

LITERARY SECTION

POEMS BY PETER HORN

Peter Horn
University of Cape Town, South Africa
peterhorn@telkomsa.net

About the Author

I was born on December 7, 1934, the son of Alfred Horn, wood carver, and Paula Horn, teacher, in Teplitz-Schönau, Germany. I attended the elementary school in Schönau, the classical secondary school in Teplitz, the secondary school in Donauwörth and the classical secondary school in Freiburg/Breisgau, where I matriculated in 1954.

In 1955, I emigrated with my parents to South Africa, since then my permanent residence. I studied German and English as majors at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1957 to 1960—1959 BA (Witwatersrand) with a first class in German; 1960 BA Honours (Witwatersrand) in German (First Class). After that I qualified as teacher at a high school (1961, Higher Education Diploma, Johannesburg). By 1960 to 1964 I taught German, English, History and Afrikaans at the German private school in Johannesburg. In 1964, I was Temporary Junior Lecturer in the department for German language and literature at the University of the Witwatersrand; in 1965 Lecturer at the University of South Africa; from 1966 to 1973 Senior Lecturer and Head of Department at the University of Zululand. In 1970, I received a Daad-exchange-scholarship to do research in Stuttgart.

In 1971, I graduated PhD at the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on “Rhythm and Structure in the Poetry of Paul Celan,” and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1985 to 1987, I was Deputy-Dean; and from 1987 to 1990 Dean of Faculty; and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

I am (or was) member of the South African Association of German Studies (executive committee 1975, vice president 1985-1989, president 1989-1997), the Heinrich-von-Kleist-Gesellschaft, the Internationale Germanistenverband, the Gesellschaft für Internationale Germanistik, the Georg Büchner Gesellschaft, a scientific adviser of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the Skrywers Guilde, the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW)-Western Cape Executive (1988-1990), and National Executive (1991-1992). Besides these, I was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners’ Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers’ Movement (1984/5).

Since 1971, I was invited frequently as guest professor and external examiner at Natal University, Witwatersrand and Rhodes University (1978). In 1977/8, I was guest professor at the Free University of Berlin, the University of Cologne, the Gesamthochschule Essen, the University of Regensburg, the Gesamthochschule Siegen. In 1981/2, I was visiting professor in Cologne and Essen and in summer 1982 in Regensburg (DAAD guest-professorship). In 1986, I was visiting professor at the University of Hong Kong, in 1990 at the Ateneo de Manila, the University of the Philippines, Queensland, NSW, Melbourne, Adelaide, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Riverside (California), Stanford, Boulder, Houston, Georgia, Tennessee, St. Louis, Wisconsin, Philadelphia, Columbia, and Dartmouth.

In 1974, I received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay on the concrete poetry. 1982, I was made a HSRC University Researcher. In 1992, I received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for Poems 1964-1989), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award for the short story collection *The Kaffir who Read Books* (published under the title *My Voice is Under Control Now*). In 1994, the University of Cape Town granted me an Honorary Fellowship for life. I have been invited to participate in the Humboldt-University Berlin's major research project into violence in literature (April 2000 to March 2001). I have been awarded a Hertz-Stiftung research fellowship for the year 2001, to work on Kleist's dramas at the University of Paderborn (April to October).

Two of my volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by me were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime.

My poems are included in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. I have published 37 contributions to academic books, 67 articles on learned journals, and numerous reviews and review articles.

SILENCE IN JAIL!

*Nothing was sadder
there was no more saddening want
than the deadly lack
of music*

Dennis Brutus

They don't like music in prison
so they banned Dennis Brutus's poems
and Wopko Jensma's poems
and Breyten Breytenbach's poems
and James Matthew's poems
and my own poems

They hate music and poems
and pictures and statues
they have cleaned out the country:
there is silence between its bare walls
the silence of bones in the desert
cleaned by the vultures

But unaccountably
music crosses the border
on waves of ether
through every crack
between heavily armed border posts

“Eine kleine Nachtmusik”
this serene joy invading
the muscles of my body
revolutionary music
written against the dreary dictates
of puritan dominees
who don’t like music and dancing and serenading
in their straight-laced
country-wide jail

Beethoven’s fifth revolution
breathing courage into our heart
is knocking at the door
defying the corrupt little giants
ministers of state
at whose absolute pleasure
you may be detained
in our own Bastille

Tchaikovsky’s victorious canons
repulsing the would-be colonizer of Russia
succeeded to hunt the glorious army of France
across the entire continent of Europe
and his ringing church bells give us the courage
that we can too

Theodorakis’ songs from Orobos jail
the “takketak ego, takketak esy”
communicating hope through the stone walls

Wolf Biermann's songs from Chausseestrasse 131
("Thus or thus the earth will be red")
and Bertolt Brecht crowing
his venomous ballads
about worker's solidarity

There are too many holes in the net
there are too many cracks in the wall
there are too many radios on the air
the growing number of censors
scramble round frantic white ants
cementing the crumbling structure
catching invaders in their poisonous embrace
breathlessly while armies of new ones enter
Exhausted they attach their stickers
to ever new songs: Banned for possession

But music (lalalla lallala la)
"The royal fireworks"
"The New World"
"The Emperor" and the "Eroica"
triumphantly sweeps them away
helter skelter
in ever growing waves of glorious hope

LISTENING TO A VOICELESS VOICE

*As for the poets
only those who go astray follow them
Have you not seen that they wander
distract in every valley
And they say what they do not do.*

Al-Qur'an, Ash-Shua'ara v.224-226

When you listen to poems,
forget what you learned at school,
what they told you at university,
forget the literary critics,
and listen to the voiceless voice
speaking from the flames
with the lightness of birds,
sounds burning themselves out,
the torture of words chained together
which hate each other while they rhyme.
There are a lot of reasons
why a poet never leaves his bed
why a poet never cuts his hair
why a poet drinks himself to death
why a poet jumps out of a moving train
there are a lot of reasons, believe me.
Of course everyone would like to float
and to write in larger than life letters
in a manner which says their own name indelibly
in a loud voice so that everyone can hear.
But there are simply too many writers
there are not enough people to listen
and his poems do not make the top twenty.
So he waits for posterity,
breathing invisible poems,

his smile is extinguished in the mirror,
the mirror in the pool vanishes,
and everything he has to say is silenced,
but even in silence there is a kind of beginning,
a lost trace to be recovered.

Poets have written their dark songs
while there was low tide in their blood,
their voice breaking through clenched teeth
they utter the original scream, Eva's song,
a bellow, a roar, a howl,
what else should they do in a deadly town,
except bury their heads in the earth?

The heart whistles a sad whisper
a whisper which sings without a tune
in memory of burnt houses,
the sadness of ivory dipped in silver and
the tears of children with dirty faces,
the weight of the earth,
the heaviness of mountains,
the force of the sea.

Sometimes nothing is left of the poet
except a voice: childish and fragmentary
querulous, asocial and amoral.

At the end of the day
when the watches cycle through their numbers,
what kind of a stammer
vibrates in human mouths?

From: *An Axe in the Ice, Poems*. Johannesburg: COSAW, 1992

A TRIBUTE

For Lulu and all my friends in Manila

I know
one week is not enough
for the birds to tell me their names
for the crickets to impart their rhythm
to the flow of untutored words
for the trees to explain the shape of their leaves

I know
one week is far too short
to knock on the doors
of shacks on the river's quay
and to speak Tagalog
with the garbage of Smokey Mountain
to be part of the struggle of mountain dwellers
to come down through the monsoon clouds
to the rice paddies.

It will take
far longer for my eyes
to understand the green of the grass
and the greys and brown
of rusting paint-peeled houses
or the silver glint of a Mercedes
on Loyola campus

The taste buds
on my tongue
are startled by the blend of strange spices
and the blandness of McDonalds
but they don't yet know

the food of the peasant
the drink of the workers

I have a nodding acquaintance
with a distant typhoon
but I have not stood
on rocks parting in anguish
or lain under the rubble
of a school collapsing on my broken bones

I have not yet been imprisoned
or hunted as a terrorist
in the jungles of Southern islands
I have not yet been interrogated
by anything worse than custom officials

but my eyes can read the colours
of the stars and stripes
in every soap opera
on every channel
of early morning TV

So what can I say
about these islands
under a tropical sun
hidden in driving rain?

I can say: tell me, show me, *kalabitin*.¹

1 Touch me (with your fingertips, to establish body contact while talking).