

The Clan Bard of the Drakensberg

*in memoriam Msebenzi Hlongwane
imbongi of the AmaNgwane*

Behind that weathered face of yours,
a face that held a Grecian statue's look
of gaunt contempt for all things mean,

what memories of glossy cattle herds,
of honey-coloured domes of grass
and iron-bright spear-blades seethed?

You came to me again, grey bard,
blind as a Homer of the Drakensberg
as I sat hot and fretful in my car,

clamped in a Midrand traffic crawl,
bleeping off signals from my phone
to meetings streets and streets away.

Why had you come to haunt me there?
Knobbed stick, short spear in hand,
you flickered in my trafficked mind.

I wondered what you'd make of us,
you who'd strolled the hills barefoot,
breath-close to kin, to dung and dust.

How would you view the billboard ads,
the maze of streets, the rush, rush, rush
of symbiotic strangers round a town?

I turned a talk-show's chatter down
and saw you whole, a frail old man
dressed in a ragged shirt and coat

shuffling over the dawn-brimmed dew
towards a cattle byre below the crags
where I had come to drink your springs.

On goat-scoured hills – your pastoral epic
of thick-packed shacks, a shop, a school
and kin whose children wake in towns.

Is this what cities do to clans?
you made me ask as you trudged past
a rib-rack whippet suckling pups.

A pregnant girl yawned in a door,
a radio throbbed with gospel choirs
as you stretched out a hand and touched

a fence that kraaled a few thin cows,
turned to the sun, raised up a spear
and chanted out an orison of praise.

Still tense, at being so late, so stuck
in lanes of town-bound trucks and cars,
I only heard faint remnants of your poem.

That phrase where one king's called
The-Morning-Star-who's-only-seen
by-those-who-get-up-with-the-dawn.

Those references to pumpkin-plants,
to fords and feuds now as obscure
as pot-chips dug from cave-bed soil.

That warrior boast, dying in the air,
that Matiwane your Hercules slew
and slew until his eyes turned red.

Aaah Tshani! Grain-pit-of-memories!
Poet-whose-footsteps-the-dew-reveals!
You looked so small, yet so defiant

below that huge amphitheatre of rock.
How I admired and loved you then.
You prompt me still, my bardic shade,

to lift my voice, to praise the dawn
when I sit still and start to write
within the amphitheatre of a screen.