

earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow

by Seithlamo Motsapi

Deep South/ISEA, 1995 85pp.

Review by MN Ngxali

Note: this review of *earthstepper* by MN Ngxali (pen name of Mxolisi Nyezwa) is of the 1995 edition, published jointly by Deep South and the ISEA (Institute for the Study of English in Africa). Deep South published a new edition in 2003.

earth

to say bread
we tamed mountains
assaulted distances
noses stuck out & up
for the shallow odour
of silver

we left homes
herds hearts
to spite the reckless hunger
on the numeral horizon of lolly
so the sun
cd spare us her searing glance

but now you see me
all earthscent & skewed skunk
pulp in the rot to a fetter
now you see me
a bruising stagger
hammered to hell
& screwed to a grovel by capital

while their gleam comes true
suited greed to highrise paradise
pulsing oil & glitter through lucre

i fierce my furrowed eye to a
boulder plowed in the face
& as you wonder
whether i bring smile or smite
my furnace thinks of you

It is my belief that poetry written by black people in South Africa is appreciated for the wrong reasons. A new black voice that somehow manages to survive and refuses to be ignored by the powers that be ruffles up the white conscience's wits. It becomes imperative to quickly categorise the voice and stave it off in archives to gather dust so as to calm down the nerves. The role of the

black critic in these matters is to refuse to be bogged down and be persuaded by jaundiced arguments. Our role as critics is to help preserve what we deem necessary and befitting for the upliftment of the society's spirit.

Motsapi's voice is such an important voice in the development of black poetry in this country. The poetry assails the reader with its plea for life. Like in the poem "earth" above, Motsapi's poetry is a poetry of forms, estranged voices that re-enact their stories to the world. The poet gives to each human concern, each feeling, a tongue, a voice to articulate its immediate circumstance:

lips, eyes, yr face, yr laughter –
to clasp them so intimately
in the end they become definitions
of myself
("dawn")

In the same poem, Motsapi clearly explains to us what his poems hope to achieve:

i want to come to you
so i come to myself again
i want to see yr face clearly
so it recovers the misty radiance
of its primal clay
again i want to see you
so in the end you are not there
& you are there

Most critics, particularly white critics, ought to know that the issue was never the second language English which black writers, more so for reasons of convenience, had to use from time to time. The language has always been of secondary importance to the creative spirit which has harmoniously resolved its creative impulses. Once a poet has mastered the language of feelings, even a torrent of words will be canvassed into a timeless work of art – a great poem:

my love
there are no accidents
in war – no kisses
on the belligerent lips of crocodiles
no loves greener than
the dancing hearts of children
no reveller jollier than the worm
in columbus's boiling head

there is no song beautifuller
than the stern indifference of the hills
there are no flowers more clamorous
than the seas of children
home in my little heart

i tell u this
as the sun recedes
into the quaking pinstripe
of my warriors

grinning & vulgar in their muddied dreams
of power

i tell u this love
because the roads
have become hostile

(“sol/o”)

Motsapi’s poems resonate with beauty and power and wisdom in odd circumstances, particularly whenever the poet has discovered a secret he knows we are not aware of, and which he wants to share with us:

for the masterplan is not a flag or two
up the invisible masts of rebirths
it’s more than the solid pre-harmony
of shrieks & screams
as we holler our thunder over the wounds
it’s not the comical contentedness
of your own bucketful of the ocean
love is in the receding wave of the heart
the cool slink from the rainbow
into the embrace of the mesenja

(“the sun used to be white”)

People read poetry for different reasons. There are those who would read it to understand the manifestation of life: love, conflict, beauty, pain, power, laughter, despair, romance, sex, etc. These people are mostly insecure souls who need to be filled up, and who have a deep need to grow up in the world – people who have a need for knowledge like a plant would need water to grow. They read along parallel lines and would read any poem like they would read a novel, with no imagination.

Poetry has to be read with a measure of certainty about the beauty of life. It has to be read with conviction in beauty itself, with a conviction in language, sound – with conviction in the seething pains and damages obtained in the leg sprained through injury. Poetry has to be read with no illusions in mind. It has to be read nakedly, with no smokescreens. No masks:

but there was always
the alluring green of other lands
where the gnashing was mute perhaps
not the perpetual chorus
the aliens had concocted us

so that when I say ayler
there’s a thin line
to lead you to the brotherhood of breath –
they always felt london’s reckless blizzards
were too acute for flowering souls
the foggy skies too hostile for suns

(“malombo paten dansi”)

In the poem “tenda”, Motsapi shows a deep sense of feeling & living with all that is natural and simple in the world:

i look at you
& you remind me of all the mountains
i haven't seen or embraced
[...]
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 learned the inconvenient gestures of compassion
when i have learned to be infinitely present
& yet invisible like the sky

Here in this poem it is as if the poet knows the limitations of his own abilities, his own life (and his poetic voice?) when compared to the more expansive and perpetual existence of nature, the mother of all life which is 'infinitely present'.

Certain things, forgotten emotions, lost intuitions, repressed wisdoms and insights, are recovered by the discovery and the growth of true love in the heart:

I look at you
& you remind me of all the mountains
I haven't seen or embraced
[...]
for me you carry affirmations
[...]
water from an ancient well
[...]
I will always remember you

.....

my love is like a river or a fist with forty fingers
my love is like a river that swallows mirrors & saxophones
& spits out the purple pink salt of songs without heads
while the skies dance like loa grandmothers

("enia")

And this discovery of his essential humanity brings the poet face to face with his Maker – having discovered his humanness he simultaneously discovers the immensity of God:

God is the one who knows everything
God is the one who knows everything

("enia")

But not everything natural and human in man has been lost. This is shown in the poem "the man". In this poem Motsapi confronts the spirituality of man and tells us that man's spirituality is the only thing that differentiates man from animal, making him superior to all things. Also connecting man to the vastness of nature:

an almost forgotten acquaintance
was in town recently
I noticed that it started raining
just as he ambled in

I remember him as a simple man
growing up, we all wanted
to be doctors, lawyers & teachers
so the blood could ebb out of the village

my friend had much more sober dreams
he asked the heavens to grant him
the imposing peace of the blue-gum in his backyard
& that all the poor send him their tears
so he could be humble like the sun
so the red wax of the stars would not drip onto him

i remembered that man today
& all I think of is his unassuming radiance
like that of a blushing angel

as for his dreams
he tells us
whole forests invade his sleep at night
so that there's only standing room
for the dreams

This hope that not everything is lost, that there are still some amongst us who are connected to the natural stream and pull of things, who have been brought nearer to the flow of life and to what is good and life-sustaining is again the theme in the poem "the house":

the little man
with hands like the hide
of an impatient alligator
tells me he built his house smaller
so the nights in winter
could be warmer

i shake my head softly
& say love would have been kept out
by many walls

as it is
when they tire from wandering
through an indifferent world
all the suns come to sleep
in this house

Motsapi almost says that this vindication of what is spiritual in man comes through self-denial and abstinence, the downslides and the rough roads of life, through frustration, through poverty, through pain:

we are at peace here
even while our lungs are full
of secret wars
& primordial fears bruise our suns
we are peace here robert

with hopes upon our heads
& songs sprouting out of our sins
we bless the lacerations

we are at peace here
across the rock & scrub
a sole rainbow pillar
protrudes from the earth, full
of promise & solace

i have one eye full of dreams & hintentions
the other is full of broken mirrors
& cracked churchbells

i have one eye full of rivers & welcomes
the other is full of flickers & fades

I have
a memory full of paths & anointings
a mouth full of ripe infant suns
seven legs for the dancing river & the clement abyss
& a hope that corrodes the convulsions

we bless the long rough road
we bless the inscrutable darkness
where our names are rent into spirit
we bless the splinters & the air
full of asphyxiations & amnesia
we bless our lacerations & our deformities

we bless the belligerent strangers
who stay on in our throats
long after forgotten festivities

as we learn the painful lessons of love
as we learn to respect the night's sovereignty
& the slow stern wisdom of the desert
we bless the mysteries & the silence

("river robert")

But the world is not entirely that simple. The paradox of life attracts and repudiates us. Life timeously hits us so deeply, scars us and impregnates its wounds deeply inside the breath inside our visceral lungs.

i erred, i erred
as you can see my ears are scarred
from the discord cut of my plunders
as you can see my ease escapes me
into the rent language of razors

i erred, i erred
i fed my grass pisses, rancoured & oily
not growing waters, running & holy
my clouds sneered the greens their dew
as over my head dances coagulated into deserts

there is thorn
where yesterday the sea's murmur
greeted me deep like a brother

there is thistle
where yesterday the barefoot preacherman
reminded my yam its sleep of sprout

my name forgets me
& there are worms
where yesterday I rested rains
from their fraternal runs
over skies & howls

i erred, i erred & now
i return to you Mungu
my heart in the dust
my head in the ash
i erred, i erred

("soro")

We've been through a journey – the breathing side of man. And we've been asphyxiated, left for one moment in time in complete solitude, just as we are at birth. And we howl and howl madly, overwhelmed by the conflictual life: the glimpse of eternity.
