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THE TRIM

Rough Music
by Ari Sitas
Deep South, 2013 158pp.

Review by Jaya Cooper

'Rough music' is the term used…to denote a rude cacophony, with or without more elaborate ritual, which usually directed mockery or hostility against individuals who offended against certain community norms. – Edward Palmer Thompson, *Customs in Common*
(In a footnote the doyen of English social history adds a quote about 'the harmony of tingling kettles and frying pans'.)

Sitas is no stranger to Edward Thompson's work, so the title of the collection cannot be a whim or a caprice but I submit that the poems have – however rude, cacophonous, critical and loud they may be – a remarkable tonality and timbre. From the first, "Ethekwini" – the surrealist and jazz-like take on Durban, 'where visions of heaven subsided long ago' and where 'there is no stench of heaven left to prize' – to the last, "Marikana", the very recent invocation of the massacre of striking miners where, now that the strike is over, 'the dead must return/to work', there is a sense of drama and ritual in a world beyond tragedy or norm.

The back cover blurb captures the spirit that animates the pages, calling the poems 'passionate, politically undaunted and wide-ranging, expressed with the exploratory instinct of a jazz improviser'. There is an unmistakable haunting that runs through the selection – a failed revolution, a cosmos without a metaphysic, shards of rainbow, vengeful tropical hues, homelessness and yet, always a hope, restlessness and rebellion.

In a poem titled "Reconstruction", he builds from hinges and bone, rusted wire, chemicals and hemp a woman whose singing is the beauty of mourning itself; and there he is awakening always 'other/primal debts', eating 'shards of rainbow', recalling 'crabbed songs', keeping his calendar on nature's green page, playing his war-torn sitar, lamenting the dying of the 'word' and the gatherings where 'an imbongi bursts through the crowds orating in a language no one remembers', where with flour and water he mixes up glue to re-assemble people out of the giblets and splinters of bone that bombing has caused, only for the people to march on into new wars. In his long Rimbaud-inspired poem, the cart of hope is stitched out of twine and sackcloth; and then there is a wind-up key inside the statues to march them out of the corridor of his childhood home into the streets.

The epicentre of his poetic energy remains Durban and its subtropical shores where his first collection, *Tropical Scars*, became emblematic of the insurrectionary and violent 1980s. Although he returns to Durban in 2013 by now he has travelled far on his Vespa in South Africa and on peculiar wings to the mythical Ethiopia of his 2000 masterpiece, *Slave Trades*; his childhood home of Limassol, Cyprus in *Rhythmskewed* and by dhow, train and elephant for his outrageous, humorous and harsh encounters of his India in *80 Days Around the World – the India Section*. In all these wonderings he does not travel lightly: the depth of cultural, historical and poetic reference anywhere he parks his senses is outstanding. This he does unobtrusively, without the slightest showy sense.

There is a quiet authority that marks the despair of the haunting:

Unlike my elders
I cannot ask who piled
The mounds of coke-cans
And the mounds of skulls
In this darkening space
I know this room.
I know who brought them here.
The wheelbarrow is still poised
In the dimming, sun-freed light
And in the darkness over there
I cannot ask after the clicking sound
I know
I have met the dark-clad aunts
I recognize their knitting
The dead have time
Knitting,
Knitting,

I know the mounds are dented
I know what life has passed through here
The clues are everywhere
The piano is still warm from the pummel
And the cross-hand rhythm it endured

And there:
Those are the last remaining prison bars
My poet friends peddle to survive

The mounds are there
It was a monumental effort
That rolled them up the flights
of stairs.

(from "Bombing Iraq")

The aunts are there in his childhood memories as well, to intensify the haunting by the side of the story-telling grandmother: 'they sat silent, distant, like the iconstand, they would pierce you with their eyes, but their souls were floating elsewhere, in some past, where the guitar's notes danced the bolero through the night and where masked serenaders sung erotic stanzas and life was rose and garnish; and in summer – during the season of the mountain-cherry, and the watermelon they would sip their bitter coffee, their Turkish blend, with salted biscuits cracking, then melting in their mouths' (*Rhythmskewed*).

There are the aunts and the ancestors but it is hard to trace a convincing autobiographical picture. There is a father figure in "Crooning" who 'worked across the bay where they used to cut/blubber and meatpacks from whales/I swear to his last his hands sweated-out codliver oil and/on his last our lives started sinking/and me, his little ground-sailor with my Sunday blue and/white collar and hat entered the fishlife/the payroll of bones, the hurt of the other side, the/wrong side the crusted beard salt-life apprenticed//to croon'.

And there are the dancing girls, one of the three was his mother mock-singing lines of the *Mikado*; but unlike the one who ended up in Tanganyika and the other in Baghdad, she ended up in Johannesburg and all, despite their distances, had to 'tie their graces to a chore/And leap across protected pantries singing' ("Bombing Iraq").

There are hints at some defining existential trauma that the poet refuses to pinpoint. There are two powerful clues, one in the poem called "Barbarism" where there is the argument with a God that did nothing: 'you abandoned me early and I/ prayed so hard, my eyelids so tight, tight, tight, my teeth/sunk into the opposite gums, and I worded my pleas and/my murmurs, fast, fast, fast, but you did nothing and/they marched my kin outside. I lost you in the din of the/sound that sounded like our demented neighbour/banging on his metal bath'. The second is later, in "Remembering Freiburg", where he takes on Professor Herr Doktor Heidegger full on in unparalleled philosophically nuanced anger to state – 'Ich bin your worst Uberscheisstraum – which of you sentences/sent my granddad to the ovens?'

What is surprising is the omission from this collection of a quieter and more lyrical Sitas – love and possession, depressing decay in the AIDS-linked "Summer Love", the powerful despair of "Slave Trades", the starkness of "Learning to Love", the hilarious dialogues with his modern day Passepartout are compelling but there is a need for repose and melody. I recall softer and more thoughtful nuggets in *Tropical Scars*, in *The RDP Poems* and most certainly in the Ethiopian cycle.

What is heartening is the sense of rhythm, breath and musicality and it is not surprising to know that many of his lyrics have been set to music. The references to music, sound and song are plentiful and there are very few who can write words that hit powerful tonal scales; this matched by his close attentiveness to the local forms of orality and syncopation make his lines dance off the page. It is obvious that he can do doggerel and hip-hop but he chooses not to. From the humour of "Mango Tango" to "Kokovoko" he can lull the reader into seeming fun whilst playing with references to the most canonical Zulu poetry in the former and to Melville's *Moby Dick* and all fictional islands of the Pacific in the latter.

There is so much sea and ocean here to make Homer and Césaire jealous: waves whose necks are thickset with corrugations and timber-furrows left open since Bartholomew Dias, mermaids, monsoon-time monster waves, sharks whose muzzles whistle as they tug, red eddies that mark the graves of slave ships and, most importantly, the vision of his death itself on the surf's lip: 'the men will lift me up/the men will sway me over their heads/over each other down past these inclines…to my mother – the sea/…to send me off to Allah's marine gardens/…And I will be carried off on the humps/of whales with red ribbons floating from their fins/rested, beautiful, in restless times/beyond the ache that garnishes each of my arteries/and bones//And you will, oh you will weep/for us, for me' (*Slave Trades*). But also the sea as restless life as 'the hooligan moon peers over the Bluff/and the horses of the deep get restless' ("Evening Song (Durban)").

How rough is the music then? The mockery and hostility is there to all Big Dadadaddies who drive by in their Shepstone Benzes, the Gaggles of Prophets, the Zigmund Gumedes, the Big Men and Women of Power, the Culture Mandarins, but he never stands high on a moral platform or edifice – the joke is on him, his friends and compeers, their bodies and souls, their visions, their mauls and their pathetic dignity. For Sitas, the political is personal, he was 'bequeathed' as he notes 'to loudhailer [life]', so he did, does and will continue, 'condemned to crackle/forward/on and on and on' ("We Continue").

The book despite its lack of quieter and more soulful moments is a fine book because when all is said and done Ari Sitas is a fine poet.