

# Watershed at Victoria Falls

Marius Schoon and Breyten Breytenbach are two Afrikaner writers in exile who took part in the historic meeting of the



ANC and Afrikaner writers from home.

Marius writes on two of his poems that sum up the reunion at the



Victoria Falls of comrades and friends.

Breyten also

writes on the meaning of being an Afrikaner writer in a changing South Africa.

Both contributions are characterised by a disarming honesty, a preoccupation with making sense out of a country that is built on lies and tragedy.

*Photos of Marius Schoon and Breyten Breytenbach from IDAF*

## MY SUSTERS

**Die trane prikkel teen my oë,  
Afrikaans al om my.**

**'n Toekoms wat ons bou  
uit bottende vriendskap.**

**Die eerste dag se opgewondenheid  
word die laaste dag se  
opgewondenheid  
en ook die verdriet  
van naderende vertrek.**

**Jeannette, Antjie  
More kan julle sien  
hoe blou Malutis  
uit die vlakke rys  
hoe aandwind  
die suikerriet laat tiekieswaai**

**Kyk ook vir my,  
my kamerade.**

When I showed this poem to a comrade, he said, 'Yes, it's your normal style – sentimental social realism.' So there you have it: a report from a sentimental social realist, and undeconstructed at that.

The excitement starts as the plane begins the long descent to Harare. The blur of the land starts taking on the familiar form of the enchanting Zimbabwe bush.

We arrive very late in Zimbabwe and I rush for the connecting flight. Air Zimbabwe's computer has not heard of me and the flight is full. Eventually I get a special boarding pass to sit in the cockpit. Albie Sachs is not so lucky. As he is turned away he says to the Air Zimbabwe ground staff: 'Are you really letting a terrorist sit next to the pilot?'

Later I get inside the plane. I find there are ANC comrades on the flight. Not only comrades, but also close friends, people I have worked with

in the past. The excitement mounts, and I savour the foretaste of that special pleasure of working in a team where shared experience means there is so much which has not got to be said.

It is three years since I have been in Zimbabwe and I realise how long that is when I hear Zimbabwean voices all around me. To my unaccustomed ear, the Zimbabwean accents sound as if they come from home. But Afrikaans is being spoken in the row behind me. I tense and bristle, as I do when I hear Afrikaans on the metro in Brussels or on a bus in London.

At Vic Falls the delegation from home is straggling in from the immigration gates. There is the immediate joy of seeing friends – Breyten, Ampie, Hein. Introductions are made, but the only names I can place are the well-known media figures – Van Zyl, Alex. The rest are a blur which the coming week will concretise.

In the bus on the way to the hotel, Afrikaans is all around me. Already I am able to enjoy the sound and not feel threatened or at risk.

There is a short introductory session that first day and I listen carefully to try to penetrate the camouflage of words coming from the podium. When I speak I am surprised at how important it is to me to be amongst Afrikaners.

As we come out of that first session, Jeannette Ferreira stops me and tells me of a project on the Cape Flats which has produced a book of poems on South Africa's women such as Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, Jeannette Schoon. Not for the only time that week, my eyes are misted.

That evening, we all eat on the terrace. It is the first time I have eaten *boerewors* since leaving Botswana in 1983. The long absence has improved the flavour. A number of people living at home tell me they have never

***A number of people tell me they have never before heard anyone on a public platform introduce themselves by starting, 'I am a member of the ANC.'***

*Washington Street, Langa, woodblock print, 1986, by Suzanne Louw*



before heard anyone on a public platform introduce themselves by starting, 'I am a member of the ANC.' I recall September, 1964, walking to the kwela-kwela parked in Plein Street and raising my manacled hands to shout *Amandla!*

Yet, people do not really mingle that first evening. They sit in groups with people they already know. I wonder what calf's foot magic will get it all to gell.

The catalyst came the next morning. Comrade Steve from the NEC spoke on ANC policy. I watched and saw how attentively people listened. How eager they were for what he was saying. From then on we started becoming friends.

That afternoon I made a brief contribution. Overly frank, I thought, and perhaps harsh for the people from home. I was surprised at how many people came to me afterwards to say that they thought the content timely.

That evening we joined for a poetry reading. Never before have I been anywhere where the bulk of an audience would understand my Afrikaans verses.

In a week like this, you cannot speak to everyone, cannot have all the conversations that you wish. Yet some of those meetings and conversations stand out. After the poetry reading Antjie Krog comes to our room. We drink *Jameson* and talk. From our different perspectives, we

find we have so much in common. We talk as if we have to fill the evening with our intertwined lives.

The next morning, at the session on women in South African writing, Jeannette with great courage speaks of the personal trauma of growing up in the horror of white South Africa. I am allowed to make an intervention, and I speak of the comradeship and friendship I have found in our Movement – the amazing generosity which I continue to receive from what has become my real family. I can see with what hunger she listens.

The first day of the conference becomes the last. We are speaking of the essence of being a South African writer. Breyten rounds it off, poetical-



ly politically, and I wish I had spoken so well.

This leads us into a consensus on a final communique. Then we sing an 'Nkosi'; the first singing there has been. Baleka's beautiful voice carries us into the future and around me, virtually without exception, the challenging fists are raised.

Then its 'Senzeni na' and the rhythm of the toyi toyi joins us in comradeship and determination.

That last night we take over the restaurant, singing, dancing and being together. Freedom songs in Afrikaans – I would not have thought it possible.

The next morning is not good. The farewells are too protracted. People wait for the bus to take them to the airport. Will I ever see these new comrades again? I long to see what they will see (perhaps they will not even look properly) when they get home later that day. There are few dry eyes.

The beauty of the Falls has been the background to our meeting. The mighty plunge of Zambezi over the escarpment has strengthened one in quiet walks between meetings. The spray hangs over the valley and the distant roar of the water has been the counterpoint of every conversation.

**Musi wa Tunya.**

**Ja, dit is die rook wat donder,  
die dreuning van die Valle  
is agtergrond vir elke gesprek.  
Die misrook hang oor die vallei  
soos onblusbare damp van vryheids  
vuur.  
En die krag van die water.  
En die krag van die water.**

**Ek is getrein,  
as ek kamerade se lewensbeskry-  
wings lees,  
om te soek na waterkeidings –**

**punte waar iets gebeur het  
wat hul verander het  
Van jou alledaagse yuppie whitey.**

**As knaap van tien sien ek eers die  
Valle.**

**Ma, pa, ousus and ek,  
saam in ons karavaan.**

**In daardie tye was daar 'n spoortjie  
van die grootpad na Livingstone se  
standbeeld,  
en 'n waentjie op die spoor,  
'n hefboom of die waentjie  
en swarte manlik lywe  
wat die balk laat op en neer  
Die lewenskrag vir die waentjie.**

**Ek wou so graag op die waentjie ry.  
Pa, ousus en ek het opgeklim.  
Maar ma wou nie.**

**In die oondheet van 'n Zambezi  
somer  
het ons vir haar gewag  
in die skadu by die standbeeld  
tot sy opdaag,  
amper so besweet  
soos die knegte op die waentjie.  
"Ma, hoekom het ma dan nie gery  
nie?"  
"Boetie, ek ry in geen waentjie  
Waar mense die osse is nie."**

**Hier by die Valle  
vind ons mekaar.  
Die bevrydende saamwees  
ten spyte van ons hondsdolle  
geskiedenis.**

**My nuwe kamerade,  
dink terug up Victoriawaterval.  
Onthou die dreuning van ons  
toekoms  
soos ons dit daar gehoor het.  
Sien uit na die toyi toyi van ons  
vryheid  
om rokende bevrydingsvure,  
en die krag van ons mense.  
En die krag van ons mense.**

Perhaps it is too glib for this great nick point in the Zambezi valley to come to symbolise a watershed, a point of political growth and maturity. Yet, glib or not, for many of us these few days were a watershed.

I sat and marvelled at the warmth and empathy between the Afrikaners and my black comrades. Just as the bulk of the Afrikaners had never been anywhere where people were openly ANC, so many of my younger comrades had never previously mixed socially with those who speak the baas's language.

For myself, for the first time in many years, I am writing in Afrikaans.

I remember eating in the restaurant with Antjie, Jeannette and Comrade Steve. Steve telling us of the horror of his detention in the sixties, and of recently welcoming in Lusaka the ex-security policeman who had been responsible for his conditions. 'The man has changed. He is welcome to talk to us in the ANC.'

Those dreadful farewells on the last morning. Yet also memorable farewells.

Jeannette saying: 'Barbara has become the mother that is lost to me. My respect for Steve is what I am unable to have for my own father.' Antjie saying: 'I have seen the only structure that I think I could fit into.'

Tsamaya ka kagiso, my new comrades. Yet I fear for you. Writers work alone, outside the strength of a collective. Would that you find that *Amandla nga Wethu* is not just a pretty slogan but rather the only way to give one the strength and the courage to destroy that beast and realise the hope and joy of our future.

Marius Schoon