

# Environmentally Aware Art, Poetry, Music and Spirituality: *Lifelines*

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## Introduction

*Lifelines* (Mann *et al.* 2006) [is](#) the originating text of a holistic work of environmental art. Poems by Chris Mann based on encounters with forty animals, ranging from the aardvark and bees to the peregrine falcon and zebra, are embedded in images by Julia Skeen on each right-hand page of the book. The poems are informed by recent discoveries in science, while the images evoke the animals in their habitat with frequent references to fossil and cosmic time. On the left-hand page is a ghost image of the animals and scientific notes about each by Adrian Craig, a zoologist. A bibliography lists some books and articles concerning astronomy, biology, cosmology, palaeontology, physics and zoology as well as research into the behaviour of individual animals, while a list of further reading is available on request.

Other cultural artefacts accompany the book: an installation launched at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2007, a DVD of the music and images from the installation, a CD of the songs and a multimedia show. There have been over eighty performances of the last mentioned to date, at universities, schools, churches, literary and science festivals and conferences.

The performances can be interpreted as a form of oral literature, an influence evident in Mann's work from early in his career. Texts from the book are embedded in a sequence of digital images. These are projected onto a large screen behind the poet who introduces the poems, reads them aloud and performs original songs. The songs draw on the musical and literary

traditions of the ballad, *mbqanga* (a Zulu musical genre), folk-rock, jazz and plain-chant.

The performance of *Lifelines* at the Eco-Literature colloquium held at the Twinstreams Education Centre, Mtunzini, KwaZulu-Natal, on 6 October 2007, led to an invitation from the organisers to participants to submit an article to this journal. The performance on which this interview is based took place in the Senate Hall of the University of South Africa, Pretoria, City of Tshwane, on 4 March 2008.

We (interviewer and poet) share similar views regarding the value of a holistic approach to human existence which allows room not only for the material, in the environment especially, but also the spiritual. However, both of us felt it would be worthwhile to discuss and interrogate these assumptions. Hence the following interview, which condenses and focuses various points of discussion and sources from our combined reading. Furthermore, we felt such an approach to be valuable as regards the commitment in *Lifelines* to combined oral, artistic and musical forms. We regard this as simply the first step in a continuing conversation on all levels, and invite others to enter the discussion.

**DL: Chris, I enjoyed the passion and skill of your performance and Julia's art but mightn't it be possible to dismiss *Lifelines* and other similar work of yours such as *The Horn of Plenty* (Mann and Skeen 1997) as sentimental responses to natural phenomena?**

CM: Literary theories fifty years ago, constructed primarily by university scholars resident in functioning cities, may well have dismissed poems about animals, fruit, cereals and vegetables as sentimental. After all, the lights shone without interruption in the streets and lecture halls, the smokestacks of the factories, discretely sited on the urban fringe, were pouring their waste into the magnanimous emptiness of the atmosphere, abundant clean water gushed out of the taps and the racks of the food emporia were filled with cheeses from Ireland, beef from Argentina, salmon from Canada, rice from India and fruit and wine from South Africa.

*Homo sapiens*, or at least an affluent caste of the species, who'd lived for hundreds of thousands of years in fear of predatory animals, drought and famine, appeared to have gained control of the bio-niche in which its offspring lived. Modernity had arrived. The Enlightenment which had

produced education, commerce and industry, democracy, science, medicine and the nation-state had subjugated nature to serve the evolutionary trajectory of human beings. The progeny of Adam and Eve, as prophesied by Genesis, had indeed attained 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.' (Genesis 1:26). The literary scholar with a social conscience merely had to continue to implement the dream of progress, of human improvement, begun so promisingly in the nineteenth century.

There were of course a few unpleasant deviations from the dream: spasms of intra-species slaughter which in the twentieth century killed tens of millions of soldiers and civilians; a population which in a scant two thousand years had increased from a hundred or so million to billions of hungry people; an accelerating migration from the land to urban conglomerates which produced more shacks and crime than houses and shopping malls; and poverty, enormous poverty, in which more members of the species now lived than ever before.

Other social injustices presented themselves for solution, in the form of inequities, for example between men and women, between people of different classes, colours and ethnic origins. The list lengthened inexorably as monetarist economics and a culture of personal freedom and human rights spread rapidly through industrial democratic states and elsewhere. Was this a reaction to the duties and responsibilities imposed by the peasant culture of the forebear? Or was this the triumph of consumerism disguised in the exhilarating pursuit of individual aspirations to be free of nature, God and other people's irritating requirements?

Whatever the causes, market-driven economics, emboldened by the seeming collapse of the moral superiority of communist and socialist theories, promised at the start of the twenty-first century, if not a fridge and a book-shelf, at least a Coke and a TV set in every home. God and nature were redundant, pushed aside in the heady enthusiasm to explore new pastimes and to consume more and more. Anthropocentric hubris was running in full spate. Some enthusiasts like those who once clung to the idea that the earth was the centre of the universe, created the notion of modernity. With hardly a reference to the imprint in each of their cells and molecules of ancient cosmological events and still-occurring biological processes, they placed human time at the centre of the cosmos.

Nonetheless, under the surface, of course, a new current was beginning to flow. Environmental activists and researchers in the natural sciences during the second half of the twentieth century accumulated more and more evidence that showed how human beings, increasing in number and mechanized power over the environment, were depleting natural resources, poisoning the water, soil and air and extinguishing other species at a rate comparable to the Permian extinction.

The sporadic attempts by 137 countries to implement the Kyoto Protocol of 1997 and 2007 on climate change and the widespread, if grudging, acceptance of Al Gore's film 'An Inconvenient Truth' symbolized the paradigm shift underway across the world. The dominant species had begun to realise how domineering it had become and how much damage it was causing its habitat day after day after day.

Against this background, the genre of eco-literature which had been foreshadowed by the Romantics, for instance, began to emerge in a new form, to which it would seem that *Lifelines* is a modest contribution. Ironically enough, a charge of sentimentality, of charming naivety, could well be advanced against those literary critics, intellectually radical in some respects and critical of such literature, who nevertheless continue to take for granted the sustainability of the biological framework of life in which they write. It is as if such theories assume that the basic physiological needs for food, water, shelter, health and security outlined in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow 1943:394-395) have been and will always be met and that the self-actualisation of individual human beings is and will remain the central concern of contemporary literature.

Will literary theories based, for example, on different varieties of secular humanism, modernism, post-modernism and post-colonial frameworks of understanding be able to adjust to the new challenges posed by the environmental movement? The scale of the rethink is probably much more comprehensive than we can currently imagine. Some adjustments have already been made, for example the attempt to incorporate environmental concerns and the sacred into a new edition of a prominent introduction to post-colonial studies (Ashcroft *et al.* 2006:6 – 8; 491- 493; 517-518; see also Scott 1996:303-314).

**DL: Turning to South African interpretations of the environment, in what way, if at all, could you say that your work differs from that of the ‘Veld and Vlei’ poets of the past?**

CM: *Heartlands* (Mann 2002) is a series of poems-of-place. Unlike most of the poems of the so-called ‘Veld and Vlei’ writers with which I’m acquainted, *Heartlands* depicts a series of landscapes, both in South Africa and other countries, in which people are shown to be present and a part of history and culture.

‘Midlands Lexicon’ and ‘Komga Thornbush’, for example, evoke a multi-linguaged natural environment in which even a single species of grass or an ordinary thornbush have a variety of names and significances. ‘Hlambeza Pool’, a fairly typical sacred site in the Eastern Cape countryside, images the tobacco, beads and grains of mealies used in contemporary rites that venerate the *abaphansi* (ancestral spirits). ‘The Magic of Motse’ sets out the struggle of a local catechist against the corruption and administrative collapse of a small town. A similar post-liberation dysfunction is seen in ‘Seymour’. ‘Karoo Pyre’ describes the attempt by policemen to incinerate the bodies of the Pebco Three. ‘Hogsback Oracle’ evokes the shade of Monica Wilson, the social anthropologist whose insights into the change from small-scale to large-scale societies in Africa and elsewhere provided a model of social change that has influenced much of my work. ‘A Field in Italy’ links the second world war with families living in South Africa and Italy while ‘Saying Goodbye to the Romans’ imagines the impact of decolonization on Britain after three hundred years of occupation by the forces of a large-scale imperial power. Then there are a number of what might be called family poems of place, deliberately set in such quotidian built environments as a supermarket, a child’s bedroom, a swing in a garden in the suburbs and the passageway leading to the front door of a home.

‘Shacklands’ (from *Kites*, Mann 1990:28-40) is an earlier example of a peopled landscape. ‘Shacklands’ is an extended multi-voiced poem that evokes a number of individuals and some of their activities in and near a sprawling slum on the outskirts of a city where water, plants and animals are shown to be as underdeveloped, to use a euphemism, as the immigrants from the land.

In *South Africans* (Mann 1996), I tried to transmute the tradition of *izibongo* (praise-poems) into a multi-cultural work suitable for the page.

Dozens of individual people from widely different backgrounds, as well as people in groups, were evoked. In this series of portrait-poems the diversity of people in South Africa is celebrated and the landscape, and in particular the wide open spaces of veld and vleis relished by an urban dweller visiting the hinterlands and the mountains, were of course of secondary or no importance.

*Lifelines*, in contrast, is located in the tradition of poetry about animals found in numerous, if not all, cultures. Animal metaphors are layered into daily speech and remind us of our ancient kinship with other living creatures (Wilson 1975:271-301). Within the tradition of literature in English, as elsewhere in other cultures, animals signify different meanings in different texts and eras. Think only of the serpent in Genesis, the antelope in the Song of Songs, the lamb in the Gospels and the horses of the apocalypse in Revelations. Then we have the peacock and other fantastical creatures in the medieval bestiaries and the owl and ass in Shakespeare. Think also of the lamb, tiger and worm of Blake, the nightingale of Keats, the skylark of Shelley, Tennyson's eagle, Kipling's *Just So* stories, Orwell's elephant, Seamus Heaney's badgers and otter, Roy Campbell's zebras, Douglas Livingstone's wild-cat, lion and goat and the crow, the eagle and fox of Ted Hughes.

The portrayal of animals by Hughes in particular (Hughes 1957; Hughes 1960) marks a significant change by poets in the West in their attitude towards animals. Hughes expresses a neo-Darwinian interpretation of nature, though less dourly in his later poems. The rough, tough competitive struggle to survive is emphasised. The narrator is an observer, the animal a creature out there, an object to be looked at (the hawk) or consumed (the pig). This neo-Darwinian emphasis is a healthy antidote to the romantic, urban view of nature so vividly and poignantly expressed by Keats and in my view brings the reader closer to the empirical reality of nature than Wordsworth. My reading of Hughes left me wondering, however, whether he was oversimplifying nature from another perspective.

I continued to admire the fierce strength of 'The Hawk in the Rain' and 'Lupercal' but felt that my own experiences of nature, in particular working to develop sustainable low-cost agricultural projects for an NGO in the Valley of a Thousand Hills outside Durban during the eighties and nineties, were different. I was at the time part of a small multi-denominational reading and discussion group called Christians Anonymous.

Our reading of recent discoveries in a number of different sciences was beginning to position a neo-Darwinian view of nature in a wider ecological context. The texts we read, together with the findings of the environmental movement, invited a fresh interpretation of animals and their environment.

In complete contrast to Hughes and Douglas Livingstone, that much undervalued South African poet, I saw the bio-sphere as sacred and felt a restless urge to write a book that would show how we could live with the reality of natural selection as well as re-consecrate our attitude to nature.

**DL: Isn't this Wordsworth's essentially pantheistic response to nature, but just in another guise?**

CM: I was in fact initially influenced in this direction by the theologians whom the group was reading at the time. Drawing on the work of Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179) and Meister Eckhardt (1260-1328), Matthew Fox introduced the idea of creation spirituality (Fox 1983:42-54, 88-92). Attempting to distance Christian thought from the sobering disquietude provided by St Augustine's doctrine of original sin, Fox wrote enthusiastically of 'original blessing'. Central to his work was a joyful affirmation of cosmic creation and a natural philosophy he dubbed 'panentheism'.

Notable in this array of ideas was Hildegard of Bingen's concept of the 'greening' of creation (*viriditas*) (Hildegard of Bingen 1985:113), a poetic insight of extraordinary prescience for a nun with little formal education who wrote without the research results of palaeo-biology at hand and who was unlikely to have known that the earth was once as barren of life as the moon is today.

The forays into theology by Fox, however, seemed to me to be in need of temperate refinement and more observable empirical foundations. My attention then shifted to work by physicists, astronomers and cosmologists such as Paul Davies, Martin Rees and Thomas Berry, as well as books introducing disciplines such as biology and zoology on which my previous studies in English Literature, philosophy and African oral literature had not touched at all.

While struggling through these I was shocked to discover that I was in fact living and working with a dated Newtonian paradigm of understanding, one that I had simply inherited from the physics and chemistry of school.

This had been shaken but not dismantled by the reading I had done into the history and philosophy of science which was part of an undergraduate degree in philosophy. The complex implications of the work of Einstein, Bohr, Hubble and Heisenberg had yet to disturb the comfortable rectitude of a conventional urban, post-industrial epistemology. There was, as can be imagined, more crucial socio-political work to be done during the eighties and nineties in South Africa and my intellectual pursuits were erratic. There were pipelines to install and schools to be built and young children at home to be parented and loved.

In keeping with the practical holistic philosophy of development that was being implemented by The Valley Trust, the non-governmental development organisation where I worked, the idea of the specialised pursuit of a rarefied, comprehensive theory of understanding to the exclusion of other aspects of life was and remains to me unthinkable. The interplay of carefully researched and constructed models of understanding, incomplete in themselves and incompletely absorbed, taken together with the lived experience of work and family life, with all their stresses and strains, their tears and embraces and exhaustions and joys, seemed to me the locus and subject of poetry. The pursuit of theoretical knowledge by itself, remote from work and daily life, would be an act of reduction, of disincarnation, to coin a term, in which the poetry would wither away to lifeless if noble abstractions.

The Newtonian paradigm, for those of us whose understanding of science was limited, suggested a universe that behaved like clockwork. God was the ghost in a machine. The macro-cosmos was large and stable and governed by decipherable laws. It had neither a beginning nor an end and was emptiness, a vacuum not a plenum, populated by stars, the sun and the planets and a few other such bodies. The micro-cosmos likewise was populated by spheres of one kind or another, the hard-edged atoms and molecules of Rutherford. Their movements, like billiard balls on a snooker table, could be measured and predicted with precision. People who worked in the humanities spoke with respect at the time of such 'hard science' as a type of superior, more dependable knowledge.

Logical positivism, scientific materialism and, it may be, the confidence in social ideologies that flourished in the first part of the twentieth century grew out of this misunderstanding of science, with tragic consequences for the environment and for the imagined classes of people who did not fit the intellectual paradigms of the intellectuals and leaders.



One by one, the discoveries of the twentieth century seeped slowly and intermittently into my consciousness. Still consumed by work in peri-urban and rural development in the non-profit sector, I simply did not possess the scholarly background or the intellectual ability to question the results of physicists, palaeontologists, biologists and astronomers. Nor was there the time to explore the manifold implications of the discoveries or attempt a reasoned yet poetic coalescence. What could any one individual, especially a person brought up on literature, make of the explosion of scientific knowledge that was occurring every day? One example must suffice, the increase in size of the publication *Chemical Abstracts*:

What began as two little volumes in 1907 (free to members and carrying a subsidized price of \$6.00 for non-members) had by 2000 swollen into a behemoth that swallowed library budgets and shelves at an alarming pace. Its colossal 1997-2001 Collective Index occupies 35 linear feet and lists for \$43,000 (Flaxbart 2007:1).

And that was just an index. I was living by faith in far more areas of thought and discovery than I cared or dared to acknowledge. Here are a few examples of the discoveries in science that shook my paradigms. Rather than prune and carefully order the list, I have deliberately left the discoveries in a single paragraph, tumbled together and tangled up and at different levels of insight to reproduce the muddled and at times exasperating process by which most of us in fact learn across disciplines, in contrast to the orderly absorption of knowledge in a book or a well-designed course organised by an institution of higher learning.

The universe had not always existed. There had been a start. Billions of galaxies were once contained in a pinhead. Energy had, over time, transubstantiated into light, into matter, life on earth, then consciousness. Time was inseparable from energy, was linked to the speed of light. There was in fact an arrow to time, to complexity from the hydrogen atom, to iron, carbon and uranium to Shakespeare's mind. Energy, not matter, was the primary constituent of the universe. Space was not empty but full of numerous forces and events always intangible to human perception. Science did not provide immutable facts but incomplete models of understanding.

These models changed with time. The scientist could not be excised from the experiment. While events at the macro-level were precisely predictable, measurements at the quantum level faded into estimates and probabilities. Mathematics had limited scope. Some complex physical systems would remain inexplicable given the dimensions of consciousness. And language. The macro-universe was far bigger than expected and expanding every moment with enormous speed. The micro-cosmos was opening out under experiment into more and more complex realities. There no longer was an end to the small. A molecule of carbon, the element without which life cannot exist, needs three million years of heat and pressure in the nuclear reactor of a star to be created. It takes a universe this old and this large to create the possibility of that most complex of phenomena, life, to occur. Cosmology can tell us what happened but neither science nor philosophy has yet explained why the universe is here. The chance of repeating the founding conditions of the universe is one in ten to the power of 123, which exceeds the number of all the photons in the universe (Penrose 1989:339-345). Why genes replicate and life struggles so fiercely to survive cannot be explained within biology. Or science, given its self-limiting method of experimentation and verification. Which was its strength. The relationships of forces between the sub-nuclear particles in a rock, a plant, bacterium or animal on earth were established at the start of the universe and are to be found in all other matter in the universe fourteen billion years or so later, including those sub-nuclear forces within each neuron within each brain. Human sensory organs as well as the brain curved, filtered, censored, broke up and reconstituted in different combinations the incoming stream of data. Consciousness, in other words, only provided illusions of the real. Refined technologies of perception such as the radio telescope and the electron microscope revealed megabytes of data inscrutable to direct human perception. The physicality of humans and the limits of their technologies preset the range of phenomena we could ever hope to know.

It was ludicrous to imagine that I could or would want to synthesize all these incomplete and, it must be said, rapidly altering models of understanding into a grand design. That was the business of philosophy and theology. My

vocation was poetry, written in a period characterised by a rapid and stimulating flow of new ideas from different disciplines, socio-political instability and the mutability of much of science.

What poetic form, what narrative structure, mode of address, diction and prosody could best absorb and express this flux of astonishing new findings, particularly in regard to the manifested need to engage once again with nature? Did the subject matter not require epic treatment? A grand metaphorical narrative as in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*? A precisely ordered poetic journey as in Dante's *La Commedia*? The verse paragraphs of pentameters that conjured up the pantheism of Wordsworth out of the rocks of an island?

After considerable thought, experimentation and rejection, I postulated a form in keeping with my creative abilities and the highly differentiated and changing character of the science I was trying to absorb. The larger forces at work in the universe would be depicted not in a grand design but in a series of individual dramatic monologues in which the narrator addressed an animal he had encountered. By choosing encounters from my own lived experience and working them into different lyrics I could more readily incarnate aspects of the standard model of cosmogenesis into poetry. The metrics would be based primarily on stressed peaks, providing the regular irregularity and irregular regularity observable in a living organism. By addressing the animal directly as an animal I could avoid the pathetic fallacy on one hand and the distancing stance of a Hughes on the other.

This latter mode of address would, I would hope, encourage the reader to feel that animals were not so much objects to be observed, ignored or consumed as chromosome cousins, fellow creatures in an interlinked web of necessary bio-diversity. To substantiate this relationship with an image, the artist has shown the animals in the book looking out and at the reader.

By addressing a variety of animals encountered at different times and evoking different responses I could bring out a range of different responses felt by others of our species. This range of feelings included the following: frustration and anger ('Cutworm'), regret ('Kudu' and 'Eastern Cape Rocky'), apprehension and fear ('Orthosucus'), repugnance at the unknown ('Spider'), repulsion then acceptance ('Maggots'), admiration ('Eland'), a sense of mystery ('Bees'), a deepened sense of biological time ('Dicynodont' and 'Lizard'), distress, ethical uncertainty and awe ('Silverfish'), horror then grudging acceptance ('Peregrine Falcon'), disaffection with fellow humans

(‘Porcupine’ and ‘Tortoise’), dismay at interspecies violence (‘Moth’ and ‘Zebra’) and moments of tranquil unity with nature (‘Dove’, ‘Blesbuck’ and ‘Cicada’).

**DL: I take your points, but I wonder if your work would appeal to anyone who would prefer not to read religious themes into (or out of) nature?**

CM: I would sincerely hope so. Religious themes are decipherable in some of the poems but there is, I think, much more to them than that.

‘Antlion’, for example, is based on the numerous times I sat as a boy on a dune and stirred the sandy den of the creature with a twig, as well as on the comprehensive field work of a researcher who worked on Kalahari antlions (Van Zyl 1994) and Wheeler’s *Demons of the Dust* (Wheeler n.d.). The poem also incorporates references to the energy transfers observable in the macro-cosmos in the creation and life-cycle of a star (Davies 1983:26-32) and in the micro-cosmos in the exchanges of energy in biological systems (Pimm 1982:99-106).

All this sounds too technical, too scientific for poetry but that was the challenge I faced, to transmute the findings of scientific research into texts of poetic significance in a form where the reader suspended suspicion and discontent. I mean no one in their right mind addresses an animal in verse, let alone one present only to the imagination. The art of the poetry lay in making such dramatic monologues believable, in speaking for example to an imagined chameleon on a branch using alliteration, assonance and four or more stress-beats to a line in the hope that a reader would read the poem with what Robert Frost (Poirer & Richardson 1995:777) described in ‘The Figure a Poem Makes’ as a delight that turns into wisdom.

**DL: Nevertheless, should one bring God (however defined) into a poetic/artistic response to nature at all?**

CM: I would not be prescriptive or censorious here. The current preference for, if not hegemony of, secular literature found in the western academy should not exclude writing by people of faith. Shabbir Banoobhai, for example, a South African poet of great distinction who writes within the Muslim tradition, or a poetic hymn-writer such as Isaiah Shembe, the founder

of an enormous African independent church in KwaZulu-Natal, perceive and celebrate a God whom they perceive at work in the lives of people and the whole panoply of the natural world.

I write as an artist who happens to be an aspirant Christian, whose life is steadied by daily prayer and given a wider perspective in space and time by regular meditation and worship and the music, liturgy and evolving traditions of the Anglican community. In *Lifelines*, as elsewhere, I prefer to avoid using the word 'God' wherever I can. To me the mere verbal deed of drawing such a word into the syntax of a sentence, particularly one written in prose or spoken in a secular social context, diminishes the energy and complexity of the metaphor and turns what to me is a vocative, a salutation, an infinity, a glimpsed presence, an unfolding, an opening out of consciousness into a noun as humdrum as the word 'potato'.

In *Lifelines*, for example, I tried instead to be true to the range of emotions that the encounters with animals aroused in me. A number of these left me and, I would hope, the reader eschewing any didactic and narrow interpretation of a Creator, for example the unpalatable discovery, conveyed in a number of poems, that ongoing sacrifice is built into the biosphere. How can there be a loving 'God' in a world of ferocious insects ('Mosquitoes') and destructive herbivores ('Rhinoceros')? Poetry for me is an art that shares with a reader not texts declaiming and defining a closed ideological commitment but emotions such as pain and a sense of helplessness ('Electric Ray'), humour and irony ('Warthog') and confusion ('Finches') as well as translucent moments of tranquillity and felt belonging ('Heron').

**DL: However powerfully these emotions are felt, is it really feasible to trace links between nature, in South Africa for example, and the cosmos?**

CM: The links have been discovered by astronomers, cosmologists, palaeontologists, biologists and palaeo-microbiologists. One of the most comprehensive summations of their findings to date is the book *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Barrow 1986).

Let me give a few examples of what has become prominent in my imagination as I pondered over the years the significance of books like that. The leaves of the milkwood trees on the dune at Port Alfred where I sat as a boy and fiddled with antlions, like leaves all round the earth, catch photons

of light speeding in from the sun at a little less than 299,792,458 metres per second and transmute these miniscule packets into sugars and gases and energy consumable on earth. Without such capturing of energy the earth would be as thinly skinned with plants today as it was before the assumed first appearance of such an astonishingly complex molecule in an angiosperm.

The nuclei of the grains of sand on the beach below the dune are held together by the same set of astonishingly precise forces that cohere the hydrogen and helium and other atoms in the furthest observable and measurable star and dust-cloud in the universe. These forces, their relationships of energy, momentum and radial speed were established at the start of the cosmos over fourteen billion years ago. Were those sub-nuclear relationships to differ, by even a tiny amount, the whole universe would collapse.

Local gravity related to the movement of the moon pulls the sea back and forth and, pulsing out in waves through the sea, chamfers the edge of each grain of the sand on the beach. The complex molecules in every nerve and cell of me were fused out of hydrogen in a long-vanished star whose dust was compacted by gravity into the planets which circle the sun. My lungs thirst after oxygen which is present in each breath of air I breathe only because of the photosynthesis of the leaves. Dark matter or energy, recently discovered and still poorly understood, links huge conglomerations of matter such as the galaxies. The existence of the whole expanding cosmos is sustained by enormous forces or powers that also remain unknown.

**DL: I personally am struck by the scale and vividness of your imagination, but do you think your work will or should cause a response? If so, in what way? Or doesn't it matter whether you evoke any reaction?**

CM: Definitely. The response I would welcome most from a reader of the book is the one that slowly emerged in me as I did the research and entered into the meditations that slowly turned into the poems, namely, a frightening realisation of the vulnerability of life in an industrialized, monetarized biosphere and an exhilarating understanding of the intimacy of the lifelines on the planet with the cosmos in which they emerged.

The response I also welcome, after a performance, is linked to a lifelong passion to find ways to restore poetry to the public domain in a culture dominated by the mass media. When young people come up on stage at the end of a performance and say how much they enjoyed the poems and the art, then Julia the artist and I feel hugely affirmed.

Whether or not *Lifelines* will have any impact at all on behaviour is another matter. On the one hand there is the gloomy view of the later Auden, that poetry 'makes nothing happen' (Auden 1968:41). On the other is the statement made by Seamus Heaney during his visit to Grahamstown in 2003: his Irish experience suggested that poetry can help to change 'attitudes'. In South Africa it is often forgotten how much poetry or verse was written by people during the eighties and nineties. The value of this huge outpouring has passed and the violence of many of the sectarian slogans and battle cries posing as poetry still needs to be openly acknowledged and criticised. At the time such oral political literature served at the very least to articulate the socio-political attitudes of large numbers of people in an international language.

Also articulating an unfolding cluster of feelings, by suggesting that we view other animals as 'chromosome cousins', the book and the performance confront a current prejudice among humans which I call 'animalism', our tendency to feel instantly superior to any animal we meet. Despite the vigour of the animal rights lobby it is difficult to imagine how long it will take for this prejudice to be ameliorated among a largely carnivorous species.

**DL: Agreed, yet I still need to ask whether such poetry and images do have any place in a South Africa that is still struggling with massive socio-economic inequalities and other difficulties, which are increasing rather than being resolved?**

CM: Poetry, the reading and writing of poetry, like prayer, provides me with less imbalanced perspectives on daily life and moments of tranquillity in which values and beliefs that guide future action coalesce. This is not an elite pastime. Is it unnatural for people who live in poverty, in a violent, overcrowded urban slum to pray and sing and dance and listen to the live oral literature of a sermon for hours on a Sunday when there is so much material work that could be done at home? Of course there are numerous incidents of

charlatan chicanery in such spirituality, as there are not only in some of the inner city churches with their thousands of adherents but also in the established mainline churches as well.

Both activities, however, in other words the poetic and the religious, engage the inner life, in solitary meditation or in the community of a faith group, and both are as crucial to the restoration of an abundant life among poor people as decent homes, water, sanitation, roads, clinics and schools.

That said, the awareness you express of this ghastly, dehumanizing blight cannot be dissolved in Pharisaic disdain or shunned in an intellectual protectionism that always privileges art over action, or worse, favours socially committed texts, masquerading as poetry, in order to foist these on pupils and students and thereby exiate personal guilt at ethical inaction. Individual artists make their peace with this material injustice, as well as crime and corruption and the inefficiency of government services in different ways. In my case I am fortunate enough to be able to spend more time on writing and performing than I could do in my youth but I continue to express my commitment to social justice through the development activities of a literary festival of which I am the convenor, through Spiritfest, a recently established independent festival that takes place during the National Arts Festival, of which I am the secretary, and through several developmental trusts and similar activities.

These are of course minor enterprises when set against the billions of rands spent and often squandered on development by a government increasingly characterised by ineptitude. To give but one example: a qualified report from the auditors would be enough to get the director of a company or a department of government fired in other parts of the world. Year after year since liberation, however, to no avail the Standing Committee on Public Accounts in Parliament lists department after department and parastatal after parastatal whose accounts are not acceptable.

Another role for the poet with a social conscience is thus emerging, with greater and greater urgency, the perennial role of public witness, not only with regard to the environmental crisis. Why, it may be asked, are writers who were so prominent in their criticism of the injustices of apartheid so silent about Mugabe's Zimbabwe and the widespread and growing incidents of maladministration and corruption of the post-apartheid government in South Africa?



To my mind the oral, musical and visible medium within which I practise my craft calls many of the human being's senses and capacities (affective, intellectual, even spiritual) into play, and I'd hope that the experience of this holistic art will be shared by others, not as an escape from daily reality, but as an enriching explication. Who knows, it may in some cases lead to a change in behaviour. I often wonder, for example, what effect the poem 'Finches', which conveys my disquiet at the slaughter of such birds in a gum plantation when I was a boy on a farm, has on audiences of schoolboys. In the Eastern Cape where we live there have been observable changes, not inspired by poetry of course, towards better conservation practices, sometimes induced by rational economic factors. Who would have thought, for example, that unsustainable cattle and maize farming which has had such a destructive effect on bio-diversity in the area would have been largely replaced by game-farming in a decade?

In this so-called post-apartheid era we need a number of perspectives to help us regain the sanity of sustainable relationships between each other and the biosphere that succours us and the cosmos which is our home. Other writers and artists will and must of course focus on what to them are priorities different to ours. But such differences, as in the sciences, as in the competitive urge to survive in nature, are a healthy and welcome part of life.

**DL: Having set out some of the intellectual and biographical background to *Lifelines* would you, in conclusion, choose a poem from the book that embodies what you have been saying?**

CM: I'd like to offer 'Rhinceros' (Mann 2006:63) which brings together a few insights from science, technology and ecology and articulates my belief in the importance of art, an attitude in this case derived from a response to the gold-skinned sculpture of an African rhino excavated from Mapungubwe.

### **RHINOCEROS**

A gully of thorn-bush, smitten by the heat.  
Ant-heap pinnacles, like Gaudi's cathedral.  
And sightings, in cycads, of pale grey hide.  
Ear-scallops. The dusty boulder of a rump.

You were a saga upwind of me. Had been,  
for millions of years. A Pliocene mammal  
getting on with it. That maw of a mouth  
lipping, ripping, grinding scrub to a mash.

I sat in a jeep, my camera aimed like a rifle,  
and zoomed in. On a snuffling, slobbering,  
pig-eyed cranium. A calloused flange of lip.  
*Click.* I bagged in pixels a kill of your being.

What art, I thought, could begin to semaphore  
the instincts delicately latticed in your genes,  
the shoals of blood-sacs bred in your marrow  
and your whole horned hunger to live, live, live?

A month or so later, back home at my desk,  
tracking your spoor through the internet bush,  
I marvelled at what the artists had made of you  
centuries back in Mapungubwe's hill-top smithy.

You were a small, austere replica of your self,  
a talisman crafted by the sculptors of the village,  
a totem whittled from wood and skinned in gold  
to strengthen and beautify the life of the clan.

I gazed and gazed, at the stump-strong legs,  
the hippo-squat bulk, a head dropped to charge,  
loving your lustre, your bony snort of a tail.  
And then you charged, right out of the screen  
into the word-carved talisman of this poem.

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A further reading list is available from Chris Mann.