

It All Begins: Poems from Postliberation South Africa. Ed Robert Berold. Scottsville: University of Natal Press, n.d. R 149.95.

This anthology is of poems first published in the journal *New Coin*, during the first ten years of Robert Berold's editorship, 1989–1999. Berold says that he selected them then, as he selects them now, for the way they speak to him. I have not read *New Coin*. My knowledge of South African poetry comes from books rather than journals. This anthology thus introduced me to some poets I did not know, and I read the collection for what the subtitle promises: a poetic snapshot of the first decade after apartheid and a survey of the poetry of that time.

The first thing to note about the anthology is its variety. There are eight thematic divisions, and while politics is everywhere, the subjects range from the land to sex to family to art. Explicit comment on national politics is limited to one section that looks backward at the suffering under apartheid, and two sections that comment, usually with bitterness, on the present dispensation. Disillusionment or at least challenge and scepticism remain a near constant. I was pleased to see translations from Xitsonga, Afrikaans, and Zulu. Vonani Bila combines several languages in his poem "Comrades, Don't We Delude Ourselves?"

Kelwyn Sole, himself represented in this anthology, says in the afterword that these poems should not be read as representative of something else but for their own sake. He rightly denounces any of the common stereotyped distinctions between poets made on the basis of race. The differences among the black poets here, like the differences among the white poets, are so great that any broad distinction between black and white will be suspect. Nevertheless, one important distinction leaps out at a reader. It is striking how many of the established white poets continued their writing through the transition to the new order. Jeremy Cronin, Don Maclennan, Antjie Krog, Petra Muller, and Lionel Abrahams are all present here. Most of the other white poets, as well as the Coloured poets in the collection, were born in the nineteen-fifties and started their careers in the last years of apartheid: these include notable names found in every anthology, such as Karen Press, Ingrid de Kok, Joan Metelerkamp, Andries Walter Oliphant, Stephen Watson, Chris van Wyk, Ari Sitas, and Sole himself. Black poetry, on the other hand, seems to have undergone a complete generational renewal. The poets who first came to fame in the seventies and eighties, like Siphos Sepamla, Mongane Serote, and Mafika Gwala, are not represented here. The patriarch Mazisi Kunene is here, but he writes in Zulu not English. Dambudzo Marechera and Taban Lo Liyong are here, but they are not South African (Marechera's poems in *New*

Coin were published posthumously). The black South African poets here, many of whom were not previously known to me, are generally born in the 1960s or later and almost all started publishing after liberation. The best known is Lesego Rampolokeng.

If this distinction between white and black poets is at all valid, we can expect it to have consequences for the nature of the poetry. The first relation of white and coloured poets to the past is, it seems, through personal memory. The black poets, who by and large came of age with the end of apartheid, write about present conditions or adopt a collective history.

The distinction I am making is not that black poetry is more political than the white poetry, for all these poems are political. Cronin writes, "there is no such thing / as pure poetry. / The poem is not alone / it must forge its way into the world / between the silence and / (trajectory, point of entry) / these official words." Nelson Mandela features prominently, as one would expect: Sincedile Mngomeni has written a praise poem in his honour, but Tatamkhulu Afrika, Kelwyn Sole, and Vonani Bila express varying degrees of scepticism. The black poets are arguably more *overtly* political, more concerned with protest, more conscious of the need to speak for others. I note that the last section of the anthology, organized around the theme of social injustice in contemporary South Africa, has only two poems by poets who are not black (but they are each very long): Sitas's "Black Mambo Rising," which looks at militants who have survived the struggle, and Cronin's powerful commentary and analysis of journalistic expressions of the status quo, "Even the Dead." The section of poems about love and sex, on the other hand, features twelve white poets and only four black. The sorrow and anger emanate from three sources in particular: the violence inflicted in the past, the persistence of suffering due to poverty in the present, and the loss of value and control inflicted by global capitalism.

The major difference between the groups is one of voice, however, rather than subject matter. The white poets most often write of 'I,' while the black poets write of 'we,' 'you,' and lower-case 'i.' The distinction I am making is less between the individual and the collective than it is between the centred and the decentred. When the white and coloured poets here respond to the land, to history, and to social injustice, it is always in terms of personal consciousness. Joan Metelerkamp can plead to her "chattering consciousness" to leave her and let her be taken over by a rhythm or by words or by the Word, but the poem attests to her difficulty doing so. The black poets, in contrast, seemed to collect voices and images from the world around them and to weave them into a constellation where the self is not at the centre. Paradoxically, their poems feel more abstract than those of the white poets

do: because they do not make spatial relations clear, their imagery appears decontextualized (or, what amounts to the same thing, often involves a national rather than a localized context).

A major theme for the white poets is the tentative and provisional working out of a true relationship for oneself to the land, the past, family, and others. The white poets see as though for the first time what they have always known, and measure Truth by the uniqueness of poetic voice and the personal renewal of language. Words must be redeemed after the abuse they suffered under apartheid. "Had I language," mourns Antjie Krog. Metelerkamp seeks "a new way of speaking, / way of being," forged one word at a time, because the "old language" and its "old Self" weigh on her shoulders "heavier and heavier." She needs "something more": "words to take me / somewhere new." Lisa Combinck, on a "Naming Journey," feels "ignorant of the speech of these parts": "I stutter and stammer / with smiling faltering syllables / in the only language I know." Until the world is named afresh, it is as though words and world have come loose from each other. Karen Press writes,

No-one's nailed down properly here.
There's always a corner loose and we wobble
bending over to hold it down.

Grief stands in Sole's way:

My poem trips on stone.
It can't move forward, or start back,
but loathes this standing still.

He also expresses frustration with "the fumbled maleness / of all metaphor." Cronin writes very differently, but is as concerned with the renewal of language: "Art is the struggle to stay awake" in the face of amnesia, which, like language, "exists across two axes—the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic."

If the white poets sometimes sound as if they are learning to communicate all over again as adults, putting one word after another on a page, the black South African poets gush forth, as if they are finally able to release words that have been pent up inside. Seithlamo Motsapi says, "every one of us / carries the seed of a storm within him." Many of the poems demand to be performed, especially the ones influenced by hip hop and dub poetry (Lesego Rampolokeng, Sipiwe ka Ngwenya, and Isabella Motadinyane). In the poem entitled "for the oral," Rampolokeng announces that

it is DEMOCRACY beyond the statute book
it is rocking to the rhythm of the drum & the bass
it is pumping up the pace of the human race

it is a smile on the face of a mental case
it is sunrays beyond our sorry days
it is simply
poetry

Another way of saying this is that the white poets are more prone to be inspired by painting, by Vermeer (Ian Tromp) or Monet (Metelerkamp) and the black poets by music. Yet another way of saying it is that the white and coloured poets are more likely to be concerned with writing, the black poets with oral performance, although Marechera and Phillip Zhuwao prove the limits of my distinctions by writing about their solitude as poets face to face with ink on the page.

My attempts at classification must be taken for what they are worth: subjective and based on a limited sample, they are no more than sketches of the path followed by poetic consciousness in contemporary South Africa. Clearly, however, we must try to name exactly even as we seek to give these words power by repeating and circulating them.

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Nora Foster Stovel. *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008. Pp. xii, 406. Paperback CA \$29.95.

Nora Foster Stovel's *Divining Margaret Laurence: A Study of Her Complete Writings* is an excellent addition to the corpus of literature on the renowned Margaret Laurence. Readers will be familiar with Nora Foster Stovel's work on Laurence, for she is, as Barbara Pell notes on the book cover itself, "arguably the pre-eminent Laurence scholar in Canada." Most recently, Stovel has edited new versions of Laurence's *Heart of a Stranger* (2003) and *Long Drums and Cannons* (2001). Stovel unearths some of Laurence's writing in archives—including translations of Somali poems and an essay called "Tribalism as Us Versus Them"—and publishes them as appendices to *Heart of a Stranger*. *Divining Margaret Laurence* intelligently and clearly discusses all of Laurence's writings. Most admirably, in this book, Stovel has once again unearthed—"divined," if you will—Laurence's work, including unpublished writings that have not been discussed previously. These unpublished writings include Laurence's original version of her bestselling novel, *The Diviners*, and her unfinished novel, *Dance on the Earth*.