

Artist's Statement

The poems “Poems of Struggle and Exile”, read during the “ANC between home and exile” conference organized in Naples, 19-20 November, 2012, are from the collection in progress *Souls: Poems of a Transitional Era* (working title), which will be probably divided into two parts focusing on home and exile: “Here and Then” / “There and Then”.

The poems are set in the period between 1984 and 1994, which saw an estimated 20,500 people killed at the hands of the state-backed Third Force. 12,000 were killed in Natal province alone (see Anthea Jeffrey, *People's War: New Light on the Struggle for South Africa*, Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2010, and *The Natal Story: 16 Years of Conflict*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1997).

An earlier version of “Who Will Wash My Feet?” appeared in Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Isabel Ferrin-Aguirre and Xiao Kaiyu, eds., *No Serenity Here: An Anthology of African Poetry in Amharic, English, French, Arabic and Portuguese* (Beijing: World Knowledge Publishers, 2010), 74. Otherwise all five poems appear here for the first time.

Poems of Struggle and Exile

Sleep runners

How can we forget when we run in our sleep?
Stones in one hand, a wet cloth in the other, we run
Facing the mellow yellows, sometimes hordes of men
with spears in one hand, shields in the other, coming.

How can we forget when, years later, we still run in our sleep?
Away from the meeting line, back to where we came, hearts pumping
amongst other running bodies – comrades in flight – feet thumping
wet cloths on our eyes, bodies falling left, right, in front, while running.

They have the luxury of forgetting but not us, the sleep runners
who run back to the fallen bodies; feeling for pulses, tearing off clothing,
using it
to stop the bleeding, turning over bodies to shut eyes and straighten
limbs.
We can't help noticing our teardrops and sweat falling on still bodies.
Then again, we run.

Our truth comes through in our sleep. It keeps us running
to call community members, to help carry the many fallen bodies
before the men in the yellow vans or those with spears and shields return.
How can we forget when being on the run has become the natural rhythm
of our sleep?

¹ The title was inspired by
Langston Hughes's poem
"The Negro Speaks of
Rivers", first published in
1921 in *The Crisis*.

The river speaks of ashes¹

I have known corpses:
whole and intact
wounded and mutilated.

I propelled them to the bank
for their relatives to find and claim.

I have known ashes:
of burnt corpses
bagged and unrecognizable.

I listened when they spoke
I memorized their names:
Champion Galela
Qaqawuli Godolozzi
Sipho Hashe²

² On 8 May 1985, Port
Elizabeth Black Civic
Organisation (PEBCO)
activists Galela, Godolozzi and
Hashe (later referred to as the
PEBCO Three) were abducted
from an airport in Port
Elizabeth. In 1997, during
the Truth and Reconciliation
Commission hearings, a
Security Police Officer,
Colonel Gideon Nieuwoudt,
confessed to killing them,
burning their bodies and
throwing them into
the Fish River.

I have known corpses, and I have known ashes
My name is Nxuba, those who arrived and never left renamed me Fish.

After the massacre

After the bodies had been identified counted and taken away
After the police had come and gone, the neighbours stuck around
Four women walked the familiar path in a line, paraffin lamps in their hands
The stars listened to their now hushed cries, watched them wipe away silent tears
Mechanically they filled their water buckets from the homestead tank
Back in the house, taking rags and soap from the cupboards, they started cleaning:
First, sweeping shards of glass scattered in every room, then
Wiping splashes of blood on walls and broken windows,
smeared across furniture, doors, sometimes even spotting the ceiling.
In the kitchen, they removed pieces of the brain tissue splattered in all directions
When they went on their knees to clean the floors
cupping congealed blood in their hands – they told the girls
to look away and sent them to comfort younger children and put them to bed.
They put in a bowl all cartridges and bullets they found.
In the bedrooms, they stripped the blood stained bedcovers and curtains
soaked everything in a large zinc tub for washing the next day.
They went into each room and repositioned everything
So that it looked almost exactly as it did before the massacre.
By sunrise the women had restored the homestead
Bodies identified, counted and taken away live with them, years later.

About the ambulance

They had us all fooled
about the ambulance
We never imagined
Never suspected
We prayed for the injured
We wept for the dead
While they smiled in victory
as the weapons left the scene
under the cover
of the ambulance

Digging for freedom

This young man says he and his friends refuse to come and work with us
even though they know we can no longer cope with digging; day and
night.

He and his friends agree that we, gravediggers, must take a stand
and refuse to dig graves for our people dying all the time.
Then, we too, would be making a statement; about this unnecessary war
of girls and women raped, of playing children dying in the crossfire
of families fleeing homes, of brother against brother.
This young man says no freedom can come out of so much bloodshed
and mayhem.

This young man doesn't know that we are women disguised as men
We started digging graves three months ago when so many men were
dying
children were fleeing their homes, simply disappearing
He doesn't know that when we send him away to sleep at sunset,
we start another mission of hiding women and children in these graves
so they can at least get some sleep and feed their infants in peace.
This young man doesn't know that to an army of women gravediggers
freedom is taking an energizing nap, on the other side of this hill.

³ An earlier version of this poem appeared in Phillippa Yaa de Villiers, Isabel Ferrin-Guirre and Xiao Kaiyu, eds., *No Serenity Here: An Anthology of African Poetry in Amharic, English, French, Arabic and Portuguese* (Beijing: World Knowledge Publishers, 2010), 74.

⁴ This refers to the unbanning of liberation movements by the then Apartheid government President F. W. de Klerk on 2 February 1990.

Who will wash my feet?³

Who will wash my feet?
My tears dried before 1990⁴
My thirst is unknown to the world
My hunger is not for food
My wounds are hidden inside
My womb weeps silences
My nipples watch the soil
to safeguard those
who travelled through me
My memories run in my veins
My cracked, dry feet
have never touched a shoe
or the floor of any office
but I also deserve the courtesy
of someone washing my feet.