

it all begins.

Robert Berold (ed.) Scottsville: Gecko Books [an imprint of Natal University Press], 2003. 240 pp, ISBN 1-86914-008-7.

Robert Berold's collection of poetry entitled *it all begins*, recently published by Gecko Books, is a "must have" for all lovers of poetry and for all serious critics of South African literary outpourings, notwithstanding the fact that its content belies the promise invoked by the title, itself suggestive of a new beginning, a turning of the page. Its subtitle is likewise misleading. Although subtitled "poems from postliberation South Africa", this anthology includes poems from

the five years prior to 1994 (and what is referred to as the first democratic elections) as well as those from the five years after that momentous watershed in our country's history. Effectively, then, this is a record of the wisdom and vision of our poets from the earliest negotiations to free Madiba, through to the unbanning of the ANC and embracing their first five years in Office.

This decade of writing from 1989 to 1999 is of singular importance, for it is our poets who have been our *griots* recording, for posterity, our memories – yet pregnant with the violence of the past. They have also been our sangomas, gathering the herbs and tossing the metaphorical bones so vital for the nation's recovery. It is undoubtedly these poets who have felt the moral responsibility to be the voice of our country's memory; and it is also their writings that have therefore embodied our sense of national identity. As in Russia's comparably turbulent history, the arts in South Africa "have served as the arena for political, philosophical and religious debate in the absence of a [democratic] parliament and a free press. Nowhere has the artist been more burdened with the task of national leadership, nor more feared and persecuted by the state" (Anon. 2002: 32).

This, then, is an important collection, representing not only ten years of *New Coin* selections but also a crucial decade in South Africa's political history. Reading like a veritable who's who in South African poetry, it features poems by such anthologized givens as Kelwyn Sole, Lionel Abrahams, Ingrid de Kok, Mazisi Kunene, Stephen Watson, Jeremy Cronin and the late Tatamkhulu Afrika among others; but it also includes such hitherto largely unsung voices as Karen Press and Lisa Combrinck, whose "Heart's Hunger" and "In the Moonlight", respectively, remind us of our innermost beings, our souls, our essential humanity (even in loss), of the capacity to love that is so nec-

essary to pave the way for the healing of our beloved country.

The collection is divided into eight unnamed sections; these are seemingly arbitrary, but only until one detects the subtle inner coherence informed by a few lines from one of the poems in each of these sections. These function as the proems or epigraphs to each segment of the text. Take, for example, the first section – comprising eleven poems – which is introduced by a stanza from Lesego Rampolokeng's "Lines for Vincent". Here, the nostalgic imperative that gives birth to the poem is "the red rage" of injustice, in lines recalling the "nation's homicidal glory" that has left so many of our brave young men dead.

In like manner, the dozen poems in the second "movement" are informed by their proem, this time from "Raid!" – one of several poems in this anthology by the celebrated Zimbabwean writer-activist, the late Dambudzo Marechera, whose self-exiled voice records the bitter sweetness of "Uhuru". The ambivalences of freedom are also encapsulated by the first poem in this segment. Here, the English Academy's 2001 Olive Schreiner award winner, Mzi Mahola, with his telling title "How will I trust?" sets the tone to this series of twelve cautionary poems – including two by popular poet, Vonani Bila.

The pattern is repeated throughout and the final segment contains thirteen poems, appropriately prefaced by Seithlamo Motsapi's "river Robert" to suggest the theme of life's dichotomies, and the symbiosis of hope and despair:

*i have one eye full of rivers & welcomes
the other is full of flickers and fades.*

As the blurb on the back cover announces, these are essentially experimental poems, the "innovation" of which inheres in their inimitable African rhythms – reminiscent of the *Drum* generation but with the newer Kwaito beat; their catholic paradigm shifts; their unexpected yet compel-

ling use of englishes; and their graphic images often “yoked by violence together” (to appropriate Alexander Pope’s reactionary critique of mixed metaphors). Consider, for instance, Don MacLennan’s fructifying fig trees, the full blooded fruit of which at once belies and accrues from the suicidal climatic furnace of the “drought of March” in his poem “The sky is on fire tonight”. Then, there is Karen Press’s poem “incarnate eternity” where “jasmine” flourishes like the weed of rape, and sun warmed strawberries signify blood, the blood of the nation’s endemic violence against women and children.

Perhaps the most interesting experimental poem – in terms of voice and mode, reminiscent as it is of the mode that CS Lewis termed “proemdra”, with its a cross-generic mix of poetry, prose and drama – is Ari Sitas’s “Delirium” (final section of “Slave Trades”). Sitas’s satanic apocalyptic vision is tempered only by his powerful, central injunction

*you will realise that you need to invent
and grow the trees of paradise again*

and his clever subversion of the clichéd Cartesian adage into

*I hope still,
therefore
I am.*

The new poetic consciousness, as articulated in Lesego Ramolokeng’s rap narrative “Welcome to the New Consciousness”, is earthy, sensuous and “con-sensual”, rooted and transcendent, a bringing together of the sacred and the profane, a synthesis of Euro- and Afro-centrism, reflecting strands of the partial recovery inherent in Modernism and the kaleidoscopic chaos of Postmodernism.

The anthology is commendable for its vast range – here we have in a singular collection 107 poems with something for everyone. In the words of the editor, “poetry is the resilient human vision, the mind flying, the body speaking”.

“It all begins” with the voice and vision of the people, for the people, by the people! Not since Wole Soyinka’s *Poems of Black Africa* (1975) have we had a collection with a greater capacity to help the nation “to move ahead or sideways, by the thoroughness of ingestion within a new organic mould, by the original strength of the new entity”. As a final year student noted in response to an examination rubric I set to test *Broken Strings: The Politics of Poetry* (1992) against the presupposition that poetry is more compelling than pure political protest or sloganeering, is more than the mere sum of its parts, is the most intimate form of communication:

“If poetry is ‘man meaning to man’ [as opposed to political clap-trap], then considerations of the closely intimate and personal precede the more totalizing notions of the body politic. The accent falls on ‘meaning’ – what is important and what is meant or signified and not (as with political diatribes) what can be achieved in the saying or writing. To put it in another way, the true achievement of poetry does not reside in its ability to communicate ideology but, instead, in the way it bridges all agendas and hones in on the most basic (and the most political) state of being of all, the fellowship between listener and speaker.”

It all begins invites just such an intimate fellowship.

Reference: Anon. 2002. *BBC History*, 3(11): 32.

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