

NEW COIN POETRY PRIZE 2021

Judge's Report

by Malika Ndlovu

I frequently describe writing and poetry specifically as a listening art and listening to the poems in the two issues of *New Coin* in 2021 certainly requires going beyond the reading or the intellectual analysis of the poetry. It has called for a listening to how the voice/s in the poems land in the vessel or cavities of the body. This particular journey of poems in both editions have a way of landing in the body that is hard to find words for. What I can begin by saying, is that it takes a particular kind of listener and lover of poetry to create and curate such a holding space, a quality of respectful listening which becomes evident when you see how the poems have been so embracingly edited together. The accompanying conversations in the form of poet interviews and book reviews feed into this space. Here a breadth of the South African poetry community gets to 'meet', a circling within these covers that allows local poets to encounter each other often for the first time, whose paths may possibly never cross otherwise. Finding common and equal ground in this publication made something in me, as a South African poet, begin to sing in resonance with much that has been offered by the poets.

The editor's note for June 2021 (written in July) alludes to a kind of archiving, mapping, mirroring of extraordinary tectonic shifts within the landscape of literature, our country and the world literally – meaning that all our bodies and ways of being have been affected. And while this is a destabilizing experience, it is also one of those fundamental things that nature does, which is to continuously reveal our interdependency and connectedness. In these times particularly evident through the social ruptures, mass losses, through the widespread conflicts and collective trauma in which we recognize parts of our own stories, common vulnerability as human beings. The majority of the poets in these two *New Coins* can be read as interpreters, empaths, bellringers, protestors, visionary activists of some kind, responding to this inner-outer world

upheaval. International speaker, post humanist thinker, poet, teacher, essayist and author Dr. Bayo Akomolafe has championed the phrase “The times are urgent; let us slow down”. He points both to the body impact and this crises-context I have described above and unpacks these as our invitation to respond in new ways, to what he calls ‘post-activism’.

Activism is usually framed in terms that we can understand: It’s the bad guys against the good guys; it’s us versus them. But there are other moves to be made, especially in times like this – times of fissures and cracks and fault lines, which start to upset the coherence of the body. This is a crisis of form. We are now diasporic, our bodies are disorganized, we’re disarticulated by the pandemic, by the Anthropocene, by racial issues, by poverty, by all these things that we name as crises. We need to go beyond critique and maybe edge towards experimental liminal spaces of transformation. That requires a different kind of movement and thinking altogether. It requires getting lost.

These poets evidently understand loss and how to use their art to navigate the numerous ways one can feel lost or at a loss. They explore ways of witnessing (a form of listening), of naming, transmutation and even playful or wild reconfiguration amidst the various contexts of fragmentation and shattering. From disconnection, disassociation, toxic domestic and social spaces to indigenous narratives relentlessly under the threat of erasure – within the bodies of each poem such complexity can find a new wholeness. These poems grow intriguing dimensions, surface fresh insights and sustenance where each poem in itself, in the moment – is enough.

Before zoning in on the three prize winning poems, which I see bearing equal merit, I reference a few poems which capture the wealth and variety of poems in both collections. Ari Sitas’ “Mangrove Bay by an AfroAsian Sea”, Abigail George’s “You began as particles”, Sarah Frost’s “Ghost Town”, Johann Van der Walt’s “Creek” and Joan Metelerkamp’s “Mother City, Newlands” powerfully invoke a specific location yet catapult us beyond the senses, where the story threads being unearthed transport the reader in very different ways and steadily deepen the

emotional terrain. Unathi Slasha's graphic storytelling and darkly entertaining "Anecdotes Part One to Four", split over the two *New Coins* certainly deserve a category of their own as poetic narrative and the genre-blending skills of this writer. Teamhwe SbonguJesu's memories, Stephen Symons' "The song of a bullet", Gail Dendy's "Four Men" and Kelwyn Sole's "The foreboding", each employ simple yet expansive metaphors that lead us down unexpected and unsettling pathways, evoking the sense of haunting or even profound revelation. We are drawn into the undeniable power of poetry as testimony, witnessing, protest and lament with Siza Nkosi's "For my Uncles (Mandla and Jabu) in exile", the inescapable fire of Lesego Rampolokeng's "Riddim, Rime, Reason" and Chulumanco Ntisa's "Stoning in the city". Themes of fragility and intimacy of the body charged with the potency of intentional language at play are exemplified in Haidee Kotze's "Prognostications on a rooftop/voorspellings op 'n dak", Luleka Mhlanzi's "Fingernails" and all three of Shane van der Hoven's viscerally intense and jarring poems.

The three prize-winning poems each reflect conscious grappling and play at the intersections of subject matter, structure and psycho-emotionally liberating form of poetry on and beyond the page.

Richard Fox, "Animal mind is tripping"

Fox takes us into surreal terrain, brilliantly reflective of our Covid-19 era-digital-divide global political circus-mindboggling-social media addiction-sparking cyber reality-collision with planetary-destruction. Without any of the predictable doomsday warnings or linear unfolding, there is a frenetic energy moving through the piece which mirrors so well the way our overstimulated brains scamper in multiple directions in an attempt to make sense of these turbulent times and are confronted with the ominous rise of 'old wars' and amplified scales of violence across the world. The visual and visceral assaults are relentless to the point of that very feeling untethered that this poem 'embodies'. Equally effective is the underlying wit commenting subtly on how we have co-created this hell and have to laugh at ourselves, the 'madness' of our choices and actions. One does not get off this racing brain train to a calm and safe destination, as the poet cleverly concludes with the dawn of a not-so-new day, a reality that feels less and less containable or assuring.

Sibongakonke Mama, “Maybe”

All four poems by this poet bear themes of traumatic or violent dislocation and the irreversible impact of these on the mind, body and being. The first of these entitled “Maybe”, is both about someone’s psychological unravelling and in its flow and topography, an unravelling poem. The incomplete or interrupted phrases, irregular stanzas, line lengths and spacing aptly express trauma-response and a sense of mental breaking down as the poem progresses. In the end images morph and all sense of familial rooting or comfort begin to recede, suicide ideation is hinted at as relief and ultimate release, and punctuation disappears with the last word ‘noose’ literally leaving us hanging. This is certainly a poem that makes more than one body hit and bears the layered gravity of a poet who writes from a place of deep knowing and the ability to speak into spaces of absence and compounded grief. If you believe that poetry serves therapeutic purpose and can offer some form of personal liberation through expression and reimagination, Sibongakonke’s strength as a writer certainly shines through in this way.

Rachel Chitofu, “The tumour”

This relatively short poem is a knockout, from its heavy and unambiguous title to the harrowing last lines: ‘Trying to give birth/ to a paranormal form of myself that can/ walk on all fours and spray paint obscenities/ on the wall with its two tongues.’ The poem is dense and is sure to make you do a double-take of some phrases to re-digest what she has spat out in brutal detail or revealed through vivid pain-filled simile. It is clear that Rachel sees no point in painting pretty or soft images of the experience that is the nightmare of brain tumour surgery.

These three poets give themselves permission to voice an edginess, a raw messiness and the extraordinary human vulnerability of being in liminal states. Their work epitomizes the brave responsiveness and courage to allow the ‘getting lost’ that I described earlier. What emerges is poetry that boldly claims authority over one’s own narrative, experience and perspective. They equally deserve this award.

Prize-winning Poems

RICHARD FOX

Animal mind is tripping

Animal mind is tripping blind across the bush elastic;
and the planetary sun, swept entirely upside down
lingers on the ripples of the tide, flashes of colour.

When last did I hear from you, carried swiftly away
on these stormy wings of reeds;

we build our bridges across rivers that no longer run.
Our endings and our beginnings
are no longer paired
we wander effortless through the seven dimensions.

Fields of wheat fields of mechanised precision; the heartless rows
of crows
I've been burning both my footprints for hundreds of years
and still these roads do not close, still the borderguards.

Tethered fires
how many lengths of wood, how many
buckets of blood. How fast do we disappear in dual rearview mirrors?

I've lost so much
more than I can understand. I refuse to accept the child of your regret.
I leave it out with the morning papers
for the scavengers to collect. I detest

any real form of punishment
or neglect. I've grossed the tallies and set out the rallies
somewhere on the internet
Bullish Bearish. Amish

Lavish. The nuclear towers of Babel, swing wide.

★

Frontal lobe, swift data carriers, the animal mind is tripping
glass bottle breakers, plastic chairs to the grand parade.
Rainbow chicken lottery tickets with sharp, retractable claws.

Highlights will be shown at midnight, Eastern Central Time.
I just got off the phone with Donald; I just got off
Melania, I just got off a plane from east
Texas, The robber barons and the bones, the endless
clatter of bones.
Stirling diamond glitterazzi, all the new paupers on display
fire and ice and graveyard dice, fast cars finish last.

★

Animal mind is tripping pure cerebral love;
The last bazaar in the everglades,
the oasis filters our dreams.

The borderguards are closed, borderpatrols have opened
on Nasdaq, everyone
is singing the song of the fear of their people

floating around on bubbles; coasting to a stop in the desert,
Turning the key, turning the screws,
waterboard championship riders of waves of future tech.

Animal mind is tripping great big breaker balls to the wall –
why are the waters rising on our planet;
why do we refuse to drink
the medicine

I love you, phone charger, I love you
ice cream truck, I love you cold chain silicon implant,

I Love You, Miley Circus.

After the final broadcast from the bunkers of the leaders
of our enthusiasts, we chased dragons by their tails
We cornered the globetrotters
in their pens

and in the morning papers as the batteries held
and the screens of the world
fired up, one by one like birdsong, I watched the season
finale of Planet Earth 3.

SIBONGAKONKE MAMA

Maybe

When your father disappears
and your mother fades away
and your breath –

maybe children
will hide planets
in your heart,

when snow colonises your tongue
a lake will swell in your gut,
your voice will drink dark flowers
and when they sprout
from your ribs

when your father doesn't return
and your mother forgets to –

when all the homes are taken
and your spine lays bare,
close your throat,

falling beads will call from the street
singing your granny's arms.

She'll wash the longing off your feet
in liquorice root and elderflower
and call your lost laugh with blackberry baths.
Dreams will give you a purple sunset
under aisles of orange trees

and when your bones break when your song comes on and your veins
burst when your heart shrinks and a bomb ticks in your ear and your
brain forgets –

a wind will nest you.

Or maybe
you'll fall –

and a wind will burn
when a lover comes too close
water will burn, like rocks in your shoulders

When your grandfather
gifts you a white blanket
and your granny unozitholana,
and you make yourself
a green and white noose

The tumour

Sharp words and soft scars do
kind of sound synonymous
That was my disinclination blaring
out the tormented gut of a blowhorn
Nineteen appear as brief
when wearing grief;
its sagging over my knees
like sexagenarian hips.

Remembering that slaves shave
their hair all the time
I only shaved half,
revealing a big black brain
haemorrhage just to watch
it burst like a cork off a bottle of Scotch
whiskey, like a gangster's golden

toothwork searing dental seams;
the result of bad surgery.
Or an eyeball
out of a socket during a four hour football game.

Desipramine. Chlomipramine. Imipramine.
My prescription's amines,
whether caustic or explosive
I have full authority to stick
that up my mental health or else
Try giving birth
to a paranormal form of myself that can
walk on all fours and spray paint obscenities
on the wall with its two tongues.