

“Superintendent Officer Mthembu”

Spoken word poetry against police brutality

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If our pain was turned into an art museum the most popular exhibit would showcase portraits of the South African Police Service with our bodies on the floor as their footstools. Our silenced screams clog up the airways in our throats, our tracheas burst out and with both hands we grab the artery veins in an attempt to contain the bleeding, trying to redirect this blood, this life back into the cause and yes, bang, bang, bang; you keep shooting and yes bang, bang, bang, we keep running.

But please first allow me to start this poetic prose in Joza extension 7, the peripheral of the township itself almost excommunicated from the centre of Grahamstown. Somewhere unclearly mapped by angry ground stones who share their space with the kind of dust that does not easily settle well on the road, is what looks like an afterthought of an RDP house. In it is Superintendent Officer Mthembu. A child of the working class. Mthembu on his tea breaks always jokes about how he wanted to be a lawyer, most of his stories start with the words “and during the apartheid...” he would recall those memories so well, remembering quite clearly all the fights, the protests, the revolutionary climate that engrossed South Africa. His stories would also always end with “...if only I could afford the fees in '94, I would have been a qualified lawyer like Madiba”.

You would think that would be the cue for disappointment to enter the space, to remind him that he was just another causality of a system that did not care for his dreams, but like a comma with no manners, his smile interrupts his thought process joining his past failures together with the apple of his eye, his only beloved daughter Siphokazi, a final year LLB student who carries her dreams in the same back pack loaded with her father’s dreams and NSFAS loans.

On Wednesday the 28th of September 2016, Siphokazi has all the candles lit in their home, it’s still early not even dawn is aware of how the day will unfold. 4 am sharp the good officer jumps to attention, not waiting for the hot water that doesn’t exist; he tidies himself up and rushes to report in for duty. Siphokazi awaits the slow pace sun rise to commence before she can decide it’s a safe time to start the 10 kilometer walk to campus, she spent the entire night researching on interdicts, and the right to free education.

It’s nearly been two weeks since the events of 28th September she tells me, she says they ran in all kinds of direction that day, shocked at how something so small could hurt so much. The images rock her mind so much I feel like I am extracting a physical memory as it tears through her forehead and fills the room.

She takes me back to the lawns within campus, she points to the Drostdy lawn walls with such disappointment in their inability to shield the students. On my right is a student I have never met before rolling on the ground as if he is on fire only trying to locate where the pain is coming from. On my left 9 students run into each other in chaotic harmony, stun grenades go off again and again. I feel anger and fear simultaneously race up to my temple. The corner of my eye catches two female students attempting to run in the chaos, both their hands find each other; they clutch on to each other as two lovers would in a dark tunnel, but the grip tightens, the hand holding generates sweat that turns into glue “don’t let go!” they both shout. I reach out my hand I want to tell them it’s all over now, that this is just a memory, that in this moment right now we are all in Siphokazi’s memory.

Truth is the police have been slaughtering generations long before we even started looking for our voices. That on most days standing on campus corners makes us feel like an endangered species, that at any point we can be left looking like red confetti splatted on a concrete sidewalk. That our voices sound unhinged, almost like the voices from the primary and secondary high school kids whose dreams are lynched on a daily basis. Dreams executed Monday to Friday by the failing education system. Such that by high school all we have is a large spectacle of hangings that occur at least twice a year –called exams.

There is nothing to examine if you cannot account for the massive unlearning that needs to occur instead all it is – is an execution. Bang, Bang, Bang! – shooting continues. The memory of September 28th feels like the first time the death of a close family member wraps itself around you.

All of a sudden I remember the most profound metaphysic question, “if a black body unarmed is shot by the police in broad day light, in front of everyone, does it make a sound”. Does it matter? Did it really happen? Working class struggle is not just a matter of theory; police brutality is absolute despite your level of awareness. It’s not about keeping the streets safe anymore; it’s about keeping them empty.

They make bullets different these days, these new bullets do not go in and out, they get absorbed in the body – same function as a tampon to suck and pull in all life. There is after all some reason why these bullets seem to fall in love with melanin given the way they pursue us, some reason why shotgun shells never run out for the working class. I guess it’s pretty hard to fight back when all you have are your fists and unhappiness.

Its September the 28th 8pm, Superintendent Officer Mthembu arrives home, extremely exhausted, he has scratch marks he cannot explain, probably another protestor resisting arrest. He is greeted by the emptiness of the one bedroomed house. According to memory by now Siphokazi would have long been home and made him something to eat. He grabs his cell phone only noticing now that he hasn’t paid much attention to it all day. 19 missed calls from his daughter, 23 missed calls from a private number, 10 text messages all of them looking like an SOS, one reads – “hie sir your daughter was shot by the police today, police opened fire on us with rubber bullets unfortunately Siphokazi was in the front she got hit in the throat. She said if she doesn’t make it – it’s important you know she was fighting for free education for the both of you.

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