

# **HELEN OF TROYEVILLE**

**A play by  
Mike van Graan**

**All rights reserved**

## **The Play**

*Helen of Troyeville* is a one-person drama featuring a woman character, Helen Jennings (nee Blakewell), a white South African in her mid-to-late seventies who reflects on her life in the context of the situation in which she finds herself i.e. she is locked in the downstairs guest toilet while her house is being ransacked by two black young men in their earlier twenties.

## **Structure**

The structure of the play generally follows the “stages of grief” idea, moving through Denial, Guilt, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and finally, Acceptance. Although these titles are used to separate the different phases in the play, they are more for guiding the actor and director than for public knowledge i.e. there is no need to project these publicly. They should emanate through the script, the actor and the directing.

## **Set**

At its most basic, the set can comprise a toilet bowl (without the cistern), a mirror and a wash basin (the latter two can be done away with, and the Actor can mime washing hands/turning on a tap and/or looking into a mirror).

*Lights come up on Helen, sitting on the toilet, with the top cover down.*

## **DENIAL**

*Tone: Generally, bemused, confused, uncertain, disbelief*

*Tone: starts light, bemused, wry.*

Television news is for the rise of astronauts  
The birth of princesses  
The havoc of nature  
The deaths of beloved kings  
Perhaps of despised despots too

And headlines that scream  
“Bad news”

I’ve long forgotten the smell of newspapers  
I love the talk of music radio  
And anti-social me can dip in  
Dip out of social media as I please.

And when those dinner conversations start up  
The ones about  
Currency decline  
Crime  
Once upon a time  
I hum Wagner with a wry smile  
Remember our times in Guadeloupe  
Cuba  
India  
Imagine I’m being schooled  
By my grandchildren

“Is this fair-trade coffee, gran?”  
“Hope you don’t have made-in-Bangladesh labels”  
“Are you awake, Gran?”  
Not awake, Gran.  
Woke!”

*Smiles, shakes her head wryly*

To be there and  
Not there  
At least till the dinner talk turns to  
palatable hearing

It's not that ignorance is bliss  
But that not knowing  
Not hearing is often times...Zen

I've done with clutter  
Shut out noise  
Avoided the dark  
Chose laughter  
Light  
Life

It's served me well these lean years past  
I've lived  
I've loved  
I've laughed

*Change in tone to reflective, more serious, concerned. Delivery is more rapid.*

And now at three score and more  
This cannot be  
This is not happening

I have not become "other people"  
The neighbour's once-neighbour  
The did-you-hear-about person  
Tomorrow's front page news  
Tonight's grisly television lead  
Talk radio's catalyst for renewed debates  
On old death penalty riffs  
The reluctant subject of Facebook brawls  
Where human plays second fiddle to pigment  
And reason and respect  
Are sacrificed to the point-scoring popes of  
Race and Rage

*Slows down, more self-critical.*

Who am I kidding  
Self-important me  
Queen of my inherited queendom

*Stands up/looks wryly at the toilet*

Sitting on my glorious throne

This will all be over soon  
They'll take what they want  
And get out of here before  
You can say "armed response"  
Uncluttering me of mere material goods  
And make some insurer weep  
Rendering mine but a housebreaking stat  
A minor item for dinner chat  
Yet provoking ever-more horrific tales to  
Compete with the fiction crime of  
Margie Orford  
Deon Meyer  
Mike Nicol  
Our bookclub lovers whom we bed each night

*(sighs)* Bring on Wagner

*Beat. Reflective.*

Why is this happening to *me*?  
*Is* this happening to me?  
*What* is this that is happening to me?  
The censors of thought have been paid off by ego

*As if talking to the bathroom mirror*

Mirror, mirror on the wall  
Who's the fairest of us all  
If it's not Helen Jennings  
She must be right up there

*Argumentative*

Martha Field? It cannot be!  
Her hairdresser is paid for one sitting  
What her domestic helper earns in a month

Sally Ackerman who believes that blacks from the rest of  
the continent are better than "our" blacks?  
Not patronizing her, surely!

And sweet, generous, lovely Margaret Kemp  
Who believes the government is put there by God  
At least the previous one  
Not the current lot

You can't be serious about Erica Turner  
Sad at the decline of the rainbow nation  
When she's never had a black person for dinner  
Or any meal for that matter  
Unless she or he was making it

*Beat, then, wryly*

What I am cursed to endure  
For being part of my generation  
And yet, not of it

Not that I wish any of this  
On any of them

Helen the do-gooder  
Tree-hugger  
Helen, the charity-queen  
Sandwich-maker  
Helen the petty job creator  
Chief consumer at the traffic light malls

Such tame labels compared with the once  
Communist Black-Sasher  
A label I wore as proudly as  
Some their  
Emilio Puccis  
Their Anne Kleins  
Their oh-so-look-at-me  
Pierre Balmain's

*Looks at the "wall"*

Well, well, look at this  
A cracked tile  
And another  
This skirting's rotten  
The towel ring's loose  
Gladys has missed some dust here...

Things that miss the eye  
When four toilets are yours to choose from  
And the guest loo remains the loo  
For guests

Note to self

As soon as this is over  
I must get these fixed

Not that any of this matters to my unwanted guests

*An afterthought*

I should install a panic button in the guest loo!

Can't have the pilates  
The tennis  
The bookclub guests think  
(*conspiratorial whisper*) "She's fallen on times hard"  
As I get out the Gin and Tonic  
The white and the  
Red juices  
That water the conversations  
Of old women who compete  
Boasting of their children  
And *their* children's latest achievements

While no-one speaks of  
Drugs  
Drunks  
Debts  
Divorce  
Though everyone knows

We survive on the oxygen  
Of Politeness  
And Denial  
Lipstick and practiced smiles  
Hiding heartache

Widows all  
Or almost all  
The weaker sex has bequeathed us each other  
To serve our remaining time  
Remembering the old times  
While indulging ourselves in whatever  
Fortunes our now  
Rotting partners may  
Or may not  
Have willed us  
(*Snorts*)

*Beat. Gets up. Paces out the area.*

My *guest* toilet  
Windowless but  
As large  
If not larger than  
Madiba's cell  
Where now I am locked up  
While my raider jailers  
Roam my erstwhile paradise

What was it I saw in their eyes  
As they tied me up  
Was it guilt?  
Was it hate?  
Deference maybe?

What was I looking for?  
Some softness?  
Ambivalence?  
Respect for the aged?

*Looks upwards*

They're up the stairs  
Occupying my bedroom  
Colonizing my space  
Rummaging  
My life of want-less-ness  
For what they want  
They may not yet know  
But could discover now

My haves  
The mine of have-nots

And when all of this is done  
What would Madiba do?  
Could  
Should  
Would I forgive?

Bad things happen to good people  
Good things happen to bad people  
People do good things  
Desperate people do bad things  
People are not born bad



*Sudden realization of her position, breaks out of reflection mode*

What if they do not unlock the door  
And leave me here?  
Gladys comes on Friday  
So does the garden service  
She has her own key  
She'll find me here  
Two days hence  
Hungry but hydrated

Shall I scream?  
Who will hear?  
Will that madden them to harm me?

Samuel will call  
He always calls  
To check up on his favourite mother

Unless he's in Johannesburg

I have declared my independence  
So my children know better than to downsize me  
Or entice me to a room in their homes as  
Their live-in babysitter  
Or put me in some depressing home  
Where new neighbours arrive weekly  
As the old ones are moved out  
In a casket

But still  
They'll phone  
Hannah will call her mother dear  
To ask about some recipe  
Gossip about her mother-in-law  
Or arrange a sleepover for Jake  
So *they* can party

An invitation to the movies  
Or tea at the Mount Nelson  
Perhaps a theatre date  
Now *that* would be lovely  
Darling daughter

When there's no landline answer

Nor on my cell  
Which by then  
Would have been traded for  
Who knows?

They'll come looking  
And find me here  
*(play acting)*  
Weak but alive  
*(strong again)*

And I shall have to endure fresh rounds  
Of told-you-so's

More electric wire, mom!  
More bars, Helen!  
Higher walls  
Better beams  
Fiercer dogs

*(Sudden thought)*  
The dogs!  
Goodness! The dogs!  
What have they done with Ziggy?  
If they've harmed harmless Lentil...!

*(Gets onto her knees and calls softly as if under the door)*

Ziggy, Ziggy, Ziggy...  
Lentil!  
What am I thinking  
Lentil's deaf  
Ziggy...  
Have they locked them outside?  
Poor pups!  
They need to be fed at five

*(Paces around a bit more anxiously)*

I need to get out of here!  
I must get out of here!  
I will get out of here!

*Music, lighting to signal a change, that it's later.*

**GUILT**

*Tone: Slightly faster than the previous stanza, conflicted, hyper-ventilating at times*

These very scarves (*has a scarf or two that she plays with*)  
Such amateur chains  
Symbols of roads more travelled  
Sights more seen  
Tastes more tempted  
More heard sounds  
More touched emotions  
Than ever these raiders shall have

The mountains that beckoned  
Kilimanjaro  
Whistlers  
Himalayas  
Taking away my breath  
In exchange for their vanity vistas  
Yet have I to see Table Mountain  
From Khayelitsha  
Nyanga  
Delft

Symphonies have thrilled me in Seoul  
I've danced to jazz in Japan  
Harlem intrigued me with hip hop  
But I know no township rhythms  
Nor have woken to poverty's chimes

I've walked in genocide's footsteps  
Kigali  
Phnom Penh  
Auschwitz  
But still have my feet not trod  
The shame of Sharpeville  
Nor Soweto's sorrowful streets

I felt safe walking the Kruger  
Birdwatching in Central Africa  
Pursuing Rwandan gorillas  
But I've been saved and am safe from  
Vultures who prey on the innocent  
Hunger that roams with sharpened knives  
Desperation hunting with angry claws

At least

Till now

My life flashes before me

My mother's smile as I awake  
And close my eyes to sleep  
And in between the joyful face  
Of Nanny Dipuo  
Whose children lived with her mother  
And whose husband worked afar

My absent father working hard  
Our sometime weekend parent  
Cheering his sons playing rugby  
Indulging in backyard cricket  
Before retreating to his home office  
To think  
To plan  
To scheme  
How best to give us the life he thinks it's his to give

Mixed primary schooling in Troyeville  
(*wry smile*)  
Mixed as in boys and girls, that is  
Girls high school boarding in Grahamstown  
Physiotherapy at Cape Town University  
The closest I got to medicine  
There not being money enough  
To fund my doctor brothers both  
And girl me

I would have  
Should have  
Could have  
Pursued and claimed my own ambition  
To be the first woman doctor  
In our family  
Our street  
Our community  
My school

But to be my mother's nurse was  
The higher calling

Meeting Henry at varsity  
Leaving Henry in Cape Town to return

To Johannesburg in part  
To care for my ill mother  
A mother of the time  
Caring  
Giving  
Sacrificing  
And yet of another time  
Encouraging  
Motivating  
Inspiring me to  
Ambition  
To think big  
To see the world differently  
From the one made in the image of men  
White men

My first car  
Inherited from my god mother  
My mother's best friend  
Working in a hospital  
Being paid a salary  
Moving into my own flat  
Asserting my independence  
And yet my dependence  
Dipuo's daughter cleaning my flat  
Her son working the family garden  
Her husband poisoned by asbestos

Marrying Henry  
In my white dress  
With white roses  
In an all-white church with  
Dipuo's family at the back  
Smiling their white teeth smiles

Moving to Witbank  
Where Henry rose in the mining world  
While I gave birth to our first born Samuel  
Our tomboy Hannah

*Quieter, slower*

And Richard my not man-enough boy  
For this man world

Playing tennis with other white men's wives

While black men sang their way to work  
And back to their mono-sex hostels

I asked  
I questioned  
I shook my head  
At the gymnastic answers  
All variations on the theme  
“This is the way of the world  
There is little we can do”

And so we played tennis  
While black men sang their way to work  
And back to their mono-sex hostels

Head-hunted Henry moved us to Cape Town  
Where Nomsa entered our lives  
Along with her children  
Luvuyo  
Dirontso

And her extended family  
We bailed her brother-in-law  
For having no pass  
And bailed him again and again  
Till Henry found him a fake job  
With real money  
Which earned him an urban stamp

We visited such violence upon families  
Making criminals of wives longing for husbands  
Of husbands needing their children  
Of children wanting both parents

And now we decry a culture of absent fathers  
Of boy children with few good role models

I wonder about these raider boys  
Who modelled them?

My sibling brothers worked hard  
They worked long  
But no harder and no longer  
Than Nomsa dear  
Who had long reached her ceiling  
As a hewer of wood

A drawer of water  
Fulfilling our minority dream

Sometimes I lay awake at night  
When winter clouds shed their heavy burden  
Or summer heat forced sleep to flee  
I imagined walking in Nomsa's shoes  
Getting up before the sun rose  
So we could go to our respective places of lording  
Caring for our offspring  
While neglecting hers  
Cleaning up after us  
While living in official squalor  
Cooking for our nuclear family  
While nourishing an extended community

All the time singing her hymns  
Reciting her Bible verses  
Saying her silent prayers  
Never complaining  
Believing in a God that blessed her

Not seeming to mind a God that blessed white people more

*Looks "upstairs" as if at the thieves in her house*

Is this the present  
Feeding off the sumptuous  
Carcass of history?

What shall I say to my grandkids dear  
Desperately confused  
Caught between  
What should be  
And what is not

How proud I was to boast to my wide-eyed bookclub  
Of these young bloods mine  
Who raised their fists  
To demand that Rhodes must fall  
Who marched to parliament  
Gave of their time  
Their studies  
So that fees could fall  
And more escape poverty  
Through knowledge degrees

I so enjoyed the silence of the bookclub  
But I could hear their thoughts  
“Were these not barbarians  
Thugs  
Uncivilized youth  
Tearing down “our” institutions?”

Not easy labels to pin on my but-two generation

But then  
Things turned  
Former school friends became varsity foes  
Privilege prosecuted them  
Their home language  
Skin colour  
Surnames  
Testifying against them  
The sins of their parents  
And the parents before them  
Rendering them guilty  
For current inequity

The damage caused to  
Young hearts  
Young minds  
Nubile commitments  
May yet breed self-fulfilling prophecies  
As they retreat to own group affirmation

I hope note  
I truly trust not

Perhaps too sheltered  
They talk of gap years  
Working abroad  
Withdrawing from the heat of unwinnable local race wars  
Ancestral passports allowing them to travel  
Where others from this same land will  
Know only suspicion  
Walls  
Humiliation

They choose friends from  
Zimbabwe  
Rwanda



Zambia  
All refugees from black hate they say

This saddens me

Contemporary innocence  
Inherited guilt  
What burdens we have left them  
Perhaps we *should* have left  
It is we who have laden them with these unfair crosses

What would they do if they were here  
Now  
What would I have them do  
Fight?  
Defend their grandmother?  
This is what they would do  
Defend "us" against "them"  
When some of "us" have  
Made "them" so

Do not judge them harshly  
These grandchildren mine  
It is me  
It is I  
Who should be declared guilty

And if this be my sentence  
Who shall I call in mitigation  
The dignity of Dipuo  
Nomsa's nobility  
The grace of Gladys?

To say what?  
"She was a good madam"  
What else could they say?

*Reflectively*  
Power  
The twin of privilege

*Music to facilitate a transition*

**ANGER**

*General tone: Anger, outrage*

Damn the blue sky  
And the still green sea  
Damn the mountain  
And all of nature's beauty

For they hide the terrible truths  
That lurk  
Beneath the life-giving sun

Beguiled by winking sunsets  
Co-opted by blue skies and their nightly starry cousins  
We ignore  
Deny  
Turn blind eyes to  
Human misery breeding  
Human desperation

Legal violence begetting  
Violence more  
Official pain  
Birthing anger before  
Being set free to strike wherever  
Whoever it wills

Damn them  
Damn the race rulers past  
Who have brought us to this

Unwilling sacrifices  
To appease the gods of history  
Grown fat off the land  
Pampered  
Allowed free ranging ambition

Our once-drawers of water  
Now drawing blood  
Damn them!

Soul-less bodies in the service of privilege  
Apartheid's zombies  
Giving birth to monsters joined by an umbilical cord of  
Hopelessness  
Now returning to haunt us  
Arrest  
Prison and even

Death no longer matter  
When life has never mattered

Tricked by the false starting line of contemporary equity  
They wonder at being left behind by those  
Whose better-training  
More healthy nutrition  
Are reflected in their lithe bodies  
Their aero-dynamic clothing building their speed  
Spurred by starting blocks of  
Education  
Networks  
Language

High walls designed to keep us safe  
Sheltered  
Sightless  
From hungry vultures that roam our streets  
Now serve as screens behind which the  
Vultures pick at our bodies  
Our minds  
Our hearts

What will they do?  
What manual of cruelty will be referenced today?  
Will it be a hot iron across my body?  
Face and neck tattoos with a sharpened knife?  
“Blows to the head with a blunt instrument”  
Will they force me to my car  
Oblige me to draw my daily limit?

Will these compensate for past sins  
As if in the DNA of current generations reside  
The thirst for revenge  
Ubuntu but a white wish  
An abuser’s dream  
After centuries of visiting violence  
Upon black bodies  
Minds  
Spirits  
Hearts and  
Dignity

Damn these rulers new  
Who think it is *their* right  
Their turn to eat

For having freed the masses  
From the rulers by race

Who now care more for  
Their own stuffed stomachs  
Their vanity vehicles  
Their fashions foreign  
Than granting real agency  
For those who believe in them  
Damn them!

Brought in on waves of hope  
Carrying the expectations of a people denied  
But now ignited by visions of the possible  
A safer life  
A better life  
A longer life

Standing with Nomsa  
Queuing  
To make our marks together  
Madam and Domestic  
Living monuments to inherited  
Advantage and Handicap  
Power and Impotence  
Birthright and Birth wrong  
To herald in a new era  
Perhaps too late to change our lives  
And the states imposed by our recent past  
But to grant our children  
And to their children  
The opportunity to be fully human all

Emerging from our respective booths  
With wide smiles both  
And even some tears  
Having both made crosses alongside a face  
Hidden from us some twenty-seven years

“Let us build the future together  
And toast a better life for all South Africans”  
So ended Madiba’s victory speech  
So began another country

Damn them!  
Damn the frauds who made promises and delivered but noise!

Damn the corrupt who sold rich dreams for cheap backhands  
Damn the selfish who did not join the struggle to be poor!  
It's their turn to eat  
To gorge  
To get fat at the table of restricted opportunity  
While the rest are made cannibals all.  
Damn them!

Damn them!  
Damn my generation  
And the one coming after  
For too easily giving up

Watching  
For this was no longer our time  
But a time for others to lead  
To correct our wrongs  
Even to make mistakes

Withdrawing  
Our money having grown on the trees of apartheid  
Rooted in racism  
Watered by deliberate ignorance  
Fertilized by selfish blindness  
In our parallel world we can buy  
Better health  
Better education  
Better housing  
Better security  
Once separated by race  
Now separated by means  
We inhabit our infinitely better world  
Unencumbered by the burden of governing

Sneering  
Can you believe that  
Did you read this  
I told you so  
What do you expect  
Unbelievable!  
How do they get away with it  
This is Africa

Our polite  
Practiced smiles hiding our natural superiority  
We are not like them

The present  
These Blacks  
And we were not like them  
The past  
Those Afrikaners  
We only reaped  
And reap the fruits of both

Our parallel world  
Rooted in unfair advantage  
Now bearing richer fruits still  
Secured by booms  
By beams  
By electric fencing  
By walls  
By armed response

In this new world  
But not of it  
Damn us!

And damn them!  
Damn these uninvited guests  
Do they know my history?  
Is all they see my skin?  
I...am...Helen!  
Helen of Troyeville!  
I am NOT like all the rest  
How dare they?

What if  
What if they  
Should wreak violence between my legs  
God forbid!  
Across my breasts  
Leaving scars inside my head  
Depositing fear  
Anger  
Suspicion  
So that forever I will  
Expect the worst  
From anyone who bears their hue  
Will I become a them-fulfilling prophecy  
Judging on the base  
Of race?

Damn them!  
Damn them!!

Nay, damn me!  
Damn me for refusing to live like my neighbours  
For declining the invitation to fear  
For thinking  
This won't happen to me  
If I'm kind  
If I treat everyone with respect...

As if I stand outside of history

Damn me!

Damn it all!  
That it has come to this!

## **BARGAINING**

You false god of the rainbow nation  
Worshipped by the blind  
The deliberate denialists  
The want-to-believers  
Who refuse to acknowledge  
Let alone repent the past

Those who demand that its victims  
Get over apartheid  
After all  
Its more than twenty years hence

Move on  
Move forward  
They say  
While demanding to keep alive  
Their memories

*mockingly*  
"How dare they move Rhodes?"  
"How dare they change the name of my road?"

The living monuments  
Of our lifestyles  
Education  
Salaries

Our pension schemes  
Scream  
Apartheid still lives  
Unpalatable truths  
Yet we ask  
No  
Demand  
Reconciliation

Forget the past  
Move on  
Move forward we say  
While marking 100 years since the first world war  
Two hundred years since the Anglo-Boer war  
Three score and ten years since the holocaust

*Shakes her head.*

You false rainbow nation god  
If you really exist  
Then hear this agnostic's prayer

Should I live to tell this tale  
If no harm comes to me  
Should I only lose material things  
I still won't prostrate at your feet

But I'll also  
Not indulge ignorance and fear  
That parent prejudice

My ears will not heed hate  
My eyes will see no deed  
That root themselves in othering  
Without my tongue unleashed  
To slay the perpetrator foul

This I promise even if it robs me  
Of remaining friends  
Or alienates me from family dear

And you  
You false god of justice  
Parading in your fashionable cloak  
of equality before the law  
When we who have



Are more equal  
More able  
To reap un-justice

What do you want of me  
That I file charges  
Pursue my pounds of poverty's flesh  
Point them out in an i.d. parade  
It's him  
And him  
And maybe him  
And definitely maybe him  
For what does it matter  
When poverty all looks the same

Justice must prevail  
The law be upheld  
Our Civilization depends on it

Our Civilization  
(*snorts*)  
Our roads  
Our piped water  
Our books  
Our law  
Our noble values  
All built on the ignoble past of  
Slavery  
Racism

But still we do not see  
Still we do not feel  
We still believe we are right  
And only we  
And then we wonder  
Really wonder  
About why hate and anger and terror  
Surround us so?

What reason shall I offer  
If they ask why I should live  
Why they should not draw their knives  
Across my throbbing throat  
Nor put a bullet through my brooding brain  
Should I offer my silence  
For my life

I will not lay charges  
Not bear witness  
Should I plead innocence of the past  
When all around bears testimony  
To real and vicarious guilt

*As if in court*

I put it to you two young men  
That you do not seek jail time  
That you do not wish to tarnish your records  
That you still wish to make your mothers proud  
You are good people  
In bad circumstances

When you rang the bell at my gate  
And asked for work in exchange for some few rands  
I quietened the dogs  
And silenced the voices inside my head  
Shut out the screams of neighbours  
Friends  
Children  
Their cacophony of  
“Don’t let them in”

Empathy  
See people as people  
Treat them with respect  
With dignity  
Knowing that what you have  
Who you are  
Are accidents of history  
I could have been them  
They could have been me

You can wash my car  
Move those heavy garden pots  
Cut the grass  
Even though Shakespeare will be here on Friday  
To do exactly that

Sefako  
Monwabisi  
Those were the names you gave me  
(Wry smile)  
It could have been  
Surprise and

Serious?  
Such were the expressions on your faces  
When I let you in  
Though making a pointed stop at the  
Armed Response sign

You worked well  
In your amateur ways  
Just one cracked pot  
After all  
I could get another

I practiced my limited vocabulary  
“Uhlala phi?”  
“Ndiyavuya ukukwazi”  
“Enkosi”  
And Monwabisi you wanted to know  
“Iphi inldu yangasese?”

“Let them use the outside toilet”  
I heard my neighbours scream  
“Now you’re letting them drink out of your mugs?  
The same mugs you serve us with”  
My bookclub friends were having a fit  
I smiled as prejudice and fear  
Staged their plays inside my head

This was all going well

Until you drew your blade  
Sefako  
Until you picked up that brick  
Monwabisi

Were you practiced thus  
Or did opportunity make monsters of you?  
Your poor knotting of these scarves  
The debate about what to do with me  
Cloistering me in this toilet cell  
At first forgetting the key was on the inside  
These mitigate your practiced guilt  
Why settle for a promised hundred rand  
When more was on offer  
Though  
At a price

After you have taken what you will  
Will you just leave  
Or will you come back  
To silence my tongue that has tasted your names  
To gouge out my eyes that knows your faces  
To bludgeon my memory and rid it of these events

Should I plead and  
Beg  
Should I scream and  
Fight  
Or  
Should I be thankful  
To have lived this long  
For history bequeathed me  
A white skin  
A name  
A suburb

Should I be a willing sacrifice for the sins of the past  
An aged lamb to be slaughtered  
And mock the rainbow deities?

What can I trade  
My past  
My colour  
My privilege  
These are no currencies  
In the market of life and death

Perhaps death would be preferable  
To book club sympathies  
Expressed in racist slurs  
Told-you-so sneers  
With its tightening laager  
Around "us"

Death  
Be not proud  
When living could be a shame

## **DEPRESSION**

*Tone: Generally quiet, introspective, sad*

I've seen the work of the reaper grim

He's come to my door  
At least times four

He harvested by nature twice  
And then twice more he bloodied his scythe  
So should it be that my time has come  
I fear him not  
I've seen his work  
His best  
His worst  
And should these be his servants two  
May they be quick  
May they be true

I had a younger sister once  
Vivacious  
Bright  
Engaged  
The mother of my niece and nephews  
My friend  
My crutch in grief  
My mother confessor

And then with still ten years left of her allotted time  
The cruel reaper invaded her breasts  
Cancer-cells multiplied faster than a pyramid scheme  
Spread like a shack fire  
Fanned by a brutal south-easter through  
her gentle body  
Her dust now strewn along her favourite walk

Not five years after, he reaped grim again  
Henry the first and only husband of Helen nee Blakeway  
Lymphoma and leukemia conspired  
First to stab  
Then weaken  
And finally lay to rest  
A man of stature  
Standing  
Strength

This was the smiling reaper's nature period.  
Taking respite from his earlier violent ways

For before the century had turned  
His bloody scythe slew Nomsa's first-born son

We must break the cycle, Henry had said  
She worked for us  
And as so many women of her generation had done,  
And generations before and after  
She co-mothered a white woman's progeny

We must break the cycle, Henry had said  
Give her children the same chances our children have  
And so it was that Luvuyo and Dirontso  
Were schooled in suburbs  
Were the first in their extended family to attend university  
Were ideal candidates for the opportunities offered by a country  
Correcting its sordid past  
Exposing the lie  
That dark pigmentation meant inherent  
Deficiencies

Great careers beckoned both

But then one fateful day  
Luvuyo  
Twenty-seven years of age  
As many years on this earth as his hero was in prison  
A better human being you'd be hard-pressed to find  
Visited his mother in her township home

Having waved her goodbye  
About to drive off in his proud first car  
Three young men encircled him

Thirty-seven times they stabbed  
Thirty-seven angry wounds  
For what?

It broke our mother hearts

When black life matters little  
It follows that black lives should count for nought

Her other son  
My othered son

Safe at home  
Embraced by family  
Laagered by love

But othered at school  
At play  
At work  
For not being a man  
But a woman neither

Mocked  
Ridiculed  
His dignity and person  
Constantly violated

My othered son  
Then apple of his mother's eye  
Chose death  
Rather than a life  
Promised by 1994

But twenty-three years old  
He jumped from a mountain ledge  
Into the reaper's welcoming arms

A country is born  
A child  
Our child dies

Leaving a forever hollow in our hearts.  
The tears of a Nomsa  
As ready  
As salty as mine

Here lies our Richard  
Here lies our Luvuyo

Nomsa took comfort in her hymns  
In her Good Book  
In her belief in her God's will

I could so easily lay

But then  
How many more mothers  
Would have holes in their hearts  
Because of young men  
Doing to other men  
And women

Young and old  
Straight and gay  
Poor and wealthy  
What had been done to ours

These two young men  
Now raiding my house  
Sowing morbid thoughts

Could have been beneficiaries  
Of our education fund  
For sons of fatherless families

Or interns in my son's entrepreneur programme

Perhaps participants in the leadership courses my daughter sponsors

Not stuff to change the world I know  
But something to change the worlds of a few young men

What if these two should be caught  
Some mothers' sons  
Some grandmothers' pride  
Already sentenced to a life of violence  
A cycle of survival  
Crime  
Prison  
Hollow freedom  
Survival  
Crime  
Prison  
Hollow freedom

Thanks to history gross  
Unfair  
My grandsons  
Will never know  
This cycle's curse

## **ACCEPTANCE**

Death will come to us all  
I have lived a full and mostly happy life  
A year or two in seventy candles burned  
I've lived at the invitation of Death



Expecting Natural Causes  
The death of privilege

Hoping to part this world before  
Having to mourn the loss of  
One child more  
Or any of the children whom they bore  
Please spare me that!

I shall depart in peace  
Leave without fuss

Not like dear friend Gloria  
Suckled for weeks by  
Respirators  
Sustained by drips and pipes  
Desperate to stay in this world  
Why?  
What unfinished business  
What unspent or unrequited love  
What unsaid truths  
Keep you here?

I watched her often  
Holding her hand  
Screaming at her in my head  
Go, woman, go!  
Donate the oxygen you consume  
Make someone happy  
Why prolong your agony?  
Is your heavenly mansion not ready yet?  
Have the Italian tiles not arrived?  
Are they still paving your street with gold?

The worms await their aged feast  
The daisies your fertilizing flesh  
The soil your organic donations  
And yet here you lie  
Struggling for breath  
Your family wishing you would leave  
For your sake  
And for theirs

That won't be me

No wheelchair future

No care-giver  
No old-age home  
I've booked my place  
In Switzerland

When Terminal Disease first hints  
It will be to the terminal with me  
A one-way flight  
A walk along the lake  
Some chocolate  
Wine  
Perhaps a cigar

And then  
Nothing

But even if death shall come today  
By some instrument  
Sharp or blunt

Write it as my epitaph  
Here lies Helen of Troyeville

Maybe not the death she wished for  
Nor the life that she would have chosen

It was what it was

A divided past  
That unjustly bequeathed her  
Privilege  
Opportunities  
An inheritance  
Denied to a million  
And millions more

A present where  
She needed no god to do the right thing  
No religion to guide her  
She lived by no book

Just eyes that would see  
Ears that heard  
A heart and a mind keeping each other open  
In her quest  
To be ever more human

Arrested by the past  
Paroled into a present  
Where pessimism and optimism  
Collide in endless battle  
Set free  
To make a difference  
In someone's  
And another's  
And yet another's worlds

Just tiny ripples in the ocean of life  
But ripples nevertheless  
That perhaps, one day, would turn the tide  
And tip the point for most  
Towards a better, longer, safer life

Whatever happens  
Forgive Sefako  
Forgive Monwabisi  
As I would have them forgive me  
For their lives  
And the lives of their parents  
And their parents' lives

And I would rest in peace.