

Writer's Block

A Play by Mike Van Graan

All Rights Reserved

About the play

The play is written as a solo piece for a woman actor in her early 50s.

The character – Terry Rankin - is a single, South African-born academic in her early fifties, who now teaches African literature and creative writing at an American institution, while also having a (struggling) creative practice as a writer herself.

Thematically, the piece explores a range of themes to do with truth, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Setting

The play is set in the USA in 2012 with the final scene in South Africa, 2014.

Much of the play is set in the consulting rooms of Terry's therapist, Simon. Sometimes she breaks out of the storytelling mode on the couch, to enact certain scenes.

Character

Terry Rankin was born in South Africa in the late 50s/early 60s. She spent most of her life in South Africa, doing her schooling and university education there. She was engaged in anti-apartheid activities during her student days as a member of the National Union of SA Students (NUSAS). She worked part-time in the fledgling trade union movement in the early 80s, and left South Africa to do post-doctoral studies in 1997. After completing her studies, she was offered a job in the US, where she now teaches.

Audio-visuals and sound

It is recommended that a sound track is created to supplement/complement the script.

Terry is speaking to her shrink, Simon.

I thought I was dying.
My heart was beating harder and faster than anything I've experienced before.
I struggled to breathe.
My hands were sweaty.
I felt dizzy...I had to hold onto a rail so I didn't fall down.
My first thought was...I'm having a heart attack.
It felt like...forever. But it must have been less than...fifteen seconds. Or the time it took from the ground to the eighth floor.
It started almost as soon as the doors closed.
It was just me. I've done this for nine years now...taking the lift to my office.
That was the first time it happened.

I pressed the emergency button.
But the lift just kept going.
When it stopped and the doors opened...I don't know what I looked like but it must have been pretty scary for the students waiting to get into the lift.
I remember stuttering something ridiculous like "I don't want to die..."
It was a girl and a guy. She kept the door open while he tried to help me out.
I was shaking. I think he was pretty scared too.
I remember him yelling "Call 911! Someone call 911!"
It was like being in a movie.

Then I had this most comforting thought.
My life didn't flash before me. It didn't.
No Kruger Park happy families.
No Jewish Mary in the primary school nativity play.
No high school debating team.
No Student Representative Council at varsity.
No fiction prize.
No post-doctoral studies in the U.S.
No creative writing teaching post here in New York.
And...if my life wasn't flashing before me...I wasn't dying, right?
Either that or having a life review during a near-death experience is a bunch of bollocks.

I know now that I was having a panic attack...but *then*...I really thought I was going to die.
I didn't have to teach that day, but I did have to see some students about their writing projects.
It was surreal. I heard myself talking to them, but it felt like I was somewhere else.

I've read up on panic attacks since.
I know I have to breathe deeply if I feel it coming on.
And no, I don't smoke.
Yes, I do coffee, but I wouldn't say I'm addicted. Maybe three or four cups a day.
But never after six in the evening. If I *have* to, then it's decaf.
And I've gone back to yoga.
So...I'm doing all the right things, Simon.

But then...this morning. It happened again. And I couldn't stop it.
The weird thing is...it was in the same place. In the lift. Just after the doors closed.
My GP – after the first time - suggested Xanax or Valium.
She says these bring immediate relief.
But I would rather not deal with this with drugs.
Which is why I called you.

What's going on, Simon? I need your help.

(Sighs deeply. Beat, listens to Simon asking her to describe the lift)

It's just a lift. Sorry...an elevator. Old South African habits die hard.
It's a normal elevator. It's in one of the older buildings on campus, so it's probably
slower than those built more recently. Steel.

(Closes her eyes as she tries to remember what the lift looks like)

There's a rail on either side, but not at the back. Maybe two metres deep, three
across. Panels on both sides...with twelve buttons for twelve floors.

No mirrors like in corporate lifts.

Just a normal elevator.

Beat. Simon asks her about any anxieties she associates with lift.

Like I said, I've had the same office for the last nine years.
And I've been using those elevators without any problems.
There are two. Next to each other. They're exactly the same.
Both times...I think it happened in the elevator on the right.
I was alone.
On both occasions. Yes.

Beat.

No, I've never been harassed in a lift. Maybe flirted with, but not harassed.
No bad experiences. If anything, people are often friendly. You get to know the
faculty, the students...who use the elevator.
I've never been stuck in a lift.
The worst I've had is someone spilling some coffee over me.
Hardly panic attack material.

Beat, as Simon asks a question.

What do you mean "before"? Before I came to the States? That was fifteen years
ago.

I don't remember any harassment.

Or being stuck in a lift.

Things worked in Johannesburg. Generally....

She stands up suddenly, having had a recollection.

Oh my God!

(Repeats it slowly as she steps forward)

Oh...my...God!

1984...John Vorster Square.

Lights change as Terry recites a poem.

He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He hanged himself
He slipped on a piece of soap while washing
He fell from the ninth floor
He hanged himself while washing
He slipped from the ninth floor
He hung from the ninth floor
He slipped on the ninth floor while washing
He fell from a piece of soap while slipping
He hung from the ninth floor
He washed from the ninth floor while slipping
He hung from a piece of soap while washing

It's a poem I use in my creative writing class. By Chris van Wyk.

May he rest in peace.

It's a satirical comment on the explanations offered by security police for the deaths in apartheid detention. Like Steve Biko's.

But it sums up the thoughts going through my head when I was being taken to the tenth floor of this notorious police station.

Section 50 of the Suppression of Communism Act.

Indefinite detention for interrogation purposes.

I was deemed a threat to national security. Little suburban me.

Little suburban me, a junior lecturer, doing my Masters degree in African Literature at the University of Witwatersrand.

Little suburban me...engaged in adult literacy training for a trade union.

A mostly black trade union.

With a strong anti-apartheid focus.

Captain Coetzee on my left. Warrant Officer Van Schalkwyk on my right.

The lift doors open. We enter.

Van Schalkwyk presses the button for the infamous tenth floor.

I try to be strong. I want to be brave. But I feel the tears damming up.

Waiting for the sluice gates to open.

I'm angry.

Angry that they have this power.

Angry that helping others is deemed a threat to national security.

I'm angry that I'm fearful. Nervous. That courage has deserted me.

This is the enemy.

I must not be weak.

This is the enemy.
There shall be no compromise.
This is the enemy.
They will try to divide us.
This is the enemy.
They will do their damnedest.

Others have survived.
I will too!

We arrive on the tenth floor
I ask to use the bathroom
They tell me to wait
I first have to complete a form
Name. Sex. Age. Race.
They expect me to say "White"
I write "Human" in wry, small defiance.
I ask again.
They make me wait still
While they stand around in oppressive silence.
Till I can hold it in no longer
And my waters break all over their cheap office floor
To their mocking jeers
Which draw a further audience of their laughing, disparaging, contemptuous peers

My shame not nearly enough for them
They call an office cleaner
Black and in her seventh decade
To clean up after me
I search for sympathy in her dark eyes
But they avoid mine
Focusing only on her demeaning task at hand
Our mutual humiliation complete
Albeit in different forms.

From this point, she walks round and round in a rectangle, imitating the size of the cell in which she was kept.

My home for the next seventeen days is a two by three metre cage
They keep me because they can
Notwithstanding the efforts of my businessman father
My university principal
Even my long forgotten rabbi
With a 24-seven light burning as my ever-present companion

They take turns in firing questions
Captain Coetzee always the most aggressive

Walks around the "cell" in the opposite direction.

Who funds the union?
Do you meet the ANC when you travel?
What's in it for you?
You have the most privileged of lives
And you support the total onslaught against our country?

Changes direction again

Are you a communist?
Israel supports us with weapons.
With nuclear technology.
With military training.
Are you against your own people too?
Why are you doing this?

Walks slowly towards the audience

Doing what?
Teaching people to read, to write?
Informing them of their legal rights?
Supporting their organisation to defend their interests?

Why do I do it?
I do it for Pumeza Madlala
So a single mother of three
Will not be trapped by a primary school education
I do it for Philip Masoga
For a brilliant leader to do even better
I do it for Oupa Vilakazi
Whose extended family of nine depend on him
I do it because it is right
Because it is wrong that a few should have so much at the expense of the many

Am I too white to be concerned with justice?
Am I too Jew to feel others' pain?
Am I too woman to know others' fears?

What would these brutes know in their world of white and black?
With their doctrine of superiority
Their fear of other
Their belief of their own lies
So that they would go home to play with their children
Walk their dogs
Make love to their wives
Eat, drink and laugh with their friends
After beating a black human being blue
Delivering a tortured truth
Determining who lives, who dies

With my mind I know that they too are human

But my heart clouds them in a mist of hate
And it is hate that drives me
Hate that sustains me
Till I am released

She sits down, talking again to Simon.

Well done, Simon. You helped me make the connection. Elevators. Confined spaces.

Beat

You must be wondering though what triggered this. What brought it on? Nearly thirty years later....

Sighs.

About ten days ago, I received an email from Captain Coetzee. He's retired now. He's dying. Lung cancer. I'm not surprised, the way they smoked. He's reaching out. He's had a religious experience. Before he meets his maker, he wants the forgiveness of those he wronged.

I haven't answered him.

I'm thinking about it.

I still carry some of the anger, some of the hate of that time.

I don't know what to do.

I've been trying to work through it with my creative writing class.

Terry addresses the audience as if they are her sixteen, post-graduate, creative writing students. As a teacher, Terry is animated, creative, engaging and humorous.

For today's writing exercise, I'd like us to explore the theme of "forgiveness". In the past, we've spoken quite a lot about context. The themes we deal with as writers need to be explored within particular conditions. Macro circumstances like the social environment, the physical surroundings, the state of politics and economics, even the geography and climate could be factors that influence our stories. And then there's the micro: personal histories and relationships...how these interface with each other, the macro with the micro, the personal with the political, the individual with the collective.

To get our creative juices flowing, perhaps we can start with an associative exercise. I want you to express the first word that comes to mind if I say... "forgiveness".

Terry repeats the words that her students call out, using her smile or facial expressions to express how she feels about their comments.

"Forget", yes. Forgive and forget. Though I'm not really sure how possible – or even how desirable – that is.

"Sin". Right...forgiveness of sins as in a Christian religious paradigm.

(encouragingly) Don't think about it...just say it. Forgiveness...or forgive.

“Hurt”. Sure, there’s often hurt involved when forgiveness needs to take place.

“God”, yes. If you’re religious...

“Unfaithfulness”...for some, that would be a reason for the need for forgiveness.

Okay, keep writing down other word associations that come to mind...

While you do that, I’d like to move on to some quotes on the theme of forgiveness which my research assistant – Mr Google – has found for me.

Terry takes out a “remote control” and points to the “data projector”.

Mahatma Gandhi says:

On screen projection: (Terry reads the quote)

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”
- Mahatma Gandhi

Terry repeats it.

“The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.”

Here’s one from Martin Luther King, who, like Gandhi, was an advocate of non-violent action.

On screen projection: (whenever there’s a projection, Terry reads the quote, but not the name at the bottom of the quote)

“Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”
- Martin Luther King

What do you think of these quotes? I want you to think critically about them. Are they just nice-sounding, trite comments, or do they have some substance?

I really like this next one from Oscar Wilde.

On screen projection: (Terry reads the quote)

“Always forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.”
- Oscar Wilde.

With quotes like that, I think Oscar Wilde would have enjoyed Twitter. And he would have had thousands of followers.

Forgiveness generally takes place between people. It’s an individual-to-individual exercise that some thinkers believe have as much to do with changing the person who is forgiven, as the person who is doing the forgiving.

That’s what the next two quotes are about:

On screen projection: (Terry reads the quotes)

“Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself”.

- Suzanne Somers

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and discover that prisoner was you.”

- Lewis B. Smedes.

True? Or trite nonsense? I'd like to hear your thoughts later.

Having said that forgiveness is personal and individual, there are others who believe that it has macro, political relevance too.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu - as you know - is from my country of origin, and received an honorary doctorate from this university three years ago. He believes that:

On screen projection: (Terry reads the quote)

“In forgiving, people are not being asked to forget....Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. It means...drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens our very existence. It is not just spiritual. It is real politics.”

- Desmond Tutu

“Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done....” He says, it does *not* mean forgetting, like someone suggested earlier.

Archbishop Tutu headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – or the TRC as it was called - which was set up by President Mandela to deal with the human rights violations of the apartheid era. Those who perpetrated abuses were given an opportunity to come clean, publicly to confess what they had done, and in exchange – and provided they were deemed to be telling the truth – they would be pardoned, and not be criminally charged.

So, in this case, the very idea of forgiveness was built into a political process that was designed to bring healing to a divided society...to help it move forward.

Can you imagine that kind of forgiveness...victims and perpetrators coming face to face...the perpetrators admitting what they had done wrong, saying they're sorry...and the victims having to find it in themselves to forgive, when they themselves had been violated, even through the loss of someone close to them?

I was trying to think of what an American equivalent would be...perhaps former slaves and slave-owners meeting face to face, with the slave-owners admitting they had committed human rights violations against those whom they held as slaves? And then agreeing to pay them compensation....But that is far away from our contemporary experience.

Beat.

How many of you know the story of Amy Biehl?

She nods as she counts three or four hands.

This story can be supplemented by visuals of Amy, her parents, etc, depending on the choice of the director.

Amy was an American Fullbright scholar who was studying in Cape Town in 1993...this was a year before the historic 1994 elections that led to Nelson Mandela being inaugurated as the country's first black President. One day, she was taking friends home to Guguletu, a black township in Cape Town. A mob surrounded the car, and pulled out Amy. They beat and stabbed her to death. Four men found guilty of her murder were associated with the militant Pan Africanist Congress, which had broken away from the ANC, believing that Africa was for black Africans and that there was no space for white people. Amy's killers were all freed as part of the Truth and Reconciliation process in 1998. Her parents – Linda and Peter - travelled to South Africa where they set up the Amy Biehl Foundation...to work with marginalised black youths...to discourage the kind of violence that ended Amy's life. They met the young men who murdered their daughter. Subsequently, they employed two of Amy's murderers at the Foundation. This is a true story....

Beat.

Would you have been able to do that...if you were Amy's parents? I'm not sure that I could have.

Beat.

I'd like you to reflect on the following question: What may be situations in which you would find it hard, if not impossible, to forgive?

Imagine that you're the family of one of the young children killed in the Sandy Hook Elementary school mass shooting...and the gunman's family asks to meet you, to forgive him?

Beat.

Or imagine that you survived the attack on the Twin Towers, but you lost both your legs and are now confined to a wheelchair. The brother of one of the pilots of the planes that crashed into the building finds you, and comes to ask for forgiveness on behalf of his family...would you?

Beat.

Or a policeman wrongly shoots dead your son or your brother...would you be able to forgive him? Would the passage of time make a difference?

Terry repeats her earlier question...

What may be situations in which you would find it very hard, if not impossible, to forgive?

Terry sits down, back in Simon's consulting rooms, and talks to Simon, telling him what happened in her class.

I had them each write down three answers to the question, and then sifted through these. At the top of their "unforgiveable" responses was rape...either being raped or having someone close to them being raped. Most of my students are women, so that makes sense.

Another theme in the top five was paedophilia; many thought that the sexual abuse of children by adults is unforgiveable!

Quite a few felt very strongly about the abuse of animals...whether in a domestic situation or in medical experiments. Or for fashion. I found that interesting. It took it out of the realm of human relations...some people felt closer to animals than to the humans who abused them.

Then there was a lot of heated discussion about unfaithfulness in a relationship and when this might be forgivable or not. Some felt that it's more unforgivable when a partner is unfaithful with one of your own family members or with a good friend, than if he or she were unfaithful with a relative stranger.

And the fifth one was the deliberate death of a loved one. Some said they could forgive someone if they killed a loved one in an accident. Others said they would be less likely to forgive the person in such a case if he or she was drunk, or went through a red traffic light or something like that, or if they were somehow directly responsible for the death of their loved one.

I remember, that night, I dreamt that I had detained Captain Coetzee.

Terry gets up and acts out her interrogation of Captain Coetzee in her dream. "Coetzee" is stage centre, and she circles him, faces up to him, comes up behind him as appropriate.

Take off your shirt.

(firmer) Take...off...your...shirt!

(shouts) I said take off your goddamn shirt!

Your shirt!

Not your tie!

Keep your tie...in case you'd like to hang yourself!

Now...your trousers. Off!

Beat.

Keep your belt.

Socks, shoes, off!

Beat.

You can keep your laces.

Beat

You're shivering.

Good. Let me open the window

For some fresh winter air.

If you'd like to jump out...be my guest.

The families of detainees are waiting ten stories down.
And they're not in forgiving mode!

Beat.

You're wetting yourself!

How disgusting!!

A grown man....

Not so brave now hey...without your gun, your friends, your turf.

Take it off. Your underpants. Take it off.

Clean it up.

Clean up your piss.

Beat.

Lick it up!

That's the only liquid you'll be getting for the next 48 hours!

So...if you want to leave it for later...

(As if looking, and then pointing, at his groin area, intrigued at first and then bursts out laughing disparagingly)

Is that it?

Is that all you have?

Is this why you do this job, beating, assaulting, intimidating, terrorising...

To make up...for that?

Bursts out laughing.

Your poor wife...!

Beat

What did you say?

I can't hear you...speak up. And stop crying, dammit!

You're sorry...

Sorry for what?

For peeing on the floor?

For having a small dick?

For being born?

You think a general sorry can make up for the particular pains you inflicted?

Sorry...for...what?

Are you sorry for Steve's death?

Not Biko. Berkman.

Steve Berkman was the love of my life.

Beat

You don't remember...

Then let me remind you

You took great pleasure telling me that my "boyfriend" was sleeping around

Showing me pictures of Steve with other women

Trying to break me with your notion of morality

Even while you were engaged in some brutal, immoral acts yourself

Believing that your bourgeois idea of monogamy

Would somehow destroy my commitment to what I believed to be right

"What's a nice girl like you doing with a bunch of communists?"

"What does your daddy say about the bad influence of Steve Berkman on his daughter?"

"That Steve is going to get you into so much trouble"

Beat

You're...sorry?

You may not have wrapped the rope around the beam
May not have strung the rope around his neck.
Did not kick the chair from under him
But...
Beat
You'd like a cigarette?
Here, have five!
And five more!
Have the whole box.
I have cartons for you.
Smoke all you want.
No food. No water. Just your own piss. And cigarettes.
That's what you'll live on.
That's what you'll die from.
From multiple detainees in your police cells
To multiplying cancer cells
Perhaps there is a God after all.

Terry sits down on the couch in Simon's rooms, giving the impression of exhaustion.

What do I make of my dream?
It would be scary...if I could do something like that.
And yet...cathartic.
What do *you* make of it?

Beat
Come on, Simon! I don't just pay you to ask *me* questions! Surely you must have some insights from what I'm saying...! That you can share with me. You didn't spend six years studying to ask "so what do *you* think?" Jesus!

Beat
I'm not asking you to interpret my dream!
You're not bloody Moses or Joseph or whoever...!
I'm asking what you think!
Do you think I'm capable of torture?
Do you think the dream reflects what I'd like to do if I had the power to do it?
Is it my unconscious saying how much un-forgiveness I have inside me?
Is it just a dream? And means nothing?
I don't know!
You're the bloody expert!

Beat
How's my writing?
After all that...you want to know how my writing's going?
Well, it's not going.
It hasn't "gone" for the last few years.
Clearly, the Muse is still locked up.
Detained! Tortured! Silenced!

Terry gets up. Spotlight is focused on her as she recites a poem.

Where will she lead
And where shall I follow

Slave-like

Truth hurts
Truth heals
She binds
She frees

With her halo
She beckons
Speak truth

With her sword
She calls
Write truth

I follow
Haltingly
Intimidated
Scared
Excited

Now I see her
Now I don't
As she
Half-opens
Closes
Opens
Half-closes
Doors

Then spawns
Hundreds
Thousands
Millions of
Truths

His truth
Her truth
Their truth
Her truth
His truth
Their truth
The truth according to...

Still she makes me follow
In search of
The Truth
My truth

Under whose truth shall I shelter today
Captured by which camera
Held hostage by which edit
Beamed by which satellite
Manufactured by which
Truth Fairies

The whole truth?
Nothing but part-truth?
White truth?
Black truth?
Rich truth?
Poor truth?
The vain truth of the victor?
The scarred truth of the vanquished?

Truth
Occupied
Truth
Embedded
Revolting
Truth
Truth
Unverified

The truth is
I am a writer

Deny me
Forgive me
Reject me
Embrace me

Do as you wish

Still will I need follow
Where Truth leads.

Lights change from spotlight to general light. Terry is back in Simon's consulting rooms.

That was the last thing I wrote...speak truth, tell truth, write truth, blah, blah, blah.
The real truth is...I'm not ready to speak truth.

They say "the truth will set you free". But that's...bullshit. Truth's overrated. It also hurts. It alienates...scars!

We want to be loved. To be accepted. So we don't always say...we don't always speak truth.

I remember Steve arguing with his father. He didn't get that Steve wanted to avoid military conscription and spend time in Zimbabwe. He said that Steve enjoyed the privileges of South Africa, so he had a duty to protect the country. He couldn't make the connection between the lifestyles of white people on the one hand, and the poverty of black South Africans on the other.

He didn't want to hear the truth, least of all from Steve. They didn't speak to each other for years. And then when he wanted to...Steve was gone.

The longer I'm away from South Africa, the less I feel able to write about it. That country is a gift to writers...fifteen years away from it though, and the Muse goes into exile.

This country's been good to me. Great academic stimulation. I really enjoy my teaching post. It's very comfortable. But I feel so complicit...being here. I'm in the belly of the beast...like I was as a white South African in the apartheid era. Yet I struggle to write here. About here. Speaking truth to American power...what if my students are alienated? What if the university doesn't like what I write? Should I write under my own name? There's so much anxiety about speaking truth now...lest you land up on some national security database with all of its consequences.

I encouraged my students to immerse themselves in the Occupy Movement, (*smiles*) as part of their work. They had to write about their experience, but they could choose to be someone else. They could be a policeman, a banker, passers-by, protestors, journalists, homeless people...whatever.

Beat

I have this recurring image...the 99% marching on the really rich 1% of Americans and, as they get closer, the 1% says to the 99% that they should look behind them. When they do, they see 80% of the world marching on America, wanting to share in its wealth and its material consumption. The 99% get anxious. They don't have what the 1% has, but they have a lot more than 80% of the world, which they will lose if the 80% have their demands met for a more just world. So the 1% dishes out guns to the 99% to defend America against 80% of the world. 100% America against 80% of the world, and the 1% gets richer, because their 99% is better off than the rest of the world.

I'm not sure that anyone wants to hear what I have to say. Or maybe I'm struggling with how to say it.

As for Palestine and Israel...I'm not even thinking of going there. It's impossible to have a rational conversation about that situation. I've seen highly intelligent people just lose it...completely! Discussions that start with logic and reason descend into emotional madness within minutes.

So...what to write about?

Beat as Simon says "What about love?"

Love? Write about love?

Let me tell you a love story, Simon.

Terry sits on a bar stool, with a spotlight on her.

It's twenty minutes past three in the morning. There's a loud banging at the front door. Torches are shone through the bedroom window. Carol wakes with a start. She gently shakes Tony's shoulder, but he, too, is already awake. They hear the hard-edged voices: "Police!" "Open up!"

They look at each other without saying a word, but their eyes say "this is it". They hug one another tightly. Tony pulls on his jeans and a T-shirt; he turns on the lights and opens the door to a posse of policemen.

Carol joins Tony in the kitchen while eighteen policemen undertake a meticulous search of their house. Tony offers Captain Erasmus, the policeman in charge, a cup of coffee. Initially surprised, he recovers his composure as his colleagues watch for his response, "I don't drink communist coffee," Erasmus sneers.

"We have ours black, but you can have yours white, Captain", Tony responds gently. Erasmus leaves the kitchen, swearing under his breath.

Tony and Carol are university academics. But they've devoted much of their free time to the independent trade unions that are mobilising resistance to the basic premise of apartheid: the exploitation of cheap black labour for the benefit of a white minority. Four of their colleagues have been detained in recent weeks. Tony's movements are being monitored by men in non-descript, but official vehicles. They know that their phone is bugged. They were expecting a police raid at best, lengthy detention-without-trial at worst. Both have kept ready a bag of clothing, basic toiletries and a Bible, the only book they would be allowed to read if detained.

The police look for anything that could be used to show that they had acted illegally – even the possession of banned literature would do. Carol and Tony are too smart for that; they've ensured that their computers and bookshelves are free of any incriminating material.

The security police do not take Tony that day. Instead, they detain Carol under the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act. The Act defines communism so broadly as to include any action to bring about economic, political, industrial or social change in the Republic of South Africa through "disturbance or disorder".

Carol and Tony have been in a steady, but open relationship for more than three years. They are part of a group of mainly white activists intent on finding alternative ways of living, relating and acting to the dominant apartheid structures and Calvinist morality.

Publicly, they are as in love as their alternate ideology allows them to be; privately, the intensity of their feelings for each other is heightened by the constant threat of forced separation because of their political activism.

A week into her detention, Captain Erasmus engages Carol in conversation: "You must be wondering why we didn't detain your boyfriend, Tony...it's because he works for us."

Carol bursts out laughing; the thought of her lover, the highly respected academic activist being an informer for the security police, is too ridiculous to consider. As if expecting her response, Captain Erasmus lists three items of information about the union and about her activities that he says could only have come from Tony, but which Carol knows could have been sourced from elsewhere. Erasmus mentions a holiday which Tony and Carol undertook to Lesotho, and where they met leaders of the ANC in exile; a "holiday" which Erasmus says was paid for by the security police.

Erasmus invites Carol to consider working for them too. She refuses.

By the time she is released ten days later, rumours of Tony's alleged betrayal of his comrades and the union have spread. Notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary and only very flimsy circumstantial evidence against him, he is ostracised, fired from the union, suspended from the university pending an investigation, and isolated from their circle of activist friends.

Deeply disillusioned with the lack of support from his comrades, disgraced by the unproven rumours and depressed that all his adult work has come to nought...Tony hangs himself.

Music interlude. Terry sits again on the couch in Simon's consulting rooms.

As I teach my students, Simon, themes happen in contexts. Write about love you say...that was my love story. Tony was Steve. Erasmus is Captain Coetzee. Carol? That's me.

It was the worst of times.

Terry limbers up, preparing to run. As she speaks the next few paragraphs, she alternates between sprinting, slow motion and jogging.

I took up running to deal with it.
I'd never run before. Not recreationally.
But then, I'd never lost someone close to me.

Jogging

I ran away from friends, from comrades who, believing that Steve had betrayed them, betrayed him instead.
How could they?

Why did they not see that this was a ploy by the apartheid government to sow division?

The same accusations could have been levelled at them.

Self-preservation mattered more than loyalty.

Friendship was sacrificed on the altar of mistrust.

I ran to give release to my anger.

Sprinting in a different direction

Anger at comrades and friends who expressed their support in song,

And their betrayal in whispers.

Anger at the union for not even giving Steve a chance to defend himself

Anger at the university for its political expediency

Anger at Steve's father for not supporting his son earlier

Anger at Coetzee for his role in Steve's death.

Anger at myself for not seeing it coming

Slow motion, heading in yet another direction

How could the world still be turning when my world has stopped?

How dare everyone continue with their business when I am numbed?

How could others smile, even laugh while I was in pain?

Why did everyone seem so fulfilled, when I was hollowed out?

We had given our all to the struggle for justice in our country

And now, we had been done the most grave injustice!

Terry collapses onto the sofa in Simon's consulting rooms.

Two years ago, I received a letter from Philip Masoga.

He was a leader in the union in which Steve and I worked.

He was now the Minister of Labour.

The ministry was about to move into a new building which had been specifically built for them.

At a cost of tens of millions of dollars.

They had decided to name the new library in the building after Steve.

In recognition of the work that he had done in the union movement.

Of which the Minister himself was a product.

They wanted me to say give a speech at the opening of the library.

I was in two minds.

Was this too little, too late?

Was it a way of honouring and acknowledging Steve?

Was it at last a public admission of his innocence?

When Captain Coetzee appeared at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, he confessed that they had spread the false rumour that Steve had been a police informer.

It was a minor entry in a catalogue of much greater atrocities which Coetzee was testifying about.

So...it did not get much public attention or newspaper coverage.

I had left the country for post-doctoral studies a few months before, delighted to have been there through the period of the elections and the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela.

But I was cynical about the TRC and the role, if any, it would play either in laying bare the truths about human rights violations, or in moving the country forward in terms of reconciliation between the broader beneficiaries and victims of apartheid.

It was a huge relief to hear of Coetzee's confession.

But it also brought back so many feelings of anger.

At the total meaninglessness of the loss of Steve's life.

At those who questioned his innocence.

Those who simply believed the apartheid's lies about him.

There were some from our old circle who sent messages, apologising for doubting Steve.

On the odd occasion when I returned to see family – my mother and sister still live there – I get together with some of them.

It gets less and less awkward.

It's interesting to hear their increasing disillusionment with where the country's going.

Many of them feel that the ideals for which they struggled

The vision they had for what the country would be after the defeat of apartheid

Those have been betrayed.

I keep wanting to remind them...

Like they betrayed Steve.

I declined Minister Masoga's invitation

With some polite excuse about the timing clashing with an important period in our academic calendar

I couldn't just stand there and mouth a few empty words.

Well, I *could*, but I wouldn't want to.

Not in honour of Steve's memory.

There are more unemployed people in South Africa now than when we worked for the union in the eighties.

Of those who have jobs, most earn less than \$300 a month.

South Africa is now one of the most unequal societies in the world.

That's not what Steve fought for.

So to have his name on a multi-million dollar building to house a Ministry of Labour...

I didn't think so.

"Speak truth!" That's what Steve would say.

I'm just not sure that they would want to hear it from me.

A white woman...

A white woman who's lived nearly a third of her life abroad

You know what also hurts?

There are many who *were* apartheid spies and informers and who are now senior members of government.

And that's just all been covered up.

Which makes Steve's death even more meaningless.

Beat, as Simon asks Terry a question along the lines of "Are you seeing someone now?"

You mean, am I in a relationship with someone?

Sighs deeply.

I wish.

There've been flings, one-night stands, even the possibilities of something ongoing.
But could I ever love someone?

Could I ever say "I love you"

Without feeling like I'm betraying Steve again?

I don't know.

I haven't been able to. Till now.

He still haunts me!

Consideration to be given to the next sequence being done with Terry dancing and Simon and Garfunkel's song "Fifty ways to leave your lover"

I have a drink with Jack and it seems to go well

Then I have this thought

He's not as smart as Steve

What if I get bored?

Josh invites me for dinner

And he's as bright as a button

Able to talk about anything under the sun

But oh, so lacking in the humour in which Steve excelled

Aaron's funny and clever

But he's not as tall as Steve

And so it became clear

Any suitor had to be at least a head taller than me

Then there was Paul

Intense and earnest

Not as chilled as Steve

I kept walking on eggshells

Adam was great

We could probably have made things work

If it weren't for his mother

A dominant presence in his life

He was unable to set boundaries

Unlike Steve

I close my eyes when making love with Thomas

And slowly an image of Steve's face appears

Gentle, smiling, generous at first

And then morphing into this contorted, lifeless, almost mocking face

An image forever seared into my memory bank

I dance with Vince
Who can salsa with the best of them
But I keep falling over my feet
As if tripping over the rope around Steve's neck

Christopher invites me over to watch a series at his place
And every lead character looks like Steve when he's alive
Every bad character looks like Steve's dead face

Terry stops dancing

I don't know how many times I've made that speech

It's not you
It's me
It's my issues
I wish it could be different
I need to sort it out
I'm so sorry
I'll call you...

Terry sits down again, leans forward on the sofa

I don't suppose it's in your job description to give me a hug, is it, Simon?

Beat

It's okay. You don't have to explain.

I pay you to listen.

Wryly

Clearly there's a gap in the market for hugging.

I would pay someone for a hug every now and then.

Beat

So...what do you think?

Is there any hope for me?

Listening to myself

It would seem like there's this block.

To my relationships.

To my sense of whom I am in relation to where I am

To my writing...

Thank God for my teaching

At least I've got that

I haven't written for a while. Not creatively...

I try...I sit down...I start a few lines and then

Nothing.

Beat as Terry listens to Simon

You think?

Yes, of course, I have a few photos of him.

Why?

Seriously? You want me to talk him?

I can do better than a photo or two

I actually have him at home

What's left of him

Yes, of Steve.

His father wanted to bury him in accordance with Jewish law

But Steve was very particular in the will that he left

He wanted to be cremated.

And – if I wanted - he said I should have the urn with his ashes to dispose of as I wish.

I've kept it.

It's on a table in my apartment

Next to various photographs

Scene changes to Terry's apartment. There's an urn on a table surrounded by 2 or 3 photographs. Terry alternates between sitting down, standing up, walking with intent, as she "talks" to Steve. Terry gets progressively angry, and emotional along the way

I was thinking of writing you a letter

That's what Simon suggested I do

To say what's on my mind

As if you're still out there

And I need to tell you things

To get them off my chest

Beat

Simon says I'm angry

He says I'm angry at everyone

Even at myself

But not at you!

I'd never thought of it like that before

Or to be honest, if the thought came up

I'd suppress it

Like it was wrong to think it

Disloyal to allow it even to surface

I even feel like that now, but...

I'm going to say things, okay?

Just see this as part of *my* journey...

One thing I've always wanted to ask you...

Why *our* house?

Ours was a happy space

An oasis of sanity, you used to call it.

Of music. Quiet. Laughter. Love.

And then that's where you kill yourself.
In the passageway
So that it's the first thing anyone sees when they come through the front door
You...hanging...lifeless

Why not at your parents' place,
In your father's study?
Or in a lecture theatre at the university?
That would have got them thinking.
In fact, why not somewhere that would have made a real statement
Outside John Vorster Square
On a tree outside Captain Coetzee's house?
Or at the bar, where all the lefties hung out
If you'll excuse the pun.

I couldn't go back to that place
Not even to clear out my things
My sister had to do that for me
You turned our place of sun into a thing of darkness
Two-and-a-half years of happy memories
Snuffed out
Clicks her fingers
Just like that
Fuck you, Steve!!

Feeling a degree of catharsis, she ups the ante
You knew I'd be the one to find you
Did you give any thought to the impact that would have on me?
What intake of drugs
What amount of alcohol
What level of abuse would I have to put myself through to erase that image from my
consciousness?

I blame myself for not seeing it coming
(*almost shouting*) But why the fuck did you not talk to me?
Tell me what you were thinking?
Did you think you were somehow saving me?
Did you feel you had to do the manly thing and carry it all yourself?
I knew you were hurting
Of course I knew that
But we could have got through it together
If you had talked more about it!
Fuck you, Steve!
Fuck you for not trusting me enough with your feelings
However dark!

Ante rises further
Do you have any idea of what I had to go through for you?
Defending you at every turn!
Trying to clear your name.

Keeping your work valued despite the tarnishing by the rumours.
Challenging our comrades to seek the truth!
Desperately loyal to you
Even when it cost me friendships...credibility...reputation.
So fuck you, Steve!
A big fuck you for showing no loyalty to *me!*

Okay...you left me your two thousand, three-hundred-and-eighty-two books
Your 1968 Beetle
Whatever else of your miserly possessions took my fancy
And you bequeathed me your ashes
Big fucking deal!
You wrote me a letter
Declaring your undying love
And then you offed yourself
With irony and anger
Great! You're gone, but your love lives on!
Thanks for the hug, big guy!

Some people tell me how brave they think you were
They say it must have taken courage to do what you did
To buy a rope
To wrap it around your neck
To kick over the chair you were standing on
To make that decision in the first place
Perhaps they were trying to make me feel better

You want to know what I *really* think?
I think you were a fucking coward!
There were people dying all around us
People who had NO choice!
Shot and killed while protesting
Tortured to death in police custody
Assassinated by death squads
People who wanted to live
But were given no choice!
You?
You chose to die
At the first point of some adversity,
You chose to take your own life
How bourgeois, how middle class, how privileged is that?
You couldn't live with the rumours?
You couldn't face the ostracism?
You couldn't bear the suspicious looks?
You...COWARD!
Taking the easy way out!
Rather than fight for what you knew was right!
"Speak truth", you would say
Big talk!

By now, Terry is hyperventilating with anger. She picks up the photographs of Steve and dumps them in a waste bin.

She opens the window of her apartment, and takes the lid off the urn.

She pours the ashes into the wind outside.

Good-bye, Steve!
No thanks for the memories.

Bright Blue's "Weeping" plays. Terry changes into a smart jacket and shoes. She is attending a book launch in South Africa. As the music fades, a spotlight shines on Terry who is holding a book in her hand.

Finally, thank you all for coming tonight and for sharing in my book launch. It's good to be on home soil and to see so many friends and colleagues. I wouldn't have been able to do this book if it weren't for a therapist in New York who, eighteen months ago, helped me on the path of healing. It made me realise just how apartheid messed us all up, and how we then thought – naively - that we could just get on and live happily ever after as the rainbow nation. There is still so much healing to be done. Perhaps there's room for the grand gestures like the TRC, but for so many of us, much of this healing has to be done internally, at a personal level. This, of course, costs money. So with the proceeds from the sale of this book, I've decided to set up a trust fund in the name of Steve Berkman, to fund anyone, but particularly those who earn less than 6000 dollars...sorry, less than sixty thousand rand per year, who'd like to deal with the hurts of their past through therapy. And I'd like to invite others who can afford it, to contribute to this fund...it's not much, but it's one way of contributing to healing our past.

Thank you for listening.