ENTERTEXT

Letter to Motherwell

Author: Rhona Hammond

Source: *EnterText*, “Special Issue on Andrea Levy,” 9 (2012): 162-68.

Abstract

‘“Letter to Motherwell” was written during and after a ten-month stay in Port Elizabeth, South Africa in 2007. It is a personal memoir, a diary of impressions, and also an attempt to make sense of a wonderful but very challenging experience. Andrea Levy’s novels are about women in extraordinary and ordinary circumstances. They are women who have to do their best for themselves and their families even if their best is not ideal. Relocating to the intensity of South African society exposed many of the same dislocations of identity and culture which Andrea Levy’s characters experience and this is why I feel that these stories have a place amongst these papers examining her work.’

—Rhona Hammond

Letter to Motherwell

Rhona Hammond

Walking home from the supermarket with a bag full of bread and dry cleaning I thought about my children. I smiled to myself and remembered compliments received from passersby and daycare teachers. Then I looked up and caught sight of the newspaper advert on the lamppost. SHOCK CHILD RAPE FIGURES. A few metres down the road the next poster said something in Afrikaans about the South African cricket team. I was being reminded that I was in Port Elizabeth, where the security forces tortured Steve Biko and the main street is named after Govan Mbeki.

Tractorman waved as I walked to the daycare centre. He moved his big red tractor round in neat circles and trimmed the grass of the school playing fields. The sun beat down but he was wearing a woollen beanie hat. Wheelbarrowman had what looked like a t-shirt under his baseball cap to make something like a foreign legionnaire's cap and he waved too. I had given them these names because we saw them every time I collected Mhairi from school. Tractorman was my favourite because he had responded the first time we waved hello to him. I had picked him out because he had a red tractor and I said to Mhairi, 'Look! It's Tractorman. He has a tractor just like Grandad's.'

The hill was not very steep but the casuarina needles made it a bit slippy underfoot. Students drifted along on their way to the shopping centre for lunch or to catch a taxi. Some smiled, some didn't.

The big dogs threw themselves at the gate, as usual, then a couple of cars sped past, far too fast for the neighbourhood and I was glad once more that I didn't actually drive in this country because they all drove like maniacs. Unrestrained children bouncing around on seats and laps or even in the back of pickup trucks, utes, bakkies, whatever you call them. Those flatbed trucks which aren't as popular in the UK. Working cars, the border collies of the roads. On my right the yardman for the big white house washed a Toyota Corolla as if it were a Mercedes in the security cage built to protect it from the outside world. The newly spread asphalt was still very smooth and black and shiny. The midday heat was intense. Not far to go now.

It would be safer in a car. None of the other daycare mothers walked to collect their children. Mina, the maid who came with the apartment, had warned me never to talk on my phone in public, in fact, to switch it off so no one would know that I had one. She said it was sure to be stolen. In some ways I hoped that by being friendly to the gardeners and yardmen that I passed every day on my travels around the 4km square patch of PE that was my home they might help me if anything bad ever happened, if anyone ever tried to rob me. What did I mean 'tried'? It would be unlikely that they would fail, more just a question of the force that would be used and how well I would handle it. I was terrified it might happen when I was out with both girls.

EnterText, "Special Issue on Andrea Levy," 9 (2012): 162-68.

still no sign of her. I threw the sandwich out and put twenty rand in my pocket the next night but she wasn't there again so I gave up. Three days later we flew home to Sweden and I wondered if she was looking for us. I wondered where she had gone. When we got back from Sweden I half expected to see her again but we didn't. Instead I had a more typical encounter with a thin man called Joe who said he was from Durban and had no money because he had been robbed. I really didn't have anything I could give him that night. Mhairi was blowing bubbles into the wind beside the beach as I apologized but said I could not help him. He appealed to me as a Christian woman but I had to say firmly no, I'm sorry I can't help you. I really don't have anything I can give you.

My American friend Erin had told me about a volunteering opportunity in Central PE at a shelter for victims of domestic violence. I called the lady in charge and made plans to start once I got back from Sweden. I was going to teach the women who were on their way back into the world and the workforce how to use a computer. I planned it around

inside there was room for a post office worker to put the mail into everyone's boxes but now it was trashed with garbage piled up and bits ripped off.

At each house we were welcomed and thanked and I took only the pictures I was meant to take and did not just snap away like some press photographer or tourist because it would have been wrong and rude. Everyone enjoyed seeing the picture immediately afterwards on my digital camera and I promised to get them all copies. It was often quite dark inside the houses so when I got home I asked Wade to adjust the pictures on the computer.

Visiting Motherwell was quite an experience. One woman had a deaf and dumb son, a baby boy and a daughter who had just given birth to twin boys. They were all living in perhaps the poorest of the houses we visited. Erin had given them cement to render the house and keep the wind and rain out and a new door, one which would actually close. But they did not yet have the money to buy the sand that they needed to finish the job.

Gladys told me that the government only paid for the outside walls. Even her house doesn't have the second partition, only the one that splits it into two rooms, not three. She said she was hoping to have the money for the bricks by Christmas. She found it hard to sleep when it was raining because of the noise on the zinc roof. People are living in garages and they are among the lucky ones.

My volunteer job at the shelter for victims of domestic violence, or battered women as we used to say at home, was having mixed results. I enjoyed it but there were times when it was difficult. People didn't turn up or came late or didn't understand basic arithmetic which was a problem when we were supposed to be learning about spreadsheets. However one woman, Patricia, picked it up quite quickly. If she had had a PC at home and a chance to practise she would have done very well. She certainly had a focus for her interest as she was working at a fish-processing factory beside the docks and had just got a new job administering the wages. This was all being done by hand on a piece of A4 at the moment, some fifty employees split over the factory and the packing areas, some paid by the hour and some on piece work at a rate of 55 Rand cents per five kilo box. One lady in the example she brought me had packed 300 five-kilo boxes and 100 one-kilo boxes in a shift. The one-kilo boxes paid 28 Rand cents. The boss had promised to buy Patricia a computer to make it easier if she completed her training and despite the obvious lack of professional standards, competencies, assessments or anything else that I would have expected in Australia or the UK, the certificate being issued here would do.

Our time in Port Elizabeth was coming to an end. I had spoken to a kindly American man at the amusement park in the casino one night, just in passing, and he had commented that he found South Africans to be unfailingly polite and civilized so long as you never got onto the subject of race. I had settled in to a pleasant rhythm of life and adjusted to or accepted some of the fear and alienation I had initially felt. I was more comfortable than I had been. One day I went to the shopping centre on my own to buy some groceries and send some emails. I treated myself to a coffee and a scone at the café, which was busy, and an elderly lady who I had seen around the shops asked if she

could share my table. I had no idea why but she suddenly leaned over the table and said that she could not understand why so many people adopted black children. Weren't there enough of their own people to do it? I felt like I had been slapped and didn't know how to respond. I said well, it was surely better that the children had a family than stay in orphanages. This was, apparently, not the correct response so I looked away from her and saw the white woman with the little black girl in a pram and I realized what had happened. My table mate must have seen them coming.

Beauty the tea lady at Wade's work was retiring, forcibly, I think, at the end of September. She was seventy years old and when the HR lady asked her what she would like as a farewell gift she said food. Obviously, without her job, she was worried about how she would feed herself. People were invited to bring in tins and non-perishables or to donate money. Wade put 500 rand in an envelope and passed it to the HR girl who came round to his desk later to thank him.

Beauty was a tea lady who mostly made coffee and she brought it to you at your desk then cleared away the cups and made the place look nice. As nice as possible in a series of containers and temporary offices in a huge car park. She used to wash Wade's plate and fork on the days that I sent him to work with leftovers, curry or stir fry in a plastic box, as a change from sandwiches.

There was a big presentation on Friday at lunchtime. The office had managed to collect five archive filing boxes full of food for Beauty and they had bought her a little stove with four rings and a small oven. Beauty had only ever cooked with a paraffin stove before. They gave her some pre-paid electricity vouchers too. She wept. Her grand-daughter, who had a car, had come to collect her and her presents and take her home. The new tea lady was a young girl who had supposedly been in training for a week but there was no coffee that afternoon and on Monday the site manager had to go looking for her.

One weekend after we returned to Australia I found seventy rand in notes in one of Wade's pockets. I had not lived in Port Elizabeth for the best part of a year but I looked at those notes in my hand and it all came back to me. I wondered what to do with them. They sat on the kitchen bench top for a week. I looked at the Australia Post website and learned about the use of Registered Post services. I wondered if a registered post letter would make it to Motherwell Township. No valuables they said, very firmly. I bought such an envelope from the post office. I did not reveal my plans but even so the post lady gave me a stern warning about only using these envelopes for documents. I muttered something about photos and she grunted.

I decided to take a chance and post the money anyway. If it gets to Gladys then that will be great. If it doesn't, then I am sure the person who steals it must need it.