

DEATH  
*and*  
LIFE

*Bianca Bowers*



DEATH *and* LIFE

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[www.paperfieldspress.com](http://www.paperfieldspress.com)

Printed in Australia

ISBN-13: 978-0-9942404-9-1

eBook ISBN-13: 978-0-9942404-8-4

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2014



POETRY BOOKS BY BIANCA BOWERS

Butterfly Voyage, 2018

Pressed Flowers, 2017

Love Is A Song She Sang From A Cage, 2016

Passage, 2015

Death and Life, 2014

## DEDICATION

For those who struggle in their youth.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Author thanks the following publications where these poems first appeared:-

The Wind, Tongue in Your Ear Volume 4 (Four/Two Publishing 1999)

His Sin, Tongue in Your Ear Volume 4 (Four/Two Publishing 1999)

Motherland, Spirits in Motion (The International Library of Poetry 2002)

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I lived with depression through my adolescence and early 20s, mostly due to abuse which was later compounded by an attack that disrupted and ended my first year of university. With my dreams crushed and no sense of direction, I spent the next three years venturing down many avenues without making it to the end of a single road. Adding to my vocational failures, I was failing on a personal level too. In addition to a destructive relationship that I seemed incapable of releasing myself from, I struggled to adapt to the increasingly violent landscape of post-apartheid South Africa. Somewhere along the line recreational substances crossed the border into an addictive coping mechanism as I attempted to desensitise myself to the violence and poverty that had fast become the accepted norm. When my parents immigrated without me, leaving a lot of loose ends, my decaying foundations crumbled and eventually resulted in my attempted suicide.

I quickly realised that people had strong opinions about suicide and friends were not what they seemed. Most of my 'friends' dispersed like crowds in a bomb scare, and those who hung around seemed to do so out of a morbid fascination. When I talk about leaving South Africa with nothing but a suitcase, I mean that literally. When I moved to New Zealand, I started from scratch. In addition to having no money, I was a shell of a person and my only goal for the next 12 months was to make it through the day without falling apart and without the help of drugs or alcohol. With the help of numerous self-help books, physical exercise, and writing, I focused on my own personal development by undergoing tireless self-analysis

and trying to change my negative behaviour patterns. For the next 15 years I never breathed a word about my suicide attempt, or my struggle with depression, or my past. After all, if my 'friends' who had known my circumstances had judged me, then I could only imagine what strangers were likely to do.

In retrospect, I was healing myself in one way but hurting myself in another. Continuing to live in the same manner of the past by being secretive about who I was and what had happened to me. In early 2013, I finally acknowledged that my authentic life would never be wholly realised until I was honest - regardless of judgement. That's when I decided to create my blog (bgbowers - no longer in existence) and publish my poetic confessions. It was liberating, to say the least, not to mention comforting when strangers began to reach out to me. It also unleashed the imagination, that I had once thought lost in childhood, and confirmed my unequivocal passion for writing.

Six months in I had no doubt that writing was my future, but it also dawned on me that most of my work was tied to the past - the old me - it was another person's voice and her story needed to be released. I believed for many years that I had an obligation to reach out to people and share my failures and flaws, anger and sadness, questions and answers, discoveries and rejections. Why an obligation? Because the act of sharing gives others permission to embrace their own truth and wear it like a badge of honour instead of hiding it in shame.

That's when Death and Life was born. I published Death and Life in March 2014, and, four years on, I still have mixed emotions about my decision to publish. Like a new home-owner suffers from buyers remorse, I have consistently

suffered from publishers-remorse over this book. As a result, the book has been unavailable for purchase longer than it has been available . Some days I pick it up and tell myself that it's not so bad. Most days I turn it over, or hide it underneath another book, because I can't bear to look at it. I just want to press rewind and undo what I've done. It's all about judgement - judging my past and my writing.

Four years down the line, me and my writing have come a long way, and I am finally content to allow this book to be. To accept that it contains my earliest writings - as far back as 1987, when I was still in primary school - and honour the young girl who wrote her darkest thoughts and kept these painful secrets until they overshadowed her.

# DEATH

*“Death is the great disruptor. It thrusts us opposite life’s mirror, invites our truthful exploration, and reveals the naked truth, from which rebirth is possible and we are free to reinvent ourselves anew.”*

DEATH AND LIFE I

Life

dictates Death.

Time is suspended, Mortality is certain

Puppets with strings, scissors poised

Destiny is inescapable, darkness devours light

Religion dictates judgement, sins are unforgettable

Eternity condemned, heaven or hell

Hearts fearing, souls burning

Nature is unnatural, pleasure is sinful

Guilt influences choice, Dogma breeds ethos

Happiness is impossible

Life and Death

~ condemning ~

Death and Life

Impossible is happiness

Dogma breed's ethos, Choice influences guilt

Sinful is pleasure, unnatural is nature

Burning souls, fearing hearts

Hell or heaven, condemned eternity

Unforgettable are sins, judgement dictates religion

Light devours darkness, inescapable is destiny

Poised scissors, strings with puppets

Certain is mortality, suspended is time

Death dictates

Life.



# I

*Death descended like a theatrical storm over the  
Drakensberg Mountains, stranding the living while  
it ran its course.*

THE ROAD OF LIFE

*For Chris*

The road of life  
dark and quiet  
beneath my feet  
before morning breaks  
when the air is thick with fog;  
Impenetrable  
are we.  
Street lights, few  
and far between;  
lit, fading, shrouded, blackout.  
Intersections,  
forks, turns, bypasses  
criss, crossing  
opening, closing  
signposts missing  
streets with no names...  
The road of life  
quietly lit beneath my feet  
as morning breaks.

SMILING BAG

Here he comes  
the man with the empty bag  
your earthly name,  
scribed in bold  
across the black rubber of its lifeless skin, soon  
the indifferent mist will hem your margins, soon  
the carnation tinge, that kisses your mortal cheeks,  
will turn;  
anaemia, soon  
Winter's snow will claim your hollow bones, soon  
your humanity will be tamed beneath the zip  
of a smiling bag.

Here he is  
the man with the brimming bag  
the weight of your mortality  
decomposing  
inside the lifeless rubber of its black skin  
indifferent to the cold mist that hems your margins  
carnations line parlour tables, and men's lapels  
Winter's rigour mortis at its height  
within your hollow bones  
the weight of your humanity  
housed beneath a timber frame.

There he goes  
the man with the empty bag  
the remains of your humanity,

a memory,  
inside the black rubber of its slippery skin  
the fugacious mist, evaporated  
carnations sprout in the shadow of pale smiles  
Winter retreats with changing conditions  
your earthly name,  
etched in italics  
across the bones of marbled stone.

BLUE BUTTERFLY

I don't remember her name  
It was too common to recall  
But I remember who she was  
    A blue butterfly  
    Markings on her wings  
    like teardrops  
There was mysterious sadness  
    in her moon-shaped eyes  
    A sadness that drew me  
A sadness I strangely related to  
A sadness that enveloped her  
    Her wings failed her  
    as she rested her chin  
    on the elephant barrel  
The elephant and the butterfly  
The blue too bruised to flutter  
The teardrops too heavy to soar  
    And though she is gone  
    Time is powerless  
    to smudge her memory  
Her blue wings at peace  
    in my heart

## THIEF

Time is powerless to subdue  
the memory of that solitary night  
when everything was wrong  
beyond the strange window.

A secretive moon, intimidated by clouds.  
A trespassing wind  
surged up the willow-lined-driveway.  
Red rain drops  
scattered  
upon the windowsill.

A shrill ring pierced the night.  
Mother's wary footsteps descended stairs  
quietly shivering in bed - I waited -  
muffled sounds of loss ascended  
like speech bubbles.  
A thief broke and entered;  
grief's shadow, the only trace.

MORTAL GIRL  
*For Nicole*

She was loved by all  
placed on pedestals  
this mortal girl.  
Her beauty lit the room  
of father's heart  
like mine never could.

Friday the 13th, 1989  
lived up to its reputation  
and distinguished her light.  
We searched the long arms of night  
waited for the darkness to blink  
begged the moon to spill its secrets  
but the silence of night was final.

The sunrise brought false hope  
and little joy  
as the Xerox worked overtime  
and a lost smile  
found it's way to every lamppost in Kloof  
(but when have posters not been in vain?)  
The police car in the driveway  
and her best friend's expression  
killed the last of my youthful hope  
and that gorge of death, and ravine of tears  
claimed my relationship with paternity.  
So loved was this mortal girl

and so shocked was her congregation of followers  
that men of God all hailed  
their modern day resurrection.  
Her funeral, a fever pitch  
of frenzied faith  
as the circus of fools  
waited in vain  
for this mortal girl  
to rise from her coffin  
but any hope of resurrection  
was vetoed by her choice

The light of love followed her through the door  
of no return  
leaving me with broken pedestals, I could not fix  
and a seed of doubt that grew into a new door  
that tempted my entry, year,  
after year, after year.

She was loved by all  
this mortal girl  
her beauty lit the room of father's heart  
like mine never could.



WEEKEND  
*For Jane*

The weekend promised fun for all  
but she wasn't laughing  
when his humour clipped her wings.

The weekend promised time for lovers  
but an eternity  
wasn't what they had in mind.

The weekend promised a party for friends  
but a bottomless drink  
ended the celebrations.

The weekend promised youthful freedom  
but freedom from youth  
was a step too far.

The weekend promised justice  
but a paltry fine  
was all he paid for taking her life.

## I WATCHED YOU DIE

I watched you die  
under a baobab tree .  
Your spirit rose and fell  
like red dust on the dirt road.  
Black cornrows  
smiled, unnaturally  
like a red gash across the sky.

Sobbing so intense  
I couldn't catch my breath.  
Palpitations descended,  
as panic rose  
from my toes to my head.

We held each other so tight ;  
clinging desperately .  
You slipped away,  
life force  
bleeding out.  
My energy, sapped  
like sticky syrup  
from the blue gum tree.

Your last exhalations  
clammy  
on my moist cheeks.

A honeysuckle stopped to see.

Her tiny body, hovered  
over yours  
momentarily.  
And as her gentle wings  
flapped  
your eyes blinked  
finality  
and closed.

TO THOSE I HAVE LEFT BEHIND

I know it's hard for you to understand  
why I have chosen to leave you all behind.

You feel frustrated, because you think  
if I had held on a little longer,  
I would have made a turn  
and seen a ray of light.  
You feel guilty, because you didn't know,  
you didn't see it coming.  
You blame yourself for not trying hard enough,  
not persevering one more time.  
But most of all, you feel pain.  
A void in your heart  
in the space I used to fill.

I want you to know, it is not your fault.  
The blame lies with no-one.  
Feel blessed for the time you have had with me,  
do not feel cheated for the time you have lost.  
It is hard to understand why my soul passed  
into this world a short while,  
only to be taken so soon.  
It seems cruel and unfair  
from where you're standing  
but try to look at it from mine...

I was born into a world that did not allow  
for a gentle, sensitive spirit as mine.

Your earthly world is cold and harsh  
it continually tries to break the spirit.  
I tried my best to beat it,  
to harden myself like other's  
But my spirit was not made that way.  
It was easily broken,  
and after much battering and bruising,  
it simply broke in two.  
I could not put it back together again.  
My soul yearned for the tranquillity and gentleness  
it was born into.  
My soul chose to give up the battle  
and lead the way back home.

Do not think of me as gone,  
as being worse off than you,  
for although my body has returned to dust  
my spirit remains with you.

Do not look for me like you used to,  
for I will not be there.  
Rather, look for me in the sun  
that rises in the morning  
and sets in the evening.  
Look for me in the springtime flowers  
and the autumn leaves.  
Listen for me in the nightingale's song,  
the wind in the trees  
and the roar of the ocean.

Listen to all I have told you.  
I have passed from this world  
and returned to the other.  
I am no longer broken.  
I rest quietly,  
in the warmth of the sun,  
and sleep peacefully,  
by the light of the moon.

FORGOTTEN GARDEN

Walk with me  
through a garden of graves

a forgotten garden  
where nobody prays

avenues of souls  
and anchors of love

witnessing angels  
without faith from above

structures of class  
still dominate the past

decrepit stones and broken bones  
packed in the valley like quarry stones

where guardians of the underworld  
patrol and protect

and vines of history  
remind us to forget

wildflowers sway  
in the whispering breeze

rain clouds gather

above wrinkled trees

gothic arches and filigree motifs  
stained with smoke and tears of grief

infants who entered  
with breathless defeat

and adults who tiptoed  
a life of retreat

moss and decay  
rust and dust

a forgotten garden  
is nature's way



## II

*The loss of innocence is inevitable, but the death of  
innocence disturbs the natural order.*



## PREDATORS

Predators make lousy gardeners.  
They pick buds from backyards  
And strip flowers of their opportunity to bloom.

OBSESSION

His obsession builds  
like a wild storm  
on the horizon  
and I watch – helplessly -  
as it draws nearer  
as the sound of thunder  
- rattles -  
and flashes of light  
- strike -  
filling me with dread  
filling my insides  
with liquid darkness  
keeping my life  
under perpetual nightfall.

## HUNTER

Mother offered him my teenage bed  
- oblivious -  
and he took it  
couldn't wait to lie in it  
breathing the scent  
of a trophy  
after years of fruitless tracking

The hunter, exhilarated  
by the very thought  
of closing in,  
turns to his wife, the lowly substitute,  
to enact the fantasy  
that is destined for reality.

HOSTAGE

She watches him  
- from across the table -  
mouth moving  
licentious words  
escalating  
piercing her flesh  
like fangs  
splitting her ears  
with his forked tongue  
sinful eyes  
burrowing  
into pockets of innocence  
relentlessly smashing the door  
to her inner sanctum.  
- Weakened -  
by years of hostage  
she counts the hands of despair  
as her pink glow  
pales  
Her weaponry of words  
fail  
to deflect the vile flow  
that inches closer.

HIS SIN

She suffers silently  
Agonises so quietly  
For his sin.

Her life tainted  
Her innocence violated  
For his sin.

Her past irrevocable  
Her future inevitable  
For his sin.

She stands alone  
The choice not her own  
For his sin.

HELP

H-E-L-P

four simple letters  
trapped in my throat

Help

a treacherous word  
stitched behind my lips

Help

an impotent word  
imprisoned by my silence

H-E-L-P

choke  
bleed  
expire.



### III

*Depression is a void of perpetual darkness. Left too long, the darkness is mistaken for light and the void a haven.*

## THE ABSENCE OF HAPPINESS

The absence of happiness, knowledge  
withheld by teachers of misery, schooling  
reserved for masters. Sadness  
substitutes blood, veins  
blue thoughts that hang, the precipice  
cradles fragility.

Thoughts carry the weight of bones, psyche  
trapped by a body of skeleton, joints  
fixed into meandering associations feeding  
rivers that swell and flood, oceans  
forming like moats, vulnerable  
and protected  
inside an island castle.

## SADNESS

Sadness climbs inside me  
settling itself uninvited  
abducting wise discernment  
exacerbating the splinters in my head  
prompting a myriad of images  
to roll  
like a forbidden reel of film  
causing emotional disquiet  
propelling to the surface  
ultimately untrammelled  
emotional swells  
take the shape of salty tears  
welling, flowing, rolling down my cheeks  
settling in moist droplets  
all around me.  
Sadness washes out of my entire being  
cleansing  
like a thundery rainstorm  
until my catharsis is complete.

BLEED

In her mind  
nothing makes sense  
confusion is the passenger.

Myriad thoughts  
colliding at top speed  
for reasons she chose to abandon.

An abyss of slumber  
forged by need  
to forget the thoughts  
that make her bleed.

## DEPRESSION

Depression is a game,  
my mind a player  
Light leaks  
from my wounded heart  
Internal debris pollutes  
my soul  
Crimson handcuffs  
secure my oppression  
Help  
is a mirage that wavers  
on an imaginary horizon.

## DARKNESS

Darkness eclipses light  
like death on life.

Darkness occupies temperament  
like anger on body.

Darkness occupies space  
ineludible as a shadow.

The struggle for dominion  
is soon to be won.

Darkness distorts light,  
casts skyscraper shadows.

Darkness seeps into life  
like groundwater.

THOUGHT TUNNEL

I slip inside the old thought tunnel  
skin extinguished by darkness  
falling prey to adolescent fears  
struggling against the onslaught  
of viscous gloom  
that fills and floods  
my body  
breathing is for the bold  
and the well-adjusted  
the haves and the hordes  
She invites me  
into the cool echo  
of dark familiarity  
Attempts to coax me  
into her throat  
but she is wicked  
She'll only let me drown  
in her belly  
and spit me out  
Slipping inside the old thought tunnel  
too scared to surrender  
to the cool echo of dark familiarity.

END OF SAMPLE

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