

A Little Deeper & Other Poem

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I
it all started with a white school teacher
locking her grade 5 pupils inside a classroom
a black boy in a corner breathing slowly deeply

by the strength of his own legs
frantically climbing attempting to escape
by way of the classroom window,

possessed by the *fight or flight*
drowning under the laughter of school children,
because he felt he was on the verge of dying.

II
often confused with claustrophobia,
the nature of the fear is not one of enclosed space
the fear is of being trapped
& this is a fear that I have lived with for a long time
now.

III

when the windows are shut
when the doors are locked
I reassure myself
that everything is fine
but only after I have seen the keys,

& when I don't see the keys,
I am overcome
by this feeling of drowning

then to breathing slowly deeply
my gentle lie
just to get some sleep.

IV

the sinking feeling a transition
into an aversion to signing things
& once a small ring got stuck on my finger
& as I struggled to pull it off my heart racing,
all I was thinking was
is this what commitment would feel like.

V

there were talks of hypnosis once,
until I thought how could I live freely,
knowing I once surrendered my mind
for another person's spell.

the essence of my issue is control,

because I feel once I step inside an elevator
I give myself to the machine that may well stop in limbo
perhaps the doors may jam closed & remain that way for an eternity.

the truth is rooted in the ground floor
I have lied to myself
saying that I elevate by the strength of my own legs
my truth is I have absolutely no trust for elevators

VI

is the heart not imprisoned behind the rib cage,
is the soul not imprisoned by the body,
a heavy rock, sinking
with each year a little deeper

tightly entangled with the seaweed
on the ocean floor is the same little boy
still down there

& isn't it such a wonder

how for so long he has somehow managed
to hold his breath for all these years.

Observations during a Siege

a first observation on laughter

nothing was meant by it it was pure coincidence that a Mexican pale
lager

had the misfortune of being named 'Corona' the jokes were harmless
& for a brief tender moment a light-heartedness to ease tensions
with laughter described as medicinal or another way to keep from
crying.

a second observation on a false sense of security

by definition, panic as "a sudden uncontrollable fear or anxiety"

& who could have foreseen the commercial carnage
an aged psychologist blames retail therapy or buying to manage
an emotional state

& so this was the moment in time when panic compelled a sudden rush
can you believe survival comes at a cost

a third observation on control

lockdowns and curfews imposed, under the guise of 'to protect and
serve'

Lagos, Nairobi, Soweto on the news we are under the siege

& to think of all the things we have in common with the rest
of the world

how protective measures become even deadlier than the virus itself.

a fourth observation on a loss of power

for some, the *gravitas* of things yet to register nor to infiltrate the
depths of the nervous system,

of all disinformation the fake news & above all the willingness to
endanger others

the reality of our fates intertwined the *laissez-faire* approach of
those not willing to comply.

a final observation on being desensitized

the virus the regional statistics the measuring of 'hotspots'
the 'epicentres' the active cases the number of recoveries the
comparisons of continental graphs the mutations the
vaccination conspiracy theories the so-called South African variant
the numbers the numbers declining the numbers increasing the change
the deaths today versus the deaths yesterday the value of a single
life
the date of the first death in your country the value of a
single life
the afterthought

all the ways we have been changed by the siege.

Sihle Ntuli is a South African poet and classicist living in Durban. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Classical Civilisations and has previously lectured at the University of the Free State, where he was awarded the 2019 CTL Innovation Award for Curriculum Design and Delivery. His poetry was shortlisted for the DALRO Poetry Prize in 2017. He most recently became the author of the poetry chapbook, *Rumblin* in 2020. He has had work published in South Africa and across the African continent on notable journals such as *Lolwe*, *Down River Road* & *The Johannesburg Review of Books*.

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