

A PASSPORT TO THE WORLD by Phillipa Yaa de Villiers

I received my first literary affirmation in 2005, when I was selected as a scholar on the British Council/Lancaster University's distance learning scheme, Crossing Borders. For eight months I sweated out poems under the gentle mentorship of John Lindley. The result was a manuscript, which I submitted to the Centre for the Book's Community Publishing Scheme. I used the R15 000 grant to print 500 copies of *Taller than Buildings*. I quickly realized that the slim volume was less of a meal ticket than a passport to a world that I had no idea existed.

The world is filled with literary events; many of them cash-strapped so the writers get paid in kind or kindness (often a five-star hotel, which we can never really afford) and an opportunity to meet people and talk about reading and writing. The rich relationships that I have gathered in this round-trip have paid back in poems, essays and stories inspired by the process of travelling away from familiar landmarks. Here is a whistle-stop through all the destinations to which this book carried me.

May 2007, Havana International Festival of Poetry, Cuba

I was part of a delegation of poets headed by our National Poet Laureate, Koorapete Kgositsile, James Matthews, Lebo Mashile, Khanyi Magubane and the enigmatic novelist, representing the Department of Arts and Culture, Siphiso Mahala, and I spent ten days in Cuba learning about literature in a revolutionary country, politics and South Africa's long-standing friendship with Cuba. Learn a lot about recent history, the battle of *Cuito* Cuanavale told from the other side. Our guide in Cuba told us that his father had died in the battle – he had never met South Africans before and felt a fraternal sense of comradeship because of this history. Fidel Castro was prepared to draft soldiers to come and fight South Africa in Angola – but there were so many Cubans that volunteered that they had to send many people back disappointed. It was incredibly inspiring to be in a socialist country where everyone can read and everyone has their own private doctor. It gave me new parameters for dignity. On the last night we performed for the first batch of South African medical students to graduate from Cuban med school – more recipients of Cuban generosity. I came home with eight new poems.

October 2007, Poetry Africa, Durban

Normally one has to be invited by this festival, but I was voor op die waa: I phoned them up and asked them if I could come. At first they said no, but then something happened and a place was available. I shared the stage with Mputlane wa Bofelo, Napo Mashane, Ishle Yi Park and many more wonderful poets. The week was very stimulating – we did many encounters with school children, hospitals and shelters – the festival is extremely organised in that way, bringing literature to the people. The strangely wonderful thing about the festival is that they put you up in the Royal Hotel in Durban! None of that garret business that these poets. We schlepped all the way and were wine and dined by night. A wonderful experience because of many things, mostly the contact with people who wouldn't normally be at a world-class literary festival. I came home with four new poems.

September 2008, Voorkamerfest, Darling

I'm not trying to get fresh with you, it is actually a real place and a real festival. Audience members purchase tickets for routes where they are taken to three different voorkamers in the Darling area, so they see three half-hour shows. This little festival is a delight for an artist who likes intimate performances – my theatre/voorkamer was so little I was literally sitting on the front row's lap! Very relaxing, as the artists are put up by townspeople and we walk to work! Very down to earth and a wonderful experience. Not much work done, quite a lot of wine tasting though!

March 2009, Northern Cape Writers Festival, Kimberley

This new festival is interesting because it is based in a practical cultural diversity that makes African issues and stories the centre of the event. The idea of writing expands to include other forms of expression, traditional storytelling and dance alongside hip-hop and slam poetry. Alongside the literary events there were song and dance events: I saw an Afrikaner rock band sharing the platform with Nama dancers, and this was beautiful to see. The royal family of the word, our own nobility, the Plaatje family was in attendance, as well as our spiritual leader Credo Mutwa. The Kimberley art museum was the venue for many of the panel discussions and it was inspiring to wander through the magnificent collection. Somebody in Kimberley knows their art. Bumping into the wonderful artist Dumisani Mabaso was a wonderful piece of serendipity. Three poems and the beginning of a short story.

March - April 2009, Villa Hellebosch Het Beschrijf Residency and Passaporta Festival, Belgium

As a prize for a short story I had written for a competition run in partnership by the National Arts Festival and De Buren, a Belgian literary residency, I was given a one-month residency at Villa Hellebosch just outside the village of Vollezele, about 40 km from Brussels. It was quiet and I shared the house with one other writer, a glum Estonian who listened to Beethoven and wrote short, evocative poems. It was interesting to be right up close to a very celebrated poet. His English was excellent, which is good because I have no Estonian. It was also interesting because he had never been this close to an African before and I felt, behind his kindness, he was doing a little anthropological research. Which is exactly what I was doing. This was a mad time and a fruitful one too: forced isolation cooked two essays, a book review, several poems and the beginnings of a story. I also began preparing the manuscript which will be published by Modjaji Books this year: *The Everyday Wife*.

May 2009, Badilisha Festival, Cape Town

This festival offers some of our greatest poets a chance to be heard. Audiences were Uche Nduka and a host of other voices from all over the planet, as well as the delightful iBushman. Lorelle Vieggi and Malika Ndlovu run a tight ship out of the Africa Centre in Long Street. The festival feels like it is born out of Malika Ndlovu's brain, I feel like one of her poems, reaching across continents to bring humanity home. I feel stretched and stimulated by listening to the range of poets with whom I shared the stage. I come home refreshed, with three new poems.

June 2009, The Cape Town Book Fair

I accepted with pleasure the chance to attend this event as a guest of the British Council, appearing on a panel with none other than Colleen Higgins, the CEO of Modjaji Books, Khosi Xaba "Tongues of Four Mothers", Malika Ndlovu "Invisible Earthquake", Sindiwe Magona "Please, Take Photographs" and Zena Edwards, a wonderful young British poet who will be performing in South Africa in March. Watching her share the stage with Malika Ndlovu, I was moved and inspired. The next day I went to feel poor at the Book Fair – it feels like it's priced in Euros, way beyond my pocket. And since I am either self-published or published by a small publisher like Modjaji, cash is always an issue. But always, the richness of the experience makes it well worth it. My son is ten and an avid reader, so it was great to stock up on novels for him, and he enjoyed seeing the huge hall murmuring with a thousand stories, each packaged in their fat little covers. My absolute high point was seeing his face as he walked in to the hall at the Convention Centre. I didn't write anything this weekend – I just read and enjoyed the experience!

Continued overleaf...

June 2009, The Berlin Poesiefestival

The Ritz Hotel has a swimming pool in the basement where I could practise my lines as I did my lengths. I just acted like I spend ages in 5 star hotels, which happens when you go to poor festivals that can't give you cash – they spoil you. I don't know how we're supposed to retain our integrity as poets with all this luxury but actually – bring it on! It was AMAZING to hear Rita Dove read in English and German noga! And it was wonderful to reconnect with Chiwoniso, who was doing a tour of the USA. We first met at Poetry Africa and it was as if some of her superstar gleam rubbed off on me, because I'm sure the doorman at the hotel looked at me differently (the first day he returned my tip with a look of compassion – as if he was saying: you need this more than I do!).

October – November 2009, Beyond Words Tour: UK Arts Council, British Council, Department of Arts and Culture, Sustained Theatre and Apples and Snakes. Five cities in the UK.

When the child holding the red balloon at the Deptford Albany got lost in Bra Don Mattera's words and let go of the thing, it floated up like a prayer, like a wish, like a red balloon over the silent heads of the listening audience. A magical moment in a wonderful tour where it felt like we had died and landed in poet's heaven: love and appreciation gushing over us wherever we went, and strong encounters with inspiring young poets, visits to bookshops to spend per diems unwisely, overweight luggage and sympathetic air-traffic controllers. Heaven indeed!

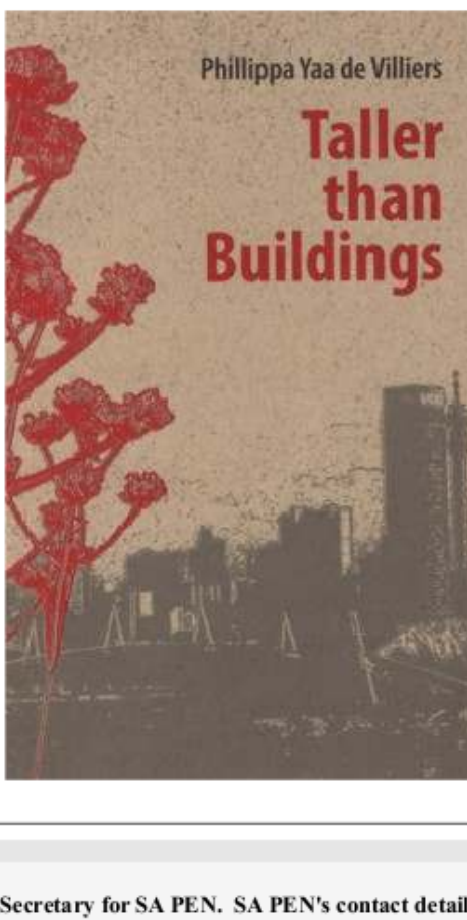
SA PEN

In the first week of March I will be performing my one-woman show at Humboldt University's conference on African literature: Conventions and Conversions, and at the end of April, I will be performing at the Harare International Festival of the Arts. My passport is still valid: have poems, will travel. I can't help feeling that I am such a lucky bugger.

February 2010



Phillippa Yaa de Villiers



SA PEN MEMBERS' PUBLICATIONS

New publications by members are featured on the SA PEN website, www.sapen.co.za. If you would like your book to be featured please contact Deborah at rudebs@icon.co.za. In recent months the following publications have been released.

- ◆ *Holding Pattern: Poems & Drawings* by Gus Ferguson
- ◆ *Home Away* edited by Louis Greenberg
- ◆ *Burning a Hole in the Page* compiled by Robin Malan
- ◆ *Lord Hamlet* - text by William Shakespeare, collaged by Robin Malan
- ◆ *Yes I am!* compiled by Robin Malan & Ashraf Johaardien
- ◆ *Killer Country* by Mike Nicol
- ◆ *Four Drunk Beauties* by Alex Smith
- ◆ *Don't Mess with the President's Head* by Zapiro



This edition of SA PEN NEWS was compiled by Deborah Horn-Botha, Secretary for SA PEN. SA PEN's contact details are: e-mail: rudebs@icon.co.za, or P O Box 732, Constantia, 7848, Republic of South Africa, Tel. (021) 701-8510.

LIU XIAOBO

From: info@pen.org
Sent: 29 December 2009 11:27 PM
To: anthonyf@icon.co.za
Subject: Join Us for Liu Xiaobo Press Event/Rally

Dear Friends,

As you have heard, the Chinese government has sentenced our colleague Liu Xiaobo to 11 years in prison in China.

This Thursday, we will hold an outdoor press event in midtown Manhattan to protest the verdict and press for Liu's release. We believe this is both a good way to underscore PEN's commitment to this case and to ring in a year that marks the 50th anniversary of PEN's organized efforts to defend imprisoned and persecuted writers around the world.

Please join us for this important show of solidarity.

The event will take place at 11 a.m. at a convenient midtown Manhattan location - we will e-mail final details tomorrow.

Many thanks, and all best wishes for the New Year,
K. Anthony Appiah
Steve Isenberg
Larry Siems
PEN American Center

From: **Anthony Fleischer**
Sent: 30 December 2009 12:34 PM
To: info@pen.org
Subject: Join Us for Liu Xiaobo Press Event/Rally

Dear Larry,

We will not be represented in midtown Manhattan on the occasion, but let me say on behalf of South African PEN that we strongly support what you and others are doing. The very act for which Liu Xiaobo has been imprisoned "inciting subversion of state power", or "questioning authority", is what free expression and a free press is all about. Our Charter: "... renders a free criticism of government, administrations and institutions imperative". State power has always been a huge danger to individual freedom and it still is. South Africans know this well enough and we applaud your pro-active involvement in this case. We are with you in spirit at the year-end and into 2010.

Best,
Anthony Fleischer
President, SA PEN

CHINA AND THE PEN CHARTER by Anthony Fleischer

"... the necessary advance of the world to a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative."

I have just received a message from American PEN about Liu Xiaobo's imprisonment by the Chinese government for a period of 11 years. Liu is a writer and one of the founding members of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre.

Liu was imprisoned for writing these words:

"Since the Communist Party of China (CPC) took power, generations of CPC dictators have cared most about their own power and least about human life."

"The official patriotism advocated by the CPC dictatorship is a fallacious system of 'substituting the party for the country'. The essence of this patriotism is to demand that the people love the dictatorship, the one-party rule, and the dictators. It usurps patriotism in order to inflict disasters on the nation and calamities on the people."

"Thus, all the tricks used by the CPC are stop-gap measures for the dictators to preserve the last phase of their power and will not be able to support for long this dictatorial edifice that is already showing countless cracks."

"One-party monopolization of ruling privileges should be abolished..."

To emphasise how dangerous this interference with free expression is, even to warn of Chinese hegemony in Africa, let me

substitute ZANU PF party for CPC in just one repeat:

"Thus, all the tricks of ZANU PF are stop-gap measures for the dictators to preserve the last phase of their power and will not be able to support for long this dictatorial edifice that is already showing countless cracks."

The principles of PEN should help others avoid a situation in which the same could be said of their own potential one-party states in Africa. If we ignore the PEN Charter, to whom might this repeat apply?

"Since HPS' party took power, dictators have cared most about their own power and least about human life."

The President of International PEN, John Ralston Saul, responded this way to China's claims that international protests over Liu Xiaobo's trial amounted to interference in its internal affairs.

"Liu Xiaobo's case is about agreed international human rights standards, not merely the internal affairs of China. China is signatory to international treaties and conventions, and cannot be given a free pass when it acts against its own and international standards."

Thank you Mr President!

20th January 2010