

JOHN AXE

Midas Men

For Douglas

The flattie who lives in my shower, who lurks
Mostly behind the tiles, cast loose
His exoskeleton; it lies
Lightly above him on the wall.

Outlaw Billy, the arachnid Kid!
All I see of him now are some black
Extensions of his new legs; a quick
Scuttling from sight when I reach for the taps.

It must be unnerving, I imagine, soaping,
To live with your corpse poised over you, hanging
Like Damocles' sword. But I, drying, pause
To consider our two-legged being who hauls
Heavy corpses about with no nerve at all
Parading the boast – having sloughed the soul.

IAN TROMP and LEON DE KOCK

The Making of *The Heart in Exile*

In view of the controversies which have arisen around our anthology, *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995*, it is perhaps appropriate for us as editors to offer our own version of the book's genesis and the impulses informing it. Our (reluctant) intervention is spurred by what we consider to be wilful misreadings of our methodology and our intentions. Most galling of all is the fact that, in some quarters, there seems to have been an unwillingness to engage with the explicit terms of reference in the anthology's introduction. In the most notorious instance of this, the book was recoded into the very cultural narratives from which we sought to break free.

As a result, we have been tempted to reassess our contention, central to the entire anthology, that it was possible to talk about a 're-mapping of South African cultural space' and 'a greater and more benevolent capacity for acceptance, forgiveness, negotiation' (xviii). In terms of critical reception, the book proclaimed — as something new — a broader sense of inclusiveness than existed previously in South African aesthetics; our intention was that the anthology should embrace the 'full force of multiplicity and surprise in South Africa's many expressive forms and moods' (xix). We felt, perhaps wrongly, that it was indeed possible to conceive of 'a freer, more capacious expressive environment, a place where excellence could find its mark more diversely' (xviii). For us, the collection was like asking our readers a question: can you read these poems and find, as we do, pleasure in the sheer range of voices and idioms, satisfaction in what we called 'a conception of difference in South African lyrical expression' (xx).

Reading reviews of the book, mostly favourable, we find a curious bifurcation. Those with few pretensions to the grand cultural pronouncement show implicit agreement with the above positions, using their discussions to give different ex-

amples of the excellence and diversity we suggest can be found in the anthology. Of the two reviews by prominent literary professionals published by the time this essay was completed (12 August 1996), one warmly applauds our choices, while the other offers the critical equivalent of the finger. The latter discussion drew much attention to itself by the extremity of its claims, but both in the review itself and in the correspondence which followed, few people seemed willing to take up our critical conversation as we had set it out in the book's introduction, resorting instead to the mere assertion of competing value claims, and, distressingly, to the championing or denouncing of a literary personality. We would have welcomed argument, alternative visions, engagement with our openly stated principles of selection. What we got, instead, was a free-for-all. Given the fact that we made the rationale for our choices quite explicit, it would not seem too much to ask that readers refrain from re-inventing our terms of reference for the convenience of their speculations. Generally, when frank discussion is declined, the implicit message is that one's contribution is considered unworthy of response. When, in addition, the most prominent response is peevishly hostile as well as inaccurate, and it leads to further instances of public mud-slinging, the vision of a 'capacious' environment of critical reception indeed begins to seem utopian.

However, we feel compelled to report that informal and non-highbrow response to the book has been overwhelming, generous, and passionate. Many ordinary people, people who would not normally read poetry books, have been buying *The Heart in Exile*. Contributors, who received five author's copies each, have been sending them all over the world. Messages of appreciation have reached us from Germany, Australia, Scotland, the USA, Canada, Zimbabwe and elsewhere. Penguin UK liked the anthology so much they decided to release it independently, in October this year. Astonishingly for a poetry book, it has been listed on no fewer than three Sunday newspaper bestseller lists. Is this not a breakthrough for the marketing of South African poetry? Or do we wish to confine South African poetry to an etiolated parlour of '20 poets alive at any one time'?

The sheer force of other peoples' pleasure in the book, reported by word of mouth and in all reviews to date except that

in the *Mail & Guardian*, has led us to feel that, after all, we might have been correct in our opening gambit about tolerance and generosity in the reading of diverse South African poets. This is not to subscribe to a facile dichotomy between 'populist' and 'snob' reception, but to reposition debate around South African poetry outside the exclusive confines of a febrile Academy. Our guiding feeling in making a book of poetry which issued from transition was to embrace, to reflect, and to enshrine the democratic impulse — demos, the people; kratos, strength — both within the making and the reception of poetry. This meant including a wide range of poetic expression, as well as to register and re-inscribe the importance of a diversity of feeling, and decisively to move beyond our customary orthodoxies and heresies. Our selections were based on the paradox of the greatest possible diversity within a highly constrained time-period: the years of immediate political transition, 1990-95. What we sought were poems of unusual emotional force in this very particular context, and not the absurdly vague category of 'new' poetry inaccurately imputed to the book. Is there a middle way between the 'elitist' twenty poets (read by a diminishing coterie) and the broader reach of a deliberately more inclusive, more democratic aesthetic of poetic expression? To shut down, to refuse to publish, acknowledge or validate any but those 20 voices strikes us as profoundly anti-democratic, authoritarian and prescriptive. This is not even to begin to discuss the insuperable problem of who gets to nominate the twenty and by what criteria. The middle way we sought was a desire for inclusiveness constrained by rigorous considerations of affective quality, in defiance of the literary prescriptions of the 1980s. In other words, we judged the poems not by colour-count, gender-count or rhyme-count, but by a simple question: how strongly does this poem move you, and how well is it written to achieve its effect?

Of course, such choices are never innocent or free of politics. We knew that all too well, but we nevertheless set ourselves the challenge of becoming more eclectic readers, and we wanted to set our readers the same challenge. We were all too aware that the 1980s had been characterised by the most viciously exclusivist orthodoxies, principally of the 'aestheticist' and the 'struggle' varieties in opposition with each other. It

was from an atmosphere rent by exactly such oppressive laws of composition that South African writers entered the 1990s, to some extent in a state of exile from their better selves and from the life of a country they loved but could not improve. As editors, we found it necessary to register Albie Sachs's important, if contested, intercession to unshackle the expressive arts, in all their diverse forms, from the burden of carrying the 'struggle', steadfastly, unwaveringly, unvaryingly. To us as anthologists, Sachs's propositions, and the debate they caused, seemed to loosen the tight bonds of allegiance, the divisive factions of style and aesthetics (are you for or against?), and to lessen the stridency of competing claims pitting politics against mere art. As Kelwyn Sole has recently argued, 'the realities of contemporary South Africa are too complex to allow for a retreat into either a blinkered public, or private poetry'.

The poetry we encountered suggested that, although South Africans were still far from any political homecoming to speak of in the first few years of the 1990s, they nevertheless detected a foretaste of freedom, an intimation of release and resolution, while in reality conditions continued to be grim and murderous. It was such a paradoxical sense that led us to the notion of 'the heart in exile' (taken from a poem title by the late Lynne Bryer) as a leitmotif in our reconception of poetry in the new 'moment'. The idea of the 'heart in exile' somehow succeeded in allowing for the coalescence of public and private, and for the longings of physical exile as well as the intricacies of internal exile. It conjoined the suffering of the heart, for a land which always promised more than it seemed to give, with the deep struggles of political suffering — the exile from justice and legitimacy — and it emphasised, in all these divergent states, the primacy of feeling: indeed the necessity of feeling. Coming as we do from a tradition of literary aesthetics in which 'feeling' was consigned to a formula called 'Sift' (Sense, Intention, Feeling, Tone), the recovery of feeling as a serious value should not be underestimated. For it is more: a community of shared feeling, a place we can all call 'home'.

While a broadly conceived sense of exile has arguably been shared by a great diversity of writers in South Africa over a long period, it seemed to us that the transition years brought a

new urgency and a greater suppleness inside what poets began to see as a newly imagined community. We felt, perhaps prematurely in some instances, that critical reception had begun to relinquish the irritable scratchiness and spoiling-for-a-fight mood so characteristic of the 1980s, when dogmas were lined up like armies ready to do battle. Our feeling was that we could now read Lionel Abrahams's poem 'Flesh' (in which he confesses that his own struggle with a bent and palsied body entirely overshadowed the greater political struggle out there), without automatically resorting to sneering condemnation. The poem bears quoting in full:

Busy in my skin in my house, I receive
rumours and news. Again and again I hear
about too much death, too much pain,
too much emptiness, the culpabilities,
relentless causes and terrible ends.
Hearsay comes muffled, distorted,
diminished through the walls of my house.
Busy in my safe place, the attention I pay
takes the form of distraction.
Busy in my safe skin, I attend
with half an ear or heart —
because my skin, from my side,
after all is no safe place.
The walls of my house contain
sufficient travail,
the floor lies ready to bruise me,
beat out my breath. Health, safety,
time for work are not vouchsafed.
I must carve them out of each slippery
hard-textured day, must grapple
with the knotted minutes for those luxuries:
my bare subsistence, a glint of meaning.
This is why, for all I have heard,
I remain, you could say, aloof;
in practical terms, you could say,
ignorant of the struggle.

One can now perhaps better appreciate the delicate paradoxes in Abrahams's poem, the burden of an aching knowledge about 'relentless causes and terrible ends', and the affliction of a still greater, more immediate threat: floors and walls that are ready to abuse and attack the frail body and the still

more frail sense of life and safety. Abrahams speaks about the trials of being alive and trapped in an inarticulate, complicated body as a condition enclosed within the terrible entrapments in a foul body politic. Abrahams's manipulation of the received language of anti-apartheid correctness ('I remain, you could say, aloof;/ in practical terms, you could say,/ ignorant of the struggle') invites one to ask: but would you really say that? Can you read my words and still say that? For to go ahead and make that judgement seems to imply a most profound lack of feeling, a refusal to understand that our struggles have taken on many shapes and forms.

Of course, this is not to say that we regarded political commitment as in any way wrong or suspect in itself. It is to say 'in addition to' and 'as well as'. We still need to read Denis Hirson's narrative of a childhood defined by political exile to understand how irremovable the experience of politics has been in the everyday fibre of South African life ('The Long-Distance South African'), where the 'smooth-eared/ telephone waits patiently to pick up any stray phrases' and where the finality of repression under apartheid is recorded with a stunning sense of circumambient suburban numbness:

It is 1964 and my father is arrested. He neither dies nor is he there. His shadow dents the cushions of every chair. Outside, children dive-bomb swimming pools, dogs barb the air with their din. History stops where the suburbs begin.

Hirson's life, as telescoped in retrospective form in the poem, is a story of losing one's home to the political commissars, but his poem's dénouement (watching, in Paris, a television transmission of Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990) presents a resolution of two forms of exile — the poet's own and his father's political alienation, as well as Nelson Mandela's prolonged exile from his political destiny — within a sadness and a feeling of distance that is unbearably harrowing.

The greater suppleness, and the wider ambit of feeling and poetic texture which we believe characterises this period in South African English poetry, is evident in Hirson's ability to tell this story, and to tell of his own desperation — despite the national euphoria — with absolute frankness. Hirson's narrative verse brings all of apartheid, all of its memory, into the moment of release, and teaches us how ambiguous that experi-

ence is, how the teleology of liberation is displaced by different struggles and renewed agonies. Similarly, Bongani Sitole's praise poem to Nelson Mandela, 'Hail, Dalibunga!', which with Hirson's poem inaugurates the collection, carries a fulsome sense of commendation which is yet barbed by a forewarning of trials to come, and an implicit caution about the scorn that will be visited on 'foot-shuffling'.

Our choices were frequently marked by just such glimpses of a turning, of surprise, and never by the ranking and counting exercises which some of our critics seem unwilling to relinquish. For example, a poet who sees in Mandela's release an ending rather than a beginning, despite his comradely joy, is Tatamkhulu Afrika. Afrika writes about Mandela's victory speech in Cape Town's Greenmarket Square as a moment of the most lamentable sadness. His poem, 'Tamed', offers a sense of the disorientation that occurs when a legend, a signifier in other people's texts, is suddenly called upon to give his own victory speech:

A mannikin hands
you the typed sheets of your speech.
You shuffle them, tap
the microphone, gently clear
an old phlegm from your throat —
and are oracle,
measured thunder of your voice
doomsday's in a square.
But then comes
the small fumble of the tongue,
the stretching thin
of the fabric of the spell,
and the words are sad
old slogans that fall
like stones onto a stone

.....
We rise in rapture, stretch
up our hands to the kitsch,
alienating pedestal we've piled
for your pinioning, and you reach
out to bless
us and I am hanging my head —
amongst these many thousand others
hanging my head lest
you see me weep,

knowing, as I know,
that there is no crying like
the lamentation of old men.

Afrika's poem helps one understand the surprise of poetry in post-transition South Africa. Mandela's release allowed a whole brace of suppositions — about glorious freedom and the political millennium, and the many attendant expectations — to collapse into the ordinariness of a day-to-day continuance. The kind of continuance, perhaps, that is described by Ken Barris in 'The People Who Now Live in District Six':

The people who now live in District Six
have abraded complexions, roughly planed
by bad weather and methylated spirits.
The women groom each other's hair, crouching,
combing for parasites with crooked fingers:
touching heads as if to say,
we survived last night. In good weather
they sit along the broken duct,
now a trickle of papers and garbage,
drinking sunlight, unwrinkling,
taking a first timeless drag, talking,
sitting like birds.
One might catch your eye as you pass
and greet you, the manners
of a small nation without bitterness:
about a dozen of them. They sit,
when the southeaster blows, in the lee
of the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouefederasie Tehuis
an angular ship
bearing elderly people
in gravity and kindness
to their innocent deaths.

Barris's words convey the necessity of a record to monitor the destitution of innocent people, regardless of political liberation. It is precisely such a warning that is sounded by Kelvin Sole in his poem, 'The Face and the Flag', in which a rapid and slippery trajectory is detected from a potentially national liberation to the enrichment of a new elite:

The songs of resistance
are more muted now

trade unions

praise their politicians, expectant
of a better world.

Limousines

filled with executives
still grease the multiracial
freeways. Books forgotten
with their covers red
are now an item up for sale.
There is a quiescence which longs
to break itself.

Written before actual political liberation in South Africa, Sole's poem asks the question: 'And five years from now?' Addressed to a fellow-comrade, fellow-socialist, it poses uncomfortable, unanswerable questions. As the slide into elitist comfort becomes more real with each passing day in South Africa — and as socialist ideals are ditched in favour of market-economy 'solutions' to joblessness and destitution — Sole's questioning begins to assume a historic flavour, as though the moment of asking was already being engulfed by the affirmative wave of apparatchiks who increasingly populate the country's freeways in the limousines of political influence. Sole wants the political struggle to continue, and memory to be awakened — forget the illusory glories of liberation! In a similar way, Dennis Brutus's superb poem, 'Goreé', makes a chilling plea for the unshackling of memory from the kind of post-liberation blindness, indeed guiltlessness, that characterises the attitudes of many — especially whites — who comfortably lived through the apartheid years, and who now expediently settle for a painless amnesia:

Bring back the implements of slavery,
manacles, chains, the collar, the gouge,
bring back the instruments of slavery
hang them in the forests of the mind
let their windchimes vibrate
in the tremors of time,
and whisper the phrases of guilt
remorse and compassion:
Goreé, Goreé, send back the chains
that our hearts may break
and our tears be unfrozen
and that the healing may at last begin.

Many of the poems in the collection serve to break the amnesiac spell. Compositions such as Barbara Schreiner's 'Chain Reaction', Stephen Gray's 'Slaughtered Saints', Peter Horn's 'Unrest Report of a Father', Andries Walter Oliphant's 'The Hunger Striker', Karen Press's 'Dispossessed Words', and others, bring back into sometimes brutal focus the sheer, irreducible facts of torture and suffering in South Africa, beyond the transition and beyond signification or redemption: just there, like a carcinoma. *tered Saints*, Peter Horn's 'Unrest Report of a Father', Andries Walter Oliphant's 'The Hunger Striker', Karen Press's 'Dispossessed Words', and others, bring back into sometimes brutal focus the sheer, irreducible facts of torture and suffering in South Africa, beyond the transition and beyond signification or redemption: just there, like a carcinoma.

As editors, we were surprised to find that while circumstances have allowed the bonds of exile to be dissolved, the condition of homelessness, and of making accommodations with homes away from home, continues to be written about, with ever more feeling. Exile had passed from an overdetermined political decision to a voluntary or unchangeable state. For CJ Driver, a return visit proves that he no longer belongs at home, yet he cannot stop wanting to:

... We've grown up —
 And some of us have grown away, and some
 Are dead, and some will die, and soon, I fear.
 The dawn-song blares; the curtains pulse with wind;
 The shutters bar the early night. How strange,
 How strange it is to be alive, and back
 Where I belonged so much, now not at all.

('Aubade')

In contrast, Ingrid de Kok in her poem 'Transfer', evokes a sense of internal exile, of being at odds with one's mental and physical environment, although she brings the moment perfectly into an apprehension of the South African world turning, when the decaying, tight little bourgeoisie of a white past grows rank and desolate, and new possibilities beckon:

All the family dogs are dead.
 A borrowed one, its displaced hip
 at an angle to its purebred head,

bays at a siren's emergency climb
 whining from the motorway ...

... The municipality leers over the gate,
 complains of dispossession and neglect,
 dark tenants and the broken fence.
 But all the highveld birds are here,
 weighing their metronomic blossoms
 upon the branches in the winter air.
 And the exiles are returning.

.....

A question one may ask about the book, and which no one has yet posed, is the following: in what way does the anthology reflect (or deflect) the current preoccupation with post-coloniality in global literary studies. This question ties in with the matter of English and its imperial history. A short answer is that English has always been one language among many in southern Africa, and although it served as a master-discourse for narratives of civilisation in the nineteenth-century, it has remained sufficiently marginal in relation to a plethora of other tongues for it not to become ironically or self-consciously preoccupied with itself in a manner typical of postcolonial cultures where English predominates completely or almost completely. In a sense, South African English has felt it imperative to maintain a sense of its own liberalism, first as the purported vehicle of grand civilisation in the missionary era, and later as a medium of 'liberal capitalism' in opposition to apartheid (a contested idea in South African studies). Both these enclosures — the discourse of missionary colonialism and the embattled defence of a liberal position — have rendered English in South Africa a postcolonial language only in a paradoxical, 'colonial' sort of way. One of the manifestations of this 'colonial postcolonialism' has been a steady, obdurate refusal by certain liberal poets to be drawn into politics of any kind whatsoever, and their insistence on remaining 'universal' in their subject matter. In their estimation, politics was vile and they wanted nothing to do with it. They cultivated an aestheticism that would be scorned by black poets and radical critics, and which was seen by many as insupportable during apartheid's long reign of national complicity. A strange result of this is that a particularly marked feature of postcoloniality in South Africa is precisely this pseudo-universalism, this ex-

tension of local South African experience — the 'backveld' as Leonard Flemming used to call it — into an imagined universality out there, when in fact the English-speaking world at large was not there at all; it was embedded in regional concerns, and in global conflicts, but not in an imagined, free-floating sphere of universal English letters.

Nevertheless — and here the surprises become even more exhilarating — this tendency in South African poetry has produced, even in the 1990s, poetry of marvellous force and resonance. In editing the book, we felt that the more receptive space of the 1990s which we were positing should allow a greater generosity towards this kind of work. These poets would all argue very persuasively that writing 'universally' was their way of opposing apartheid all along. For them, it was a refusal to allow apartheid a stranglehold on art, a determination to persist in elevating poetry above the partisan, worldly sphere of political mendacity. The critical storms that raged around such arguments need not be repeated here. In compiling *The Heart in Exile*, we felt able to let go of those bruising fights, to enter into Nelson Mandela's determined quest for reconciliation, and to let all the voices be heard again, as long as they satisfied the primary requirement of resonance and poetic texture.

The older white poets who perhaps fall into this category — specifically Don MacLennan, Patrick Cullinan and Douglas Livingstone — continued to surface in the 1990s with work of great effect, though Livingstone passed away a short while before the book's publication. MacLennan's work is characterised by the sheerest simplicity of diction and plainness of content, and it speaks of a life honed to bare minimum in the provinces of a far-off, once-colonial land:

When death takes me
I'll be in no mood to recount
the way I saw things
or work out my account.
All I've ever wanted to make —
a few clean statements
on love and death,
things you cannot fake.

(*'Letter in a Bottle'*)

His writing evokes the kind of space, out there in rural South Africa, in a small university town, in which a poet can, in Foucault's phrase, make words 'shine in the brightness of [their] being'. MacLennan is somehow able to say the following about his life's labour as a scribe with the most undivided sincerity:

And writing?
Flinging words
against the world,
to conjure up the sound
and smell of things
that are themselves.

(From *'Letters'*)

In Patrick Cullinan's hands, the appearance of aestheticism is also deceptive, for his poetry etches out the textures of a peculiarly South African sense of place — of lovelessness and want and danger and yearning — that is palpable and utterly rivetting. In *'The Dust in the Wind'*, Cullinan is able to compress a lifetime's experience of the particularity of a here and now into language that nevertheless resists mass mobilisation, and is all the better for it:

The grass black and a turbulence,
a blossoming
that shakes from the plum tree
clockwise,
that drops a hundred yards away.
Spring comes with its mortal odours,
a flicker of red in the hills at night,
and age is a taste, dry on the tongue:
all day
there is dust in the wind.

The younger successors of this school, perhaps one could call it 'aestheticist', although they are defined partly by a pre-occupation with the individual's relation to place and landscape, have likewise produced exceptionally moving poetry, crafted out of a deeply-felt sense of time and place, although paradoxically aspiring to an ahistorical claim to beauty. We have in mind poets such as John Eppel, Basil du Toit, Alan James, Robert Berold, Lynne Bryer, Francis Faller, Joop Bersee, as well as a number of others. There should be a place in

our hearts for all these poets, and for others besides. Their numbers far exceed twenty.

We have presented a few instances, in cross-section, of the impulses and rationale behind our choices in making *The Heart in Exile*. Yet the questions remain: how is one to ascribe literary value? Who should be the arbiters of literary value? We were led to write this essay by a sense of outrage at the thought that any single person, or group of people, could still presume to legislate unreflexively on matters of literary value in the 1990s. Since negotiation had become the key-word in our national lexicon during the transition, we took the line in editing the collection that it was feasible to negotiate our way through the unanswerable questions of what constitutes 'good' and what 'bad' poetry. This meant give and take. It meant a broad exposure to various kinds of poetic enunciation. Behind the scenes, behind all the positions and competing theories of value, we were also reading the masses of poems before us as writers. We tested the words, the lines, the stanzas and the feelings by our writerly sense (sometimes at odds with each other) of the fitness of things. But this was always qualified by the desire to let as many voices as possible speak. Judging by the range of feedback the book has received, and by its sales, those voices are being heard far and wide.

