How Poetic Language Enacts Agency

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List of Acronyms:

FZ= Fiona Zerbst

PYDV= Phillippa Yaa de Villiers

BLV= Bronwyn Law-Viljoen

JT= Johan Thom

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BLV: Thank you to the two poets, my interlocutors today, Fiona and Phillippa, and to all of you who are out there virtually. Today we are going to talk about poetry, agency, poetry and language, agency and language. Hopefully you will all participate in the discussion. I will open with a few remarks, and we will have some reading by Phillippa and Fiona, which I think is important for us as a way of enacting what we are thinking through.

I was listening to some of the comments made in the previous session. Johan, you remarked about the way in which knowledge extracts something from the body. I want to link that to some of what we're going to talk about in this session. What does poetry, as a particular kind of knowledge, as a particular enactment of knowledge, as a particular form of knowledge, extract from us physically and in other ways? I want to unpack what we mean when we talk about agency in relation to language.

Right at this moment there is a raging discussion about the offensive posters that were put up by the DA in Phoenix. If you look at those posters, you'll notice that they're comprised only of language. There are no images, nothing visual to offend anybody, and yet the language of those posters has galvanised intense debate and objection. If there was ever any doubt that language and agency are embedded within one another, one would simply need to look at a story like this. I want to think then about how language does that, how it galvanises and enacts agency.

There is a long history of the relationship between language and agency in linguistic anthropology and philosophy. We know that speech as an act always involves a form of agency: when we speak, we express something, we change something, we enact something, we display something, we reveal something, we hide something, and we betray something.

Many philosophers and thinkers have tried to unpick the complex knot of this relationship. A useful definition of agency from Alessandro Duranti goes something like this, 'it is agency, it is the property of those entities that exercise some degree of control over their own behavior'. And then: 'whose actions in the world affect other entities (and sometimes their own)', and finally: 'whose actions are the objects of evaluation, for example in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome' (Duranti 2005:453). So, it involves control over behaviour – one's own as well as the behaviour of others. It involves action in the world that affects one's position in the world and the position of others in the world, and it leads to an evaluation of where one stands in relation to other people, to ideology and to value.

Duranti goes on to say that one can think of this relationship between language and agency as having two dimensions, and this is where it gets really interesting for the two poets that we're going to talk to today. These two dimensions are performance and encoding, and by performance we mean not necessarily performance in a narrow theatrical sense, but rather performance as any kind of enactment (Duranti 2005:454-455). The enactment of agency is a performance of agency.

We have to ask, then, what is the relationship between poetic language and agency? This opens the discussion for Fiona and Phillippa. Here is the opening line of a poem by Fiona called 'Tools', in the collection *In Praise of Hotel Rooms* (2020): 'Tired, as I am of useful words – words like tools, blunted, numb'. I want to focus on the use of the word 'tools' in relation to language. Then, in Phillippa's collection, *Ice Cream Headache in My Bone: Poems* (2017) the poem 'Polite conversations' contains the following line: 'While I was sleeping a forest of words grew up in my room'.

My first question is in light of those two pieces from each of your poems. What is poetic language and how is it different from other modes of discourse? How do you think of language when you write poetry? What does it enact, what does it encode that makes it different from other modes of discourse?

FZ: Yes, thank you. It's actually quite an interesting dilemma because words are considered tools. We use them every day, but as you rightly say, as soon as you start writing poetry you move away from that. So, you're moving away from everyday discourse, from the known, and trying to see where you can take language to when you write. I think poetry is innately transgressive because you're forced to think about your choice of words, and you make formal and linguistic choices that are quite deliberate and intentional. Just by doing that, you move away from everyday mundane language as a sort of blunt tool that you wield thoughtlessly in conversation, as something that goes from cliché to cliché. For me poetry is trying to get away from that to something more interesting, but yes, it's a tricky one to articulate.

BLV: Phillippa?

PYDV: It is tricky because we have to do it in words [laughs], and language itself is a communal resource. As we're using these words, we're imagining a person on the other end who is also using them to make a different sense. For me, the thing about poetry and the kind of individualist voice within it, is that no poet can be the same as another. It speaks to the self and one's experience of life in general

is never going to be the same as anyone else's; and yet language is this communal resource and there's always an interplay between the self and the other, the self and the collective.

BLV: Thank you. I'm going to push this inquiry a little further to try to understand how poetic language enacts agency – if indeed it does – and what are the particular qualities of agency that poetic language is able to both perform and encode? I want to veer slightly left of where we're going at the moment and quote something from Kristeva who has written about poetic forms of language. She says that literature, in particular, is a remove from what she calls the depository of thin linguistic layers. Perhaps this is something like what you're talking about in relation to language in its ordinary sense, as 'tools'. You are thinking about the particular relationship between the individual and language that poetry enacts. It takes us outside of what she calls the 'layers' of a 'thin linguistic discourse' that we all live in on a daily basis. It involves the sum of unconscious subjective and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction, and construction. It is a productive violence.

Kristeva is suggesting that poetic discourse is capable of simultaneously constructing and destroying something. I don't use the word 'deconstructing' because that has a particular philosophical strand. Rather, poetry is quite literally able to construct and destroy at the same time, to appropriate and to produce violence in some way. I wonder if you would talk to that a little. How is poetic language able to enact a kind of violence, or point to and interrogate a violence embedded in language?

PYDV: Well I come back to the point you made from Duranti about agency being a change that gets wrought by the existence of something, by bringing something into existence. That change is sometimes violent because it's disrupting something that was created before, something that existed but might now never be the same again. That is what I think poetry has done for me as I've grown, and as I grow with poetry it shows different ways for me to see the world. Especially in relation to this idea of appropriation and the various power struggles that we're engaged in.

Poetry often destroys something that you hold dear – an attitude, a point of view. It suddenly disrupts and changes that, and that is sometimes a violent feeling. One is then left in a kind of void where the structure that language presented to us no longer exists. So we have to create something else or just flounder in it for a bit.

BLV: Fiona?

FZ: Yes, I agree with Phillippa, I think there is something essentially radical in it. When you were talking earlier about the body, that resonated with me because I've written a poem that I wasn't going to read today, but I think that I should. It is called 'Song for the Body' and it shows an interesting relationship between the body and language that is quite radical [laughs].

BLV: This would be a good time to read that poem then Fiona.

FZ: [Reads]

Song for the Body

Do you have time for the body,
its fevers and shaking strings,
its longings held and knuckled
beyond a scoop of cravings?

This is not home but makeshift:
the world laid flat, a truck stop
for the body's low vibrations
before a long, hot journey.

Can you avoid the shavings,
abrasions, lines of sight,
these pillows, boards of bone?
Presumably it's final

as an infant's first abandonment.
Where do you go from there?
Cradle your given language
in the telephone of your hair.

BLV: Thanks Fiona. I think what happens in that poem is what happens in many of your poems, that you are defamiliarising not just the body, but other things around the body, in the material and physical world. This perhaps is something like using the word violence, but perhaps it's too strong a word for what we're talking about here. Phillippa, you talk about a disruption, something that unsettles what we understand to be a given about the world. For example, Fiona, your phrase 'the telephone of your hair'...

FZ:

Presumably it's final

as an infant's first abandonment.
Where do you go from there?
Cradle your given language
in the telephone of your hair.

BLV: When I hear lines like that, I see two forms of disruption. One is a literal disruption that you're describing in the abandonment experience by the infant, the first abandonment that the infant experiences. It's the abandonment of leaving the mother's body or perhaps the first time the mother or the caregiver is away from the infant. That's a deeply traumatic moment, we're told by psychoanalysis, that moment of separation is a kind of a violence enacted upon the body of the child.

FZ: Yes, it is.

BLV: So, you're describing this relationship to the body as holding those kinds of experiences – of abandonment or loss. At the same time there is a second disruption that is in the language itself. On the one hand, a material physical disruption – the disruption of abandonment – and on the other a defamiliarising irritation, though not in the negative sense, but in the sense that you poke something with a stick or lift a rock to see what's underneath it.

In a line like, 'cradle your given language / in the telephone of your hair', you take the familiar – an old style telephone that sits cradled against the ear – and shake and rattle it a little, linking the familiar to something that it is not. The telephone that is now hair that is a telephone. At the same it is language – the telephone is cradled – language is cradled. There are several breaks with the real, apparent, immediate world in those few lines. Phillippa is there something you want to read?

PYDV: The baby is also cradled. I love the verbs. In powerful poetry the verbs work very hard and can be understood in different contexts. The words carry you somewhere. They push you to different levels of understanding of how we do things because poetry 'does', poetry makes in the world, poetry is making. I love that, I'm so glad you got to read that poem because it wasn't on the list and I wanted it [laughs].

BLV: Phillippa do you want to bat something back to Fiona by reading a poem?

PYDV: Okay, this is going into something different. Because you're talking about language as an instrument of something, this poem that I'd like to read – a prose poem called 'Don't mention the War' – is a bit of a blunt instrument. There's a bit of a trigger warning here, violence …

PYDV: [Reads]

Don't mention the war.
Don't mention that your grandparents escaped gas ovens, think of something nice to say, anyway it was long ago and you're still here almost! Don't mention the men in balaclavas who beat you and your husband in front of your three-year-old child before locking you in the boot of your car. Crime brings down property values so don't mention it, don't mention Marikana and who gets what, and don't try to come up with a theory or make some claim about the relationship of crime to poverty, you've never been poor so make do with your lot and don't mention the robbers that crossed the double stand adventure garden and forced themselves into the French windows of your three-bedroomed farmhouse and dragged you out of your dream under the duck-down duvet. You pinched your lips together stifled sounds as they manhandled you around the house demanding money and kicked away the teacher's salary in your wallet because it was not enough. Don't mention that you looted your child's money box for the one hundred dollars that her aunt in the US sent to her in increments of ten dollars per birthday and Christmas for the past five years, don't mention them (especially to the child! She'll be FURIOUS). Don't mention that they tied you up and threatened to shoot you (Ag, there was no sign of a gun and they were young and sounded foreign) and don't mention that after they left you dragged yourself (and the chair you were tied to) to the panic button and pressed it with your chin and the security company took forty minutes to come and so you had ample time to think and mostly you thought
Wonderful! I am alive!

BLV: The poem sets about mentioning everything it tells us not to mention. In this sense it is a naughty poem, or we could say that the poetic language is naughty language because it deliberately unsettles and provokes. It says, 'in fact I will mention', all the way through the poem, which is pointing to the need to not say something or the desire that someone should not say something. The poem says everything that it tells one not to say.

The poem both hides and reveals, not only an event, but also a set of values. Something is contained in the poem that is immediate, visible, and tangible, at the same time that something in the poem is invisible, intangible and buried. Would you say that is part of what's happening in this poem Phillippa?

PYDV: Yes, it makes it sound much cleverer than I would have ever thought [laughs]. I never realise what I am going to discover when I write a poem. It comes out of me and then I go, 'Oh, is that what it was!?' [Laughs]. It's exactly what you're saying, there is something transgressive about it, as Fiona says, because you

consciously do not want to go there but it takes you there anyway, whether you like it or not you're dragged along, and this other thing is revealed.

BLV: This speech act then is a speech act that is 'don't mention'. If we say, 'someone's coming to dinner, don't mention …', we're wanting to keep something secret, so it's a speech act that immediately enacts the secret or instructs someone to enact the secret. If you say don't mention the war, you've already mentioned the war, you're asking the speaker of the language to keep a secret, but in asking them to keep the secret you bring the secret to the surface. So, if you say don't mention the war, the war is now mentioned, the war is now present and has become enacted into discourse through that phrase.

On the other hand, what's also happening in this poem is a tension between different sets of values. On the one hand there is a speaker somewhere in this poem who is saying, well you live in a nice house, and you had a home invasion but that's not so bad because there are other things that are much worse. There are other people who perhaps don't live in nice houses and so can't have a home invasion in quite the same way that you can. There's an enactment of a set of values and an ideology underpinning this poem. At the same time the poem – which is why I call it a naughty poem – says, well I don't really care about the values that I'm going to disrupt here because I'm going to tell you about something terrible that's happened. There is a back and forth, a grappling inside the world of the poem over territory.

Fiona, can we go back to you perhaps? Which one do you think is a good next poem to read to keep this thread going, or perhaps to take us in a different direction?

FZ: Yes, I was just thinking of what you were saying now from an existential perspective. If you look at agency, it's being able to speak despite all the pressures that almost drive speech out of us, like pain or grief, or trauma, oppression, and disenfranchisement. It demands to be said in a sense, so I think that a poem is something that demands. Being able to tell a story is at the heart of that use of language. Historically, oppression has taken away people's right to tell their own story and everyone's story needs to be told regardless of the paradox that Phillippa draws attention to in that poem.

I really like the work of Svetlana Alexievich – the Russian Nobel literature prize winner – who is an oral historian who collects other people's stories. She's not so much speaking for people, but rather bringing their stories to the fore and presenting a record of their experiences. Having a record of what happened to you is important

when you talk about agency. To be able to say, 'This happened to me' means being able to speak and be heard, and to some extent take control of what did happen to you.

The poem that I could read now is about my husband who is an Iraqi refugee and stateless. He's been trying to get documentation in South Africa for more than fifteen years. He is not a writer, but he tells me stories about what he has been through. I wrote a poem about the fact that he was an aeronautical engineer in Iraq, but when he came to South Africa as a refugee, he was told that he couldn't work on planes here because he's an Arab. I wanted to read 'After the Airshow' to demonstrate that sense of telling someone's story. So, here's the poem.

> After the Airshow
> *– for Omar Hamed*
>
> We were left staring at silent engines,
> the landing strip scuffed and empty;
>
> skulked by the fence, where crushed
> cigarettes and cactus plants had formed
>
> a collage on the apron. You revealed
> your life in Iraq as an engineer
>
> maintaining government planes. You said:
> *There's really no margin for error when*
>
> *an aircraft's up there. It's not enough*
> *to simply do your best*. You walked
>
> beside me as we left the airfield,
> eyes flicking towards the hangers,
>
> looking for clues. I have no words
> for what you've lost – the enormous cost –
>
> but I've felt how tailwinds of the past
> unsettle, capsize the future.

BLV: There are many things that strike me as you read this poem. The one is the way in which you thread through the poem, the way you create an atmosphere that begins with the word 'skulked' by the fence, but also comes from 'Crushed

cigarettes …', 'the landing strip scuffed and empty; / skulked by the fence'. The two characters in the poem immediately embody not just themselves in the moment of the story that you're telling – but something else. It's like a first warning shot for what is to come. The word 'skulked' contains a whole host of associations, of somebody wanting to hide, wanting to maintain a low profile, wanting not to be seen or perhaps wanting to get somewhere without being seen.

Then it is followed by a phrase like 'no margin for error', which is an immediate phrase, it comes out of a conversation, it's a little piece of found text. I imagine you hear the person to whom you're addressing the poem say these words – there is no margin for error – but in the context in the world of the poem, they acquire a whole host of meanings. That phrase is pregnant with other meanings given that there's a story underlying the airshow, and there's a whole history of stories and a history of a relationship also. That scary phrase 'no margin for error' suggests no ability to move either left or right, no chance that you could possibly make a mistake because then you will die, which is what no margin for error might mean in relation to aeronautic engineering.

PYDV: … and other people will die. The value for me of the character in this poem is in a fidelity to the idea that others will die. There is no margin for his error, he holds himself responsible, but nobody seems to take the same care for him.

BLV: Phillippa would you read another poem.

PYDV: This poem is about motherhood. The experience of becoming a mother was a centrally important moment for me. It destroyed my agency and also created agency for me.

The mother.

Contact a feeling of joy, a feeling of fear,
a feeling of hope and anticipation. It is spring,
it is winter, it is anytime when your baby is
due to appear, contact your body's heaving
beyond your will, breaking your mind into
waves of pain pushing you further than you
could ever imagine, contact a feeling of dread,
or is it awe, or is it overwhelmed by
joy, too much whatever it is

too much
and yet enough.

Contact a feeling of pride, fulfillment, courage,
connection to a group, to a bloodline, to a destiny,
contact your memories, the oldest hands that
held you safe. Contact a vague sense of anxiety,
inadequacy, laughter, perseverance, contact
changes beyond your will,
pushing you further than you could have imagined.
Contact seasons, nature, teeth falling and growing,
growing into and out of
contact
a feeling of alienation, of loss, of loneliness,
of desperation. Contact a feeling of anger,
abandonment, hopelessness.

Sit there in the cold till it discomforts you
listen for an urge in the chest
a quickening towards the source of warmth. Contact
this you that seeks to contact
and all contact ceases
as you exist
where you are sitting or standing
in your house, outside at a bus stop
alone
your blood singing through a forest of bone.

FZ: I love that.

BLV: Phillippa there are two things that strike me in listening to this poem, the one is the use of the list as a poetic device. In one sense this poem is a list of all things motherly, and motherhood related, and it's a list of often contradictory things that are at once negative and positive for the experience of motherhood. It's also a means of accumulating things. The poet begins with the feelings and the experience of motherhood and simply accumulates more and more of these as the poem progresses.

The other is the use of the word 'contact', which becomes both a repetition and a kind of punctuation. What I'm pointing to here is the linguistic devices, the tools of this poem, the machinery of this poem, which are connected to the experience that you're describing – the experience of motherhood. I wonder if you could talk for a moment about such devices, about the way in which lists and repetitions move a poem forward and give the poem its pattern of movement through time.

PYDV: Well, I suppose what you want to do is to deliver to somebody else your experience as you experience it. A way of doing that is to saturate, and you do that by accumulating, although you don't realise that's what you're intending to

do. What you're intending to do is give a person this experience as you experienced it. The thing that was ringing in my head was actually [laughs] a movement class that I once did with a British Alexander technique teacher, who asked us to contact a feeling. As they were giving us instructions to move our bodies, they said we should contact this feeling, so it was an instruction. So, the word 'contact' now feels like an instruction; it feels like an injunction. It was interesting to me that as I was writing this poem there was a thing that was impelling me towards something. In the last two years since Covid-19 we've just been dispersed and culture has become so scattered … it's in the air, it's on the web, and I feel an urge to contact, an urge to close the space between us.

Yes, language is an instrument, but sometimes I feel like I am also an instrument of language, that once I surrender to the poem itself, then I don't know what it's making me do.

BLV: Thanks Phillippa. In the last few minutes, I'd like to take a slightly different turn in our discussion and draw attention to something that's enacted in your poems, though in very different ways. This brings us back to the start of our discussion, which has to do with the way in which poetic language gives us access to something that we may not have access to in other ways. That's partly what agency means, it gives us access to something we are then able to enact through poetic language, something which may not be enacted in any other discursive space.

Phillippa, could you read your poem, 'Refugee'. The poem that you've just read Fiona, speaks to this particular theme. In the meantime, if anyone has a question or comment they could turn their cameras on and interrupt us for a moment.

JT: I wonder if I could interject seeing as no one else is jumping at the opportunity. I was wondering about the term 'contact' there and it seems to me what happens with that is it introduces a rhythm, and that rhythm is connected in a very real bodily way to the text, in the sense that it generates anxiety on the part of the listener or the reader and that it simulates something almost like a breathing. It's not simply stopping but it's also regulating in a bodily way. I wonder if you'd like to say anything about that Phillippa.

PYDV: I hadn't really thought about that, but while really studying these poems by Fiona and comparing them to mine, I feel that there is so much space in Fiona's poems for the reader, whereas I feel like I'm in people's faces [laughs]. My poems grab you and they don't let you get away. I don't know whether that's a pleasant experience for you, but I'm sorry [laughs].

BLV: But what it draws attention to is two things that are very different but related. On the one hand Johan, what you're describing is a physical anxiety the poem induces. The repetition produces a low-level physical anxiety. And no less productive is the absence and silence of the gaps – I think they are present in your poems too, Phillippa, despite what you're saying. I would say that stylistically there are huge differences between your work and Fiona's, but the deployment of the gap and the space is as much at work in some of your poems as it is in Fiona's.

That's a different kind of discomfort, a moment in which the poet inhales, and by extension the reader inhales, and something must come after that. An exhalation must come. It's like listening to a child who inhales as they're crying and they don't let go, and we're waiting for them to expire. The poem enacts something in the poet and produces a physical response in the listener or the reader. If anyone wants to add to that or take us somewhere else, I'm happy to entertain another comment. Thanks Johan, is there anything further you want to suggest?

JT: Actually, I'll open the floor if anyone else wants to say anything [pause]. I was listening to the poems and to the rhythms and the structures and the different formats in which they perform their meaning. One thing that struck me is this question, 'what is poetic language doing?' and when I listened carefully to the poems I thought about the indexes within which voices and language function. It seems to me that we're all fairly conversant in the instrumental usage of language i.e. the medical textbook or the pragmatic function of language when I want to go and buy my apple and we have to agree upon the price right there and then, and we have to do so in a way that is mutually comprehensible within the least time as possible. What happens with poetic language is that it's self-referential, by which I mean that old term 'subjective'. What that subjective space does for me is that it introduces the self into an instrumental functioning of language, so that now it's no longer just information. Now, once this self and its context and feelings are introduced into language, then there is a moment of participation and agency. That shifts the picture.

PYDV: It's also very creative, Johan, and I'm so glad that you mentioned it because you made me think about a friend of mine who is a Tswana poet who uses metaphors and idioms from seTswana in English. She has a poem in which the speaker says 'your dog has eaten our eggs' and it's about making a girl pregnant. When a person begins the conversation in that metaphoric way, the person who answers must continue the metaphor. I find a lot of the time that English is the very functional and direct instrumental use of language in the world that we have today. It sometimes robs us of that creativity where people throw a metaphor at somebody and tell

them, come back with it, make it fatter, bring it on, and in that way, we expand language between us.

BLV: We've got time for two short poems. Perhaps 'The Emigrant', Fiona, might be the one to put side by side with Phillippa's poem 'Refugee'. Phillippa let's start with you and see what this poem enacts, and how Fiona's poem responds.

PYDV: [Reads]

Refugee.

People ask me:
where is home?

Last time I saw my village
it was burning
in the night.

My house, a screaming
mouth
of firehot fear
in the mask of darkness.
my only thought was flight.

Nobody here understands my language, so
I speak the tongue of compromise.
The grateful grammar
of being alive.

This is my certainty my identity.
People ask me, where is home?
I say
home is where the heart is.

At night I watch the stars:
distant villages, all aflame,
terrified angels, running away.

BLV: Thanks Phillippa. Fiona?

FZ: My last poem is called 'The Emigrant'. It's for a Libyan gentleman, who was my second husband [laughs]. He moved to South Africa and was studying here for some time. This is a story that he told me about his father – it was the greatest trauma in his life when his father died.

The Emigrant
– *for Ali Belgasime*.

Libya squats on your life
like one of its Roman ruins.

You can't escape its labyrinths,
the white dust of its towns.

Obsessed with heat and death,
you smoke, forget to eat.

Your efforts come to nothing.
You sleep, you dream of times

before your father died,
his truck trashed on a road

to Tripoli. His face
unmarked in death, at peace.

BLV: Thanks Fiona. I would like to comment on both poems and on the very different ways in which they enact this idea of removal, loss, and alienation, and on the ways in which these poems are disguised as something other than what they are.

When I hear Fiona reading 'The Emigrant', the title immediately conjures a series of associations, but what the poem does is to defer those associations. It reveals to us something other than what is immediately evoked by the title, in other words it becomes a poem that purports to be about one thing but also carries within it something else: the death of the father. It's about both of those things at once, it's about a literal displacement inherited by the son, and it's also about an original loss – both the loss of the father and the loss of the place, the loss of home.

Phillippa in your poem, the title has within it a series of associations that the poem works both to confirm and to displace. It displaces them through the language of the poem and the way in which it transposes out of the trauma. Right at the end of this poem you link fire – which is a site of trauma and violence – to stars and angels. There is this extraordinary movement from immediate loss and violence to a transposal of those things into something else.

This is partly what we're talking about when we talk about poetic language. It simultaneously is immediate in its ability to make something sound like and associate

with something else; and at the same time tell us in some obscure way that it's about something completely different. It does this through a kind of necklace of images, the jewelry of images that it strings together through the words and the language of the poem. Perhaps Fiona and Phillippa you can articulate that in some other way.

FZ: It is a transmutation, yes.

PYDV: I think also within 'The Emigrant' it's like immigrating to that country that we're all going to go to eventually, that we're never going to come back from. There is always a sense of mortality and if there's mortality there's a sense of the importance of life.

FZ: Yes, I mean, ultimately everyone dies alone, but by sharing in rituals of death for example, we find our common humanity. So, there is that potential for connection and contact.

BLV: And when you use the phrase 'rituals of death', what we're suggesting is that the poem is in discourse what the ritual is in action. The poem stands in place of action, it stands in place of the physical enactments of mourning that we as humans engage in. It becomes the act of mourning; it becomes the ritual itself through language. It really only has the language and the imagery at its disposal to perform these acts of transformation from a story to a ritual, from an event to an emotion. The poetic language enacts these transformations as the poem unfolds.

FZ: Yes, you can see that in Phillippa's poem, absolutely.

PYDV: Can I please read a poem by Fiona that I really love, and which links in to what we have just spoken about?

BLV: That will be lovely, thanks Phillippa. Which poem is it?

PYDV: Is that okay Fiona?

FZ: Absolutely.

PYDV: It's called 'The Dead'.

The Dead

Therefore, don't despair if you see death. Nothing really dies.
– Ben Okri, *Astonishing the Gods*

The dead, who watch
with half-closed eyes,
appear as lizards on leaf walls
vein-disguised.

Coiled in green,
their half-smiles dipped
in gold leaf, lying
somewhat despised

at the outpost of being,
they watch us, without
touching the earth.
As if they had crossed

oceans of air and capsized.

BLV: Thanks Phillippa. Let's draw to a close on that note. Thank you both very much.