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.