MODERN CLASSICS

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The House of Hunger

PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

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DAMBUDZO MARECHERA

The House of Hunger

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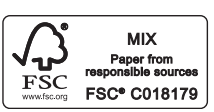

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Introduction

Dambudzo Marechera and *The House of Hunger*

Charles William Dambudzo Marechera was born in June 1952 in Vengere, the township of Rusape, in the east of the then Rhodesia. He was the third of nine children in a family which became destitute once his father was killed in a road accident in 1966. He gained entry to one of the first secondary schools to be opened to blacks – the Anglican St Augustine's Mission School at Penhalonga. In 1972–73 he was inscribed as an English major at the University of Rhodesia. From 1974 he studied further on a scholarship at New College, Oxford, from which he was sent down in March 1976 to live out his exile in Britain in a succession of squats for another six years. He contributed to several publications, including *The New African* and the London *Sunday Times*, hammering out the first draft of *The House of Hunger* on his portable typewriter in a matter of three weeks.

Notoriously, on his return to independent Zimbabwe in February 1982 with a Channel Four crew intent on filming him, he was confronted with the news that his second novel, *Black Sunlight* (1980), had been banned. When Lewis Nkosi viewed the film at the 1983 Zimbabwe International Book Fair, he called it 'a marvellous, scandalous document, recording the scars left by colonial society on one of the most original talents yet to emerge in African Literature'. Marechera became noted as a

tramp, writing in public on park benches, as recounted in the journal of his return to his native land included in *Mindblast*, published in 1984. He lived to see *The House of Hunger* taken as the mouthpiece of his generation and then of the new internal exiles post-independence. Later he could afford a bedsitter in the centre of Harare, where in January 1987 he was diagnosed with pneumonia as a complication of AIDS. In May that year, in an interview with Kirsten Holst Petersen, he noted: 'I lead a very solitary life, and so most of the time I am simply reading, in here or outside.' He died in August that year, aged thirty-five.

The House of Hunger first appeared in the Heinemann African Writers Series in December 1978, with an edition soon published by Pantheon in New York. A translation of the whole sequence into German followed after his appearance at the Horizonte Festival in West Berlin in 1979, with others translated into Dutch and French, with 'Protista' going into Norwegian and 'Burning in the Rain' into Portuguese. For the original edition he was awarded the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1979, jointly with Neil Jordan (£250 each). Reviewing it for *The Guardian*, one of the competition judges, Angela Carter, remarked: 'It is indeed rare to find a writer for whom imaginative fiction is such a passionate and intimate process of engagement with the world.' The first edition included the title novella, with nine additional sketches and short stories, a few of which were intended to be read as interrelated with the main text. Here some of the makeweights have been omitted in favour of later pieces written to complete *The House of Hunger* cluster. They are 'The Sound of Snapping Wires' (first published in *West Africa* on 7 March 1983), with the three last essays, all unpublished at the time of his death. The prefatory 'An Interview with Himself' of 1983 is also an addition here.

Kole Omotoso in *West Africa* (14 September 1987):

Dambudzo Marechera's life provided the material for his art. His existence, to those intent on their business of living, seemed dedicated to dying. On 18 August he finally completed the process that began with his birth.

David Caute in *The Southern African Review of Books* (Winter 1987–88):

The writer Dambudzo Marechera died in Harare at the age of thirty-five. A brilliant light, flashing fitfully in recent years, is extinguished. He once wrote: 'It's the ruin not the original which moves men; our Zimbabwe ruins must have looked really shit and hideous when they were brand-new.'

Dieter Riemenschneider in *Research in African Literatures* (Fall 1989):

Marechera's first-person narrator in a story like 'The Slow Sound of His Feet' is unable to restore a life that is both meaningful and worth living. He paints a harrowing picture of the individual suffering of a person who bears much resemblance to the author himself.

Dan Wylie in *English in Africa* (October 1991):

Marechera is the misfit. His *The House of Hunger* is a characteristically turbid, angst-ridden, dadaesque story virtually unparalleled in African fiction, by a profoundly dislocated writer living in a shattered, repulsive environment of mindless violence, raw sex, filth and madness.

Lisa Combrinck in *Work in Progress* (August 1993):

Above all, Marechera believed that the task of the writer in a changing society was to be honest, true to him- or herself and never hypocritical. Young South – and other – Africans who read Marechera will probably, like their Zimbabwean counterparts, embrace his works as a militant young lion who bravely criticised the government in the post-uhuru period.

Jean-Philippe Wade in *Alternation* (1995):

The House of Hunger is one of the most important texts to emerge from Southern Africa in recent decades. It should be on every school and university syllabus, because these powerful stories challenge just about every complacently hegemonic view of what 'African Literature' is.

Wole Soyinka, nominating *Scrapiron Blues* as his book of the year (1996):

A profound, even if exaggeratedly self-aware writer, an instinctive nomad and bohemian in temperament, Marechera was a writer in constant quest for his real self.

A. K. Thembeka in *Laduma* (2004):

He was a black who read all *their* books, and let them know it in the relentless stream of quotes that littered his prose. The literati rewarded him, not for his achievements, but for his 'struggle'.

Kgafela oa Magogodi in *Outspoken* (2004):

> my song grows from the ground
> where Marechera rose to write

Stephen Gray (2009):

The central text in this revised *The House of Hunger* collection is well enough established by now as the unforgettable, virtuoso accomplishment of African writing in English of the 1970s. Indeed, with its overlapping scenes of horror and of humour, it rattled the staid and timorous establishment like a refreshing outburst from a mighty imagination, setting itself impressively free. Supported here as it is now by various satellite pieces to complete the cluster, it reads all the more finely.

An Interview with Himself

Which writers influenced you?
I find the question oblique, not to the point. It assumes a writer has to be influenced by other writers, *has* to be influenced by what he reads. This may be so. In my own case I have been influenced to a point of desperation by the dogged though brutalised humanity of those among whom I grew up. Their actual lives, the way they flinched yet did not flinch from the blows dealt out to us day by day in the ghettos which were then called 'locations'.

Who are these 'They'?
They ranged from the few owners of grocery stores right through primary school teachers, priests, deranged leaders of fringe/esoteric religions, housewives, nannies, road-diggers, factory workers, shop assistants, caddies, builders, pickpockets, psychos, pimps, demoralised widows, professional con-men, whores, hungry but earnest schoolboys, hungry but soon to be pregnant schoolgirls and, of course, informers, the BSAP, the police reservists, the TMB ghetto police, the District Commissioner and his assorted pompous assistants and clerks, the haughty and rather banal Asian shopkeepers, the white schoolgirls in their exclusive schools, the white schoolboys who'd beat us too when we foraged among the dustbins of the white suburbs, the drowned bodies that occasionally turned up at Lesapi Dam, the madman

who was thought harmless until a mutilated body was discovered in the grass east of the ghetto, the mothers of nine or more children and the dignified despair of the few missionaries who once or twice turned up to see under what conditions I was actually living. This is the 'they'. The seething cesspit in which I grew, in which all these I am talking about went about making something of their lives. These are the ones who influenced me – through their pain, betrayals, hurts, joys.

You mean you observed but did not participate?
How can you 'observe' a stone that's about to strike you? That was my relationship with the then Rusape 'society'. I was the drunken brawls. I was my father one night coming home with a knife sticking out of his back. I was the family next door being callously evicted because the father had died – it was to happen to my own family too. I was my father when some sixteen year old twit, white twit, insulted him. I was all those who were being evicted from the surrounding white farms and being dumped and dumped anywhere. I was the fellow student dropping out because the school fees just could not be found. I was in the horrible dark nights (the street lights never worked), I was the ghostly lamentations and wails when someone died and you knew they would have to bury him in that rubbish dump they used to call the Native Cemetery. I was the young primary school teacher strutting everywhere with an important air. I was all my age group when we formed ourselves into gangs and gang warfare broke out into real fights with sticks, bricks, stones, knives. I was a cowboy, an Indian, a GI, a Second World War British commando officer – those dark days of succulent escape from our cheap and humiliating surroundings. But what terrified me most – it was the seed of Marie's blindness in *Black Sunlight* – was the sight of blind parents being led around by their five year old little girl – they had nowhere to stay – sometimes they slept in

the stadium, sometimes at the Railway Station – but the police were always after 'vagrants'. It was so pitiful and pity was not easy to come by in the ghetto of those days. Then there were the disabled – no one cared – I didn't care. To my eyes all this was our normal condition. The condition which later drove most of our fellows into Mozambique to become freedom fighters and I to become a writer.

Why a 'Writer'? Not many Blacks were?

Hmm. The dull and brutish ghetto life was always there. Fights, weddings, arrests, church services, the school-bell summoning us to assembly, summary evictions, football, insults, athletics, grim poverty, netball, the line of convicts going to and from hard labour on some white bastard's lawn or farm, playing golf behind the notorious women's hostel – the hard physical facts of day to day ghetto life. There was this too much, this cruel externality – you could not escape it. But there was the rubbish dump where they dumped the garbage from the white sections of the town – a very small small-minded, very racist town. I scratched around in the rubbish with other kids, looking for comics, magazines, books, broken toys, anything that could help us kids pass the time in the ghetto. But for me it was the reading material that was important. You could say my very first books were the books which the rabidly racist Rusape whites were reading at the time. Ha-ha, my most prized possession was a tattered Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopaedia* – very British Empire orientated but nonetheless a treasure of curious facts about the universe and the earth. There were jingoistic British Second World War comics. Superman. Batman. Spiderman. Super this, super that. Mickey Spillane, James Hadley Chase, Peter Cheyney, Tarzan things and Tarzan thongs. I had these two friends, Washington and Wattington, twins. They had built 'offices' of mud and tin and cardboard, offices about two and a half feet high. They had a children's

typewriter. They were the Chairman and General Manager. I was the office boy. We had a library there – of books and comics salvaged from the dump. Every day it was the rubbish dump – and then the offices. Washington typed down meticulous records of each day's acquisitions. See what I mean? There was the typewriter, there were these books. After school every day that was what we did.

That's when you thought of writing?
Not exactly. But the connection was made. You see? I was very young – I am talking of the period when I was still in primary school, when I was six years to ten years old. At this time I did not think blacks could become writers. I did not see a book by a black author until I was in Form One, at boarding school – Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*. And that was mind-blowing – that sealed and signed the earlier fumbling connection. I suddenly knew what I would do with my life – write stories, poems, plays. Write!

You started writing when you were eleven?
I would have done, but something happened. My father was killed. Our family was evicted from the ghetto house. It may have been a ghetto house but it had been our centre. And there was no father any more. Mother was a nanny. There we were – nine kids for her to look after. She was sacked. I was in Form One. Where would the fees come from? What did it mean that father was dead? What did it mean to not have a home? It was the beginning of my physical and mental insecurity – I began to stammer horribly. It was terrible. Even speech, language, was deserting me. I stammered hideously for three years. Agony. You know in class the teacher asks something, my hand shoots up, I stand, everyone is looking, I just stammer away, stuttering, nobody understands, the answer is locked inside me. Finally the teacher in pity asks me to please sit down. I was learning to