



BREYTEN BREYTENBACH

Intimate Stranger

A WRITING BOOK

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To Ms Reader

“The inside is just the otherside
of the outside, but it’s also
a different place altogether.”

A. NADER, *Notes on Love*

“Umlomo yisihlangu sokuzvikela”
(The mouth is the shield to protect oneself)

XHOSA SAYING

“Mimo, chitatel’, mimo!”
(Wrong, reader, wrong!)

VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Lips to Lips*

Intimate Stranger

PRE-WORD

the older you become the more silent you are
outside in morning sun
light over one shoulder
you read in the book
a knapsack for the night
the wisdom of all uncertainties
(oh, the showdown of the word!)

through heavens the pink hot-air balloon drifts
with tongue of stalking fire
on its way to mountains
you don't hear
and later cicadas go murmur-murmur
to stitch and hem heat's silences with shadows

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the hunter's fire-stick barks
in the hill of the fox
and the boar and the frog and the rabbit
so rapidly death jumps up
with mute cry
of life's anguish flared in eyes
soon to fade

you cock an ear now
the world no longer revolves round
the long dance of life with wife
with child with choir of words
with old dog patiently watching the yard
until you are ripe enough to eat –
everything wonderful
white and merciful
to lose

listen, there's a small bird somewhere
between pewit and quail
with duskfall it shoots
two thousand meters high
into the shuttered sky

to while and hood and wink
and wing away
the night on the wind
for its legs are too weak
to sleep on earth
and sometimes it never turns back

I don't understand it either

tonight with moon against slope of darkness
a cold stone cheek
you look into the mirror appearances
of uncertain eternities
and see the sheet
a knapsack of day
the rictus of the old word-fool

and slip away in ashes of duration
and the dog's noise of blackness
to lip-touch the nothing-eye stillness-lie
as pre-word prayer to whiteness

POETRY IS THE BREATH OF AWARENESS

“However much you feed a wolf, it always looks to the forest. We are all wolves in the dense forest of Eternity.” This was written by the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, the man said softly as he stroked the silver fur of the animal crouched in his arms. The animal pricked up its ears, then strained to look back at the dark copse of trees where shadows moved as if alive. As if alive and waiting to move out into the open.

Listen, this process called poetry is an exercise in imagining memory, and then having that memory snare and cherish imagination. Yet, every poem is and will be a capsule of territory in the perpetual *present tense*, a vessel taking on the ever-changing colors of the sea.

Poetry is the breath of awareness and the breathing thereof. I even mean this literally, for underlying the flow and the fall of verses are ‘natural units’ of consciousness sculpted by rhythm, by recall, by movement reaching for the edges of meaning and of darkness. One could illustrate by averring that the poem is a membrane, rippling, thrumming; reminding us that we are breathing organisms continually translating the space around us, continually translating ourselves into spaces of the known and thus drawing circumferences around locations of the unknown. From this one could extrapolate that the practice and process of remembering /evoking /awakening events and our selves lead quite naturally to questioning the polarities of other and I, to writing (and un-writing) the self, and toward rewriting the world. The boat changes the water.

Poetry is also the wind of time and thus the movement and singing of being. An old poet friend of mine – now coming to the end of his life and cold to dying, the earth lurching under his unsteady tread as he hides his eyes behind tinted glasses to soften the glaring (maybe the gloating) look of Dog Death sniffing closer – told me the other day that whatever memory and understanding he has of himself, of the route and the roads traveled, of seas navigated, of big H history, he knows through the resonance of a clutch of poems.

“If we want to know what it felt like to be alive at any given moment in the long odyssey of the race, it is to poetry we must turn.” (Stanley Kunitz)

For when you hold a poem to your ear you hear the deep-sound, the movements we are part of, conveying not so much a literal meaning as an existential sense. It constitutes the spinal chord of remembering. And it reminds us that remembering is movement.

Yehuda Amichai once claimed that poetry was the last art form meant for the single human voice to communicate in a totally free fashion across boundaries of tongue and of time. Nothing could be more personal and nothing could be more selfless. It may be described as a Way of Telling (off) the Self. He might as well have added that it is also the first form, the most ancient chant of daybreak, fragile and indestructible. It conveys no power (except the non-power of freedom and free-fall); it normally doesn't give access to privilege or to status. *Alles van waarde is weerloos*, the Dutch poet, Lucebert, wrote. “Everything of value is defenseless.” And the defenseless should be held cupped in the heart.

Over the ages contexts fade to a palimpsest, references become interpreted to an utter corruption of the original intention, the religion within which the poem lived like a fish in its ocean or bathtub of unsolicited understanding will have

disappeared, the music to which it was set no longer exists – and yet this *thing*, this harmless but explosive mining metaphor and tool tracing the texture of living, this frail bark – the poem – comes to us down the ages in an instantly recognizable shape. As drunken boat. I am the beloved addressed by Li Bai in his Middle Kingdom lament all of these many centuries ago; the deep-sound comes to me through the mutation of a tongue of languages. The poem survives unadulterated because poetry partakes of the *how* it is to be alive, not the *because* or the *therefore*.

It is, always, a homage to all those alive at the time of reading it – written in the *possible tense*, not the past or the future imperfect, but the perpetual might-be: when it functions fully it will bring a tongue-exciting beauty and appear as effortless as water seeming in a well. And curiously, it is as always an epitaph, drenched and darkened by an inkling (and inking) of death as certain and as enlightening as dawn; it will be water smoothed by wind which came from nowhere, waiting to be drawn by Charon's oar. And the *voice* will remain encapsulated in its form the way wind is born from nothing. The poem is crypt, or just a hollow in the ground, where the swaddled remains of rot-darkening flesh has long since perished but where the voice is kept alive. The poem is the phone booth of the ancestors.

Poem is process. Of course it is also a product: the budding of a moment in time defined by whatever environment and sensitivities hold sway when it comes into being. The poem is thing indeed – one should never underestimate its thing-ness. But then, I'd submit that thing *is* process. That is why I say it is written in the possible tense, because it is a take in progress, a visible and audible mouthing of the combat against death and nothingness, and a statement (or station) in becoming.

Can one be known, identified, pointed out as 'poet'? The function, as old as rocks, is there for all to see. The poet dances with the void as partner. S/he is a shaman, a priest – if you'll admit that priests fornicate, lie, pilfer, and can be hopelessly politically incorrect. Naturally, Reader-Poet, I cannot vouch for your priestly fornication, I have not smelled the hem of your dress, but I would wish that political incorrectness (maybe 'insubordination' is a closer term) – in other words, the rage to remain consciously and critically alive with all senses alert and true to the shifting light – would find in you a proud protagonist.

In Afrikaans the shaman would be *sieketrooster*; *wondmeester*; *genesbeer* – meaning 'comforter of the sick' and 'master of wounds' and 'gentleman of healing'. The poet-shaman uses deep-sound as primeval exorcism to console and confirm the known but also to destroy certainties, perturbing particularly

the comfort of moral make-believe. He will put up signs as inscrutable and ineffable and brave as rock paintings exposed to the glare (and the gloating?) of time's wind. The poet makes manifest the magic in which we still live, even in a globalized, post-modernist world. We will always have with us the open-ended, the beyond and the before, the cruel and the knowing, the warmth of seeing-which-is-making, the deep breath of our mountains, our human way of becoming part of the stars when the bottom of the boat gives way, and then the reverberating nothingness and dark light of space that cannot be sounded.

I suggest that you have to let this fire of beauty run through you. What's left is the ash of the poet's craft in which all fire will be remembered embers to be recalled and read like runes and stones and bones still smoldering in the streets of wind and water, so beautiful and so bleak. These are the poet's remains we hope to return to; that, and the grace of his continuing without certainties but with the writing ear ever alert to the profound echoes of human commerce . . .

Now I pause to wonder what it would be like to be a poet in South Africa now, in that country where I no longer live, six years after *Mandela* triumphed and two years into the presidency of *Baba Mbeki*. The answer, I expect, may depend to an extent on the language used. But it is again becoming urgent to turn and look into the hungry eyes of the question . . .

What I would have liked to detect would be a voice totally of its place and time but not ‘South African’ – neither in inflection nor pretension or excuse or even preoccupation – that is, not South African in the wishy-washy querulous and whimsical way we’ve come to expect and experience. I’d love to see clarity of line and depth of feeling and resilience and truculence, and a nearly reckless insistence upon the qualities of excellence. I’m looking for resistance to bullshit, to the sweet and simple fodder of feel-fine moral fat making all too easy distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ to the drone of slack triumphalism, to the worm of apocalyptic despair, to the insidious barbarism of mediocrity justified by the hocus of an ‘egalitarian’ ethic or other self-indulgent ‘post-colonial’ dirges, to the gentle art of forgetting the past, to the thundering silence of finding extenuating circumstances for our cowardice, to new hegemonies of taste and to new depths of lying and the ass-like adherence to bovine orthodoxies – be they of the so-called liberation variety . . .

I’m listening, I’m listening. (Ah, what a fool I am!)

memory is a space:
slide away death’s lid
and lower yourself

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to walk about
in landscapes of recollection,
the pulsating dimensions
of view and of breath

perhaps my eyes
will no longer be of the best,
colors be more brash,
distances more intimate,
and those birds
are they crows or bats?
is heaven of ceramic or fluff
or of flesh?

and that wind soundlessly
weeping through hollows and crowns –
how to return to the place
which I have always borne
like a grave rhythm under the skin?

could it be my imagination
or have I truly forgotten?

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WATERWALKING

If I were to propose a course I'd say that the coming pages would not, properly speaking, be a discourse on poetics, but rather a few *causevies* around poems, approaching the edge of sanity (from whatever side) with a balance of curiosity and tactful distance, if not distaste. The less you know the more tactful and circumspect you ought to be. It would be neither the history of any particular period or tradition or mode, nor that of any given poet. The *situation* of the poem may be highlighted though. For there are many *places* of poetry: magic, mysticism, youth, the public forum, breath, history, memory, loss . . . There's also the place of diamond shining.

Of central concern will be the *function* or the workings. Poem is as poem does, and I think one paradoxically learns the

‘how’ of poetry long before understanding the ‘why’. Writing is a process of creating consciousness and thus the making of a self, because awareness is expressed through a vector, however abstract. The *nature* or *intention* of that ‘self’ is of secondary concern.

In so doing I’d want to look at some contradictory givens: the poem as disorderly and unlawful as ‘reality’; the poem predicated upon *breaks* in an attempt to encompass or imitate a *whole*; as stilled movement, or moving stillness. You see, the *position* of the poem may change but the *problem* is the same ever since breath became audible and visible incantation. Poem is a capsule of space and time; it is always finished – you can no less add to it than you can detract from it – yet never completed until such time as it has been consumed (consummated) by you, Reader. Sure, there will be as many original versions as there are readers, since each partaker uncovers her own reading; poem *is* self-enclosed in its thingness, and yet will always depend on the reader for final and total completion. The world is full of strangers. Finally, it is a simple equation playing with invisibles and unsayables as if these could be seen and said, and they are, as “consciousness running away through words” that can carry but not keep. The word becomes world, dense and explosive, but the *sense*

– the location and the reach – depends on or is triggered by the between-words, all those other components and contingencies making (up) the verse: prosody, line, shape, texture, harmony, dissonance, silences, ruptures. The function of the poem is to fuck the words good and hard.

The practice of poetry – as opposed to the coming about of poem – may on the other hand be described as an idle sport framed by the indignities of time. Grown men do it so as to buy cigars; women new garters.

With the above in mind one would want to trace notions and mechanisms of consciousness as flickering in the writings of the Chinese ancients, Rimbaud, Lorca, Celan, Vallejo, Pound . . . , and examine presence /absence and empty /full; of how poems are written in *the possible tense*.

Can we say that the object of writing poems is to create a microcosm “more true than Nature itself”? (Tsong Ping), in which case we are involved in the restitution of vital universal breath? Do we go about this by grasping the internal ‘lines’ of things (which we re-present), thus to fix the relations which they have to one another?

But these ‘force lines’ can only come into becoming (incanted to incarnation) on a background of emptiness (the Void). “Nothing belongs to the trait, [...] not even its own

‘trace’ . . . The outline . . . retraces only borderlines, intervals, a spacing grid with no possible appropriation.” (Jacques Derida, *Memoirs of the Blind*)

Therefore, in poetry as in the universe: without the Void no circulation of breath and thus no shaping of opposites that, together, ensure harmony. And so one can say that harmony is not possible without movement.

“How do you know that my kind of voyaging doesn’t rejuvenate me in some obscure way?” Fernando Pessoa asks in “A Voyage I Never Made.” Or again, later, in the same text: “. . . my salvation lay in interspaces of unconsciousness.”

Emptiness, expectation, resonance . . . must be built into the verse – indeed, into the very word! Then, when writing arrives at the point of being self-evident, “without traces or footprints,” it will appear to be a natural emanation of the paper, which is itself Emptiness. This ‘invisible’ written, that which has come about on the paper, the ejaculated seed, the spilling of whiteness, will prolong and purify the ‘off-page’ or the ‘beyond-page.’ “Conscious of the White, containing the Black: the way to mystery” – this was said by Huang Pin-Hung in reference to painting.

In this context we’d then look at the nature of the poet, how writing is a means to inventing the self – even as that first

person singular whom we sometimes meet and grimace at in the mirror. “This seeing eye sees itself blind.” (Derrida) We look at the (dangerous) ways in which the line defines, calls forth, confines the future. We try to observe the poet as shaman, healer, historian, magician, agent of transformation, chameleon. We encounter the poet as outlaw and as terrorist.

We move forward.

Only the Tao (tracing/uncovering/writing/walking the flow) can obviate or wipe out the Dharma (the Law, Teaching).