

Karen Press

Karen Press has worked as a teacher of Mathematics and English, with a range of progressive education projects, and has also written textbooks and other education materials in the fields of mathematics, science, economics and English, as well as children's stories, a film script and stories for newly-literate adults. In 1987 she co-founded The Buchu Books Publishing Collective, and has since published seven collections of poetry. Her poems have been included in anthologies in South Africa, France, Austria, the UK and the USA. She currently works as a freelance editor and writer, and is an associate of the National Advice Service for South African Writers.



PHENDUKANI SILWANI

✿ by Karen Press

His name is Phendukani Silwani.

He was made of carbon and light
and has vanished forever.

Phendukani's voice, flying home from school
ahead of him one kilometre after another,
crossing the river, finding stone after stone in the cold
water,
fetching his friend, his other friend, his dog
in from the hills to walk with him
through the bushes, one kilometre after another,

little boy on your way home—
'Where are you? I'm here. Where are you?'

His vanishing was efficient,
it barely scratched the air of the country.

His little life endures forever
only here, where his footprints
sparkle in the river's memory.

Phendukani can write the alphabet and numbers.
He can tell a story on the classroom magic carpet,
he can kick a ball hard enough to hurt his foot but not the
wall.
He hasn't grown into his knees yet.
In the ground they'll lie like scaffolding for an unbuilt
tower.

In the magic carpet there's a hole
each child falls through, remembering Phendukani,
falling into the mists of come unto me,
following his voice with theirs
to weave a nest of hymns his spirit can fly home to.

Phendukani on a horse
panting through the beautiful valleys
to find a nurse, a doctor, a car,
turned back at the boundary
between the valleys and the highway
that the Ministers control

small saddlebag of life
slumped across the horse's patient back
nowhere to go but home
to the house that freedom has not blessed

hunched against his father's chest
holding his pain steady, borrowing the horse's breath
and his father's heartbeat to reach the last day of his life

In the shadow of the broken house
those who love him stand together
to bury his burst body, shrouded
in death's cold exhausted air.

On the horizon the Ministers pause to wish them well
until their bodyguards hustle them back to their bullet-
proof limousines.

When a child dies, who is responsible?
It's a complicated diagnosis.

When his liver turns against him,
who can say what story it has to tell, what its tumours
remember?

Let Phendukani Silwani stand for all Departments of
Health,
all out-patient queues and closed wards and unbought
drugs and spent doctors.

Let Phendukani Silwani stand for all Departments of
Education,

all unbuilt schools and untrained teachers and stolen food
and books bearing false witness.

Let Phendukani Silwani stand for all Departments of
Housing,
all cracked walls and broken pipes and poisoned streets
and lost gardens.

Phendukani is playing with an old tin and some wire.
And then he is not.

Phendukani is brushing his teeth.

And then he is not.

Phendukani is calling goodbye as he turns the corner.
And then he is not.

Let Phendukani Silwani stand for all parents
with emptied arms and bent heads
whose tears hang like silver nooses in the air.

Let him stand for all children,
all parcels of carbon and light
who come only once, and vanish forever.

Let Phendukani Silwani stand for himself only,
only he existed in his small body,
only he was there, looking out at us,
at the tall grass that hid him, at the unreachable blue sky.

Thank you for the paracetamol.
Thank you for the social grant.



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