

**John Mateer**  
Selected poems from  
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## ETHEKWENI

### 1. The Poet

The poet, a New South African, holds his fist out to me.  
I extend mine to meet his, our knuckles snug as in a knuckle-duster.  
“Welcome home,” he says, swaying his fist back to his chest, his heart.  
I do likewise, but feebly, and mutter, “This is strange...”

Earlier he’d told of when they’d razed his grandmother’s house with her inside.  
In the interrogation he’d been asked, “What do you think of your comrades now?”  
And he had shouted back: “Every revolution has its casualties!”  
But when in gaol, alone, he wept for her for the first time.

I look at my hand on the table between us: a pale, grotesque thing.  
*Why, without reticence, did I press that against his dark fist?*

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## 2. The Prostitute

The woman is sitting in the doorway half in the sun.  
Her face is hidden. She's talking to someone out of sight.  
Her legs crossed like fat fingers.  
Even from here I can see her shins are bruised  
and the white high-heels scuffed and dirty.  
Though she beckons passers-by they hardly glance at her.

Then she stands up, steps into the humid street.  
Her eyes clench against the bright.  
Under her black vest her limp, shrunken breasts.  
She spots me in the bar across the street and beckons,  
insistently beckons me like a long forgotten friend.

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### 3. The Tourist

They have their hands in his pockets and around his neck.

They've pinned him against the wall.

In the public toilets there are no surveillance cameras.

The tourist just off the plane has no witness to his struggle,

no one but himself to testify to his calm,

how he is telling himself, *I could have been one of them,*

*disappointed with the Revolution...*

The wall persists, abrasive, against his cheek

as he's being bitten on the shoulder in this land of AIDS.

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#### 4. The Worshippers

They're up from the beach, are dancing at the bus-stop.

They're dancing, circling to the throb of the cow-hide drum.

The drummer, head low, holds the leather heart under his arm,  
pummels with a quick pulse that is pure praise.

The women sway and clap fast, absorbed as Rastas on an Ethiopian mountain.

On one woman's back, snugly bound with a blanket, an infant,  
eyes wide, cheeks jiggling, is memorizing all this.

Of their words all I hear is the prophet's name: *Shembe Shembe Shembe*.

Behind them, on the beach where they have been since the night, other gatherings  
of Zionists, some standing, some kneeling, clasp their hands in prayer,  
their candles now low in the sand, their bottles of holy water pale with the breaking day.  
Waist-deep in the grey swell a man is baptizing a calm, white-robed child  
while two surfers, skirting carefully around them, enter the waves, slip away  
from that tourist who photographs this scene with the hotels as backdrop.

Up here at the road the worshippers are dancing and singing as if they could forever.

[Durban, South Africa]

**NYOONGAR COUNTRY****The Statue of Mokare**

I'm walking down the colony's main street  
when I sight the statue outside the Shire office.

And when I approach the bronze – *It's Mokare,*  
*the native whose past was Co-Existence, a cordial greeting.*

Two kids are hanging from his arms, kicking his shins,  
while their crouching nanna chatters: "I'm keeping a beady eye on them."

Noticing that I'm reading the plaque, she calls out again, amiable,  
though I can't understand her. She points at the kids, cackling,

telling them off. I'm not a local: *My plaque would be an apologia.*  
For some time I stand there wondering what to say.

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**The Novelist's Comments**

After I read my poem addressed to one of his people's heroes,  
in his reclaimed, autochthonous voice  
the novelist doesn't say:

*This is our language, our land.*

Nor does he say:

*Why don't you go back where you came from?*

And in what he doesn't say he is echoing the woman  
who after burying her father – a rare fluent speaker of language –  
declared she should have chucked his tapes and journals,  
his repository of the tongue, after him into the mouth  
of the grave:

*So that the white bastards wouldn't get that too.*

[Perth, Australia]

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## GREETINGS

My brothers, my bluntly fraternal greetings  
 – as Sengor once wrote to Cesaire –  
 and I will call you my continental brothers  
 while knowing that each of us is far from home  
 and that I'm also addressing our sisters,  
 knowing that in the Australian streets you ignore me,  
 your eyes downcast as you stroll in your galabias  
 to evening prayers at the Albanian mosque,  
 or you stare away off into the distance  
 as if at a wobbly Paradise

*though I speak in the black tongues of angels and men*  
*I am not invisible*

And I see you all, my African brothers and sisters  
 – even in absentia –  
 whether behind the Tuareg-blue tent of a birkah  
 or under a peaked cap GOREE as sunset,  
 or there on the housing-estate's basketball court  
 intensely pummeling the ground and I hear you when  
 the mental white poor pace their anger in rap,  
 when they are reborn as poets – black –  
 and in the turntablist's phrasing,  
 the talking/drumming of an old vinyl record

*though I speak in the black tongues of angels and men*  
*I am not invisible*

*I am not a phantom, albino terrorist, tokelosbe*  
*under your child's bed*

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Yes, my brothers and sisters...

[Melbourne, Australia]

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**THE BANQUET OF CLEOPATRA**

– a painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo

Her arm is outstretched, its horizontality stilling the feasting, the palace.

Everyone watches her. The wager –

*To host the most expensive banquet in The Known World.*

Cleopatra, the African Queen, in extravagant Venetian dress, is off to the left in the picture, the miracle of those fluted columns and busy servants another airy frame around her.

Her hair is bound up, isn't black. She isn't dark-skinned, is unAfrican.

Rigid with competitive arrogance, her arm is silencing us all with a held moment.

Not everyone is watching her. Some have turned away.

Behind her – almost her shadow – the Nubian: *What's he thinking*

*as he clears away the plates? Of his lost Saharan village, of his stolen family?*

The Roman General, his eyes, though invisible to us, are on her: *Gorgeous.*

And at her fingertips the famous pearl gleaming like our star seen from another solar-system.

Beneath, the goblet of vinegar waits swirling like a blackhole.

Unknown to the Queen, the General and everyone else there,  
we of the Southern Hemisphere, beneath the Equator of her arm,

will wait for that precious pearl to fall, slowly, slowly, for that pearl to refuse gravity.

[Melbourne, Australia]

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**INDUSTRY: TWO KINDS****In a Public Park**

Hammering. Dull hammering on a weekday morning.

The sound of early industry in Ueno Park.

The tourists ignore them, the employed have their own destinations,  
while they, the homuresu, are already hard at work  
pounding with mallets or half-bricks their store of recyclable cans.

A post-industrial metalwork, an unforaging that begins with being placeless,  
with life under a blue tarpaulin on public land that was once a battlefield,  
that begins with the civilization of the hammer up-raised,  
with each falling blow of that Iron Age tool, that icon of the proletariat,  
that ends and begins mechanically in the morning light  
here under a leafless cherry tree where a surplus

– an airy paragon of strength, the aluminum can –

is being repeatedly battered down, hammered flat  
in hopes it will become a coin, a unit of exchange, a simple fact.

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**In the Pleasure Quarter**

Being foreign is the democracy that allows the Nigerian,  
in all the accoutrements of a gangsta, to address me as brother

and offer a special discount to a nice place where the girls are all foreign  
– Russian, Brazilian, Australian – and all speak english.

We are, perversely, brothers: of the same continent,  
slave and master, ear and mouth,

in the weird dialectic of Shinjuku, this thoroughfare  
where crowds blur into clouds.

*What tradewinds brought him here? and those girls? and me?*

Our common tongue is illusory, necessary, a kind of coin  
minted by being stamped on.

[Tokyo, Japan]

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## SAIGYO'S CHERRY TREE

The spirit of Saigyo's cherry tree is waiting there for me in my dream.

An old man, armoured in a business suit, his face a Shiwajo mask,  
he asks me what I meant by writing – *The colour of the momentary,*  
*that's what they're photographing out there in the blinding world.*

Momentarily I see the four hundred other cherry trees alive with blossoming,  
then see myself as a joyful young husband on his wedding day,  
those blossoms bright confetti tossed on a warm wind.

*The colour of the momentary in a blinding world?*

I don't know how to reply to the spirit of a tree.

Actually he's the spirit of the blossoms.

*That's what they're photographing out there in the blinding world!*

*the colour of the momentary!* he shouts,

then disappears in a blinding whiteness.

And I'm waking to remember that one hibakusha,  
in a letter to his wife's spirit, evoked their fateful moment  
as *an enormous blue-white flash,*  
*as when a photographer lights a dish of magnesium.*

[Kyoto, Japan]

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