

LONG TIME COMING – SHORT WRITINGS FROM ZIMBABWE

'I am spent. I am hollow. I am ready to dream, to fill up my mind with hope because without hope tomorrow is stillborn'. (Judy Maposa, First Rain)

Long Time Coming is a remarkable achievement. Published in desperate internal conditions by 'amaBooks, established in 2000 in Bulawayo by Ebbw Vale-born Jane Morris and Brian Jones, it brings together stories and poems from 33 authors including Zimbabwean writers and other international voices, as well as contributions from Wales by Peter Finch, Owen Sheers, Ian Rowlands and Lloyd Robson.

Throughout the collection, there are glimpses of private anguish and resilience. Urgent needs are continually frustrated by the consequences of a collapsed economy which has suffered a million percent inflation and that *'has spawned millionaire beggars and a billionaire middle class'* (Judy Maposa, *First Rain*). The supermarket shelves are empty, the transport system is minimal and chaotic, and everyone, everywhere is waiting endlessly in queues for the borehole, the bus, bread, mealie-meal, sugar and fuel. There are those, like the woman in Linda Msebele's story who travel crammed and sweating on the treacherous *Chicken Bus* and others who drive the latest Mercedes. Where there is no public transport, passengers, like the young woman in Sandisile Tshuma's *Arrested Development*, wait in the searing heat at garages to hitch lifts costing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In a country left waiting and wanting, the element most keenly awaited for is rain. Water is rationed, women wait for hours with their containers in long scowling lines and rain is precious, as Pathisa Nyathi poignantly depicts in his poem, *And the Rains Came*:

*The enchanting smell of fresh rain
wafts through the enduring odours
from loose rank sewerage from toilets and factories.
Swarms of swallows drift ahead in flights of bliss and rapture
and grand expectations.*

Not only do the people struggle in the face of drought, poor sanitation and sporadic power supplies, they battle against the proliferation of AIDS. In Owen Sheer's story, *Safari*, a foreign journalist is escorted around a number of brothels by an NGO worker, Tiisetso, leading a project to protect women's health. Challenged by one of the prostitutes, Rosebud, as to the purpose of his investigation, and what difference he thinks it will make, he is unnerved by insufficient answer, and she leaves him with, *'Go home Peter. Go Home. And don't worry, I will stay here. Waiting for something to happen'*. Ian Rowlands, on his visit to an orphanage for children who have lost both parents to AIDS, registers the same unease when introduced to an eight year old boy called Innocence: *'..I knew immediately that, as a writer, he would be the seed of a story; words upon a page, a moment of intense irony, a moment I would drag out to illuminate a point'*. These writers have the privilege of distance

that others do not. In Fungai Rufaro Machirori's *Rain in July*, a young couple go for an HIV test before they get married. She is negative, he is positive. Their future together is destroyed.

The individual suffering of ordinary people is set within a broader context of corruption in business, the government and its military: the brutal rape of a village girl, Khayelihle, by soldiers, her son born with a silent tongue, '*his hands were rolled up into tiny fists holding tightly to the secrets*' (Raisedon Baya, *Echoes of Silence*); *The Awards Ceremony* (John Eppel), in which the Deputy Minister of Borrowdale Shopping Centre and his wife are danced to by a group of emaciated ten year old girls before presenting awards to two Comrades – one for strangling five terminally ill patients to help '*solve the problem of urban overcrowding*', the other for his vicious beating of seven women supporters, two of them expectant mothers, of the National Constitutional Assembly; and *Justice* (Wim Boswinkel) in which a daughter, forced into prostitution, takes revenge on the businessman, Phil Chibaya, who laid her father off and made their family destitute.

This is a hard hitting collection touched by moments of tenderness: an old man delights briefly in meeting his ex-wife again; a group of young girls fantasise about the personal lives of their teachers; the woman on the chicken bus exchanges a wink and remembers the joy of laughter. But these are flickers of light amongst a people who are grieving. They grieve for the loss of the past, loved ones, livelihoods, dignity, humanity, their sense of self, touchingly expressed by Ignatius Mabasa in *Some Kind of Madness*. Leaving home for work one day he knows he has forgotten something. On the bus, his companion asks:

'Who are you?'....

'I don't know,' I answer looking into her watery brown eyes. That's it, I realise with a start, that's what I have forgotten.

Jane MacNamee, March 2010

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