

HELEN OF TROYEVILLE

**A play by
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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 man 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 Balmains

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
Withdrawning 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
Queueing
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 since 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.