

the breath in live blades  
 the pulse of our wind  
 altogether ours

when some say mine mine mine  
 say I beg, beg your pardon,  
 nay ours ours  
 remember our sweat  
 too is ours  
 dead people's sweat  
 we will not forget  
 when we still bleed  
 our pain also pours  
 ours the scattered grains  
 to cement  
 to build  
 and to build over.

Amen. Five times – differing melodies,  
 the last deep in the throat and the chest – husky,  
 positive.

Amen? Johannesburg is the child of 'Soweto'. Aah! Amen Stranger!

Don't be alarmed at such an umbilical existence. The reverse of the question would be more appropriate to answer but since a child of 'Soweto' significantly differs from a Johannesburg darling we shall again ask the question direct: Where is Johannesburg without 'Soweto'? If the cemetery suggests itself, blame it on the gold deposited below the earth we trample.

Without Johannesburg, Soweto lives and dies. Dies as South Western Township, dies as dependence and gold. Lives as full humanity, peoplehood! Ours.

Amen. So be it.  
 This will be.

## DANIEL MANDISHONA

### A wasted land

Uncle Nicholas came back from England after the war in January 1981. He spent the entire fourteen hours that the journey lasted trussed up in a straitjacket between two burly cabin crew. On arrival at the airport he was met by a four-car police escort and taken straight to the psychiatric unit at Harare Hospital. For his waiting relatives, most of whom had not seen him for twenty-five years, it was a traumatic homecoming.

I had been born in his absence and only knew him from a sepia-edged black and white photograph which he had sent to my father on his arrival. It was of him and a friend standing ankle-deep in fresh snow with pigeons perched on their heads and arms. Throughout most of my childhood my memory of him consisted of that hazy, unsatisfactory likeness that was twenty years out of date. Yet it told me nothing about his behavioural quirks: how he talked, how he walked, how he laughed; whether he drank or smoked. In short, I could not visualise the whole without knowing its parts.

When he killed himself in March 1982 by cutting his wrists, all I was left with were confused memories of weekly visits to the hospital bed of a druggy and pathetic old man, who soiled himself and had to be chained to the bed posts to curtail the intermittent orgies of self-inflicted violence provoked by deep bouts of melancholy. It was an inescapable yet poignant irony that he had gone overseas to better himself, not to come back in disgrace to swell the ranks of burned-out, unhinged 'been-tos' with minds contaminated by too much learning.

For the last eight years of his exile he had stopped writing altogether. My father wrote to him regularly but in the end stopped because all his letters were returned saying there was no such person known at that address. Nobody knew what Uncle Nicholas was doing or where

he was doing it. Eventually, it seemed, nobody cared much. We knew he was still alive because he sent the occasional Christmas card, and sometimes we went to the post office to collect boxes of second-hand clothes he bought at street markets. When my paternal grandmother died he did not know about it until my father sent a message with a woman who had won a British Council scholarship to study pharmacy at the same college that was Uncle Nicholas's last known abode.

Up to this day nobody knows why he went mad, or why in the end he thought it necessary to take his own life. His madness gradually got worse and in the end, out of sheer desperation, Father had to take him out of the hospital and put him into the care of a traditional witchdoctor. At night he hardly slept, consumed as he was by terrifying nightmares in which he was pursued by the demons that had taken up residence in his unhinged mind and so corrupted his language that all he was capable of was a dialect of carnal profanities. He slept a lot, ate very little and soon managed to reduce himself to a gaunt mass of bones.

The witchdoctor left one rainy night and never came back.



Later on we were to learn – through unsubstantiated rumour, naturally – that after completing his studies he had moved on to Manchester, taken an English wife, and fathered several children. The story was all the more incredible because in Rhodesia he was still married to my Aunt Emily, with whom he had three grown-up children. Another rumour, from a different source, said he had subsequently spent six years in a British jail for wife-battery and child-abuse. This seemed to explain his long silence in the middle of the 70s. When he came out his wife had the marriage annulled on the grounds of his cruelty. She sought a court order that prevented him from seeing his own children. He foolishly threatened to kill her and got himself deported. Those who had nothing better to do than speculate about the reasons for his madness identified the woman's callousness as the pebble that dislodged the avalanche of derangement that finally overwhelmed him.

Sometimes I would look at that old black and white photograph, which my father had relegated from pride of place in the living room to

the back of his bedroom door, and wonder how such a brilliant and gifted man could have been capable of the cruelties that were alleged of him. Yet it is quite often said that the calmest features hide the most scheming minds. In the early years my father made sure that everybody in the street and beyond knew that his 'kid brother' Nicholas Musoni – the precociously gifted former herd-boy who wrote prize-winning essays on the Pioneer Column and the Great Trek and the Battle of Blood River – was studying clinical pharmacology at the University of London; that when he completed his doctorate he would be the first indigenous black Rhodesian to hold such a qualification. On most occasions the boast was met by politely bemused blank stares: Pharmacology? – was it something to do with farming, perhaps . . . ? Father's simplified explanation was to tell people that Uncle Nicholas was learning how to make Cafenol and Disprin.

Yes, Uncle Nicholas, even though he might not have not known it himself, was a man on the verge of creating momentous history.

But in the days after Uncle Nicholas's death and before his own suicide my father rarely talked about him. When he did he no longer referred to him as 'my kid brother' but as 'that unfortunate brother of mine'. It was almost as if he felt that by propagating this subtle but unbrotherly denunciation he could distance himself from the accusatory fingers that were looking for somewhere to point. He after all had been the instigator of Uncle Nicholas's decision to study abroad. In truth, there had been nowhere for him to go after he had been expelled from the University of Rhodesia for his political activities. The letters he wrote in his first year abroad were all opened by the Special Branch before they were delivered, usually a good month from the date of the postmark. Once, we even got a Christmas card from him a week before Easter.

Despite the fact that he was thousands of miles away in England, Uncle Nicholas was as much a victim of the war as us who were right there in the middle of the bloody conflict. Wars claim their victims in many different ways. They have tentacles that reach beyond the definable violence of battlefields and muddy trenches. They continue to claim casualties long after the physical wounds of shrapnel and gunfire have healed. There is no doubt in my mind that the enforced exile that alienated Uncle Nicholas played a crucial part in his illness.

As the doctors at the hospital told Father the day they discharged him, there was nothing physically wrong with him. Whatever he had was all in his head. He was much too young when he left for London. Too young and too inexperienced to cope with the exhilarating freedoms of his new world; a world that was so different from the one he had left behind.

I was ten when the war started and twenty-one when it ended. In between I lost most of my youth and some of my best friends. Ishmael, Garikayi, Kingston, Jabulani, Abednigo. These were people I had known since childhood without realising that they harboured grudges far deeper than mine. When they were all killed on the same night trying to cross the Mozambique/Rhodesia border I felt cheated and angry because they had left me out of their doomed plan. And yet I also knew that had they invited me to join I would have found a reason for not going. I was simply not strong enough, or perhaps I was just a coward.

The first time I realised there was a war on was when some of Father's people came down from the villages and vowed never to return. Before that I had always thought of the war as something that happened to other people – like freak accidents, natural disasters and fatal diseases. These people from operational area villages spoke of landmines and dusk-to-dawn curfews; of the mangled corpses of civilians 'caught in cross-fire' and of road blocks manned by sadistic soldiers; of stealthy midnight air-raids that dropped bombs that peeled off skin and burnt the flesh to the bone. Raids that flattened whole villages and filled orphanages with children who would grow up without ever knowing who their parents were or what they looked like.

The country was a wasteland of pain and heartache. Events were happening much too fast for them to be seen as anything other than an incoherent jumble of random circumstances that rolled headlong into each other, cartwheeling towards even worse disasters. The conflict became an indecisive tussle of divergent wills; of peripheral battles vying to influence an outcome that was already decided.

The violence was the worst part.

It so bludgeoned our senses that in the end we became immune to it, like a tired horse that can no longer respond to the stinging pain of the jockey's whip. Each passing day I watched my mother grow old with the violence; embittered, disconsolate, unforgiving. For it was a violence that encapsulated in its obscene wholeness the disarray that military confrontation breeds. The nationalist politicians indulged in ritualised displays of reciprocal insults that only served as a tool for the unsympathetic press to explore the dark depths of their ignorance. They waved militant placards and when on television droned on and on and on like demented sleep-talkers. They proclaimed a fragile unity yet the only thing they had in common, like travellers on the same road, was the destination – not the means of getting there nor the best course to take.

They were an assortment of vainglorious misfits stultified by a communal dearth of intellect. They were men of many promises but few deeds, each pulling in his own direction, each vying to impose his own will. Their speeches were long on emotion and rhetoric but short on ideas. They talked unrealistically of dismantling by proletarian revolution a political system that had been in place for over a century. A political order that was so deeply rooted in the very fabric of the society it had created that it could only be destroyed at considerable expense to the society itself.

The nationalist politicians and the government were like a parasite and its host animal who need each other because of the mutual benefit of an otherwise harmful co-existence. They talked and talked and got nowhere. We listened to both of them, hoping some day they would remove their blinkers and start to make sense. We could see that their promised land would be a tainted utopia, a paradise of emptiness. Yet somehow we listened to them and followed them like columns of compliant somnambulists to the edge of the chasm. Perhaps we were naive to do so, but the situation dictated a response fashioned not by reason but by impulse: the impulse of survival. After the war the same people were to swiftly change sides and stand on rostrums and claim credit for a victory that everybody knew was not theirs.

It is truly amazing how expediency can make people have different memories of the same thing.

I remember going to the funerals of relatives who broke one curfew too many and ended up riddled with bullets in dusty roadside ditches.

We lived in Bindura at the time. It was an old colonial house; so old that sometimes when it rained the walls shook and the windows rattled and the zinc roof produced the most astounding din. Each night we arranged cups and saucers and buckets on the floor to catch the new leaks. We spent many Christmases huddled by the fire in the front room, roasting peanuts and mice to while away the tedium of long slow nights. By staying up late and waking early we sustained the illusion that the days were long and the nights short. Our mother told us stories of her own childhood, growing up in a country that would perhaps be irrevocably lost to us. When we went to bed we pressed our ears hard against the walls and listened to the thunder-roll of gun-battles raging in valleys full of ghost towns long deserted by all sane people. In the long silences that followed sporadic lulls in hostilities our lives were full of fear and uncertainty. Yet even the silence had its own smells; its own ghostly cadences that hung to every long moment.

We celebrated New Year's Eve wondering how many of us would make it through the horrors of the next twelve months. We watched army helicopters gliding like sinister dragonflies on daily manoeuvres to flush out the unseen enemy, rotors swirling in the haze, flattening the grass. Our race-fixated masters had us by the scruff of the neck and they would not let go. Having shut the outside world out – and us in – they were, like caged animals in a zoo, the undisputed masters of their insular kingdom.

Even before Uncle Nicholas's death, we all knew that Father's businesses weren't doing too well. We knew he couldn't get supplies for the two grocery shops that provided our livelihood. The truck drivers, understandably, had reservations about driving along roads that took them through the treacherous terrain of the war zone. There was a fortnightly army convoy that came our way but the supplies, when they arrived, ran out in three or four days. The few drivers who dared drive through the operational areas at night demanded exorbitant payments of 'danger money'. After all, they said, they were risking life and limb.

It did not matter that they were on the same side as the guerillas. Landmines and bazookas were colour-blind.

He was a proud man, my father. Perhaps it was this unfortunate tribal trait that fostered within his stubborn head a self-deluding and dangerous overestimation of his own capabilities. He soon found himself, indefatigable optimist that he was, marooned alone in a sea of chronic pessimism. Beleaguered and yet stoically heroic, he dealt with the considerable strain of his fluctuating fortunes by calmly playing down his many failures and exaggerating the few successes. My mother worried constantly about him, for she had known him far too long to be fooled by the elaborate masquerade of normality with which he sought to hide his quite substantial anxieties.

Yet within his bounteous heart he harboured humanitarian sympathies that went beyond the call of duty. People came down from the villages and he was sufficiently moved by their plight to unselfishly borrow money and help them start new lives away from the incessant boom of guns and mortar shells. But in the end he became a victim of his own exemplary altruism. People simply took advantage of him.

When the war intensified the supplies stopped altogether. A convoy was ambushed near Devil's Hill and fifteen Rhodesian army soldiers killed. So our side was winning the war, but at what cost? The shops had row upon row of empty shelves as business slackened considerably. There was no bread, sugar, eggs, soap, salt, milk, butter. In fact, there was nothing. Disgruntled regulars took their custom elsewhere. The point was soon reached where the monthly lease repayments on the buildings far exceeded the profits the businesses themselves were making. The three girls Father employed, distant cousins brought in as a favour after special pleading from their parents who were worried that continued unemployment might lead them into premature motherhood, were now threatening to take their erstwhile benefactor to court for non-payment of wages. They appreciated their employer's plight but insisted that their own difficulties were now just as pressing.

One afternoon an unmarked van from Zimbabwe Furnitures arrived to cart away our threadbare living room suite. Mother told prying neighbours that it was going back to be reupholstered. She too had started telling little lies to maintain the family's good name. That night she sat alone by the fire and cried herself to sleep. We sold things in

the house so Father could pay off his debts. He said his insolvency was a temporary hiccup; a minor occupational blip he would soon overcome. But by then I think even he knew that he was fooling no one. He had to borrow money off one loan shark to pay off another. It became an endless spiral of debt. Sometimes he spent hours in the shops and came back bleary-eyed and pensive. He was a broken man.

I hated the war for what it was doing to him, and what it was making him do to us.

On the day of Uncle Nicholas's funeral Father had to go to court again. One of his unpaid creditors had run out of patience and sympathy and issued a writ. The funeral itself was delayed because of heavy seasonal rain. They put the coffin in the living room with its top open and the body garlanded by flowers. There was a heavy, overpowering scent in the air. I went in alone and stared at Uncle Nicholas's dead mad face. It was smooth, like a chiselled slab of pasty grey skin. The facial muscles had been frozen into a rigid, lopsided snarl that gave his normally pious features the appearance of a petrified gargoyle. His hands were clasped across his chest as if in prayer, the cuffs of his favourite shirt judiciously covering the wrists he had slashed with the bread knife.

His eldest daughter, Michelle, had arrived unannounced from Manchester the previous day for the funeral. She exhausted herself being friendly to the point of sycophancy with everybody she spoke to but it was all in vain. Aunt Emily, Uncle Nicholas's widow, had made sure that the girl would feel unwelcome by shamelessly orchestrating a verbal boycott directed at her and her white boyfriend. Most of the people Michelle spoke to spoke back in Shona even though they knew fully well that she was a stranger to both the country and its language. I felt sorry for her, yet at the same time I was also ashamed at allowing myself to be party to such a disgraceful conspiracy. But Aunt Emily had made it known, quite emphatically, that she held the girl's mother solely responsible for my uncle's fatal madness. It was an unfair charge but Aunt Emily had always been inclined towards mindless vindictiveness.

Outside the house women in black veils stood patiently on the deep veranda. Some sang hymns, others chatted about the continuing drought. The men held subdued conversations that centred on the estate of the departed man. By mid-afternoon Father had still not returned. The rain by that time had stopped. A straggly rainbow appeared on the edge of the sky but its colours were not quite right; they were frayed and indistinct. My left eye had an autonomous twitch that portended unfavourable news. The rain stopped an hour later and the hearse arrived to lead the procession to the cemetery.

My father had still not returned.

Bernard . . . Run to the shop, said my mother, and phone the court to see what has happened to your father. We cannot bury his brother without him there . . .

I took the shop keys and dashed off to the smaller of the two grocery shops. There was a telephone in a back office which Father used to ring up the Mount Darwin Indian wholesalers who supplied most of his stock. And that was where I found him, slumped across the counter with his wrists cut and his shirtsleeves drenched in brilliant splashes of clotted blood. He was surrounded by unpaid invoices and court summonses. He had been drinking heavily. Several bottles of Bols brandy were on the floor. The Chinese doctor who came from Bindura Hospital said he had been dead for four or five hours at least. There was a bottle of rat poison by his side, long opened but still emitting a faint pungent odour. He had drunk that too. Your father must have really wanted to die, said the doctor, making his astute observation sound as if it was a compliment.

The time of death coincided with the time he had left the house. I knew then that he had never intended to go to the court. That evening I went back to the shop and removed all the court summonses I could find from the office and burnt them in the backyard. I did not think it

either fair or necessary for my mother's heartbreak to be compounded by the revelation that our comfortable lifestyle had been fraudulently financed.

The judge declared him a bankrupt in his absence and ordered sequestration of all movable assets. All the court cases against him were dropped because there was nobody to prosecute. Bailiffs arrived over the next few days to apportion the remaining things in the shops and the house to pay off his creditors. They literally left us in the clothes we were standing in. Mother had to borrow money from relatives to pay for the funeral. Michelle came to tell us that she had booked into a cheaper motel and would be staying for the second funeral. Mother was so touched by this gesture that she dropped her pretended hostility and even invited Michelle and her boyfriend to a meal. But they never came. When I went to their motel I was told they had left urgently. I wrote her a letter, speculatively using one of Uncle Nicholas's old addresses, but it came back saying there was no such person known at that address.

We moved house after that but we could not erase the memory of Father's death. One cannot rid a room of its bad associations by rearranging the furniture. Father died in April 1981, exactly a year after Independence. Those debts accumulated during the war proved too much even for a man of his resilience. Like Uncle Nicholas and so many others, he survived the war only to die of its effects when the peace arrived.

MIA COUTO

## The birds of God

Begging your pardon, I don't know anything more like a pilgrim than the river. The waves pass by on a journey which has no end. For how long has it been water's job to do that? Alone in his old dugout, Ernesto Timba measured his life. At the age of twelve he had entered the school of pulling fish from the water. Ever in the waft of the current, his shadow had reflected the laws of the river dweller for the last thirty years. And what was it all for? Drought had exhausted the earth, the seeds were not fulfilling their promise. When he returned from fishing, he had nothing to defend himself from his wife and children, who impaled him with their eyes. Eyes like those of a dog, he was loath to admit, but the truth is that hunger makes men like animals.

While he contemplated his suffering, Timba made his craft glide slowly along. Under the *mafurreira* tree, there on the bank where the river narrows, he brought the boat to rest so that he might drive away his sad thoughts. He allowed his paddle to nibble the water and the dugout clung to the stillness. But he could not stop his thoughts:

*'What life have I lived? Water, water, just nothing else.'*

As it rocked to and fro, the dugout caused his anguish to multiply.

*'One day they'll fish me out of the water, swallowed up by the river.'*

He foresaw his wife and children watching him being pulled from the mud, and it was as if the roots of the water were being torn up.

Overhead, the *mafurreira* retained the sun's fierce dispatch. But Timba wasn't listening to the tree, his eyes were peeping into his soul. And it was as if they were blind, for pain is a dust which drains light away. Still higher above, morning called and he caught the smell of the intense blue.

*'If only I belonged to the sky,'* he sighed.