

VALHALLA ARTS

*"When the burning flame of spirit is ignited, it will
transform any soul - no matter what the circumstances."
(MUSA E. ZULU, 1999)*

POETRY

A 21 GUN SALUTE! - In Three Seven-Volley Rounds -



A 21 Gun Salute

To the 21 amazing and memorable years
With their rewards and blessings that life bears
Unveiling secrets which have allowed me to move on and heal
Mounted in dignity on these majestic wheels of steel
That have supported, lifted and brought me here today
From over the hills and far away

A 21 Gun Salute

To the power of love that always finds the way
Where our fears, doubts and reservations are kept at bay
To its rhythm that beats creating sweet melody
Adding spice and flavor to the tunes of an old everlasting rhapsody
That gently soothes the impossible to the simple possible
Magically transforming improbabilities into a resolute probable

A 21 Gun Salute!

To all battles fought, lost and won
Testing whether our soul character remains solid or torn
Against the winds of change that hover across these plains
Leaving bellowing flames illuminating the joys and pains
Whispers of glory days when we played and embraced our childhood
Memories of lost-loved-ones who toiled with us in building this neighborhood!

(Previously unpublished)

On the 20th of April 2016 I am celebrating 21 years in the wheelchair. 'A 21 Gun Salute' accords me the pleasure and honor to celebrate in 21 beautiful rounds these special 21 years. This musical poem, in its three explosive stanzas of seven-volley salutes each, captures the essence of what has been happening during this rollercoaster, rock-and-roll phase of my life. To write a celebratory poem like this one is such a pleasure - a special honor!

The mighty Teddy Pendergrass, in his golden masterpiece song "In My Time" - penned by the greatest songwriters of my times; Gerry Goffin and the late Linda Creed - and ably produced by the maestro Michael Masser, says:

I've won some and I've lost some
But as dreamers don't complain
We keep reaching out for passion
No matter what the pain'

In these 21 years I've come to embrace the fact that I am only human - and that sometimes things can become very difficult for me to comprehend or shoulder. These years have come with critical lessons that have taught me so much about both myself and the world around me. One of these lessons which I have adopted through the storms of my times is to 'keep reaching out for passion, no matter what the pain'. During these years I have painted words, poems and sketches with an insouciant passion that simply refuses to be marshaled - and have enjoyed it all. This path has only found me such amazing strength to face my circumstances head-on with just one aim - to break through all solid barriers that may come my way. I've come to confront my fears with a single resolution to use them as my inspirations - to dream and complain less. Life has taught me to observe and salute my passing moments - good or bad - as part of my challenging changes that will always call on me to rise as a phoenix always does from the ashes. I've learnt to redefine, to improvise, to realign - to compromise sometimes, to hold on, let go and sacrifice at times - winning some and losing some ...

This philosophy towards life has enabled me to win even in great loss, to smile through the pain and to walk tall in permanent paralysis. 'A 21 Gun Salute' captures my own highs and lows, and is my personal version of the classic 'In My Time' - my way!

(MUSA E. ZULU; 2016)

On The 20th of April

On the 20th of April it is an Anniversary
‘Remembrance Day’ it says in my diary
A celebration and an examination of the changes
The story of a boy and a man on the pages

On the 20th of April I cried and I wept
Feeling the cold in the wind as I was swept
For walking these valleys was not just another act
It was a part of me and that was a fact!

On the 20th of April I reflect on a journey
That not only myself but others who are many
Travel and live through its fears and pains
Hoping for a home and love on these lonely plains

On the 20th of April to myself I made a promise
To cry, heal and move on in peaceful bliss
To battle with the fog that hums in crazy song
And find the clear skies that stretch along

On the 20th of April I assured my father and my brother
And I said the same words to my sister and my mother
That my world was beautiful and always will be
That with time I’d open my wings and fly like a bee

On the 20th of April I struck a deal
I made a wish and I wrote my will
To live my life, represent myself and be snappy
Today I am alive and my story is happy!

Every year on this day I am called upon to account
For it is on this day that I come to find myself
And remember that it is me and always will be
On the 20th of April

(Poem sampled from ‘The Language of Me’)

“If ever I were to settle down one day to compile my ‘*Greatest Hits*’, this poem would definitely be the introduction. I wrote ‘*On The 20th of April*’ to commemorate the day I was paralyzed and to keep the promise to celebrate it as a moment of change in my life.

I composed this poem on a work visit to Port Shepstone, KwaZulu-Natal back on 20 April 1999. I still remember that afternoon when it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I just went for paper and started scribbling - finishing it in two or three takes – editing and all. I included it in ‘*The Language of Me*’ as part of the books’ introduction. Over the years a lot of people have commented on this piece, with many remarking about how it had moved them to commemorate and celebrate their own days of change. I was also very happy when Glen Cowley, my late publisher at UKZN Press, described it as ‘*iconic*’!

The 20th of April is indeed a very special day for me – and with the passing years it has truly come to symbolize my moment of inspiration. All my books, together with most of my other creative materials (including my old Valhalla Arts website and the Valhalla Arts Brochure), were launched on this day in different years. Every year, on this day, I visit the road and wall where I crashed back in 1995 – to meditate and remember. I have also always made it a part of the day’s celebration program that I visit radio stations for interviews. This is where I get the pleasure to read this poem out to listeners and also to talk about my evolving journey through these amazing changes of our lives.

In the words of the legendary R Kelly, this poem is truly my ‘*Number One Hit*’!

THE MELODY of ABILITY - Let Us Be!

Let us be
Who and what we want to be
In a free world of no prisons and chains
Where cheeks are not bleeding with stains
And we see what we want our eyes to see
Summer flowers that bloom for a busy bee

Let us be
All that our hearts and souls wish us be
It all begins with stereotypes and prejudice
And before long it turns into sheer malice
Then a child is lost in the open raging sea
Where they drown away never to be

Let us be
Open your blind eyes and you shall see
That we walk tall despite these limitations
Life is a beautiful mystery of inspirations
The miracle of a blind man shouting 'I can see'
A deaf maestro conduction a symphony session in G

Let us be
And it won't cost you a bloody fee
Equality should not be a thorn in your shoe
We are just like you and can do the things you do
And if you give us a chance you will indeed see
That a lost child can survive the open sea

(Poem sampled from 'Wheels on the Soul of my Shoes')

"I wrote *'The Melody of Ability – Let Us Be!'* in 2002 as a cry to be free. In a world full of negative stereotypes, misconceptions and marginalization of disability one sometimes really just tries hard not to breakdown. Most people with disabilities survive by fighting everyday against a sometimes very hostile environment which stifles their personal aspirations and social freedoms. I wrote this poem in support to the voice of this sector which for a long time has been saying 'if you would just let us be we could be free to be all that we can ever be'. I just wanted to join hands with my counterparts and break free!

On International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2004, the slogan "**Nothing About Us Without Us!**" was adopted globally by people with disabilities to communicate the idea that no policy should be decided by any representative without the full and direct participation of members of the disabled sector which is directly affected by that policy. The motto relies on this principle, and has ever since been used by the disability movement to achieve its full participation and equalization of opportunities.

In early 2012, still inspired by the 'melody' of my poem and the wave of disability activism that had been ushered by the adoption of this mighty slogan, I got the opportunity to work with an excellent young music producer, Vincent – aka 'Vinny' - Mdluli my brother-in law. I approached him to discuss how we could capture and release the moods of both the poem and slogan in song. He was game and we agreed to record it at his Vinny Production Studios in Durban. He wrote new lyrics and the song was delivered by three powerful young female singers signed under the 'Vinny stable'.

I did no writing or singing on that day - but sat quietly to listen, advise and marvel as the producer and his trio executed the brief so precisely. At the end of the two-day jamming session we had successfully recorded our own pounding song. We titled it *'Nothing About Us Without Us'* and was performed for the first time on stage at the TRIBUTES Excellence Awards gala dinner held in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal in August 2012. The trio performed it to the delight of the audience at the occasion – they danced.

I hope you will also sing along!

Link to: **[Nothing About Us Without Us!](#)** (mp3)

ZULU

A Zulu is not only about the pounding drums and dance
A Zulu cannot only be defined by his spear and shield
Nor does his courage on the battlefield portray his whole nature

A Zulu talks and a Zulu listens
His silence is his peace and his voice his command
His eyes are always focused on building his world
And in them burns the spark of his inner strength
The wrinkles on his face mark his determination
To plant a tree that feeds generations in unity

This is the secret of his wisdom
His master plan revolves around family
A Zulu shares his soul with those around him
This is the wood that fuels his fires
The winds of change only see his flame burning higher
For his sense of togetherness is the bolt of his culture

His history is about survival
The art of continuity through the tides of destruction
His legend tells of a mystery of diversity in unity ...
Oneness

(Poem sampled from 'The Language of Me')

“I wrote *‘Zulu’* in early 2000 when the whole world was still gripped in New Millennium celebrations - an exciting time when all of us were emerging from a past into a new future. Such moments can create space for deep reflections on self definition and social introspection. I guess this time inspired a desire in me to give my own take on my cultural identity and definition as a Zulu person. Years of writing poems have made me notice that there are poems that come very quietly – and those that come with pounding drums. *‘Zulu’* came with thundering sounds, taking me straight into myself and in the process unveiling how I wish to define my roots, self and being – revealing the pride with which I hold my culture and how much I will defend it against popular misconceptions and distortions. This is my direct challenge to other cultures of the world that *‘however you have come to define me over time - this is who I say I am’*.”

In April 2007 Valhalla Arts staged an art exhibition to celebrate my 12 years in the wheelchair. The exhibition was held in partnership with the Centre for Creative Arts at the University Of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg. For the display I assembled a collection of artwork with strong Zulu-ethnic themes, symbols and orientations. All were framed in material and colors chosen to complement and project the subject matter they sought to portray. A good old friend, who taught Zulu as a second language at Hillcrest Boys High (a prestigious local private school) requested to attend the exhibition with a group of boys from his class. I gladly obliged, and the day finally came.

His boys, all of them white, came dressed in Zulu war-gear. I thought this was not only beautiful but also symbolic of a new era where the young generation is open to learning and embracing our multi-faced cultures. As they entered the exhibition hall one boy started beating the traditional Zulu drum as the others advanced chanting my poem *‘Zulu’*, with each boy after the other taking a line in the poem. My friend had secretly helped them with rehearsing carefully choreographed Zulu war-dance movements which they executed like gladiators as they came closer. The boys then attacked the last stanza as a raging chorus of warriors - guests at the exhibition just roared! It was theatre at its best and I was completely floored!



This poem captures the essence of my purpose as a Zulu person – to share my soul and culture with those around me, to mobilize them around a moment where we can all come together as children of a common ancestor to share in a unifying objective of building nationality, peace and oneness!

***THE RHYTHM of YOU & I
(Song for my Audience)***

When in front of my audience
I am the dance
And my audience my music
I am the sound of the note
And my audience the symphony
I am the conductor
And my audience the orchestra

When in front of my audience
I am the soaring eagle
And my audience the stretching skies
I am a twinkling star
And my audience the vast galaxy
I am a swinging whale
And my audience the deep blue sea

When in front of my audience
I am the crackling lightning
And my audience the rumbles of my thunder
I am the young cadre on the frontline
And my audience the emotions of my struggle
I am the beauty of a song at dawn
And my audience the true meaning of my freedom

When in front of my audience
I am just one color in the rainbow
And my audience is the whole spectrum
Together we create the completeness of diversity
And mine is to sing in one clear voice of unity
I am just a player in search of a dream
And my audience the wider stage of society

When in front of my audience
I am defined – as us!

(Poem sampled from 'Wheels on the Soul of my Shoes')

“This poem is one of those transforming opportunities that my life as a creative artist has presented to me this far. I love music and in *‘The Language of Me’* I do confess that singing is not one of the blessings the Almighty granted me – I just cannot hold a note. I have always wished to sing, to use my words to make music and translate my lines into melodies.

I finally got to do just that with *‘The Rhythm of You & I - Song for my Audience’*. I penned this poem in late 2007 to celebrate my moments with the audience. I love my audiences and will do anything to rise and talk. Each invitation I have received to address people has always left me a changed and better person. With this poem I sought to celebrate this intimate relationship and to note the mutual inspirations between myself, as the speaker, and my audiences as the platform on which I am enabled to pass my messages in stage performances. I love this poem and I was very happy to later choose it as the lyrics for my first song when the opportunity to ‘sing’ my lines finally came my way seven years later in 2014.

I was excited to return to the Vinny Productions Studios, happy that this time around I was to ‘sing’ my own words to the sounds of music which took me back to the times of Teddy Pendergrass, Barry White and Bobby Wormack – in the flavor of the Old School. Vinny was exceptional and the young maestro nailed it in a few takes. I did my best to complement Vinny’s genius by taking the moment in my stride - belting out my lines to the crescendo of horns, violins and drums. It was a thrilling moment of creativity and he told me a few times to take it easy – I was beside myself, lost in the feeling. Later he rearranged the song and introduced thunderous sounds of a rousing ‘standing ovation’ to give the production a ‘live’ feel. In a single day we had a beautiful original song of our own. We had successfully brewed a perfect storm and in the end the song *‘Standing Ovation – Song for my Audience’* was born!

Later I roped in a young videographer friend Mholi Zuma to come on board and assist me in creating the video of the song. The result was equally excellent and very rewarding to me and Mholi. I was left truly inspired - these young men will blow your mind!

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to serenade you with my *‘Song for my Audience’*.

Link to: [**Song for my Audience**](#) (MP3)

Link to: [**Song for my Audience**](#) (Video)

I Am What I Am!

I am an African

The raging beat of a warrior's drum
The rumbling tremor of a buffalo stampede
The roar of the Lion King in the quiet jungle
I am beauty and pride coated in dark shades
I am gold, diamond and every other precious stone
In the depth of the furrows and the caves is my ancestor's bone
I am the mountains, the running rivers and the trickling streams
I am the rain and the soil, the flower and the bee
From horizon to horizon, coast to coast – all is me!

I am a broken African

A sad story of pain, fear and tears narrated by an old man
'I've seen many moons through these wrinkled eyes', he says
I am the horn of a rhino stolen by a poacher from the other world
The broken wings of an eagle tumbling and drowning in a fall
I am the family swept away by a wave that brought a stranger to my shores
He spoke of love and friendship yet exchanged my beads for chains
Taking with his gushing wave my birth, my land, my flight!
I am the songbird singing hoarsely inside a nest of steel bars
The Kingdom and the Heavens razed to ashes in a blaze of change

I am a rising African

The dark clouds that blind the day, the loud thunder of a brewing storm
I am the burning larva running wild from an exploding volcano – I am war!
A river of a nation with its dark waters meandering to the raging ocean
A colony of stars that captains a lost vessel out of the deep blue
I am the attempts of a toddler stumbling at the foot of a stairway
The flap of a phoenix rising from fire, the beauty of a song at dawn
I am the worm that ducks the early-bird, still waters that run deep
I am unity in diversity - from Cape to Cairo I paint the rainbow
I am an African and strong, from your broken promise I rise reborn

I am a proud African
The stretching blue skies tell the glory tales of my yesteryear
Unveiling the mysteries of the sacrifice and the bellowing bull
Telling the secrets of the grave and my fears of a hooting owl
The blowing wind whispers the memories of a happier time
When naked children splashed in ponds and frolicked in open fields
And a virgin clutched proudly on a reed, warriors salivating in awe
The crackling lightning screams the story of the night of light
When grown men sat around to pass the calabash, debating family and politics
Falling to their knees at the majestic sight of their King
'Bayede Ngonyama! – Hail to the King'

Beka indlebe izwisisile lelozwi
Lend me your ear and listen to the echo of the voices
Zwana umzabalazo wesizwe nezinhlupheko
Feel the struggle of a nation and its pains
Inzukayikeyi nezinswelo nendlala
The confusion, the needs and the hunger
Kepha kulesosicinacina bayahlangana
Yet within those confines they come together
Wazalwa uNhlango, yabuya iNkululeko!
Giving birth to unity, resurrecting freedom!

I am what I am
A song of freedom given birth inside the dead-quiet of your dungeons
A single voice of inmates locked away in separate cold cells
The melody of a nightingale spreading its wings to a new day
I am a nomad who moves his empire with the changing seasons
My riches are my beads and skins, gold and diamond the beauty of my soil
I am the lost ivory returned to the tower – pride restored
A virgin island not fertile and open to alien innuendos
I am what I am and I sing to the beat of 'I am' and 'I am'
I am an African so just let me be, for that I truly am ...

I am what I am - I am an African!

(Poem sampled from 'The Language of Me')



'*I Am an African*' is the title of an iconic speech made by former South African President Thabo Mbeki on the occasion of the passing and adoption of The Republic of South Africa Constitution Bill in Cape Town on the 8th of March 1996. This was probably one of the most inspiring orations of all times. The speech has since become a symbol of national pride and personal resolve not only amongst Africans but other people of the world in search of self-definition as well.

Just like Mbeki's speech, the poem '*I Am What I Am!*' allowed me to capture my history in sweeping pen strokes which came naturally and spontaneously. Once the first line was written it was a given that the entire poem was going to carve and cast itself on solid rock and free space. This is one of those poems where the writer is obliged to just sit back and let the rollercoaster of emotions speed away without constraints or restraints. A poem like this one takes one very far and way too deep; through a trance where the past, present and future are paralleled in a world where joy, pain, sunshine and rain are mashed into one-and-the-same time-and-space dimension. It forces both writer and reader to be happy yet sad - its African subject to feel defeated yet triumphant, a man to realize in the mirror that he is lost yet found, a commentator to shoot straight yet attempting to be politically correct - a nation to realize its power yet acknowledging it is weakened - an era to flash its memories gone-by, now and forever!

Link to: [**Thabo Mbeki's 'I Am an African' Speech**](#)

THE LAST WORD

Part 1: I (One!)

I
My
Myself
Mine
Me,
One

Words
Sounds
Touch
Feelings
Mine -
One!

My
Pain
Joy
Love
Peace;
One

Fire
Wind
Rain
Ice
Myself
One!

Life
Time
Death
Eternity
Me ...
One

I Am One!

Part 2: I (Am ...)

“I am ... one of a kind ... unique... yet a part of unity. Within the small universe of my being is embodied the whole vast miracle of God’s creation ... life and death ... past, present and future ... time and eternity. I am just a note in the symphony of life ... but through me the entire orchestra finds its harmony.”

(Part 1 & 2 sampled from ‘The Language of Me’)

Poetry Review

By Ken Junior Lipenga

(Edited)

One of the most striking aspects of MUSA E. ZULU's language is indeed how personal it sometimes becomes. His pains and losses are expressed in a metaphorically rich and impassioned voice that effectively communicates the experiential from his unique perspective. His narrative style is remarkable for its emotional appeal - highlighting the intimate and centrality of language in the author's projection of his self. In the emotional narration of his journey, Zulu creates a path through which his readers can enter his world. His language appeals affectively to the reader in an attempt to bring us as close to the experiential encounter as is textually possible

Zulu's poetry contains a variety of themes, some of which are personal ones like the subject of his disability whilst others are directed to a broader audience. His poems are not only on the topic of disability, but rather embody a sense of pride that highlights the poet's acknowledgement of his cultural identity. Some of his poems address a need for restitution that the poet has, a project of self-reconstruction in which he draws on various sources in order to reassert himself as a worthy human being. Through poetry, he displays an awareness of his place in the world around him, while also recognizing his position in his nation's history as well as the plight of others around him. Such assertions of belonging and of reflection on his culture are part of what gives his work appeal to other people - according his texts additional merit.

Two examples from Zulu's poetry highlight this point. In the poem '*Zulu*' the poet sets out not only to speak of himself as a proud descendant of the house of Zulu, but also to correct the stereotypical image that has come to be accorded to his people - aggressive, war-mongers and uncultured. The subject matter of the poem mirrors his cultural consciousness, displaying a trend that James Olney sees as unique to African autobiographies where the artist evokes the ancestral-dependant motive as something that points to an entirely un-Western relationship between the individual and his past. Zulu takes a slightly different perspective on this argument. In this poem Zulu attempts to assert, through verse, the multifaceted nature of a Zulu person, drawing attention to attributes that are rarely part of the stereotyped image but which are nonetheless features that create pride - evoking the image of a Zulu as a nurturing masculine figure.

For the poet, telling the story of his culture is one way of countering stereotypes that emerge when other people tell it. This is an aspect that appears in the poem *'I Am What I Am!'* which is a highly optimistic image of the African subject. The poem is written in the context of the poet's personal struggle and in the spirit of the African Renaissance. Through this poem, Zulu expresses the overlaps he sees between freedom fights of disability and blackness – a vivid image that indicates the way racism and ableism can entrap the person if one allows these prejudices to have such an effect on one's sense of self-worth.

One of the themes of *'I Am What I Am!'* is that of pride in being an African, suggesting African people's resilience and ability to rise from slavery and colonization. The figure in his poem is an African subsequently broken, rising and proud - a majestic figure couched in romantic metaphors of the wilderness of the continent. This poem also speaks to the poet's awareness of his place in the world. It is through images such as these that the African life narrative-form implies, by its nature and displays in its performance, a communality of existence that is unknown in the Western world. Like his other poem *'Zulu'*, this poem also indicates a profound awareness of the poet's place in history, which consequently emphasizes this spirit of communality.

Zulu's text and poetry stand as a testament to narrative enablement, creating a path through which his readers can enter his world. His creative words do not only speak to his own soul, or to disabled people alone, but resonate with and address other people outside the text. His lines ultimately draw attention to one feature for which he stands out – optimism. Zulu's language reflects a potent positivity that is probably responsible for his career as a public speaker.

(‘Edited Review’ sampled from Ken Junior Lipenga’s Dissertation on ‘Narrative Enablement: Constructions of Disability in Contemporary African Imaginaries’ presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University; 2014)