

TJ Dema, *Mandible*

New York, Slapering Hol Press, 2014, 31 pages, ISBN: 978-940646-51-0.

TJ Dema is one of the best poets writing today. And finally she has a book out so we can take our time and ruminate with her words the way good poetry should be savoured, not just let it flash by us at one of her performances. I, for one, am-over-the-moon happy. Her new collection has been included in an annual series, this being the inaugural set, done by the Africa Poetry Book Fund (APBF) called ‘Seven New Generation African Poets’ which is not an anthology but rather a collection of chapbooks (small volumes of poetry) by leading poets from around the continent. They are sold as a set and can currently be pre-ordered on Amazon and, hopefully, will be available soon in local bookstores.

TJ Dema’s book is titled *Mandible*. The other books in the collection include: *The Cartographer of Water* by Clifton Gachagua (Kenya), *Carnaval* by Tsitsi Jaji (Zimbabwe), *The Second Republic* by Nick Makoha (Uganda), *Ordinary Heaven* by Ladan Osman (Somalia), *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* by Warsan Shire (Somalia), *Otherwise Everything Goes On* by Len Verwey (South Africa). The collection of chapbooks also includes an introduction from APBF editor Kwame Dawes and poet and novelist Chris Abani. Dema travelled to Seattle, Washington (USA) to be part of the APBF Writers and Writing Programme Conference where the chapbooks were launched. At the Conference, Ghanaian poet Kofi Awoonor’s book *The Promise of Hope* which is also published by APBF was launched. Awoonor died last year (2013) at the Westgate bombings in Nairobi while attending the Storymoja Hay Festival. Dema was one of the poets chosen to read Awoonor’s poems at the Conference during a panel to launch his book.

Besides the new book and the trip to the United States, Dema has been busy with quite a few other things she told me in a recent interview. Straight from Washington she headed for Scotland to attend StAnza: Scotland’s International Poetry Festival. While there, she worked with a group of teenagers talking about their writing and their process and sharing their poetry.

She also had the honour of sharing the stage with Britain’s Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy during the Saturday night performance. Dema read her poetry to the full house crowd (with an overflow room fitted with a big screen) for 40 minutes and Duffy took the stage after a break for 50 minutes. ‘I was very chuffed to be on stage with her’, Dema said. ‘Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry is accessible and speaks to everyday experiences. ... I wish I knew about her when I was in school’.

And if that was not enough, The Danish Arts Counsel invited Dema to be part of the DIVA Residency Programme (Danish International Visiting Artists). She will be in Denmark for two months starting from 7 April 2014. The programme has the artists fully engaged in arts project in the community. Some of the events include public readings, collaborations with local artists, judging slam contests and working with young writers.

If that seems like a whirlwind few months, there is a local cherry to drop on Dema’s quite big cake –she was chosen as one of Kgalagadi Breweries Limited’s St Louis Export’s Top 40 Under 40 at an awards ceremony at the new Masa Centre on 31 March 2013 to receive her pin to recognise the honour. According to Kgalagadi Breweries, the awards are meant to bring ‘together different individuals under the age of 40 who have shown a commitment to positive change in their environments in order to better Botswana as a whole’. Another poet, Andreattah Chuma also made the list of the top under 40 year olds. Congrats to both of you!

Reviewed by Lauri Kubuitsile

(The review first appeared in *The Voice*, 11 April 2014)