

Freed from the role of protest, South African poetry is reaching for its soul

*The Heart in Exile:
South African poetry in English,
1990-1995*

Edited by Leon de Kock
And Ian Tromp
(Penguin)

The question that lies at the heart of this anthology is a tantalizing one: what has happened to South African poetry in English in the five years following the watershed of February 11 1990?

The answer, as provided in the selections in *The Heart in Exile*, is that poetry in this country has been released from the sterile aesthetics of our unhappy past. Not only is it now permissible to plumb the depths of highly particularized human experience, it is a requirement that poetry should do this in a complex, more nuanced post-apartheid South Africa.

The editors unashamedly went in pursuit of “unusually fine poetry”, of “poems of potentially breathtaking impact, poems with sinuous, sensuous textures of feeling and expression”. As academics, De Kock and Tromp would be only too aware of the contested nature of such critical precepts; that they chose nonetheless to employ them is evidence of an admirable forthrightness that contributes in no small measure to the appeal of this book.

De Kock and Tromp astutely judge that the dramatic turn-around in South African society makes the 90s an era that deserves to be treated on its own. The time will come for anthologists to make

sense of the now-disrupted patterns of South African literature over the past 150 years; understanding the present is, for the moment, the pressing issue.

Another shrewd judgment is selecting the theme of exile as the core motif of the anthology. As a great number of poems in this anthology attest, fragments of South African lives cluster round this motif in colourful profusion.

The tone is set by Denis Hirson’s richly nostalgic *The Long-Distance South African*, which comes directly after Bongani Sithole’s praise poem to Mandela, *Hail, Dalibunga!* With its passionate injunction, “Be strong, Madiba, our ancestors watch you”. The other poets follow in alphabetical order, from Lionel Abrahams to Fiona Zerbst, the latter’s fine tribute to one of South Africa’s lesser-known talents, Ruth Miller, coincidentally providing the anthology with a fitting conclusion.

Ruth Miller has also been vividly recalled by Joan Meterlekamp, whose poems probe at new ways defining the relationship between private and social space. Exploring the same territory with equal freshness are Ingrid de Kok, Karen Press and Lisa Combrinck.

The deaths of Lynne Bryer (in 1994) and, more recently, of Douglas Livingstone, cast long shadows over this anthology. Bryer is represented by 10 poems (the most accorded to any poet here), among which *The Heart is Always in Exile* (which provides the anthology with its leitmotif) stands out. “Some words”, runs an extract from this poem, are “local and specific”:

Review: Craig
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*Take them on the tongue: round
or sharp, they're hewn of here,
shaped by a topography
nowhere else true.*

*Run your fingers over them,
feel the braille
of donga, koppie, kloof,
the homesick lurch
of windmill stoep Karoo.*

It is difficult to read the one poem by Livingstone, *The Wall beyond Station X*, without a sense of its premonitory dimension. The speaker in the poem recounts his increasingly perilous adventure along a wall that extends out into the sea, pointing "straightly to some promised land". Considering it safe, he "foolishly" advances. Hours later, the sky turns overcast and the sea stormy, but still the adventurer plods on, until he finds that he has travelled too far to return. Glancing back, he finds that the wall behind him is "dissolving" as he passes.

The metaphorical dimensions of this solitary walk become increasingly clear as the poem progresses, leaving the

reader with a strong aftertaste of the bleak power of Livingstone's vision.

The "exile" of the anthology's title has a number of semantic resonances. In its more literal sense it is powerfully explored by Alan James, Douglas Reid Skinner, Mark Swift and Cherry Clayton.

More pervasive, however, is the sense of the past being "another country", where things were done differently. In Jonty Driver's *Elegy*, the speaker wanders around the school at which his father (who has since died) was headmaster, hoping irrationally to round a corner and find his father miraculously there. Disappointed, he sombrelly reflects that they will not meet on "the last busy day", either, for

There is no god, there is no life to come,

There is no time when we shall meet again:

*We have to learn to live with pain,
Impermanance, and our long home.*

For me, the centerpiece of the anthology is MacLennan's *The Poetry Lesson*, a poem that captures in its whimsical nuances and pared-down style the simultaneous "being and nothingness" that is poetry's paradoxical nature. The speaker in the poem is a teacher of English who ponders the purpose of poetry and why young people bother with it, while admiring "their courage that they / at this unnerving time in history / still want to know / the purpose and meaning of poetry". He challenges them directly: " 'Now tell me what it is,' I ask them."

*They are struck dumb, like animals
that smell a yawning emptiness
that waits beyond their years.*

*Perhaps I have projected onto them
some of my own fears –
that evolution has no purpose,
that mind and spirit, even god,
are only words we use
because we do not understand.*

Against expectation, the students “sense an answer/just beyond their grasp”.

*Intoxication floods
their solar plexes, bowels and genitals,
and the poem floats free
into the green morning
amazed and filling our silence.
Almost out of range it mingles
with the whistles of the starlings,
and becomes astonishing and strange.*

It is this astonishingness and strangeness that *The Heart in Exile* has restored to South African poetry. Although there is sometimes a discernable unevenness in the poems that were chosen to represent a particular poet, the bulk of the poets selected deserve their place in this anthology. One obvious omission is Lesego Rampolokeng. It may appear at times as if the selections have been steered by emotion rather than balance, but surely this is the prerogative of the anthologists.

Outstanding for me, among the poets are Tatamkhulu Afrika, Kelwyn Sole, Robert Berold, Peter Wilhelm, Stephen Gray and Francis Faller. [*The Sunday Independent*, 26 May, 1996.]