Review by Rustum Kozain

Rough Music – Selected Poems, 1989–2013
by Ari Sitas

Deep South, Grahamstown, 2013
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Ari Sitas's *Rough Music* selects poetry from eight published volumes and one volume still "under construction", the poetry spanning the twenty-five years from 1989 when he debuted with *Tropical Scars*. It is a valuable book, providing a good review of the poetry of one of the few prolific poets of South Africa. In a literary context where poetry disappears from the radar the minute it appears – scant attention in fewer and fewer reviews – Deep South should be lauded for producing a book which reacquaints the reader already familiar with Sitas's work and which will introduce, one hopes, younger readers and aspirant poets to one of South Africa's most vibrant poets. The historical view such a selection provides of Sitas's writing also gives the lie to johnny-come-lately writers and critics' claims that the literature of late-apartheid is an archive of monotone protest.

A sociologist by profession, Sitas became involved and influential in anti-apartheid politics via his work with trade unions and associated community organisations. Understanding the growing labour movement in 1980s South Africa as also defining a new cultural moment, Sitas curated *Black Mamba Rising* (1986), a small collection of poems by trade unionists Alfred Temba Qabula, Nise Malange and Mi S'dumo Hlatshwayo, and seminal to the rise and popularity of poetry at workers' rallies.

This close involvement in the workers' movement is evident in Sitas's own poetry: it teems with references to the lives and spaces of the marginalised, but not as artifice, a nod to political correctness. Rather, there is a fulsomeness to the world represented in his poetry that teems in contrast to the almost misanthropic silences and blind spots of much South African poetry caught in narrow, unseeing class perspectives. And it carries the ring of truth of someone who moves through these spaces, who knows the people.

The poetry is alive with much else as well – the grotesque and the carnivalesque, the smells and sights of the world as it obtains in South Africa, especially Durban (most of his poetry), Ethiopia in *Slave Trades* (2000), or Cyprus and Greece in *Rhythmskewed* (2000; Sitas was born in Cyprus). "Ethekwini", taken from *Tropical Scars* (1989) and opening the selection, is a good example of Sitas's voice, his barbaric yawp:

> There is
> an expanse of green and dust
> hemmed in
> by cane and a stitchwork of hills...
> there, here
> is this expanse that claims me: my Hell.
>
> From here
> from this hell's odours
> – tomato street, guava avenue, molasses valley
> steel-shavings township, glue location, masala hill
> melting and boiling –
> there is no stench of heaven left to prize

In his preface in the original *Slave Trades*, Sitas mentions poets who have shaped him, the moderns being Baudelaire, Kavafy, Rimbaud, Césaire, whose poetry of the "blank" spaces of North and Northeast Africa Sitas sets out to counter in *Slave Trades* (more below). But in much of his other poetry, one feels something more akin to Whitman's barbaric yawp and Ginsberg's *Howl*, both poets of the carnivalesque, of a world teeming with love, music (jazz for Sitas), pleasure, but also with its grotesqueries and murders. One gets the sense of a poet who consumes the world, masticates on it for a while and then spits it out back at us. But there's no distaste or misanthropy in the gesture. The poet is as much part of the world that moves him to love and to despair. This double-bind is distilled in "Doubt", a short poem from *Tropical Scars* in which the poet is figured as Joseph Conrad's Kurtz, caught between the atavism of both

apartheid's torturer and the necklacing of spies by community activists.

Some early cynicism finds expression in the selection of poems from *Songs, Shoeshine and Piano* (1992). "Barbarism", a poem that mixes its theme of the loss of faith with images of environmental and political dread, opens with the forlorn, foreshadowing lament:

> It hurts to lose a dream – to live with the horror that
> there will be no tomorrow better than our yesteryear
> and our time to be marked only by this century's
> register of gassed lung.

From the layout, the above poem can probably be described as a prose poem, a form that Sitas is not afraid to employ. But what strikes me about his lines, even in the "prose" poems, is the rhythmical force driving them. Perhaps that rhythm comes from a piece of jazz in his inner ear (several poems are inspired by and pay homage to jazz musicians). It strikes me, though, that much of that driving force, given its urgency at times, can also derive from the poet's urge to take in the world in its fullness because, while his lines drive you towards their end-breaks, they burst at the seams. Here is a prose stanza from *Slave Trades*:

> Give me the power to flood the stalls and tear at the fleshy, dampened scabs, the boxed palmtrees and the sacked falcon beaks, the shredded cocks, the bottled tears, the piled up seashells and the dying sundried river fish, the whites, the blacks, the weighed summers and the trapped voices, the gathering of bird skull, baboons, balloons, spice and cloth and Menelek's stolen lambs.
>
> The world has gone flattened, mad, devoid of life, pregnant with Things.

Despite scant review attention when it came out, *Slave Trades* is a book often lauded in informal conversation among historically sussed poets and literati in South Africa. As mentioned earlier, Sitas conceptualised *Slave Trades* – an epic in large fragments – as some form of literary corrective to the blank spaces figured in colonial representations of Africa, specifically Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Rimbaud is central and Sitas imagines "the voice of a cynical Rimbaud" and

those of his Ethiopian lovers, of kings and queens in a world in flux, but a full world. It is an astonishing piece of work, maintaining a feverish tension between, but short of, the exotic and the real. The writing gives off whiffs of the kind of literary-mythical as in JM Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but here, of course, we are located in a real place. Beyond this selected volume, *Slave Trades* is probably the best introduction to Sitas's writing and I wish the selection in the present book was larger. I am unsure whether the original is still in print; if not, its publisher, Deep South, should give some serious consideration to bringing out a new edition.

Rough Music is a varied book. Selections from *The RDP Poems* (2004) and *Insurrections* (2012) show Sitas also trying his hand at a sparser line to face the brutalities of more recent years. He can be steely, apposite in poetry that addresses an impoverished political, social, economic and discursive landscape. A bone-dry language for desert times:

> I stabbed the foetus
> with these
> I used to stab the rain with these
> How did you dare
> grow this inside my womb?
> ("The Eighth Insurrection of the cow", *Insurrections*)

But I prefer the feverish language of *Slave Trades*, even as I know that no poet wants to be defined only by work he or she wrote years ago. The verve of that earlier book feels a bit dissipated in the last three poems of *Rough Music*, taken from the unfinished *The Vespa Diaries*. Perhaps there's an existential exhaustion that intellectuals and activists from the height of the anti-apartheid struggle (and those of us younger, who came of age in the late 1980s) experience as we view the present, a present that many on the left foresaw. And so, even as poems address the present with full critical consciousness, there is a lesser energy, a resignation reconciled to a present antinomic to the future we imagined in the past:

> The strike is over
> The dead must return
> to work
>
> ("Marikana")