

THE POETRY WORKSHOP 1985

Regular readers of **English Usage in Southern Africa** will recall the interview with Ridley Beeton ('Speaking to a Writer') which was published in Volume 16.2, 1985. There, Professor Beeton expressed his belief in the value of creative writing:

What I am now trying to explore are simple ways of getting people to talk about writing as such, as a process, and what we can do to write more effectively. ... Creative writing itself must not be regarded as a precious exercise for the few who write poetry or short stories. All writing is creative, and it is principally in that sense that I am interested in creative writing.

Professor Beeton also described his role in initiating and leading a Poetry Workshop in Pretoria (under the auspices of the Institute for Continuing Education at the University of South Africa). In discussing this new venture, he remarked:

I don't want to produce a genius, nor do I think I can, nor do I expect students to produce masterpieces. They need not even be students. They could just be people who come for occasional courses, who can talk about their writing, and learn from an exchange. ... Knowing what it is to feel inarticulate myself, I want to help other people to become more expressive. ... What I want to get across to them specifically is that there must be a diversity in approach.

This first Poetry Workshop ran its course during the latter half of 1985. A record of the Workshop - including a selection of

the poems written by each of the participants, with commentary by Professor Beeton - has now been published for limited distribution by the Institute for Continuing Education.* What follows below is a sample of each poet's work, culled from the published record. (For reasons of space, longer poems could not be considered for inclusion here.) Collectively, the poems bear eloquent testimony to the diversity of which Professor Beeton spoke, and to the expressiveness which he hoped the Workshop would nurture.

K.R.

Poetry—surely

Of all of poetry
These should basics be
That it structurally
Should rhythmically
And concisely be
With meaning
Provoking
Thought or feeling

Let not the rogue
"In vogue"
Lessen
The lesson.

Stan Elterman

*Copies are available at ten rands each from the Institute of Continuing Education, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 392, Pretoria, 0001.

**Moment in the Gardens, Cape Town
(Spring, 1984)**

Suddenly suspended, Time pauses
As I wait in the dappled circle
Beneath the trees, idly aware of
Children's voices and swooping wings -

A kaffir-boom is alight, pentecostal
And in the aviary exotic birds
Talk and sing. White azaleas
Are silent beside purple cinerarias

And a slave-bell warns beyond
The palm-tree. Other flowers flame
Near the fountain where pigeons rise
Wheel and fall with absolute grace.

In the distance bright figures
Move in the sun spilling down the
Mountain's bastion; shift, change
Under luminous cloud - After

Long years it is much the same
Trees pursue their secret life
And the squirrels, once so ubiquitous,
Are gone while I, no longer young

And hesitant in a strange city
Am still surprised, enchanted
By this place, these trees,
The shining flowers, the certain birds.

Dorothy Murray

We've seen terrible deaths, behind
the chant of each destroyer
leaping forth on the bloody arena
of child and childless family.
Who suffers to show us more?

Who wins to show us Victory.

Cry, there is no love to hold peace
Tell me man, whose gun fires to show
me more
than the opening arms it tore and the missing faces
so as not to face the eyes
lying blown from bodies
and then the reek of flesh anyone
decides to burn.

We've seen the terrible deaths
the unmatched score

Paul Dirksen

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Forgive me
for having nothing more
relevant
to say in
these turbulent times

than that
a sudden spring shower
breathes fragrance
even into
the bitter burnt grass
in me

Barbara Kinghorn

Under hot spires
Working upon the fevered foundations
The earth, hardest of grains
Speaks its ungentle season of fruiting and decay.
Even in my dreams I see blue-eyed Dominicans, reciting their
 canticles,
Talking of the strange banned god, the blood-stained Crux,
The deceitful device that shows the poppy seeds as big as
 apples,
Or the flexible optical instrument through which the paradisaal
 sky is viewed.

Creeping under the armpits of the dead
The proud nuncios satin-robed are content
For in rapture with themselves
Their days are spent in scarlet halls; embowered in triadic
 perfume
They wait.

This House is built of stones, and the white blood of its
 granite,
Contained in a diamante glass jar, is said to glow at night
As the visions of electricity, in a fragrant stench of velvet
Shadow forth the quaint birds and beasts of the lunar world.

Under the crimson glass and sharp-scented carnations
The image of Mary is painted in putrid petrolic oil,
Her nerves as white as parsley.

How these pale-coloured Latin letters weep for the smell of
 the youthful flesh,
A keen stimulant, as strong as the onion in the malthouse.

Grant us then, enticing Reverend Fathers -
For though a hundred years were contracted into one moment,
 and
one should bleed to death on a cross, what care I? - Grant us
 then
this day the maw of your secret; the eternal carmine trance.

Elizabeth van Niekerk

Lovely woman
let me stroke your
silken flesh,
feel the warmness
of your embrace.

To hold, to touch.
What worth is this
without your
spiritual caress.

Antonia Rolfes

The Beggar Woman

The warm humming of humans
waiting,
surged forward
when red changed to green,
leaving
the shrouded figure
crouched on the corner.

Bent double, inward looking,
but with taut arm
outstretched,
inviting alms,
its nimble fingers
as sensitive to their catching
as the tentacles
of an anemone.

A young arm,
unwrinkled hand
serving
an unfitting apprenticeship
in the city centre.

Edna Smuts

Beach Fire

We walked
Through sand-encrusted night,
Through shifting dunes
Which rose and fell about us
Like mists
Of half-forgotten dreams,
Till cresting one
We came upon a timeless scene -
A fire
Crouched
Amidst a group of crouching shapes

We walked
Through starless night
Yet the fire mumbled
Ground its teeth,
Spat out a hundred-
Thousand
Shooting stars
Which traced molten parabolas
Against the cloud-dark haze,
And died in ecstasy.

We left
Through ash-grey mists,
Through shifting dunes
Which hunched their backs
Against the dawn's cold light,
And cresting one
Looked back on soft moth-ashes,
Whirling timelessly
Beneath lost stars.

Penelope Kew

Past Present Future

Lord I had pain.
I saw a black man
one grey dawn
carrying all his possessions
down our street
he looked sad and down
but I never stopped
to share his pain

Lord I have pain.
I see burning cars
people running before tanks
and charred bodies on the TV

Lord I shall have pain.
If I can no longer hear
their voices calling
to each other across our street
or see the veld caught golden
in the rays of the dying sun
or smell the winter veld fires

Angela van Schalkwyk

In the Master's Study

Purple-grey cat sitting beside
the industrious writer
witnesses dusk's hesitant entrance
raises its right front leg
stretches its paw
nails carefully withdrawn
almost brushes the trousers
waiting confidently
to be noticed.

Charlotte Ley

Trial Ground

Could I but discern
Life is a trial ground
to toil, to sweat, to understand
My lessons here to learn

I am tested and tried
my cross sometimes too heavy to bear
There are those moments of ecstasy
The rest of the time spent in despair

To fight life's battles and to lose
To fall and fall again
To get up and to try once more
and in the end, to win

The path of life, treacherous and ill-starred
with pitfalls round every bend
I fall, I flail in the quicksand
I think I am at the end

I alter course
see a glimmer of light in the dark
follow that path, reach my goal,
find safety and solace for my soul

Life here on earth is a trial ground
and in the final run
I'll have to give account
how fair I fought my battles
and on what grounds I won.

Sally Snyman

Motives

Impulse fools us,
Establishes a false equilibrium
In the moment's heat.

The languid fire dies
Leaving our noses
Nudging the aroma
Of disappearing smoke.

When the phoenix of reason rises,
Clearing the air,
Sweeping those potent ashes away,

We are left examining motives
Which weren't ever there.

MeiHsian Proctor

Karoo

A world of vast burned sand;
its sun indifferent in its torment.

Immense space - beyond the hope of time.
And yet a profound notion stirs ...
... of some sublime secret.

The notion of meaning
in vast emptiness like this.

The same notion that scares
and sends life scurrying
for the security of a society.

The fear of being alone
in an indifferent universe.

Avi Kometz