



Verwey, Len. "Water & Other Poems."
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Featured Poet: Len Verwey

Transnational Literature is delighted to present new work from Len Verwey, a poet who was born in Mozambique and grew up in South Africa. Verwey's most recent collection, *In a Language That You Know*, is a quiet exploration of life in a country tinged with violence, social inequality and dark history. The poetry, however, is never overtly political or judgemental. Verwey's touch is much lighter, mostly drawing on personal experience to highlight the problems of a male culture that applauds machismo and sexual conquest.

"who can say where the knife's edge is?
Aren't we like drunks in a courtyard
who reel, recover,
reel again, insisting all the while on sobriety?" ("Our Leader Speaks")

Like the early work of American poet, Mark Strand, Verwey's poetry is characterised by precise language and an intense lyricism that speaks directly to the heart of the reader. The uneasy preoccupation with self that haunts many of his poems is also reminiscent of Strand: "you've/ lost/ yourself in yourself again" ("Rehearsal") or, in the collection's title poem.

"Given half a chance I'd talk to you more
in the witless language of muck
and fervor, confusion and forgetting,

made less by what I lost
than what I became
in order to continue. It gets worse."

But despite the dark uncertainty, there's also a sense of precarious hope. As Verwey says in "An Unchained Dog for Each of You", "tonight the windows/ could destroy the bricks, it must happen/ sometimes otherwise everything goes on."

Alison Flett, Poetry Editor

PROCESS - Len Verwey

I keep a notebook but, beyond that, where initial lines or phrases or words come from, and why some seem promising and others not, is a mystery I don't probe too much.

It's important to show up every day, I think, in case you have visitors at the door. If there aren't I do the work that pays the rent, or go cycling.

Some poems have taken years, others an hour, with hardly a word added or removed subsequently. The ones that take shorter are not better or worse than the ones that take longer, but they have a different feel.

At some point I throw a poem in the drawer, figuratively anyway; in reality it's probably a folder on the computer. It's not necessarily finished, but I've gone blind and deaf to it. I can no longer see what it does. I think there's skill in knowing when to stop for a while.

I try, when I return with semi-fresh eyes, to read as though someone who mildly detested me was reading. If I can get their grudging admiration it'll be alright, I hope.

South Africa, with its rich and contradictory histories, its incomplete transformation, its strange magic, has no doubt produced me in many ways I remain unaware of, and some I'm very aware of. It remains the basic context for what I write and to which I write.

In most of my poetry, there seems to be a provisional, questioning stance, a voice and a language that reflects uncertainty rather than resolution, a narrator on the margin of life and himself.

For me, if there is an ethics to writing, it lies in not claiming too much more than you know. A bit more is probably ok.

Water

I was afraid of the deep side of the swimming pool
in the caravan park just this side of Mozambique.

My father was gone, missing, living without a trace
in Lorenzo Marques as the war concluded there,

and I was here in a dusted dry caravan park

with my mother and my little brother.

The pool had been the promise that lured
me away from him, the Old Spice man in the suit with the pipe.

You can swim every day, you'd love that, my mother said,
wouldn't you? But because it turned out to be deeper

than she'd thought, and because I was afraid anyway,
I was only allowed to hunker in the shallow end,

water to waist level, hapless toad boy,
while she sat on a picnic blanket nursing my brother.

I didn't dare go past the middle line, though I pretended
I was accommodating her whims and fears.

I was terrified of the deep end and I was terrified
of other children arriving, seeing me in my cowardly state,

the mark of something on me, making fun of me,
maybe in a language I knew,

maybe in one I wouldn't understand, for though
I was South African I had never really lived here,

not until now, but luckily it wasn't the season
for caravan parks, it wasn't holidays, it was almost empty,

very quiet, no other children, we were there
not because we were on holiday

but because my dad was across the border
where we couldn't be and this was the closest we could get to him,

and my mother walked to the pay phone with us
in the morning and evening

and spoke to her mother and her sister, but not to my dad,
who was in a city where the phones were dead

and the army was in the street, he was working in the embassy,
he was skeleton staff, my mother said, but I didn't know

what that meant, sometimes she cried, and I wondered
would he bring presents when he arrived back.

It didn't sound like there'd be presents,
if there weren't even phones.

Wave

Our rocky unprotectable island.

The wave from the earthquake
could be at the shore
then in the city before you know it, they said.

Live elsewhere if you can, live wary,
peer over your shoulder
if you choose to stay.

In our dazed perfect unflooded world
things went on as they may.
We were unwary. We did not notice

the people collecting on the roofs,
waving at the sky, later
the garden furniture floating by.

Even the sirens sounded playful to me,
and when the helicopters
couldn't land I chuckled at their strange choreography.

The wave kept going after it hit the shore,
that was all, I thought, and now
the elders cannot care for anything anymore.

In a way it was what we'd been waiting for.
Perhaps if we'd grown thin and strong
like Jesus when he was young, that violent

human-hearted love for everything,
then perhaps we could've seen ourselves
interfering, strong-shouldered, strong-handed,

getting all the undone jobs done,
unmaking in some ways what the waves had done.

But when she asked how I planned

to save everything and us, and when I asked how
she planned to save everything and us,
we thought that was pretty fun, we pulled

the sodden couch to the window, we said hush, hush.

Loving the dying

We tuck them in, place a dry kiss
on a dry brow, rearrange the flowers
and open and close the curtains
(the light is never right for the dying).

At the end of each long shift
we turn up our collars, slink through
the white passages
and quickly past reception and the security guard.

But the dying are cunning.
They peer through our windows,
leave finger smudges on the post box,
hang clownishly from our rafters.

They sigh from a room next door
we knew to be unoccupied.

Nobody will hold them in their place.

In our back gardens, tired, we ask:
Are there no other jobs, for people like us?
Will we have no other love
but this begrudging, shiftless thing?

The dying chuckle at that,
cosy for the night in the tree houses
we built for our children summers ago.
There are no other jobs and they know it.
There are no safe separated lives.

Loving the dying
is what we have done and what we will do.

On our better days, mornings

almost like the sound of a clarinet,
evenings almost like the sound of a ship's bell
we know it too.

Len Verwey

Len Verwey is a South African poet, living in Cape Town. He was born in Mozambique in 1973. His chapbook, *Otherwise Everything Goes On*, was published in 2014 in the United States. In 2017, a full-length collection, *In a language that you know*, was published by the University of Nebraska Press.