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

Review by Alan Finlay

Shown what we are afraid to see

Angifi Dladla's poetry has a raw, almost dislocated feel to it. Its movement is often surreal, yet its meaning focused. *The girl who then feared to sleep*, his first book of poems, is a good example of how poetry can respond to a violent and violated society.

A recurring theme is one of political betrayal: "our heroes evolve into yetis,/ we lament africa's waste of labour pains". The warning is explicit: "the building you occupy, belonged to the enemy;/…/his thought forms have formed you into his twin./…/the way you are, is the way he was;/…/ignoring the rumbling under his feet". What persists is a world of opposites, where whites "at the malls/…/from sunrise to sunrise/ with their apprentices/ eat and eat and eat", while those in the "slums, dumps and/all the burrows/…/with their paws/ carry blood and/ curses".

In the opening section, 'dreaming', the poet's dreaming becomes a way into embedded emotional pain: "call me between your tears and eyes;/ i'm the shadow, i won't drown". At times the dream seems interchangeable with reality. In several poems – 'at the government mortuary', 'vacancy', 'impression' and 'so turned a taxi' among them – reality has a hallucinatory presence: "drained/ dizzy and dazed/…/where the tyre has nailed him./ human gravy in the sun".

Much of this book is about death, the absurdity, horror and meaninglessness of physical death, and the spiritual death of the present where "children of my children/ without shame swoop upon me" ('song of the aged'). Sometimes death is an escape, but it refuses to listen: "when you hear your grandfather/ scream and plead for death,/…/do know he smells the unsmelt –/…/do know he was a match-/ stick, he was!"

Dladla's notion of whiteness versus blackness is the least satisfactorily unravelled. There is some attempt to break the equation of opposites in 'when i was a child': "i stoned things,/ i hunted things./…/when i was a child, i was a whiteman". In this symbolic world of opposites, oppression is absolute: "even in the grave,/ worms, white/ as if practically all fat,/ loot us dry".

The girl who then feared to sleep offers no easy solutions. It does what poetry is good at doing. It shows those things right beneath our noses that we are perhaps afraid to see.

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