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Me and Dambudzo

A Personal Essay

Flora Veit-Wild

I have often been asked why I did not write a proper Dambudzo Marechera biography. My answer was that I did not want to collapse his multi-faceted personality into one authoritative narrative but rather let the diverse voices speak for themselves. But this is not the whole truth. I could not write his life story because my own life was so intricately entangled with his. While I have generally come to be known as 'The Marechera Authority', there have always been two narrative strands behind this persona — the public and the private. While the public one has stood out as strong and clear, my private life has been interlaced with love and passion, loss and pain, with illness and the threat of death. Yet, what I have gained is so much more than what I have endured that I am filled with gratitude and, I might add, with laughter. My personal involvement with Dambudzo Marechera has affected my professional life in a way I would never have expected. The many ironic twists, the tricks that Dambudzo played on me even posthumously, make *our* story an immensely rich and funny one, one that I now, more than twenty-five years after I came to know him, want to tell.

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I first met Dambudzo Marechera in Charles Mungoshi's office. They were drinking vodka. Mungoshi was then an editor with Zimbabwe Publishing House (ZPH), one of the new publishing houses established after Independence in 1980. I had started a correspondence course for journalistic writing before coming out to Zimbabwe and was gathering information for articles about the upcoming Zimbabwean literary scene. I had heard about the legendary writer who slept in doorways and on park benches. Lately, it was reported, he had slept on the ping-pong table of a German commune after they had thrown him out of their house.

I did not expect him there, on this bright October morning in 1983. While Harare's Avenues were sparkling blue with jacaranda blossom on the east–west axis and blazing red where the flamboyants lined the numbered streets going north to south, I stepped into a rather drab office; a desk with a telephone and a pile of manuscripts in the in-tray, some wooden chairs and, in a corner, a bulging plastic bag and a portable typewriter — Dambudzo's belongings, as I would learn later. He was using ZPH to freshen himself up after a night out on the streets.

'Hey, have a seat,' he said, pulling a chair for me at Mungoshi's desk. His open face was looking at me expectantly, and Charles – not a natural speaker – gladly left his guest to his eloquent colleague. So that is *him*, I remember thinking, so accessible, charming and boyish, clad in denims and a faded light blue T-shirt — incredibly young.

He was thirty-one years old, I was thirty-six. I was wearing sandals, a pink blouse and wide, softly flowing trousers with a striking flower pattern. Looking me up and down, he said: 'Oh, my lawd, your garments cannot be from here. You would rather expect them in a Bloomsbury setting than in prissy old Salisbury.' His stilted Oxford accent and the exaggerated emphasis on some of his half-mocking, half-serious words made me smile. I was curious to know him better.

The Oasis Hotel and the UZ swimming pool

We arrange to meet again soon at the Oasis Hotel garden, a popular place for expats and locals. When I enter the poolside bar, I find him surrounded by people yelling: 'Hey, Dambudzo, what are you writing about?' He has some copies of *The House of Hunger* under his arm, which he is trying to sell — a few dollars for the next beer. 'Shit man,' he says, when we sit down, 'all they know about my writing is that it contains hot sex. But, between you and me, I learn all that from books.' Which is true, as I will find out later. His own sexual behaviour was not at all outlandish.

We talk. I tell him about my life, my political activism in the 1970s, how we collected 100,000 Deutschmarks for ZANU PF to buy four Land Rovers; the money then confiscated by the West German government because Mugabe was classified as a 'terrorist'. And I find myself in a country ruled by this erstwhile terrorist, now lauded as the 'pearl of Africa'. The historical ironies crisscrossing my biography have just begun; so many more will follow. Dambudzo is a good listener and can relate

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Flora Veit-Wild and Dambudzo Marechera in Harare, 1984 © Lourdes Mugica Arruti

to my experiences, as he lived with leftists of all sorts in the squatter communities in London, closely following the developments in Germany. The Baader-Meinhof group gave him ideas for his urban guerrillas in *Black Sunlight*. He tells me how alienated he feels in his home country. All his former fellow students from the University of Rhodesia have become civil servants or university lecturers. Slogans about 'building the new nation' wherever you go. Socialist realism is on the agenda, his own writing denigrated as Western modernist decadence, blah blah ...

I am open to his views. After years of working with Maoist cadre organisations, I am wary of the so-called struggle of the workers and the peasants against capitalist oppression and international imperialism. I am excited to find a black intellectual who does not try to make me feel guilty for the crimes of colonialism but points his finger at his own leaders. In the years to follow, I develop an increasing allergy to the patronising stand of European ex-lefties towards the poor colonised souls. The Albert Schweitzers reborn. Dambudzo Marechera is becoming my mentor. His ruthless critique of all types of attitudinizing is utterly liberating. I feel at ease in his company, I feel no racial bias, no need to justify my presence in his country. His curiosity about my life and ambitions, paired with his wittily flirtatious manner, work like a magic spell.

Our next date fails due to a misunderstanding. When we do meet again, he gives me his nicely typed poem 'In the Gallery'. We arrange further dates. I drive to town from our house in Highlands using our family car, a white left-hand drive VW Passat station wagon, and meet him in one of the bars. We talk. I pay for his Castle Lager. Sometimes it is Chateau Burgundy. I drink G & Ts. We go dancing. He snatches kisses while I talk. During the daytime he 'wanders through Hararean mazes' (see epigram to Marechera, 'Parkbench Journal' in *Mindblast* 119). He writes more poems, tears them up in fits of anger. Some of them survive. I will include them later in *Cemetery of Mind* (see Marechera, 'A Writer's Diary' in *Cemetery of Mind* 101–13) — traces of a burgeoning love for life.

One night he suggests that we drive to the UZ (University of Zimbabwe) campus, a couple of miles north of the city centre. It is his old hideout. After his return from London in 1982 and the aborted filming with Chris Austin,[1] he held readings and lectures there. The students venerated him. They let him sleep on the floor in their dormitory rooms. They called him Buddy. Albert Nyathi, now a well-known *imbongi*, was among them, as was Tendai Biti, later right hand of Morgan Tsvangirai and minister of finance in the 'Unity Government' of 2009.

We sit in the dark by the UZ swimming pool. We tumble about in the grass. It feels playful, joyful, frivolous. Yet back in the car, he starts pressurising me. I want to drive home. He urges me to stay. He pulls my hand into his lap and, angrily, provocatively, he says: 'You see what you are doing to me, you can't leave me like THIS.'

But I do. I give him the picnic blanket from our car, and he sneaks into the lavatories of Manfred Hodson Hall — where he resided as a University of Rhodesia student in 1972/1973 until the 'pots-and-pans' demonstration, during which he was expelled as one of the ringleaders (Veit-Wild, *Dambudzo Marechera* 95–115; Veit-Wild, *Teachers* 205–13). Alfred Knottenbelt, who had famously defied Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965, was his warden. Thirty-year-old Terence Ranger, another prominent figure in the early days of the university, staged an anti-colour-bar protest and was pushed into the pool by an angry white

Rhodesian, the very swimming pool where we almost made love.

On that night in October 1983, I was oblivious to the history of these places. I would learn about it only much later when I followed the writer's tracks from his birth in 1952 to his death in 1987. I would then also discover his play, 'The Stimulus of Scholarship', serialised in the UZ students' magazine *Focus* in 1983–1984 — the very time when the campus *vlei* became *our* first hideout. Did he talk to me about it? I cannot recall.

Did I have any idea what I was getting into? I had always had a longing for the wondrous, the fantastic, the outlandish. Dambudzo appealed to the clownish, melancholic, poetic part of me, which was menacingly dark and colourfully bright at the same time. I had never suppressed it, lived it out in pantomime or in romance, but had always been pragmatic enough to know that, for 'real life', I had to make rational choices. Dambudzo more than anyone before embodied this 'other' side in me, he led me through many closed doors, he fostered my infatuation with the mad side of life, the 'Coin of Moonshine'.[2]

After those nightly tumblings at the pool and in the car, I consult with one of my German friends, an expat wife like me. A group of us meet regularly for gym, gossip and ranting about men. We are all in a state of excitement, stimulated by the beautiful country and the grand spirit of hope, of unlimited possibilities that reign in Zimbabwe in those early 1980s. We are open to the new, ready to go beyond the boundaries of our lives as wives, mothers or teachers. I tell my friend that I am drawn to Dambudzo, but that I know it will be very complicated. Her laconic answer: 'But you like it complicated.'

Her words propel me forward. Like the skydiving I do around the same time, I jump. I go for the free fall. Similar to the sensation when I first jump from a plane, I feel a complete whirling of body and mind. Yet, as daring as it is, I have my safety net: my family, my social and economic infrastructure, my inner groundedness. I have always been a fearless person. But I have been able to afford the occasional jump only because of my protected childhood, my emotional and financial security. I always believed I would eventually land on safe ground.

What I do not know at the time is that my involvement with Dambudzo will be almost fatal; that for a very long time I will walk on shifting ground. Nor do I know that Dambudzo, the troublemaker,[3] will unwittingly make me into his mouthpiece once his voice is gone and thus make me gain recognition I would never have dreamed of.

The Seven Miles Hotel

For the first night we will spend together, we drive out to the Seven Miles Hotel on the road to Masvingo. The manager in suit and tie greets us with a slight bow: 'Good afternoon, Mr Marechera.' We sit under one of the thatched umbrellas. I feel awkward, the only white face among a raucous crowd of drinkers, mostly employees from the city meeting their girlfriends after work. I get strange looks and Dambudzo obscene remarks, in Shona, about his 'white chick'.

Now it is I who is getting impatient, while he dithers. He needs another beer and a third or fourth, before we timidly ask for a room. Even more embarrassing: 'For how long? Half or whole night?' Dambudzo keeps his eyes to the ground, while I stammer, 'Well, maybe rather the whole night,' thinking a night's sleep in a proper bed might do him good. 'All right,' says the manager stiffly, 'That will be forty dollars.' I pay and take the key.

The room is a rondavel with a steep thatched roof. It is sombre inside. It is quiet. Now we are far from the noisy crowd, just me and him. When we lie on the bed, I see a dove rustling up from its nest. It escapes through the opening into the night sky. As I close my eyes, the roof starts spinning in my head. I hear a voice murmuring, 'This is magic, this is pure magic.' The voice is mine.

In the early hours of the morning, I disentangle myself from his arms and tell him I have to be home before my children wake up. He sits up, alarmed. His face, mellow and tender a few hours before, is tight with anger and suspicion. 'So you are leaving me here, stranded. You have set all this up to get me into a trap. Who is behind this plot?' Baffled, I try to calm him. 'You will easily find a lift into town in the morning.' I leave with an anxious knot in my throat. It is a foreshadowing of the extreme shifts in mood that will mark the eighteen months of our relationship.

Boscobel Drive

After a few weeks, Dambudzo moves into our house. It feels too bad to leave him 'stranded' in the streets after we made love in the car (I had never done that before) or at a friend's house. In the sordid city hotel, where we spend one night, all the black women stare at me. In the morning I find a window of my car smashed.

My husband agrees to let him stay for a while. He likes him and recognises his extraordinary literary style, a welcome exception to the rather boring middle-of-the road African writing. Like me and a few other friends, he hopes to stabilise him by getting him off the street.

This is, of course, a vain hope. Dambudzo refuses all attempts to get him therapeutic help, to reduce his drinking or establish a healthier lifestyle. He is afraid he would lose his distinct personality, the source of his art. Yet, for a little while, the shelter, a bed, clean clothes, regular meals and sharing our family life revive his spirits. He sits in the garden typing the Kamikaze poems. He sits in the guest cottage with six-year-old Max and types 'The Magic Cat' and 'Baboons of the Rainbow', with Max drawing the illustrations. He sits in the playroom with three-year-old Franz and paints. We also take him to outings and on picnics, to our artist friends on a farm in Raffingora — which will appear in his poetry.

He stays with us for three to four months, interrupted by times when we have to 'expel' him, as he puts it — friends or

Flora Veit-Wild and Dambudzo Marechera in Harare, 1984
© Lourdes Mugica Arruti

family are visiting, or the frictions grow too much to bear. After Christmas 1983, we take visiting friends to the Vumba Mountains, leaving him behind in the house. When we come back, he has written his poetic sequence 'My Arms Vanished Mountains' and asks us to record him reading it with Ravel's 'Bolero' playing in the background. The recording still exists; you can hear his voice swelling in sonority and bathos – he is helping himself to Chateau Burgundy while reading – and dramatically enhanced by Ravel's crescendo. It is quite hilarious to watch him set himself 'in' scene. Yet his wish to have it recorded turns out to be provident, because a couple of days later he tears the manuscript up in one of his tantrums. Thanks to the recording, I will be able to transcribe the piece after his death, with transcription errors, as critics will remark.

The long poem itself is like a fiery concerto of over-powering imagery, resonating with the impetuous sounds and rhythms of the Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Smetana and Grieg symphonies that he listened to at our house while we were away. Bewildering to me, the listener then and later, how his verses convolute the traumas of his youth ('The Boulder, Father Boulder') with the antagonisms in our relationship. The 'eaglets in Vumba' still swirl through my memory today, binding Stephanie (as he calls me in the poem)[4] to his lonely self in that 'week a pang of desire'. And I hear his drunken voice rolling the 'r' in a way truly comical to German ears when he evokes images of Der Alte Kanal. This ancient waterway near Nuremberg, where we lived in the years before coming to Zimbabwe, picturesque in its tranquillity, with its quaint little lockkeepers' houses — these images came from the photo book of the Kanal from our bookshelves.[5] I had told him how we used to take the boys there, in a pram or on our bicycles. The 'three country-men' in the poem he both envies and sneers at; his arms 'flung wide open/out for you, Stephanie' who, however, has made him into 'the place she staked out, pegged, registered' ('My Arms Vanished Mountains' in *Cemetery of Mind*, 126, 122).

The poem says it all. It cannot last. Sharing me with my husband, his host and sponsor, fills him with increasing resentment. My husband, then director of the Zimbabwe German Society, organises a reading for Dambudzo in February 1984, his first public appearance in a long time. Two years later, he commissions Dambudzo to conceptualise a lecture series on African writers speaking about their craft. Dambudzo's own opening lecture 'The African Writer's Experience of European Literature' will, when published posthumously, become one of the most quoted documents in the growing body of Marechera scholarship. I use it often in my teaching. No better antidote to the politically correct induced attitudes about being 'Eurocentric' blah, blah. 'That Europe had, to say the least, a head start in written literature is an advantage for the African writer [. . .]. I do not consider influences pernicious: they are a sort of apprenticeship' ('The African Writer's Experience of European Literature' in Veit-Wild *Dambudzo Marechera* 363). No wonder that the current generation of African writers see in Marechera the great liberator of the mind.

For his fellow writers, it wasn't always easy to handle the drunken rebel. Ama Ata Aidoo, who lived in Zimbabwe at the time and was the second writer to present a lecture, began her talk with a tribute to Samora Machel. He had just died in a plane crash, allegedly at the hands of the South African regime. As Ama Ata was saying something in honour of 'our fallen heroes', Dambudzo, a mug of beer in hand, brayed from the back of the packed lecture hall: 'Fuck the heroes'. Ama Ata, flabbergasted, shrieked, 'Shut up, Dambudzo', and then resumed: 'Our dead . . .'. 'Fuck the dead' came the drunken echo from the back, at which she closed her manuscript and made to leave, unless we, the organisers, removed Dambudzo from the room — which we did, by force of manpower.

February of 1984. Dambudzo is still staying at our house. He spends most of his earnings from the reading on drink. The combination of alcohol and his usual paranoia creates a series of unpleasant frictions and disasters — often a mixture of high-strung drama and absurd comedy. One evening, on his return from the bars, he feels threatened by my husband who, Dambudzo hallucinates, is wielding a sword. Then he slips and cuts himself badly on a glass cabinet. Rejecting first aid from a neighbouring doctor, he insists instead on waiting for the police, blood pooling on the floor around him. When the police arrive, they drive him and my husband to the police station,

where he files a charge of manslaughter against his alleged assailant. After being bandaged in a clinic, he is driven back home and put to bed, two policemen sitting with him, helping themselves to his vodka and reading parts of his manuscript of *Mindblast*. Only at that stage does he agree to withdraw the charge — and all is well again.

Our relationship grows increasingly difficult. After every painful argument I swear to myself that this will be the last time. Then the longing and fretting start over again, and I go looking for him in the city bars.

Why could I not let him go despite the tremendous tensions, grudges and pain on all sides? There was a deep bond between our bodies and our minds, which still needed time to unfold. It was an irrational force, which I can still feel today but not explain. He also disarmed me with his utter truthfulness, his loyalty and – despite his obvious penchant for melodrama – his modesty. Having made a terrible scene the night before, he would apologise the next morning: 'You know me, when I don't get what I want, I throw a tantrum. Just like Franz.' He would rub his short-sighted eyes with the back of his slender hands, boyishly, bashfully — and I found myself loving and forgiving him.

Sloane Court and the Amelia poems

The happiest time of our love life begins when we manage to secure a bedsit for him in the Avenues. It is on the ground floor of Sloane Court on Sixth Street and the corner of (then) Rhodes Avenue. I have it cleaned and redecorated, give him furniture, put curtains up, this and that. As with each new beginning, he is in good spirits. He is writing. He also has a job for a couple of weeks, teaching literature at a private college.

I often sneak in through the French window of his flat, and we spend a few delirious hours before I go to teach German at the Zimbabwe German Society. At that time, he writes poems full of erotic images — when I read them years later or even teach them, I relive those moments. I remember stumbling into class, with his taste still in my mouth and his scent on my skin, the subtext to my public persona as literary scholar and university professor.

Next comes the period of the Amelia sonnets, written as he feels betrayed, left alone, discarded. Before travelling to Germany with my family in August 1984, I tell him that I will be back, but he feels just as abandoned as when I'd had to throw him out of my car during our first days together. To him, I am lost. Amelia turns into a ghost, she is dead, she haunts him in his dreams. Reading those poems, I sometimes wonder whether there was more to it, whether there was already an intimation of the tragedy that lay ahead.

When I return from Germany in September 1984, Dambudzo is distant. He believed I would never come back. He has another girl, a blonde woman. Soon she is gone, teaching somewhere in the rural areas.

We are close again, as close as we can be, the usual ups and downs, fury and frenzy, passion and panic. I have bouts of deep depression. Our love seems elusive. In between there are moments of elation.

He shows me the Amelia poems. I have never written poetry myself nor have I read much of it but, more than anything else, his poems allow me to see how it is through his writing that he wards off the 'incompatibilities, which overwhelm, harass and threaten to crush him', as I write in my first published piece about him, an essay that I had to compose as the final assignment in my journalism course (Veit-Wild, 'Schreiben' 16; English version 'Write or go mad' 58–59). Through Dambudzo I start to understand the 'terrifying beauty' of true art. Henceforth I will be more receptive where I find it and more critical where it is missing. The irony at this point in my life is that I am the inspiration or catalyst for some of his most beautiful writing.

I interview him as part of the series of conversations with Zimbabwean poets, which would later be published in my 'baby-book': *Patterns of Poetry in Zimbabwe*. This is where my split identity begins. His poems are about our love, but I talk about the work with him as a literary scholar. The interview will later become another much quoted source. He possessed great lucidity in looking at his own work.

Repeatedly, he complains that I always leave him; that we never have much time together. One day he denigrates me and my work; the next, he makes plans for us writing a book together. That is my hope; that we will transform all the precious and precarious ties and conflicts between us into working together. Naïve thinking on my part. Our creative collaboration will only come once he is gone.

Lake McIlwaine and after

Urged by his laments that we never have enough time together, I arrange for a three-day outing to Lake McIlwaine. It is January 1985.

A horrendous disaster. I swear: Never, ever, again.

Yet, two or three weeks later I crawl under his sheets again. How often? One, two or three times?

Then, finally, I feel that I will be able to let go.

In April I am ill with some kind of virus infection. Fever, a rash, swollen glands. Similar symptoms to Pfeiffer's glandular fever, though not really identifiable. Two years later I would know.

September 1985. Again I am back from a family holiday. I find D in bed, in his fortress of sheets and blankets, reading. Everything is dirty. The fridge and the stove have stopped functioning. He lives like a caveman. Late in the day he goes out to get drunk.

Now that we are no longer lovers, we are more relaxed with each other. He seems happy to see me back. 'I am always worried when you are outside the country. I always think you can't take care of yourself.' How sweetly ironic. While I was away, he had another car accident, riding with drunken guys. All of his front teeth were knocked out. They have been replaced courtesy of the Canadian Embassy.

One day in February 1986, D tells me that he has been to a clinic for a test of his semen. There was blood mixed with his sperm. He says it was hilarious. The female nurses were very embarrassed. The legendary writer in for a semen test. They got a male colleague to show him where and how to collect the specimen. When he comes out of the cubicle with his vial, the nurses don't know where to look.

Twenty-five years later, I was looking through notes and papers of the time, when I found a receipt from Montagu Clinic dated 25/2/1986 for testicular surgery. I looked after him when he was not well and paid the bills. Is it already HIV-related? In 1986, HIV was beginning to be part of public consciousness. Did they test him? If so, what was the result? Did anyone tell him he was HIV-positive?

1987

This will prove to be a bad year. Especially for Mrs Marechera, Dambudzo's mother, who will lose three of her nine children within five months.

On one of my usual 'rounds' to D's flat, I find him in a very poor state. He is coughing badly and has a high fever. I take him to our family GP, Nick C, who has seen D before. 'You are not looking good today, Dambudzo,' he says and, after listening to the rattling in his lungs, tells me: 'Take him straight into Parirenyatwa.'

A couple of days later, Nick asks me to come and see him. He knows that Dambudzo does not want to have anything to do with his relatives, so he discloses the news to me, whom he regards as his closest friend. 'Dambudzo has AIDS,' he tells me, 'HIV-related pneumonia. One cannot tell how long he is going to live.'

The news sets me into a state of panic. Three weeks later I get my test results: I am HIV-positive.

I do not speak to D about it. The load is too heavy. I don't want him to feel guilty. He once mentions that the hospital doctors have found a 'strange virus'. Does he know which one and what it means? I do not know.

When I come to see him in hospital, he tells me that his mother and other female relatives have been for a visit. News has spread that he is dying. As always he is utterly dismissive. 'All they want is my money,' he says.

Out of hospital after a couple of weeks, he is frail. He appears at an African literature conference at the University. Colleagues and students are happy to have him around. He is there, he speaks, he 'behaves'. He seems subdued, not his usual angry self.

In April, his eldest brother Lovemore dies of liver cirrhosis. D goes to Marondera, where family members gather but returns just a day later, before the funeral takes place. He is disgruntled, feels maltreated and excluded by his relatives, especially by his brother Michael, now head of the family.

In June, his sister Tsitsi is 'bombed to heaven'.[6] I read about it at breakfast on the first page of *The Herald*. Half an hour later, D phones, shaken. I drive with him to the site of destruction. Later Michael appears, other relatives. Then Mugabe and four of his ministers arrive and pay their condolences. Though she was the only one among his brothers and sisters for whom he felt affection, he would not attend her funeral. They are making her into a 'national hero' and bury her at Heroes Acre. He refuses to be a part of this.

On 15 August, I find him in his flat, feverish, dehydrated, out of breath. I take him straight to the hospital. His lungs are damaged to an extent that he hardly gets enough oxygen. Yet, when I come the next day, I find him upright in his bed, smoking. His wish, muttered in between drags on his cigarette; I should bring him something to write with, he wants to make a will.

I don't seem to realise how critical the situation is. I should have gone right away to get pen and paper. When I return the next day, I find him unconscious. He dies in the early hours of the next day.

What would have been different if he had written a will?

'Which one of you bastards is Death?'

Dambudzo, I am sitting by your bed watching you die. I have never seen anyone die before, so I don't know whether it will happen within the next hour, day or week. I have asked the nurses who glide in and out of the room at long intervals, ignoring my presence. Dying is shameful and nobody wants to be implicated. I feel like an intruder, white in a black hospital, encroaching on a foreign culture at one of its most secretive moments. The nurses tell me one cannot tell, it can be very soon, but can also take its time.

When did you write the 'Bastard Death' poems? Days or weeks or months ago? You did not show them to me, I will find them tomorrow when I clear out your flat. You are in conversation with this bastard now, not arguing anymore, silently acknowledging his presence as he lets you draw your last wafts of breath. You seem far away, your mouth and nose under the oxygen mask. The mask is all they can provide to relieve your struggle. Antibiotics won't help, not with one side of your lung already gone and the other near collapse. It is only a matter of time. I am sitting here, helpless, watching you breathe in, ever so slowly, as deeply as your corroded lungs allow you, wheezing as your chest heaves up and then rattles down. There is a pause after each breath and I listen anxiously, waiting for the next. The pauses seem longer and longer. Each time I wonder, is this the last one?

But while you are going to join your ancestors – oh, how you will howl at them to leave you alone! – let me tell you how the Bastard is threatening to get me – is hovering above my house, too – because this is also part of our story.

For many years I will live full of joy about every new day that I will be in good health. But, unlike you, I will be lucky. I will survive.

The After-life

After Dambudzo's death, there was talk among publishers and friends about what to do with his unpublished work; who could collect and publish it. I did not want to do it. I wanted to focus on my PhD research, which I had started in 1986, and also, I did not feel sufficiently qualified. I did *not* say that my life was too closely interwoven with Dambudzo's to be the one to select and edit poems that had been inspired by our relationship. How could I work on his biography without mentioning his love life and the real cause of his death? Yet, in the end, Irene Staunton and Hugh Lewin, my main consultants – who had just founded Baobab Books and published the tribute collection *Dambudzo Marechera* 1952–*1987* – persuaded me that I was the best person to take on this task.

So I did. I took on what was to become a deeply gratifying labour of love. In a way I have been in constant conversation with him, safe from his invectives, free to do with 'him' what I deem proper.

Ironically, Dambudzo, out of his grave, 'paid me back'. To my great surprise, seven years after his death, I found myself appointed Professor of African Literature by Berlin's distinguished Humboldt University. I would enter a career that I had never planned or expected.

Yet there has also been the dark side, the menace. Dambudzo haunted my dreams. Once, not long after his death, I dreamed he was throwing little poison darts at me from across the street. They stuck in my skin, but I pulled them out and walked away, safe. When he appears to me now, the threat is gone. He seems calm, composed, almost serene.

During my family's remaining years in Zimbabwe, I worked concurrently on my PhD and on the posthumous publications and the biography of Marechera. Both my dissertation, *Teachers, Preachers, Non-Believers*, and my *Source Book* appeared in 1992. I attended conferences and published articles.

In 1993 we returned to a re-unified Germany. East German universities were being restructured, so also Humboldt. A chair for African Literatures and Cultures had been created. Although I had only passed my PhD at Frankfurt University in 1991 and did not have the usual prerequisite for such a post, the German Habilitation, other work could be recognised as an equivalent. In my case, this other work consisted of my Marechera oeuvre.

Yet another historical irony came into play. In 1974, the West German government had not admitted me as a high school teacher because of my adherence to Maoist organisations. I was a victim of what was called 'Radikalenerlass'.[7] Twenty years later, I was ordained as 'Beamter auf Lebenszeit' (civil servant for life). And this not only thanks to Dambudzo, the troublemaker and the most anti-authoritarian spirit I have ever known, but also thanks to the changed political environment in my country. The academic committee at Humboldt University had shortlisted an Africanist from an East German University as number one for the position. However, he had been implicated with the GDR regime and therefore lost his job. That is why the government authorities did not accept his candidature at Humboldt, thus making way for number two on the list, the erstwhile Radical, which was me.

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This is, in outline, *my* story of Dambudzo Marechera.

He unlocked many doors for me and let me peek into the marvellous world beyond. He gave me intimations of hell but also the strength to resist.

He, who said he had never met an 'African' but only human beings, made me into an 'Africanist'. What a prank, Dambudzo.

Notes

1 Marechera had a contract with the South African film-maker, who wanted to film his return to Zimbabwe after eight years in the UK. The project collapsed within the first few days owing to a row between Marechera and Austin. For details see my *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work* 281–90.
2 Title of one of his poems in *Cemetery of Mind* 74.
3 'Dambudzo' means 'causing trouble or pain' in Shona.
4 He had told me he would use this name when referring to me in his writing.
5 Liedel, Herbert and Helmut Dollhopf, ed. *Der alte Kanal damals und heute. Ludwig-Donau-Main-Kanal*. Würzburg: Stürtz, 1981.
6 Her Zambian husband worked for the ANC. He had brought a TV home from Mozambique in which South African agents had planted a bomb. When Tsitsi switched it on, it went off, tearing her to pieces and destroying the flat. See *Source Book* 375–77. Marechera alludes to it in his poem 'I used to like tomatoes' in *Cemetery* 207.
7 Decree of 1972 prohibiting members of extremist organisations from becoming civil servants or teachers.

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