

The Poetry of Our Lives

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'... the passions/of dolphins'

In the mid-1980s at the University of Natal, the student body was overwhelmingly of white, middle class and suburban upbringing. Most had attended well-performing, or reasonably performing, schools. The smattering of Indian and African faces in the lecture halls signalled the unravelling of 'grand' apartheid (to use an oxymoron of the time). The parents of these students had probably managed, by whatever means, to enter the peripheries of the white suburbs, or the white economy. Whether these students felt at home in their skins was not an issue of consideration, let alone debate.

Interchange in lectures and tutorials found a common language, which intercultural studies identifies as 'high context': that is, a reasonably shared colloquial and idiomatic facility; a reasonably shared response to irony, humour, and inference. In this high context, I taught Douglas Livingstone's then recently published *Selected Poems*. It was a selection of startling juxtaposition. Like the 17th-century 'Metaphysical' John Donne, Livingstone – a marine bacteriologist – yoked the language of science to almost any form including the Petrarchan sonnet and the African praise poem. The students, probably understandably, responded in a mix of enthusiasm and bafflement.

In today's 'low context' – a greater diversity of race, class, religion, and tradition; different levels of proficiency in the language of learning, English – a poet of modernist inclination, of subtle integration of Western forms and local reference, of wit, irony, and sexual innuendo, would probably not be the most appropriate choice for an introductory course on poetry.

Back then, my lecture on the poem, 'One Time', provoked a confident voice in the lecture hall: 'Cool man, the guy takes his chick for underwater sex.'

Looking pleased with himself, the young man, beach-tanned, blonde bleached surfer's hair, T-shirt, and baggies, earned a giggle of approval from a row of sun-tanned chicks.

More recently, a lecturer in the English 3 class – of about 200 students – passed a remark about corrupt leadership. A young man in a black, yellow, and green ANC T-shirt stood up: 'Why do you disrespect my president, President Zuma? In my culture, we respect our leaders whatever they do.'

'What,' I asked, 'was the reaction of the class?'

'Stony silence,' she said. 'I dunno whether that was a good or bad thing.'

He remembers their delight at the silent
new experience,
the emulations of the passions
of dolphins...

...

Then, he recalls his panic
when, with a mounting climax,
perhaps upside down, certainly weightless,
he had to cram her mouthpiece
back into her vacant lips, fishwide and cyanosed...

Michael Chapman [to lecture hall of first-year students]: The colloquial – that is, the almost conversational – rhythms underscore an air of worldly amusement. But the easy flow is deceptive. Look at the use of rhyming and half-rhyming words as well as the skilful construction of long sentences. [I illustrate.]

What's the poem *about*, you ask? Well, enter imaginatively into its delight in its own creative energy. The suggestion could be that we needn't feel we have to conform to each and every social injunction, every restraining expectation. We may revel, on occasions, in our instinctual nature. We are, after all – as Livingstone has put it – two-footed creatures, two-footed animals.

Twenty years later, in her study of Livingstone's poetry, Mariss Stevens would strike a more sombre note, perhaps too heavy a note, in the context of this poem: 'One Time' suggests the impossibility of returning to our oceanic, evolutionary past! Twenty years later, there were also new issue-driven questions: who, in this poem, dictates the value of the experience, him or her; or, who are 'we' to presume who enjoys what?

In any case, I'd caught myself in a bind... How does the 'aesthetic', which evokes appreciation, taste, a suspicion of moral and social purpose in art, function in relation to objectively pre-existing experience? It's a question that, since the Romantic era of Emmanuel Kant's Third Critique, has taxed greater minds than my own. Seeking an elusive bridge between nature and freedom, cognition and morality, fact and value, Kant referred to 'thought-emotion'. This apparent paradox, in turn, provoked Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School in the 1940s to place the poem, especially the lyric poem, as a 'go-for-broke' game: that is, art functioning coherently in and within the medium – language – which we human beings use to articulate objective concepts while, at the same time, we explore subjective, 'un-conceptual', even ephemeral, experience. Robert Kaufman, in 2003, attempted to elaborate on such a philosophical and theoretical conundrum (how, simultaneously, to think objectively and subjectively): critical response to the artwork, he avers, has to articulate an expanded conceptuality: a conceptuality that the artwork itself generates, non-discursively. Literary criticism, therefore, enunciates conceptually what the work (in this instance, the poem) constructs quasi-conceptually: that is, in accordance with its distinctive character, or its thought-experience. The poem stretches conceptual language towards affective response without relinquishing intellection.

What kind of explanation, however, would this have been to a lecture hall of 300 18-year-old students, even had I at hand (which I didn't, back then) Kaufman's guide to the semi-tutored philosophical mind? That we feel as we think, or vice versa, that our feelings are never quite free of our thoughts, or vice versa.

MC: You want the theme of 'One Time' [I heard myself say]. Well, as I've suggested, we should be free to exercise our whole human capacity. Not only to enjoy sexual play, but also our play with language – that which makes us human. All this, so long as we don't harbour evil intent towards other people, or creatures ('their emulations of the passions/of dolphins'):

She did, of course, recover adequately
after a few splutters and with him gently
squeezing her ribs regularly
while finning desperately
upwards.

'I understand your concern,' I continued. 'A *lesson*, a moral, captured in a mood, in a poetic form, is always elusive... But free yourself, on occasion, from conformity. Enjoy the experience; enjoy the poem.'

'Still not satisfied? You want something more precise, more down-to-earth. Ok, how about turning to the last lines. Note the play on words, the rhyme-in-repetition with variation, from "one time" to "some time".' [Pens poised.]

But it was some time
before they tried it again
– some time after
and in shallower water.

‘So, when you next try to emulate the passions/of dolphins, do your thing in shallower water.’
[*Pens scribble. Pens pause. Hesitant laughter, even from the dude in his surfing gear!*]

‘I hear laughter – a little hesitantly. Ok, let Livingstone, not me, have the last word:
“Poetry can plead one last quality: it can entertain, sometimes at an emotional level which
outstrips or defies our present ratiocinated limit” – that is, it outstrips the limits of our
reasoning mind.’

[*Perspiring – it was, after all, a day for the beach – I exit.*]

‘sometime starmen’ Over Lunch with the Poet

MC: Even in your love poems, there’s often a scientific language underscoring a romantic language. I think of Ted Hughes’s comment, at the Cheltenham Festival in 1977, on the Czech poet and immunologist, Miroslav Holub. He remarked that what, at the time, made Holub probably the most important poet writing in Europe was his poetic transfiguration of registers from medicine and technology: love’s pain not as the conceit of a broken heart, but an emotion attached to a world of ambulances, scalpels, sutures, bandages, and intravenous drips.

DL: Poor old Miroslav. A poet’s burden! Neither his wife nor his daughter even knew he wrote poetry,

red meat
conse-
quently
red wine,

as he said when we had supper with him down at the beachfront. A ‘found’ poem, as you, or Carlos Williams, might say, in the anti-poetic mode.

Even the scientist-poet is an idealist, even when the scientist in him observes raw nature, or biology, even through a microscope:

One short flagellate sucks
and fills: its brood could sjambok
bowels into a bloody flux.

...

This jejune universe
looks bent – perhaps such advents
will rule the unknown planets, or worse.

Science and poetry... But eat up, your fish is getting cold.

MC: Well, you were obviously having the newspapers on when, after your *Selected Poems* won a major award, you said you were just an ordinary bloke – that the poet must just be an ordinary bloke.

DL: Did I say ‘must’? Of course, there’ve been great poets and great artists who’ve been extraordinary blokes – blokes who haven’t had to work, blokes born with silver spoons in their mouths, or in some other orifice, blokes supported by their mothers, or by American conscience money. There’ve been a hell of a lot of ordinary blokes who’ve been artists – I’m an ordinary artist, I’m an ordinary human being.

The first sputnik blipped above me
 where I worked 12 metres down
 at the jaws of dam construction
 in an outraged Zambezi;
 hearing the broadcast about it
 that evening, recalled a light
 cord tied at my back which strung
 the man groping in mud
 to sometime starman, knotted
 under my ancient aqualung.

Some say the juxtaposition of art and science is extraordinary. I don't see that at all – I have no problem; I move from one hemisphere of my brain to the other – between the 'two cultures' – with easy facility. It's easily learnt. I think I'm perfectly ordinary.

Yet there's quite a strong poseur element in the oldest civilisations, whereas a bloke who loves words in southern Africa can't get away with a cloak and a white hat and stroll down the street with a sign on his back saying, 'I am a poet.'

MC: You allude to Roy Campbell – playing the rough-neck colonial when in 'literary' Bloomsbury and the Bloomsbury dandy when back home in his 'grocer's paradise', Durban.

DL: A great poet. He could encapsulate a vivid image in rhythm and rhyme. A great poet but, at heart, an ordinary bloke.

The only aristocracy I would allow is that of the intellect. I love individuals and not masses. As a malevolent neutral, I pray hopelessly for peace on earth. I hope for a deracialised society here, in which everyone has enough to eat, safe water, shelter from the elements, and can get a decent education, if they want it. I haven't got remotely near the top of the tree in either science or art. I live in a one-bedroom flat. And that's it, I'm ordinary.

MC: Before we go, you mentioned your job as a diver at Lake Kariba. The reference to 'sometime starman' – it's always puzzled me.

DL: At the bottom of Kariba – hell! It really was hell – I couldn't even see my oxygen lung. Above, the stars, shamanistic trance-states, paradise, nirvana – whatever words you want to use – all the same, all meaningless or meaningful, depending on you.

The scientist wants to believe that life must have started from something that had a kind of life – organic molecules from other parts of the solar system, comets that hit the earth leaving building blocks that are essential to life, at least as we know it: carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, sulphur, phosphorus, iron. A theory of abiogenesis.

Lovelock postulates a kind of cosmic view of Darwinian natural selection. I suppose in 'A Spinal Column' I tried to link our aspiration upwards, metaphorically, to our beginnings down in the slime. Or, in reverse, to reconnect, back, to the supernova or comet. The Buddha, the enlightened one, might say, what does it matter in our evolution whether stars preceded sea, or vice versa. We're, in any case, creatures of salt and water.

Ultimately, I'm an Earthman before I'm a Starman! But, more immediately, from the stars to my unpretentious block of flats. I'm the Chairman of the Body Corporate. I must go after our lunch to deal with a complaint. An old dear – a really charming old dear – has seen a young couple, as she phrased it, 'spooning' in the garages.

MC: So, what does the 'sometime starman' do?

DL: I dunno. Maybe say to her, I'll intervene when the couple starts 'forking'!
 Keep it clean!

I drive back to my own flat, musing on our conversation over lunch. In my exchanges with Livingstone, I often sounded – at least, to myself – somewhat ponderous; he, verbally adroit. A case of the headmaster/pupil syndrome? When you meet your primary school headmaster years later, you revert in your tone of response to being the 12-year schoolboy. I had initially met Livingstone when I was writing my Masters study on his poetry; he was the luminary, even as he claimed to be an ordinary bloke. The ordinary bloke would go on to be awarded a PhD in his own field of research, a PhD that was adjudged to be a key contribution to what we now say are our 'green' concerns. The ordinary bloke said he'd been into green – how to keep the sea water clean – before it became fashionable!

Livingstone's oscillations between intellectual strenuousness and an anti-intellectual stance, I began to realise, was a tactic of his 'persona', whether in the language of literature or life: a bed-rock self, foundational, beneath the transfigurations of his 'poetic' sensibility.

I provoked him on analogies of literary representation, or re-creation: from the thunderous sky of his first significant collection Sjambok, and Other Poems from Africa, written at the time of the 'wind of change' in central Africa, to the clearer sky (if one were white in South Africa) of Eyes Closed Against the Sun, then back again, in The Anvil's Undertone, to the darker colours, to the ominous rumblings of the 'struggle' years of the 1970s and 1980s. In illustration, I raised the case of his response to the 'First People' of the region, the Bushmen (so named, derogatorily, by colonists) or the San (cattle-less people), so named, derogatorily, by the off-shoot Khoi, who were known derogatorily, in turn, as Hottentots or Hotnots in colonial parlance.

At our initial meeting at the Berea Rd Hotel, back in 1978, Livingstone had linked Bushman trance-states to Einstein's physics, both alike in perceptions of mystery beyond our understanding. In Eyes Closed Against the Sun he opposed 'modern civilisation' to the conceit of 'moon-rites and rain dances'. In The Anvil's Undertone, in contrast, the harsh world of Sjambok re-appeared, in which the motif of 'Cain and Abel' had signified the almost inevitable, violent pattern of human history.

'Rock Art', accordingly, has the poet interpreting a sequence of Bushman cave paintings, in which the hunter-gatherer band, first ostracises and then kills one of its own young, who had found consonance with a 'blue wildebeest'. Swiftly – in instinctive self-justification – myth encompasses the here and now (the little boy's spirit becomes a shadow on the moon). Yet, even as the hunter-gatherer band incorporates this new god into its trance-states, physical reality intrudes violently. The blue wildebeest exacts its revenge by trampling to death the tribe that has killed its kindred spirit, the little Bushman boy.

Had I then had available A Littoral Zone, Livingstone's last collection before his death from cancer in 1996, I would have continued this particular line of enquiry. 'Rock Art', for example, may be juxtaposed against the less severe 'Eland about Station 17'. Having uncovered an ancient cave, the poet/water-sampler touches, mystically, the Bushman 'dream of eland', while in 'A Visitor at Station 21', he is licked, unexpectedly, on the wrist by a duiker doe, his 'mentation' suspended by this 'impending holy event'.

Possibly Livingstone's imagination was unduly sensitive to the temper of each decade in which he produced a collection of poems. When I posed this, he replied tetchily about 'Rock Art' that he'd tried to bring alive only what he'd seen in the rock-painting sequence, nothing more, nothing less.

My musings are unceremoniously disrupted.

[VIOLENT HOOTING]: GREEN LIGHT... ARSE HOLE!

Chastised, I pull into the carport beneath my flat. Fortunately, I encounter no teenagers either spooning or forking.

'We poets, we try to entertain'

MC: Please sit down, Ms Nkosi-Groenewald. You say you have a year off from your lecturing duties – the whole of 2010 on sabbatical to pursue a Master's degree.

NNG: Thank you, Prof. Please call me Nelisiwe, or just Nellie. Yes, I'm at a university in the Eastern Cape. I was a student of yours in the late 1980s. Then I was Nellie Nkosi. I'm married. I have two almost adult children.

MC: Why Livingstone?

NNG: I was introduced to his poetry at school. I went to Durban Girls High. I suppose I was an early coconut. My English teacher – she had interviewed Livingstone – encouraged us to participate in the Alan Paton Literary Competition. Douglas Livingstone often judged our efforts.

Then I studied here, at Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal. I remember you lectured us on the poem, 'One Time'. We were first-year students. We wanted to know what to do with the poem in the exam. *What* was its 'lesson'? You said the lesson – I realised, afterwards, you were playing the fool with us – you said the lesson was, next time you do it, do it in shallower water!

Then, Prof, you gave us an essay topic, ‘Can the poet as entertainer also be a serious poet?’ It was beyond us – we said some stupid things, I’m sure.

MC [awkwardly]: I was being a little unfair, a little mischievous... [*Actually, as I’ve confessed, a little at a loss as how to explain the functioning of the ‘aesthetic’*] ... perhaps I was echoing Livingstone himself. He insisted throughout his career that he was first and foremost an entertainer.

NNG: Well, I want to do an MA on that theme – Livingstone, the poet as entertainer.

MC: Quite a bit’s been written on Livingstone since then. Hardly anything on that angle, though. A lot recently on the ‘environmental’ Livingstone. Ranging from the perceptive to the prescriptive – Livingstone should be this or that kind of eco-poet – to the ‘abstractly’ scientific – the application to his poetry of sometimes obtuse biological, and other, theories. Sometimes the poetry gets a little lost.

But... before we go any further, let me raise this with you. Livingstone – by his own admission – has been called sexist. And, I think, he enjoyed the label...

NNG: Hey, Prof, in his ‘Alan Paton’ talks he always encouraged... eh, ‘gentled’ us school kids... Yes, maybe especially the girls. And we enjoyed it.

Before my family moved to the suburbs, we lived in KwaMashu township. I know all about sexism. It’s now called traditional African culture. Douglas Livingstone was... kinda old-fashioned in his charm.

Greetings everyone, Sanibona Nonke. And a particular welcome to all the young writers present... Enrich your English with your own culture, your own circumstance, your own experience in this beautiful and troubled country.

[I’m slightly embarrassed by my own ‘correctness’. Livingstone, an old-fashioned modernist? Well, I suppose modernism hovered precariously on the cusp of the past and the present... I return to Ms Nkosi Groenewald.]

MC: You say you’re based in the Eastern Cape. People at Rhodes University have been prominent in promoting Livingstone. Mariss Everitt, Dan Wylie – on a ‘green’ Livingstone. The ‘Livingstone’ papers are now housed in Grahamstown at the National English Literary Museum. And two Grahamstown academics, Don MacLennan (also a poet of note) and Malcolm Hacksley, are the editors of the almost 600-page *A Ruthless Fidelity: The Collected Poems of Douglas Livingstone*. Rhodes University – like Natal – awarded him an honorary doctorate. Grimstown – that’s what he called Grahamstown – has actually done Livingstone proud.

And then there’s the current Head of English at Rhodes, Professor Dirk Klopper who, since the mid-1980s, has had – has enjoyed? ... how shall I say this, an ideologically fraught relationship with Livingstone’s poetry. Like several in the humanities in the 1980s, he displayed a somewhat rigid Marxism. He saw Livingstone as a kind of flat-earth Darwinist. Later, at the time of Livingstone’s death, he penned an astute, if a still somewhat ‘undecided’, recognition of the poetry.

More recently, Professor Klopper – together with Stephen Gray – has co-edited a selection of Livingstone’s essays. Again, Dirk reveals an ambiguity in his admiration: ‘Perhaps in our time and place, it is his environmental thinking rather than his poetry or politics that is of greatest interest.’ He then adds that, despite this comment, ‘the relationship between the microbiologist and the poet, between the scientific understanding and the poetic understanding, remains intriguing’. When, in our black-and-white years, we all felt obligated to declare our allegiances to a political position, I called myself a radical-liberal. To Dirk, at the time, both Livingstone and I were deemed to be politically conservative.

But more to your point... in his Preface to Livingstone’s essays, Dirk quotes Livingstone’s comment that his poems are ‘game reserves of the imagination’. This acts as a prelude to Dirk’s conclusion that Livingstone ‘presents poetry not as an artefact of vivid rhythmic utterances, but as analogous to a piece of the world’, and the piece of the world he has in mind is dedicated specifically to the preservation of natural phenomena against a rapacious modernity.

This is accurate as far as it goes, so long as we recall that, in the same article in which Livingstone speaks of game reserves of the imagination, he also rejects any perceived dichotomy between content and form. He devotes considerable time to talking of ‘mutually antagonistic chords called form [at once] extremely fragile, sensitive, and delicate and, like barbed wire, ruthless, disciplined, violent, to force the poem to retain the shape that it is delicately hinting at for itself... you can crumple fountain-pen nibs at this’.

All this sounds pretty heavy, but I’m leading up to Livingstone’s concluding juxtaposition, which bears on your interest:

... poetry can plead one last quality: it can entertain, sometimes at an emotional level which outstrips or defies our present ratiocinated limits.

It’s the quotation on which, all those years ago, I concluded my lecture on ‘One Time’.

NNG: Yes Prof, as a student I recorded your radio talks on poetry, including the one in which you interviewed Livingstone.

MC: Many students find ‘The Zoo Affair’ one of the most striking and even problematic poems they’ve encountered.

DL: Oh, I’m sorry about the ‘problematic’ – you know, we poets, we try to entertain!

...

MC: ‘The Almighty and the Hammerheads’: the paddle-skier, the sharks, God.

DL: Fortunately, hammerhead sharks are not normally man-eaters, unless they are hungry enough. The experience was real enough, though. I hope the poem remains entertaining.

[*Nelisiwe continues*]: The idea of the entertainer stuck with me – the serious poet, the entertainer. So, how to let one talk to the other... the crux of my dissertation?

[*I’m impressed.*]

[*Nelisiwe takes a breath*] Prof, I hope you’re not trying to get rid of me – to Grahamstown. Because I’d like you to be my supervisor... if you don’t already have too many students.

MC: No, we – in English – now struggle to find postgraduate students. No career opportunities. Those who approach us usually want to do creative writing – that’s the latest buzz. Or the study of TV sitcoms. Or something they’ve seen on YouTube. Literary studies have drifted towards cultural studies. Our managers, meanwhile, threaten staff about having too few postgraduates.

*NNG: Yes, my institution is also ruled by managers. I’m – I suppose – an ‘equity’ appointment. I still have only an Honours degree. I’m instructed to complete my MA during my sabbatical year – or else! [*Nelisiwe flicks her braids.*] Our managers – for all their threats, they’d be too terrified to act against a black African woman. Especially a sassy one, like me.*

But I don’t want to do the MA for them, but for me.

MC: Time? You’ve obviously got family responsibilities?

NNG: My mother lives with us. My husband – Werner – he’s the headmaster of a high school. I used to teach in schools. He supports my career.

MC: Ok, how long will you be in Durban?

NNG: This week. I’m visiting old school friends. And I still have family here – my grandmother.

*MC: All right, let me think this through. We can have another meeting before you leave. Try to write – not more than two pages – ‘The aim of my study is....’ And, at this stage, chapter headings – say, an Intro and three chapters. Very tentative... [*pause*]... To be judged primarily by his capacity to entertain? ... Although Livingstone insisted on this, he only dropped hints as to what he meant: to celebrate aspects of being alive; to show humility towards what he produced; to communicate, respectfully, to his readers. To be a moral human being needn’t be at the expense of a bit of fun...*

So, to make us see, feel, to expand imaginative possibilities and considerations. To encourage us to touch the experience, almost as if it were palpable:

After the floods, debris heaped higher than two men
 ...
 On one high peak, (a pain for the SPCA
 if ever there was one!) a roughed up bantam stands
 ...
 This teapot, whose rage is writ too large to be cooped
 within one pygmy chanticleer, surveyed amazed
 by gulls and gannets, trumpets his fractious challenge.
 Tempting to dub the din thanksgiving; or more: life
 triumphs even on longer trusted planets.

A bantam, a teapot, a pygmy chanticleer, thanksgiving, and a flood; 'life/triumphs even on no longer trusted planets' – I remember, it was Livingstone's juxtaposition of startling... uh... heterogeneous images that initially stamped his style on my own imagination. That initially *entertained* me.

As I said, most of the more recent articles focus on Livingstone's environmental vision. But there're two helpful summations of his several volumes. Published in Italy... Then there's an essay that should suggest a few ideas on Livingstone, the entertainer. It's written by the South African novelist, Christopher Hope.

Hope's essay, 'Boxer on a Surfboard', looks at *Eyes Closed Against the Sun*. Instead of Roy Campbell's 'Flaming Terrapin', we have Livingstone as a 'Truculent Terrapin'. The boxing-biologist, the surfing-poet, surfing and salvation. Here, I quote from Hope: 'There is in Livingstone's poems often the feeling that our species is the planetary delinquent.' But a delinquent deserving of tenderness: 'an air of bygone gallantry [is a] constant pleasure in the verse.'

Hope finds 'seriousness' embroidered in the very fabric of the poetry: '...this is where morality comes into it – in the fastidious use of words in a country where words in the mouths of bullies become the usual form of blackmail'. He concludes on a note of gratitude: Livingstone's poetry makes him 'feel so free'...

As I repeat Hope's comment, my mind returns to the consideration by Morphet, Sacks and others of Livingstone's 'ruthless fidelity' to self, given that the freedom, or autonomy, of the cultural self remains constrained by the determinism of the biology of self. Poets as entertainers, Livingstone said, must show humility both to their own work and to readers; must connect the 'difficulty' of the modern sensibility (I allude to T.S. Eliot) to the buffetings and pleasures of the daily round, or grind.

How did Eliot square the 'difficulty' of modern poetry with what he termed the 'ordinary man's experience'? The latter's experience is 'chaotic, irregular, fragmentary':

The ordinary man falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet, these experiences are always forming new wholes.

All very well, but Eliot's poet and ordinary bloke remain separate entities. Livingstone's aim was to be, inseparably, poet and ordinary bloke. Accordingly, humankind, its bloated ego, must be restored to a humbler place in the natural world:

*Here's to the sea and its restive quest
 intent on drowning land;
 even the saddest poem's a jest
 written on the ebb tide's sand.*

As Sacks puts it, 'This may be partly Stoic cheer; partly a resurgence of the Cervantean geste-jest; nonetheless, it reminds us of the comedic frame to what, in A Littoral Zone, is essentially a sad book.'

How then, asks Sacks, do we understand Livingstone's certainty of Gaia's victory over us clowns of creation, wedded as he, Livingstone, is to a loving and often painful fidelity to the threatened pulse of human life? Is his best prayer – the last poem in the sequence poses the question – 'Uncontainable Joy'? However tenuous, however elusive, the joy, the scientist-poet, the questing knight, renews himself after a long day of sampling: 'The pennants flutter, the sound of pounding/hooves drums up the trophy: life? ... small pieces will live'.

Nelisiwe snaps me back to the present moment, her question embodying life: Thank you, Prof. Um... one more thing. What's your favourite Livingstone poem?

MC: Hey, that's a difficult one. Livingstone often said that he wanted to be remembered, a century after his death, for only one or two poems that could 'quietly unshackle one human heart'. He should be remembered for many, but here's one, 'Steel Giraffes' – tender, gently humorous, sad, the conflicting emotions captured in a wonderfully suggestive image ('filaments of dusk ringing shrouds/woven through the word goodbye'):

There are probably somewhere
arms as petal-slight as hers;
there are probably somewhere,
wrists as slim;
quite probably, someone has
hands as slender-leafed as hers;
the fingers, probably
bare of rings, as thin.

Certainly, there is nowhere
such a dolour
of funnels, mastings, yards,
filaments of dusk ringing shrouds
woven through the word goodbye,
riveted steel giraffes
tactfully looking elsewhere,
necks very still to the sky.

The three-syllable word, 'probably' (in the first stanza), disrupts too easy a rhythm while anticipating its converse in the second stanza, 'certainly'. The disrupted rhythm is held in tenuous equilibrium by the near-rhyming words, 'slim'/'thin' and 'goodbye'/'sky'. The drab industrial dockside, perhaps even the animal world beyond, tactfully respects a moment of intimate parting.

A newspaper columnist once said that anyone who could make poetry out of Durban, indeed must be a poet of consummate skill. Livingstone's Durbs! A local recognition resonates beyond the locale to unshackle a heart.

Nellie, as you leave make an appointment with the English Department administrator. For the end of next week.

NNG: No problem, Prof.