

2. Rhodesian Poetry

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Twenty-fifth Anniversary Issue (1950–1975)

by Fenella Laband

The Poetry Society of Rhodesia has been functioning for 25 years, and its anniversary issue contains some poetry which proves that the political situation has not produced literary sterility in Rhodesia. Indeed, Colin Style, in his poem "The New Town", evokes the brashness of a town, "in new clothes . . . like the clerk in our office." and his uneasy and confused mind faced by "a knotted fence." and "our palisade of rooms." His description of the land before the growth of the town forms a rich contrast:

What I remember,
dimly wrapped in soiled paper,
is a hidden landscape still primal
but beginning to be skirted by settlements.
You could still find duikers and hares in wire nooses,
seeing in their eyes dumb but acceptant agony.
Shadows would burn darkly in the grass,
flattening the earth's suppliant body.
But, what did come bending towards me,
tapping on the scarred bones in the fields,
was rain,
dripping down and damping out a squatter's fire
distantly,
scrubbing down the baroque flourish on the houses
forehead;
and afterwards, the Africans would flood over the
empty earth
(its voice stilled, the hillocks rumped like men sleeping
with blankets pulled over their heads)
with pails, piling mushrooms steadily through the
emerald grass,
past the temporary pools, gross with barbels that
wriggled up-field and hatched,
dressed in punctured sacks, wet black faces, breath
steaming out smelling of coarse tobacco,
and the glistening white mushrooms heaped there with
helpless frilled bellies.

Philippa Berlyn, in her poem "Border Road", uses surprising natural imagery—bullets and landmines "blossom" and "sprout" to convey the shock of sudden, 'camouflaged' violence:

I drive along a border road
in mist of rain
watching the trees spin by
and waiting for them to
blossom burning bullets.
Along the soft and sandy road
grows hardy grass.
I follow on the twin tyre tracks
and wait for them to
sprout a landmine blast.

And then, I remember there are still
—thank Heaven—rainbows
in quiet places;
bush without ambush,
tracks that lead somewhere
other than bloodied death,
and star-scattered nights
with a full moon
latticed by twigs and serenaded by cicadas
not the dragon's teeth harvest
of a midnight spring.

Not all the poems in this volume are, however, stimulating. Some are convention bound. Stephen Gray, of the Rand Afrikaans University, criticises this weakness in his foreword:

"Look, some Rhodesian poets have got to defend themselves against Keats. Keats is inappropriate to Rhodesia, because his entire world-view as conveyed in his choice of words is to Rhodesia of historic interest only. For that reason I find the use of "tracery", "saffron", "flute", "swathe", "trembling strings" and still more "swathes" inept. These words are no more than nostalgia now."

Nor do I enjoy the uncontrolled melodrama of Charl Sisson's "The Terrorist." I quote a stanza from the poem:

You slipped through dim evening tunnels
Evil bright in your eyes.
Avoiding the curling sun's light

Bullets slipping in your sweat crazed hands
You pressed the gun against your thigh
And fear flapped and crouched behind you
On empty hunchman feet
Dripping a silence on leaves where you passed.

In the next stanza Sisson describes the terrorist's arm,
"a cricketer's arc around a heavy ball."

There is, however, much to enjoy in this slender volume of
poetry, including Solomon M. Mutswairo's "The Grave of
an Unknown Person", the late Wilson Chivaura's "Song for

Hunting Animals," and Bonus Zimunya's "Old Granny",
which is reproduced below:

A little freezing Spider:
Logs and arms gathered in her chest
Rocking with flu,
I saw old Granny
At Harare Market;
It was past nine of the night.
When I saw the dusty crumpled Spider—
A torn little blanket
Was her web.□

from **IT'S GETTIN LATE** and other poems from **OPHIR: Selected by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn;**
Ravan Press; 1974

THE RUBBER STAMP

The rubber stamp cuts down
A frozen arc of motion
To land on my passbook
And leave a reverberating
Silence.
The stamp means
I can almost be a man.
I can brush shoulders
With the great white god
Along West Street,
In search for **their eternal** wallets.
The gory ink in my pocket
Is greater than me, you Kind sir,
And the man in Pretoria.
The rubber stamp is a gun
I can use to guerilla unmolested
In the white jungle.

Mandlenkosi Langa

MONOTONOUS SONG

A man,
a dark skinned man
looking at us.
A man
with big white eyes
and dark skin,
just staring at us.
Dark skinned
but a man, just the same.
A man staring
and walking on the other
side of the sidewalk.
A dark skinned man
but a man, just the same.
A man, a thousand men,
a million, ten million men
all by himself.
Ten million men
on the other side of the sidewalk
staring and walking
walking and staring at us.
Without hatred or anger,
without fear as well.
Just looking,
like any other man, looking
at his fellow man.

Rui Knopfli.

From "WALKING THROUGH OUR SLEEP"

Peter Horn. Ravan Press 1974

I'M GETTING FAMOUS SORT OF

my first poems are published
I am getting famous
sort of

I rehearse dignity
in front of a mirror
I receive visitors
young poets
present to me
their first attempts
I

say: not too bad
no need to do a lot of thinking
from now on success
breeds success in every case
I will say
I am for peace
(naturally, who is not?)
and against the government

soon they will present me
with prizes (academics, juries, professors)
and I will smile
the prescribed smile
what I say
will be reasonable
or appropriately angry
or soothingly shocking

it is time
somebody
kicked me
in the arse

ADVENTURER ON FOREIGN SHORES

The helpless adventurer,
washed ashore
on the pounding surf of madly spinning words.
shipwrecked,
speechless: when will he regain
his consciousness?

The guileless princess
is used in all her shining black beauty
as a means to lengthen the story
to its prearranged end in Ithaca

The mortal danger of the waves
and the risk of death and total loss
provide the reason
for robbing the natives
in the name of calculated profits.

The choice seems simple;
success or failure,
swindle or die.

Conscience is a luxury
Which only the poor can afford.!!

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