

***Sweep of the Violin: An Anthology of Poetry from  
Around the World*, by Lukas Mkuti and Naomi Nkealah**

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Writers from around the world  
Whose words capture our world  
arrived at the flowing pond of texts  
each with nets to catch our attention  
some dipped in sounds and others in rounded  
syntax that taxed not our comprehension.  
These writers from around the world  
drew the sword but never  
drew blood, their words pulled us  
into pits of thoughts and contemplation  
These writers from around a 'world'  
from the east, the west and the rest  
of the cardinal points came  
in this season of rains in our dessert



An anthology of poetry is more like a symphony where dexterous instrumentalists blend together to make melodious music. In *Sweep of the Violin: An anthology of Poetry from around the World*, 16 different voices come together to engage readers with ideas that shape their future and inform the present. Owing to space constraints, this review will only focus on the first nine contributions. As should be expected, the poems range from concerns about nature to the structure of societies, and there is a lot in between, depending on the social location of the contributor. Themes in this anthology move from the destiny of humans to the destination of travelers, as can be found in Vonani Bila's *The toilet cleaner at OR Tambo International Airport*, or the poem titled simply *Hotel*.

This anthology may not be a television set, but it does not shy away from selling visions of life in faraway places. Raphael Urweider, in the poem *Joburg*, takes readers to Johannesburg, where "skies would be limitless if people would take time and look up" (p. 8). This poem does not run against the general narrative of city pathologies. It sets the tone of an insecure space peopled by those with frenetic pace. If Joburg were a person the reader would not be certain that it would respond to the questions this poet asks of it. The biting humour in this work cannot be missed, and so too would the sub-text of frustration of a city dweller who "already [lives] on end street" (p. 9) with a strict budget that can tax a person's sanity. This one dimension of present-day cities should be a springboard to rethink the potential of places, where necessity is the mother of invention.

Making a transition from commentaries on socio-economic pains to Dorothea Rosa Herliany's poem about "broken lands and barren plains" in "The land of disasters" moves the music from lighthearted to deep sympathy with people who have to consume "bowls of porridge mixed with dust" (p. 6). The imagery here is heart-wrenching, and it delivers the sympathy the way the poet might have intended it. The last four lines will force any reader to take a moment and pay closer attention to the condition of life of the people of this nameless nation-state. The wind we know does not only blow with dust; in this case, "it stinks with the flesh of your brothers" (p. 6). The helplessness in this poem, without respite, should bother any discerning reader.

When a poem tells half of a story, the other half must be hunted down if the reader's interest in the story is beyond surface meaning. A quick search online reveals other sides of the story of Vonani Bila's Lake Fundudzi in the poem *Saluting Lake Fundudzi*. One source states the following (<https://sacredsites.com>):

Remotely located in the Venda region of the Limpopo province, in the foothills of the Soutspansberg Mountains, sacred Lake Fundudzi is one of the few true inland lakes in South Africa. Measuring about 140 hectares and estimated to be at least 10,000 years old, Fundudzi is filled by the Godoni and Mutale rivers. Mysteriously, with no obvious outlet, it never overflows.

Can one now find it any fun to salute Lake Fundudzi? Instead, the fear of nature jumps off the page with a rage. This is a lake which hides a people's memory and acts as a final receptacle of the "ash of the dead" (p. 20). Its activities are mysterious, for it is a place where "the fertile yet orphaned pythons mingle and swim" (p. 21). Bila uses poignant rhetorical questions to convey the mythological identity of this remarkable nature resource (p. 21):

Is it true that you once destroyed a fence a day after it was erected

& showed some white researchers darkness,

When they tried to steal from you?

Or were they trying to steal you...?

I too am tempted to ask the thief of the King's trumpet where it will be blown. What the capitalists and robbers of nature do to a lake is beyond imagination. The lake is like music and flow it must. The next set of poems bring music to the fore.

Just like Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Lukas Mkuti blows a textual trumpet, not of rhythm and blues, but of things coming out of the blue. The poem *American blues* (p. 76) is a long tale with its head in the right place and the tail holding the narrative together in all of three tongues. It is a story of a snake that appeared from the blues, of pain told with fun and of fast food, which is the hallmark of America. In all the fun and banter, Mkuti adds to the postcolonial discourse of Oyekan Owomoyela's *The African difference: Discourses on Africanity and the relativity of cultures*, where he turns the tables in the customary representational subject/object relationship between Africa and the west (the United States of America in particular). This poem gives a picture of what an African think of America and in the process invokes John Pepper Clark's *America, their America* as an apt inter-text that signposts the seriousness in the jokes.

Just as in a symphony where instruments respond to instruments, this anthology has Indonesia as a baseline that keeps re-occurring. First, it presents the poems of Dorothea Rosa Herliany who comes from Indonesia (p. 1), then it has a poem by Vonani Bila titled *Indonesia*, which tells of how the speaker gets drunk by the toxic beauty of the place (39), and finally there is Saut Situmorang, who sings a song of red and white to Indonesia in the poem *Indonesia, a song of red and white* (87). It is very possible to read and interpret the latter poem using the prism of the "personal is also political" to situate the narrative focus. In Situmorang's poem, nationhood and a mother co-mingle and the pains of one are inseparable from the pains of the other. The refrain of the poem "my country the land where my mother lived and died" (p. 87) keeps the poem along the melancholic track until the very last word. The beauty of the geo-political space rendered as "the country of deep blue sea, [but] deep blue sorrowful sea" (p. 87) stands

in convergence to the deaths, diseases and deception that riddle the country. The reader may want to know where the redeemer lies. If we had Bob Dylan's song *the answer my friend is blowing in the wind*, it will rent the air as we wait to read the next set of poems.

Mbali Kgosidintsi, in her evocative *I stand between my Africa and me*, offers readers a tiny respite from the doom and gloom at the very end of a long stream of woes and imagined "real" foes when she asserts as her final statement: "Dream of an Africa I claim as mine, I will fight for this continent with fierce pride because it is only I that stands between my Africa and me" (p. 99). The spoken word style is very evident in this poem as in the rest of her poems. The poet moves seamlessly from one theme to the other, and finally connects the dots with some flicker of hope at the end.

As the ship of these poems moves from one location to another, it also changes direction. Sylvia Geist brings a scientific touch to her poems. She writes Carbon, Neon, Aluminum, Chlorine, Calcium and even Scandium into her poems. Each poem represents a coded message only the resolute can gain access into without much strain and stress. These stable elements of the periodic table in different states drag along memories of a coal miner father and of times when "nothing connects us" (p. 107), while also evoking reality that "in the gnats' eyes we are perhaps just a polyp flailing around" (p. 109). If a reader is left dazed, it will not be incorrect to accept that the chemistry between text and reader does not often gel.

At this point in the anthology, readers must be ready for prayers (if not supplications). Naomi Nkealah makes her contribution with *A prayer for the brothel keeper* (p. 113). This is a prayer offered "in the name of pleasure" (p. 114) in aid of treasures hidden between the thighs. As usual she treats the social taboo with sensitivity and with her usual dose of humour, and smuggles in a little message "for debt is a thief of peace" (p. 113), reinforcing the notion that he/she who goes a-borrowing goes a-sorrowing. The pinnacle of her humour can be confronted in *Police encounters* (p. 120). In some parts of the world, police brutality is the main concern, but in the land from where the poet writes it is police immorality that rules the day/night. At street junctions and corner stores, palm greasing is the norm as "the police need to eat" (p. 121). They eat in midday sun and eat when the sun retreats at twilight. These police officers (seldom women) eat forbidden fruits in open air and in dark crevices, where eyes need not tell the stories but the palm-to-palm encounter records the transaction.

It can be said without equivocation that when writers from around a "particular" world, whose words capture our world arrive at the flowing pond of texts, our expectation is that each poet with nets will be ready to catch our attention. In this anthology some of the poets wrote in (and with) sounds and others in grounded syntax that did not tax our imagination. It is not possible to focus on all the 16 poets in the well-weaved anthology, but it can be said that these writers from around the world of the rich and the poor drew the sword to battle, but never drew blood; their words pulled us into pits of thoughts and

elevated us up to the mountains of contemplation. These writers from around the world, chosen from the east, the west and the rest of the cardinal points, came in this season of rains to our desert. The anthology drew its title from a dark poem by Herliany, a poet who has seen the world and wrote about “The woman who sinned” (p. 3):

The woman writes of sins which cannot be translated.

She writes bitter secret poems hidden in the sweep of the violin

Then makes a dark mysterious indian dancer stamp her foot down hard.

In this poem, an agenda for the state of gender struggles can be distilled. The imageries here are dark and depressing. One can only hope that reading this anthology will help clean the cobwebs of the many struggles we have seen.

As in all good tales, I have left the first to the last so that the words in the foreword by Tanure Ojaide may last for long. The textual surgeon in the multiple award winner enabled him take each piece apart by bringing them together in a neat thematic whole. Let these words of Ojaide ring in your ears as you read this anthology: “Poets may be from anywhere on the globe but their imaginative use of language and the peculiarity of their personalities inform what they write” (p. xv).

## References

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