ABCs

by Lebo Mashile

It takes just 26 letters to create a universe
The world is dismantled and then reassembled
Through the lens of a pen and verse
I’ve lost myself in books
And then found myself in words
A prison of silence would be far worse
I’ve walked through the lives of individuals
Whose eyes I’ve never known
I’ve been to cities, villages and country sides
Whose skies, to me, have never been shown
It was in this solitary cell
That my greatest strength was honed
I saw that my mind was just a shell
Its abyss simply a hole
And the hell of a heaving heavy heart
Is still my friend
Every story has its place
History never ends
The writer is a visionary architect
God child at play
On a canvass of memories
She lies naked between the covers
Her own lover
Her own worst enemy
Navigating between extremes
Both the judge and the judged
The vile despised and attacked
The unashamedly beloved
The unassuming friend who’ll tell your business
When you’re not in sight
She pulls the minds out of stillness
In the cavern of the night
South Africa is a fractured mirror
A paradox of schizophrenic selves
Who do not talk to one another
Who fear each other
Who revere each other
Who loathe
Pretend
And try to blend in
With each other

This is the time when you can become
The greatest substance of your dreams
Unless you live in a shack
And don’t speak English
And don’t know what this poem means

Tell me
how it’s possible for people
Who walk on gold to not know how to read
Tell me
how publishers who’ll never taste their tongues
Can comprehend the words that these people need?

Because they’ve never been scared of stories
The ones who uttered the very first
The ones who’ll hand them to their children
Calling out the rivers of their self worth
The ones who’ll write a narrative in the ear
But who won’t call the ear a page
The ones who’ll rhyme without pens
And perform without a stage

I’m just a colonized African
Who breaks down the Queen’s English
Until Sesotho understands it
Still I wonder if trials and translations
Could help them traverse my landscape
South Africa is an old fashioned mutt
Who knows how to sing
And knows even better how to cuss
Who knows how to piece together prayers
When she’s almost out of luck
Who knows how to laugh hard
When the tears have run her into a rut
Who knows that race is a farce
Every body’s f*#!@d
And when the welts and wounds
Demand healing salve
Words are just enough

“The enemy isn’t really clear in the way it was before. It’s an incredibly sensitive, complicated struggle with many dimensions, but the site for that struggle is inside. ... The language of poetry comes from a place where that transformation has to begin, that sort of intuitive, creative, spiritual searching place that will be the fuel for any kind of transformation process.”  Lebo Mashile