

**THE PRICE OF LIBERTY: A COLLECTION OF POEMS AND PROSE THAT EXPLORE  
THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN FREEDOM AND SACRIFICE**

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A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Magister Artium (Creative Writing) in the Department of English, University of the Western Cape.

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## KEYWORDS

Freedom  
Liberation  
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Religious language  
Pilgrimage  
Journey  
Promise  
Purgatory  
Sacrifice



## ABSTRACT

The Price of Liberty: A collection of poems and prose that explores the interplay between freedom and sacrifice.

David Schmidt

This mini-thesis explores the interplay between concepts of freedom and sacrifice. It comprises a collection of 28 original poems as well as a reflective essay that explores some of the themes that emerge through the creative work.

The premise of the collection is the notion that freedom is necessarily ambiguous and inevitably involves some countervailing sacrifice or loss. The act of exercising freedom in an oppressive context by transgressing prescribed norms, for example, has its countervailing consequences of shame, humiliation or punishment. Struggles for political freedom similarly involve many forms of sacrifice. The attainment of political or social freedom conversely comes with its own losses – loss of meaning, certainty, innocence, solidarity or even integrity. Relationship itself always involve a tension between obligation and agency – freedom is constrained by values.

The collection is divided into three distinct sections. Each section has a different rationale and logic that is also reflected in the tone, form and even the approach to punctuation. The first section explores the sacrifice involved in the struggle for democracy and the challenge of making that democracy work. The second section explores the tensions between freedom and obligation inherent in relationships and the potential for healing to emerge from the inevitable suffering. The third section centres on a series of pilgrimages, physical or psychological, that explore both the miracles and the hubris that are set free by journeys.

I am particularly interested in those crossroads where freedom and loss intersect to generate miraculous redemptive moments or sometimes inversely, moral collapse. The theme also resonates with the complex connections between political rhetoric and religious language and the role of memory and myth in mediating the tensions between these ideas.


November 2019

## DECLARATION

I declare that *The Price of Liberty: A collection of poems and prose that explore the interplay between freedom and sacrifice* is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

David Wilhelm de Villiers Schmidt

14 November 2019

Signed: 



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is for my parents. They would have been proud.

The consistent love and encouragement of my wife Claudine made this possible. I could not have done it without her.

My daughters are the joy of my life. They have cheered me on every step of the way.

The support of my sisters has been so valuable. I am blessed.

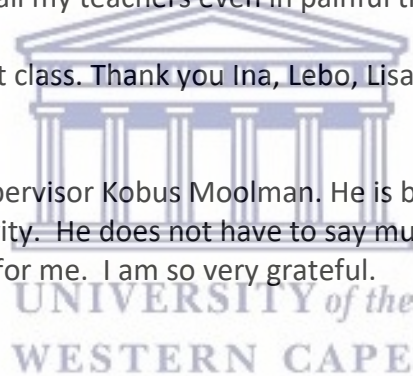
I have wonderful and special friends. I am the person I am because of them.

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## PART 1: COLLECTION OF POEMS



## promised lands



*we measured our virtue in burnt offerings like priests  
we conjured promised lands out of words like magicians  
we buried our wounds in stoic acceptance like lambs  
we prostrated ourselves at the feet of idols like dogs  
we scavenged the carcasses of the dying flock like jackals  
we tend the green shoots in our desert like poets.*



## **boy still falls**

we breathed in tear gas, we breathed out wild flowers  
that year of breath  
when we barked at police dogs and bared our teeth at armoured beasts.

our sleep was tortured, our food was laced with lead pellets  
that year of death  
where my dreams still drip, where that boy still falls.



## hanover park elegy

through fine white mist amongst lilies  
a tall white stallion grazes, wet  
magnificent and fresh

closer up, it's a broken horse, tied to the coal cart  
the halter made of wire rusted red, the raw red weals  
reveal its flesh.

\*\*\*

the dying boy his pink-specked grin on the car backseat  
head bandaged white against the black plastic armrest  
as panicking teachers do mouth to mouth

the red of his freshly bled blood becomes  
the colourless stain in the dull upholstery  
that the years never wash out.



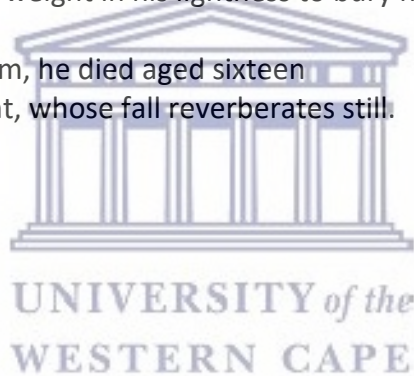
## lightness and weight

that boy shot down on vanguard drive fell without weight  
he was buried the same afternoon, the imam gave thanks  
we carried his body to the graveyard chanting god is great  
a politician claimed him for the cause but forgot his name  
all seeking the weight in his lightness to bury him

that boy shot down on vanguard drive fell without weight  
an adolescent not an innocent child, a school drop-out not a brave student  
he hung out with the local gang, joined for the action not the cause  
a life and a death so light, he left no mark or motion  
as we sought the weight in his lightness to bury him

that boy shot down on vanguard drive fell without weight  
they laid him out in the front room swaddled in white  
schoolchildren filing past, giggled how small he looked  
as his mother cried, "he was a good boy", over and over again  
a simple phrase that found the weight in his lightness to bury him

his name was Mogamat Ebrahim, he died aged sixteen  
a good boy who fell with weight, whose fall reverberates still.



## the meaning of mrs h s balls original chutney

peach and apricot mixed with teargas  
the sweetness of it and the sourness

i knew that march was not going to end well, round  
some corner waiting - whips, birdshot and rubber bullets

the uncertainty being the degree of the burn  
was it to be regular, hot or extra hot?

i always imagine the worst, you will find me at the  
back of a march hovering between fear and duty

hoping that policeman does not mark me in my teacher  
suit as an instigator deserving extreme heat

how would he know that shame is like mrs balls chutney, that lathered  
in its rich associations, the unpalatable becomes just eatable enough?

the footfalls echo through the backstreets of athlone like a heartbeat  
one hundred high school students marching to a banned rally

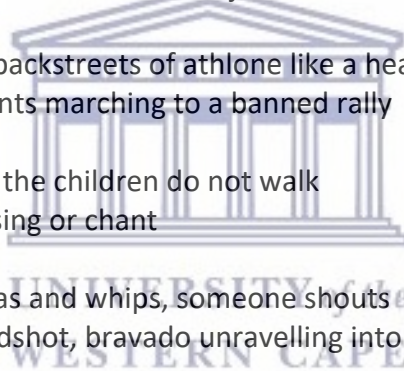
plus some terrified teachers so the children do not walk  
alone, everyone too scared to sing or chant

around some corner, the teargas and whips, someone shouts  
sit down but we scatter like birdshot, bravado unravelling into flight

in the aftermath, the search for the lost and wounded, their  
eyes still burning, panicking breath, the raw red hives of the whips

in a bottling plant, we find ten hidden stragglers struggling out of cupboards  
as rows on rows of mrs balls chutney file bravely down the conveyor belt

mrs balls means original home grown sweet and sour courage  
that after-tang always catching the back of my palate.



## **transcribing torture**

beneath the clank of the old electric typewriter on  
scarred cassettes, the disembodied voices of victims  
rewind the piercing of psyches through skin

the transcriber's task is to write down every word precisely  
the solitary atrocities blur into each other like piled stones  
evidentiary weight lies in patterned repetition

but it is not the patterned words that haunt me  
it is the throttled silences, a nameless voice falters  
the memory lodged in the body, far beyond speaking.



## the grammar of the wound

how were we to know that the coils of destiny had already  
wrapped themselves around our young throats  
that first night of the second state of emergency  
as the full moon rose unseen behind the fire of Crossroads

the ash falling so delicately  
on frenzied friends or foes who wander like grey ghosts  
a blanket of smoke muting the gunshots  
and the soft calls of comrades looking for each other

or that three young men who sat around our hearth  
would be the human sacrifices that year of frayed eclipse  
or the grief of those I love so thick my heart withered back into  
itself, a wound I bandaged without adjective for years

the ash falling so delicately  
my housemate taken too that night of smoke  
I find the lights on but nobody home  
each new loss breaks strand by strand the bonds that hold us

we loiter on the slopes looking down into the prison  
the kites we fly for her tethered tightly but still free in the wind  
can she not see us there so young against the burnt mountainside  
as we reach out into the morning air

the ash falling so delicately  
weighed down by the tombstones of our dead  
we try to resuscitate what we had  
collapsing towards freedom like ragdolls

I recount all this to a friend I love  
conjugating the wound again in the present tense  
I sense her heart wither back into itself  
unpunctuated it is all too much

as the ash keeps falling so delicately  
without substance but holding the original form  
until the last ember dies  
and we become air.

## **not only what has been gained**

*crossroads 1986 - 2016*

the slow tornado of smoke swallows up the screams and the gunshots  
in nebulae of incomprehension that spill out as acid rain on cornfields  
the innocent doing the killing and the dying while the reapers of youth  
laugh over cigarettes on the hill. the ash blue sky, the dead dry earth  
the lost dogs scavenging the bones of compassion.

box houses now bloom in that desolated ground  
there are children again, playing without care  
the scars hidden, the pain corralled deep in the heart  
but the torn plastic of dashed hope litters the street corners  
in the shebeen of angry young men I now watch my back.



## loss of hearing

the plants keep dying in the bitter earth  
did we not break the land enough?  
or did we water it too much?  
i have taken living nouns myself and suffocated them  
in a red sea of reports leaking good intentions and  
sat in meetings in round rooms where troublesome  
verbs were billy-clubbed until they churned comfortably  
in the mouth like tenderised steak  
we once knew how to make words speak  
now we mistake shouting for speaking and talking for doing.





## what we found

in arcane readings, meaning  
in smoke-filled meetings, love  
in lost causes, hope  
in silenced atrocities, voice

in constitutionalised freedom, complacency  
in settled careers, doubt  
in secure estates, fear  
in nostalgic recollection, forgetfulness

in recurrent turmoil, renewal  
in fragmenting certainties, coherence  
in old friendships, wonder  
in discomforting youth, gratitude.



## purgatories



*we are broken apart  
he and she  
us and them  
my own split soul  
how do we heal ourselves?  
clothe our victim in garments of light?  
stitch our perpetrator up in kindness?  
melt our armour?  
find those moments of reprieve?*

## **cracked**

the slow wearing has opened the cracks  
they are leaking apart into their own dampness.

she still has the ears of a wild dog, acutely  
aware of distant sounds of distress.

he has made himself invulnerable, sharp  
shards freed of the weight that breaks the jar.

she wants a cottage by the sea where  
they can close the windows to the storm

and catch lightning in the shuttered glass.



## **still together**

he double-locks his door and bolts the shutters. he says he feels safe that way.  
she buries herself in snow outside. her suffering does not speak to him.  
what he speaks to her is what is unspoken. she cannot breathe but she must.

she makes a small hole in the top of her head. she pulls out the red silk scarf.  
it is tied to a blue scarf. she sees in that the sky. she stuffs the scarves back into her head.  
she is hanging from the sky. she cannot hold on but she has to.

he is swimming out of the shallows into the ocean.  
she thought he would be. she swims out to him on a boogie board.  
she wishes he would drown. she does not want to save him but she does.



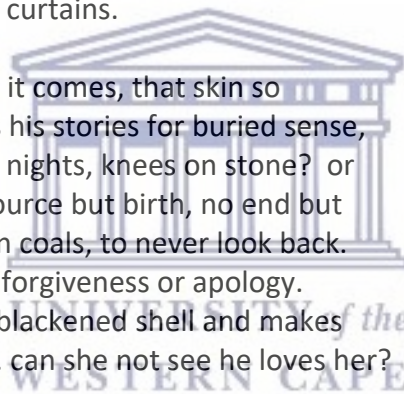
## house of wood

the fires start on those days of hard-won  
calm as she relaxes into herself while he  
smoulders without the oxygen of war  
and feels in her distracted gaze, his death.  
their natural history of combustion.  
she says a family is like a house built of wood.  
once the fire starts, you cannot stop it  
it will burn the house to the ground.

the flames consume the precious things,  
rough-hewn love poems, artefacts of nakedness.  
he walks through the house with a blow torch,  
roof beams collapsing over him, windows blowing  
out. she stands outside with a limp hosepipe  
spurting water into the blistering heat,  
her boy pressing his face into the lawn grass,  
the neighbours staring through curtains.

she does not know from where it comes, that skin so  
impervious to flame. she mines his stories for buried sense,  
family prayers on long stripped nights, knees on stone? or  
are there no words for it? no source but birth, no end but  
death? he has learnt to walk on coals, to never look back.  
fire makes things right without forgiveness or apology.  
when it is over, he sweeps the blackened shell and makes  
her breakfast on the dying slag. can she not see he loves her?

they have learnt to live lightly in their house of wood.  
the poignancy of fragile love in wan light. she says a family  
is like the phoenix, you can burn it down no end of times.  
the blood shared regenerates the burnt flesh. they start  
again. glue pieces together. restore facades. cover holes.  
hang pictures. the violation is redeemed by the forgiveness.  
she lies on the scorched grass, her boy still screaming.  
the forgetting that families do, waiting for the fire to come.



## modern western

she digs the ground for traces of  
dinosaurs that roamed these plains  
like she probes his flesh to find the moisture  
they once shared. where did the water go?  
he blames the miners, she says the mine came first  
he is of the earth, waiting for rain to settle his fury  
that hangs like dust over everything.  
she is of the sky, divining the moods  
like a crow, surviving on the remains  
of dead things he leaves on his trail so  
he can cage her. he gathers her onto his four-ton  
truck, sticks his accelerator to the floor  
she has died a thousand times in his car wrecks.  
he does not mind what happens  
as long as someone gets hurt,  
so she can know, he says,  
how he feels.



## waning moon

an impression of her warm body left in  
frosted leaves where she held him close  
under her bearskin and smelled the phlegm  
of his dark. he was so cold waned to a  
thin steel sickle. she follows the blood  
trail like a she-wolf. she never wanted  
a placid horse, see-sawing on his poles  
through the famine years for those  
hot nights when he comes on full. it  
is herself she finds bleeding out on the  
leaves where he left her and when she is  
dead, he rises and kisses her as if  
she was sleeping beauty.



## gun control

she puts the gun on the car seat  
it is a metal-grey assault rifle  
the type she imagines Americans use  
she does not dare to touch it  
she covers it with a towel  
she no longer recalls who gave it to her  
at the shopping mall she hides it in a suitcase  
when she gets home she no longer has the gun  
she does not know where she left it  
she lies half-awake  
panicking in the seam of her dream  
the talk radio news announces a rifle has been found  
would the owner collect it?  
she phones in and denies the gun belongs to her

he finds himself in a church  
light shining through red stain-glass windows  
he is glad to find the quiet there  
he is not feeling himself today  
he sees the gun on the altar  
a congregation bowing down before it  
how will the earth be purified?  
he assumes it must be sacred  
it can kill with a simple squeeze  
he wants to surrender himself to a greater power  
he does not trust the voices in his head  
the talk radio tells him everyone has the right to worship  
he takes the gun with him to the shopping mall  
carrying it like a cross.





## love song on beach

there is a wildness to the coastline here, the pounding of water on rock that will break a ship, spring tide washing over feet, pushing rotting kelp up off the beach, a blank canvas of pure sand and salt left behind. she tells him skin is not like shore. she had followed his soft eyes over the ploughlands to the sea. that day she found him hurling stones at a calf who crossed over onto his land, terror in its child-eyes as it caught in the barbed wire from panicked flight and still he threw. she has had to pull stubbornness out of his earth, to reframe her forgiveness not as weakness but as a bias to kindness. she sits on scoured rocks. she will leave herself enough space for suffering this time. and he will find her in the discomfort of the silence she has left him.



## **end of the war**

the weathering takes its time  
the reduction of his stone  
the firing of her clay

they push into each other again  
his sand contained in her pot  
her shape punched into his ribcage.



## Pilgrimages



*Every voyage outside of yourself,  
leads you deeper into yourself.  
For a life unpunctuated by journeys  
has no tears to let you see into it.*

## **The ecstatic melancholy of infinitesimal insignificance**

*Sutherland, Great Karoo, 2011*

My father learnt to navigate oceans  
by the stars. In his footsteps,  
in the still darkness of the desert,  
the silence whispering,  
I see that rare distant light.



## **Mood Indigo**

*Boston, 1983*

*“it hasn't always been this way  
ellington was not a street  
roberson no mere memory  
du bois walked up my father's stairs  
hummed some tune over me  
sleeping in the company of men  
who changed the world”*

### **Ntozake Shange<sup>i</sup>**

She let me stay.

Rosaria's flat, round the corner from Berklee.  
Saxophones follow me down stairwells, students  
tumble out of treble clefs in harmony,  
street-corners weep blues piano. High  
like I'm on the set of the movie *Fame*,  
rolling Boston like I'm going to live forever,  
there are many things I do not know.  
I'm twenty-two, out of Africa for the first time,  
in America to find the mood indigo.

She takes me along.

Rosaria's friends. Vèvè Clark who moulds diasporas with her  
gentle hands, buys me my very first cocktail, liquid blue salted  
with Yoruba folklore. I'm sharing political gossip with a writer  
named Gayle confiding I would gladly host her if she ever visited.  
She says she has no plans to travel to my *apartheidland*  
anytime soon. I'm blushing for the words came out wrong.  
She puts her black hand on mine and says she knows.  
I'm twenty-two, out of Africa for the first time,  
in America to find the mood indigo.

On Harvard Square.

Ntozake Shange reading from her new novel. She  
is a lion, just stormed Broadway with *Contemplating  
suicide*. Her words bore into me like blue claws, until  
she stops the show, jumps into the audience and  
embraces Vèvè next to me, announcing “this is a  
true mother of mine”. In their reflected glory with my  
signed copy, there was a sadness I did not see.  
I'm twenty-two, out of Africa for the first time,  
finding that mood indigo, in the company of women  
who changed the world.



## Door of No Return

Dakar, 1995

1.

Families burrow homes into the holes of old fortresses,  
reframe rusted cannons as art galleries and washing lines.  
Colonial debris now lover's nests looking over cliff edges, as boys  
deep dive off ferries to grasp the falling coins, the unspoken  
wrecks deeper still beneath the shifting sands. All the paths on  
Goree' Island funnel down to one dark corridor leading to one  
small door, opening out onto light that was not light, but  
squeezed the juice of old lives out like mops.

Their names and words shucked like oysters, pickled in the  
brine of oceans, packaged with burning iron to be bought and sold.  
Waking blind as moles from that long dark passage, identical twins  
of former selves, fully lost save stories hidden in the heart. The  
slave barques of Liverpool now gleaming London skyscrapers,  
the storied legacy of those enslaved, still shackled, still seeking light.



2.

The *marassa* myth of the spirit twins travelled with them. Beyond physics,  
more than their sum, voracious as pythons, one and one is three.  
Syncretised there with the moneyless surgeons, St Cosmas and St  
Damian, twins themselves, who cut and stitched to change the world,  
black legs grafted onto white stumps, those clear edges blurred.  
Reality like broken bones can be reset, damaged souls recast in  
alabaster. Fixing the wound sometimes requires a scalpel's touch  
to cut scarred sinews healed so tight, the hands cannot open.

South Africans once pushed through walls of hideous thought,  
stood on the open steps that frame this door of no return,  
reaching out to each other across that gaping hole. Was  
it enough that fingers stretched to limits, they touched? Or did  
they need to cut and stitch themselves new shapes to squeeze  
through to the other side, blurred into each other like crows?

3.

Walking down the corridor towards that final door in that lingering dark, the sweaty intimacy still of slaver and slave, to the brightness of the open ocean where nothing remains. Where in our souls does that cruelty lie? The streets of our cities are red rivers bending back on themselves, the plastic detritus of our civilisation floats on the oily waters, a connected world no longer intimate but still cruel. Does anything beyond our debt, bind us to those who went before?

Once fallen over the threshold, you can never return to yourself or the other doors of what might have been. Beneath our human noise, the universe lies open. Unheard trees sprout silently in unknown cosmic forests. We dream united with the ancestors by the vast forever sky, as every night, the stars of Gemini keep falling into the sea.



## Isaac Synagogue

Krakow, 2005

*There lived in the Jewish town of Kazimierz near Krakow, a pious and god-fearing but poor Jew named Yitzhak reb Yekeles (Isaac son of Jacob). Although he worked hard every day to maintain his family, he never stopped worshipping God and thanking Him for the grace he received from Him.*

The high white walls of the Isaac Synagogue stretch up to the heavens. I stand in its centre facing the desecrated altar unable to feel. I have tried to imprint random names and images on my mind. Halina. Carved large into the wall of the Gestapo cells at 2 Pomorska Street. In the same hand lower down and smaller. Halina Swiatek. 19/VII 44. Klara Sara Goldstein. Her name chalked on her suitcase at Auschwitz amidst the mountains of hair, spectacles, shoes and prosthetics. The one nameless boy staring right at me from a smudged crowd by a train.

From the rail tracks of Birkenau, I pick one small stone from millions as if memorisation could somehow let this one, or that one live. As if remembering enough could bring back all the murdered as the flickering 1930s film brings Kazimierz back for a moment. As if I could dream away the emptiness that pulls me down and redeem my cruel species and myself.

*One night, Isaac, son of Jacob had a dream in which he saw a treasure hidden under an old bridge in Prague in Bohemia, a treasure meant only for him. The next morning without further ado, he took leave of his wife and children and set out on the long journey. He walked for many days and nights, crossing several rivers and mountains, circling wild forests and deep lakes, passing many towns and villages.*

I walk in their footsteps from Kazimierz to the River Vistula over the same steel bridge they crossed in March 1941 to the ghetto on the other side trying to feel what they felt. I have not eaten for two days as if identifying could mitigate my sin. I press my hands against the remaining pieces of the ghetto wall as if I could hold myself up by holding on to them and access somehow the stories they told despite their starving, hoping cruelty's barbed edges were softened by dreams of treasure.

The terror of Zgody Square where the trains later left for Belzec is muted in plaques, but the echo of their vain invocations pound in my ears. The one small stone in my pocket is now the dead weight of millions. The nameless boy follows me as I walk onwards to Plaszow concentration camp demanding to know why my dreams should live when his were murdered. Why my journey's end should be some enlightenment not death?



*Finally, Isaac saw the mighty walls and towers of Prague shining in the sun. He entered the town and slowly approached the bridge. But then he was at a loss what to do, for the bridge was guarded by soldiers and he didn't dare dig under it. While he was standing below the bridge, an officer came up to him and asked him what he was looking for. Isaac thought it would be best to tell the truth, since they could dig out the treasure together and share it between them. After all, half the treasure would be better than nothing.*

Spring grass and flowering weeds cover the remains of Plaszow. Blackbirds weave flocking patterns in the sky as they have always done. Nature moves on filling the enduring silence with the flutter of butterflies. But our short lives are built on memory. I search beneath the grass looking for pointers in the earth, something known on which to find my bearings amidst the incomprehensibility of this sundered place that no unforgetting nor uneating can penetrate.

At the end of a long indistinct path, two large concrete monuments emerge mute and cold like stern gods, telling me that the dead are dead and can never be restored. Demanding more sacrifice to heal the rupture here, the ground opening up beneath me like quicksand, the blackbirds settling around me ready to peck out my eyes.

*So Isaac told the officer about his dream. The officer laughed and said: "Only such stupid fellows as the Polish Jews could believe in such dreams. For many nights I've been having a dream that in the Jewish town Kazimierz near Krakow there is a treasure hidden in an oven in a poor Jew's house who goes by the name of Isaac son of Jacob. Do you think I am so stupid as to go to Krakow to look for this Isaac son of Jacob's house? Every second Jew is called Isaac and every third Jacob?"*

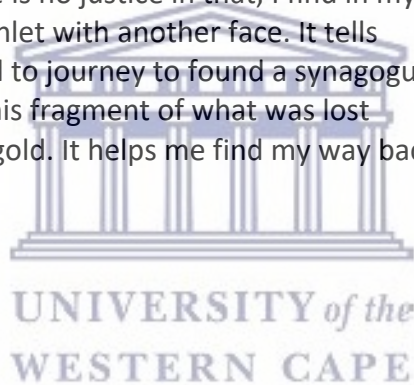
"Why?" asked Primo Levi<sup>ii</sup> and the large heavy guard replied "there is no why here". The unfathomable absences grip me in the double bind Sarah Kofman<sup>iii</sup> wrote of. The irrepressible duty to speak infinitely and its choking physical impossibility. I see bodies piled on bodies reaching for the light like a cairn. As I sit on the concrete monument at Plaszow with no idea how to feel or what to do, some impulse moves me to pick weedy flowers from the fields and place them on the monument and pledge to be courageous. From some deep and opaque place tears flood up and

break my dam walls down. It was there that god found me. Her name Halina. Her name Emma. A nameless boy. Smaller than a stone and powerless to save me. And so I wept upon the plinth of the Plaszow monument, my wailing rising up unheard to the heavens. Later as I watched blackbirds falling from the sky, I realised it was for myself I wept.

*Isaac son of Jacob thanked the officer and set out on the return journey. He walked for many days and nights, crossing rivers and mountains, circling wild forests and deep lakes, passing many towns and villages. When he reached home, he immediately dismantled the oven and found the treasure. From then on, he was the richest Jew in Kazimierz near Krakow. He lived for many years, never refusing to give alms to the poor or for other noble purposes. He used part of his treasure to fund a synagogue which still bears his name.*

I have immersed myself in the words of those who survived. They could not save themselves but they marked the untilled path. Sarah Kofman, who spoke nevertheless until she was smothered in her own bath. Primo Levi who kept climbing nevertheless until that heavy guard caught up with him. Paul Celan, who stood firm against the current nevertheless until the pull of the black milk of the Seine became too strong. Tadeusz Borowski whose stories ascended through chimneys of crematoria, until he too succumbed to the gas in his own stove.

On the tram later pushing through the darkness towards home emptied but alive though there is no justice in that, I find in my pocket with the stone, a pamphlet with another face. It tells the old story of a man who had to journey to found a synagogue. I memorise it word on word, this fragment of what was lost polishing it until it gleams like gold. It helps me find my way back.



## **Stubborn truth**

*Eritrea, 1993*

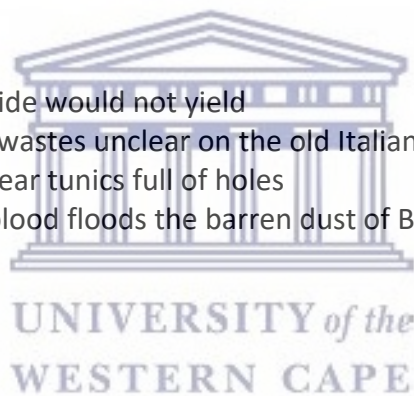
Worn thin by hardship, still on soldier's pay,  
the Mayor of Asmara wears a jersey full of holes,  
through which his stubborn pride  
illuminates the plans he shares on old Italian maps.

Everyone is dirt-poor after the war, but we see no beggars.  
Asmara's streets are clean, the potholes stopped,  
the desert dust repelled with twig brooms by old women  
whose stubborn pride reflects off polished pavements.

The young pick and shovel the new road down to Massawa,  
with the stubborn pride that ruptured Russian tanks  
still rusting on that pass to mark their truth -  
abandoned by the world, they would not yield.

\*\*\*\*

Five years on, that stubborn pride would not yield  
on borderlines through desert wastes unclear on the old Italian maps.  
Those brave young Eritreans wear tunics full of holes  
through which their raptured blood floods the barren dust of Badme.



## **Common assent**

*Athlone, 1993*

It took two years of quiet talking to get there - the inaugural meeting of the Forum. We emerged from our hiding places, into the enquiring light, small parties, big parties, arms tightly folded, to negotiate a shared future for Cape Town. The week before, the armed wing of the Pan Africanist Congress attacked a tavern in Observatory, three students and the pub owner dead on a familiar floor. The ruling National Party reps arrived to say they would boycott if we let the PAC participate.

The man from the PAC, a teacher, said he understood. Although his movement was not the only one guilty of atrocity he would withdraw, for his participation was less important than the meeting, which went ahead, National Party present, through that simple act of grace. the man from the PAC still seated at the table by common assent.



## Ice-blocks

Rondebosch, 2017

The younger daughter is melting. We sit on the blue couch in the tidied lounge. It's Saturday. She asks advice on emotionally stunted males. I mumble platitudes. She shouts: Please go away.

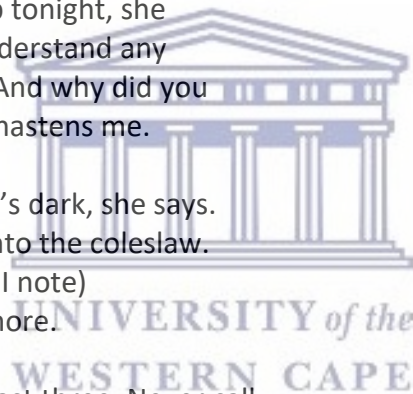
The older one says she feels so terrible she could die, as we sit on wooden chairs under the *ficus* tree, watching night clouds melt into the liquid horizon. She then goes out to party. I lie awake and worry.

At two am, she arrives back very hungry. She cooks in the kitchen, she counsels in the bedroom, pressing two ice-blocks to her sleepless sister's temples, to change thought patterns apparently and dissolve gloom.

I punched some creep at a club tonight, she says. A man who would not understand any of my 101 ways that say stop. And why did you put off the kitchen light? she chastens me.

Cockroaches creep out when it's dark, she says. Feast on the *fettuccini*, crawl into the coleslaw. The cockroaches in our house (I note) evolve, they fear the light no more.

She stares at me around half past three. Never call anyone a cockroach! It could cause a genocide. I take two dripping blocks of ice and press them against my temples in the moonlight.



## **Conclusions**

*For my mother, 2018*

It is not easy to let go,  
that anchor of breath,  
your embrace so strong.  
You fight the tides that  
slowly prise you loose,  
back down the river you  
travelled, lit bright with  
kindness now,  
to the beginning.



## PART 2: REFLECTIVE ESSAY

### Introduction

The mini-thesis collection comprises a series of poems that explore the interplay between freedom and loss. The premise of the collection is the notion that freedom is necessarily ambiguous and inevitably involves some countervailing sacrifice or loss. The act of exercising freedom in an oppressive context by transgressing prescribed norms, for example, has its countervailing consequences of shame, humiliation or punishment. Struggles for political freedom similarly involve many forms of sacrifice. The attainment of political or social freedom conversely comes with its own losses – loss of meaning, certainty, innocence, solidarity or even integrity. Relationship itself always involve a tension between obligation and agency – freedom is constrained by values.

This theme emerged organically from my initial work during the poetry module in 2018. I realised that the multi-dimensional tensions provoked by the impulse to be free had been an unsettling paradox at the heart of my life. It is of course a paradox inherent to the human condition, to be wrestled with rather than definitively solved. It is also one of the big themes of poetry.

The collection is divided into three distinct sections. Each section has a different rationale and logic that is reflected in its tone, form and even choices regarding punctuation. The first section explores the sacrifice involved in the struggle for democracy and the challenge of making that democracy work. The second section explores the tensions between freedom and obligation inherent in relationships and the potential for healing to emerge from the inevitable suffering. The third section centres on a series of pilgrimages, physical or psychological, that explore both the miracles and the hubris that are set free by journeys.

Each section starts with some introductory lines in italics on the section title page. These lines function as a precis of the sensibilities of the section and a setting of the scene. They also clearly demarcate the section alluding to the different thematic and stylistic orientation of the poems in the section and indicating to the reader that they need to adjust their expectation.

This essay reflects individually on each of the three sections and highlights key themes, techniques and structuring devices that run through the section referencing other poets whose work has influenced me. I will also seek to unpack some of the technical and conceptual challenges I experienced and where the work remains incomplete or deficient. In my conclusion, I outline some threads that knit the whole collection together and highlight insights about freedom that I have gained through the exercise.

The title of the full mini-thesis is *The Price of Liberty*. I have however chosen to title the poetry component *not only what was gained*. The title is taken from one of the poems in the first section and is a less cliched and rather more poetic expression of the intent of the collection that accents what is absent or lost rather than the attainment of liberty itself.



## “promised lands”

The first section of the collection titled “promised lands” is a reflection on the losses and wounds suffered in achieving and consolidating political democracy. The majority of the poems explore critical moments I experienced during the turbulent South Africa of the 1980s: the shooting of a boy on the barricades by a passing farmer during the school boycotts of 1985; a day driving through the war zone of Crossroads informal settlement collecting refugees; frenetic times in a communal house in Mowbray where enduring friendships were forged but where the trauma of murder, suicide, detention and security police raids took a hidden toll; harrowing months in the Criminology Department at UCT transcribing taped accounts of nameless detainees describing their torture in detention.

The idea of sacrifice runs through all the poems in this section particularly the initial six poems - its futility, our human need to find some significance in that futility and its enduring nature as the trauma lives on in subtle ways. These poems ask whether these “burnt offerings” represent an atonement that enables us the living to create a better life worthy of the sacrifice.

One theme that emerged in writing these was shame, particularly in the poems *the meaning of mrs h s ball's chutney* and *the grammar of the wound*. Shame comes in many colours: making choices that did not feel brave enough; making choices that others found offensive; being overwhelmed by the grief of those around me; the pervasive fear. But it was shame punctuated by redemption – moments of plucked-up bravery, giving up everything for love, the trust of friends sealed by constancy no matter what.

The last three poems in the section are more retrospective and seek to understand what has been gained and lost from the perspective of the present. The title poem *not only what has been gained* acknowledges the nuance that we have travelled a long way over the thirty years - from the state of interminable civil conflict, death and destruction described in the first stanza to a new almost peaceful reality described in the second stanza where we have at the same time lost some things of value like solidarity and a bright hope for the future.

The poem *loss of hearing* is an angrier self-critical reflection on our individual and collective failure to realise the promise of the democratic order. It draws on my own experiences of working in government contexts alluding to the slow erosion of integrity as the gap between the challenges and our capacity to address them seemed to continuously widen. I am mindful of the difficulty of that transitioning from activist (poet) to government official that Mongane Wally Serote laments in *Freedom, Lament and Song* (Serote 1997:27): “at the big house/at this HQ of God, Cape Town/I listen, I look, I touch/there are liars/cheats and betrayers/they manoeuvre/they are like vacuum cleaners/like hyenas/in their speeches”. Serote projects the problem onto the “liars, cheats and betrayers”. In *loss of hearing*, I have been conscious to balance the exterior criticism with my own personal culpability. I am mindful of Kelwyn Sole’s astringent social critique where he does not exclude himself from the criticism and tries to find a balance. In his poem *Vigil* (Sole 2017:15), he writes “I have died many times for this:/talked myself into oblivion until, /piece by piece, my country comes apart/in my hands skin peeling away/a parchment on which I write/speckled with blood and



forgetfulness". I seek to achieve that balance between social critique and acknowledging my own complicity that Sole manages in this extract.

Can we move beyond the memory of suffering *en route* to freedom? Can we find a way of mending ourselves? I value the work Keorapetse Kgositsile. He recognises that we cannot easily erase memories of struggle or pain, despairing in his poem *No Serenity Here* (Kgositsile 2008:1) about "how shall I sing to celebrate life/when every space in my heart is surrounded by corpses?" Yet he has a bias towards optimism, despite everything, reflected in his poem *Festive Heart* (Kgositsile 2009:4) where he notes "it is because I'm happy/to bury the loneliness/some call freedom/as I embrace this moment where/Love leaps and soars/". In this spirit, the last poem in the "promised lands" section titled *what we learned* is more accepting and recognises that cyclical nature of realising freedom implying that hope, wonder and the possibility of regeneration flows from adversity and the failures of freedom rather than its elusive attainment.

There are number of common elements that run through the poems in this "promised lands" section. One device is to contrast two incongruous or contradictory images or ideas against each other in order to provoke a resolution or question. In *boy still falls*, the "year of breath" at the heart of the first stanza contrasts with the "year of death" in the second. In *hanover park elegy*, the broken white horse grazing in the first stanza is offset against a shot boy dying in the back seat of a car in the second. In *lightness and weight*, the poem asks how we are to find "the weight (of the boy shot down) in his lightness to bury him". In *not only what has been gained*, the destruction of Crossroads in 1986 in the first stanza is compared to the reconstructed settlement of today in the second. Similarly, in *what we found*, the poem comprises a set of statements where the contrast is contained in the statement itself ("in silenced atrocities, voice/in lost causes, hope").

A concern for language and its limits is a second common thread running through most of this section. The poem *transcribing torture* suggests that some experiences exceed the capacity of language to describe them, concluding: "but it is not the words transcribed that linger on/it is the throttled silences. a nameless voice falters. /the memory lodged in the body. far beyond speaking." This poem has parallels with Ingrid de Kok's poem *Transcribing* (De Kok 2002:32) that also explores the challenge of recording the trauma of victims of violence and torture where the limits of words to describe such experience are painfully evident. Donald Parenzee in his poem *Detention of an Ordinary Girl* (Parenzee 1985:5)<sup>iv</sup> similarly seeks to locate the wounds below the "placid surface", deep in the body where "the organs tear."

The poem *grammar of the wound* explores how language can help soften truth (such as the true nature of trauma) and thus make it more palatable. It tries to convey the protective nature of language in managing pain suggesting that we need to "punctuate" trauma in order to contain it: "I recount all this to a friend I love/conjugating the wound again in the present tense/I sense her heart wither back into itself/unpunctuated it is all too much".

Other poems explore how language can become corrupted in order to obscure or disguise the truth. This is most explicit in the poem *loss of hearing* where the poem reflects on how the potency of powerful words can be easily be diluted into nothing if we do not exercise

discipline and care with language: “i have taken living nouns myself and suffocated them/in a red sea of reports leaking good intentions”.

In this section, I have stripped the punctuation down to the most basic essentials omitting capital letters and using commas or full stops only where this is necessary to clarify meaning. I feel this accents the feeling of wounded desolation that pervades this section as referenced in the poem *grammar of the wound* which asserts that “unpunctuated it is all too much.” The section seeks to be “all too much.”

## “purgatories”

The second section entitled “purgatories” explores how the paradox of freedom also manifests in the individual human soul - in its relationship to itself and to others. As implied by the title, I seek in this section to capture both the suffering and pain involved in relationship as well as the fragile potential for healing, growth and love that emerges out of that suffering and woundedness.

All the poems in this section are constructed as an engagement between two perspectives - a “he” and a “she”. The “he” is generally self-assertive and aggressive. The “she” is generally empathetic and kind. The initial impulse was Melanie Klein’s concept that two basic psychological dispositions inhabit every human psyche – the assertive self-centred aggressive “paranoid-schizoid” position and the empathetic, sacrificial “depressive” position where psychological maturity lies in the integration of the two positions (Bott Spillius et al 2011:63-84).

However, the “he” and “she” dichotomy has broader metaphoric connotations and I leave its nature ambiguous. It can represent archetypal masculine and the feminine polarities within the individual or within society more broadly. It can represent two parties in relationship and some of the poems have a deliberately familial feel. The dichotomy can also represent two discourses within a society – an exclusionary angry intolerant stream and the inclusive reconciliatory tolerant stream. This is most obvious in *modern western* where the recursive patterns of misunderstanding and often unintended hurt apparent in intimate relationships most explicitly mimic similar patterns at the level of society. The work of Gabeba Baderoon has been a helpful informant in that she is rarely directly political and yet manages to personalise the political and imbue the personal with a broader meaning. I appreciate her pursuit of small intimacies and personal change in a larger context charged with issues of identity and justice as encapsulated in poem like *I cannot myself* (Baderoon 2005:23) where she suggests that to gain entry to a new country “I cannot myself be a question.”

In almost all the poems of this section, the “she” persona seeks a freedom (from control, from abuse, from obligation, from habit) within the relationship which cannot easily be realised. This aspiration for freedom manifests differently in each poem and the outcome is always somewhat different. In each poem I have tried to access a particular discomfiting and intimate emotion or feeling. It is this “feeling” that provides the differentiating energy and drives the poem to its conclusion. For example, the first poem *cracked* has at its core a feeling of defeated weariness; *still together* is about a claustrophobic desperation; *love song on beach* is driven by a feeling of catharsis linked to forgiveness.

I also try to achieve some progression across the poems. The dominating “he” of the initial poems is balanced by a more assertive “she” in later poems. The intention is that an understanding and integration can develop through the dialogue over the progression. The final poem *end of the war* senses that a more positive integration can emerge over time – his containment and her assertion: “they push into each other/his sand contained in her pot/her shape punched into his ribcage.”

Although I think this “purgatories” section is the most coherent component of the whole collection in terms of continuity of form and subject matter, I suspect that its progression is not yet fully complete. The weight falls on the poems full of repressed anger and irredeemable frustration. I am mindful of the emphasis on healing in the work of Ingrid de Kok. This is illustrated in her poem *Mending* (de Kok 1997:35) where the “needle sutures as it darts, /scoring, scripting, scarring, stitching/the invisible mending of the heart.” I think there is potential for additional poems in this section that explore the possibilities of “the invisible healing of the heart” more fully.

### “Pilgrimages”

The third section is titled “Pilgrimages”. Each poem concerns a journey of some form that results in a transformation. Some of the pilgrimages are physical journeys to places far from home: a visit to Boston when I was young and chanced upon good fortune; an inspirational study tour to Eritrea; walking the route that the Jews of Krakow walked to the ghetto; a stay on Goree’ Island off Senegal next to the house with the Door of No Return, a site of memory for the millions sent into slavery. Others are process journeys: the two-year journey of the Cape Metropolitan Negotiating Forum summarised in one simple story that reveals the difficulties and the miracles that it bequeathed; the experience of bringing up daughters also captured in the tale of one long evening. The section is book-ended by poems for my parents who showed me how to set off on the journey of life and also how to complete it.

In exploring the idea of journey, I have been influenced by Derek Walcott whose work often takes the form of Ulyssean journeys infused with violence across racial lines (most notably in *Omeros* and *The Schooner Flight*). I appreciate Walcott because things are not that simple for him. His heroes have dark thoughts. He seeks the uncomfortable. His work pushes me to be more provocative and was particularly helpful in how I approached *Door of No Return*. His beautiful summation of how to start a journey in *A Map of the World* has been an inspiration in getting the poems in this section onto paper: “The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp. /A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain/and plucks the first line of the Odyssey” (Walcott 1985: 413).

If the poems in the previous “purgatories” section get their energy from a particular emotion or feeling, the poems in this section are generally invigorated by an intellectual idea or set of ideas. For example, the impulse for the *Door of No Return* lies in the concept of spirit twins or “marassa” pioneered by Vèvè Clark to explore slave diaspora cultures (Clark 2009:9-18). In the *Isaac Synagogue*, the impetus comes from Sarah Kofman’s idea of the “strange double bind: an infinite claim to speak, a duty to speak infinitely, imposing itself with irrepressible force, and at the same time, an almost physical impossibility to speak, a choking feeling” (Kofman 1998:70).

The poem *Common Assent* is an explication of the idea of “counter-intuitive leadership” as articulated by Njabulo Ndebele (Ndebele 2007) to help explain the leadership that produced South Africa’s transition to democracy. I tried in this poem to find a way to transform the courage of a humble person into “moments of existence that are unforgettable and worthy of unbearable nostalgia” to quote Milan Kundera<sup>v</sup> (Kundera 1999:28-29). The last poem *Endings* which was written in the period of my mother’s death is written as a journey backwards to beginning inspired by the idea from the philosopher Alan Watts that death returns us to our original state of non-existence.

One technique I have experimented with in this “Pilgrimages” section is to use the same words to both express the attributes required to achieve a change and then to shift the context and to reveal how those same attributes can become a curse as the context changes. This approach is exemplified in the poem *Stubborn Truth*. The first three stanzas extol the “stubborn pride that would not yield” and the self-sacrifice (“jersey full of holes”) that enabled Eritrea to overcome the “desert dust” of Ethiopian oppression and achieve freedom and reconstruction against all odds. In the fourth stanza, those same elements that produced a miraculous liberation conspire in a changed context to engender a disastrous hubris culminating in the pointless battle of Badme where 40 000 Eritreans and Ethiopians died over three days in 1998: “five years on, that stubborn pride would not yield/on borderlines through desert wastes unclear on the old Italian maps/those brave young Eritreans wear tunics full of holes’/through which their raptured blood floods the barren dust of Badme.”

In this section, I have made extensive use of an “American sonnet” format where the rhyme and iambic pentameter of the traditional sonnet are dispensed with but where the structure of 14 lines is retained and where the last six lines - the *volta* - introduce a change. I think this form is particularly suitable for poems about journeys. I have been challenged by the American poet Terrance Hayes, particularly his most recent work *American sonnets for my past and future assassin* (Hayes 2018) who uses this form for all the poems in this anthology. I have a bias towards an ordered formal structure partly because I have a natural impulse to make everything “fit” but also because it liberates my creativity. Hayes points to how you can introduce a common element (like an assassin) into a series of poems with a common structure as a catalyst for provoking the poems into different directions. In the three poems that use this American sonnet form, I have included a catalyst in each one who shifts the energy of the poem from tragedy to regeneration. In the poem *Door of No Return*, it is the *marassa* twins who help us transcend the horror of slavery. In *Isaac Synagogue*, it is Isaac himself whose story running through the poem elevates it above irresolvable tragedy. In *Common Assent*, it is the man from the PAC whose grace breaks down the predicted outcome of impasse.

I adopted more conventional punctuation in this section both because the extensive use of personal and place names was made more decipherable by capitalisation but also because of the subtle metaphorical shift indicated in the introductory verse to the section “for a life unpunctuated by journeys/has no tears to let you see into it” which contrasts with the “unpunctuated” intensity referenced in the first section of this collection and implied in the second.

I try in each poem to articulate an insight I have gained through the particular journey. This exercise is always partial – one can only ever capture a fragment of the rich tapestry of significant journeys in a poem. The series is also necessarily incomplete. There are many other journeys with their own insights that I have not yet reduced to poems. This is an on-going and never-ending task.

In reflecting on this section, I think a common thread is the idea that the purpose of the journey is to find “home”. In the introductory verse to the section I express this as “every voyage outside of yourself, /leads you deeper into yourself.” Mahmoud Darwish expresses it even better in his poem *I Belong There*: ‘I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: Home.’ (Darwish 2003:7).

## Some conclusions

I have sought in this collection to go into those uncomfortable spaces between freedom and unfreedom – to find points of shame, guilt, betrayal, ethical blindness, selfishness, inhibition, revenge and hatred that churn in that shadowland but also the generosity, love, trust, courage and wisdom that are germinated there and that push the arc of history upwards towards the light. I hope I have achieved this to some extent.

I have been struck by my extensive use of religious language to interpret and validate experience across all three sections starting with the three section headings. This was not deliberate, initially at least, but suggests that I find a richness in religious metaphors and imagery deepened over centuries of history and resonant with layers of meaning that is particular suited to the theme. Indeed, the paradox of freedom and loss is integral to fundamental religious questions about existence.

This project has been about finding my voice and sloughing off the restraints of excessive caution. I am trying to become more honest. Freedom is necessarily ambiguous and inevitably coloured by loss. The failures are never external to us but are us, as are the victories and moments of reprieve.



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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> From the poem *It Hasn't Always Been This Way. 1. Mood Indigo* in Shange 1985.

<sup>ii</sup> From Levi, Primo. *If this is a Man*. London: Abacus , 1979.

<sup>iii</sup> Kofman, Sarah. *Smothered Words*. translated by Madeleine Dobie. Northwestern University Press, 1998.

<sup>iv</sup> The fuller stanza reads:

*“from the past: for men had sheathed  
their solemn vows beneath  
her placid surface, unaware  
that somewhere within the organs tear.”*

<sup>v</sup> I have always been challenged by this insight from Kundera. The fuller quote is: “The idea of the poem is simple: in the woods everything is asleep, and you will sleep too. The purpose of the poetry is not to dazzle us with an astonishing thought, but to make one moment of existence unforgettable and worthy of unbearable nostalgia” (Kundera 1999:28-29).

