

“May the unfixable broken bone/ [...] give us new bearings”: ethics, affect and irresolution in Ingrid de Kok's “A room full of questions”

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Ethics is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together.
—Brian Massumi, “Navigating Movements”

Each of the four poem sequences that constitute Ingrid de Kok's 2002 collection, *Terrestrial Things*, confronts readers with both “foreign and familiar”¹ aspects of the shifting landscapes it traverses, while challenging us to consider—and possibly to re-orient—the interpretative practices through which we ascribe meaning to and engage with what we witness. The title and epigraph of the volume are excerpted from Thomas Hardy's “The darkling thrush,” penned on 31 December, 1900. Hardy's poem contemplates the vast discrepancy between what the speaker sees “written on terrestrial things/ afar and nigh around”—that is, the bleak and desolate character of the winter landscape that bears all the traces of the devastation wrought by nineteenth-century “progress”—and the seemingly misplaced hope expressed in the ecstatic song of an “aged thrush” at the dawn of the new century (ll 26-7; 21).² Re-invoked by de Kok in the early days of the new millennium, the tension registered by Hardy between this *fin-de-siècle* despair and the ecstasy and hopefulness of the thrush's “full-hearted evensong/ Of joy illimited” pervades her own explorations of contemporary South African landscapes in particular (ll 19-20). Against the chorus of songs heralding new beginnings, the advent of “the rainbow nation,” and an ethos of reconciliation and release from the horrors of the past, the poems examine the evidence that is “written on terrestrial things” of histories of emigration and exile; histories of state-orchestrated violence and its harrowing repercussions; histories of forced removal, displacement and migrant labour (especially in the context of the mining towns of de Kok's Transvaal childhood); as well as evidence of the rapidly escalating HIV/AIDS pandemic.

¹ “Foreign and Familiar” is the title of the first poem sequence; followed by “A room full of questions,” “Stretched Horizon,” and “Freight.”

² See Simon Lewis' review of the collection, on H-Net Online, for a more sustained comparison of the contexts out of which Hardy and de Kok respectively write.

In a review of *Terrestrial Things* published in *The Sunday Independent*, Jeremy Cronin attributes the tensions between despair and hope that resurface throughout the collection to a questioning of certain elements of the lyrical tradition, particularly as each poem sequence “troubles ecstasy in its various forms”; yet he is adamant that “the drive towards the anti-climactic, the mistrust of the ecstatic [. . .] are not invitations to cynicism” (18). Cronin’s insistence that the poems do not express a lack of hope, but rather caution readers against looking to transcendent impulses and rhetorics for its fulfillment, gives a strong indication as to where de Kok’s explorations and reworkings of lyricism might lead us. Again and again, the poems call our attention back to the “terrestrial things” signaled by the collection’s title, initiating what may be uneasy—even unwelcome—encounters with the material evidence of historical crisis by which we are still surrounded. As we experience the inadequacy of ecstatic song as a remedy for these crises, the poems call on us, in Cronin’s words, “not to end, but to begin, to begin again” in our attempts to address ourselves to the conditions out of which they have been produced (18).

“A room full of questions,” the second section of *Terrestrial Things*, consists of a sequence of twelve poems that respond directly to the Human Rights Violations and Amnesty hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter TRC). The establishment of a commission mandated to investigate past injustices and to grant amnesty “in respect of acts, omissions and offences associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past”³ was, of course, stipulated in 1990 as one of the National Party’s conditions for negotiating a settlement and drafting an interim constitution with the recently unbanned liberation organizations. The TRC, as the form this authority eventually assumed, was perhaps the most visible of a number of official mechanisms implemented by various levels of government, NGOs, international agencies and grassroots organizations—each with very specific interests—to register the impacts of South Africa’s violent history and to aid in effecting a smooth transition from apartheid rule to governance by the new dispensation. The ferment over the past decade of critical responses to the TRC and to the cultural work it was understood to perform is hardly surprising given the conditions of the Commission’s inception; the fundamental importance to the fledgling democracy of the questions that it sought to address; the unprecedented nature in the history of truth commissions of the procedures it established;⁴ the significance

³ Excerpted from the final clause of the Interim Constitution drafted at Kempton Park in 1990; cited in “Publisher’s Note,” Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), vi.

⁴ Where many truth commissions focus exclusively on abusers of human rights, often holding hearings in one central location and with limited or no public access, the TRC held public tribunals in town halls and community centres across the country; it included and gave high priority to hearings for victims and survivors as well as perpetrators of “gross violations of human rights”; it formulated procedures to provide reparations to

accorded by the international community to South Africa's transition to democracy in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War; the prolific and sustained international media attention consequently garnered by the proceedings; and the profoundly unsettling character of the stories that emerged in and around the hearings. I suggest that it is particularly generative at an historical juncture such as the present one, when it may seem that nothing more can be said about the TRC, to revisit artistic engagements with the process and with its symbolic import.

Several key questions motivate my reading of the poem sequence: what role might literature and the arts play as a society transitions from a period of authoritarian rule, colonization, genocide, civil war or other forms of sustained conflict to a period that is understood as one conducive to projects of rebuilding and reconstitution? How, if at all, might the role of the arts extend beyond gestures of documentation and consciousness-raising within such contexts in order to facilitate more radical and participatory forms of social transformation? What are the continuities and disjunctions in the ways historical crisis is addressed in art, and the ways it is addressed through other channels? What roles do audiences of this art play? How do they position themselves in relation to the histories of struggle and suffering to which they bear witness? And what responsibilities or ethical engagements follow from these interactions?

In a 1998 essay entitled "Cracked Heirlooms: Memory on Exhibition," de Kok accords to art a very particular responsibility for keeping the dialogue with the past open, and, in the specific context of post-apartheid South Africa, for tapping into the energies, instabilities and uncertainties to which the TRC process has given rise. She argues that at times of rapid social transformation

[c]ultural institutions and artists face an especially challenging task, of permitting contradictory voices to be heard as testimony or in interpretations, *not in order to 'resolve' the turbulence, but to recompose it*. This involves resistance to increasing pressure on art and the public institutions to contribute directly to the psychic requirements of 'settlement' and nation building. If yoked to those imperatives, art too will become victim to the pressure to 'forgive and forget'. (61; my italics)

De Kok's *caveat* against art's harnessing itself to imperatives of "settlement" and nation-building alerts us to the dangers of instrumentalizing cultural practices in the service of any narrowly focused or predetermined agenda.⁵ On this point, she echoes Albie Sachs's often-

victims; it refused to grant blanket amnesty; and it provided simultaneous interpretation in all eleven of South Africa's official languages in an effort to make the process as accessible and comprehensive as possible.

⁵ In "Mourning, gender and community in postapartheid South Africa," an as-yet unpublished paper delivered at the Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness Conference celebrating the 10th anniversary of the TRC (University of Cape Town, 22-26 November, 2006), Sam Durrant speaks of the dangers of instrumentalizing art on the one hand, and grief on the other. He understands literature "as a rite of mourning that mediates between the individual and the collective, the intimate and the public, the body and language," and

cited exhortation that culture, as South Africa begins to lay the foundations for and implement democratic rule, should no longer be understood primarily as an instrument of struggle; that although art and politics cannot be separated, the challenge is to avoid “a shallow and forced relationship between the two,” and that “the power of art lies precisely in its capacity to expose contradictions and to reveal hidden tensions—hence the danger of viewing it as if it were just another kind of missile-firing apparatus” with predetermined aims and targets (187; 188). De Kok acknowledges that the impetus to mobilize art as a vehicle for fostering healing and social cohesion is extremely powerful in the aftermath of a shatteringly-violent history. It is, moreover, she observes, an objective towards which many programs of social action are necessarily indexed; she writes, “The addressing of public grievance and pain, through legal remedy and transformational social policies, is a proper job for government bureaucracy. But the reparative capacity of government is limited, and no work of mourning, at individual or national level, can take place without recourse to other forms of mediation” (58-9). By challenging the drive towards achieving resolution, de Kok reminds us that the desire for a smooth transition from one regime to another is no way equivalent to—and may in fact preclude—more radical and pervasive processes of social transformation.⁶ Significantly, she figures transformation not as the eradication or taming of potentially disruptive energies, but as a much more dynamic, dialogic and open-ended process.⁷ This process requires an attentiveness to and enlistment of those very energies, which come into play as individuals and communities “recompose”—or alternatively, reinforce—the social practices through which they constitute their mutual relations.

The title of the sequence is crucial to consider: the poems beckon us into “A room full of *questions*” as they enact crises of understanding and as they confront readers with the myriad complexities and indeterminacies that frame each encounter with the past. De Kok, who attended many of

concludes that “mourning is important precisely *because it gains us nothing, precisely when it ruptures economic calculations and resists instrumentalisation.*”

⁶ Jeremy Cronin makes a similar point in his poem “After more than a casual contact” when he writes of “. . . this era of slippage/ from transforming power to/ Transferring/ some of the same, which is not the same” (9-12), *More than a Casual Contact* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006) p. 62.

⁷ Sindiwe Magona, in a lecture entitled “Ubuntu and Reconciliation: Themes in *Mother to Mother*” delivered at the University of Cape Town on 19 January, 2007, draws a helpful distinction between political change and social transformation. Starting from the concept of “ubuntu,” which she argues has enjoyed increased circulation since its actual practice has become less pervasive, she issues a call to action to everyone in the community of South Africa, and indeed in the global community, to work at effecting social transformation by engaging directly with crime, poverty, social inequity or any other conditions that impact negatively on the harmonious functioning of community. What she suggests is a distinction between “top-down” directives that focus on specific laws or policies and which confer authority upon elected representatives and public figures, and “on-the-ground” action that assigns ongoing responsibility to individuals and communities, and that also empowers them to effect transformation.

the TRC hearings in person, has used as points of departure for several of the poems striking incidents, gestures and fragments of testimony from the proceedings that poignantly stage some of the salient predicaments to which the process gave—and, I would stress, continues to give—rise. The poems in “A room full of questions” do not purport to “uncover” or “recover” the past or to resolve its conflicts. Nor do they treat the Commission, the narratives that emerged in the course of its hearings, or the witnesses in whose voices these narratives were articulated as objects of knowledge, fully accessible and comprehensible to readers who approach them from positions of distance, objectivity, retrospection or innocence. Even where fragments of testimony are cited directly, these citations do not expose anything quintessential about the speakers or their histories, but on the contrary, expose moments of rupture in which the language, procedures and foundational principles of the Commission come up against their own limits. Such moments of rupture are most overtly manifested in linguistic, somatic, psychic or epistemological breakdown as speakers reach states of impasse or inconclusiveness in the face of questions posed, or descend into speechlessness when faced with the task of trying to put into words the significance of the profound silences with which testimonies were often punctuated. Perhaps most notably, the second poem in the sequence focuses on TRC Chair Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s emotional collapse, when, after hearing several hours of harrowing testimony on the first day of the Human Rights Violations Hearings in East London, “He put his grey head/ on the long table/ of papers and protocols/ and he wept” (“The Archbishop chairs the first session,” 4-7). The poem’s speaker, after recognizing the profusion of discourses produced in response to this moment—media accounts, anthropological analyses, art installations, doctorates, books, and even the poem itself—addresses the reader directly in the second-person pronoun with the observation, “It doesn’t matter what you thought/ of the Archbishop before or after,” of the political context of the Commission, or of any of these retrospective commentaries or analyses (14-15). The poem invites readers to suspend cognitive responses, to dispense with what we already “know.” Instead, we are encouraged to step closer, to begin again by experiencing the affective dimensions of the psychological breaking point of a public figure who, unlike many of those listening to the first few hours of victims’ testimonies, had for decades been only too intimately acquainted with such stories of apartheid-era violence, and who nevertheless reached the limits of his ability to treat the testimonies simply as official correctives to the historical account. Along similar lines, the affective state of choking on one’s words, of finding oneself in the grips of an “umbilical neck throttle,” is enacted by the speaker—and indeed by the reader if the poem is read aloud—of “Tongue-tied,” which concludes with the fragmented and incomplete utterance of the familiar legal dictum, “That’s the truth. So help. Whole. To tell” (6; 20). What is patently apparent is that the testimony we are hearing is anything but whole, that untold volumes of meaning—probably still unprocessed and unavailable

to speaker or audience—lie behind what is actually uttered at the hearing itself. Through such re-enactments of moments of breakdown, the poems interrupt the movement towards resolution, catharsis, understanding and reconciliation which the Commission urged upon its witnesses, thus complicating and reopening questions about the nature of justice, the logic of grief, the foundations of community and the emergence of particular forms of understanding.

Because readers are afforded neither the luxury of distance from—nor the power of full cognition of—the crises in question, we are instead invited to participate in them, to inhabit the uncertainty and irresolution of the situation at hand. In this way, the poems challenge any easy recourse on the reader's part to fully formulated and often cynical analyses of the Commission's work, or to the expression of a politics of blame, regardless of whether culpability is ascribed to the Commission itself, to the political and social institutions by which it was fostered and sustained, to those who came forward to testify, or to those who refused to engage with the process. We are permitted neither the comforts of distancing and disavowal nor the sense of resolution attendant upon assigning blame. The frequent use of interrogatives in the poems, along with the subtle challenges to readers to rethink our identifications and positions in the scenario of bearing witness signal a refusal to posit the tribunals as circumscribed sites of revelation or reconciliation in which abuses of power have successfully been brought to light and age-old antagonisms brought to resolution.⁸ The poems suggest that to assign such historical and narrative functions to the work of the TRC is not only to define "gross violations of human rights" too narrowly (as critics such as Mahmoud Mamdani have trenchantly argued); or to offload responsibility for engaging with historical crisis upon those immediately involved in the hearings; it is also to fail to recognize the ever-shifting spatio-temporal horizon of the present's encounter with the past and to fail to experience the immediacy, intensity and turbulence of that encounter. It is, moreover, to "erase [the] trace" of each reader of the poems as a witness to and legatee of the process; as a participant in its meaning-making apparatus; and as an heir to the project of reconfiguring the social imaginary.⁹

The poems in "A room full of questions," in other words, enact what Shoshana Felman has termed "crises of witnessing."¹⁰ Felman understands crisis as a shift in conditions that we register, perhaps traumatically, not only when we experience drastic and destabilizing changes in our

⁸ To be fair, the members of the TRC saw their work as one of many initiatives established to "promote" reconciliation and healing, and not as a process that would bring this work to completion.

⁹ I would include not only the process of the TRC itself, from the moment of its inception through to the production of its final report, but also the history that preceded it. Each reader, of course, is a legatee of those histories (of imperialism, of capitalism, and of the cultural practices and philosophical frameworks issuing from them).

¹⁰ This phrase serves as the subtitle to her 1992 book, co-authored with psychoanalyst Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*.

embodied or material circumstances, but also when we discover that our inherited frameworks of language, epistemology, morality, and/or semantics no longer serve us, no longer provide us with meaningful forms of response to events. She suggests that we cannot easily understand the full import and implications of a crisis, but in literature and the arts fractures in old systems are first registered as crises not fully grasped or understood, and witnessing these crises is part of what we do as writers and readers. She contends, furthermore, that literature offers “precocious testimony,”¹¹ that although we may recognize almost immediately that conditions have changed to such an extent that inherited frameworks and codes are inadequate to the task of interpretation, it takes time for writers and readers alike to assimilate and comprehend the multivalent and shifting significances of moments of rupture, and that these meanings always at least partially continue to elude us. In her most recent book, *The Juridical Unconscious*, Felman proposes furthermore that law necessarily responds to crisis with gestures of stabilization, that it is a discipline of “limits and consciousness,” whereas literature and the arts take us into the heart of crisis, into an examination of what is sacrificed in and what fails to be contained by efforts to “totalize the evidence” (106-7). She suggests, then, that law and art generate radically different modes of understanding, and that each assumes different processes of meaning-making. Her account of the manner in which verdicts are reached gives an indication of one of the key differences in these processes:

Any judgment necessarily reduces a complex range of factors and often an equally complex range of unknown variables to a narrow range of possible outcomes, pre-determined in large part by protocols and conventions as to what counts as evidence. A trial is presumed to be a search for the truth, but, technically, it is a search for a decision, and thus, in essence, it seeks not simply truth but finality: a force of resolution. A literary text is, on the other hand, a search for meaning, for expression, for heightened significance and for symbolic understanding. (54-55)

Even as she contrasts the efforts to stabilize, reveal and resolve towards which legal procedures are indexed with the indeterminacy and open-endedness of artistic expression, Felman does not privilege law over art, or vice versa. Rather, she emphasizes the importance of each for any attempt to apprehend and respond to histories of conflict and affliction. While insisting on the value of trials and judicial procedures for bringing histories of extreme abuse and suffering to public consciousness; for giving them official status; for containing the sense of threat posed by those histories; and for raising questions of agency and responsibility in relation to them; Felman echoes de Kok in emphatically stressing the need for what she terms a “language of infinity” that works against such gestures of cognitive assimilation, closure and distancing (107). De Kok’s tactic in “A room full of questions” of addressing historical crisis not in

¹¹ See, in particular, Felman’s reading of Mallarmé’s 1895 lectures at Oxford and Cambridge on the poetic revolution that is taking place in France, pp. 18-24 in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*.

and of itself but as it is mediated by the quasi-legal and constitutionally-mandated institution of the TRC enables readers to encounter and participate in these distinctive processes of meaning-making, and to negotiate the often divergent imperatives, satisfactions and disappointments afforded by each.

As I have suggested, the poems in “A room full of questions” strikingly resist three familiar tropes which inform much of the rhetoric surrounding the TRC and the liberal media’s celebration of the rainbow nation: epistemological tropes of revelation and transparency, economic tropes of account-settling which tend to underpin even the most heartfelt expressions of forgiveness or remorse, and organicist tropes of healing and recovery. The refusal to concede to the logics of any of these tropes confronts us as readers very directly with our own desires for, expectations of, and investments in the achievement of understanding, reconciliation and healing, our own assumptions about the role of language and narrative as vehicles of social transformation. Because the poems do not fulfill any of the expectations or grant any of the consolations offered by these tropes, and in fact stage breakdowns in the processes upon which they are predicated, readers are invited to consider how other paths towards transformation might begin to be carved out. That is to say, the transformative potential of the poems rests not in their capacity to describe or even model change, but in their appeal to readers to *enact* it, to experience a shift or break from the past not just as an opening up of new conceptual space delineated by the poems, but as a departure from ingrained habits of mind, body, psyche, intellect, and habituated patterns of movement (within or across topographical boundaries) and of address (within or across linguistic boundaries) that we bring *to* “A room full of questions.”

Challenging the assumption that breaking silence is in and of itself redemptive or liberating, the TRC poems pose crucial questions, asking whether all that is signified by silence can be translated into language; investigating how “truths” that emerge can be received, integrated and enacted transformatively; and examining the risks that the process of articulation entails. The title, for example, of the poem, “What kind of man?,” creates the expectation that it will offer an anatomy of evil. The poem’s epigraph is an excerpt from the frequently cited exchange between notorious torturer and police captain Jeffrey Benzien and his former torture victim, Tony Yengeni, at Benzien’s Cape Town amnesty hearing. It reads as follows: “Tony Yengeni: ‘*What kind of man are you? . . . I am talking about the man behind the wet bag.*’ Captain Jeffrey T. Benzien: ‘*I ask myself the same question.*’” The poem does not, as readers might anticipate, focus on Benzien’s testimony or the events detailed therein, or on any evidence of denial or strategies of evasion on Benzien’s part. Rather, it is primarily concerned with exploring the *audience’s* responses to the hearing—the responses not only of those actually in attendance at the Cape Town tribunal, but also, through the repeated use of the pronoun “we,” of those of us who have witnessed the proceedings second-hand via

the mass media, the internet, books, or even the poem itself. We witnesses are compared, wryly, to “Victorians at a seminar” (22), attempting to determine by way of “the shape of the head,/ the family gene[.]/ Graphology, phrenology. . .” just what enables a man to inflict such extreme suffering on fellow human beings, a question that Benzien himself claims to be unable to answer (23-5). The point is not to underplay the horrors that detainees experienced at the hands of the security police, some of which the speaker enumerates early in the poem, in the second of its seven sections. Instead, the poem shifts focus from its allusions to these historical encounters between police and detainees at Culemborg and moves towards a more sustained consideration of how—or even if—such accounts are taken up by witnesses to Benzien’s testimony.¹² In “What kind of man?” the continuities between our own desires and efforts to read difference into Benzien’s anatomy and gestures and the desires and efforts of certain Victorians, through now-widely-discredited “sciences,” to read “racial,” national and class differences through handwriting and the proportions of skull and facial features are made unnervingly apparent. We are asked to consider the extent to which our own longings for “revelation” are rooted in epistemologies that serve to construct similar social hierarchies of belonging and exclusion, similar self-affirming typologies, buttressed by positivist methodologies. The speaker observes, “We have no other measure/ but body as lie detector, / truth serum, weathervane,” and yet even after an extensive catalogue of Benzien’s meticulously documented facial and bodily features, habits and expressions, the poem ends with the same inconclusiveness and bewilderment with which it opened (26-8). The “apparently depressed, possibly sedated,/ shuffling lumbering cumbersome body” reveals almost nothing that might illuminate the poem’s central question: what kind of man are you? (40-1).

Even the poem’s treatment of Benzien’s re-enactment of the wet-bag torture method—a moment in the TRC proceedings that turned into something of a media spectacle—works against gestures of dissociation and disavowal. In de Kok’s rendition, when Benzien is asked to demonstrate the wet-bag technique, all eyes focus on his body as it

...helpfully and earnestly
performs in slow motion with perfect memory
its training, its function: a tantric posture with wet bag
that just for a moment is so unbelievable

¹² This pattern is repeated again and again in the poem sequence: we witness *as a point of departure* the fraught encounter of the present with the past as victims or their family members, perpetrators, Commissioners, members of the media assigned to cover the hearings and TRC personnel in the present-time of the hearings confront and play out the legacies of the apartheid-era events invoked in the TRC testimonies. From this starting point, the poem in question opens up more prolonged examinations—and experiences—of *our own* encounter in the present moment of reading with the legacies of the multiple and multivalent histories that are recounted, contested and (re)enacted in the scenario of the TRC hearings.

it looks like a pillow fight between brothers (42-6)

The horror of the scene is not attributed to some inherent evil in Benzien himself, who is depicted according to Hannah Arendt's formulation, in decidedly "banal" terms: as almost docile, acquiescent and compliant—as much a functionary of the TRC process as he had previously been of the apartheid security forces. Rather, the horror of the scene is a function of its "almost unbelievable" familiarity, its quotidian character, its uncanny resemblance to forms of "everyday" conflict that are naturalized and encoded as innocent. It is the proximity of the re-enacted torture technique to the "normality" of our own lives that is so unsettling. "What kind of man?" concludes not by answering the question it poses, but by offering the enigmatic, tentative statement, "This kind, we will possibly answer,/(pointing straight, sideways,/ upwards, down, inside out),/ this kind" (52-55). The final lines of the poem refuse our desire to see figures such as Benzien as monstrous and other, and thus deny us the luxury of offloading responsibility or achieving closure by setting up scapegoats.

The poem, then, not only short-circuits the movement towards closure, comprehension, and the attribution of blame but also, through its repeated questions, introduces a self-reflexive element. This, in combination with the use of the pronoun "we," makes us contemplate the possibility that the multiple audiences of the testimony may be implicated, along with Benzein, in the horrors of South Africa's past, or at the very least, that we may be as implicated in gestures of finger-pointing and disavowal as the tribunal's original audiences. Significantly, the finger-pointing in the final stanza includes self-implication, and extends in multiple directions. Stephen Esquith has argued of truth commissions and war crimes tribunals, "These institutions and practices alone leave too many questions unanswered and too many layers of complicity undisturbed" (514). "What kind of man?" perhaps goes further, leaving open the question as to whether achieving more nuanced and multi-faceted understandings of implication is itself desirable, or whether *any* exercise in assigning blame is ultimately of limited value or misses the point. Instead of providing a moral guideline or imperative for readers to follow, "What kind of man?," like the other poems in "A room full of questions," invites us into the space of ethical encounter: it plunges us into uncertainty; encourages us to engage creatively with circumstances in all their immediacy, specificity and complexity; and forces us to experience the insecurity of not knowing any obvious and correct course of action to follow. If, as Brian Massumi contends, "ethics is about how we *inhabit* uncertainty, *together*," de Kok's poems encourage us to consider not only the processes according to which we habitually respond to indeterminacy, especially those to which we turn in order to secure understanding, resolution and closure, but also to examine what these processes might obfuscate; whom they might exclude, harm or imperil; what regimes of knowledge and power they might serve to perpetuate; and how these relate to the potentially competing processes through which others (in this case,

Benzien, Yengeni and any number of other witnesses) might respond to the same events (218, *my italics*). To inhabit uncertainty, *together*, then, is to recognize and respond to “contradictory voices” and competing claims that come to light in the course of any testimony’s articulation, and to endeavour to *recompose* without “resolving” the turbulence to which such encounters gives rise.

Where “What kind of man?” invites us to recognize and re-evaluate, among other concerns, our investments in notions of justice based on the individualization of guilt—and, in Felman’s words, in the “force of resolution” with which the final verdict is pronounced—other poems in “A room full of questions” challenge the economic imagery of account settling that is often invoked in the context of the TRC. For the many critics who saw the Commission functioning as a stabilizing mechanism for the “new South Africa” that had opted in to the world of global capitalism and abandoned the leftist principles of the liberation struggle, the rhetoric of sell-out is commonly enlisted. Along similar lines, a number of those who testified at the victims’ hearings were quick to point out that nothing had changed for them economically, and that it was impossible to forgive when the perpetrator stood to lose very little while they were themselves forced to endure not only the legacy of the gross violation of human rights in question but also that of continued poverty, vulnerability to disease and lack of opportunities for education or employment. These arguments are compelling, and although I do not have the space to do them justice in this article, I want to signal the continuities between the tropes of economic exchange and reckoning that underpin such materialist critiques and those underpinning the more idealist rhetoric of forgiveness that so often informed discussions of the TRC, regardless of whether the exchanges at stake are envisioned as fair or as grossly unequal. As Jacques Derrida has argued, “A ‘finalized’ forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy” (50). Derrida contends that the only meaningful forgiveness involves forgiving the unforgivable:

Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible. (32)

Derrida makes the point that any gesture of forgiveness that falls short of this mark is simply a transaction that functions within a psychic economy of guilt, blame and absolution, invoking debts outstanding or settled. The political strategy to which he alludes would in this case be that of securing the acceptance of the new dispensation and the government of “national unity” and giving credence to its privileging of bourgeois values and interests. Like Derrida, de Kok cautions against the perils of any finalized settlement. The poems make explicit reference to the dangers of framing encounters with past suffering as “transactions”; the speaker in “A commander grieves on his own” imagines, for example, that “it may cost

courage/ to [. . .] refuse the *commerce of pardon*/ offered for a tale told with feeling,” suggesting that the commander’s decision not to bow to pressures to stage remorse publicly may ultimately make possible more poignant, just and meaningful forms of redress (19-22; my italics). De Kok is also keenly attuned to the workings of multiple economies of exchange within the space of the hearings—almost an inevitability given the overlays of discourses of Christianity, psychotherapy, and radically diverse traditions of justice and community relations that were mapped on to the proceedings.

The poem, “Revenge of the imagination,” as its title suggests, focuses not on executed acts of retribution, but on the deeply ingrained if rarely acknowledged psychic habit of longing for revenge as a great leveler, as a foundation and vehicle for equalization. This habit of mind is reflected not only in the specific circumstances of Margaret Madlana, who testified at the Alexandra Township human rights violations hearings, but, the poem insists, infuses the social imaginary, as evidenced in the enduring legacy of “our dazed and shadowy/ reverie of revenge, of recovery” (32). The poem takes as its epigraph the following excerpt from Margaret Madlana’s testimony “*I would like to apologise before God . . . if ever I was to be employed, I was going to poison the white man’s children. The way they killed my son hitting him against a rock . . . I will never forgive . . . I will never rest. . . . I used to go out and sleep on top of his grave.*” The poem explores with enormous sensitivity the ethical complexities of the context out of which such an utterance issues, and ends with the lines:

Round and round and round we go
and which is the name of the next
in our broken circle
to be harmed for reckoning’s sake—
the chosen one to *briefly* close
the metal ring, the open mouth of pain?

Tinker tailor soldier sailor
rich man poor man beggarman thief?

Which one, like Isaac,
his head on a rocky altar,
will we sacrifice *in mind*
to our dazed and shadowy
reverie of revenge, of recovery? (20-32; my italics)

While clearly expressing empathy for Margaret Madlana’s feeling that no gesture on the part of the perpetrators can compensate for her loss, and that only a retributive act could equalize the exchange between victim and perpetrator, the speaker points to the escalating cycle of conflict to which such an “economy of justice” would give rise. The fact that Margaret Madlana appeals to God to forgive her for an act only *contemplated* and not carried out speaks of the psychic residues that belie the possibility of “final settlement,” and gestures towards the many levels at which inherited

patterns of response are reproduced—the many levels at which transformation must begin, and continue, to be enacted. The allusion to Isaac— an innocent victim of Abraham’s painful concession to a vision of divine justice that is ostensibly beyond his grasp— serves to emphasize the operation of different “courts of appeal,” different and often mutually exclusive economies of exchange (secular and divine, material and ideal) within the same scenario of judgment. The poem also underscores the pressure to sacrifice personal considerations for the advancement of a “nobler good” or “higher cause;” like artists and cultural institutions, those who testified at the TRC often felt pressured to bow to the “psychic requirements of ‘settlement’ and nation-building” (“Cracked Heirlooms,” 61). The lines with which the poem concludes—“our dazed and shadowy/ reverie of revenge, of recovery”—poignantly signal the delusional nature of the logic underpinning the call to reconciliation but significantly also, through the juxtaposition and alliterative association between “revenge” and “recovery,” suggest strong continuities between these seemingly oppositional concepts. The hidden ties between them require careful scrutiny: an awakening from “our dazed and shadowy/ reverie” to an acknowledgement of and sense of responsibility towards the enduring consequences in the present of past conflict, an urgent call for the very logics underpinning and informing the social imaginary to be re-examined and carefully, scrupulously, reformulated.

The poem sequence is concerned not only with questioning conceptions and enactments of justice as past conflicts are addressed, but also just as fundamentally with the ways we conceive of and invoke language and embodiment as vehicles of regeneration. “A room full of questions” is book-ended by poems entitled “Parts of speech” and “Body parts.” The insistent focus on “parts” reminds readers of the tendency, however idealistic or misguided, to conceive of both language (especially as it is rendered in narrative) and bodies as whole, integrated and organic systems. As we witness “breakdown” within those systems, the poems challenge us to consider what is at stake in these assumptions and how they inform our understandings of linguistic and embodied responses to histories of mass violence. In the final stanza of “Parts of speech,” the almost-desolate speaker asks how it is still possible, in the face of what has unfolded in the past, as well as in the TRC hearings, to “imagine whole words, whole worlds” (21). The poem powerfully registers what Cronin terms “the deficit between rhetoric and reality;” however, the movement through the poem sequence from “Parts of speech” to “Body parts” does not merely lament this deficit, but takes readers along a trajectory that moves from a questioning of our fundamental assumptions about the redemptive power of language and story through to a tentative expression of hope that new discursive possibilities might emerge from a careful, painstaking and resolute engagement with the embodied affects of violence (18).

“Parts of Speech,” explores the tension between the desire for the language of testimony to perform a redemptive, rehabilitative function—

and specifically, in the context of the TRC, to “begin in pain and move towards grace,/aerating history with recovered breath”—and the resistances of certain stories to such mobilizations (19-20). Rather than breathing new life into history, re-animating its participants and eradicating all obstacles to forward movement, language is shown here and throughout the poem sequence to falter, to distort and mislead, to escalate instead of alleviating suffering, to sensationalize, and repeatedly to push up against its own limits as a means of expression and especially as a vehicle of transformation. “Parts of speech” opens the poem sequence with a challenge to readers to examine our own expectations of storytellers, our own desires when turning to literature that confronts histories of anguish and suffering, our own relationship to the stories that have been handed down from childhood onwards as markers of personal and cultural identity, and perhaps most significantly, as Cronin’s review of the collection suggests, our own investments in lyricism as a source of inspiration and consolation. What, precisely, the poems ask, do we expect of our belated encounters with TRC testimonies as they are mediated by art?

In the first two stanzas, “some stories” are personified as resistant to our address; they are shown to walk away, straining under the burden of their own weight; to turn their backs on the encounter that we as readers eagerly seek; to refuse our desire to recuperate them as legend or myth, as forms of entertainment, as hallmarks of collective consciousness (1; 6). The third stanza, at the centre of the poem, turns from the generality of “some stories” to the specificity of “*this* stained place,” and stages graphically the violence of extracting or drawing out the resistant narratives in the public forum of the tribunal:

And at this stained place words
are scraped from resinous tongues
wrung like washing, hung on the lines
of courtroom and confessional
transposed into the dialect of record (11-15).

The verbs “scraped,” “hung” and “wrung,” associated either syntactically or through internal rhyme with the metaphorical and corporeal tongue, remind us in no uncertain terms that the act of testimony can itself be a violent and wrenching experience, a hanging out of “dirty laundry” in public, and a disturbingly reductive rendering of keenly-felt horror, vulnerability or shame as it is translated into the language of officialdom. Here, the violence endured by the victim or enacted by the perpetrator is heightened rather than abated by the act of testimony as the story is subjected to *our* scrutiny, while the truth value of the “corrective history” that is brought to light is called into doubt. At the heart of the poem lies the very clear reminder of the potential violence of acts of witnessing, a reminder that prompts readers to consider what role we as witnesses might play in the re-enactment of pain.

The final two stanzas use the interrogative form that is so frequently evidenced in the poem sequence in order to confront readers directly with questions as to how, if at all, alternative relations to language and story might be formulated. The fourth stanza tracks the conventional trajectory of the lyric—a movement away from the burden and materiality of suffering bodies towards a space of transcendence that is most overtly signaled by verbs such as “rise” and “levitate” and by images of release that see history “unweighted by stones,” and “aerated with recovered breath” (16; 18; 18; 20). The beauty of the language speaks powerfully of the enticements of such a trajectory, and yet its lyricism and abstraction stand in stark contrast to the violence, gravity and specificity of the language of the third stanza, and the enunciation of desire for transcendence is framed and qualified by the repeated questions, “Why still believe . . .?” and “Why still imagine . . .?” (16; 21). Cronin notes that the question, “is the ecstasy of pure song betrayal?” reverberates throughout *Terrestrial Things*, and it is perhaps in this stanza that it is most forcefully posed (18).

The fifth and final stanza pursues the trajectory of the fourth, with a slight—and yet significant—shift in emphasis. Rather than focusing on the desired achievement of transcendence, of a story’s potential to rise “with wings, on currents, as silver flares,” the imagery draws attention back to the painstaking labour of the production of language and story, and to the rootedness of event in physical landscapes and bodies, in the “terrestrial things” of the collection’s title (17). Here the poem makes explicit references to parts of speech; “consonants,” “vowels,” “syntax,” “rhymes,” and “verbs,” all figured in material images of emergence. This stanza, which pursues the question, “why still imagine?” shifts focus from the projection of desired outcomes to a contemplation of beginnings, a rediscovery of the raw materials (and materiality) of language. The “flame splutter of consonants” and “deep sea anemone vowels” not only serve as onomatopoeic devices, registering the sounds to which they make reference, the sounds out of which words are constituted, but also connote, respectively, the first appearance of fire, its materialization from sparks, and the emergence of primordial life forms from the “deep sea”—thereby suggesting all the destructive *and* creative potential of each beginning. In contrast to the much more abstract and disembodied—almost celestial—images through which language is figured in the fourth stanza, the attribution of the adjective “birth-cable” to “syntax” foregrounds the connection between language and the material reality from which it emerges, while also suggesting the labour of the birthing of language and story as words are organized into decipherable utterances. “Birth-cable syntax” also positions the users of language as “midwives” who usher stories into the world, who take them up and assimilate and encode them in particular ways. Language, we are reminded, is something that connects, organizes and makes sense of event as it comes into being, and that potentially engenders social relationship. The allusion to “rhymes that start in the heart” registers the quest for echo and similitude, grounding the

process in the human body and longing for relationship. The final image in the stanza—that of “verbs, verbs that move mountains”—may seem to speak of a desire every bit as transcendent and idealized as the yearning for stories to “begin in pain and moved towards grace.” And yet, the physicality of the image of the mountain, in combination with the painstaking work suggested by the repetition of “verbs,” draws attention back to the slow, incremental and indeed Herculean labour entailed in rendering language enactive. And of course, the question “why still imagine?” remains open as the poem ends. Resisting the impulse to elevate readers above histories of suffering, to place them at a distance, the poem stages a return to the material evidence of those histories on landscapes and bodies. It is here that the poem beckons the reader to begin to address the legacies of the past in the present, and hence to begin the work of enacting transformation.

De Kok’s sustained focus on images of corporeality in “A room full of questions,” already evidenced in “What kind of man?,” is logical given what she has described as the “inestimably tragic” quality of the testimonies put forward at the human rights violation hearings in particular: “—a litany of removal, terror, torture, rape, abandonment, mutilation, murder” (“Cracked Heirlooms,” 58). As anthropologist Fiona Ross points out, the character and focus of the testimonies can be attributed to the definition of “gross violations of human rights” by which the TRC’s mandate was framed:

The definitions of violation set out in the [Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation] Act are largely to do with what can be done to the body—it can be abducted, tortured, killed, “disappeared.” In the Commission’s hearings the main focus was on bodies and on the visible embodiment of suffering. In other words, the Commission tended to seek for experiences that were both literally and visibly embodied. (252)

Even as the poems register the embodied affects of sustained conflict, they simultaneously draw attention to what is obfuscated by such a focus, calling into question the legibility of these signs and traces of physical and psychological suffering, stressing the impossibility of reviving or rehabilitating a majority of the brutalized bodies, and emphasizing that much more profound suffering and anguish lie beneath visible surfaces and cannot easily come to light or find articulation in language.¹³

¹³ This gesture is also evidenced throughout “A room full of questions.” Sam Durrant, who reads the poem sequence in the light of Walter Benjamin’s notion of mimesis, understands the “hold-alls” in “Parts of speech” as “a verbal image, a physical correlate to the stories that remain untold,” and as an embodied figure of “the grief that remains unexpressed” (448). The implication is that to engage with the process of bearing witness requires a constant and vigilant acknowledgement of all that lies beyond the purview and interpretative capacities of the speakers and listeners who engage in witnessing “precocious testimony.” Significantly, then, the sequence opens with an explicit gesture towards the stories, narrators and emotions that do not and cannot come to light in the tribunals, a gesture that is iterated in the penultimate poem, “Some there be,” which is dedicated to those “*which have no memorial, who are perished as though they had never*

In contradistinction to Archbishop Desmond Tutu's repeated suggestion that "healing" of individual bodies and psyches through the "talking cure" of testimony would synecdochally precipitate the healing of the body politic, de Kok emphatically underscores the dangers of too easily conflating the symbolic and spatio-temporally contained work of the TRC with the much more ubiquitous, complex and ongoing work of transition in the nation at large. Her poems, significantly, do not posit integration, recovery or recuperation as desirable or achievable ends. "A room full of questions" is, nevertheless, indexed towards a wish for the transformation and revitalization of broken communities, traumatized bodies and evacuated landscapes, as the poem "Body parts" with which the section concludes, makes abundantly clear:

may the wrist turn in the wind like a wing
the severed foot tread home ground

the punctured ear hear the thrum of sunbirds
the molten eye see stars in the dark

the faltering lungs quicken windmills
the maimed hand scatter seeds and grain

the heart flood underground springs
pound maize, recognize named cattle

and may the unfixable broken bone
loosened from its hinges

now lying like a wishbone in the veld
pitted by pointillist ants

give us new bearings.

In "Body Parts," as the title suggests, no ultimate vision of organic healing or reconstitution is offered; rather, images of irreparable damage ('the unfixable broken bone/ loosened from its hinges'; the "severed foot," the "maimed hand") function as enduring markers of atrocity and loss even as the speaker wishfully envisions these body parts as potential agents of change and regeneration. The possibility towards which the poem gestures entails a reactivation of the senses, of the breath, of the pulse and of the means of nourishment and sustenance, a regeneration of the land, but this wished-for revival does not issue from a reintegration of the already irreparably wounded body parts. It is attributed instead to the potential imaginative capacity of witnesses *in the present* to see, hear and recognize the significance of such "remains," and to take "new bearings" from them

been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them" (epigraph). In the final stanza of "Some there be," the speaker rhetorically asks, "Can the forgotten/be born again/ into a land of names?" once again registering the impossibility of full revelation or revival (10-12).

as ostensibly “familiar ‘ground’”¹⁴ is individually and collectively re-navigated. Rather than envisioning healing and recovery as definable moments of triumph over past illness, disease or injury, or as the result of transactions between first-hand victims and perpetrators of extreme violence, de Kok figures transformation and regeneration as functions of continuous engagements with the proliferating and subtle legacies of the past, and she locates responsibility for transformation in each of “us” as we become implicated in the circuits of listening and telling and responding.

“A room full of questions,” then, extends the encounter between past and present—along with the symbolic work of addressing historical crisis and navigating pathways towards more just and equitable practices of social relations—beyond the town halls, churches, prisons and community centres in which the TRC hearings were conducted, or the boardrooms in which the Commission’s Final Report was drafted, expanding the purview of this cultural work to encompass the specific places, times and responses of each reader. Historian Deborah Posel has observed that, unlike its antecedents, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to engage with many of the dimensions of experience and understanding that Felman attributes to the domain of literary and artistic endeavour. In the course of drafting the final report, the Commissioners demonstrated an acute awareness of competing epistemologies and the imperatives according to which each is motivated. Posel notes,

One of the striking and unusual features of the report is the extent to which its authors reflect explicitly on their (perceived) epistemological and methodological options. There cannot be many official state commissions that ponder the question of the possibility of objective knowledge, explore the meaning of ‘truth’, invoke historical sociologist Max Weber as a methodological role model, and render their research process as a ‘dialectical encounter’ with disparate sets of data. Yet, for all this, the dominant epistemological and methodological underpinnings of the report are conventional fare for the genre of the official state commission. (154)

In spite of the willingness of the Commissioners to engage with both legal *and* artistic understandings of South Africa’s recent history, as signaled by the explicit references to the emergence of these debates, the final report works to resolve the contradictory demands of each response to the violent past. Posel’s conclusions, advanced as a critique of the document that was eventually produced, may in fact serve to confirm Felman’s argument about the ultimate need for legal (and quasi-legal) institutions and trial reports “to bring a conscious closure to the trauma of the [past], to separate ourselves from the atrocities and to restrict, to demarcate and draw a boundary around, a suffering that seemed both unending and unbearable” (*The Juridical Unconscious*, 106). Posel remarks that in spite of its careful engagement with considerations of methodology and epistemology, the final report of the TRC not only privileges a

¹⁴ This is the title of de Kok’s first collection of poetry, published by Ravan Press in 1988.

predominantly positivist understanding of the past over other acknowledged versions, but also re-invokes an inherited moral discourse as its structuring principle. She writes,

In line with the genre of an official state commission, the report presents itself as the work of a team of “observers” of the past, who assembled and collated a series of facts about gross human rights violations, to produce the objective, authorized version of the country’s recent past. But a closer reading reveals a different process of knowledge production. The report contains a version of the past that has been actively crafted according to particular strategies of inclusion and exclusion, arising from the complexities of the TRC’s mandate. Part epistemological and methodological, part moral, the effect of these discursive strategies is to produce a primarily descriptive rendition of the past, uneven in its discernment of detail and indifferent to the complexities of social causation. The TRC’s “truth” about the past is neither “complex” nor particularly “extensive” (despite its length). With little explanatory and analytical power, the report reads less as a history, more as a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing across the political spectrum, spawned by the overriding evil of the apartheid system. In so doing, the report goes a long way towards fulfilling one part of the Commission’s mandate—but to the exclusion of others (148).

Posel suggests, then, a tension between the Commissioners’ awareness of competing truth claims, their desire to produce an objective and fairly comprehensive account of the period investigated in the hearings, and their wish to provide a moral corrective to the atrocities disclosed in the report. She argues that the TRC’s final report ultimately reiterates and re-entrenches a moral code derived largely from inherited discourses of opposition and resistance that attribute “evil” to the apartheid system—a contention that is unlikely to meet with large-scale opposition, but by the same token is unlikely to foster any serious and sustained engagement with radically different possibilities for envisioning and enacting social relations.

The poems in “A room full of questions,” unlike the TRC’s Final Report, or many of the critiques leveled at the entire process, resist figuring the work of the Commission and of its direct participants as *representative* of larger social processes with recognizable beginnings, transitional and end points and moral agendas; they thereby avoid affording readers the opportunity to approach, access, interpret, and ultimately judge such processes from an “objective” spatio-temporal distance. Instead, they *subject* their readers—in both senses of attributing agency to us, and confronting us with the imperatives of power and knowledge through which our respective subjectivities are constituted—to encounters that bring us up against the inevitable incompleteness and inconclusiveness of any project of redress or regeneration, against the questions and dilemmas each project engenders or fails to resolve, and against the limits of inherited moral or epistemological frameworks to encompass fully the complexity of the framing circumstances of historical crises, or the range of variables that inevitably remain beyond our abilities to access or comprehend. As we come to recognize the ways in which our own interests, desires, aspirations and epistemological assumptions have

contributed to the onset and ramifications of the crises staged within the poems, or those to which they respond, we may—or may not—take up the invitation to inhabit uncertainty along with the subjects, speakers and multiple and proliferating audiences of the poems—to *occupy* the room full of questions, and to address the turbulence engendered by competing voices and contending claims. If we do so, we may begin to *participate*, with nothing but a situational ethics to guide us, in the necessarily risky, complex, uncertain, ongoing and ultimately intersubjective work of social transformation.

Appendix

Parts of speech

Some stories don't want to be told.
They walk away, carrying their suitcases
held together with grey string.
Look at their disappearing curved spines.
Hunchbacks. Harmed ones. Hold-alls.

Some stories refuse to be danced or mimed,
drop their scuffed canes
and clattering tap-shoes,
erase their traces in nursery rhymes
or ancient games like blindman's buff.

And at this stained place words
are scraped from resinous tongues,
wrung like washing, hung on the lines
of courtroom and confessional,
transposed into the dialect of record.

Why still believe stories can rise
with wings, on currents, as silver flares,
levitate unweighted by stones,
begin in pain and move towards grace,
aerating history with recovered breath?

Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds:
the flame splutter of consonants,
deep sea anemone vowels,
birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,
and verbs, verbs that move mountains?

What kind of man?

Tony Yengeni: *"What kind of man are you? . . . I am talking about the man behind the wet bag."*

Captain Jeffrey T. Benzien: *" . . . I ask myself the same question."*

CAPE TOWN AMNESTY HEARINGS

I

It's the question we come back to.
After the political explanations
and the filmy flicker of gulags, concentration,
re-education and ethnic cleansing camps,
prisons and killings in the townships and fields,
here at the commission we ask again,
can't get away from it, leave it alone:
'What kind of man are you?'

II

What kind of man mounts another
in deadly erotic mimicry,
then puts a wet bag over his head
to suffocate him for 'the truth'?

Lets her baby cry for her
from a nearby cell,
threatens to stop the crying?

Roasts meat on coals
while a man is burning on a nearby pyre?

Gives evidence like this
in daylight; but can give no account?

III

What kind of man are you?
What type? We ask and he asks too
like Victorians at a seminar.
Is it in the script, the shape of the head,
the family gene?
Graphology, phrenology or the devil?

IV

Nothing left but to screen his body.
We have no other measure
but body as lie detector,
truth serum, weathervane.

V

We look at his misshapen cheek,

how it turns away from questioning,
as if he's an abused child;

at his mouth, its elastic pantomime;

at his sagging chin, glottal Adam's apple,
throat no longer crisp from a morning razor;

at his eyes' pouches, pitted olives, dunes;

at the eyes themselves,
how they sweat, don't weep;

his ears, peaks on a listening uniform;

the hand with its thumb intact, its active fingers;

and the apparently depressed, possibly sedated,
shuffling lumbering cumbersome body
which then helpfully and earnestly
performs in slow motion with perfect memory
its training, its function: a tantric posture with wet bag
that just for a moment is so unbelievable
it looks like a pillow fight between brothers.

VI

Though of the heart we cannot speak
encased in its grille of gristle

the body almost but doesn't explain
'What kind of man are you?'

VII

This kind, we will possibly answer,
(pointing straight, sideways,
upwards, down, inside out),
this kind.

Revenge of the imagination

"I would like to apologize before God . . . if ever I was to be employed, I was going to poison the white man's children. The way they killed my son hitting him against a rock . . . I will never forgive . . . I will never rest. . . . I used to go out and sleep on top of his grave."

MS MARGARET MADLANA, AT ALEXANDRA TOWNSHIP
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION TESTIMONY

Margaret Madlana in the nursery of her imagination,
before God stays her mind, her hand,

puts rat poison in the ribena of the four-year-old
and in the schoolboy's warm breakfast milk:
and who can judge her?

Killing them in her heart
not so much to have them dead
(for they can never be as dead as her last born,
his broken head beside a murderous rock),
but that their parents might mourn for ever,
leaving the compact suburbs
each night for an expanding cemetery,
to lie upon the graves as she did,
unresting, unforgiving.

But there at the mounds' damp feet
they might also conjure in the dark
some symmetry for comfort,
an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,
an eye and a tooth to body natural law.

Round and round and round we go
and which is the name of the next
in our broken circle
to be harmed for reckoning's sake—
the chosen one to briefly close
the metal ring, the open mouth of pain?

Tinker tailor soldier sailor
rich man poor man beggarman thief?

Which one, like Isaac,
his head on a rocky altar,
will we sacrifice in mind
to our dazed and shadowy
reverie of revenge, of recovery?

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