Make Room for the Poets

We Are . . . A Poetry Anthology.Compiled and Edited by Natalia Molebatsi. Penguin (South Africa), 2008.

The stated aim of this anthology is to showcase the emerging voices and talents of a number of young poets, activists, filmmakers, actors, scriptwriters and playwrights – 'an attempt to let you into the issues prominent in the environment and the minds of some of South Africa's most talented and experienced artists' (xi). They are (mostly) young and share an 'urge for poetic expression'; many belong to a poetry collective or writers' group, and many have performed both locally and internationally. Some are well-known names, others almost unknown. The 'word power' which Gcina Mhlope speaks about in her 'Foreword' is present in this collection – if only intermittently.

Most of the poets are women, and the thread that runs most consistently through the collection is the need for young women to find their voices and direction and trust their own potential. Cape Town-based Malika Ndhlovu's 'Girl Child' is a good example: the poem powerfully evokes a mother's wishes (and fears) for her daughter, 'misled and mis-educated/ not only/by the twisted tales of tradition she is fed/but by those who continue to teach these poisoned lessons by their actions' (74). Her 'girl child' is a 'wild virgin flower' who must 'open her petals with courage' (75). In somewhat similar vein Natalie Molebatsi urges her child to 'wake up and be yourself or don't wake at all/ life is not for the feeble' ('listen up child' 67).

Shelley Barry sets the scene with her opening clutch of poems, which sensitively explore her personal situation. Here is her short poem, 'Whole':

i am whole
i will not shatter like fragile bone

i reshape/remake/reconstruct

a constantly evolving me.

This quest for wholeness, and the need to track a 'constantly evolving' self, underpin many of the poems in the collection. Sometimes the result is confessional poetry of a quite painful kind, as in Napo Masheane's 'a room between my legs', with its intimate history of sexual abuse, or Sabata Mpho Mokae's 'the skull of taung', which looks critically at male circumcision.

Other poems pay tribute to women in general, or to a particular woman. Lucille Greef's 'freedom day' is a moving tribute to Rosie, 'a vegetarian/an unusual flower/growing up into the sun/between the claustrophobic/cacophony of patchwork shacks'. She lives in Khayelitsha, and her arms cradle 'more than seventy children every night' (many orphaned by HIV-AIDS). In 'under pressure' Myesha Jenkins takes a close look at on old friend, encountered by chance in a restaurant: 'she has taken strain/ my feminist friend/ this has not been a good time for us' (26). Some poems are lighter, more celebratory, as in Maserame June Madingwane's 'call me lady e', where 'e' stands for

(among other things) 'eager', 'electrifying', 'elegant', 'exciting', 'enchanting', 'energizing' and 'exhilarating' (36)! In a poem which speaks to any reader, Natalia Molebatse reminds us of the importance of the 'now':

> the life you are waiting for is happening now
> flowing through time's fingers,
> reminding through memories
> that the story in always in motion. . . . (72)

These poems all relate to South Africa's post-apartheid 'now', and present a variety of moods and perspectives. Makgano Mamabolo's 'dear madiba' is a semi-serious expression of the difficulty of living up to the impossible expectations of a role model like Madiba: the speaker has tried in every way she knows to be 'a good girl this year' – but her final wish is to be allowed to be 'a young black woman/ with no issues/ please!' (39). Other poems look at the darker realities of crime, poverty and dispossession. In Mokae's 'streets of johannesburg' the speaker sees 'blood spitting in the streets' and remarks that 'even cops are better off as corpses' (61). In Mamabolo's 'city living' the mood is even grimmer. Here the grim reaper is ever-present:

> well . . .
> better join the line
> you're going to be fine
> we're not coming out
> of this one alive
> we're all going
> to die

Malika Ndlovu's 'Refugee' is a sensitive exploration of the plight of refugees in South Africa, thrown into sharp relief by the reader's awareness of last year's Afriphobic violence: 'until the paperwork makes us visible/ turns us into people/ we live in suspension/ thinking what to say to our children' (83).

Any collection like this is likely to be a somewhat mixed bag: some poems strike one as simply inept, or in need of more work. A few seem very naïve in terms of the sentiments expressed (Khetiwe Ntshangase's 'zimbabwe' is a case in point). The ideas expressed in Manaka's 'the ghosts of theatre', may, for example, do the poet credit, but they do not translate into lines of compelling poetry. In contrast, Lucille Greef's 'table turn genes' stands out for the subtlety and inventiveness of its wordplay, and for its sustained exploration of its rather grim subject (domestic violence).

Not all the poets live up to the somewhat laudatory descriptions provided in the Biographical Notes, and not all of the poems stand up to the scrutiny of the printed page. Some – like Makgano Mamabolo's 'question', with its exuberant celebration of 'blackness' – have the wit and the verbal energy to survive the transition to the printed page; others do not. This should not, however, detract from the value of this anthology, which is to introduce the work of a new, up-and-coming generation of poets and performers to a wider audience through the medium of the printed page. Penguin South Africa and Natalia Molebatsi, who compiled and edited the collection, are to be

commended.