

Copyright The Mail and Guardian (Johannesburg)
December 30, 1996

I can talk about nothing else. But I don't talk about it at all

Poet Antjie Krog, who has spent months reporting on the Truth Commission, on the images that will continue to haunt her

THE word truth makes me uncomfortable. As recently as last week I had to do several retakes of a voice report for radio, because - after nine months of reporting - the word truth still trips the tongue.

"Your voice tightens up approaching the word truth," the technical assistant said irritably. "Repeat it 20 times so that you can become familiar with it. Truth is mos jou job!"

I hesitate at the word. I am not used to using the word. Even when I type it, it ends up as either "turth" or "trth". I have never bedded that word in a poem.

I prefer the word lie. The moment the lie raises its head, I smell blood. Because it is there ... where the truth is closest.

The word reconciliation, on the other hand, is my daily bread.

Compromise, accommodate, provide, make space for. Understand. Tolerate. Empathise. Endure ... without it, no relationship, no work, no progress is possible. Yes. Piece by piece we die into reconciliation.

However - neither truth nor reconciliation is part of my graphite when sitting in front of a blank page, rubber close at hand. Everything else fades away. It becomes so quiet. Something opens and something falls into this quiet space. A tone, an image, a line. And the oxygen of the first line mobilises completely. I become myself. Truth and reconciliation do not enter my anarchy. It chokes on betrayal and rage. It falls off my refusal to be moral. I write the broken line. For some brief moments of loose-limbed happiness everything I am, every shivering, otherwise useless, vulnerable fibre and hypersensitive sense come together. A heightened phase of clarity and the glow stays ...

Somewhat breathless I know: for this I am made.

I am not made to report on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. When told to head the five-person radio team covering the truth commission, I inexplicably began to cry on the plane back from Johannesburg. Someone tripped over my

bag in the passage. Mumbling excuses, fumbling with tissues, I looked up into the face of Dirk Coetzee. There was no escape.

After three days a nervous breakdown was diagnosed and within two weeks the first human rights violation hearings began in East London. The months that have passed proved my premonition right - reporting on the truth commission has indeed left most of us physically exhausted and mentally frayed.

Because of language.

Week after week, from one faceless building to the other, from one dusty godforsaken town to the other, the arteries of our past bleed their own peculiar rhythm, tone and image. One cannot get rid of it. Ever.

It was crucial for me to have the voices of the victims on the news bulletin. To have the sound of ordinary people dominate the news. No South African should escape the process.

"I was making tea in the police station. I heard a noise, I looked up ... There he fell ... Someone fell from the upper floor past the window ... I ran down ... It was my child ... my grandchild, but I raised him."

We pick out the soundbite. By removing some of the pauses, we edit it into a 20-second soundbite for radio news - 200 news bulletins; 11 languages. We feed it to Johannesburg.

We switch on a small transistor. The news is read and the voice of an ordinary cleaning woman is the headline. We lift our fists triumphantly. We've done it!

We sleep between one and two hours per night. We live on chocolate and chips. After having stopped for five years, I begin to smoke again.

In the second week of hearings, I do a question and answer with an actuality programme. I stammer. I freeze. I am without language. I put the receiver down, and think: resign. Now. You are clearly incompetent. The next morning the truth commission sends one of its own councillors to address the journalists. "You will experience the same symptoms as the victims. You will find yourself powerless - without help, without words."

I am shocked to be a textbook case within a mere 10 days.

"Exercise regularly. Take photographs of loved ones with you to come home to in the hotels. Take your favourite music with. And talk to one another ... be one another's therapy."

We develop techniques to lessen the impact. We no longer go into the halls

where the hearings take place, because of the accumulated grief. We watch on provided monitors. The moment someone starts crying, we start writing/ scribbling/doodling.

The one hotel room drifts into the other. The one breakfast buffet provides the same as the other. The one sorrow-filled room flows into the other. The one rental car smells like the other ... but the language, the detail, the individual tone it stays.

"I heard shots ... I ran ... slipped and fell ...I crawled out at the front door ... On the steps my son sat ... with his father's face in his hands ... He was covered in blood ... He cried over and over: Daddy talk to me ... Today he is 11 years old. I am still woken at night by his cries. When I reach his bedside, he cries: 'Wipe the blood ... wipe the blood from my father's face'."

The story of the century, they say. With heroes and villains; well known and unknown; characters; the powerful and the powerless; the literate and illiterate. Hung with laptops, tape recorders, bags, notebooks and reels, we limp into hotel foyers long after midnight.

We hear over radios:

"That morning I did something I have never done before. My husband was still at his desk busy with the accounts of our business. I went up to him and stood behind his chair. I put my hands under his arms and tickled him ... he looked surprised and unexpectedly happy ... 'And now?' he asked. 'I am going to make tea,' I said.

"While I poured water on the teabags, I heard this devastating noise. Six men stormed into our study and blew his head off. My five-year-old daughter was present ... That Christmas I found a letter on his desk: 'Dear Father Christmas, please bring me a soft teddybear with friendly eyes ... My daddy is dead. If he was here I would not have bothered you.' I put her in a hostel. The morning we drove there we had a flat tyre. 'You see,' she said, 'Daddy does not want me to go there ... He wants me to stay with you ... I have watched him die, I must be there when you die...!' She is now a teenager and has twice tried to commit suicide."

And it wipes us out. Like a fire. Or a flood. Tears are not what we call it. .. Water covers the cheeks and we cannot type. Or think. And this was how we often ended up at the daily press conference - bewildered and close to tears at the feet of Archbishop Tutu. By the end of the four weeks it was no longer press conferences - he comforted us.

He caressed us with pieces of hope and humanity. We asked fewer and fewer critical questions. Perplexed, we listened to the sharp haughty questions posed by foreign journalists - those who jetted into the country, attended one day's

hearing and thereafter confronted the commission with its lack of procedures and objectivity.

"His body was totally burnt. I held him ... 'Who did this to you?' 'I cannot tell,' he says inaudibly ... I hold him ... even his face was burnt ... except the nose ... He opened and closed his mouth ... opened and closed ... like a bird ... Then his eyes changed their colour..."

I walked into my home one evening. My family was excitedly watching cricket. They seemed a happy close-knit group. I stood in the dark kitchen for a long, long time. Everything had become unconnected and unfamiliar. I realised I didn't know where the light switch was.

I can talk about nothing else. Yet I don't talk about it at all.

Some journalists ask to be elsewhere deployed. Others start to focus on the perpetrators. Some storm out enraged at parties, or see their friends fleeing from them. Some drink deep gulps of neat brandy, others calm themselves with neatly rolled daggazolletjies.

After four months most of those who travel frequently become ill - lungs and airways. The chairperson has bronchitis, the deputy chairperson pneumonia. It's the planes, someone says, they are germ incubators. No, it's the constant adapting to different climates and altitudes. We are becoming a family. I board a tiny propellered plane and sit next to the translator. In the back sits the Arch with his Anglican bodyguard. While we ascend shakily, I see how Tutu bows his head and prays and I just know, somehow, we're going to be fine.

Until the day in Queenstown. It is bitterly cold. Coated, scarved, duveted we listen to one necklace experience after the other - grim stories; unrelentless faces in a monotonous rhythm. A man testifies about a bomb explosion in his restaurant. "The reason," he says, "why only one person died that day is because of the top quality of tables that the Spur has." And I start to laugh. "My friend came to me and said: 'Lucas I wanted to come to you'..."but I couldn't find my legs, I say in my head, and collapse with laughter. A local journalist puts some tea in front of me and asks with a weak voice: "Have you been covering the commission for long?"

I took two weeks leave.

The man sits alone. He is wearing a cheap jacket. In a formal old-fashioned Afrikaans he says he cannot tell the story of how an African National Congress bomb wiped out his family and friends.

"I can deal with it only in the form of questions. Do you know, you the truth commissioners, how a temperature feels of between six and eight thousand

degrees? Do you know how it feels to experience a blow so intense that it forces the fillings from one's teeth? Do you know how it feels to look for survivors and only find dead and maimed?... Do you know how it feels to look for your three-year-old child and never, Mr Chairman, never to find him again and to keep wondering for the rest of your life where he was?"

The Van Eck and De Neyssen families went for a holiday on a game farm near Messina on the northern South African border. Late afternoon the two families drove with the bakkie to look for game. The right back wheel - the specific spot where the three-year-old Van Eck boy was sitting, struck a land mine.

"We were immediately in flames. When I came to myself I saw my baby boy of 18 months was still alive ... he was lying quite still, but looking at me. Mr De Neyssen was lying on the steering wheel ... his hair in flames, blood spouting from his forehead."

After Van Eck pulled them all through the window, he went to look for survivors.

"Right behind the vehicle I found my wife and Martie de Neyssen. Both severely maimed and killed outright.

I searched further. I came upon small Kobus de Neyssen who had some life in him. I went back to his father and said 'The child is still alive, but severely maimed and burnt'. His father asked there on the scene to let his child go ... which was what happened. Then I noticed Mr de Neyssen's little daughter Lizelda walking towards us out of the veld ... She had a cut across her face and she limped. Then I searched further for my son of three years, but I could not find him ... until today I could not find him ... I and my son buried our two family members and the next day our two friends. Since then it has been down the hill for me all the way. I sat for days ... I simply sat. .. I lost my business. I am reduced to a poor white."

The small side hall accommodates the electronic media. The translation is channelled to our tape recorders. We see Van Eck on the monitor. I write the news copy. I decide on a soundbite. I dictate the hard copy over the phone. I read: 'to never comma mister chairman comma never to see ...' a catch in my voice ... My throat throbs heavily. My breast silts up, speechless.

I give the phone to a colleague and flee blindly among the cables and electronic equipment ... out on to the stoep overlooking Nelspruit. I gasp for breath. Like two underwater swimmers, my eyes burst out to the horizons ... the mountains lit in a blushing light blue hedge of peace. I am drowning. My eyes claw at the trees, the kloofs ... see, smell ... a landscape of paradise and a language from paradise: mispel, maroela, tarentaal I whisper. The air as drowsy with jasmin and kanferfoelie. I sit down on the steps and everything tears out of me. Flesh and blood can in the end only endure so much ... Every week we are

stretched thinner and thinner over different pitches of grief ... how many people can one see crying, how much torn-loose sorrow can one accommodate ... and how does one get rid of the specific intonation of the words? It stays and stays.

I wake up in unfamiliar beds with blood on my frayed lips ... and the soundbites screaming in my ears.

I am called. "They say the story is really powerful ... can we possibly send another soundbite? Shall we send the one about the teeth fillings or the one about the daughter coming towards them?" I wipe my face. "Send the one about where he was just sitting and remember to add that the newspapers of that day said that pieces of his son's hair and eyes were found in a tree near the bakkie."

My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes. After the amnesty deadline I enter my house like a stranger. And barren.

I sit around for days. Staring. My youngest walks into a room and flinches: "Sorry, I'm not used to your being home."

No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. So I sit around. Naturally and unnaturally without words. If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don't, I die. Suddenly my overweight grandmother's motto comes to mind: when in despair, bake a cake. To bake a cake is a restorative process.

I snip into a bowl glacéd pineapple, watermelon, ginger, green figs, dates and walnuts. Big red and green cherries, currents, sultanas. I let it stand in a cool dark cupboard - a bowl full of glistening colourful jewels soaking in brandy. I relish the velvet of 12 eggs, butter and sugar. I bake a fruit cake and eat small fragrant slices in the blinding blue Cape summer heat.

And I think up delicious lines of Lies and Revenge.