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The
DEATH
of the
POET

Walter Chakela

Worker 1:
(Exclaiming in sudden shock)
No! This can’t be true!

Worker 2:
What’s wrong now, Kgotsitsile?

Worker 1:
Look at the eleventh page of the newspaper
Worker 3 looks at the said page, but cannot see anything
Worker 2: I don’t see anything here. What are you talking about.

Worker 1: That small column hidden in the left corner of the paper.

Worker 1: (Reading the column). The poet laureate of the township dies in hospital.

(Turning to Worker 1)

Worker 2: What are they...

Worker 1: (Interrupting him) They are referring to Ingogapele Madongoan. They are referring to the people’s poet himself.

Worker 3: But I thought the people’s poet was....

Worker 1: (In a sudden outburst) Nobody is the people’s poet but him!

Worker 3: I was just... never mind.

Worker 1: (More to himself). Why now, poet? Why now and not earlier or later. Now was not the right time for your departure. Earlier would have been more tolerable, for those were times of death. Later would have been better, for then, surely, you would have finished your task. Now is too late and too soon. By God, how can we lose you now, poet. It is now that we need you to give us your clarion call: On your marks, get set, ready, go! Run Africa! We need to run poet.

(The others are shocked at the depth of his hurt, and choose to keep quiet as he continues to utter these words:)

How
Do I sum you up
Poet
Do I
Call you names
Couched in flowery language
Extolling the virtues
Of your poetry
You
Frowned upon
Such unpropitious utterings alive
And surely won’t

Accept them
In your now
Ancestral abode

Should I
Even
Try to employ
The use of words
Inarticulate words
For
I do not possess
Your eloquence -
To
Sketch images
Of Your life
How
Do I
Begin
To paint
This canvass
In colours
Connoting
Your life
Your extraordinary life
How
Do I
Capture
The cadence
Of
Your thunderous voice
At
Regina Mundi
Or
At
Avalon cemetery
When
The bones
Of a revolutionary
Were interred
For eternal rest
I
Can only say
What I know
I
Can only recount
What my memory recalls
Moments
Events
Of
Momentous significance
With you
a central figure
I remember
That Saturday
At Funda Centre
That Saturday in Soweto
At the height
Of PW Botha's emergency
The occasion:
Readings from
Zimbabwean literature
You
On the chair
Yes
I remember the day so well
We
All of us came
Writers
And
Non-writers
Poets
And Non-Poets
Or
Hope-to-be-poets-one-day-
When-the-inspiration-comes
Yes
We
All of us came
And
Found
A party of
Literature enthusiasts
From
Botha's security police
Armed
Not with aesthetic sensibilities
Like the rest of us
But
Armed to the teeth
With
Machine guns
And armored vehicles
On
Your inquiry
At the reason
For the heavy artillery
 Came the answer:
We
Have not come
Like everybody else
To attend the reading
We were all
Stunned
By this incongruous spectacle
And
The equally incongruous answer
I could not help
But be reminded
Of
Goebbels
And
Culture
At the mention of it
He is said
To have reached
For his gun
I
Remember the look
On your face
when you addressed
The packed theatre
This was
Just
Another form of censorship
The reading must go on
We must not
Be intimidated
The reading must go on
You
Said this
Taking your position
At the helm of ceremonies
And
Gaveling the proceedings
Into order
Poet
We
Were all scared
Though maintaining
a steely exterior
Like
An experienced revolutionary
You
Were wise to
The futility
Of prolonging this reading
For more than necessary
Under such provocative conditions
But you were equally wise
To the historical significance
Offered
By this confrontation
Of
Poetry
and
The guns of apartheid
So
The reading went on
The words
Of
Our Zimbabwean comrades
Filled the theatre
Though only
For
A symbolic while
Before you call it
To strategic end
You
Had made
The critical point
You
Had consolidated
This moment
This
Event
For posterity
I remember
Poet
The spirit
You instilled in the people
When you read
Africa my beginning
I don’t remember
Any poem
In the history
Our literature
That so stirred the people
As this one
In that sonorous voice
You bellowed:
Freedom
Is the law of nature
Justice
Is deeply rooted
In the universal order of things
I am

Because you are
This
Was how
You whipped
Your audience
Into a poetic frenzy
The relationship
Between
People and their poets
Is much distorted these days
But
I suppose
The poetry
Written by true poets
Will live
After them
I remember
Your deep concern
Poet
About our skewed remembrances
Of
Our heroes of struggle
Where
In the scheme of things
Are the names of
Mofutsanyane
Morolong
Biko
And others
That you named
In rapid succession
You asked
We
Forget the names
Of
Our heroes
At our peril
You opined
You
Are now gone
To be
In the illustrious company
Of
Plaatje
Mofolo
Monyaise
Can see
The smile
On your face
When you ponder
The irony that
We envy you
The company
But
Not the journey
I
Have no doubt
Poet
That
You will
Acquit yourself well
In that community of giants
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