



Tydskrif

VIR LETTERKUNDE

ARTIKELUITNODIGING

André P. Brink-temanommer – Maart/April 2005

Tydskrif vir letterkunde beplan 'n temanommer ter viering van André P. Brink se sewentigste verjaarsdag op 29 Mei 2005.

- Artikels waarin aspekte van sy werk bespreek word, word ingewag vir die nommer wat in Maart/April 2005 sal verskyn.
- Artikels kan in Afrikaans, Engels, Frans of Nederlands aangebied word en behoort te voldoen aan die algemene vereistes wat vir akademiese navorsing in *Tydskrif vir letterkunde* geld.
- Die keerdatum vir voorleggings is 1 November 2004.

CALL FOR PAPERS

André Brink thematic issue – March/April 2005

Tydskrif vir letterkunde is preparing a thematic issue in celebration of André Brink's seventieth birthday on 29th May 2005.

- Papers in which aspects of his oeuvre are dealt with are invited for this issue to be published in March/April 2005.
- Articles may be submitted in Afrikaans, Dutch, English or French and should comply with the general guidelines for academic research published in *Tydskrif vir letterkunde*.
- The due date for submissions is 1st November 2004.





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Sello Duiker Escape

Sello Duiker (1974) was raised in Soweto. He went to Rhodes University where he majored in History of Art and Journalism. His first novel *thirteen cents* (David Philip, 2000) was awarded the Commonwealth Prize for Best Debut Novel (Africa region). His second novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (Kwela, 2001) was awarded the Herman Charles Bosman Prize.

He rents the servant's room of a house in Meadowlands Zone two for three hundred rands a month. It allows him access to a tap outside and a toilet. He gets up at five-thirty every day. First he boils water for washing over a hot plate and then he takes out his work uniform which is already ironed.

By quarter past six he is already out the door, heading for the station. It is late in March. The air cold and crisp with the promise of autumn. He sneezes into a tissue and wipes his nose. For a while now he has been feeling unwell but he doesn't take it seriously, dismissing the mild flu that makes him sneeze as seasonal change.

At a corner shop he buys a pint of milk and two loose cigarette draws. A taxi drives by belting out "Nkalakatha" by Mandoza. It was all the rage at neighbourhood parties last December. Schoolgirls wearing short skirts distract him. He winks at one of them but she ignores him. The girls chat easily to each other. He watches them hail a taxi, their short skirts lifting as they enter a minibus. He can't help but salivate at their firm thighs. The last woman he had cost him two quarts of beer and she turned out to be lousy in bed. He drains the milk as he walks to the train station.

People pour onto the road in a rush to get the train. He stands at the furthest end of the platform and lights a cigarette. The platform soon becomes full, a congregation of women singing hymns. He scoffs at them and looks the other way. The six-thirty train soon arrives and he jumps on. Every day the same routine, the same rhythm like a machine. He feels drowsy and dozes in his seat. He catches the remnants of a dream he had last night.

It is dark and he is running through the bush. Something is chasing him but he can't be sure what it is. All he can hear is the heavy breathing of an animal that sounds like a predator. He can hear its growling as it approaches. Thorns scratch his bare legs as he runs for his life. He

falls and then suddenly a bright light flashes out of nowhere. It is blinding, more luminous than lightning. It engulfs him.

After a while he startles. A hefty woman next to him smiles.

"Just now you miss your stop," she says, "Long night?"

"More like little sleep," he complains.

He gets off at Park Station in Jozi, the fallen angel of Gauteng. Traffic is rampant, commuters spilling out of the train station like ants on the march. There is no go-slow here. You must walk fast if you want to survive. Muggers are always on the prowl.

A police siren wails. He listens to the cacophony. At a corner shop off Commissioner Street he buys coffee and lights another cigarette. He stands outside the shop and leans against the wall, sipping his coffee. Across the road a middle-aged woman gets mugged. She screams and cries as the assailant disappears in the crowd. Security guards that patrol the streets go after him.

He squashes the paper coffee cup into the bin and goes on his way.

He is surprised to arrive at work and find the shop closed and empty, cardboards and bubble wrap randomly scattered on the floor. He goes to the Halaal butcher next door.

"Kewada, what happened? Where's everyone?"

"Boeta, I think Abrahams just took off," Kewada tells him.

"What? How can he just do that?"

"Sorry chief."

He takes the news and sighs. No matter that it is month end and he has bills to pay, he thinks bitterly. He coughs a little, his throat phlegmy.

A customer walks in. The butcher attends to the woman.

"Thanks, Kewada," he says and leaves.

"Take it easy."

He goes back to the furniture shop again. "Abrahams and sons" a sign reads. In the corner on the floor he can see the till. Bastard, he must have left in a hurry, he says to himself.

For a while he stands outside, considering what to do where to go. He scratches in his pocket for some coins and gives a street vendor seventy cents for a loose draw.

"It's eighty cents," the vendor says.

"Since when?"

"It's eighty cents okay."

He takes out another ten cents with irritation and throws it on the vendor's meagre table. The two exchange dirty looks as he takes the cigarette. He lights up immediately, his thoughts scattered. A cold wind

blows some rubbish in his direction, empty cans and chips packets swirling on the pavement. He rubs his eyes.

He decides to go to Hillbrow and see the mother of his child whom he rarely sees. It takes about forty minutes to walk there from Commissioner Street. He goes through Joubert Park. A lot of people idle in the sun. Women attend to their babies, men lounge on the grass eyeing young students and street children annoy pedestrians as they beg for money. He sighs when he considers asking Bontle for money. But things have been hard. His rent is due tomorrow.

There is a small hill to walk up before he gets to Pretoria Street in Hillbrow. He passes Planet Hillbrow a small nightclub he used to work for as a bouncer for seventy rands a night. But that was a year ago before the Nigerians muscled their way in with drugs. Holding a young prostitute's head over the toilet bowl while she puked her guts out as result of a near fatal overdose was not his idea of a job, so he quit. Even in poverty there is still choice.

He passes the Diplomat, one of Hillbrow's notorious prostitute hotels and drinking spots and takes Banket Street. Near the fire station there is a tall block of flats called Balnagask. They say that it is probably Hillbrow's last decent block of flats. The foyer is clean and the garbage is regularly collected although not a month goes by without the water supply being cut off for at least two days.

He stands outside and buzzes the guard on the intercom system.

"Flat 708."

"She's not here," the guard replies.

"Are you sure?"

"She left this morning."

"Did she take the child with her?"

"Uhm ... I can't remember."

He wants to tell the guard to be sure but he can't.

He looks at his watch. It's after eight. He walks to Yeoville where Bontle works as a stylist in a small hair salon. He'd rather not go there because he has enemies. Two months ago in a bar down Rocky Street called "Upstairs" a friend of his, Khulu, was stabbed in a dispute about girls. They'd gone out for a drink and shot some pool when two girls decided to join them. They had seemed flirtatious enough so he and Khulu bought them drinks. There was laughter, a bit of fondling and the kind of promises that loose girls make. Next thing three guys walk in. Local guys not dark like immigrants. They started slapping the girls around. Naturally the two protested. Knives were pulled out and

Khulu got stabbed in the arm. In the kerfuffle bouncers were called and threw out the five. It was sheer luck that a police van happened to be outside. The three men walked off but not without promising to finish the job.

And now here he is tempting fate by walking down Rocky Street again. But he is no coward. He arrives at a makeshift shop at the market. Bontle sees him in the mirror but carries on plaiting a woman's hair into cornrows. He goes to her awkwardly.

"Bontle," he calls.

She ignores him.

"Bontle please. I need to talk to you.

"Marumo, I'm busy," she dismisses him.

There was a time when all she could think of was Marumo. Maybe it was infatuation. They were still courting and he was still in school. All the neighbourhood boys wanted Bontle but only Marumo won her heart. He liked to think of himself as the Fresh Prince of Meadowlands. But so much had happened since. An unplanned baby that forced Bontle to drop out of school and Marumo to find a job. And a romance that soon turned sour when both realised they weren't prepared to be parents yet. Bontle is bitter about this.

There is a woman at the till reading the paper. She lifts her gaze menacingly. Marumo tries to greet her. She looks at Bontle who suddenly feels embarrassed.

"Marumo what do you want?"

"Can you just give me five minutes of your time?"

"For what Marumo? I'm busy. Just tell me what you want."

The customers start staring.

"You can go outside," the woman at the till says for the customer's sake.

Bontle reluctantly goes outside. It is a little chilly and she's wearing a light sweater. She folds her arms to keep warm.

"So what is it?"

"I just wanted to see you."

"Since when do you just want to see me? What do you want Marumo?"

Courage fails him. He uhms and ahs but doesn't come up with an immediate sentence. He realizes that all the sweet jive talk he once pulled over her like a spell won't work. She remains indifferent. His mouth feels dry.

"Thing is ..."

"What Marumo?" she scolds him. In her eyes he doesn't see a naïve girl anymore but an assured woman. Raising a child can do that to a girl.

"I just wanted to know how Kamo is doing."

"Kamo is fine. I feed and clothe him."

"I know I was supposed to give you money last month, but ..."

"But what Marumo. I'm tired of your excuses."

"Things have been hard."

"And you think they have been easy for me. I'm raising your child alone."

He doesn't say anything. She squeezes her temples to control the anger. He tries to hold her arm but she pushes it away.

"I just wanted to see how you were doing?"

"You're lying. You came to ask me for money again but now you've lost your nerve."

"You always know everything don't you?" he says, wounded.

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

The brief silence that follows answers her question.

"I don't have time for this. I have work to do," she says and turns.

He grabs her by the wrist.

"Bontle wait!" he says holding her tightly.

"What are you going to do? Hit me again because you can't have your way?"

He lets her go.

"You still hold that against me. It happened once."

"Marumo my father didn't pluck me from a tree," she says and walks back inside.

He stands there feeling like a fool. He remembers last night's dream again. He hears hooves and the heavy breathing of something feral. His chest feels tight. He coughs into a tissue. A woman carrying an infant on her back walks by and snaps him out of the dream. He watches her and thinks of his child and the consequences of Bontle bringing him up on her own. A father in exile. From what? From himself? It's too easy to blame life and Marumo knows this. But he just can't get his act together. He sighs and decides to walk back to Park Station to catch a train back to the township.

He feels tired, weighed down by worry. Tomorrow is Friday and Ma Ngubane is going to expect her monthly rent. And at home in Phiri he's been helping out his ailing mother who supports his two sisters with a government pension of five hundred and thirty rands a month. She's

supposed to feed, clothe them and send them to school with that money.
Who can survive on that?

At the gate he finds Ma Ngubane putting out the garbage.

"Sawubona mfana wami."

"Dumela ma." He convinces himself to smile.

"This time of the morning. I thought you'd be at work."

"Yes well there's been a problem," he says unwittingly.

She etches a concerned wrinkle on her brow.

"Nothing serious I hope."

"No nothing serious. I was just feeling a little sick so they sent me home early."

"I hope it's not the flu. They say it's going to be a terrible winter this year."

"It's just a cough. With some bed rest I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Ja, you better rest my son."

"Ma Ngubane can I ask you something?"

"Yes, my child." Perhaps she senses what he's going to say next.

"Did I tell you that Baba was saying you are the best tenant we have ever had? He says you always pay on time and never misuse the water."

"Thanks Mama."

An awkward silence follows. Marumo feels cornered.

"So what did you want to ask?"

"You know I forgot. It wasn't important."

He understands what he has to do. She goes back inside. He closes the gate and makes his way to his room. There's a quart of beer lying cool under the bed. He considers drinking it but decides it's not going to help matters. And besides, once he starts drinking, one quart leads to another and there's no money for that. He feels frustrated. Where will he get the money for tomorrow's rent?

He thinks about Bontle. He never did right by her. And love him she did. Before she got pregnant they'd made plans to finish school and study further so that they could do things their parents only dreamt about, like owning a car and going away on holiday once a year. This was the sum of their youthful dreams. She failed. Or rather he failed. It matters not any more because Bontle got pregnant. And that was the end of their dreams. And now he is faced with a baby to look after – but he doesn't have a job.

He considers another option. He's been quietly ruminating about it. And even though he tries to ignore it, he can't. The situation calls for desperate measures. He feels as though life is sucking him in again and

the beast in his dreams stalking him. He takes out a small box from under the bed. Bontle, I hope you understand he says to himself. He takes out a small pistol from the box. The last time he used it was a year ago and that got him in jail with a suspended sentence for housebreaking. It's hard to clean up your act when life is against you, he sighs, loading the gun.

He is already thinking of a hardware store in Phiri that opens till late. He knows that they are always busy and that the security is slack. He starts loading the gun. In his drawer next to the bed he takes out a balaclava. There is a bible on the bedside table. He turns it over feeling exiled from God. In the end he decides to open the quart of beer. If only to feel a little numb for what he is about to do. The room suddenly feels small and cramped like a prison cell. Except in this case the gun is the prison warden. He swallows quickly, draining the beer. It burns his throat a little. The beast that was chasing him in his dreams has caught up with him. He can hear its feral scream. It makes the hairs on his body stand on their ends. But this is no time to be overcome with fear if he is about to do what needs to be done. It is night when he puts the gun in his pocket and proceeds to leave the room.