of motherhood and birth as symbols of regeneration:

I don't know why  
 My body will just want to make babies  
 And clothe them in the lost sheaths  
 Of families  
 ('The Guest,' EW, 61)

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<sup>39</sup> In addition to Ingrid de Kok, Dennis Brutus, 'Sharpeville', *Poetry and Protest* ed. Lee Sustar and Aisha Karim (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), pp.95–96; Siphos Sepamla, 'I remember Sharpeville,' *Against Forgetting*, pp.728–730 and so on.

<sup>40</sup> Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.166

to replace all the children lost to violence in South Africa, lost in the poems of Jonker and de Kok. In de Villiers's depiction of Johannesburg parks the poet's structure includes line breaks in a stanza reminiscent of Jonker's rhythmic pattern in 'The child shot dead by soldiers in Nyanga':

smashed beer bottles don't give a damn  
about barefoot children. Adults, swollen with disappointment,  
sit sadly in the swings.  
(Jozi Parks, 59)

Children inherit the disappointment, the 'mistakes,' especially if they 'come uninvited' while words stand apart and 'can only witness / the greedy force of life' ('Switching on the light,' EW, 70). Words create the ideal, the 'this-ness of this,' (71) while 'language falters and your / sense is reduced to shrieks of agony' ('Getting to know yourself in Amsterdam museums,' 24). Like Jonker, de Villiers casts a passionate eye on life, her 'womb turns restlessly in its warm belly' ('The Middle Promise,' EW, 46), but death writhes amid the passion, 'mortal wisdom as a final breath, / the gift of living to the gifted dead.' Words as the shelter of the ideal take on their meaning historically: 'Even death will not separate you, for then / your story will continue in the mouths of others' ('Faithful as a shadow,' 45). The gravity of her words is offset by determination to feel and to write life.

De Villiers' memories of fishing and camping are being present *with* her father (unlike Baderoon). Her friend accompanies them: 'She's/Italian, not used to camping or the outdoors' in 'Night-fishing with Daddy'<sup>42</sup>(EW, 18) where 'we turn off the national road, bump-bump/bumping through the veld'(EW, 18). The rhythm of the car is joyful and exuberant, the identity of 'daddy' unquestioned. The poet joins in the fishing, her favourite being 'kurper and carp' and 'listen[s] to the long song of the line / as it flies over the water' (EW, 19), conscious both of her pleasure and her friend who does not join in: 'I am / mortified: she must be hating this' (EW, 10). The poet, 'worm-like,' struggles with pleasure and awareness, until she resigns herself to her fishing prowess and 'surrenders to night' (EW, 10). While Baderoon tentatively allows us into her memory of childhood which she decides to locate firmly in that place where only galjoen and yellow tail could be fished, de Villiers encloses her whole poem and her fishing memories expansively in childhood. South Africa becomes secondary to

the encapsulation of an authentic feeling of euphoria and contemplation, beyond borders of time and place. This poem's rhythmical insistence frees the line of memory while the free-verse structure surrenders to whatever is enclosed within the night of our imagination or dreams.

Confronting the ambiguities of South African violence, de Villiers also departs the boundaries of South Africa writing of the middle passage in an expressive, confronting poem redolent with history: 'Trance' (EW, 77). Here the imagery of 'white cotton-pyjamas' with the signifying stress on cotton coupled with the significance of the colour white on black is startlingly evocative:

a black man stands  
10,000 miles from his ancestors,  
in white cotton-pyjamas,  
ankle-deep in ocean whispers.

Persistent memories of violence wash ashore as 'triumphant / he exhales / another poem' (EW, 77) far from the ship or the ocean. A soothing, rhythmical repetition brings waves of words to lap gently on the shore. De Villiers suggests a resolution to years of slavery, exclusion and bondage, that of the freedom to sing a poem. She uses frequent repetition in the tradition of Jonker and de Kok. Although in free verse, her syntactical structure delivers an offering: a poem, as a surrender to words and the boundarylessness of the imagination:

The waves of the beach sing  
conquer, surrender  
conquer, surrender  
conquer, surrender

Havana becomes that sunken galleon where 'its people' are free beyond boundaries, the treasure of slaves now the treasure of free minds: shoals transform into souls, the alliteration of fish, freed and flotilla emphasizing the journey:

treasure: shoals of quick silver fish,  
once captured souls, now freed  
by the wrecking of the imperial flotilla.

Life itself is a ‘shelter,’ its very tentativeness and fragility alert to ‘the next possibility’:

I guess it can’t get better than this  
Because one can never improve on  
Freedom

(de Villiers, ‘The Guest,’ EW, 68)

Ironic freedom is still haunted by ‘demons’ including the unwanted demon-guest of death who can arrest freedom ‘in the bright of the day’ (‘Song of the dead,’ 69). The singing tone of the poem has hymn-like incantations which are reinforced by the juxtaposition of pity with the dead and the living, the precariousness of breath:

Pity the dead, their privacy made public  
By the absence  
Of their breath.  
Pity the living:  
The thin fabric of life just a tear away  
From death.

Ambiguity and gritty realism haunt the poet. Pity the living; the skin imprinted onto paper. Violence is not contained or excluded in de Villiers’ verse, exploding into lines within poems as it does into the life of the everyday child or wife or lover so that even desire becomes ‘used delight / piled up next to the wheelie bin’ (‘Chinatown,’ 14). Both Baderoon and de Villiers explore ‘love’s brief solace.’ For Baderoon this solace is gentle and private, ‘the murmur of my mother and father / in the bedroom down the passage’ (‘Primal scene,’ HS, 19), ‘the way we place hands over faces / close each other’s mouths’ (‘Out of time,’ HS, 44), a ‘chasteness to the meeting / of our two bodies in their coats’ (‘Twin beds,’ HS, 68).

For de Villiers, word becomes circumscribed by bodily reality. Sex is complicated by violence. Generalizing from the personal, de Villiers writes for women who have been violated by sex which is not neat, chaste or intimate but complicated and fraught with ruptures. Two poems confront the fear and horror of rape:

I envy women  
with the clean envelope  
of their pleated sex

unwritten on

...

Safe

(‘Envy,’ EW, 16)

The painful poem ‘Going Down There.’ (EW, 52) is a counterpoint to Jonker’s ‘Pregnant Woman:’

This is a letter scratched out at candlelight:  
I leave it for all those who are also  
confined, painfully pressed, split open.  
Those who hold themselves tightly in their hands  
so that they will not spill over  
and drain away.  
Fear eats hope like night eats day  
leaving only crumbs of stars. Too far away  
to be of any help.

I was raped at six, 11, at 13 at 17 and 19  
I didn’t know I was violated because  
where I came from  
love was forced and  
sometime hurt.  
The frail meat of humankind  
can’t stand extremes. We construct ourselves  
around ourselves, making of our lives  
a shelter.....

Facts are presented blandly again, almost as a list. Images of the many reported scenes of rape through war and violence against women are simply explained as facts of survival and experience, of lost innocence. These facts are as confronting to the reader as they are to the poet painfully writing her poem-letter ‘scratched out at candlelight’ in semi-darkness for those who ‘hold themselves tightly in their hands / so that they will not spill over / and drain away.’ The clichéd image of fear eating hope ‘like night eats day / leaving only crumbs of stars’ is undercut by cynicism, the stars are ‘too far away / to be of any help.’ While Baderon, with her controlled, regular language steady and simple as breathing, watches the water spill over as she seeks to capture the moments beyond the frame, de Villiers takes the spillage and contains it, holding herself ‘tightly in [her]

hands'. The poet becomes simply 'frail meat' unable to stand 'extremes' so that when 'compassion unlocked / the cage of memory'

words  
became light  
showing me  
how to get home

Baderoon's memories come to her like dreams. For de Villiers they are a cage; the poet's task is to

outrun your story as you tell yourself  
another story, making your own story  
by resisting the story you were given  
(‘Faithful as a shadow,’ EW, 44)

De Villiers resists the enclosing of South Africa's violence, choosing rather to honour her life –‘your life is a world / that you honour / by giving it voice’ (EW, 45): to live.

In this paper I have examined how Ingrid Jonker, Ingrid de Kok, Gabeda Baderoon and Phillippa Yaa de Villiers contain, write or witness violence by using poetic language to explore boundaries and freedom in poetry. Their syntactical variation, form, rhythm, choice and location of images write against loss and violence as a way of surviving ‘that place.’<sup>43</sup> I have suggested that a close textual reading creates a poetic immanence to sustain their words with the authenticity these poets desire above all else, to render a truth true to memory and self. Freed to place, witness or contain violence in poetic form or formlessness, there is a deliberate paradox to the boundaries these poets create or discard within their poems to escape censorship, convention and confusion while navigating their own subjectivity.

Putting aside the recurring image of the child as a symbol resonating through anti-apartheid and post-apartheid poetry,<sup>44</sup> I see signs of homage to Jonker in the poems of de Kok, Baderoon and de Villiers in the ways these

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<sup>43</sup> To gain an understanding of debates on this nomenclature see Samantha Vice, “How do I live in this strange place,” *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 41, (2010), pp. 323–342 and subsequent articles on this topic in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 30, no 4, (2011) whole issue.

<sup>44</sup> Wilkinson, ‘Re-visioning the Child.’

poets experiment with form, meaning and continuity to contain the subjective, what Jonker observed as spirited recollections of the everyday. Their poems become delicate, detailed layers of observation reminiscent of textured paintings, descriptions hiding or revealing meaning in images, rhythm and narration. Here we see witnesses holding back emotion within rhythmical lines, enclosing death and violence in small frames within formal and informal inventive poetic structures which slowly reveal authentic portraits of unease and reflection. These poems stand *within* form and formlessness *out* of that time, that place, as boundaryless explorations of freedom, notwithstanding writing as witness to state-sanctioned violence and personal loss.

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