REVIEW BY KELWYN SOLE

Scrim
by Haidee Kotze

Deep South, Makhanda, 2019.
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This is the third individual collection from this poet, the first two of which – *Lush: Poems for Four Voices* and *The Reckless Sleeper* – appeared under the name of Haidee Kruger. She is already well-known in South African poetry circles; and in this book her admirers will not only be able to see how she continues to hone her skills, but also delight in the brilliance to be found in some of these latest poems.

Kotze is a poet and academic specialising in linguistics and descriptive and theoretical translation studies. She has been based in South Africa and – more recently – Australia, and is about to take up a Professorship in Utrecht. In a 2015 interview, she notes "My poetry and my academic work are both driven by my curiosity about how language works in pulling the inner and outer together, how it works inside people's heads, in the world outside, and in the funny space in between one's head and the world" and goes on to suggest that, although the two require different processes of thinking and writing, they are "two very different ways of exploring the same question" (Nicole Melanson, 'Meet Haidee Kruger', *WordMothers* January 23, 2015).

Reflecting on the social possibilities open to a poet, she remarks on the "fine line between being a central figure in the community" and "a kind of commodity." As regards the latter, she believes the form of expression that may emerge too easily fits "in comfortably with current discourses; fits current needs". In a society which currently endorses and values "visibility, extroversion, the ability to engage and entertain", she questions the fact that extroverts and entertainers are currently seen as the sole "dispensers of wisdom" (Gary Cummiskey, 'Haidee Kruger: shaking language out of

furrows of habit', *Dye Hard Interviews* January 2013). Absent from this 'pop star' posture are poets who see themselves and their connection to society and politics in different terms. It seems to me that Kotze fits among these more marginalised figures.

Her remarks above are to the point. While there is much interesting and noteworthy work in progress, the current South African poetry scene (in my opinion) has recently shown signs of the emergence of two opposite but equally problematic poles: either a retreat into constrictively traditional Western models (where young poets are urged to practise by 'writing sonnets', for instance) or into displays of an overly self-conscious and emotive psychologism which tends to seek a transformative revelation, and closure, around identity. Both of these tend to dismiss critical interrogation in any other forms or discourses than their own, and thus in essence sustain a narrow perspective of social intercourse and a limited appreciation of aesthetic worthiness. The poetry produced in such a manner loses sight of the genre's potential as a form of exploration of the reality around us; as well as diminishing its potential to challenge, rather than merely affirm, the expectations of readership or audience.

Kotze's poems model themselves in opposition to any poetry that wants to draw boundaries around itself. She notes that ". . . for me, the textures, the endless possibilities of language, are a driving force in writing, and I think poetry, by its nature, is the form that allows exploration of this most fully . . . . What poetry allows one to do is to shake language out of the furrows of habit, to see what meanings emerge if you do unusual things with it." She speaks of her preference for "holding a fascinating, unusual, intriguing language object in your hands, turning it over, and then having it explode in your face with all kinds of unexpected meanings." (Cummiskey, *ibid.*). Her poems consequently are often in their impetus experimental, in ways that affect both their form and content.

Her notion of good poetry fits her own best work in this volume. Her inclinations are mainly lyrical: her poems flourish in quieter spaces, though hers is not an introverted voice. The self (usually embodied in each poem in the narrator and her perceptions) demonstrates both the desire and ability to see outside herself. Characteristically, the poems move outwards in focalisation from a personal space into the outer world, so that the individual is encroached upon by people and objects around her. This does not happen in a way which seeks to cohere around her own identity or

wishes. These poems suggest strongly that one cannot draw boundaries of any kind around one's identity or sense of selfhood, because the individual is constantly impinged upon. The poetry does not seek to create any safe space for the reader either: "We always just about extinct. Unkeeled. . . . / working on the edge of our frailty, working above an abyss of feeling" ('Adventure').

The actors within these poems are not so much frail creatures as uncertain acrobats, who come to realise that one walks through life as if one were balancing on a tightrope. There is an incessant flickering between doubt and illumination. The fact of time, and the significance of its passing, is alluded to in a number of poems: "Memory is indeed / a many-muscled thing" (*ibid.*), but "time gnaws at its / own hands" ('Up here'). The poems, then, are shot through with ontological and existential questions and anxieties; the necessity for one to "slip off // this scant sock / of skin // consider / the bones // snagged around the edges of things" ('Notes for the crossing 2').

An overall structural and associative skill is everywhere apparent, with an unexpected, telling juxtaposition of images and unusual usage of words. Kotze has a way of making technical and recondite words come alive through context. The associative power of her imagination draws unlikely objects together, interlocking the human with the non-human. The metaphysical is conjoined with the everyday, with nature and with unexceptional objects. There is an interplay between the noetic and the sensate, an admixture of the intellectual and visceral in lines such as: "When I write / *bookshelf* // you read / the odds and ends / of human hands" ('Exchange'). The connection of the body and conscious self to everything around them is reiterated: there is insistent movement and change, with little sense of equipoise or stillness ("A buttonhole / of quiet // in a swarm of bees" ('Still lives')). The poems have a dynamic of continual searching, and construct and evoke a world rich with the potential to change both body and consciousness: "Listen. Things elbow at each other." ('Adventure'). They show how awareness is ineluctably changed with the possibility that "you'll wake / steeped in time-drunk light / your throat will be / a clutter of strange birds and / banksia seed" ('Eventually'). If there are any epiphanies afforded the reader in such illuminations, they are quickly folded into a tangle of other incipient inputs that problematise these, for "the sky is a lungful of old fags / a concoction of bird circuitries crackling / through the mist pooling towards the riverbank / can you hear me over this?/ . . . we're

empty tins you and I / a harness of static biting into our aluminium ears . . ." ('Nightfall').

Many of the poems about the interconnectedness of human beings are focused through the narrators' personal experience of love and family. There are a number of love poems and poems suffused with family interactions and domestic issues. Some of the love poems are especially fine, like 'Still life':

> I lose time like
> socks and coins, thinking
> about how unknitting
> you would summon doves
> to throw themselves against
> the window in a fit
> of feathers because god-
>
> dammit you make
> my blood sing like
> a buttered bell and
> your shoulderblades fit in my palms
>
> like a plateful of radishes and salt
> on a table.

The poems about family and sustenance are noteworthy in the manner with which they represent the slow weaving of family bonds, and the necessary imperfections and incremental learning through which such weaving occurs, as in 'Twice over':

> We baked that cake twice
> over. We'll remember
>
> that. The Friday night. The boy
> with his head over egg whites and flour
> knotting the yellow light
> between us. The winter evening flush
> against the house. The slow
>
> showing we save for small
> hands. This is how you measure. This is how you whip.
> This is how you make your wrist do the tender work
> of folding. Between us
>
> we showed him the slow temper of love
> while the moon brewed like a fat ball of dough over the city.

> Even so, we burnt it. Not much. Just
>
> so it wasn't Right.
>
> . . . And so we baked that cake
> again. We'll remember
> that.

There is an ethical, and even a political, slant to this. In a country as immired in corruption as contemporary South Africa, one can observe that individual deportment and ethics have come to matter a great deal. Kotze's work can be situated in a social landscape of concern running from individual and family into wider areas of attitude and behaviour. Moreover, there is an informing feminism here: the emphasis on the everyday and interrelationship of family has, traditionally, been gendered in poetry; even as feminists have always striven to move beyond this into all spheres of activity. Such occurs here: Kotze's *oeuvre* never stereotypes people's possibilities for action and expression. Her poems are centrally concerned with issues of importance about women's lives and livelihood and also, crucially, the politics of language. Human beings shape and are shaped by communication, and our experiences are most easily made manifest in words. Given Kotze's area of research and expertise, it is not strange that the subject of language, in its structure, expression and usages, occurs frequently. The obligations, choices and manipulations of language-as-communication braids through her poems.

However, communication is not to be taken for granted: it requires work, to counteract the forces of complacency. A failure to communicate is usually negatively depicted, even as the difficulty of achieving it is not underestimated. A living language, essential to human perception, solidarity (and conflict) needs constantly to be revitalised in use: therefore lines such as "in the ransack of syllables / you'll find your skin' ('Eventually') are counterposed to "The archivist / dead in the kitchen, eyes / mothballed to / the ceiling" ('Dig'). For communication to be meaningful, it must open itself to chance encounters and happenstance, able to move beyond established habits and assumptions and revel in situations where: "You turned my dead language / with your toe" ('Resurrections').

A number of these poems seem to focus in on problems of literary concern, where language is activated in creation, utterance and reception. An example is 'Web':

The page is a spiderweb
a crochet of commas bargaining
for breath. I imagine

the spider at night
its sleepless spinnerets every spooling
hopeful filament, in the morning

left for me to comb its silken code. I must
have patience with its centripetal ruses.
Slow unpicking

is the trick, the pain-
staking feeding of fibre over full stop bounding
like bobbins under the pull. The page

is a tensile bruise,
a weft of heart-bracketing glue.

The poet's language in poems such as this can be especially rich and connotative. However, there is a counter-urge to this elsewhere; an imperative to pare expression down to its core, evinced in poems such as 'Shuck' ("The word / is the heart's husk. // Let the poem / shuck / and shuck"). In another memorable poem, 'A word minus a word', she takes Atwood's poetic observation that "A word after a word ... is power" and deconstructs it to illustrate that statements such as this should be wary of their own fulfilment. She reverses Atwood's argument so that the reader is lead back into a musing on the power of silence ("empty is the first language / what is not said / cannot be lost") and – in my reading of the poem – into a realisation that replacing one stance of power with another is never enough.

Kotze's statements about language and literature can be paired with her statements about human demeanour in other situations. There is an urge to strip everything down to its core, leaving nothing extraneous in one's manner of living; and to constantly battle stasis and loquaciousness. This is clear in 'Notes for the crossing 1':

Above all,

be light. Take only

what sings
in your hand.

Shake out
your skull
like a sheet.
Let your landscapes

take flight.

As you cross

remember
to scratch your name
on the bow
against the drowned
eyes of the dead
spawning at the hull..

If they come
anyway,

set it
on fire. ...

The inescapable fragility of life is precisely why vision needs to be conjoined with action or (to put it less abstractly) social and intellectual work. Consequently a number of these poems revolve around suggesting ways of perception and behaviour which may point the way forward. In several, the interrelationships and actions are focused into lessons: the need to keep watchful and alert, to learn to live lightly, and to continue with all forms of endeavour as modes for learning about self and world: "there is nothing but / to work / to work your heart's lumbering loom / around seeds and animals and time / eventually / to rest / your cheek / against the slow / fray of time" ('Eventually').

However, these is something further here that seems to distinguish this poetry in its dealing with world and language. The fluctuations and interdependencies between inner self and exterior world appear not to be wholly satisfied by an apperception of reality *via* language. Intermittently, there is something gestured towards that lurks outside of language; that hovers beyond. In one or two poems, language appears to be overdetermined by the 'real' world of nature and everyday objects. One example is in the title of the book. 'Scrim' refers to any open fabric used in upholstery, bookbinding, curtaining, and other coverings, as well as a gauze that appears opaque until lit

from behind. It is fascinating that the word is used in a poem only once in the whole collection. While the domestic and literary connotations of the word seem to fit naturally with the thematic interests of the books, something further seems implied. On my reading, it suggests that the individual has to reach beyond any covering ("the scrim of you / trussed against tears") in order to gain cognisance of a wider world; "to work your heart's lumbering loom / around seeds and animals and suns" (*ibid.*). This diverges from the post-modern conceptualisations to be found in most recent poetry dealing with language issues.

Stylistically, most of these poems have a remarkable effectiveness. There are many poetic devices and influences to be seen at work: a concentration on the apt, condensed usage of imagery as a means of explanation that bypasses the intellect, reminiscent of early Imagism; the associative explorations of leaping poetry; the experiments with page-space and phraseology popularised by the Black Mountain School. There are more: in the Cummiskey interview, Kotze acknowledges an interest in metropolitan poets such as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, Anne Carson, Diane di Prima, Denise Levertov and Margaret Atwood, and mentions a number of South African poets whom she labels 'more experimental' as influences, such as Kobus Moolman, Lesego Rampolokeng, Joan Metelerkamp and others. All this is knitted into an increasingly distinctive voice of her own.

Much lingers in the mind after reading *Scrim*. Particularly striking are lines such as "Grief / drags its sleeves // through / the soup of / everything" ('Up here'); "Old men / arrange their knees like knitting needles in the sun" ('Adventure'); "Every day upon your eyelashes / I letter my allegiance" ('Spirograph'); "time jumping like / a trout between us / or just / a curdle, of synapse / and light?" ('Dig'); "fingers starved / for the grammar / of things the spell that / pulls the universe like a freshly sewn pillow case / through its own seams" ('A word minus a word'), and others.

Formally speaking, I was especially struck by her spatial experiments; an inventive use of line, stanza and page. Words, phrases and stanzas are placed with precision: and the overall effect is enhanced by her liking for jagged lines and stanzas of varying length. The overarching concepts, concerns and themes of the collection are in many cases interactively embedded within individual poems, thus achieving great complexity. While some lines are imagistically rich

and compound, others may be minimally pared down to a word or few words. These 'thin' poems, especially, have spines of steel.

The careful placement of words and usage of space in the poems induce particular and striking rhythms. Use of enjambment and stanza breaks suggest a refreshing understanding of rhythmic possibilities by the poet. There is a latent aural strength noticeable, even as one is reading on the page: witness the masterly use of pauses and run-ons in the aptly named 'Breath':

> A dovetail of tongues, dumb,
> I think, as the sky
> gravels to a halt, smog
> furring its teeth. An arm
>
> arcs something towards us,
> an answer for glass, slow-
> sickled silence the thin
>
> wire at the throat of halflinged
> afternoons. Breath is all, all-
>
> ways: bone-milk
> condensed in your
> mouth, your clean-
> appled skull singing
> in my hands …

The North American poet Ron Silliman notes that "the goal of poetry can never be the proof of theory, although it is inevitably a test of the poet's beliefs" ('Of Theory, To Practice'). There is a temptation for any poet who is also an academic to make the poem emerge too obviously from a theoretical base, just as there is a similar temptation for a politically-inclined poet to utter solely from and about their ideological convictions. Here, though, there is little affectation. Kotze's knowledge of language studies is contained in her poetry in a manner which is sharply and imagistically realised – there is no sense here of a poet straining to fit her poetry into a theoretical framework. The linguistic vitality of her poetry is deeply conceptual but is rooted in the tangible and sensual.

However, there are a handful of poems which, to my mind, do not work as well as the others. This mainly occurs when the conceptual leaps being made are too extreme and therefore show a

degree of strain: or when the unusual juxtapositions and associations attempted do not convince in their relevance, nor resonate sufficiently in the reader's consciousness.

Nevertheless, this is a fine collection, and shows the poet's ever-growing strength and talent. Her personal voice seems more grounded and sure here, as a locus for her interrogation of the world. All in all, the exquisite and seemingly fragile beauty of these poems sits side-by-side with their intellectual and conceptual strength. In reading them I was continually surprised by the unexpected directions the poems took me: in a very real sense, the best of them embodied one poem's injunction to "Look. Everything is always about to happen" ('Adventure'). One is repeatedly taken further than one suspects – as their narrator says, "I try not to think about endings" ('Hummingbird postcard'); for "Beginnings are such soft-skinned things / to bite into, blanched / by time. And endings? Nobody gives gifts / for endings/ We must travel light" ('Gift'). In this collection there is an extraordinary sense of latent power, of possibilities for further development. This suggests to me that an important poet has emerged. I cannot wait to read her next book.

It would be remiss, in closing, not to mention the book's cover. Some of Deep South's recent covers have been striking, but this is to my estimation probably the best of the lot. Gowans and Berold have excelled themselves.