

Student photo of Dambudzo Marechera at New College, University of Oxford circa 1973.

...it is my story, I am the only constant factor in the different versions...

—Dambudzo Marechera

i. Machine of Death

Dambudzo Marechera has never left. He occupies a special place in the Zimbabwean imaginary. The miniature of his existence continues to inspire wild conjecture, despite his early death on August 18, 1987, aged 35. The cause and manner remain elusive. There is no hard proof. It is a matter of speculation and gossip. What is not in dispute is that in his final year he was in and out of hospital—sickly, had lost weight, had no appetite, and often spit blood. He also drank a lot and was negligent of his own health. For most of his public life, Marechera was diagnosed by public opinion as mentally ill.² In the archives held in Berlin and Harare, primary documents on Marechera's life are present except the actual death certificate. There is a fading typed note stating the causes of death as:

1. Bronchopneumonia
2. Human Immuno Trophic Virus Syndrome

The absence of this final document is a void that has contributed to the writer's mythical figuration.³ Did he die of HIV/AIDS, or was it a convenient diagnosis? Did he die lonely of a broken heart? Was he tired and demoralized? Whatever the cause, Marechera's demise attracted a groundswell of emotion. Hundreds of young people turned out for his burial. They mobbed the Warren Hills Cemetery, located not too far from the Heroes Acre—a "shit monument" as Marechera called it—constructed by North Korea, where the official heroes are buried. At Heroes Acre, Robert Mugabe⁴ presided over all funerals, which were often elaborate, state-sponsored multi-day affairs that included the public display of the deceased, processions through Harare city center, full military honors and a long-winded speech by Mugabe himself that was broadcast simultaneously on radio and TV. Mugabe alone authored the official biographies and contributions of Zimbabwe's heroes. In a sense, Mugabe was

the de facto biographer of the nation. The government ignored Marechera's funeral and that snub had adverse effects as the decision contributed to Marechera's status as its arch critic. Marechera's death became a moment for young people to vent their anger and frustration. Mugabe's promise of independence was unravelling.⁵ Seven years in, Mugabe was already facing unusually sharp public discontent that even Zimbabwe's rigorous censorship apparatus was unable to stifle entirely.⁶ The death of Marechera—frequently censored for his dissenting views—unleashed a torrent of pent-up public grief and rage over the government's handling of the many political and economic crises that were erupting. Marechera's death is, arguably, one of the first alternative moments in Zimbabwe to allow free expression and unadulterated criticism of the political establishment. In death, Marechera served as the source, or the most influential exponent of anarchic ideas and practices in Zimbabwe. His personal actions—the choices he made, the way he chose to live or move, what he wrote—were all anarchist acts, for Marechera was grappling with the quotidian realities of decolonization, corruption, and everyday life in Harare. Through his very occupation of the city's peripheral spaces, Marechera contradicted the central premises of Mugabe's socialism—he embodied new ways of living in the city, and forced a confrontation of the assumptions of Mugabe's central ideologies.

In death as in life, people rejected Marechera. His friends—who had become politicians, senior civil servants and academics—didn't want to be seen with him. There was a stigma attached to any social association to Marechera as he was an outspoken critic of the new black government. Frustrated by this rejection, Marechera decided to retreat into himself. His powers of observation were deepened by his rejection. He was detached and excluded from his own society and viewed it from within. One element of Marechera's post-independence identity was his opposition to the state and his sense of political persecution.

THERE'S A DISSIDENT IN THE ELECTION SOUP!

I have no ear for slogans

You may as well shut up your arse

I run when it's I LOVE YOU time

Don't say it I'll stick around

I run when it's A LUTA time

I run when it's FORWARD time

Don't say it we'll fuck the whole night

The moon won't come down

At first awkwardly, excruciatingly embarrassing

But with Venus ascending, a shout and leap of joy

When the sheets are at last silent

Don't ask "What are you thinking?"

Don't ask "Was it good?"

Don't feel bad because I'm smoking

They ask and feel bad who are insecure

Who say after the act "Tell me a story"

And you may as well know

Don't talk of "MARRIAGE" if this reconciliation

is to last.

The black heretic of the pre-independence exile movement had developed into the opponent and provocateur of the majority rule black government. Mugabe's government, desperate for self preservation, was turning nasty, harsher and more autocratic to any perceived enemies. Through his writings and public utterances, Marechera single-handedly took the state to task for the suppression of any kind: for the killings of dissidents in Matebeleland, for the increasing nepotism in government, for the uneven distribution of drought relief, for the suppression of the freedom of speech. In the newly independent state, Marechera was a dissident.

Marechera was never at home in his country of birth. He was an outsider in “[his] own biography, in [his] country’s history, in the world’s terrifying possibilities.”⁷ While he remained an outsider in his personal, professional and political capacities, this is also true of the subject positions which he articulates in his literary writings. Similarly, ambivalent relationships characterize Marechera’s narratives and poems, with the narrator or persona functioning as a social double. It is an articulation of marginality which signifies a disruptive disorder from which a new order must emerge. In both the life and the work, the biographical subject and the artistic subject are closely implicated. As far as his life is concerned, Marechera renounced all familial ties and adopted the role of the autonomous, free-thinking visionary writer. He displayed an almost uncanny ability to identify the mood of a time, to give shape and form to what was yet unvoiced.

The point of tracking this process is both to foreground subjectivity in biographical research and also to make sense of Marechera’s conflicted legacy. Marechera’s own person embodies celebrity and politics, spectacle and radicalism, universality and self-aggrandizement. He is aware of the importance of self-fashioning for a political and critical public, and also was acutely conscious of his own iconic status. Most of the details of his life have their source in the author himself. He proved to be an unreliable witness to his own life, often contradicting himself. What endears him to a generation of Zimbabwe’s “born-frees” is his refusal to offer easy answers or present static identities, for his fictional characters or himself. Sometimes he had a genuine fear of the world: invisible forces of law and order, people who had the power to silence the individual by taking him away and throwing him where he was most defenceless.⁸ He once said, “...people threaten to beat me up, but ask me at the same time to ‘scream quietly, Dambudzo, or the international community will hear, or our enemies will hear.’ Now, whenever I’m in trouble, I scream out loud. If I know that, ‘Shit, I’m going to get killed,’

I scream out loud to get attention, so that someone will hear and come running for help.”⁹ Marechera is transgressive and daring while engaging with collective trauma. His writing projects are forms of improvisation—mutable, revealing. His books change with each encounter and can be deployed for different ends by his readers. They extract and recast fragments, quoting and misquoting, and combining multiple texts to constitute new communities and new audiences in changing circumstances. In this way, his texts reflect the constraints and possibilities of the world in which they are produced.

* * *

I call on my namesake, Tinashe Muchuri, to accompany me to Warren Hills Cemetery to visit Marechera’s final address. Neither of us drives, so the trip involves walking through the Harare city center, hopping on and off *kombis*. Due to the slow afternoon traffic, we eventually decided to get a cab, to dodge the fast approaching rush hour. Muchuri, a Shona novelist and poet, has a deep grasp of traditional knowledge systems.¹⁰ He guides me through them, explaining the philosophy of death in Shona culture.

...if someone dies we say *haana kufa*, he is not dead. He is still alive, and living among us. We have a way of taking back that same person into the family so that they perform the role of an archive, the role of guiding us in the living present. We bring back our dead through the ritual of *kurova guva*. After the ritual the spirit of our loved one lives with us and becomes our consultant in many things that may trouble us in the living world. But, not all dead people become consultants or guides. There are certain categories of people who become consultants and these are people who would have lived their lives well before they were elevated to *kuenda kunyikadzimu*

(the world of the spirits). These may possess the living or just guide them without possessing them. Those who died without children are not tolerated and rituals are done to make them forget to come back and be among the living. They are said to have died and their names are dead too. They may only be used when trying to whip some rogue children into line. *Haudi kuroora senge babamunini vako! Unoda kufa uchimbeya nemataundishipi satete vako!* However, there are those who died young before they reached marriageable age called *mabunha* (young girls not boys). These have a special place as their spirits are entertained in the spiritual world and the world of the living. They come back and possess the living, they can be consulted and also come to entertain the living through the *Zvipunha* Traditional Dance. Even if you get married and are not able to sire children or give birth, the living do not tolerate you. It is the reason why in the past there were arrangements done behind your back to have children if you were a man and if you were a woman, a younger sister *chimutsa-mapfihwa* was brought to bear children for the elder sister. The Sarah-Hagggar scenario. All this is done in a way to avert death of the family.

Because we don't know of any child that [Marechera] left, *saka mwana* and *kana ari mwana* we don't expect him to come back, we don't expect his spirit to guide the living because *haana waakasiya*, *haana waanotarisirwa kudzoka achitungamira*. *Muchivanhu zvinonzi mwana mwana haagoni kutungamira matare.*

Rufu rwerombe

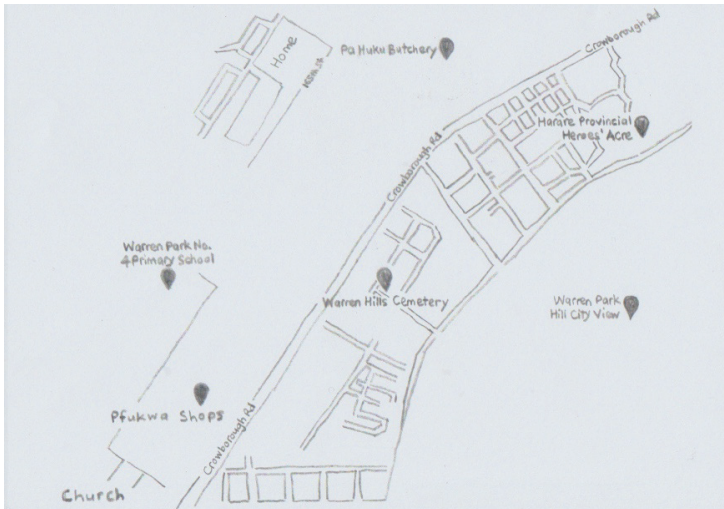
Rufu rwemunhu ari kutanda bostso

Ngatimukanganwei

Chitevera nzira ichi

Haana chaatisiira

Haana kufa akasiya matsimba



Asi tikazvitarisa nerimwe divi Marechera ndibaba vane vana vakatekeshera. Munyori Ignatius Mabasa unoti mabhuku vana vedu. Vana vaya vane vavanotandara navo. Shamwari dzevana vedu vana vedu zvakare. Vanouya mumusha tichitamba nekuseka navo. Vana ava vanosangana nevana vedu kumabasa, kuchikoro, kudzisivondo, nemumabhawa. They are everywhere. Zvino vana ava vaakutsvaga baba vavo. Ndosaka muchiona kune vakawanda vakuenda kumarinda kunotaura nababavavo uye nekugadzirisa parere hama yavo. Zita reuyo akasiya vana haafi. Anorarama nguwa dzose. Marechera raisave rombe. Aive munhu ane muonero wakewo waiva usina vamwewo vaiutsigira. Kana uchirarama, zvakanaka kutsika pakatsika vamwe iwe uchivavarira kuwedzera rwendo netsoka dzako panozoonekwa matsimba ako badzi panozoti vanosara vanoti apa ndipo pawakafamba ukavika ukasiya matsimba. Ichi ndicho chinhu chakagonekwa naMarechera, kubvunza mibvunzo yakakosha inoramba ichiita maungira munzeve dzavapenyu zvinoita kuti vadaire kuizwi rake. Naizvozvo pamusha waMarechera musha usiri werombe.

Working with and through the Marechera archive has always felt cyclical for me. I spent parts of my childhood in Warren Park D, a high-density suburb, adjacent to the cemetery where Marechera is buried. We moved there in 1990–91. Prior to that my childhood was a series of movements, year after year, sitting in the back of hired removal trucks with all the worldly possessions my parents had, in search of better lodgings. Warren Park D was the last stop in my childhood before we would move again, this time, further away from Harare, to a small town where my parents bought their first house. As kids we didn't consider living in a neighborhood near a cemetery a scary place because it was a part of our childhood. We witnessed regular funeral processions and we told each other stories of ghosts and spirits that were often seen walking the parameter walls of the cemetery, carrying their caskets, singing, dancing, and refusing to go, refusing to be forgotten. The renegades. Though it has been many years since I have been back to this neighborhood, the visit to Marechera's grave is the last part of a link in a chain that stretches back.

What do you bring a dead man, a dead Marechera? A crate of beers. A typewriter. A bunch of books. Flowers. Weed. I carry nothing with me nor perform any ritual but only bring stories and laughter. The visit is a long overdue fellowship between us. Two young gravediggers wearing dirty blue overalls and monkey hats lead us to Grave No: 1237, Section E. We did not find a disheveled or untidy grave.¹¹ There was fresh lawn yearning for water, and bare red soil. The graves surrounding Marechera's are inscribed with Bible verses and flowers. Most of their occupants were in the army and the police force and probably died in the line of duty. The gravediggers stood in silence, intrigued by the cast of visitors. They look fascinated. I ask them a torrent of questions: what kind of people visit? How long do they spend at the grave? What do they do when they are here? They scratch their heads. They speak in turn and eventually leave us. We have joined a stream of anonymous people, black and white, who pilgrimage to Marechera's graveside.

A GOTHIC FRAGMENT NEAR WARREN HILLS

I raised a ghest this day yesteryear
Skeleton still in wedding gown and ricegrains graced;
In sulphuric fury & bane of chloride she looked round and
Round Till I called her name.
If socketless eye could tears of molten glass^{pour}/forth upon
My heartless shoulder, she did. We kissed the last of kisses
And without backward glance parted.

My drinking companions, when told, ordered a bumper
And in full mirth we cavorted till daylight
When I woke and remembered t'was still my wretched stagnight.
The dreadful event was still to come.

A butterfly flutters around, flapping its wings before it rests on the headstone which simply says:

WRITER
DAMBUDZO MARECHERA

4. 6. 1952 – 18. 8. 1987

From the perspective of the speculative enterprise, Marechera's death was a necessary death, a death that has had movement, a death that created an unprecedented schism in the Zimbabwean imagination. For the political class it was good riddance, but for multitudes of young people Marechera's death is the awakening. It was a new type of death that refused to be killed, a death which