

POETRY | SPRING 2021

The Number

By Mariechen Puchert

We first see it when we lift your right arm
to apply the blood pressure cuff
in that well-coordinated bustle after your delivery to the ICU
- exchanging monitors, applying probes,
relaying the simple values that determine your vitality
right now.

They call it: your “crown”
The story of your life as a Number,
etched into your skin
and we read it
as a judge might read a report:
You have been in prison six times.
You are a Second General.
You have killed.

Just yesterday
one of ours was killed
shot six times, execution-style,
for failing to stop Death.
Today we wear black armbands
and we look at you now as one does
a sleeping snake
fearfully fascinated.

And we have to decide right now
how hard we will fight for your life.
Will we jump on your chest
Will we charge rhythm back into your heart
or can we convince ourselves that the world is
better off
without you?

It might be.

But the ink on your body
Does not tell us about

Your boyhood.
Who you were.
Are.
Were you safe;
Were you hungry;
Were you deceived?
These we may never be privy to.

And so we close our eyes
and we beat on your chest
so that you may live
to kill another day.

COMMENT FROM THE AUTHOR:

“Numbers” form a unique and socially complex part of the gang-landscape in South Africa. Members of these gangs (27s, 28s, etc) are fiercely loyal to their numbers. The skin markings of these gangs are well documented in the literature, with symbolism that includes a member’s rank and kills.

In September 2020, a South African anaesthetist was killed execution-style in what is presumed to be a “hit”. The anaesthetist was to be tried for culpable homicide following the death of a paediatric patient in surgery. The investigation remains ongoing.

Mariechen Puchert (she/her) is a Medical Officer in Anaesthesia in South Africa. She completed her MB.ChB at the University of Stellenbosch and currently finds herself in a semi-urban public hospital in the Eastern Cape. A storyteller at heart, Puchert is an alumna of Youth Journalism International, where she gained confidence in writing for an audience, and of the Semester at Sea Spring 2013 voyage, where she first enrolled in a class in Illness Narratives. She has a special interest in pain medicine as well as mental health, and contests the popular opinion of anaesthesiology as an invisible and minimally interactive specialty. Puchert lives and learns in East London, South Africa, with her partner and their four cats.