

Poetry Series

Diana van den Berg

- 62 poems -

Publication Date:

August 2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

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Diana van den Berg (4 November 1945)

Unlike Princess Diana, I am old (a wonderful word!) , ugly (well, certainly in comparison with Princess Diana - and who cares? - not me! - in actual fact, I don't really think I am ugly, but find that difficult to say) , alive (all the time) and happy (most of the time) .

I am an animal lover (all animals - wild and domestic - including snakes, spiders, frogs, scorpions, etc - every creature that walked, hopped, crawled, swam, flew, slithered, anything-else on the planet) and very interested in ecology of all kinds. My garden is an indigenous forest (a small one) . My children, when they were small used to give me indigenous trees for birthday and Christmas presents. I had the most wonderful horse (Flicka) in the world for 20½ years, but he went to Heaven on 28 April 2002 at the age of 37½. He was the healthiest, happiest horse I ever knew. I miss him terribly. I have two darling animals at home - a tabby cat called Tigger (14 on 15 March 2009) and a blind Maltese poodle called Daisy (14 on 24 May 2009) . Dogs don't bite me. Either I taste bad or they know I love them all - even before sight.

I have 2 children whom I love with all my heart. My daughter is divorced and has two children and lives in Australia. She doesn't talk to me, beyond about 6 sentences a year - and that, and all its implications, breaks my heart. My son is married and has two step-children and lives a couple of kilometres away from me. He loves me.

I divorced my husband in 1974 and he died at Christmas time in 2007.

I adore my country South Africa (and my continent Africa) and am very optimistic about South Africa's future. I have been the secretary for our local sector policing forum for the last 3 years, not just to support my son who has been the chairman for the same period. We are both, along with others, very active in operations designed to bring peace to our community and have reduced crime in our area to a very marked extent.

I believe that World Peace is possible. It is my opinion that the solution is simple theoretically, but complex practically.

I never go anywhere without my sense of humour - or almost never. It carries me through a lot!

I love being 63. I find it great fun. People tell me I am young at heart, but that is not true. I am old. It is a simple fact. There is nothing wrong with the O word (except when referring to my animals - then the word is 'mature') . To me the O word implies, amongst many other things that I

can't think of all at once, 'maturity, wisdom, learning, having life experience, having developed sensitivities that bring appreciation of the smallest and largest things and the wonder of all living creatures'. I have the most incredible health that defies explanation, the bone structure of a 20-year old (with X-rays to prove it!) , more energy than most people I know all put together - I have no idea where it comes from (I often forget to eat, and when I don't forget, I often don't eat much anyway or the right things) , but the energy is there. I don't see why I should walk if I can run.

I write poetry - have done just about all my life with some gaps. I don't want my poetry published. Weird? Perhaps, but it is my choice. My daughter-in-law has threatened to have it published after I am dead, but I threatened to haunt her if she does. I don't mind reading it - or showing it - to anyone of my choice whether that be an individual, or a hall full of people, or posting it on an open forum - but that is different - I haven't really thought how and why, but it is.

I taught in high schools and primary schools for many years, mainly French in high schools, but also English and Afrikaans - and in primary schools, all subjects. At various times, I used to run a Poetry Club and a Nature Club at the school I taught at, at the time.

Currently, I have a 12-month contract which ends in October 2009, based on my Microsoft Access skills.

I am a realistic optimist - or an optimistic realist and try to make differences, even if they are very small. I sing (metaphorically - if I really sang, all frogs would leave South Africa and I don't want that) - as I was saying, I sing my joys, cry my sorrows and am temporarily paralysed by my fears (and then I take control again) and I put a lot of all of that into my poetry.

I am me. I like me. Not everybody else does. I am not really a people's person, although I try my best to be. I am easily disappointed in people. I try to be tolerant of people with different values to mine, and succeed up to a point, but I don't find it easy. I am very faithful and supportive to my friends. I usually find that the people I get on best with are animal lovers (even when I don't know that to begin with) .

A Branch Shook

A branch shook.
A leaf detached itself
and fell
on to my verandah in the sunlight.
A bird had taken flight
from a height
above the eaves
and out of sight.
I wondered what bird it was.
I wondered.
I still don't know.

(August 1998)

Diana van den Berg

A Difference Made

When dark crawls small
around the throat,
and soul-stones grind both grey
and shiver-slow,
and tears glass-freeze
before the words,
and flow seems ebb, forever more...

just one warm word
like a candle glow...

and sunrise sings
in sky-splashed flames,
and millstone lifts
and breath is free,
and sun-drenched tears dry
with soft-healing balm,
and words surge boundless, skywards, wide
and ebb reverts to blessed flow.

(7 March 2006)

Diana van den Berg

Africa Sings

Icy mountain mornings laugh
in liquid trills.

Ridiculous puffs of fluff bounce
through powder blue eternity
hung clean with avian harmony.

Sun-painted grain whispers
earth secrets to the wind.

Minuscule desert lizards scuttle
over burning sands.

Peerneef acacias and patterned reptiles
are awash with sun.

Floods of fragile colour
splash transient petals.

Forests of a million greens
throb with woodland lives.

Yellow sands hold sleepy warmth.

Cool sapphire undulates with thundering, frothy steeds
galloping from the unfathomable depths.

It is no wonder that
Africa sings.

(3 November 1999)

Diana van den Berg

Alone

Perhaps
it was intended
that I walk
alone.

Perhaps
there is none
who can feel
song
and sun
and colour
and sweetness
of hay
and
honey,
as I.

Perhaps
one greygreen autumn day
a rugged stranger
will,
with silent footfall,
and respect
for forest creatures,
come wandering
through
the green mists
of my garden trees
and
perhaps
we will understand
each other,
and
perhaps
not.

(1991)

Diana van den Berg

And

And I love you,
little word,
for your brevity
and your Biblical cadence
and your graceful shape
and the roundness of your letters
and your meaning
and the continuity you imply
and the hope you promise
when all is lost.

(16 February 2001)

Diana van den Berg

Back to Normality?

Today I am going to pretend to be normal.
I am going to behave as I would have before that Friday.
I am going to hang up the washing
and I am going to weed the garden
without my finger on the button
of my remote control panic device.

However,
it will be
the back garden.
And the device will be
in my pocket.
Well,
I did tell you
that I was only pretending,
didn't I?

(1 January 2001)

This is the 3rd in a series of 3 and includes 'That Friday (29 October 2009) ' and 'My October Visitors'

Diana van den Berg

Beyond the Brink

Sometimes the pain screams red the raw
And tugs the push
Into the from and jagged corners.
The furling weir
drags on and trails
blazing backward flames of perihelion anguish
while all the time
hidden deep
and as useful as forgotten notes
lies ...
the point?

(3 November 1999)

Diana van den Berg

Big Yellow Moles

BIG YELLOW MOLES

Flicka, my darling horse,
you know, in Yellowwood Park...

- do you remember the Yellowwood Park Stables
I rode you to
when you first became mine
and Tania's
and Chrisjan's,
and where you lived for
the first four years
you were ours,
and the duck slept in your stable? -

as I was saying,
and as you know,
for the last couple of months,
there is road construction
and re-laying of waterpipes,
everywhere in Yellowwood Park,

and everybody,
(including me)
is complaining
about the detours
and the inconvenience
and the fences
that have been taken down,
and the huge concrete piping
and the piles of soil
on the side of the road,
and the crime
that is taking place
around it all,
and the time
it is taking to finish the construction work...

but those big yellow graders,
my Flicka boy,
oh no,
not them my darling horse,
I am not complaining about them
and
never
ever
could
and
never
ever
will.

Since the day you died
and my heart
and lungs
and stomach
were
wrenched
out of my body
and strewn
in miniscule, rough-edged pieces,
I know not where,

- since that day
when Karin
organised
for a large,
kind,
yellow,
mechanical
mole
to dig
your grave,
I have had
such a soft spot
for large, yellow graders.

Anybody
or
anything
that does
anything good
for you, my darling horse,
or reminds me of you
even more
than I think of you all the time,
is my close and revered
and much loved
friend
for
life.

22 July 2009

Diana van den Berg

Blim

(Note: An imagined dialogue between
me, a sixty-three year old,
and her, a twenty-five year old colleague)

"Blim, " I said with a cheery smile.

" Er, er par... don? "

"Blim, " I said again -
in a particularly explanatory way -
you know, like Winnie-the-Pooh
in his cuddly, teddy bear voice
explaining about honeypots or songs -
'How cold my toes, tiddly pom' and all that?

"What are you talking about? What's 'blim'? "
she said in that voice -
you know the one a twenty-five year old
girl from Pretoria who always gets what she wants,
uses, when she thinks
that her sixty-three year old colleague
has misplaced her sanity.

"Well, " I said, "I was hoping you would tell me! "

"I really don't know what you are talking about, " she said
not knowing whether to be terrified or abrupt.

"Neither do I, for that matter.
Are you really telling me that you don't know what 'blim' means?
After all, you mumbled it to your left thigh
in a very grumpy voice
yesterday afternoon just after half past four
when you were sitting on the wall
waiting for whoever you have extracted
a lift home from now.

I realise that it is probably means something
most unpleasant - and that it is a greeting of some sort -
perhaps one that you say just before you vomit.
I know that it is a greeting, " I said pensively,
"because you said it immediately after
I walked past you from your right and said 'Goodbye' to you,
but perhaps you weren't talking to me -
perhaps it was your left thigh you were talking to,
though why you would want to tell your left thigh
that you are going to vomit, I can hardly imagine.
It didn't reply, as I recall, which was very rude of it.
I wonder where it learned that from.

Now, I wonnnnnder if it could have sommmmmething to do
with the fact that

about two months ago
I was kind enough to go out of my way
every day for three weeks
and give you a lift home
in a car that needs attention
and with petrol I can hardly afford.

There is somebody
from another company in the building
who gives you
a lift home every day now,
except for now and then
and then you have no trouble
begging and getting a lift
from somebody else in our company –
Of course, you do prepare well for that
with all your friendliness
to the possible contenders –
the same friendliness you showed
me
so eagerly
before I
so politely and diplomatically
- and with a week's notice -
wriggled out of the position
you and a colleague put me into.

Funny, isn't it
that it is I
who has given you more lifts
than the rest of the company
put together,
yet I am the bad guy –
or rather,
the bad old woman!

It's not your
asking
for a lift that disgusts me –
although if it were me, I would catch the bus
from the bus stop right outside –
and when the bus drivers are on strike,
I would walk the mile and a half or so -
sixty-three or not -
but that's me, not you.

It's the
expecting
the answer to be yes -
no matter the circumstances
nor the inconvenience –
and the

resentment
when it's not.

You see,
there are some people
for whom I would
sacrifice my life
(I hope – but you never can tell
until the bullet leaves the gun)
but there are others
to whom
I wouldn't
give
even a particularly rusty cliché.

So,

blim

blim

blim-blim-blim-blim-blim

blim

blim.

Have a lovely day! ”

(18 March 2009)

Diana van den Berg

Conductor

I was spellbound
by the graceful arc
of his arm
and the precision
of his movement.
Did he train in Vienna?

I longed to hear the woodwinds
awakened by the white glove

pointed

but
reluctantly
I drove on,
otherwise
the cars behind me
would have honked,

and the pointsman
would have directed
his traffic officer precision
and ire
at me.

Diana van den Berg

Conversation with a Burchell Zebra Foal and His Mama

Little zebra,
I came across you
in a sunny clearing in the forest
you, your mama, and another.

At first I stood and talked
as I have always done
to other zebras at other times ...
not knowing ...
not knowing what was shimmering on the edge of my universe.

Perhaps it was because I spoke to all of you at first,
though the third was more interested in grazing
and didn't reply at all,
but Mama listened, assessing me,
and somehow I felt her approval and friendship
and a bonding of mothers.

It was as though she felt it good manners
on my part
not just to charm her baby without
announcing myself and my intentions.

I told her of her beauty
and that Burchell zebras
are my favourites,
and somehow she sensed
that every word I said was true.

I told her how exquisite
her little foal was,
not newborn, but just old
enough to scratch his ear
with his hindhoof
and how adorable that was
but how I was concerned that
Little One may have had earmites,
but then I repeated to her
the voices of my education
which told me that was not an issue
for wild animals
particularly zebras
and she listened to all this
with interest,
twitching each ear independently
in reply
as you did too,
listening to every word.

And I turned to you
and told you how clever you were
and by then, Mama was totally at ease

and I swelled with pride and love and gratitude
for Mama's trust
and she replied with more ear twitches
and placid deep gaze eyes
and grazed in the summer sun,
trusting,
and gradually
it was mostly you I was talking too,
for the more I talked, the more you listened,
enraptured at my voice
and the tales I told,
Arabian Nights for Zebra Foals,
and Mama listened still
but in the background
as though trusting you too
to know the lessons she'd taught.

I told you how your stripes
flowed up into your mane,
and said for you to know
how smart that looked
to look at Mama's mane -
and she looked up from her grazing
for a moment.

I told you how God gave you your beautiful stripes
of black and white and shadow brown
in love
as camouflage
in dappled light
to guard you from danger
and you listened and twitched an ear.

I told you of Flicka, my horse,
and details of how horses are different
and of how they are the same
and you twitched your ears
and held your head at times
on one side as though amazed.

We talked and talked and talked
and the sun warmed our different backs
and then the moment came ...

You took a few steps towards me
on little zebra feet.
I thought I'd died and gone to Heaven.
I held my breath with bursting joy
for I thought Mama would stop you ...
but she didn't.
She looked up ...
and went on grazing.

I thanked her for her trust -
she twitched an ear and looked at me
placidly and accepting,
zebra of the wild she was,
then you and I resumed our conversation.

I felt as though in a dream.
The moments were brighter than the sun.
We talked and talked and our conversation
became more and more intense ...
and then ...

you took a few more steps towards me,
cautious, as Mama had taught,
but curious and unafraid ...
the pinnacle of happiness for me,
for now you were but a Mama-zebra length away.

Your eyes and mine held each other
and we talked and talked of all things
like the beauty of the summer day
and the blue, blue cloudless sky.

I wanted time to stop
and then found I was wrong about the pinnacle of happiness
for it stretched further still ...
for you took yet more steps.
I thought my heart would explode with love and trust,
but this time you had crossed the boundary
of Mama's comfort, but not her trust,
for all she did was to wander a few steps slowly out of sight,
- no call, no fear, no rushing between us, no lashing out at me
with her tiny sharp, sharp hooves -
just a few steps out of sight, knowing you would follow.

But so much gratitude and love and trust had passed
in that golden triangle, that I could not have wished for more.

Thank you my little zebra darling
and not least Mama dear
for the sacred moments
of bonding with a baby zebra
and his Mama
in a conversation
that will take me back
to every word and twitch of ear
at every recall,
and each time I return
to your vast grassland hills and riverine forest home,
I'll look for you my baby zebra, and your Mama
and when you've grown
I'll search the depths of every zebra's eyes

and talk my soul deep into his or hers
in the hopes that
it is you
my little zebra foal.

(30 March 2002)

Diana van den Berg

Dawn Symphony on a Spring Morning

I strain my ears,
greedy
for each delicate note,
for each pianissimo dolce espressivo trill,
spilling on to slowly gilding branches
and spreading through the celebration
of greens and browns and greys
with morning blue
selectively filtering through
one or two patterned, celestial windows
and many dazzling, ceiling peepholes.

Avidly I savour each phrase of the spontaneous symphony -
an extravaganza,
praising the glory of the new day's dawning -
and I welcome
the soft canine injunctions
from far off furry throats
and an impromptu crescendo moderato of railroad clicketty-clicks
that fades into the distant highway swoosh of tyres
and engines' low, low rumble -

for all this
enhances the counterpoint of the little musicians
bursting beauty
into forest foreground.

As my hearing heightens,
the tentative morning litany of waking crickets swells the 3-D outpouring.

Symphonic movement blends into the next
and I lose myself
in every perfect tone and semi-tone,
in the sunshine-and-shadow flow from note to note,
in the echoes, the contrasts, the ebb and
flow of choral twitters,
the sparkling solos blossoming from quiet corners -

and my anxiety-rigid shoulders dropp -
and the closing cadence of the dawn chorus
seeps
deep
into the marrow
of my bones
as I absorb
the first inflections
of the next musical offering -
a gentle madrigal in honour of
the full-blown day.

(27 September 2000)

Diana van den Berg

Evanescence

The light sparkled on the glass in your hand.
For a moment, I turned away,
and,
like the light,
you were gone,
but for an instant,
you and the sparkle were there,
...I think.

(December 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Forest Eyes

Deep, deep
into liquid forest eyes
she drank
as she danced
her sorrow
barefoot
in a simple
cream
silk dress
alone
alone
alone
sadly abandoned
and gloriously alone
embraced by the trees
who are
her spirit
her mind
her soul

(30 July 2012)

Diana van den Berg

Gagged And Bound

GAGGED AND BOUND

This is a suite of 3 poems all on the same subject. Although the first poem is long, the other two are very short.

THAT FRIDAY (29 OCTOBER 2000)

I didn't go to work that Friday.
I was tied up.
And gagged
and my fingers were turning blue
and my ankles and wrists and mouth hurt
because the bonds were too tight.
They tightened them when I asked them
to loosen them.
And my throat was dry,
so dry
so very, very dry
- sore too from their hands
around my mouth and throat
when they were smothering my screams.
And my head hurt from when they inadvertently banged it against the wall.
One of the three was actually quite nice.
He said, "Cool" when I asked them
not to break anything,
when one,
probably he,
dropped what may have been a drawer.
He didn't drop anything after that,
although minutes later
he had the knife at my throat
saying he was getting tired of me.
They said they would untie me before they left
and they didn't.
But they didn't hurt me any more than they needed to.
I have never trained as a burglar
but presumably
they are taught to frighten their victims
in order to get on with their job properly.
They did that very well - the frightening part, I mean.
I duly
was frightened,
very frightened,
terrified, quite frankly.
The other part of their job they couldn't do very well.
As I kept telling them
there weren't any possessions of value to do it to.
Previous burglars and my financial situation had seen to that.
People ask me what I thought about.
I remember wishing that they would hurry up
and finish

and go.

I remember thinking that time was dragging.

I remember thinking how dry my throat was.

I remembered wondering what the time was
and how long they had been there

and when they were going.

Couldn't they see there was nothing to take?

They took my son's old watch - I kept it in my handbag because the strap was broken.

He lent it to me because I didn't have a watch.

I remember trying to recall my car registration number
and I did.

I remember replaying several possible scenarios in my head.

I remember wishing that they would go.

I remember thinking how very, very dry my throat was.

When they asked me where my son's gun was,

I told them the truth - that we both hate guns and don't have any
and that my son doesn't live here any more, anyway.

When they asked me which computer worked, I told them the truth,
but said they would benefit more from being taught by me how to use it
than from stealing it.

They answered yet again, "SHUT UP"

and stuck more tape

around my mouth and head,

and yet more tightly every time I spoke,

until what I said was inaudible anyway.

My October visitors eventually departed

with R16.67 each

and a third each of

a torch,

an old cheap watch,

a ripped off printer plug,

the padlock on my front door burglar guard gate - without the key

and two handfuls of worthless old coins

that my son had collected and treasured from childhood

and was keeping for his children

and hadn't yet taken to his home.

They didn't announce their departure formally.

How rude that was.

When I thought they had gone

I counted to 1000

(faster than I ever have)

and struggled to my feet.

You would be surprised

how difficult that is

in a confined corner at the end of a passage

with furniture and what appears to be all your household possessions
spilled around you.

I knocked over a broken kettle

they hadn't taken

and hoped they really had gone and didn't hear the crash.

I jumped down the passage.
I remember puffing
and struggling
to get my feet off the ground with each jump
and wondering if I would make it.
It is hard to jump when your ankles are all tied up
and you are gagged and your wrists are bound
and you feel that your life is in danger
whether it is or isn't.
I remember trying to think clearly.
I jumped first to the back door then the front
and locked them both with difficulty
as only my fingertips stuck out of my bonds.
Then it was puff puff puff - no time to rest - back down the passage
where I set off the alarm
and hid in the passage far from the window.
When the alarm stopped I set it off again.
Then I wondered how my rescuers would know I was there.
So I opened the curtains that my visitors had closed.
I opened them just enough to jump into view of my rescuers.
When the first reached the window,
his name was the same as my son's
- probably still is, why would he change it just because he has passed my window? -
I jumped into view
and then towards the front door
which again with difficulty I opened.
For the first time, I pulled down part of my gag
and said, "ND 252-655, gold Datsun Pulsar".
He in turn, repeated my greeting, but not to me.
He said it into his radio,
and added my name,
as though I didn't know it.
Then another rescuer
said my car was in my garage.
I probably didn't look any different externally when he said that.
I wonder if they thought I looked different internally.
Cars and a motor bike,
security officers,
policemen and a policewoman
and the public
arrived
and did their bit and more
and eventually left.
And so began that Friday.
My October visitors gained little.
I gained a million ridiculous fears that I am teaching to develop into caution,
but the learning curve is slow,
but fortunately I will never be a palm tree, a building nor a racist.

5 December 2000

MY OCTOBER VISITORS

I wonder who you are, my visitors.
Are you callous, and did I read your shreds of human kindness incorrectly?
What are your names?
And what schools did you go to?
What games did you play when you were children
and what music do you listen to now?
How long have you known each other
and why do you work together
and did you learn the trade
or did you just pick it up for yourselves?
Do you want a real job and can't get one?
Is burgling really as easy as we all imagine?

11 December 2000

BACK TO NORMALITY?

Today I am going to pretend to be normal.
I am going to behave as I would have before that Friday.
I am going to hang up the washing
and I am going to weed the garden
without my finger on the button
of my remote control panic device.
However,
it will be
the back garden.
And the device will be
in my pocket.
Well,
I did tell you
that I was only pretending,
didn't I?

1 January 2001

Diana van den Berg

Gilbert Khuzwayo, We Will Look At The Sun And Remember You

Siyakala, siyakala, uGilbert wethu shonile.

We,
and your two wives, your children,
your fellow grooms, the stable management, the committee, the
horse-owners,
the horses, the children who come here for riding lessons on the school
ponies,
their parents, riding members, non-riding members, friends of members,
the people who delivered or collected,
in fact, everyone you came into contact with,
- whether once in your life - or every day -
we cry our hearts
empty
and raw.

Gilbert, the rivers overflow with our tears.
The heavens echo with our calls to you.
Our hearts are breaking.
We don't understand
why you had to go,
but God does.
He took you early because
He needed another angel in Heaven
and He chose you,
of all indunas,
to be an induna of other angels
because you were the very best induna here on earth.

You taught us all.
You made us smile.
You made us laugh.
We were always happier
because of you.
We were wiser
because of your wisdom.
You were always happy.
You calmed the angry.
You lifted the spirits of the sad.
You warmed the hearts of the lonely.
You comforted the worried.
The horses were shinier,
happier,
healthier,
better cared for
because of you.
We all loved you,
respected you,
listened to you,
did as you asked,
asked your advice.
You were our sunshine on cloudy days,
our cool breeze in the burning heat of summer,

our warmth in wintry weather,
our shining light, a very present help, in times of trouble.
You never turned anyone away empty-handed -
you always had time for everyone -
if there was no time, you made the time.
We are so glad that you have no more pain.
No harm can touch you ever again
where you carry out your further tasks
for God and all humanity,
the way you did here on earth
for us all and for our beautiful horses,
with love in your heart for all.
You were too good to remain on earth.
You belong in Heaven
with God and the other angels.
Your laughter,
will live on
in the wind,
the hum and clatter of the tractor,
the clanging of the trolleys,
the loud whinnies and soft nickers of the horses,
the sweeping of the brooms.
It will reverberate through the stableyard,
and the hearts of your wives,
your children,
your family,
and your family here at the stables,
for we were all your family.
You were Our Gilbert, Our Macici.
You are still Our Macici, Our Gilbert.
You will always be Our Gilbert, Our Macici.
We will turn our heads
or come round corners,
expecting to see your smiling, happy face -
and we will.
It will be in the sunshine,
the blue of the sky,
the green of the grass and the trees,
the neatness and cleanliness of the stableyard,
the smiles and the greetings of the grooms,
once the time for tears is over.
We will ask you for the same advice,
the same information, the same help,
and we will feel your presence,
and hear your voice in the stillness of our hearts,
leading us, guiding us, helping us
as you always did.
We will read your answers and your messages in the sky -
fluffy white common sense against ocean blue in the working day,
vibrant, sensitive swirls and splashes -
the colours of dreams and hopes -
at the rising and the setting of the sun,

and reassuring starlight and moonglow in the dark, dark night.
Do you remember how you and I used to joke,
- amongst so many other things,
about your grey tractor-horse
that you fed with petrol?
Malume cries for his Gilbert too.
Every single one of us has our own special memories
of you,
your smiles,
your laughter
your warmth.
You were an induna par excellence.
You never mis-used your position.
Everyone looked up to you, looked for you, relied upon you.
Your wives and children must be so very, very proud
that so many, many people loved and respected you so very, very much.
Now you are an induna amongst the angels,
But we will always have Gilbert at the stables.
Your laughter and your voice will ring everywhere.
We will look for you when we hear the tractor starting.
We will see you wave above its noise
and carrying on with your daily tasks with excellence.
We will hear you laughing and joking with the grooms
and calling out to each other as you work
in the harmony that is Gilbert.
There will come a time that our tears will slowly dry
although that seems impossible now.
When that time comes
we will remember you with smiles in our heart.
We will forever remember your laughter, your smiles,
your good nature,
your friendship,
your unstinting help.
We will not forget you.
We cannot forget you.
You are a part of our lives.
We will carry you here in our hearts.
You will live forever in our memory.
You will live in the calls of our horses.
Each time they whinny or nicker, there will be a message for you, too.
Your spirit will be with us always.
None of us, alone, can carry the light
that you carried in our lives,
so we will have to help each other carry on your work
of lighting up the lives of all around us.
We will do that.
We will do it for you
and we will look at the sun - setting, rising, shining on high -
and we will remember you.
That is all that is left that we can do for you, now.
We thank you for giving us and the stables and the horses
so much of your life and your love.

We are all the richer for your gift.
And God, please take care of Our Gilbert, Our Macici.
Make him feel at home amongst the other angels.
They will love him too, we know.
Nkosi siyacela ukuthi
izinsuku zika Gilbert zibe nokukhanya
njengoba uGilbert kade eletha ukukhanya
empilweni yethu sonke
ebesisebenzisana naye.
We loved you, Gilbert.
We love you still.
We will always love you.
We mourn for you,
but we don't want our tears to spoil
your happiness at being an angel of God.
You will want us to pick up our hearts and carry your light,
I can hear you telling us not to cry,
but Gilbert, grant us our time to cry.
It will help us heal.
We will not cry forever, Gilbert.
We promise that.
When we have overcome the irrepressible tears,
we will stop mourning your death,
and we will again be happier because of you,
and we will celebrate your life instead
and we will carry your light
for you,
together,
because of you,
and with you,
because your spirit will be with us
helping us do that.
But for now
siyakala, siyakala, uGilbert wethu shonile.

- from Diana van den Berg and Flicka - on behalf of everyone who loves you

17 January 2001

Diana van den Berg

Good Morning God

Good morning, God
in this picture-book, pre-work moment.

Look at that pair of yellow-billed kites
playing in the thermals
above the traffic
with the grace and spirit
you gave them.
Is that the way they greet you at the start of every day?

See the elegant curve of those palm branches
reaching towards you
in the blueness of beyond
then bowing in submission.

Your smiley-face sun is summer-warm
and reflects in the faces of pedestrians
sporting sunshine, sea and pasture colours
and walking with the lightness of summer in their step.

You see, God, I am on my way to the stables to see Flicka
before work today as well as after
- but you know that, don't you? -
However, I know you'll forgive my irrepressible chatter.

You see, you have painted such an uplifting day
that I can't contain my exuberance about it.

And in a few minutes
I'll see Flicka
- watching me from afar -
- wondering if it's me - is it? isn't it? -
then as I get nearer -
that indescribable moment of recognition -
in his stance -
the carriage of his head -
the pricking of his ears -
and when I am close enough to see - the glow in his eyes.
And then, our long hello
that only he and I can understand - and you too God, I suppose.

God, thank you for this sunflower morning.
It is a luxurious cushion for my broken heart.

(4 January 2002)

Diana van den Berg

Goodbye

I could find no poetry in your soul;
I couldn't teach your heart to sing;
You wouldn't let my spirit fly;
And so I stand here on the moonlit beach
With icy water at my feet
And whistling wind around my ears.
With sad relief, I toss the ashes
Of our might-have-beens
Into the air, and as I do,
I feel the flutter of my wounded spirit
As it breaks free and tries to soar,
But the wind plunges it into the waves below.
It splutters, then struggles to the shore,
And, bird-like, hops before me
As I make my homeward way.
The healing process has begun.

(April 1994)

Diana van den Berg

Harbour Corner Hobo

You went about your something way.
You lit your fire like clockwork every night,
and scattered your spot with your litter,
As though it was your dirty washing, your cushions, your shoes.
You never glanced at passing cars.
You were busy with primary tasks.

Were you a recluse?
A poet? Thief? An immigrant?
Or were you merely temporarily unemployed?

Did you look long and deep into your fire's flame?
Did you have enough to eat?
Did you ever speak?
And were you ever spoken to?
Did you have a mind
or was it destroyed by mankind or substance subservience?
Were you content?
Or miserable, cold and lonely?
Did you ever beg?

Who were you,
really?

And why are you no longer there?

(September 1998)

Diana van den Berg

I Feel Your Strength

I feel your love and strength
my sweetheart horse
holding me up
and helping me walk and talk,
but oh, how heavy
is my heart
and lost and empty
is my soul.
Forgive me
for needing you so.

(6 May 2002)

Diana van den Berg

If I Woke Up Black

if I woke up black
I would sprint at once to buy
a sun-yellow dress

(17 December 2005)

Diana van den Berg

Initiation (To Live Poets Society)

This is like wow, man.
This is like real and now, man.
This is cool, man, really cool.

This is where the real and the crazy and the now are at.
This is home, brother, really home.

This is where a long-haired man
racked with pain or anti-inflammatories,
with cat-closed eyes,
twangs raw poetry out of his throat and his guitar -
poetry that rips open the gut, slashes the lungs and intoxicates the spirit;

where a lovelorn girl
makes music out of pain;

where cappuccino's and philosophy
give painful birth to beauty's child;

where children and aliens come to heel and hear not what,
where words and sounds and watermelons and motherhood and honesty and
performance
and regret and Sunday nights and Monday afternoons and a telephone call
whirl faster and faster,
and twirl and swirl into a crazy kaleidoscope
of wild colours beyond colour.

This is where Life began.

(6 August 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Inspiration Overflow

Months of silent pen
you whisper words hardly heard
my pen is breathless.

(1 August 2012)

Diana van den Berg

It's The Africa In Me

It's the Africa in me
that loves the forest in which I wake,
that sees and hears its fauna and flora and revels in their names.

It's the Africa in me
that you hear in my spirited conversation,
that shakes my shoulders as I sob my sorrows
or laugh my insides, inside-out.

It's the Africa in me
that keeps me reading poetry deep into the night
and causes me to stroke the sinuous muscles of my striped, domestic cat
and kiss the muzzle of my gently nickering horse.

It's the Africa in me
that has taught me how to love
and patches up the fragments of my soul after each disaster
and renews my zeal and increases my understanding
in preparation for the next onslaught.

It's the Africa in me
that has carried me
from my first baby breath
and will support me to my very last.

I am truly a child born of Africa.

(August 1999)

Diana van den Berg

It's The Weekends That Are For Crying

I sat with you, my beloved horse,
when you breathed your last
when others who loved you
did all the organising
and asked if it was all, all right with me
and I was sitting with you
when they found a perfect spot
for your final resting place
and you and I
we slept a moment
and talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

I was with you
when they loaded you
with love and pain
on to the horse box
and you and I
we talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

I lay next to you
all the way your brother drove us
to your final resting place
and you and I
we slept a moment
and talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

I lay next to you when they dug your grave
with care and precision
and you and I
we slept a moment
and talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

I was with you
when they put you
in your grave
and arranged your body
and I screamed
in agony and cried
from this side of
The Great Divide
and then I threw
into your grave
my two near-red flowers
and my blood-red heart

and my soul
and spirit
and tears
for you
beyond
The Great Divide.

And when they covered
you with Earth
I lost my mind
and screamed
for you
beyond
The Great Divide.

And people talked
and did things
and walked
and you and I
we talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

And that night
and every other since then
I held your blanket
in my arms
my face deep in it
breathing
your sweet horsy self
and slept deeply
reaching across
into
The Great Divide
and didn't understand
why I had so few tears
this first week
without you
beyond
The Great Divide ...

and then I woke this
first Saturday without you
and the tears fell out
in water buckets
and you and I
we talked and cried
from either side
The Great Divide.

And only then
did I understand that

God and you
on the other side of
The Great Divide,
were holding me up
and giving me strength
because you both knew
I couldn't do it alone
and you both helped me through
this first week back teaching
at a school I didn't know.

And the other thing I learnt today
from God and you
on the other side of
The Great Divide
is that
it is the weekends that are for me to be myself with you
and it is the weekends that are for crying
when you and I
can talk and cry
from either side
The Great Divide.

My darling, darling, darling horse,
I'll do my best
to live my life
to be worthy
of joining you again
on your side of
The Great Divide.

But for now
God and you
and your blanket in my arms at night
will walk me through
what happens around me
and I'll hold my breath
until the weekends
when you and I
can sleep a moment
and talk and cry
from either side
The Great Divide
for it's the weekends that are for crying.

(4 May 2002)

Diana van den Berg

Jackie Somebody from South Africa

At a baby clinic
in Gondola
in Moçambique
is an angel
who is not an angel
but a mere human
who shames me
when I despair
of the human race
and all of us
who say, "What can one person do against/for the whole world? "

Without wondering where the next donation is coming from
this young, pretty, married missionary
who could have an infinitely different life,
devotes herself
to every single Moçambiquan baby
or Zimbabwean baby from across the nearby border
who needs her
despite
despair,
disease,
superstition,
poverty,
ignorance,
malnourished babies,
and sparse supplies far away.

Some come from far away
leaving their homes on foot
at midnight
to reach the clinic
at daybreak
knowing
she
is there
and will help
in whatever way she can
with knowledge,
expertise,
kindness,
grace
and authenticity,
no games,
just the real deal.

She does what she does
as she says,
not because of
a theory
or a notion
or a religion

but
because of
the reality of the love of God.
She doesn't preach compassion;
she doesn't write poems about it;
she
IS
it
and she
acts upon it.

Her story is told
but what about
those whose are
not?
There are many, many thousands
like her
that we only hear about
by chance.

How dare I
bemoan
the state of humanity
until I have walked
a fraction
of a mile
in her
or their
moccasins?

(23 February 2009)

Diana van den Berg

Laser Surgery

No, I will not have my feelings removed
for my pain is me
and life is misery
and joy is but a momentary reprieve.

I will not have my feelings removed
though my tears block my nose
and my head thunders
and my limbs are withered;
though I put my fingers in my ears
when friends recount stories I will not hear;
though I turn off the television
when I cannot face reality;
though I often wonder
if I could do my bit
for disaster victims;
though I know I stand alone;
though I repeatedly try to do
what is right
though it is unnoticed,
unappreciated,
or misinterpreted;
though I do not understand
the selfishness, thoughtlessness and cruelty
of the human race.

No, I will not have my feelings removed
for my pain is me
and life is misery
and joy is but a momentary reprieve.

I will not have my feelings removed
for I will not give up my moments
and I will make
and live
and remember
and wallow
in my moments
of birdsong
and Chopin sonatas
and Wordsworth and Longfellow
and leaf-fringed sunsets
and the bonding gaze of my horse and cat
and I will wash my feelings in my glorious moments.

No, I will not have my feelings removed.

(12 November 2000)

Diana van den Berg

Losing Now

the dark has come
with no breathing
and no power of movement

outward dissipating
inward falling
inward shrinking
mind disintegrating
backward rips
heart remnants tremble
forward void
the now is all
the now is stagnation and paralysis
and soul-withering
smaller and smaller
and the now that is all
is fading

flowers try
colours are weightless
earth unto earth
death unto death
deathly
dead
dark
dead darkness swallows all

(16 June 2002)

Diana van den Berg

Meringue

She goes about her nothing way
Pointing plastic smiles at cardboard figures,
Doing relatives and others on given dates at given times,
As surely marked on some drab calendar.

With effort she could spell compassion,
but the homeless constitute a threat.
She never wonders how or why.

She fills her day with nothing things.
She doesn't know another way;
She hasn't walked damp forest paths;
She doesn't feel the sun's kind touch;
She hasn't watched an eagle fly
And craned her neck till it wants to break long after bird becomes the sky.

Her outer crust has shunned the crisp
sweet green of freshly mown grass.
She's heard of music, but hasn't let it crumble her shell.
Nor has she ever reached into a painting.
Her thoughts have stretched once or twice
... to leaking taps and travellers' cheques.

Three times she kept standing at her door and talked
To her lonely calipered neighbour,
But didn't ask her in - you never know with them, she says.

She once or twice poured tea for charity,
but now she counts her money gleefully
and flits from England's cold
to our sunny shores which are too hot
then back to England - it passes time.

Children and pets are not for her. They needsomeone.
She has no future, nor past nor present.
She goes about her nothing way.
She doesn't know that she doesn't know
nor that
she just
simply
isn't.

(July 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Moon Patterns

The moon makes patterns on my floor,
leaf-edged and almost still.

The thick blanket of night silence cushions
the little sounds
of talking wood,
the rhythmic heartbeat of a dripping tap,
a bark in the distance
that is passed on faithfully in highs and lows
to north and south and east and west.
I wish I understood its message.

Sensitivity quivers
and a hundred crawling perplexities
mate and multiply and mutate
into grotesque monsters
that pulse electric shock
after shock
after shock
until the patterns on the floor
reduce them to limp, exhausted slugs.

I long for night to end and never end.

Leaf-edged and almost still,
the moon makes patterns on my mind.

(July 1999)

Diana van den Berg

Mourning

I begged you,
little gecko, with the big frightened eyes,
not to leave the comparative safety of my single windscreen wiper
and especially not to go on to the roof of the car,
for the wind would be too strong
for the sucker pads
of your tiny feet,
and I couldn't stop the car
on the freeway with traffic all around me,
but I didn't speak Gecko
and the windscreen that protected my human-sized body
was a barricade between me and your little gecko-frame
and now my insides
are scrunched up
at the thought
of your fate.

(20 January 2001)

Diana van den Berg

My All

You are the birth of dawn colours
splashed across my eager sky,
that thrill my waking
and invite me to another day.

You are my early mornings
of wet grass,
bus stops,
bird calls,
and the pulse of man, machine and time in motion.

You are my golden afternoons
of unhurried sunshine,
feeding ducks,
holding hands
and watching busy weavers and darting swallows.

You are my quiet evenings
of silver moonshine, snow-tipped waves,
shared thoughts,
quiet moments
and the crisp, cool crunch of beachsand underfoot.

You are my long, black velvet nights
of star-sprinkled skies,
darting bats,
grey shapes of pot plants
and sensual breezes on hot skin.

You have taught my soul
to taste the wind,
to float,
to dive,
to fight,
to win,
to hover,
to acquiesce.

You have warmed my smile
and filled out the hollows
of my face.

You have given shape to my dreams
and shared your own with me.

You have dissolved my confusion
and are my solution.

You have penetrated my being
and known me
in every way imaginable,
and understood and liked what you have found.

You have accepted my love
and allowed me to lavish it upon you.
You have welcomed and appreciated it
in a way that I need you to.

You are the pillow beneath my headache,
the haven when I can no more,
the fountain for my thirst
and the honey for my hunger.

You have invited me into your life
and allowed my pride in your successes
and my pain in your troubles.

You have joined me in my nature walk
and listened and watched and noticed all with me.

You have heightened my ecstasies
and washed away my fears.

You have destroyed my passion for Solitude
and replaced it with my passion for You.
You have given me your love
and we have met in body, mind and soul.

I admire your strengths
but want to protect you most
when you are vulnerable -
and always, but especially then,
I can no more hurt you in the smallest way,
than I can hack off my arms and legs
with a blunt butter knife.

You are my light,
my colour,
my optimism,
my free spirit,
the sea air in my nostrils,
the salt on my tongue,
the breeze on my back,
the water lapping at my feet,
the gulls calling
and wheeling above me in the sky.

You are real.

You are everything to me.

You are
my man.

(November 1992)

Diana van den Berg

My Horse and a Colleague's Daughter's Cat

I was retching hot tears
out of my gut
and heart
and lungs
as I drove home
after hearing of the death
of a colleague's daughter's cat.

I had never met
nor heard of
the kitty
before,
but I mourned her catness
with the erupting marrow
of my screaming bones
and a million ragged nerve-endings,
jangling multiple messages
in a cacophony of pain.

I knew
Flicka,
my darling angel horse in Heaven,
would have met her at the gate
(as he does all animals
and certain special people)
and would be showing her around Heaven
and introducing her to everyone
and making her
comfortable
and welcome
and loved,
but I knew also
that he would understand and feel
my need
to make sure
he had found her

and he did
and he comforted me
in ways that
only
he
knows how.

His daily cloud messages to me
today were all about the cat
whose name I didn't know.
He told me everything
knowing I would want to know
every
tiny
detail –

how well, he knows me -
some clouds were dark and sombre
to honour the passing
of the kitty
from mortal
to immortal life;
others warm-orange bright
to celebrate
the kitty's years on Earth;
some clouds were happy fluffy ones
with a backdropp of baby-blue
to symbolise the joy awaiting her in her new world;

and on my home-coming stretch
my precious, darling horse
dramatically
flung wide
the curtains of Heaven
and showed me
the golden sunbeam staircase
the kitty trotted up
to a soft cloud
large enough
for her to sit on
(and not be afraid of falling off)
as Flicka opened the gate
with ceremony and welcome,
and behind them, the flaming sun
the symbol of certainty
of the kitty's safety,
and regained health
and glorious happiness.

Flicka, my darling,
you slowly dried my tears
and I was able to smile,
albeit wanly at first,
knowing that
the kitty-cat
will forever be
in your loving care
and one of your
many much loved friends.

How on earth can I thank you?

14 August 2009

Diana van den Berg

My Indigenous Garden

You, my morning forest,
my early morning forest,
my dew-awakened, early morning forest;
You with your dark shapes softening into gold;
You, who seat your little daybreak choristers
whose tiny lungs inflate with leaf-clean dawn
and scent of wet-earth green,
and explode into harmonising joy,
to herald the unfurling day and
greet those who will listen, and the sun;
You with your pranks,
A flutter of water on my head,
No, not a bird,
but had it been, who cares?
Perhaps you know what shampoos and hairdryers do,
and short hair dries so quickly too;
You with your damp, soft-cushioned, morning carpet
of mellowed leaves on forest grass,
Shiver-cold under my naked feet,
You, my early morning forest, are my tremulous inspiration.

You, my day-time forest,
With your honeyed acacia breath,
You with your bustling avian Hillbrow
whose verdant skyscrapers quiver with life...
LBJ's and flashes of colour
dart from one inviting delicatessen to another
with traffic sounds of chatter-chirrup and
liquid arias;

You with your surprises -
The sometimes mid-morning picnics,
especially when the pigeonwoods are fruiting,
of a bounding troop of monkeys
who find the time to play as well as feed;

If I keep still, they regard me
as one of them,
deformed and stretched and strangely inept at movement and communication,
but one of them,
though the alpha male watches me
the way an alpha male will do
when the smallest ones
play Dare-To-Swing-Too-Close-To-This-Grandmother-Of-All-Monkeys,
then leap back to their comfort zone and on to other games...
then comes the silent signal, and,
with a whoosh of flying goodbye branches,
they all depart,
thundering over the roof;
You, my daytime forest with your carpet crisp,
where hadedahs delve
almost

at my feet;
Then, once a mongooseslender with black-tipped tail ...
I held my breath as this elegant creature of the night
stood motionlessly watching me in dappled daylight
without apparent fear.
I held my breath and every muscle
for one forever minute
until his eye and he flowed back into the undergrowth...
You with your sun-splashed butterflies
who tease the fractious light and shadows
that play games with your multitudinous nuances of green;
You with your red and yellow blossoms into orange;
You, my daytime forest, are my blazing optimism.

But you, my night forest,
You, with your ghostly, green-white-wooded fever trees,
their graceful arms spread wide,
lure me from your fringe
into your dark-barked depths;
You, with your white night blossoms' sweet, sweet fragrance,
You with your silent moments...
and your tiny night sounds,
You with your shelter from civilisation
and your leaf-patterned moon,
You are my DNA.

(August 1998)

Diana van den Berg

My October Visitors

I wonder who you are, my visitors.
Are you callous, and did I read your shreds of human kindness incorrectly?

What are your names?
And what schools did you go to?
What games did you play when you were children
and what music do you listen to now?
How long have you known each other
and why do you work together
and did you learn the trade
or did you just pick it up for yourselves?

Do you want a real job and can't get one?
Is burgling really as easy as we all imagine?

(11 December 2000)

(This is the 2nd in a series of 3, following on after 'That Friday (29 October 2009) '.
The 3rd in the series is 'Back to Normality? ')

Diana van den Berg

My Parting Gift

Any readers, be prepared for a soppy love poem...

You low-level, scheming, sub-human three-timing scum of the earth,
you should be removed from society,
yet you wander free,
an unstable toddler with a gun and shooting skills
and a self-confessed principle of only shooting to kill,
you cowardly psychopathic, ticking time bomb.

You make the same crazy, sweeping statements and repeat the same stupid stories
and the same ridiculous theories formulated to suit yourself,
to the same list of people,
ad ad ad infinitum,
with the same words, commas and paragraphs,
exclamations and sound effects at the same boring places.

Your only interest is you,
but you are not interesting.
When I persuaded you to leave your gun behind
you agreed, but told me not to expect you to protect me if anyone should attack me.
You cringe at everything.
You are a cowardly blob who would never consider saving a diving buddy -
"Why should you risk your life for someone you have only just met? ' you say
'And so what! " you say, "if over 13 000 Turks die in a single earthquake.
They would have died at some stage anyway, " you say.
You are a wimpish, fifty-four year old basket-case who wouldn't know a single scruple
if it wore a label with large clear print around its neck
and introduced itself to you.

You have no emotions and inspire none.
As everybody else feels about you,
I don't love you, like you, respect you, trust you, notice you, remember you.
You are so easy and quick to forget,
like the silly, boring string of photocopied enlargements of silly, boring aeroplanes
on your wall at the top of your stairs.
I should know. I've forgotten you often enough
and fast enough.

You are a white-haired old-man-baby,
a megalomaniac who surrounds himself with self-images
and has learnt nothing more than Mommy taught him
and all she taught you is that her darling son is always right;
the world is harsh and cruel to you and always wrong,
and isn't it fun to walk all over people shamelessly
and use them as and when you need to,
and then tell horror stories about them to everyone you know,
and doesn't it give you a rush to lie and scheme and be evasive
and when nobody bothers to challenge your lies,
isn't it fun to be so stupid
as to think they believe you
and that you have got away with it,

and when anyone does take the trouble to confront you about one of your lies,
you attack with indignation and more lies and badly feigned assurances of honesty
or astonishing toddler tantrums.

But ha! ha! ha!
Wasn't it fun for me when you fell into your own trap.
Fun and funny,
and the tornado devastation
that tried to crush me
when I realised that you, my worst enemy, could go so low,
brought cathartic closure
to a farce of a relationship
with a raving lunatic.

You schizophrenic robot
What a pity that none of your personalities have any personality
and what a pity that I could only tell you that
most of the time with you I was angry or miserable.
What a pity that I couldn't
bring myself
to tell you also
that
all the time
I was
bored.

(September 1999)

Well, at least I have a sense of humour, don't I! I couldn't resist the comment before
the poem!

Diana van den Berg

My Study At Night

The day's tattered, shattered nerves
bathe their wounds in the stillness.
This haven - book-impregnated -
Stimulates my mind,
Soothes my spirit
And I again become my friend.

The cheap prints above me cannot mask
The serenity of the Dutch and Flemish masterpieces.
Vague shapes on another wall
Sail into seas of blue-grey mystery.
Brown and ochre soften white
In the autumn of the day.

My clock, wood-carved and old,
Slowly ticks away each pregnant minute.
At quarter hours, I hold my breath
And listen to the mellow notes
Soft-echoed soon by other clocks in other rooms.
Age and time and grace
Are mingled into one,
In this, my sanctuary à moi.

My massive, hand-built, yellow-wooded desk
Bears marks of character
And stains of use
Dealt by hands unknown to me.

My music is
Now symphony of passionate wind and sighing trees,
Now tenor-voiced crickets penetrating
The depth of night in poignant song,
Now haunting oboes creaking odes to Rain,
Now Rain herself, whispering at my window-pane
Or thundering on the roof and gurgling in the gutters.

My friends are all around,
Bound
In leather, cloth and paperback,
Free
To speak
And speak again.

Brown canine eyes look into mine
And we delight in our mutual understanding.

Psychiatrists say there is no communication
And acquaintances ask why I work so late.

(±1976)

Diana van den Berg

Night Sound

Out there
in the tranquillity of my night forest
there is a squeak
of a small animal
or bird
or frog.

I hear it above the intermittent swish
of tyres on the distant highway
and the gentle zing
of crickets below my window
and the deep contented breathing
of the dogs at my feet.

And I need to share the squeak
of the small animal
or bird
or frog
with you.

(14 September 1986)

Diana van den Berg

On A Hill Not Far Away

Here where
Boers and Brits incarcerated Brits and Boers and Blacks
and,
amongst others, Number Four
attacked the body, mind, soul and spirit,
but mostly did not win,
Desperation
has given breach-birth
to a shimmering infant, Hope;
and a glass band
celebrates
transparency
and eleven official welcomes
emblazon an invitation
in rainbow colours
to enter into

Our

Constitutional Courts
where every brick and style
has its story...

May Justice
forever prevail
in these hallowed halls of history.

(22 February 2009)

Diana van den Berg

Playing the game

" He will be replaced by the new coach as from tomorrow,
and there will be scattered thunderstorms all over the country,
and that is the end of the news"
- with a smile and media mannerisms for the image.

A job and a heart dropped on the same day
because his team was second-best.

What is happening to
"playing the game"?

My children knew - they still do
and so do my cat and my dog.

Playing the game is about
a ball and toy bats
and laughter and running and falling
and clothes in the wash-basket
nobly dirtied by heart, soul, energy
and feeling good about togetherness.

It's about family and friends making memories
in the sun
in the wind
in the rain
and not remembering who won.

It's what lions teach their cubs,
a key to life.

It's about writing with a broken ballpoint
so as not to waste the ink.

It's about losing with dignity.
It's about winning with humility.
It's about understanding
that a game,
amongst many other things,
is, above all else,
fun.

It is not about playing the game.

(15 October 2004)

Diana van den Berg

Re-awakening

My Africa breathes blood.
Let her bathe her wounds
in the sweet waters of understanding,
let ubuntu warm her heart,
let her sing in unison with the voices of her rainbow nation,
let her savour forgiveness on her multi-coloured tongue,
let her fly with the masekhane eagle
into the hazy blue of the new South Africa
and let her breathe golden acacia blossoms of all time.

(13 November 2000)

Diana van den Berg

Reconciliation Day

A long, long walk,
Madiba.
More than A Long Walk
To Freedom.

Some of us
don't know,
didn't know,
can't know,
want to know,
... are afraid to know...

We are a miracle country,
a real country,

yes,
a country with scars
and tragedies
and real blood
and stabbings
and burns
and gun wounds
and murders
and past tortures
(and some still hate
and some still murder)

but we are also
a country with
quivering,
shimmering,
breathing,
beautiful
hope and heart,

... but...
the most precious thing
we have

as fleeting
as butterfly breath
and as substantial
as a mature whale

is the forgiveness
that many
so many
have heart-given
to their perpetrators
of such evil atrocities.

I stand in awe

I bow my head in reverent silence
I cannot own that ability for myself
for I don't think that I could do it
if I had had to walk your path

but I own it by association
for I am proud to be a compatriot
I am proud to say,
"I am a South African."

(16 December 2005)

Diana van den Berg

Relish the 31 557 600 seconds of 1999

Awake with the year like a child on a birthday.
Feel new life sprout through the pavement cracks.
Grasp with both hands, every quivering moment,
and ignite them all
with Life in the round.

Reach past the laughter and smiles of the homeless;
endure their raw anguish
and savour each unconstrained joy.

Set free your emotions and tease them alive.
Toss them, turn them, wave them, wear them, stretch them, shake them, shock them,
teach them how to run, fly and dive.

Crack the encasement that traps all your senses;
sing patterns made by light and shade;
colour your canvas with whispering breezes;
touch the sweet fragrance of milky-white night flowers;
taste honey's secret -
and walk barefoot
on sharp gravel stones.

(December 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Since My Death

I see me there,
in the world below,
sometimes (I think) ,
moving wooden puppet parts,
making words,
dead smiles,
a salary (for what?) ,
drab,
drear,
silent,
ghostly,
only waiting only
to ride you
in a gallop across celestial pastures.

(9 May 2002)

Diana van den Berg

Sky Talk

Frazzled by
watching out
for afterwork drivers
who feel the law does not apply
to them, I catch
a corner
of your cloud messages
emblazoned
on my rearview mirror...

and

... your instant magic
drops my shoulders
and eases my face
into a Flicka smile
and suddenly
I have all the time in the world
to get home
and I welcome red robots
so I can take my eyes
off the road
to read every word of your love
splashed across the Heavens
and wrapping me
in a cosy cocoon -
and I feel the joys of the day
blending into our love
and I am in your stable again
sitting on the side of your manger
talking with you as we always did,
about this and that,
like what "succulent" grass means,
and how the rotation of the Earth on its axis
causes day and night,
and the revolution of the Earth around the sun
causes the seasons, of which Winter
made you need your blanket
(it is still on my bed next to me
bunched into a blue circle
symbolising our never-ending bond)
or walking with you
while Honeycat accompanies us,
or riding you
in the ecstasy
of our oneness...

... and in my car
I whisper
my thanks
to you
and discuss my delight

at every word of each cloud message,
hardly moving my lips
(so that the drivers
wondering who I am smiling at,
don't see me talking too!)
and there
in front of me,
and on either side,
and the bits that I can see above,
echo the messages
in my rearview mirror,

some gold-edged magnificent,

some rounded and rose-warm
embracing my heart,

some wispy threads galloping
across the wide African sky
in delighted abandon,

(and, oh, my darling horse,
that quiver-breath-reminds me of you
when you led your friends around the field
like a noble mustang celebrating
power and speed and freedom -
when I went down to the stables
from the office at lunch time - remember?
and a tear hides behind my smile
and my conversation with you
in Gretta, my Jetta,
whom you, of course, don't know
except from Heaven
- my heart broke when I had to say goodbye
to Samantha, my Datsun Pulsar,
especially because she was the car you knew) .

Remember too, how, after Gilbert went to Heaven,
(three months and fifteen days before you,
all those eight years ago
that seem like yesterday)
we used to cry our hearts raw,
while I walked you, often with your Honeycat in tow,
and how we would take solace
in the exquisite cloud messages Gilbert sent us
especially in the late afternoon sky?

Perhaps that is what gave you the idea
to send me your messages in the clouds
and the sun and the moon
and the whispers of the wind
and the joyous bird calls

of my garden forest.
Perhaps it was because you knew
how much Gilbert's sky talk meant to us.
Perhaps it was because you knew
I would understand your messages
because you knew I understood Gilbert's.
Perhaps it was to honour Gilbert
who is with you in Heaven now.
Perhaps Gilbert helped you
with your first messages.
Perhaps, and I believe this is so,
he is sending messages to me along with yours.
I am sure God has a hand in helping you both.
Please thank Him for me, and thank Gilbert too.

Do you remember how I used to tell you
how the hugs I gave
your beautiful warm neck
and the kisses I gave you muzzle
and face
and neck
and mane
and the nuzzlings you gave me
would stay with me
- I could feel them physically -
the whole long drive home
every day
warming my heart
and making smile
and rejoice in our communication?
Well, that is how your sky messages
make me feel,
very especially the ones of late.

You know how much I need
our daily conversations
and you never fail me
not even from Heaven,
as you never failed me,
not ever, not once,
in the 20½ years we were together.

How ever, ever, ever can I thank you,
my darling, darling horse?

10 June 2009

Diana van den Berg

Solitude

Can it be
that to revel in moods
of sun and wind and rain,
To caress the velvet warmth
of sunshine
on my horse's winter coat,
To share opinions
with him
on matters
of workaday importance,
To walk in ecstasy
through leafy forests
bustling with little lives
and little sounds,
To wander through
poetry books
and piano music
in the bowels of the night,
I have to be alone?

It seems
I must choose
between solitude
and
polystyrene conversations
about false nails
and BMW's,
while stringing my lips
into plastic smiles
that hurt my head.

Oh Solitude
cool, silent, soothing Solitude,
forgive me
for having doubted you so.

(1991)

Diana van den Berg

Solution to Lovelessness

If you think you don't receive love,
remember first that there are many types of love,
and very few people
truly
don't receive love
ever
and you are probably blindly
trampling on little bits
offered to you
with an open heart,
but that you think are insignificant
or not from the right person.
Be careful that the giver doesn't
subsequently decide that
you
are insignificant
and be careful
of not being
grateful
and truly happy
with little bits of love,
for how can you be entrusted
with something so precious
as big love
if you spurn
the little bits?

If you truly don't receive love (and even if you do) ,
don't bemoan your fate
for you will just feel worse.
Instead, dispense love
to all around you
and you will
love yourself
for it
(so that's one person who loves you now!)
and the warm fuzzy feeling
you spread,
will stretch
its arms
around to include
you
too.

(14 February 2009)

Diana van den Berg

Still

She read his name in the clouds
and felt his voice caressing her skin
and heard his eyes whisper deep inside her soul
and the missing stopped her clocks.

Diana van den Berg

Suddenly One Sunday

SUDDENLY ONE SUNDAY

Sleek, silver-grey spirits curving
with an easy grace
in patterned arcs
bucking through the billowing sapphire-blue,
sporting with cloud-white horses of the sea,
riding the white-fringed waves in immeasurable delight,
- the stuff of surfers' dreams -
gliding underwater
to surface far ahead
and gambol freely once again.

We gazed and gazed,
and tasted your elation upon our tongues,
as tens upon tens upon tens of you
slid into view,
leaping and looping past us
in dolphin delight,
blood-brothers of Shelley's skylark,
putting time and work and pettiness
into perspective,
and revelling in your rapturous games.

Is it silly to have felt your call to us,
mere earthbound admirers,
standing hand in hand,
transfixed,
in wonder,
on the shore,
our speech hopelessly inadequate,
as yet another band of playmates
surged into sight?

How envy floated away,
and our spirits soared and mingled with yours,
as you swept us into your frolic,
now cleaving the cool, clear, undulating surface of the sea,
now plummeting its depths.

Your zest for life and fun,
like Wordsworth's daffodils,
taught
in moments
what cannot be learnt
from books
or people
in a lifetime,
and we thank you.

In years to come,
the memory of your morning exultation,

untinged with traces of human melancholy,
will warm and elate the hearts
of two who were privileged
to have engraved upon their souls
a glimpse of the beauty and spontaneity
of your presence
early one Sunday morning
in summer.

January 1993

Diana van den Berg

Sunday Comfort

Like the slow-note embrace of evensong,
heavy-scented on the darkening air;
like the sky diffused with sun-paintings,
blessing my muddied fingers
and my horse's
gardened grave;
like the sunrise strokes
on trunk edges
in honour of the dawn chorus;
so is this, my quivering Sunday morning,
in this hallowed place of adoration,
a coat of many stained-glass colours,
bonding song with all that is sunbeam-pure.

(13 August 2006)

Diana van den Berg

Takahira Yashima Hiroyuka Tomita

Takahira Yashima Hiroyuka Tomita
Takahira Yashima Hiroyuka Tomita
I want to learn Japanese
not because of your excellent performance
in winning the gold medal in the high bar
at the Olympics
in the magical city of Athens,
but because of the music
of your names and those of your three team members.
I wish I could remember them all
for I would say them - all five -
one after the other
over and over
and again and again and again
like a waterfall
like a bed of colourful flowers
like a Japanese painting ...
but I can't remember them ...
and so I will have to spend years
learning Japanese,
and make music with
"The vase is on the table, "
but for now
I will make do with
Takahira-Yashima-Hiroyuka-Tomita-Takahira-Yashima-Hiroyuka-Tomita-Takahira-Yashi
ma-Hiroyuka-Tomita

(17 August 2004)

Diana van den Berg

That Friday (29 October 2000)

I didn't go to work that Friday.
I was tied up.

And gagged
and my fingers were turning blue
and my ankles and wrists and mouth hurt
because the bonds were too tight.
They tightened them when I asked them
to loosen them.
And my throat was dry,
so dry
so very, very dry
- sore too from their hands
around my mouth and throat
when they were smothering my screams.
And my head hurt from when they inadvertently banged it against the wall.

One of the three was actually quite nice.
He said, "Cool" when I asked them
not to break anything,
when one,
probably he,
dropped what may have been a drawer.
He didn't drop anything after that,
although minutes later
he had the knife at my throat
saying he was getting tired of me.

They said they would untie me before they left
and they didn't.
But they didn't hurt me any more than they needed to.
I have never trained as a burglar
but presumably
they are taught to frighten their victims
in order to get on with their job properly.
They did that very well - the frightening part, I mean.
I duly
was frightened,
very frightened,
terrified, quite frankly.

The other part of their job they couldn't do very well.
As I kept telling them
there weren't any possessions of value to do it to.
Previous burglars and my financial situation had seen to that.

People ask me what I thought about.
I remember wishing that they would hurry up
and finish
and go.
I remember thinking that time was dragging.
I remember thinking how dry my throat was.

I remembered wondering what the time was
and how long they had been there
and when they were going.
Couldn't they see there was nothing to take?
They took my son's old watch - I kept it in my handbag because the strap was broken.
He lent it to me because I didn't have a watch.
I remember trying to recall my car registration number
and I did.
I remember replaying several possible scenarios in my head.
I remember wishing that they would go.
I remember thinking how very, very dry my throat was.

When they asked me where my son's gun was,
I told them the truth - that we both hate guns and don't have any
and that my son doesn't live here any more, anyway.
When they asked me which computer worked, I told them the truth,
but said they would benefit more from being taught by me how to use it
than from stealing it.
They answered yet again, "SHUT UP"
and stuck more tape
around my mouth and head,
and yet more tightly every time I spoke,
until what I said was inaudible anyway.

My October visitors eventually departed
with R16.67 each
and a third each of
a torch,
an old cheap watch,
a ripped off printer plug,
the padlock on my front door burglar guard gate - without the key
and two handfuls of worthless old coins
that my son had collected and treasured from childhood
and was keeping for his children
and hadn't yet taken to his home.

They didn't announce their departure formally.
How rude that was.
When I thought they had gone
I counted to 1000
(faster than I ever have)
and struggled to my feet.
You would be surprised
how difficult that is
in a confined corner at the end of a passage
with furniture and what appears to be all your household possessions
spilled around you.
I knocked over a broken kettle
they hadn't taken
and hoped they really had gone and didn't hear the crash.
I jumped down the passage.
I remember puffing

and struggling
to get my feet off the ground with each jump
and wondering if I would make it.
Old people can't jump. That is why they can't run.
I discovered that years ago
(though I can, and I don't know why) .

I remember trying to think clearly.
I jumped first to the back door then the front
and locked them both with difficulty
as only my fingertips stuck out of my bonds.
Then it was puff puff puff - no time to rest - back down the passage
where I set off the alarm
and hid in the passage far from the window.
When the alarm stopped I set it off again.
Then I wondered how my rescuers would know I was there.
So I opened the curtains that my visitors had closed.
I opened them just enough to jump into view of my rescuers.

When the first reached the window,
his name was the same as my son's
- probably still is, why would he change it just because he has passed my window? -
I jumped into view
and then towards the front door
which again with difficulty I opened.
For the first time, I pulled down part of my gag
and said, "ND 252-655, gold Datsun Pulsar".
He in turn, repeated my greeting, but not to me.
He said it into his radio,
and added my name,
as though I didn't know it.

Then another rescuer
said my car was in my garage.
I probably didn't look any different externally when he said that.
I wonder if they thought I looked different internally.

Cars and a motor bike,
security officers,
policemen and a policewoman
and the public
arrived
and did their bit and more
and eventually left.

And so began that Friday.
My October visitors gained little.
I gained a million ridiculous fears that I am teaching to develop into caution,
but the learning curve is slow,
but fortunately I will never be a palm tree, a building nor a racist.

(5 December 2000 - This is the first in a series of 3 poems. The other 2, in order, are

'My October Visitors' and 'Back to Normality'.)

Diana van den Berg

The Flight of the Blue Balloon

On the way to the supermarket
whom should she meet,
but a blue balloon floating by.
Who hasn't?
But it would have been absurd for it
to be attached to a grey-haired old woman
even for a moment.
So she watched it
and the moment and the balloon were lost.
The child, no doubt, soon forgot.
To her regret, she could not.

(September 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Theatre

Rubber screams
and then the bang
and metal turning on itself,
.....and then the sirens.

Amidst the debris,
bodies strewn like amputated butterfly wings,
move or moan or merely breathe,
and then there are the others.
Blood flows unchecked on dark blue tar.

Like an orchestrated wave,
eager androids,
who daily cry, 'Peace from Violence'
rush from warm retreats
into the road and the cold night rain,
crowding the wings, the steps, the stage,
to stand compacted in a circle
for the best impact of acoustics,
lighting
and atmosphere,
gawking at the bloody players,
digging a new vantage point
when one or other puerile puppet dares to obscure the view.
Feasting vultures fight,
but
for their rightful portion
and clear their living space of disease
as they were intended,
but these clones from some third-rate horror movie,
count dead bodies gleefully,
and argue about which live body moaned and when,
and if the thought occurred to them
would be grateful to the playwright for the entertainment,
which ... for a while ... fills the spaces around the sparse grey coils
in their hollow civilised heads,
taking mental notes for those who don't
have tickets...

... but then the blood stops flowing
and the actors leave the stage
in ambulances which scream their cargo's plight,
and, like painkillers,
the adrenalin wanes,
and, with one last glance at remaining props
to get the details right,
the spectators turn themselves
and their thoughts
away
in bunches
to substitute tomorrow's talking point
for warmth, coffee, biscuits and disaster on the small screen for a while.

(1998)

Diana van den Berg

To JB - The Story of a Relationship

This is a suite of 6 short poems to the same person as 'My Parting Gift', but was written about 1988!

TO JB - THE STORY OF A RELATIONSHIP

OFFER

If I could ease the muscles
of your heart,
If you would need me
in the nucleus of your soul,
If you would trust me
with your innermost self,
I would not hurt you
for all the world.

I would tread softly
on the pathway of your thoughts,
cushion your feelings
with reverence,
teach you not to fear
what lies beyond the sunset,
and leave you room to be yourself.

Each day would bring
the joy
of meeting
no more of you
than
you wished
to present.

But,
as these ifs can never be,
and all the woulds already are,
I offer you,
as always,
and with my blessing,
however much of me - or little - you ask,
and the unconditional freedom
you desire.

WELCOME

I could let you into the darkest silence of my night,
where solitude is peace
and not lose my tranquillity.

TRUST AND PROPHECY

The reason I am free
to give you my all,

unconditionally,
is that your gentle soul will
not
do me
any harm.

I cannot be your doormat
because you will not
wipe your feet on me.

Your rejection,
when it comes,
will be a gift
from you to me,
because you will put
what heart and soul you have,
into doing it
with the least hurt you can.

YOUR FREEDOM

The very integrity of my love for you
is what prevents it from being a threat.

PROJECTION

This evening has given me
a hazy vision into distant years
where you meet me
in a western sunrise.

MY DISCOVERY AND FREEDOM

How strangely warm
is the morning sun
on the truth
that you will
never change.

How painless
is acceptance
in the misty afternoon
of my rainwet, wooded
haven,
which you have never seen
and would not understand.

How absent
is the unreciprocated love
I once felt for you.
Only an intangible sadness
lightly bruises my evening

when I remember
you have lost
the chance to discover
a world
beyond your ken.

Diana van den Berg

Tonal Tomato Number Lost in Me Splashed Merger Oldus 55

Twinkle, tinkle,
jingle, ring,
whoooosh,
splutter,
splash,
squawk,
trouble, rubble, squabble, wobble, literary, wittery, squittery,
triller, filler, spiller, willer, tiller, tumble, rumble,
ming, mang, mong,
uppity, duppity, serendy, dippity,
whether you will
or
whether you won't,
cool flow,
low, slow,
- hush,
no blow,
jiggle,
trickle,
tickle,
pebbled rivulet,
mellifluous peace,
suppose,
how many,
dappled green,
so old,
filtered gold,
tiny twitters,
darting flitters,
fluttering,
flying,
soaring,
gliding,
floating,
sleeping,
slipping,
lost,
soft cloud,
sun-swathed,
blue dream.

(5 December 2000)

Diana van den Berg

Tryst

A suite of 4 poems

GLANCE

It was a momentary pact
of who knows what
for who knows how long
but so exhilarating
and bewitching
that a new path was born.

CONVERSATION

The leaf swayed in the wind
and the light danced on it
and flew to another
in celebration of
Life.

MOMENT

The pan flute set free celestial trills
and held the last note forever
and the world stopped turning
to listen
to the attainment
of Perfection.

AFTERMATH

It was a moonstruck silence
which held
all things
on tiptoe at the edge of Time.

(December 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Turning on a Tap

In the dimly lit stableyard,
wind shattered the column of water
trying to flow from the tap.
Moon caught the broken column and its scattered droplets
in a dazzling display.
Wind and moon and water
danced for me
and a stablecat
one moment
on a blustery winter night.

(August 1998)

Diana van den Berg

Washed Up

This is a suite of 7 short poems to R van der R

LOST

Silence slips into moon shadows
and thought fish swim in shapeless circles
through forest coral
and the last firefly message is swallowed by black death
and emptiness pervades the darkness.

FORLORN

The storm lily lies broken and forgotten
and the bootprints lead away, away
and the wind calls
and the rain haze caresses my eyelids
and I lift my face
into the underside of the green river stone.

GONE

I look for you in my dark night trees,
I listen for your sleepy breathing next to me in the crickets' song,
I reach for your warm arm embrace on your pillow in the frozen hours,
I hear your voice softly in my ear,
melodious and low
on the sunlit hill of long ago
or was it yesterday?
I touch your thoughts flowing through mine,
and the knife turns,
and I gasp and sit up,
but my legs won't walk.

TALK

... the river has stopped flowing ...
... there are bootprints on my mind ...
... and the blue mists on the hills have spread....
... and the castle walls block out the sun ...
and the talk has died.

REQUIEM

I stand at my bedroom window
and gaze
into the secret life
of my night forest.
And my soul seeps deep
into the tree shapes dark,
and,
sadly and low,

I hear it
singing.

REGRET

I wanted to give you the promise of newborn light
pouring in delicate streams into our early morning forest.

I wanted to give you the kiss of sparkling day branches
filled with the celebration of bird song from the heart.

I wanted to give you the golden glow
of late afternoon leaves bathed in glory.

But most of all I wanted to give you the peace
of moonlit trees standing guard over your sleeping form.

THE UNKNOWN

Glimpses of hidden mysteries,
golden glow promised land,
lashing thunderstorms,
rush for a cave.
If you take my hand
we can face the wonder and the onslaught
together.

(10 - 20 February 2001)

Diana van den Berg

Weeding

First it is honing in on the target.

Closer and closer.

Pounce!

Then it is easing it out,
slowly and with precision.

Out damnéd weed,
for all the root must out.

And then it is the clean, sweet smell of dew-drenched mother earth,
and the greenness in the nostrils,
and the burnt sienna grains of life smeared on the hands,
and the shake to scatter the sod wrenched up
and the growth by one on the pile of spoils.

And the satisfaction of a task accomplished
and the turning back to admire the weedless patch...

and the turning back...

(12 December 2000)

Diana van den Berg

Why the Elation?

Why is it, that with all my fears, failings and inadequacies,
I am not sucked down into the cold, wet vortex of despair?
Why, with all my guilt, can I sit at my desk
and play with my cat at two o'clock in the morning,
exhilarated by the gentle sounds of night,
breathing poetry of others
and ablaze with joy at my near solitude?

Why, even in the revealing light of day,
do I love my barren life so ardently?

What is it that I share continually
with you
for so long
without you?
And how did the searing pain become only a dull bruise
which I prod to keep alive and cherish with unabated joy?

Why can I not envy the shallow rich, no matter how hard I try?
Why is it that my life is so rich and blessed and full?
What is it that I have,
that no-one else seems to share,
or want to?
And why
is nobody
bathed
in wonder
at what it is
to be me?

(August 1998)

Diana van den Berg

You Would Have Been Cold These Nights

If you had lived,
you would have been cold
at nights
this last week
without your blanket
which had become
a danger to you
and so you had to do without it
your last two nights
which God made warm
for you.

(6 May 2002)

Diana van den Berg