Ntsikana kaGabha

Ntsikana’s Bell

Sele! Sele!
Ahom, ahom, ahom!
Sele! Sele! Come, hear the Word of the Lord.
Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

[call to worship]
[bell sound by striking a rock]

Respond! Respond! You are called to heaven.
Come, all you multitudes! Come, all you children!
Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

It has been fenced in and surrounded, this land of your fathers.
He who responds to the call will be blessed.
Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

Sele! Sele!
Ahom, ahom ahom!
Respond! Respond! You are called to heaven.
Ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom, ahom.

(tr. isiXhosa J.K. Bokwe)
Andrew Geddes Bain

The British Settler

Tune — ‘Oh what a row’; or, ‘The humours of a Steam-boat’

Oh! what a gay, what a rambling life a Settler’s leading!
Spooring cattle, doing battle, quite jocose;
Winning, losing; Whigs abusing; shopping now, then mutton breeding;
Never fearing, persevering, on he goes!

When to the Cape I first came out, in days of Charlie Somerset,
My lands were neatly measured off, and reg’larly my number set;
I strutted round on my own ground, lord of a hundred acres, sir,
And said I’d plough, I’d buy a cow, the butchers cut and bakers, sir.
Oh! what a gay, &c.

On Kowie’s banks I built a house, and made a snug location there;
I fenc’d my lands with my own hands to keep all tight;
The river rose, and fore my nose made awful desolation there;
The Kafirs stole my only cow away that night!
I made a trip to Kafirland, in hopes to find my cow again,
And tried to act the dentist then, which no one can do now again;
I drew the Kafir’s ivory teeth, at risk of hempen collar, sir.
Which at Graham’s Town on the market brought me full 300 dollars, sir!
Oh! what a gay, &c

My second go was but so so, although the trade was brisk enough;
The patrols nearly boned me in a secret maze;
I hid my load out of the road, and, faith, I just had risk enough,
For this trade was hanging matter in those good old days!
My stock-in-trade on pack-ox laid, I tried my luck at smouching then,
But found the Boers were wide awake as Yorkshiremen at choussing them;
They swapt me some rock chrystals — gems, they swore, of purest water, sir;
And for breeding stock, a scurvy lot of hamels and kapers, sir!
Oh! what a gay, &c
The Contraction and Enclosure of the Land

Thus spake the heirs of the land
Although it is no longer ours.
This land will be folded like a blanket
till it is like the palm of a hand.
The racing ox will become entangled in the wire,
Too weak to dance free, it will be worn
Out by the dance of the yoke and the plough.
They will crowd us together like tadpoles
In a calabash ladle. Our girls
Will have their lobola paid with paper,
Coins that come and go, come and go.
Blood should not be spilled, so they say
Nowadays, to unite the different peoples;
Until we no longer care for each other,
As a cow licks her calf, when love
And nature urges her to do so.
Can money bring people together?
Yes, a man may have words with his son’s wife,
His son need no longer respect her mother.

Yes, we fold up our knees
It’s impossible to stretch out,
Because the land has been hedged in.

(tr. isiXhosa Robert Kavanagh and Z.S. Qangule)
Johannesburg

Along the Rand in eighty-five
Fortunes were founded overnight,
And mansions rose among the rocks
To blaze with girls and light;

In champagne baths men sluiced their skins
Grimy with auriferous dust,
Then oiled and scented, fought to enjoy
What young men must;

Took opportunities to cheat,
Or meet the most expensive whore,
And conjured up with cards and dice,
New orgies from new veins of ore;

Greybeards who now look back
To the old days
Find little in their past to blame
And much to praise –
Riding bareback under stars
As lordly anarchists of the veld,
Venison feasts and tribal wars
Free cruelty and a cartridge belt;

Pioneers, O pioneers
Grey pillars of a Christian State,
Respectability has turned
Swashbuckler prim and scamp sedate;

Prospecting in the brain's recesses
Seek now the nuggets of your prime,
And sift the gold dust of your dreams
From drifted sands of time.

New Leaves
City Johannesburg

This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo’burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo’burg City.
My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don’t you know?
Jo’burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love,
My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever
whirling dust,
My death
That’s so related to me as a wink to the eye.
Jo’burg City
I travel on your black and white and roboted roads
Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo’burg City
That is the time when I come to you,
When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the
falling darkness
On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me.
Jo’burg City, Johannesburg,
Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it,
When you leave the women and men with such frozen
expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
Jo’burg City, you are dry like death,
Jo’burg City, Johannesburg, Jo’burg City.
then leap back like a hare!
and bitter wind of air—
All winter long I'll nibble at the bare
wind blow, rain pour!
be dimmer than before,
If only day adjourn, the night in store
and not be marred?
prospect of shattering shard
What fragile thing can happen in this hard

Wirwaterstand
Nightfall

I watch the darkness falling
And hills withdraw their shadows:
The sun, like ochre, reddens.

The swallows are at rest,
The sea-wind still and silent;
Above me fly the bats.
Now, as the streets are lit,
I fear the lurking thieves
Who seek their prey like hunters.

Here, there is no grass,
But dust from off the mine-dumps
Like smoke is drifting skyward.

Here there is no river
To shelter lurking frogs
And harbour water-fowl.

Here are only people
Jostling home from labour,
Herded by dusk, together.

(Malcolm, Friedman)
Sipho Sepamla

To Whom It May Concern

Bearer
Bare of everything but particulars
Is a Bantu
The language of a people in southern Africa
He seeks to proceed from here to there
Please pass him on
Subject to these particulars
He lives
Subject to the provisions
Of the Urban Natives Act of 1925
Amended often
To update it to his sophistication
Subject to the provisions of the said Act
He may roam freely within a prescribed area
Free only from the anxiety of conscription
In terms of the Abolition of Passes Act
A latter-day amendment
In keeping with moon-age naming
Bearer’s designation is Reference number 417181
And (he) acquires a niche in the said area
As a temporary sojourner
To which he must betake himself
At all times
When his services are dispensed with for the day
As a permanent measure of law and order
Please note
The remains of R/N 417181
Will be laid to rest in peace
On a plot
Set aside for Methodist Xhosas
A measure also adopted
At the express request of the Bantu
In anticipation of any faction fight
Before the Day of Judgement.
Letter to Martha, 4

Particularly in a single cell,
but even in the sections
the religious sense asserts itself;

perhaps a childhood habit of nightly prayers
the accessibility of Bibles,
or awareness of the proximity of death:

and, of course, it is a currency –
pietistic expressions can purchase favours
and it is a way of suggesting reformation
(which can procure promotion);

and the resort of the weak
is to invoke divine revenge
against a rampaging injustice;

but in the grey silence of the empty afternoons
it is not uncommon
to find oneself talking to God.

[Robben Island, 1966]
Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang  
(A person is a person because of other people)

By holding my mirror out of the window I see  
Clear to the end of the passage.  
There's a person down there.  
A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.  
In the mirror I see him see  
My face in the mirror,  
I see the fingertips of his free hand  
Bunch together, as if to make  
An object the size of a badge  
Which travels up to his forehead  
The place of an imaginary cap.  
(This means: A warden.)  
Two fingers are extended in a vee  
And wiggle like two antennae.  
(He's being watched.)  
A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc  
On the wrist of his polishing arm without  
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.  
(Later. Maybe, later we can speak.)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?  
– a voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.  
He turns his back to me, now watch  
His free hand, the talkative one,  
Slips quietly behind  
– Strength brother, it says,

In my mirror,  
A black fist.
Orioles, Storks and Monarchs. The coffee is good, the people are interesting, and the weather is perfect for a walk.

I take a stroll along the boardwalk, enjoying the fresh sea breeze. The sound of distant waves and seagulls fills the air, creating a peaceful atmosphere. It's a perfect day to be outdoors.

I stop by the boardwalk cafe for a bite to eat. The menu offers a variety of delicious options, from fresh salads to hearty sandwiches. I decide on a lobster roll, which arrives steaming hot and perfectly seasoned.

After my meal, I take a leisurely walk along the boardwalk. The sights and sounds of the beach are easy on the eyes and ears. I enjoy the company of other beachgoers, all of whom seem to be enjoying the day as much as I am.

As I continue my stroll, I notice a young couple hugging by the water's edge. They seem to be having a wonderful time, and I can't help but smile. It's moments like these that make the beach so special.

The sun begins to set, casting a warm glow over the boardwalk. I decide to return to my hotel and catch some rays before heading inside for the night. It's been a perfect day in Paradise, and I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings.
the right palm that reveals ash on my sleeve:

it is solitude that multiplies,

that terrifies me:

it is not cosmic immensity or catastrophe

I suffer the radiation burns of silence.

under the Distant Early Warning System:

for a northern life of senti-snow

You yourself have vacated the violent arena

the harshness of your eyes.

new magnitude of thought has but betrayed

not anything affectionate,

The amplitude of sentiment has brought me no nearer
Pregnancy

I am expecting
to feel I don’t know what,
as now and then you knock, softly,
like a student entering the presence of authority,
until grown with the weeks insistent you butt in more
and still more and more confident.

Nok nok!
Who’s there?
A good question that, unanswered
in the mirror’s muteness, and the held hands’ bolstering.
To what can I refer for the knowledge that I seek? Doctors? Books? Other women?
Nothing, except to each week’s waiting which throws me back upon my body.

Knock nok.
But I know nothing about the knowledge that you seek –
Life, or some quest equally as large –
though each week my body bellies its figurehead more fully,
breasting a cargo through erratic waves.

Of course I am said to bloom, my dear, and blossom.
But I have never been a flower, and do not now intend to pistil into motherhood.

And always my power is limited as I try to hold but refuse your shape:
cutting the elastic of familiar clothes;
determinedly craving nothing out of the ordinary;
pleasuring my body – my body – as I will.
You will not lie still but I belie your presence,
and think of customs where mothers bind their daughters' feet,
and fathers celebrate the birth of boys in bars.

Just wait, people say ironically.
(Well what else can I do, with this intimate living that happens all despite me?)
Your time will come;
we cannot wait to see you, as the Bible puts it, big with child.

So I refuse but hold your shape,
slathering the jut of ourselves with salve;
waking nightly to the darkness;
flushing the bladder yet another time.

And always another knock
a kick
a funny flick
a shiver
and a finny glide

Suddenly
that slides

across the flesh.

Past the bellybulge you wait,
taking things slowly,
circling the date declared to make you present.

Lying low beneath a swell
you show your shape in moments:
my elation and sadness,
your peaks and dents,
movements that irreverently decline your future.
Look at myself getting up!
Look at myself having a nightmare!
Look at myself coming back to bed!
Look at myself going for a walk!
Look at myself sleeping!

I must be their judge!
I'm in it.

They saw
I call them a joke
They all screamed
I showed them my punt

But they only laughed
I made them laugh
I set with glory
I lost my head off
They took me naked

Why are they staring
I hid no shame, no cold
But they don't laugh
Now they let me pour
They stripped me naked

And the pack of first walkers me
And me with the world
Many people beside in and one of me
The pack of ris in my heart walkers me
And which human unfavorable disappear
With stories in the corner of my skull
I am a dirty little room
First paint my skull in all detail
then the nose, the tongue
then peel off the skin
then burn the hair off
then smash the teeth out
then strip off the lips
then cut the ears off
then pluck the eyes out

not knowing that I am being watched
I keep looking at myself

! Look at myself going off to work
! Look at myself shaving

†
For All Voices, For All Victims
[in response to stories at the TRC]

because of you
this country no longer lies
between us but within
it breathes becalmed
after being wounded
in its wondrous throat

in the cradle of my skull
it sings, it ignites
my tongue, my inner ear, the cavity of heart
shudders towards the outline new in soft intimate clicks and gutturals

of my soul the retina learns to expand
daily because by a thousand stories
I was scorched

a new skin

I am changed for ever. I want to say:
   forgive me
   forgive me
   forgive me

You whom I have wronged, please
take me

with you.

(author)
Under the Sun

under the sun
i am daughter,
   comrade,
       lover,
           friend
i do to please
and please to do
they are me
and i am them
but,
under the stars
under sirius and the three sisters
the southern cross and orion’s belt
i am
   wonderfully
   less than
       vapour
Voices of the Xhosa, 1880

Praises of Matanzima, Son of Sandile*

He's the hero with ivory armrings,
the great aloe that stops children sucking.
The overthrower, he drops the grey stone,
the cannon that thundered in the Mathole,
so the cowards fled into this land,
so the cowards fled in headlong.
He's the dark one fit to stay in the Xhiba house,
and not be removed to Mxhamli’s at Mnzwini.
He casts at a wagon and its ribs fall apart,
the tent falls apart leaving the buck seat.
The piercing lightning, the strong sky-wagon,
which dropped a millstone and flattened forests,
so officers lay flat on their backs.
The wild beast that roared below Ncememe,
so the yellow-wood was uprooted.
The raging bull of Rharhabe:
don’t you slaughter this beast for its age?
The red-shouldered parrot of Myeki’s daughter,
which arrived with Mangcotywa.
One black-nailed from digging for the nation,
who entered the court of Victoria.
He has a sharp-pointed tool like a pick:
he dug up the yellowwood below Gcolo,
and hurled it down below Gqontshi.
The long-haired one of Bholo,
who never paid tax all his life.

(tr. isiXhosa Jeff Opland and D.L.P Yali-Manisi)

* Matanzima anticipated a skirmish against the British in the ninth and last frontier war (1878). [ed.]
After the Battle

Ho-o-o-o-o-yini! Ho-o-o-o-yini!
It's me that's talking, a man of no worth!
It's me that's talking, a man who knows how to speak!
What kind of creature did you think I was,
One who says things that can't be said?
   Today the country's in labour;
Today the land's in pain;
Beware of something in the stomach,
Suspect this thing in the womb;
Today it's as if Gilikankqo'll be born,
As if a doe who spurns her own fawn will be born.
   Ho-o-o-o-yini! Ho-o-o-o-yini!
The trumpet sang out for the start of a journey,
The horn bellowed to gather us,
The day we crossed the Kei armed to the teeth;
The day not a word passed Zanzolo's lips,
We saw the flames flash from his eyes,
We saw the smoke billow from his nose,
We heard the shrilling of whistles in our ears.
Someone said today the beast's enraged,
Something long expected had now come to pass,
For they looked at his brows and saw he was furious;
Today those brows are like clouds on a thunderous day,
Today they're flashing like lightning, and the people tremble.
Someone said today the world's at war,
In the land of Rharhabe all things are in turmoil,
Shame and disgrace have befallen the Xhosa.
Oh! the things that occur on this earth!
How could the child sidle up to his mother?
Crane feather piled on crane feather, at Hoho;
Iron bit into flesh, at Hoho;
Club clashed against club, at Hoho;
The oxhide thudded, at Hoho;
There was thumping here and there and there, at Hoho;
Someone passed on without prayer, at Hoho;
He joined the multitudes in a moment, at Hoho;
The vulture fed with his dogs, at Hoho;
The buzzard fed and left more for the raven, at Hoho;
The hyena fed and passed on to the wild dog, at Hoho;
The green fly fed and left more for the maggot, at Hoho;  
Ho-yi-i-i-i-i-i-i-ni!  
Please lay down your weapons now, warrior;  
Please lay down your shield now, valiant youth;  
It seems your task is done in the land of Rharhabe,  
For my part, it seems you’ve scattered your foe.  
Go now, there’s much to put right,  
For you abandoned your homes with no one in charge,  
You left your children to set fire to each other.  
There are rows on rows of things you must tackle.

There are so many things that you must attend to –  
Haven’t you heard of the visions of old man Khulile?  
Haven’t you heard what will come to pass in this land?  
Haven’t you heard of the weighty Book that’s impending?  
Won’t we send you to examine it for us?  
For by then our own eyes will have dimmed.  
Haven’t you heard of the prince who will speak?  
Even in this battle his presence was felt.  
They say that he’s Gaba’s son of the Cirha.  
Haven’t you heard of a girl who will speak?  
We’ll call it destruction, but it’s sacramental slaughter.  
Haven’t you heard of Bright Ears who are coming?  
What you say, for we hear they’re coming with scourges?  
Haven’t you heard of these flowing-hair nations!  
We hear that they’re people who traffic in lightning.

So I, son of Zolile, address you young warriors,  
Go home but stay watchful, the country’s in labour –  
When it gives birth I say it will bear Gilikankqo:  
It will bear a doe who spurns her own fawn.  
Go home but stay watchful, there’ll be pools of blood;  
Go home but stay watchful, mankind will come to an end;  
Go home but stay watchful, you will sell your fathers;  
Go home but stay watchful, your fathers will sell you;  
Go home but stay watchful, chieftainship will die;  
Go home but stay watchful, you’ll examine the Book for us;  
Go home but stay watchful, the shooting star will flash;  
Go home but stay watchful, you’ll stand on guard for Zanzolo;  
Go home but stay watchful, you’re the props of the nation;  
Go home but stay watchful, your family’s in danger;  
Go home but stay watchful, darkness will descend;  
Go home but stay watchful, we’ll not endure forever;  
Go home but stay watchful, prepare for future generations;  
Go home but stay watchful, I say the real battle is upon us.

(tr. isiXhosa Jeff Opland and D.L.P. Yali-Manisi)
Could you not Write Otherwise?

Could you not write otherwise, this woman said to me,
Could you not write of things really poetical?
Of many-coloured birds dipping their beaks
Into many-coloured flowers?
Of mine machinery standing up, you know,
Gaunt, full of meaning, against the sky?

Must you write always of black men and Indians,
Of half-castes and Jews, Englishmen and Afrikaners,
Of problems insoluble and secret fears
That are best forgotten?
You read the paper, you post your letters,
You buy at the store like any normal being,
Why then must you write such things?

Madam, really, since you ask the question,
Really, Madam, I do not like to mention it
But there is a voice that I cannot silence.
It seems I have lived for this, to obey it
To pour out the life-long accumulation
Of a thousand sorrowful songs.
I did not ask for this destination
I did not ask to write these same particular songs.
Simple I was, I wished to write but words,
And melodies that had no meanings but their music
And songs that had no meaning but their song.
But the deep notes and the undertones
Kept sounding themselves, kept insistently
Intruding themselves, like a prisoner tide
That under the shining and the sunlit sea
In caverns and corridors goes underground thundering.

Madam, I have no wish to be cut off from you
I have no wish to hurt you with the meanings
Of the land where you were born.
It was with unbelieving ears I heard
My artless songs become the groans and cries of men.
And you, why you may pity me also,
For what I do when such a voice is speaking,
What can I speak but what it wishes spoken?
Me, Coloured

Aunt Liza.
Yes?
What am I?
What are you talking about?
I met a boy at the river.
He said he was Zulu.
She laughed.

You are Coloured.
There are three kinds of people:
White people, Coloured people,
and Black people.
The White people come first,
then the Coloured people,
then the Black people.
Why?
Because it is so.

Next day when I met Joseph,
I smacked my chest and said:
               Me, Coloured!
He clapped his hands and laughed.
Joseph and I spent most
of the long summer afternoons together.
He learned some Afrikaans from me.
I learned some Zulu from him.
Our days were full.
There was the river to explore.
There were swimming lessons.
I learned to fight with sticks;
to weave a green hat
of young willow wands and leaves;
to catch frogs and tadpoles
with my hands;
to set a trap for the springhaas,
to make the sounds of the river birds.
There was the hot sun to comfort us.
There was the green grass to dry our bodies.
There was the soft clay with which to build.
There was the fine sand with which to fight.
There were our giant grasshoppers to race.
There were the locust swarms
when the skies turned black
and we caught them by the hundreds.
There was the rare taste of crisp,
brown-baked, salted locusts.
There was the voice of the wind in the willows.
There was the voice of the heavens
in the thunder storms.
There were the voices of two children
in laughter, ours.
There were Joseph's tales of black kings
who lived in days before the white man.
At home, I said:
Aunt Liza?
Yes?
Did we have coloured kings before the white man?
No.
Then where did we come from?
Joseph and his mother come from the
black kings who were before the white man.

Laughing and ruffling my head, she said:
*You talk too much. Go 'n wash up.*

*(Tell Freedom, 1954)*