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Truth Trickle Becomes a Flood

By Antjie Krog

The truth commission's Alex Boraine said the confessions would start. Last week, the perpetrators began to tell their stories. In the latest in our guest writer series, poet Antjie Krog listens to the different voices

FOR six months the Truth Commission has listened to the voices of victims. The first narrative, focused and clear, cut into the country. It cut through class, language, persuasion - penetrating even the most frigid earhole of stone. And it continues. Somewhere, in some dusty, suburban hall this week, the tale keeps on being plaited.

Because she is sitting behind a microphone, dressed in beret or kopdoek and her Sunday best, authenticity and integrity are sustained. Everybody recognises her. But when her face distorts behind her rough hand, we know nobody knows her. So we have never known it.

Yet something was amiss. We pricked up our ears. Waiting for the Other. The Counter. The Perpetrator. More and more we wanted the second narrative. And it had better be good. It had better be powerful. It had better display integrity. And it had better bring acute personal detail, tears and bewilderment.

There can be no story without the balance of the antagonist. The ear and the heart simply cannot hold head above a one-way flood. The victims' hearings became less reported, less read; fewer hearings were scheduled. Why would one want the truth if the truth has turned its back: why would one confess before commissioners with as little power as oneself?

Now and then, the muffled sound of a perpetrator in a court interdict or press release was heard. At the political submissions, no politician rose to the occasion. No single personal emotive moment was presented. When FW de Klerk said: "I stand here before you today..." - he was not standing, he was sitting.

Last week the second narrative broke loose - unfocused, splintered in intention and grades of desperation. It was white. And it was male.

The human rights hearings had a definite starting point: the unforgettable wail of Nomondo Calata in East London. The uncontrollable muscle in the jaw of Brian Mitchell, who was involved in the Trust Feed Massacre, was for me the beginning of the perpetrator narrative.

When Judge Arthur Wilson asked him: "Would you say you suffered a lot?" the only answer Mitchell could muster was the frantically quivering jaw muscle.

Three main voices were heard last Monday: the army generals, the police generals and Eugene de Kock.

I phoned the army headquarters: "May I please interview General Georg Meiring?" "About what?" "About his submission, Monday."

"The general speaks to no one. He stands by his submission. He has nothing more to say."

"But I want to know why Meiring is not presenting the submission of the old SADF?"

I'm told to get lost in the ons-is-nog-steeds-baas-al-dink-jy-nie-so-nie tone.

Monday morning the military squad marches in for Operation Shut-up and Deny. (Not to be confused with Operation Stratkom, Veikom and Komkom, Operation Skaap; Operation Paal and Pikkadel, Pebble and Porcelain.) And one has actually forgotten how they look: the clipped snorretjies, the shifty eyes, the arrogant circumnavigation of questions.

When General Deon Mortimer opened his mouth, a chill ran down my spine. I had forgotten the worst: the brutal Afrikaner accent and the unflinching tone. The relish with which he pronounced the words "ban" and "banning"; the blatant use of the word "terrorist", the cold-blooded smugness and excessiveness of the statistics: "Mozambique: 23 May 1983. Operation Skerwe took place, using 12 Impalas and two Mirage F1 AZs, to attack known ANC facilities in the Matola suburb of Maputo in retaliation for the car bomb detonation outside Air Force Headquarters, Pretoria, on 20 May. Two ANC houses and a headquarter were attacked."

No press conference, no interview.

And it was this, more than anything else, that changed the tone of the commission. Boraine leaned so far forward that only his head and neck were visible above the table when he slashed their submission to their face.

The Reverend Khoza Mgojo stammered in anger: "You reel off these statistics, as if it's nothing. People, human beings died there. People whose families we've been listening to for the past six months."

The commission seemed to say: before we are through with you, you will regard a statistic as human.

That same day in Johannesburg, former police general Johan van der Merwe walked in. He looked surprisingly well and confident. Such was not the case last year when he came to Parliament to make a submission to the Justice Committee on the Truth and Reconciliation Act. Without his uniform and cap he seemed shrunken. Collapsed he sat, his skin colour an unhealthy yellow. He blinked his eyes continuously and sometimes his mouth nibbled like that of an old man.

Before the Justice Committee, his case was put by an English-speaking advocate from KwaZulu-Natal. Flashy-suited and golden-ringed, the advocate made it clear that this was not the type of case he normally took, but ...

The advocate told the committee: "On the plane the general and I talked about the submission ... and after a long, long time, he said, barely audibly: 'I started my career with so much idealism, so many dreams. I've put into it all I've had, but because of the politicians I sit today wrapped in shame. Today I am not only old, I am also disgraced ... because of politics.'"

He might not have said much at the amnesty hearing, but he identified with his underlings - something which no powerful person from the previous regime had done yet. He also spelled out the difference between politician and soldier: the one makes the decision, the other carries it out. The better you carry it out, the better a soldier you are.

Come Monday night, come Prime Evil.

Shot one: men on the beach. Some naked, some swimming, some playing in the sand. Only De Kock brooding among them - dressed from head to toe, his clothes like a shell. The man who refused in court to cede any death to someone else. Jealously he held vigil that not a dot of his atrocities get lost.

Shot two: the confession of Jacques Pauw. Bheki Mlangeni was killed by rigged earphones originally meant for Dirk Coetzee, who identified the package and asked Pauw to warn Mlangeni, which Pauw did not do.

Like Coetzee, the man who made him famous, Pauw also preferred to confess publicly and dramatically. He chose to let the obvious moment for confession pass by - the moment after he had interviewed the distraught and weeping Sepati Mlangeni. The moment he was alone with her.

Why was this the obvious moment? Pauw, then, would have stepped out of his own safe framework, out of the story as dictated by him, out of the powerful realm of media and history. Pauw would have been at the mercy of Sepati Mlangeni - as her husband was at his - to forgive or condemn. It would have shown Pauw vulnerable - as vulnerable as millions of black people were under

a racist government.

Or are things simpler than that? People perhaps find it easier to ask forgiveness from Archbishop Desmond Tutu or the whole television-watching South Africa than from an ordinary black woman in her house.

But then, too, the fear of rejection may be worse than the guilt.

Unexpected overtones accompanied the second narrative this week at the book launch of *Reconciliation Through Truth* by Kader Asmal, Louise Asmal and Ronals Suresh Roberts.

The book states very precisely: the truth commission won't be able to fulfil its implicit mandate to create a new moral order if it does not make a distinction between those who fought against and those who defended apartheid.

This is an old debate, but the writers give a new dimension. They spell out that, unlike the commissioners' claim, there is no imperative in the legislation not to make any distinction between the perpetrators and the victims of the two sides.

It is not a question of bad apples on both sides, said Kader Asmal, it is a question of a bad tree and a good tree. The book asks: if the truth commission cannot distinguish between right and wrong, how can it weave a new moral fabric?

The night of the launch also provided an opportunity to hear Deputy President Thabo Mbeki's thinking on reconciliation - an issue he seldom dwells on.

"Apartheid forced the individual to abdicate his or her personal morality," he said. "And if you think I say this because I am very intelligent ... I am only quoting the book."

He speaks: "The only thing that will heal this country is large doses of truth -and the truth is that apartheid was a form of genocide and a crime against humanity. You, Kader, I, Sam ... oh, I see you have not invited the ministers with which you are not on a good footing to the stage - people like Sydney and Essop ..."

After which Asmal nervously laughs and says: "They were late." But it was obvious from the well-formulated speech that the days of visiting Betsie Verwoerd and drinking tea with Afrikaner tannies are over.

The days of bending backwards from the coccygeal region to accommodate, to grit teeth in tolerance until the fillings fly, is over. Reconciliation will only be possible if the whites say: apartheid was evil and we were responsible for it. Resisting it was justified - even if excesses occurred within this framework.

Mbeki said that if this acknowledgement is not forthcoming, reconciliation is no longer on the agenda.

Although this political line is timeous, it also keeps the acknowledgement within the black and white realm and gives no guidance on how the individual could move forward.

The human rights violations hearings have forced the truth commission to formulate the same issue differently - a way which takes it out of the colour-code, making it user-friendly to all South Africans as a future guideline.

The human rights of black people were violated by whites, but also by blacks instigated by whites. So the truth commission was forced to say: South Africa's shameful apartheid past has made people lose their humanity. It dehumanised people to such an extent that they treated fellow human beings worse than animals. And this must change forever.

Both lines try to drive the change.

While the debate flourishes around ANC amnesty, some vibrations stir the Waters of the Wilderness. As the Crocodile flounders, he bares his last remaining teeth. His last line of defence is his secretary, Mrs Hartman. "Mr Botha is deeply religious," she tells a journalist. "He knows his Bible. He will speak when the time is right."

She also said: "Mr Botha walks around with a big smile on his face. He says he expected it all to happen. After all, people said bad things about Hitler too afterwards."

Poet Antjie Krog has won the Herzog Prize and the CNA Award for her poetry. She reports on the truth commission for SABC radio.