

**Everything is a Deathly Flower.**

Maneo Mohale.

Cape Town: uHlanga, 2009. 65 pp.

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Loosely set against the backdrop of Benoni, Maneo Mohale's debut poetry collection *Everything is a Deathly Flower* boldly tackles the poet's experience and journey of healing after being sexually assaulted, often using time and language as a tool. It is a piece of work where the pages are dotted with emotional extremes reminiscent of the process of healing, with poems revealing instances of joy and love and then vulnerability, trauma, and anger at the turn of a page. Described in a blurb as "rooted in a contemporary southern African tradition but springing forth in queer and radical new direction", this well-rounded collection consisting of 31 poems equally explores the topics of race, colonialism, religion, sexuality, and desire.

The first poem in the collection is titled "Letsatsi" and depicts the poet's life when they were younger and shows off their curiosity regarding words and their meanings, the way they are taught about faith through their mother's Christian teachings, and them meeting "a man named Cecil John" (10). Religion's warning against their queerness—"You do not know yet, what you are—have not yet had Leviticus angled at you" (10)—foreshadows the violence that is yet to erupt from Christianity and the poet's meeting of "Cecil John".

Initially the collection represents the events of the poet-speaker's life chronologically, and time as linear and straightforward. In these early poems, readers are offered snippets of their life—growing up, moving continents, struggling with their mother tongue, Sesotho, and exploring their faith and sexuality. That is, until the poem “Morapa-Šitšane (*for survivors*)”, dedicated to the survivors, which gently reminds them to breathe, “take a second, now. / breathe” (23).

This is a much-needed cautioning, also to the autobiographical speaker of the collection, as Mohale thereafter painfully recounts their story in the titular poem. “Everything is a Deathly Flower” takes the form of a glosa (a poetic form of Spanish origin) and references the first four lines of Saeed Jones’s “Closet of Red” found in his debut anthology, *Prelude to Bruise* (2014). One of the many examples of the abundance of epigraphs and intertextuality in the collection, this serves as an acknowledgment to those poets, both black and queer, who came before Mohale and paved the way. Mohale reckons with the memory of their sexual assault as “the memory returns to me as a dream” (24), and their inability to use their words—“you read my silence as Permission.” (24). With the lines “I am up to my ankles in petals, the hanged gowns close in ensnaring you and suddenly I am safe” (25, emphasis in original) they continue, while revealing their rage at their violation, expressing their need to feel safe and showcasing their ability to heal while acknowledging all the other survivors with the emotional line “*there’re always more*” (25, emphasis in original). The abuse depicted in this poem marks the disruption in both the poet’s life and their poetry. Time becomes non-linear, language becomes inadequate and/or ineffective, the poems’ forms change and become more experimental, new ways of love and support are offered; a reflection of the idea that healing is not linear.

There is a series of poems, all printed in landscape, in which the poet uses imagery linked to photography, disrupting time, examining and capturing memory while making the reader turn the book 90 degrees in order to read the poems. In turning the book, the reader is forced to look at their words from a different perspective. In some ways it can be seen as the author forcing the reader to tag along and go through the labour of both healing and survival. For the most part, it seems as if Mohale goes through their ordeal alone until “Belief (Five Sunflowers)”, which is dedicated to their chosen family. The poem is fragmented into five memories—in which they memorialise the moments when they choose to tell their loved ones about the trauma that was enacted upon them in “Everything is a

Deathly Flower”. The poet-speaker’s chosen family not only share their support, “I got you / I got you / I got you” (39, emphasis in original), their immediate reaction is one that leaves no space for doubt, and the speaker confirms “you believe me” (39). The lines “I pull a pebble out my cheek and tell. you throw your own at me” (39) highlight how prevalent experiences of sexual assault are. In continuing with their move from the personal to the communal, the poet devotes a poem to Karabo Mokoena, who was murdered by her boyfriend in 2017, one of the many Gender-Based Violence (GBV) cases in South Africa. In the poem titled “Sandton Skye”, Mohale shows how even the safety afforded to many through privilege does not actually keep sexual assault at bay, reminding readers of how prevalent violence is, “Unknown to me / uBaba has been watching us both” (55), even in spaces of privilege.

Mohale ends their anthology defiantly with words ever so contested but self-evident: “I / ~~don’t care~~ / if you / believe me” (62). This is the perfect ending to their journey of healing. These words leave the reader with a reminder to always believe survivors of sexual assault.

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