Ingrid de Kok: 
An Introduction

Ingrid de Kok, the noted English-language South African poet and essayist, visited Grand Valley State University in September of 2006 as a guest of GVSU’s English Department. While in West Michigan, Ms. de Kok gave two well-attended public recitals, one at Grand Valley’s Allendale campus and another at Calvin College. Ms. de Kok then went on a tour of several North American cities to promote her first collection of poetry to be published in the USA as well as in South Africa, Seasonal Fires: New and Selected Poems (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), which contains selections from her three previous books of poetry, Familiar Ground (1988), Transfer (1997), and Terrestrial Things (2002), as well as a range of new poems.

Ms. de Kok’s work often probes matters of public concern, but does so in ways that evoke their more intimate dimensions, as the poems reproduced below exemplify. Among such matters are the destructive effects of state-sponsored repression, the ramifications of national reconciliation, and the ravages of AIDS. A few specifically personal concerns also mark Ms. de Kok’s work, such as her relationships with family members and friends, or her sojourns in Canada and Italy. Even in her ostensibly personal poems, however, the echoes of public history can often be heard.

If poverty, suffering, and death haunt many of Ms. de Kok’s poems, so do resilience, redress, and restoration. Moreover, even when they are contemplating some of the harshest realities of the contemporary world, these poems neither flinch nor give in to defeatism. Instead, in the spare and precise manner that is an abiding and defining feature of de Kok’s oeuvre, they testify modestly but tenaciously to poetry’s capacity for capturing the temper of the times and for conveying terse truths about the ways in which we organize our social orders.

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