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the girl who then feared to sleep
by Angifi Dladla
Deep South, 2001 80pp.

Review by Phaswane Mpe

Angifi Dladla's collection of poems is an excellent, wide-ranging contribution to South African poetry, in style, tone and themes. The collection is divided into four sections – 'dreaming', 'the sacrifice', 'exhibits' and 'in this world' – all closely linked, but with somewhat different emphases. 'Dreaming' comprises poems dealing with dreams, wishes and desires. 'The sacrifice' deals mainly with political struggles, violence and the subsequent pain. Of course, there are other forms of violence and pain which are not overtly political. 'Exhibits' provides us with portraits of persons and of places, as well as snapshots of events and incidents of all kinds. 'In this world' is perhaps more reflective – brooding and sometimes humorous – on life and survival generally.

A particularly beautiful poem in the 'dreaming' section is 'exposure', a poem on love and writing. In it the speaker has visions of his stepfather coming into his bedroom like a ghost. There is a sense of disbelief:

> my stepfather? no, it can't be …!
> he never knew where i was,
> and never cared even before
> he died to leave me in peace.

Despite the bad blood between the stepson and the stepfather – or, more accurately, the bad blood on the part of the stepfather – the intruder, as it were, has come to apologise: "'forgive me, forgive me maboi'", he says. The ghost retreats, relieved, apparently having read the person's thoughts to the effect that he never wronged him nor held grudges against him. But, despite this clear, though uncomfortable, vision, a real challenge comes when the persona shares his night experience with his wife the following morning: "she gawked at me and chuckled: / 'poets are dreamers'".

The poignancy of the wife's words issues from the fact that, indeed, the speaker could be said to have been dreaming. However, the notion of dream could be extended to embrace the idea of imagination, that is, knowing her husband to be a poet, she assumes that he is imagining – not merely dreaming – things into reality. Nevertheless, the dream helps the speaker not only to think through, once again and perhaps in a kinder light, his relationship with his stepfather, but to have new insight into the workings of his wife's mind.

Another fascinating engagement with various meanings of dreams is evident in 'dreaming'. The scene is one of violence: "nothing i saw but the place i knew / had turned into a red swamp", with terrible sights of "bloodied shoes and / shreds of flesh on the razor fence". But, clearly, the speaker is not the only one whose mind is numbed by this violence and sight of death; others, too, would like to believe that they are in a dream. When consulted about the meaning of it all, the speaker's sangoma intimates: "'you are growing, you are growing'". But growing, in this case, is too painful and, looking for a sense of escape, or perhaps some relief, the speaker gingerly decides that the sangoma is dreaming. Dreaming, here, is interpreted from various vantage points, and the poet shows that the boundary between reality and dream is so thin as to be nonexistent.

A haunting portrait of death, in 'the sacrifice', is aptly entitled 'rubbished'. While the victim of violence "has ended its run", "his friends are still on the run", and while he can himself no longer see, "green flies will lend us theirs". The "green" does not refer to what one could loosely call ordinary, small flies. Green flies are associated with weightier circumstances of rottenness and particularly foul smell, and not just any dirt. Dladla leaves the reader to imagine the reason for this death, and although "his corpse remains as a book / – a copy of hell!", the copy of hell, in some senses, tells an incomplete story. Yet death is not always scary. See the soothing intimation of death in 'fetching', for example. Appealing to the echoes of South African oral praise poetry, this is a tender, even inviting, poem of the oncoming "divine journey".

Here is the whole poem:

> o! eternal one,
> mighty spirit of fanabo,
> fanabo of the battlefield;
> i am maboi, your uncle,
> i come with lephoi, your aunt:
> the hour has come;
> the hour has come.
>
> o! formless one,
> undying spirit of fanabo,
> fanabo of the battlefield.
> listen to the talking drum;
> the incensed drum of your beautiful clan:
> let's go home, home with the fetch;
> before your divine journey begins.

The poem 'when i was a child' deals directly, but in a complex way, with racial politics. Being a child, the speaker "hurt and maimed and killed for fun", "unearthed things … stole things … snatched … paraded things … isolated things … buried things". These things that the child used to do for fun, out of a sense of discovery that goes with a child's imagination, a whiteman used to do for different reasons, a political desire to dominate other people and to suppress truth, especially the truth related to the histories of other peoples and races as represented by "kunta kinte … the aborigines … hottentot venus … red indians blackman's history".

Despite the similarities of the child's and the whiteman's actions and discoveries, the whiteman's actions appear to be more dangerous because he has a carefully planned agenda; he does not act out of a sense of curiosity. Indeed, as the grown-up persona puts it: "i was once a whiteman; / but i was afraid of white folks, / they all looked alike – their ways are / all superlatives ….". The point, of course, is not that all whites are the same, but rather that the dominant political agenda of the time made them look alike. I am reminded here of Es'kia Mphahlele's autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, in which Mphahlele's mother, Eva, is said to have kept on reminding the young Mphahlele to keep out of the way of whites because the whiteman is strong. Another person, Dinku Dikae, an adult, is afraid of all police and security officers – seemingly officers of all races, as I understand – because, as he sees them, they are cruel agents of an apartheid system. These two examples from *Down Second Avenue* give a good indication of what the superlatives of the whiteman in Dladla could mean.

My favourite poems in the collection are ‘the girl who then feared to sleep’, a sustained and haunting echo of child and parental fears, and ‘granny’s last lectures’, both humorous and painful simultaneously.

Overall, Angifi Dladla’s collection of poems is an exciting find, a rewarding read; a collection that is full of pain, love, compassion and hope.

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