

Disruptive Dialogues: the Legacies of Dambudzo Marechera

As the Disruptive Dialogues exhibition shows, Dambudzo Marechera was not just an author but a creative facilitator too, encouraging and mentoring fellow writers. When he returned to Harare, Marechera worked as a teacher, briefly ran his own literary agency, and was often an inspirational figure, concerned about the kind of publishing infrastructure that might emerge in the new Zimbabwe.

In this spirit, the Disruptive Dialogues project commissioned four poets to create work in response to Marechera's writings.

In this booklet you will find compelling new poetry by Fahad Al-Amoudi, Tanatsei Gambura, Jennifer Wong, and Belinda Zhawi, together with QR codes and links that will allow you to listen to recordings of the poets reading their work.

Thinking about the question of infrastructure, and drawing on the expertise of the team at Oxford Brookes Poetry Centre's pamphlet publisher, **ignitionpress**, the project has also been collaborating with the Zimbabwean poetry journal *ipikai*. A special Marechera-inspired issue of the publication featuring poets from Zimbabwe and the diaspora will be available soon.

For more details about the Disruptive Dialogues project, please visit <https://torch.ox.ac.uk/disruptive-dialogues-the-legacy-of-dambudzo-marechera-in-harare-and-oxford>

Fahad Al-Amoudi

in search of a new myth

let me tell you about a complicated man. how does it begin again. the barman cocks his bad eye. memory is the chink in your glass. abundance is, after all, nature's cruellest trick. there is nothing to drink in the Indian Ocean, or the Kalahari Desert, but you can always walk into a pub and order a glass of water. no one is a regular here despite what everybody says. you cannot step in the same river twice. may it never run dry. an editor's rejection letter is your coaster-cum-handkerchief-cum-notepad-cum-white flag of surrender. your cup falls and tips its contents over the wood grain table, clawed by decades of sharp rings. greased elbows have softened the counter into deep grooves and ridges. the liquid follows the paths of least resistance, spilling out into tributaries. each punter has a different gravitational pull. a man you know only by what drink he likes tells you a story you heard a version of as a child. there was once a woman who led a group of people from a place of oppression and destitution to a great river. after she settled and had children, her eldest daughter revolted and led a separatist group of people further up the river, where they built a dam. when that eldest daughter had a daughter of her own, she too led a separatist movement further up the river where they built an even bigger dam, and so forth. as the surrounding people began to notice the river was drying up, they came together and wiped out the dammed settlements, except for the original woman and her people. as she and the first runaways wept for their lost children, filling the river with their tears, the others celebrated their new nation. crowning the banks of the river, the lamenting women hardened and turned into large black wattle acacia trees. you left before he could reach his well-rehearsed epithet. patriotism has nothing to do with the fine arts. you start to see the patrons for what they are. shipwrecked, telling their stories as if they are still on the boat. there are those who have opinions and those who like to argue. you find yourself mumbling the smug man's words. *common sense says my ancestors were the worst of the men.* you are kicked out of every place you frequent for mining the patrons for material. what do you expect me to do. they invariably reply, live.

You can hear Fahad read the poem by visiting <https://bit.ly/disruptivewmyth> or by pointing your camera at the QR code.



Tanatsei Gambura

The Poet Plays Marechera at the Summit of a Cold City

On the cobbled stretch of Blackfriars Street she waits,
cedar hair catching the strain of sunlight: the darling
fantasy of God. Me: a black bundle of garments
beshadowed by buildings [tall, united, kingdomly]
—a transplant making meaning of place, a polyp festering
someplace imperial and auld, I meet her in this timeless
labyrinth. There on the street, she becomes an alcove
of asylum for me to disappear into. I, planting kisses
on her cold-bruised cheeks, become the sustenance
of her imagination. And so, carried in this Elysium,
we walk beneath an ashen sky into the burgh's swollen
heart, weave in and out the dank mouths of Cowgate's
alleys to arrive at Waterloo Place. We hike into a steep
climb, brick by brick, following the path to the city's
treasured apex. Settled on a sandstone plinth atop
Calton Hill, Edinburgh offers itself like a banquet
to our eyes: a feast of concrete and sea piercing
through the horizon. A slumbering lion in its majesty,
Arthur's Seat reclines into the dewy clouds. Here at this
hilltop's embrace, sitting with a white woman I adore,
a white woman who looks at me like I am interesting,
warmness froths at the summit of a cold city, and I am
in rapture. But as the sun begins its descent into night
and we begin ours back to the city's pith, the words
Fuck BLM cunts appear, freshly painted, on North Bridge,
bloody red on the facade. The air cuts like ice and, at once,
the spell splinters before me. My mind withers into illiteracy.
The woman stills. My body, this black, bastardly cunt,
shudders with a laugh. Curled between my sheets like a leaf
surrendering to winter, I will once again decay into my
solitude tonight. Two seagulls will stoep at my window
shrieking like demons, into the expanse. Home will be
someplace other. She will be someplace other.
All around me things are sentenced to dying. Like every
other night, I will wait for whichever comes first: the opiate
of sleep or the feeling that I have run out of things to grieve.
It will be tonight, as it is every night, first sleep.

You can hear Tanatsei read the poem by visiting <https://bit.ly/disruptivepoet> or by pointing your camera at the QR code.



Jennifer Wong

& So Dear World

I got my things and left.

At first it was my mother who got her things and left: with nine children to bring up, unable to pay the rent. Tried her best to fend for herself and for all of us. Left in 1969 for a dark neighbourhood you wouldn't want to know about.

& without that, maybe I wouldn't have written *The House of Hunger*. I am always leaving but have also arrived somewhere. Boy, I got into St Augustine's, couldn't believe it. They were the first secondary school in the country to accept students like me. I was used to something else: black students on one side of the line, the whites on the other.

The things I don't want to tell you even, all the ways they kept us under the radar in Zimbabwe, under their power, for as long as they could.

So I got my things and left.

When I came to England for the first time I realised I left my glasses behind. I was coming to England literally blind ... I was on my own, sipping a whisky, and my head was roaring with a strange emptiness. What was it really that I had left behind me ... I think I knew then that before me were years of desperate loneliness, and the whisky would be followed by other whiskies, other self-destructive poisons.

Those days when I wrote with fury. Days in a tent by the River Isis, Oxford, days in the kitchen of Stanley Nyamfukudza. Thinking of a future, not just for me, but my people and each of you. Of what our hunger is and what we must do, could do, to topple structures that harm us.

And so in 1977 I got my things again and left Oxford. I wasn't sure if the sun was shining at that time.

But I left, having – finally – a copy of *The House of Hunger* in my hand.

My writing never left me nor did I leave my writing. How keeping it going was what mattered. There I read with Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, with Dennis Brutus and Nuruddin Farah.

In the writing I exist.

The years when they came to me with hunger, flocked to Cecil Square in the heart of Harare, clutching their manuscripts and notebooks. I have lived for them. I know their battle against power.

I was once a boy who turned up at Heathrow with nothing but my anger, my hope. In my day-to-day exile below the dreaming spires, walking past the Old Fire Station, past the Covered Market, past Carfax Tower, I have a fire in my heart, and I know my words must rebel.

Those years they refused to hear me. I turn my life into an outcry, a thunderstorm.

& so dear world, I left Harare, I left Oxford, I left my silence, I left all the comfortable zones of the world, knowing only one kind of literature that can save us: words that hurt tremendously before they heal. Words that stem from rejection and exile, but promise a perennial flowering of human dignity and hope.

You can hear Jennifer read the poem by visiting <https://bit.ly/disruptivedearworld> or by pointing your camera at the QR code.



Belinda Zhawi

House of Zhara

after Dambudzo Marechera's House of Hunger

Her eyes were a blank book
of unlined black pages
I once got an American penpal.

Her smile - dirty stained windows;
thick glazing that reflected little
Our father's belt beat her

into a gradual silence
When she held me close
her heart beat like a ticking bomb.

I'd listen hard
to see if the sound would carry
She sang funeral hymns before bed,

before breakfast
she ran him a hot bath
after a leather beating

Then there were nights we heard them
make love, she'd wake with a smile
newer than dawn

and the porridge wouldn't taste like tears
The morning
we woke to a dead house her closet was empty

save for the green blouse Baba bought her.
Before I left for school,
he put his palm on my face,

moist but cool, smiled into my eyes
pressing a dollar coin into my uniform's pocket
with his other hand

That afternoon
I returned to a broken home.
His closet was empty

and the house smelled like burnt rice.

Belinda writes: I wrote this poem in response to the essay titled 'Childhood As Critical Thinking' by Robert Muponde, which explores Marechera's renowned work, *The House of Hunger*, as well as a poignant piece of fiction called 'Protista'. These works ignited a deep contemplation of Marechera's portrayal of dystopian or challenging childhoods in Zimbabwe – a theme that also seems to pop up in some of my work around my childhood memories.

Zhara means hunger in chiShona.

You can hear Belinda read the poem by visiting <https://bit.ly/disruptivezhara> or by pointing your camera at the QR code.



About the poets

Fahad Al-Amoudi is a poet and editor of Ethiopian and Yemeni heritage based in London. He was the winner of the *White Review* Poets Prize 2022. A member of the Obsidian Foundation and Malika's Poetry Kitchen collectives, his work has been published in *Poetry London*, *bath magg*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Poetry Review* and *Mizna*. His pamphlet, *When the Flies Come*, was published by **ignitionpress** [2023].

Tanatsei Gambura [she/they] is a poet, new-genres artist, and cultural practitioner living and working in Edinburgh. She is interested in how language considers the dichotomy of forgetting and remembering and offers a productive space in which violence and trauma can be witnessed. In spring 2021, her pamphlet, *Things I Have Forgotten Before*, was published by Bad Betty Press, and was selected by the Poetry Book Society as the autumn choice for the year. It was listed by Poetry School as one of 2021's Books of the Year, with one of its poems selected by Imtiaz Dharker for Poetry Archive's Wordview competition.

Jennifer Wong was born and raised in Hong Kong. She is the author of 回家 *Letters Home* [Nine Arches Press 2020], which was a Poetry Book Society Wild Card Choice. Jennifer is also a translator and an editor, most recently of *State of Play: Poets of East & Southeast Asian Heritage in Conversation* [Out-Spoken Press, 2023, co-edited with Eddie Tay].

Belinda Zhawi is a writer and sound artist. She is the author of *Small Inheritances* [**ignitionpress**, 2018] and *South of South East* [Bad Betty Press, 2019]. Belinda is the co-founder of literary arts platform BORN::FREE and experiments with sound and text performance as MA.MOYO. Her work has been broadcast and published on various platforms including *The White Review*, NTS, Boiler Room and BBC Radio 3, 4 and 6.