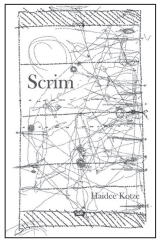

Scrim
Haidee Kotze (Deep South, 2019)

Haidee Kotze's *Scrim* is an adventurous book, full of beautiful weirdnesses, but it is not a straightforward read. Taxing collocations of noun and epithet challenge the reader on nearly every page. The poems are full of strange sound effects and semi-human cosmologies. Wispy curls of typography on the page belie considerable linguistic sinew within. In a recent interview, she aligned herself with some of the more experimental practitioners of the art of poetry, citing such exemplars as Lyn Heijinian and Charles Bernstein. Certainly, Kotze's shift towards the avant-garde, between her previous book (*The Reckless Sleeper*, Modjaji Books, 2012) and this one, is very noticeable. The word pairings are knottier and more tangential, and there is a bolder occupation of page space.

Kotze's strenuous radicalism takes her far beyond the soft lyricism of much SA poetry. But indications of major life changes (signalled by her change of name from Kruger back to Kotze) offer us a heuristic entry into the world of *Scrim*, encouraging the view that she has radicalised her art in order to address deeply private matters in a public, but shielded manner. Evidence for this lies in the title itself, and the many places in the text where gauzy coverings—nets, webs and skeins ('dressings', in effect)—provide comfort and healing. The page is "a tensile bruise", as she so memorably puts it.

Many of Kotze's poems are acutely conscious of language, both as a component of personal relationships, and as a casualty of relationship failure. In 'Resurrection', for example, a once-healthy dialogue between lovers has atrophied into two separately owned dead languages that are depicted, with heightened physicality, as half-buried, zombie-like creatures, gasping and guttering. 'A word minus a word' is another effective poem about how a relationship might lose its voice. Though this involves a process of linguistic reduction, its austerities are registered in the idiom of lexical thickening that is a hallmark of her new manner—

> Each day pares
> the obstinate wilderness of skin
> into something leaner

Despite almost sadistic connotations here (the flaying of human skin), the poem moves towards a humane and profound conclusion—every act of unsaying (of taking something back) is a loss which eventually returns us to an original, silent language—one in which nothing has yet been said. In terms recalling Wittgenstein, Kotze identifies such a language as one in which we have nothing to lose: "what is not said / cannot be lost". Such a language, by implication, is one in which one is free to take risks (as Kotze does in these poems).

Evidence of relationship breakdown is continued in 'Pith', a rather gorgeous love poem in which there are sensuous evocations (lovely to read) of natural textures and materials—locusts and honey (traditional love foods of the 'Song of Songs'), vulva-like mussels, and the sexual organs of flowers (carpel, calyx). But these seductions are actually more carnivorous than carnal. We are shown the transformation of conventional love into something rapacious, even cannibalistic: "I will lick clean / the inside / of your cheeks". This oversteps the bounds of acceptable intimacy, perhaps; that idea of licking clean combines, in uneasy alliance, grooming, sanitising and assiduous eating (getting access to every last scrap of food). That promise (or threat) is answered by: "your tongue / will fall asleep / in my ear". This can be read in so many ways—will his tongue fall asleep because it has discharged its erotic mission, or simply because it is no longer being heeded and so has fallen silent?

The touch of wry irony here reminds us that there are many flashes of lightheartedness and gentle levity in *Scrim*, even though more frequently the comedy is groaned out through gritted teeth. A work with this level of figural density (and opacity) invites considerably more comment than I can muster, so I will allude here to just one of many richly suggestive instances—'Hummingbird postcard', with its image of bird skeletons soaked in oil and honey (as love charms), combines just that degree of emblematic ambiguity, of the macabre and the charming, to keep us on our guard against undue sentimentality.

The book ends in a mood of beautiful resignation—all that is left to us, we are told, is

> to work your heart's lumbering loom
> around seeds and animals and suns

This brings the book's many images of protective containment (by skeins, skins and scrims) to an affirmative close, an almost

Schopenhauerian moment of world guardianship in which salvation depends upon a delicate membrane of compassion safely enclosing both the self and the rest of nature.

BASIL DU TOIT