Mandla Langa was born in Durban in 1950 and went into exile in Botswana in 1976. He has lived in Lesotho, Mozambique, Angola, Zambia, Hungary and the UK.

In 1980 he won the Drum Magazine story contest for ‘The Dead Men Who Lost Their Bones’ and in 1991 was awarded the Arts Council of Great Britain Bursary for creative writing. He was Cultural Representative of the ANC in the UK and Western Europe, Vice-Chairperson of the Africa95 Exhibition in London and a weekly columnist of the Sunday Independent. He holds certificates in Offset Litho Printing and Periodical Journalism with the University of London.

Five of his works have been published, Tenderness of Blood (Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1987), A Rainbow on a Paper Sky (Kliptown Books, London, 1989), The Naked Song and Other Stories (David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, 1997); The Memory of Stones (DPP, 2000) and The Lost Colours of the Chameleon (Picador, Africa, October 2008), which won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Africa Region in March 2009. He is also the recipient of the country’s National Orders of Ikamanga (Silver) for his literary, journalistic and cultural achievements. In 1990 his musical Milestones was staged at the State Theatre. Mandla has been the editor-at-large of Leadership Magazine, and sits on several national boards in the Media industry. He is married to June Josephs and they have two daughters.

ZIZI

by Mandla Langa

I am running along a beach which has been reclaimed. The signs, once empowered to prescribe swaths of landscape for particular communities are now out. The vegetation thrives and there is everywhere the taste of salt in the air. The muddy banks of the river which flows into the sea support bulrushes and haulms of sedge. Out of the vast, restless sea comes a blast of spume which gives an effect of something big and ineffable insinuating itself into the lives of ordinary people. The aquamarine surface of the sea, shimmers, changes and assumes the colours of the sun; spangled bubbles summon the memory of precious stones. There is something unreal about this scene
which suggests that one is inside a many-layered dream, which peels off, like an onion, and introduces the dreamer into another experience. Armed with this knowledge that I might wake up to another illusion, I am not fooled by appearances. What is real is real. But I am also familiar with wet dreams of fulfillment in a hungry world.

This realization that we operate without trust and expect life to be hard, and happiness to be recalled only in misery, causes me to wonder what will finally become of us. We are like orphans bereft of the head of the household, where mirrors and all the artifacts of remembrance get covered by a shroud which shields the profaned life from the nakedness of the eyes. The sea voices its neutrality, but the waves crashing against the rocks, the iridescent spray, fail to appease my personal anger. I imagine that the rage speaks on the elements. The rollers, it seems, are not so much enraged as surprised that something so sacred and dear could have been blasphemed. There are few people left who will remember what this stretch of land and water once meant to us. Most of my former friends and playmates are gone. Some of those who remained retreated into an inner world whose silence transcends the grave, they are there but they are not there. To try to prise them out of torpor, to take the sleepwalker in them, is an act more desperate than indulgence in fantasies.

Because I am one of them, and I find myself going through motions of living, I have arrogated the right to tell my story, which is also their story. But, an idea hits me. No, this is Zizi’s story and you know Zizi. He is the thing that bursts inside you, at the same time making you feel whole, as if you had a heart. Something pulses in that corner of a man’s chest where such activity throbs. And you feel it won’t stop, even if Zizi is pushing you to it, until you explain who he was—is-this boy, Zizi, who died in the docks.
As I run feeling the sand subsiding in beneath my toes, I marvel at the arrogance of it all. I believe I am a rational man, but then, which ghost is not given to a self-delusion? Zizi is unhelpful when it comes to unraveling the narrative; he knows that no one can imagine what we went through. And he can play the fool because he is dead, and death is known to bring about great irresponsibility: people cannot touch you. Which is strange in some way, because of the group, Zizi, was the most considerate. He would say to you ‘thuthuka-bless you’ when you sneezed (even when you coughed). And he would help old women with their shopping baskets from the Indian Market to Victoria Street on Saturday morning. And they would not even say to him ‘go away you little scamp! As they were wont react to us. He was that kind of boy, very dependable. It possibly came from that his one leg was shorter than the other, I cannot remember which but he walked with a pronounced limb. We would never make fu of him because; Zizi had the strongest arms south of the Equator and could wrestle the most well built of us to the ground. I have been hit in my days, even by big policeman, but nothing beats the morning when Zizi slapped me across the face for calling him a fool, the ringing in the ears, the stars that swam and the tears that sprang into my eyes.

It was Siza who suggested that since we were on summer holidays, and we were beginning to take an interest in girls, who were certainly noticing the rags we wore, we should get holiday jobs. The fashion in the township of KwaMashu consisted of Star-Press trousers or Levi jeans, Converse sneakers, Viyella-button down shirts; sometimes a black windbreaker with ribbed collar above a BVD T-shirt. No imitations.

‘There’s no work, Siza,’ someone complained, ‘not in Durban.’
‘Yes,’ I supplied. ‘Our fathers trudge the pavements seeking work…’

‘Don’t tell us about your father.’ It was Zizi. ‘He’s a priest. The only trudging he does is from Genesis to Malachi.’

‘Still…’

Siza snapped, ‘Still nothing. Just look at us.’ He sounded angry. ‘Cast-offs from brothers, uncles. No self-respecting scarecrow would be seen dead in these …’ he judged himself’ … rags.’

For a moment, it was as if he wanted to cry. But he was fourteen, and it wouldn’t have been the right thing to do. I was also fourteen. Changes were happening in my head; some, in that distant, confused moment, in my body. When this happened to you, you realized that the pillars you had heard so much about, which, maybe, Samson shook, are still there, intact, gearing up to demonstrate, with a vengeance, that your old man was talking s*#t. Something curdles up in you, love, and you remember that you are your father’s son.

Which was all fine. These noble notions. Who was Zizi’s father? I remember him as someone I could possibly have worked at liking. Trim, dapper; Arrow shirts. He wore shoes that gleamed, and it was clear that they were patent leather, maybe Italian. Moustache flecked with assigned grey. He had a car, a Valiant, which he would rev for awhile before driving off.

‘He’s okay, my dad. Full of things,’ said Zizi. Pause, speculative. His eyes did not need to talk. ‘Ma’s sleeping. Feel I have to ask you to be here with me when we do ethe asking. You mind?’
‘No. Fine with me.”

‘Fix you sommin’? Tea? Coffee?’ Then Zizi cursed. ‘Know you hate all that. Coke? Seven-Up?’

‘Seven-Up.’

My township, KwaMashu – which very few people want to claim - is there. I suspect that in those hidden corners in which I stuck my broad nose – and people were offended – something waited with a bated breath. Mine was a township of copses and darkness. Looking at the areas abutting the stations of KwaMashu and Tembalihle: is that not where we grew up and plotted robbing the Post Office and Sithole’s supermarket? An area so full of humankind, where you hear the sound of sizzling fat-cakes, juicy sausages on a giriddle, or jive to the latest tune today, baby,’cause tomorrow it would be gone.

As a preacher’s son, whatever I said, I was a victim of my parentage. I would come up with the most daring idea for mischief, but the fellows would shake their heads and roll their eyes and make me feel useless. My clothes were cast-offs from the congregations. I was an emotional case whose survival was determined by the prosperity of the believers and their weekly tithes. A pariah, This was unbearable.

My father did not come from South Africa. He had traversed the length and breadth of the northern Transvaal. Messina. Bushbuckridge. He was black, yes, but he spoke Zulu with an accent, which was not lost on my friends. My mother,
understanding my bewilderment, did not fight me. She used the family to fight me. There were always, in the context of holy, Pentecostal church, rituals to redeem the sinners and bring them to the altar of the alabaster Christ.

I did not hear her, Zizi’s mother, until she was upon us, speaking from behind me, in that voice. ‘So,’ she said, ‘you elected to feed yourself, huh? Zizi?’

This is where I escape, I thought. Tongue stinging with the fizz of Seven-Up, I turned from the kitchen stool to look at her. An ordinary mother in a faded pink housecoat. Possibly sensing my intention, she brought her elbow with a thump on the table and looked at me. ‘This is what you being taught at home?’ she asked. ‘Just coming in and having a royal right time?’

Ma…?

Don’t you ma me, Zizi. This is stupid. Her mouth trembled.

*** “Where would you find work?” She was talking to her son, but I had a feeling she was addressing me. Being hopelessly in love with her, I imagined all sorts of things. But I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“The docks, Ma,” Zizi said. “Boys are being taken on as casual labour.” [sic]

“Do your mom and dad know about this?” This time she was talking to me.

‘Yes,’ I lied. ***My mother and father would have had a seizure apiece if they had known what we were planning.
It was just our luck that on our first day out it was raining as if the heavens had gone crazy. *** On this wet Monday morning, we queued at the bus rank. By the time we were inside were soaked to the skin. The interior of the bus was overwhelmed by Jackson’s cigar smoke. [Jackson] was a thin Malawian, as black as tar. *** We certainly couldn’t say anything to him because Jackson was our key to the shipyard construction company to which we were going.

We reached the industrial site at 6:45am. Men were already preparing themselves for work, stripping off their ragged street clothes to put on even more ragged overalls. We were issued with miner’s hats strapped with little torches on the front, well-worn gloves, and buckets in which swirled a corrosive detergent. Our task was simply to follow a narrow chamber and scoop the grease from the machinery. We crawled on our bellies and slid through vertical and horizontal channels, shoveling the goo into the buckets with our hands. My torch went our and I was plunged into a carbon darkness, something deeper than the darkness experienced when you shut your eyes tight at night. Terror clawed at me. I removed the gloves and tried to feel my way about, and my hand capsized the bucket. The liquid splashed against the floor and into my eyes. I screamed once as my eyes burnt; the scream, even when I had stopped, continued ringing, a sound that was louder that the lunch-time siren. Zizi was screaming at the top of his voice.
After what seemed like an eternity, Siza came up from behind and stroked my cheek with a greasy hand. I turned to look up at him and it was in his face that I read what had happened.

‘He’s dead, isn’t he?’ I asked

‘Yes,’ Siza said. ‘He was trapped in the propeller shaft and they couldn’t haul him out.’

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I am tired now, but I still punish myself. I do a U-turn and head back to where it started. As I run, I remember all the people, all the faces we confronted in our attempts to confront ourselves. There were those children with whom I left in 1976 after the slaughter in Soweto. Running on this beach I recall how we resolved to return and claim what was ours.

***This story is an extract from Mandla Langa’s book ‘The Naked Song and other stories’ and has been edited down to fit this publication. *** indicate missing text.