

*“The Heart in Exile”:
South African Poetry in English,
1990-95*

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ALTHOUGH THE YEARS of democratic transition in South Africa, 1990-95, have seen rapid changes in political and intellectual life, these years have also been witness to the after-effects of a demented national life under apartheid. While politicians scurried about at the World Trade Centre, bartering rights for privileges, ordinary people and the country's institutions struggled to develop new modes of feeling and action. The country's poets also vigorously sought a bigger, less embattled space in which to work the perceived new realities into changing forms of expression. While it may be true to say that inspiring transformations have indeed occurred, it is also true that no one in South Africa escaped apartheid and its deep scarring of cultural life—neither liberals nor radicals, nor people of any other inclination. For many decades, supposedly liberal departments of English silently colluded with the “regime” by firmly repressing a full, open representation of the nation's literary life on their syllabuses, preferring instead to maintain narrowly Anglocentric and politically “neutral” curricula, while so-called liberal newspapers ran “Africa” editions for black readers, full of crudely sensationalized stories depicting what they imagined was the “township life” they never bothered to discover for themselves. Even the progressive, left-wing intelligentsia who promoted the cultural boycott of the 1980s, and those of us who imagined we were working from within to undermine the system, somehow cooperated in the construction of a suffocating intellectual life defined by the most cramping of dualisms. One effect of this was that we had many years of contests which pitted aesthetic standards against political statement,¹ as though such a construction

was not open to almost immediate *deconstruction*, and what is more, we had poets who wrote in that way: escapist, aestheticist, and individualist navel-gazing while the country was burning, and sloganeering of the shallowest kind while the country was in dire need of precision, definition, distinction, and texture. Not even the modest intellectual labour of anthologizing poetry was free from slander and backbiting.²

South Africans and the country's writers entered the 1990s in this kind of atmosphere, to some extent in a state of exile from our better selves and from the life of a country we loved but could not improve. Many writers were in physical exile, in places such as England, Canada, Australia, and the U.S., still writing about another, imagined country, a better place to live. And it was in this condition that two seminal speeches were made which would change all of our lives: one by F. W. De Klerk, then president and leader of an illegitimate, minority government, and the other by Albie Sachs, senior member of the African National Congress (now a Constitutional Court judge). Both speeches suspended prohibitions. De Klerk unbanned the ANC and all other proscribed organizations, setting the process in motion which would lead to political liberation (although De Klerk himself cannot be credited as the author of that process); Sachs tried to unshackle creative writing, and other expressive arts, in all their diverse forms, moods, and inclinations, from the burden of carrying the "struggle," steadfastly, unwaveringly, unvaryingly (Sachs 117-19). There was more in the world and many other ways in which life could be articulated. For Sachs, it was the duty of writers to record a bigger, more detailed, more ordinary sense of life than overtly revolutionary art was able to do. Sachs was in fact not the first to say this kind of thing,³ and there has been much debate about his pronouncements,⁴ yet he too set a process in motion. To us as literary anthologizers, this process appears to have been a loosening of the tight bonds of allegiance, of the divisive factions of style and aesthetics (are you for or against?), a lessening in the stridency of competing claims which pit politics against mere art and, finally, a coalescence or liquefaction which has rendered possible the co-existence of such categories in varying degrees or combinations, in a more capaciously conceived notion of the poet, the writer, or the artist.

This was the background against which we proposed, in a new Penguin anthology, to re-conceive the look and feel of South African poetry in English on the fresh slate of the transition years. If 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 of the moment 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 described above, for the longings of physical exile as well as the intricacies of internal exile—the struggle, in language, with an intractable land and with endlessly heterogeneous, irreconcilable people. 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 emphasized, 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" (derived from I. A. Richards and Practical Criticism: Sense, Intention, Feeling, and 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." We hardly need add that one of the principal effects of apartheid was to cauterize such a shared context of human fellowship.

In one way or another—as Lewis Nkosi's title *Home and Exile* implicitly suggested as long ago as 1965—the search for "home" is what South African writers have been engaged with since Olive Schreiner wrote *The Story of an African Farm* and thereby inaugurated a *national* literary tradition in English, a literature which spoke to fellow South Africans about forging a life in a difficult, arid colony, about the struggle to reconcile a desire for permanency with an inhospitable environment. Alternatively, it was a literature that mocked the country and its people for its hopeless

deficits, its colonial provincialism and inability to become something warmer, greater, and more inviting, more lasting. The motif of desire-recoil, a terrible longing conjoined with the harrowing knowledge of failure, can be followed through the writings, in English, of all manner of South Africans, from the yearning for elegant literary style—and therefore a new sense of emplacement in a world conceived as modern—in the writings of missionary-educated black scribes of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Jabavu, Soga, Plaatje, Dhlomo, and many others⁵), to the satirical scorn of figures such as Roy Campbell (*The Wayzgoose*), Anthony Delius (*The Day Natal Took Off*, “The English South Africans”), to the long tradition of liberal-humanist realism in fiction in which an agonized saga of wanting to make peace with a hostile home is chronicled all the way from Schreiner to Gordimer (*The Conservationist*), via William Plomer (*Turbott Wolfe*), Pauline Smith (*The Beadle*), Alan Paton (*Cry, The Beloved Country*), Doris Lessing (*The Grass is Singing*), and Dan Jacobson (*A Dance in the Sun*).⁶ In black South African writing specifically, exile increasingly became a multifaceted, existential as well as sociopolitical phenomenon, not only in the fictional convention of Jim-comes-to-Jo’burg (Jo’burg being the illusory Eldorado of wealth and modernity), but in the pronounced strain of autobiography in which home is forever lost in a precolonial mist or is being sought out anew in a second-hand cosmopolitanism in Sophiatown, District Six, or Doornfontein.⁷ When the metropolis became real, in exile, it was a home sought in the disconcerting streets of Nigeria, London, New York, and Havana. For Dennis Brutus, home changed from a Robben Island prison cell to the airplane seat, where many of his poems were composed after he left the country on an “exit permit” and became an itinerant scholar-poet.

While this broadly conceived sense of exile has arguably been shared by a great diversity of writers in South Africa over a long period, the transition years brought a new urgency—a belief that something was finally within grasp as the millennium came into view—and a greater suppleness inside what the authors increasingly began to see as a newly imagined community of

shared feeling. Critical reception—what little there is of it inside South Africa still—seems to have lost the irritable scratchiness and spoiling-for-a-fight mood so characteristic of the 1980s, when orthodoxies were lined up like armies ready to do battle. It seems we can 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.⁸

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 body politic as foul as the apartheid milieu indeed was. That Abrahams's sense of dire "rumour[s] and news"—as South Africans, we know this is about slaughter, about mass killings such as Boipatong, about hit squads and people being thrown off fast trains—that this should come as a *distraction* from the daily struggle with a *skin* that is "after all no safe place" (a synecdoche that must be uniquely South African), gives the lie to the rather shabby idea that to be white and middle class during apartheid was in itself remiss, and that one had better make one's contribution to the "struggle" literal and visible, regardless of the expediency and cronyism which was often evident in the more obvious, public forums of "struggle." Without necessarily adhering to any reactionary politics, Abrahams's poem tries to re-invest the word "struggle" with a larger ambit of meaning and feeling. 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" [emphasis added]) 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. Ultimately perhaps it would imply a desperately narrow orthodoxy of correctness.

Of course—and here the automatic dualisms so deeply etched into South African intellectual life make the recusal necessary—this is not to say that political commitment was 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 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 political alienation and Mandela's prolonged exile from his political destiny—within a sadness and a feeling of distance that is unbearably harrowing:

The man comes walking, tall and solemn and slow. One of his hands bends into a fist, an old fist, tight with stamina and ash. He raises it before the crowd, which presses in on him and takes possession of his name. . . .

He advances warily, restraining with his pace the entire procession of loyal aides and gunslingers, high priests, kith and kin, praise-singers and hangers-on. It's been twenty seven years of bootsteps and breaking stones. Out of time with all the elation, he is still alone. . . .

One long ocean away I watch it happen. Wind spreads the chiffon curtains in our flat; the lead roofs of Paris are lacerated with rain. I switch channels following the man to the car again and again.

Then he is gone and another man comes walking. He is my newly freed father, crossing the garden of absence to meet me. Above us, a single butcher bird on a telephone wire. The sun is hot but I can't feel its fire.

I am against him and the ground under our feet changes to water. We belong to no single place, ours is the history of those who cross over. And at the docks to wave us goodbye there are only a few acquaintances and no doubt a few cops. Car tyres stick like velcro to the wet streets outside; windows flicker with the foggy light of T.V. One more news programme and Mandela comes walking, behind him the unsealed door of an entire country.

I pick up the phone and call South Africa. Hello, I say, and the echo of my voice returns to me from under the sea. Hello, a friend answers. Are you alright? I squeeze the receiver so hard my hand is white. When a vacuum is broken, air rushes in. I'm at the far end of the world listening to the wind.

The greater suppleness, and the wider ambit of feeling and poetic texture, which characterizes 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 poem, along with a Xhosa praise poem to Mandela by the imbongi (praise poet) Bongani Sitole (translated into English by Russell Kaschula), inaugurates *The Heart in Exile* as a whole. Hirson's narrative verse brings all of apartheid, all of its memory, into the moment of release, and teaches us how ambiguous that experience is, how the teleology of liberation is displaced by different struggles and renewed agonies. Sitole's praise poem, too, 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":

Be strong, Madiba, our ancestors watch you,
 Our grandmothers promised you'd not die in jail.
 Bring change, Madiba, things aren't right.
 You were raised, Dalibunga, on Dalindyebo's cows' milk
 So you would grow to stand tall
 Like the river reeds of this country.
 The men of our home shuffled their feet:
 Cowards! Your cowardice will be bared!
 So says the poet of tradition.
 Long live Dalibunga!
 Long live this old man!
 Long live Sophitshi's Madiba!

("Hail, Dalibunga")

A poet who sees in Mandela's release an ending rather than a beginning, despite his comradely joy, is Tatamkhulu Afrika. Afrika, a septuagenarian of Egyptian descent, emerged in the 1980s and was almost instantly recognized as one of the country's very best poets. He 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:

You come out onto the dais,
distant as a god, a totem, raise
your arms and we roar
with an adoration like a rage.
But the trees are dumb,
the wind stalled, the air
ambivalent as a new wine. . . .
And now?
Are you still he that,
stripped to his soul,
denied it its death,
sought the dream in even stone and iron?
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 us 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
[of the Federation of Afrikaans Christian Women’s Home]
an angular ship
bearing elderly people
in gravity and kindness
to their innocent deaths.

Barris’s words convey the sense that despite political liberation, a daily record must still be kept to monitor the destitution of innocent people, regardless of political liberation. It is precisely such a warning that Kelwyn Sole sounds in his poem “The Face and the Flag,” in which he detects a rapid and slippery trajectory 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 such as the following:

what if one night you hear
 softly at first, then
 louder, ever more insistent,
 the roar of throats
 back in the street?
 as you look over
 your balcony with the lattice
 digging into your nipples
 as you stretch further,
 do you see that face
 in the crowd below you?
 you, who want to lean forever
 on the comfort of your victories
 your defeats . . .
 and what you once had fought for
 begins to slide from what
 you now perceive; slides
 into the frown on your own brow
 puzzled at its new surrender
 as everyone except you marches anew
 in a democracy of shapes and colours
 for socialism
 (you have so much to lose)
 comrade, traitor, lover, friend—
 will you dismount into the street?

As the slide into elitist comfort becomes more real with each passing day in present-day South Africa—and as socialist ideas 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,"⁹ makes a chilling plea for the unshackling of memory from the kind of post-liberation blindness, indeed guiltlessness, that characterizes the attitudes of many—especially whites—who lived comfortably through the apartheid years, and who now settle expediently 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. Barbara Schreiner's description of a black labourer's appalling recourse to burning his own wife follows his own utter humiliation in a racist assault; and its details are very hard to stomach, under any circumstances:

Living there but not a resident
while out walking
uncoiling the taut springs of his back
warped from weeding and watering
his jaw met a white fist.
His daydreams stumbled

knocked against white-painted walls
 dog-high gates
 the rhythm of kaffir-klapping rage
 until there was too much blood
 and his mind sprawled
 lurching to the hot reality
 of tar and boots
 swinging to meet ribs
 He lay in the road like garbage
 scattered by remorseless dogs
 and his thoughts shivered like a mirage
 in the desert of suburban gardens.

II

In the cold whip of winter
 midday and mad
 he burned his wife
 turned her among plastic plates
 and sunlight soap
 from dusky black to pale
 peeling like paint from an old door . . .
 ("Chain Reaction")

Stephen Gray, too, will not forget the maiming facts of death in the post-1990 hubbub. His poem "Slaughtered Saints" asks the most unsettling of all questions:

a row of graves in the veld, bar-code of death
 at Sharpeville again—black coffins before
 a soccer stadium of mourners—
 this recurs as the great South African ceremony:
 public weeping, no compensation, together
 only in the mass shuffle of their united end
 what then, once the chants and sermons are done,
 the bodycount of liberation, the victims
 guilty of their innocence, their reduction to dust?
 who worked out how many it takes?
 do they signify, either way?
 —did anyone consult with *them*?

In Peter Horn's "Unrest Report of a Father," the poet plays on the South African euphemism of an "unrest report"—official news releases providing statistics which camouflage the reality of murder and police repression—by making the "report" that of a dead boy's father:

Here
 at this corner
 they shot my son
 he was seventeen
 he had dropped out of school
 the situation was not such
 that he could study, he said . . .

(“Unrest Report of a Father”)

The father’s apparently deadpan narration betrays a resigned hopelessness, mixed with a necessary hardness born of too much exposure to wailing and killing. It is the kind of resignation apparently evident in Karen Press’s poem “Dispossessed Words.” The poem is dedicated to a woman, Jessie Tamboer, who set herself alight and burned to death because she could no longer provide food for her children, and it is made out of words extracted from interviews in the Second Carnegie Report into Poverty in South Africa:

Trucks carried 40 000 blacks to the southern edge of the desert
 I cannot say anything about my future now.
 We had a very beautiful view
 and this was the first time I saw my father cry.
 They said “Old man, are you moving?”
 I took a crowbar, pulled the house down.
 I cannot say anything about my future now . . .

Oliphant’s “The Hunger Striker” uses a mode of liminal consciousness, a kind of dream-remembrance in the mind of a prisoner whose deprivation is both political and from nutrient-sustenance. It concludes with a haunting metaphoric twist:

I laugh like one immersed in life’s conviviality
 amid table cloths and serviettes.
 Amid the repertoire of knives and forks,
 the bright taste of pain
 strikes me like a sharpened axe.

* * *

Another surprise in the poetry of the period is that while conditions have allowed the bonds of exile to be dissolved, homelessness, and making accommodation with homes away from home,

continue to be written about, with ever *more* feeling because exile has now passed from a overdetermined political decision to a voluntary or unchangeable state. It is almost as if things have gone too far for a simple change of location. Life has moved on irreversibly. For C. J. Driver, a return visit proves that he no longer belongs at home, yet he cannot stop wanting to. Driver ranks as one of the country's longest-serving exile writers, and his work of the 1990s continues to speak from "the water margins" (the title of a recent collection). A return visit to South Africa suggests to him that he has become an exile from his own past:

A pre-recorded priest awoke me
 Who stayed in bed and did not climb the stairs
 Of the tower I could not quite see there
 Somewhere towards the Cape Town end of Mowbray;
 And I remembered other dawns I'd heard
 All those years before, in this fated town—
 And most of all a friend who woke me up
 To come to celebrate his first son's birth—
 And we heard the muezzin sing, over Wynberg.
 The ghosts of all the slaves who'd built the house
 Were gathered round. "Champagne for sons," we said,
 And "Freedom in our time." The old house cheered . . .

That son's a scion of the further Left
 In London now; his father somewhere else
 High-up now, one hears; and I am teaching
 Clever boys in Berkhamsted. 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 Cherry Clayton's newer poems, exile is changed too: it becomes a source of surprise and love, although tinted with a remote but poignant sense of longing and regret:

Helpless as a fish
 I'm caught in your net
 in which I thought I would thrash.

Peaceful as a deer
 stroked into stillness
 I've made your love my door.
 Owls hoot in the forest
 to announce the Canadian spring.
 This will be my first.
 Gulls cry over the brown river.
 The past is the débris of winter.
 May I enter this dream for ever.
 ("Canadian Spring")

For James A. Harrison, as it was for Guy Butler a generation before him, the home-exile axis tracks a disconcertingly reversible circuit between England and South Africa; thus, he is no longer certain of how to conceive honestly his identity following a visit to the U.K.:

Returning to this hybrid culture, it was strange to feel
 again not embedded but precarious, dangling on the fringe.
 Meadows and the Queen's English are deep and dear,
 as owned as Afrikaans and koppies in dry landscapes,
 but I am no colonist, no matter how those winds blow.
 Living without a tribe is insecure, lonely;
 the homefires burn low.

("Homecoming")

Perhaps what Harrison perceives as missing at home in South Africa, is the sense of a broad and more-or-less acceptable civil society, if not as comfortably homogeneous as in England, then at least generous and given to looking after its own people. Instead, as Michael Cawood Green's "The Big Picture" suggests, South Africa's mining history produced a narrow, utterly selfish white bourgeoisie:

The big picture,
 So Dan will tell you,
 Was the creation of a middle-class;
 Nationalism, it seems,
 For the Afrikaner,
 Was *Ons Eerste Volksbank* [Our First Nation-Bank],
Volkskas and *Uniewinkels*,
 SANTAM and SANLAM—and, of course,
Federale Volksbeleggings,
 Our way into the superstructures
 Of mining.

For Johannes Oosthuizen,
 It was the *Reddingsdaadbond* [a welfare organization]
 A trade, employment, insurance,
 All woven into song and dance
 In Afrikaans—
 But you who have seen what the
 Nationalists would give away:
 The song, the dance, the pure white Afrikaans,
 Leaving naked and stark
 Property that's private,
 Interests invested—
 You can ask now,
 What cost, a bourgeoisie?

 Endless images
 From forty lost years:
 Lorries with domestic loads heading quite deliberately nowhere,
 Workers less than the machines they operate,
 Scattered bodies at odd angles in the dust,
 Children's bellies pregnant with emptiness,
 Bullets in a blackboard,
 Screams echoing in clinical rooms
 . . . even a house
 An ordinary, middle-class house,
 Disappearing down a hole . . .
 Yes, you can ask now,
 What cost, a bourgeoisie?

Green's poem is taken from a long cycle which describes a sinkhole disaster in 1964, in Blyvooruitzicht (Transvaal), a mining town. In evoking the chilling image of one family home and its occupants falling into a hole in the earth in the middle of the night, the poem asks a significant question: given the fact that in the 1990s, the Nationalist fathers would give away their political power and privilege but hold on to their *own* wealth, what is the cost of this terrible little bourgeoisie in mining towns and the places they have spawned, such as Sharpeville, Uitenhage, and Boipatong? Against the grain, Green's poem remembers one white family falling down the abyss of the country's greed, and asks on their behalf if it was worth it. The poem evokes the most impossible mixture of anger, sadness, and mute rage at the death and the dying in the face of what the country was nurturing— asphyxiation, closure, a death of the mind. It is this sense of

internal exile, of being at odds with one's mental and physical environment, that Ingrid De Kok evokes in her poem "Transfer." However, De Kok brings the moment perfectly into an apprehension of the South African world turning, of the decaying, tight little bourgeoisie of a white past growing rank and desolate, and giving way to new possibilities:

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.
 Seven strangers now have keys
 to the padlock on the gate,
 where, instead of lights, a mimosa tree
 burns its golden blurred bee-fur
 to lead you to the door.

* * *

In the context of a global scholarly preoccupation with issues of postcoloniality, the question is often asked whether South African writing is "postcolonial" in nature and, if so, in what modalities of form and enunciation. The trope of place/displacement common to the literatures of many formerly colonized countries is only moderately prominent in South African contemporary letters, partly because the earlier layers of colonial imposition upon a foreign land were rapidly subsumed into South Africa's own special brand of "internal" colonialism¹⁰ culminating in apartheid. Furthermore, English was always one language among many; and although it served as a master-discourse for narratives of civilization in the nineteenth century, it has remained sufficiently marginal in relation to a plethora of other languages 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 civilization in the missionary era, and later, as a medium of liberal capitalism (a contested oxymoron in South African studies) in opposition to apartheid. Both these enclo-

sures—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 manifestation of this “colonial post-colonialism”¹¹ 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 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 extension 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 wondrous—this tendency in South African poetry has produced, even in the 1990s, poetry of marvellous force and resonance. Perhaps the more receptive space of the 1990s now allows 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 our recent anthology *The Heart in Exile*, we felt able to let go of those vicious fights, to enter into Mandela’s determined quest for reconciliation, and to let all the voices be heard again, as long as they were poetically compelling. Some of the older white poets who perhaps fall into this category—specifically Don Maclennan, Patrick Cullinan, and Douglas Livingstone—have continued to produce work of great effect. Maclennan particularly must rank as one of the most achieved poets writing in South Africa at the

moment, despite (or perhaps because of) his post-retirement status. His work is characterized 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")

Maclennan's 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" (*The Order of Things* 300). Maclennan is somehow able to say the following about his life's labour as a scribe, and mean it:

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

Maclennan's verse sometimes succeeds in evoking, in its Eastern Cape locality, a sense of place and atmosphere that lends his use of English a wonderfully local universalism, if such a notion is allowed:

Midday on the patio:
 salad and hot rolls,
 coffee and cheese—
 one of those winter days
 that dries out into crumbs
 the fallen leaves
 and forces you to wear
 dark glasses.
 Temptation does not lie so quiet
 when someone beautiful
 admires your work—

this bright young girl,
 complex as Aphrodite,
 for example.

I am more easily satisfied:
 a good lunch and a cigarette,
 a glass of wine,
 a friend whose conversation's
 near perfect;
 and sleep then, in my chair,
 savouring the richness
 of some paragraph.

("To Geoffrey")

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 riveting:

In the mountains
 the first, far beat
 of spring thunder:

thick with young,
 a lizard on the rock
 moves its head

and in the flank
 the quick heart pulses.
 ("The First, Far Beat")

Similarly, 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 mobilization, 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 preoccupation with the individual’s relation to place and landscape, have likewise produced exceptionally resonant 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, and perhaps even the very young Adam Schwartzman.

The farewell gesture of Alan James, who went into exile only recently, to a land that is loved with such bittersweet passion is suggestive of the trend described above, although James’s style is unique. In “Cape St Francis: A Visit Prior to Emigration,” James begins by remembering:

To revert. That’s where
 my grandfather once poked
 about at shells: it
 was a wintry day:
 he was wearing a
 heavy overcoat: his gait
 was unsteady: he found
 nothing he fancied: and
 as it turned out,
 that was his last
 attendance here. Further on
 is the scrum of
 rocks where my dad
 sometimes fished when the
 water was right—not
 too clear, not too
 strong—there are favourable
 gullies there where in
 the light turbulence one
 might take a plump
 galjoen, or in water
 a little turbid, a
 kob, or, most highly
 prized, a musselcracker or
 even a red steenbras. . . .

Following this internal rediscovery of the self in memory and landscape, James concludes as follows:

I turn to go,
 and as I turn
 I ask you to
 let me go that
 I might be unclasped,
 not an abandonment but
 a sending, and a
 release from anger that
 I should have to
 leave my possession, and
 from sorrow of leaving.
 A last visit but
 I know there will
 be others of a
 sort, that I shall
 face you again but,
 for now this is
 goodbye. My eyes shall
 be awake for your
 promise. You shall
 be my locus and light,
 and still my keep.

Basil du Toit's poem "Darwinism" describes his sense of place and the struggle to accommodate an abrasive physicality within the ambit of personal feeling, in the finely-achieved poetic form so characteristic of all his poetry:

To inhabit your kind of world I'll need
 poisonous spit
 a rougher skin
 and dribbling surface glands.

I'll hold thee, forsaking height and grace
 as the welwitchia does,
 sprawling in loops
 like a tree with cerebral palsy.

How to breathe in your planet, without
 rasping, bug-eyed, for air.

How to live with you—you, who are so inhospitable to love.

Du Toit's poem suggests that trying to forge a love for a "planet"—a country or a place—where feelings come to inhabit localities that are themselves resistant and unyielding continues to confront the South African poet as an unfinished, unfinishable task. One of the most interesting new voices in South Afri-

can poetry, Seithlamo Motsapi, offers his own, visionary kind of answer to Du Toit's plea for personal accommodation in a world conceived as ungingiv:

i look at you
 & you remind me of all the mountains
 i haven't seen or embraced
 & since you are like every one of us
 you rise out of my heart
 with the craggy serenity of kilimanjaro
 enduring like prophecies
 peaceful like distances
 since you are like all of us
 eternal like every river
 even when the sea claims us
 for me you carry affirmations
 a sprout in the parch, a mend in the rend
 water from an ancient well
 & since every one of us
 carries the seeds of a storm within him
 since the mountains come to rest
 in the breast of every one of us
 beginning the long journey across the desert
 since the forests & the skies & the faces of children
 overflow with the lessons of love
 for all to learn
 i will always remember you
 & your face that is the end of all roads
 poetry will never travel
 i will remember you
 when i have learned the rustle of rivers
 when i have learnt the inconvenient gestures of
 compassion
 when i have learned to be infinitely present
 & yet invisible like the sky

("tenda")

Whether Motsapi's "you" is figured as the country, or as his own sense of the godhead, or as a lover, he seeks a selflessness and a capacity for feeling that is overarching and imbued with the plain value of compassion, for a country and for all the othernesses in such a country. Motsapi's poetry has begun to cut through all the older categorizations of critical reception in South Africa: it is syncretic in form and generous in its address, persistently seeking fissures in the nation's hard surface. Perhaps it is fitting to

conclude with another poet who also sought out those fissures, Lynne Bryer. Her composition "The Heart is Always in Exile" is an aching premonition of loss which is yet a declaration of love.

The heart is always in exile,
already aching
for what it has not lost.

Some words
seem to be clay,
perhaps stone:

something local and specific,
springing from the earth as
—who should say?—
ears of wheat, loaves of bread
tasting of the soil there,
as wine from one small valley
needs to be named anew.

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.

Your heart is always in exile,
it aches, anticipating loss.

These words perhaps speak for most of the poets collected in a volume named after the title she gave to this poem. It is a lyric which suggests that regardless of other vicissitudes, the South African poet's heart will continue to seek an accommodation with the changing currencies of its "home."

NOTES

¹ For example, see Ulyatt, "Dilemmas" and Maughan-Brown, "Black Literature." For a later manifestation, see Oliphant, "The New Illiteracy" and Watson, "On the Unforgiving Page" and "Poetry and Politicization." For a penetrating scholarly exposition of the various implications of this debate and of the politicization of writing in general, see Chapman, "The Liberated Zone" and "The Critic in a State of Emergency."

² See Gray, "The Politics of Anthologies."

- ³ Cf. Mphahlele, "Literature"; Ndebele, "Turkish Tales."
- ⁴ Cf. Brown & Van Dyk, *Exchanges*; Sole, "The Role of the Writer."
- ⁵ For more extensive treatment of this subject, see De Kock, *Civilising Barbarians*; Attwell, "The Transculturation of English."
- ⁶ This observation is not original. It was made very convincingly by Stephen Gray in his pathbreaking work, *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, in a chapter entitled "Schreiner and the Novel Tradition." Clearly, the description and examples given here are extremely selective, serving as illustration merely. The same yearning will be found in many other works.
- ⁷ District Six was a "non-white" area in Cape Town; Sophiatown the same in Johannesburg, whose inhabitants were forcibly removed in terms of the apartheid Group Areas Act. Both areas have been written about extensively by South African writers. Doornfontein was a slum in Johannesburg.
- ⁸ All quotations of poems or parts thereof are from De Kock and Tromp, eds. *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995*.
- ⁹ As per Brutus's own footnote on the title of this poem, Goreé is the island off Senegal which was a centre of the slave trade.
- ¹⁰ Coetzee argues that after 1948 white South Africans graduated "from being the dubious colonial children of a far-off motherland" to "uneasy possession of their own, less and less transigent internal colony" (11).
- ¹¹ Atwell coined this term in *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*.

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