

43 Poems

Joop Bersee

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by Joop Bersee

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*To the following, who died in detention in South Africa between 1963 and 1987,  
I dedicate this publication:*

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**Mountain**  
*for Sandy*

An oath,  
world of stones, grass, birds,  
the sky,

into a flag, song of life,  
its gorges an aria,

a soprano's voice rising and falling  
into a lake of sulphur, cutting edge,

feet of lava, throat of ice,  
rasping a lake of crystals  
into the nights interior.

A sea of lusty waters dives from its heights,  
flowers jerk in the wind; small children  
on a giant's lap, nagging.

And the clouds  
write their philosophy on its peak.

### **Unknown Child**

I will always keep my eyes on you.  
How the sun hid this darkness,  
dark hours of the wild whip,  
sticky boots and the anger of fear.

Children born and cooked under  
corrugated iron, between doors,  
lying under rocks, fists, coffins.  
Brains and AIDS, swelling up, exploding,

covering the stars with muck.  
I will always think of the twenty –  
thousand eyes and scabs growing  
in the wild, cars passing at a safe

distance from their begging hands.  
The smoke of small fires dissolving.  
The crinkling eyes of the dead.  
Clutching a few grains of sand.

**Thuthukani Ngoxolo**

The lamp and the fire.  
A purple horizon  
sinking into shades, shaggy smoke.

Quiet wires and shirts with helpless  
arms surrendering night sky.  
Drum fires warm shooting stars.

I feel skin, your pretty face move,  
the fire in your eyes,  
fire in my cupped hands.

## **Darkness is a Hammer of Raw Steel**

Cold steel whispers.  
The wind.  
They will put him in an oven,  
the drawers between his ears.

His eyebrows lit candles.  
Into the rawness of trees.  
His hands of paper.  
He will meet an angel on a tower,

climbing lightning,  
as he cries, out of Time.  
Lonely his sinking  
into bread.



## **Detonated**

Her doll faces courageously  
this wintry landscape of ceiling,  
plastered sticks and trees.

She remembers her friend running,  
after the sun went blank,  
anger shooting brown images past her.

The rain came tumbling down:  
tubes, a plastic, purple vein,  
curtains that can't hide the stage-fright,

bedpans, needles. Her sleep is thin,  
rewinding scorching bandages  
tearing through a cat's alley.

Tigers kill and cut thighs  
where thighs are no longer,  
licking listless the lost limbs.

### **Diana Princess of Wales**

Right from the beginning,  
arrow,  
you knew.  
Tense world  
under the Balmoral blanket,  
erratic bulimia triangle.

For sale and see her smile,  
waving the red carpet,  
our addiction. Raped  
her on the shelves  
of cornea,  
the whetstone.

Flashes. Glitter,  
the hunting column of hounds  
devouring,  
as we deny restlessness,  
loneliness.  
Need to destroy.

## **Snow**

Dispersed silence into countless  
fingerprints, beautiful patterns  
on a Scandinavian jersey wrapped  
in a song under a Christmas tree.  
Or, steam of an engine portrayed,  
the brushwork enlarged, scrutinised.

I shrink to the size of a dot;  
white goes for the throat, covers  
three seasons slid into a marsh  
with hair dripping: sketch of a young Yeats amidst  
laddered roots of leafless chimneys,  
factories, shattered glass.

## **She Withered**

(A stick in dry ice.)

The churning of faith. Soft.  
Exhaling mouth clearing the sky.  
Me listening, sharp, helmeted.

-       -       -

(Her bandages lay quietly in a bin,  
still the shape of her wrists, cried  
knowing what is best.)

## **Spring is Winter**

Spring is winter  
finally gone.

Buried

in an old shack, somewhere  
in the Alps.

Or it dies  
beneath the hot grass of May,  
trampled upon  
by the cows.

But somehow  
it always relives its past,

sending us back  
to our dim cellars.

## **Taxi Explosion**

The sliding door burst like a coconut.  
Money, bones amidst  
the smoking ligaments.

Fingers twitching the last seconds.  
The impact tore off.  
Their heads.

Escarpment.  
Frayed tufts in the sun,  
wet.

The heat of the day smelt  
like fresh tar of wounds  
talking, writing and waiting,

the sun stripped of its engine.  
The moon lost a few fingers.  
A few lovers.

A few trees would never  
forget their scars  
in this hand dug tunnel.

**Steve Biko**

*Steve Biko in his open coffin*

The black boat with its sunken, rent face.  
Ungracious deeds of boots.  
Dusty well.  
His frame wrapped around the last, buzzing days.

The rain comes down, silver sheets of prayer.  
Grave country. Thud in a bottom drawer.  
As the trees grow their tales  
of bloodshot splashes angry sunsets,

who'll sit with your bones  
as rivers flood our souls,  
maimed voices?

## **Old Wounds**

Boots running wild.  
Cold of heavy steel piercing.  
Blue and brown leaves falling.

My eyes silent and lonely.  
My ears disturbed, red wild.  
Stomach pushed into rot.

He can't have known the agony.  
The steel slamming into his young belly.  
The soft sponge between head and legs.

Rattling chain of horror, and death  
piercing. Father, mother.  
Organs sleeping in the sand.



## **Lies**

The last one still warm.  
Your clothes on the bedroom floor.  
You sailed my pockets,  
godless inside out,  
drank the cut off darkness,  
the only dream I had.

## **Patient**

I am so scared.  
Every night.  
Every hour of the sun.

One day  
I'll break  
my own pale face.

One day  
I will open  
the garden gate,

flowers  
following me around,  
sleeping on my name

in stone.  
I count my fingers,  
again and again, scared

they might have run away.  
I cannot stop my watch,  
ticking

shoved into my ears.  
I cannot stop  
the remains.

## **Vincent & Co**

Bristles, hair, red and yellow.  
Paint and the wheat field mongrels.  
A constant remorse and crows  
in the scheming, fermenting landscape

like a logo, design between  
a stubble field and dark blue sky.  
A promise disappeared, gone.  
He goes for a walk like a feather.

Shoots, of course, himself.

The tranquil landscape of his bedroom, 1890.  
The brother holds a candle,

permit in the other hand  
to sell the pastures of his mind,  
rake the autumnal leaves of his breath.

## **Coma**

Beneath your ebbing eyes you lie,  
green young shoots exploring  
cold and black that shoulders stars.

Are there centaurs to ride,  
horses, amidst veils, glory?  
Death must be glorious;

it is a promise to all.  
But first there is the ventilator,  
sheets of paper rolling out,

evidence written down by a sickle  
in a straightjacket, and your hands,  
the helpless hands.

A river seeks ways, a new trail,  
or old veins lost long ago, washed away,  
leaving us destitute.

Silently I drink out of a paper cup,  
crush it into the waste paper and float,  
passage after passage, to the exit.

## **Crash**

It must have looked like war:  
a burning plane falling  
out of the clear blue sky.  
Inside the instruments screamed,

their red lights flashed,  
buzzed, burned a downfall  
into the pilots' eyes, ears.  
The forest white and green was waiting

patiently, for all those suitcases,  
shirts, socks hanging from the trees,  
people, and the frightful loneliness  
of the wind whistling afterwards.

### **In Memory of my Dog Sweety**

I found the slides in a box:  
you in the running snow,  
chasing stick, blurred snowball,

something caught by the frame.  
Time, more time. But time is scarce,  
the calling, stainless steel table,

murmuring razor - a handful  
of the black, curly hair fell,  
uncovering a patch of scaly skin.

A needle sank sterile  
into its vein.  
I drove a marker, a cross

into the grave soil,  
rejoiced with the birds,  
faraway lake. Immaculate frost.

## **Circle**

Cremated. Every cell exploded  
into a fine world of dust.  
She's been added to Auschwitz,  
floats in front of the moon,  
lives inside a nightingale's chest,  
lies on a side-walk in New York,  
sweeps high over the Kalahari,  
planes drifting past,  
everywhere and nowhere to go.

**Paul Verlaine**

Light-years ahead,  
away from the bohemian life.

He flew into a galaxy,  
the voice of creation still ringing,

pain a caring hand.  
He must have noticed

Death's ear at the door,  
the scorched heart

pounding, life  
slowly slipping away,

his ears flaming,  
listening to the bony rites.



**Woody Guthrie**  
*(American songwriter)*

Seven-Eleven, McDonalds, crap and television.  
The streets are packed with dung and cars.  
The metal cattle drums filled with trash.

And the warmth of your breath in my face.  
The streetlights are stars. The empty  
bottle against my hand a moon hiking.

The shape of your body is like the shape of my wife.  
Your warmth the bodies of my children longing,  
staring, tumble dust trains.

The engine roared, singed,  
whined towards the solid pillar.

A comet of water and blood  
tore a stringy beep  
through his head, the hair

so neatly combed.

Rubber gulped the hacking air,  
glass jingled past the fires.  
Hands swirled,

danced like ballerinas.

Squirting veins  
whipped the skies  
for the very first time.

## **Entrance**

Nightfall. Owl in a tree.  
A rose on the border of long blades of grass  
leading to an empty house.  
Who's afraid

of the roar behind doors, naked glass?  
Two soldiers search the house,  
every blind corner, empty coffin  
cupboard, the lids on hinges.

Two dead pigeons in the attic.  
The grass turns to hair.  
The house opens its eyes.  
Its mouth wide and red like a flower.

## **Farms**

Calling the sodden moors.  
Knee-deep the rain in the  
punching hill, its song:  
'Let us sail, wet or else

dry', on our lips.  
The sun illuminates seed,  
gives new life to the  
shepherd, his school,

the children swimming,  
wounded, boys  
running the graveyard wall,  
seeking refuge.

**Ex**

I found your photograph. You  
swirling on an Italian square,  
not looking at the camera.

What does your horseman look like?  
Handsome. Dark.  
Seventies sunglasses.

Hungry.  
Leaning on a convertible.  
Versace labels.

It was autumn.  
We both fell out of a tree,  
like apples,

ripe.  
Ready to be picked up.

### **Her Small Wooden Car**

The evening is so far.  
He feels the rain on his bald patch.  
Black hunger of his wife in the ground.  
Her eyes burning the sky.  
His barn is full.

Glimpses of her ashes.  
Small wooden car in the ground.  
Selling lettuce.  
Carrots growing towards the land.  
To the larvae walking in their boots.

**John Belsuhi**

*(American actor, d. 1982)*

Just a monument for deeds of blood,  
the flowers of his neck, to hell with  
overstating it. This parcel of life,  
cobwebbed icon, the wounded end hanging  
out (we'll catch sight of more) asks you  
to join him, and you're not only supposed  
to read about the triumphs; only a  
simple sheet remained, not too far away.  
Guns of eyes held him under cover, a gate-  
jerking blast, bending his knees, you  
have reached me, even now, lighter than body,  
lighter than rubbing, vagueness, under grass.

## **In Memory of Ted Hughes (1930-1998)**

### **I**

The dropping tied carried him  
on a raft of tree trunks.  
A frayed, white flag hanging limp  
beneath the fringe of a tree on the beach,  
pale twigs burning the night.  
A black curtain burning.  
Two silver coins covered the foundered eyes,  
two silver moons.  
The journey towards the potters' wheel had begun,  
between anvil and evil of landscape.  
Away from the pursuing dogs on the moor.  
Explosives buried deep inside  
the safety of their rib-cages.

### **II**

The shouldered box traveled twice,  
nail-heads and showroom polished wood,  
through the somber aisle,  
the hatch for good, death of Time.  
Black Shoe, horizontal descent.  
Starless plot with its harsh,  
rocky, Devon winters, pale  
thoughts caught in a morass.  
Prism of dreams.  
The astonishment at the news  
of your emptied crawl to peace.  
The frozen star in the north  
fell into an open ear. Drips from  
monuments of seed and soil.

### **III**

Ushered into this Druid of ground,  
bottom of the revolving well.  
Tonight is our first night.



Your feet in the soil.  
Before sunrise this world spinning  
has forgotten all about it.  
The world drowns gently,  
fingers exploring your inside out,  
every inch of grin, constellation.  
Mother earth rinses her pearls  
in the vastness of her mist,  
the opened vagrant receiving.

#### IV

A man in his grave,  
in the crack beside the hedge,  
the sheep, the fat maggots.  
Death became flesh.  
Carcass of soil.  
Ambush of Time.

The decades of unearthing, carving,  
until your own ship bogged down.  
Figure-head first into the mud.  
The first winter will white cover tracks,  
dark mascara of hollow eyes.

Spring,  
clothed in lamb, the smell of blood and  
back-end, thawed church steeples,  
will return, you in its stride.  
Every season.  
Row of bone pale rings.  
A row of rusty rings drips  
slowly into the mound.  
Secret, poisonous rivers swallow dark  
gurgling oily waters. The skin turns sour,  
anatomy turns to sticks. And it is just hands at  
the bottom of the well, the sky  
pins and needles at night,  
illiterate, flickering dots of ice.  
His face depletes into nightmare,  
two dimensional.

#### V

Earth voices whisper dying cut flowers.  
Warm rumours rain out of the black,  
drip down my shoulders,

comforting.

## VI

He lies deep into my idea of moon,  
high up in my head, motionless prayer.  
Hibernating in the dead of winter.

He adds to bricks of ancient buildings.  
Remains. Boulders. Stonehenge seems fair.  
But its bones have been suckled dry, infertile.

You are still on the graveyard wall,  
being supple, contemplating, skimming  
the new surface. Touching my blood vessels.

You have linked with your Devon dreamland,  
two spacecraft docking, the pulsating  
spines on my bookshelves. Headstones.

## **Sylvia Plath**

The walls, tools on the shelves  
are grey with dust. Hands put  
hammer and chisel down. The stone is  
finished, the road closed,  
the garden stiffened.

She must have tried  
to kick the deaf-and-dumb flow  
that carried her away, invalidating  
the note on the kitchen table,  
call so-and-so.

Once it quenched her wound  
it formed a heavy cloud, curved  
like a hand over  
the sculptured face,  
caressing a loss.

### **Soldier**

He is scared but used to it,  
like a banker to stress;  
a tree, hole in the ground  
can finish him in seconds flat.

Letters from home, only two the  
last two-and-half years, are  
charred by his worn hands, he's tired  
of collecting faces for his brain,

pounding nightmares, the horrors  
of a sweating, quiet staring moon.  
He's sick of being the spilling breed.  
His unlit song moves on its stem.

Smoky hands hold the crying night.  
Deep wounds of shade in the bushes.  
Children run empty Coke bottles.  
The crash of a distorted bird nearby.

Pearls of wine sink  
into the hard teeth of green glass.  
Mister man roars his fists  
as approaching woman, child, children,

the whores with their wings like bats  
try to tie him to a swaying planet.  
Needles in her eyes and the broken  
fruit of her face falling, running.

### **Being in Love**

Is trying to stop the  
fast running river.  
Honeymoon is biscuits and coke,

till midnight adheres to  
golden root and soil.  
Then love turns grey, has supper.  
Two people get undressed:  
clothing in the cupboards unseen.  
Scab on a windfall.

## **Village**

Eighteen disfigured children.  
Seven fingers, eight daughters.  
Followed by the staring, missing limbs

of the harmless villagers,  
another platoon marches past  
over the dusty, sunburned roads.

Their guns are satisfied; their holes  
rest in the chests of sons,  
like cattle -

endless rows of swords  
stab the land that wails  
like sirens gone mad.

The fly invested horizon cries vultures,  
hopping, dancing, their beaks  
deep into this wonderful feast.

And not too far away a machine gun rattles  
more food, a piece of bread  
into thin air.

### **Buried Stones**

Buried stones are like hands.  
The veins vacant, a cold hook.

Hair grows in the thickness of black,  
the bones sliding into a tar.

Death is upon your shoulders.  
You open the door, the listless tabernacle.

The condor does the rest, the  
unseeing, unpretentious eye-lids.

Their beaks flame, rock  
like saw-bones into the lined soil.



## **Titanic**

Dark ship lightning, soft mocker.  
Your roaming pistons came closer.  
And waterfall skin astonished,  
knelt to the kiss of the river,  
rising dead at both ends. No time  
to forgive a moment. Just the  
grandeur of a mouse in the straw,  
shadows of goodbye, a handkerchief,  
and the brooding valuables,  
shape of the deep in their eyes,  
reality split apart. Dry bones!  
Oak-bone, banister, where is  
the soft-mouthed life, the now and always?  
You love, and I. Wakeful they die.

## **Wolves**

Limbs and Death's back-bone snapped.  
Dripping brains dragged out of jail.

Now the universe is caught inside  
the emptied rib-cage.

Millions of stars weeping and crawling.  
Hymns of birds, dreory\*.

A translucent freeze-dried moon navel  
creeps howling into eye white.

*\* Old English meaning 'dripping with blood'*

As we all know, this continent  
hasn't got tentacles but rubbery  
trees, bark leaking into vegetable  
tins wounded by the many rusty  
nails that pierced them.

Father mother brother sister  
the white human hunting  
books, and the black human chained  
to his dowry.  
Both sniffing, a small red whirlwind of dust  
covering this red earth,

not knowing, not knowing  
covered in voodoo, cloth and words.  
The fire of knifed weeds, fire sold.

### **A Sudden Silence Like A Stupor**

Why do the stars pick me  
to write about death,  
shelves filled with pain, anxiety  
still to come? As I walk  
I can feel the leaves, branches  
touch my face, my feet crushing  
sticks, the living and the dead.  
The flag lowered, sucked into  
the ground by roots, eyes, forgotten hands.  
The well that I see is not really  
there. I circle around it.  
It moves.

## **Wolves**

The night is approaching the frozen landscape;  
stars in their pale, agonizing colours,  
the raw, wintry, fallen lake,  
pine trees in their hungry rows.  
The slow snowing darkness clicks a switch;  
the machinery of wolves is coming alive,  
the empty stomachs wretched,  
bitten by the long nights  
of standing over a frozen carcass.  
They stretch their anguished voices,  
sing their prayers into the moon,  
to their fathers in the holy ground,  
still alive in the flesh of their cubs,  
asking for a new fury.

*for all these*

It is my forty-second birthday  
and a part of me 'excuse me' if  
it isn't time to say goodbye, to  
separate from birth and tension.

A drawer opens and my sky old face,  
all cloud and cotton wool, speaks and asks  
if it isn't time to rest the roots,  
with the belly in the bulging sand.

But the blind and mute will carve my headstone,  
potatoes rotting in the ground, swine  
and the pearly sweat. So much to do;

tents burned to the ground, battlefield,  
black and white photographs of a place  
where privileges have disappeared.

## **Christmas 2000**

The night froze the desert white,  
ploughing the parched hills, ditches,  
the skin of three kings on their  
thrones of camel, weary from  
the long and sandy journey.

The star of Bethlehem hung  
like a cross between frontiers,  
a silver pitchfork digging  
up the stars, more, more wrinkles.  
Six eyes sucked it in, no wind.

Close by, a flock of sheep had  
an encounter with Mary,  
her baby, seeking shelter.  
The child found his manger,  
the prickly straw, the cord cut.

The monarchs heard the voice of  
the small boy, crying in the  
middle of the light, his fine,  
dark face, steaming ox and rain.  
Soon he would walk and talk, follow

and be followed to the outskirts  
where they would sing hosanna,  
praise him and the streaming sword  
of his eyes and mouth aflame.  
The kings uttered their praise

with slippery palms: he would  
reign as bright as the star, sun  
clearing the white clouds. But first,  
there were steel bars and strong walls.  
The hate of law and order beat him

on the head, spat, kicked his face,  
mocked him, blood weaving

a martyr's crown, bitter cup,  
until they took flesh and bone:  
'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?'

that is, 'My fatherland, why  
do you kill your own children?',  
a shrapnel of star stripping  
the blunt flesh, white sticks and blood.  
He died in police custody.



## **The End**

It's a place with feathers.  
Birds and black sweating.

The sky broke out in a pale rash.  
Who the hell cares

the world  
when you're dying?

The lid was not closed,  
the ugliness of sadness,

waste of life.  
Sand touched my face.

Magic!  
Their mouths gazing.

Pale moon.  
No fear.

Shadows.  
The courage of small flowers.

### **The River Flows**

I see the bleeding hearts.  
How they kick and take  
you and me as they own  
this decaying still life,

starchy building stuffed with rot.  
The elevator broke down a year  
after the '94 elections.  
The emergency exit a wooden ladder.

Red bucket with sand.  
In two streets, in this town,  
we removed the splattered  
remains of a chance in a million,

(barely enough to fill a babe's mouth),  
our never coming back. Huge  
net of flesh and bone, splinters.  
And hung up a new rubbish bin.