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Karen Press. *Home.* Manchester: Carcanet, 2000. 72 pp. Â£6.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85754-478-7.

Adam Schwartzman, ed. *Ten South African Poets.* Manchester: Carcanet, 1999. ix + 226 pp. Â£12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85754-393-3.

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Poetry from South Africa via Manchester

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With Oxford University Press's decision to abandon poetry publishing altogether and Faber resting on their laureates, the balance of poetry activity and publishing in England has shifted emphatically North – to the self-proclaimed poetry capital of England, Huddersfield, to the home of Bloodaxe Books and *Stand* magazine, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and to the shared stables of Michael Schmidt's *PN Review* and Carcanet Press in Manchester. In venturing to publish Adam Schwartzman's *Ten South African Poets* and Karen Press's *Home*, Carcanet, with the financial assistance of the Arts Council of England, skips lightly over Oxford and London to represent spaces much further south, spaces where, since the end of formal apartheid, poetry publishing has also been pretty much in continuing crisis. Such international airing is thus all the more warmly to be welcomed and it is to be hoped that Carcanet will continue to showcase some of the extraordinary poetic energy and talent that has emanated and is still emanating from South Africa.

One of the chief values of Schwartzman's anthology is his including poets who were writing as early as the 1960s (Arthur Nortje), alongside poets strongly associated with particular historical and political moments and movements (Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, Wopko Jensma), and others who have emerged much more recently (Ingrid de Kok, Karen Press, Tatamkhulu Afrika, Seithlamo Motsapi). In the first category, for instance, it is great to have such a substantial selection from Arthur Nortje, the exiled Coloured poet who died of a drugs overdose in Oxford in 1970, and who is usually represented in anthologies by just one or two well-known poems. Here the extended selection of Nortje's poems placed first in the anthology allows Nortje's disturbing sense of uprootedness from an already rootless background as a Coloured South African, neither black nor white, to establish one of the chief themes of the book (as also of Karen Press's solo collection) – the anguished searching for a sense of belonging to one's "own bitter clay" ("Native's Letter," 29).

Schwartzman has also given us a generous selection of a neglected genius, the extraordinarily original, polylingual Wopko Jensma, whose psychiatric problems have precluded him from publishing since 1977. Jensma's twenty poems are the highlight of this collection for me, mixing rhythms from blues, jazz, spirituals, traditional Eng. lit., and Dada poetry. The roll-call of heroes in Jensma's poetry are not just those of South African artists and activists, but also Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp, et al. ("Chant of praise for the idi amin dada," 92). As a white man who had himself reclassified as black, Jensma effectively adopted a neither black nor white hybrid identity – surely prophetic of the kind of national hybrid that the contemporary rainbow South Africa aspires to.

That hybridity is reflected in the multiple languages and registers in his poems. "Black bottom stomp," to take just one example, refers to Ma Rainey and to Gerard Manley Hopkins, while other poems include phrases in Dutch, German, Afrikaans, Tswana, French, and tsotsitaal – but never with a hint of pretension or display; all is instead fired by Jensma's frenzy for life and language to make sense in a situation (apartheid) that makes it almost impossible to live simply "as human/ alive/ i" (Spanner in the what? works," 86).

There are numerous other thrills awaiting readers unfamiliar with South African poetry, ranging from the Black Consciousness inflected mode of Mafika Gwala and Mongane Serote to the cerebral, well-crafted liberalism of Lionel Abrahams and Douglas Livingstone. Controversies concerning aesthetic and political criteria for judging poetry have raged around Abrahams for some time, but,

as Scwartzman notes, "even at the height of these debates poets were making nonsense of such terms" (19). The three current Cape Town poets Karen Press, Tatamkhulu Afrika, and Ingrid de Kok exemplify this breaking down of the polarization between aesthetic and political, personal and public. Press's *Home*, from which two-thirds of her selection in Schwartzman's anthology is drawn, moves between personal lyrics and found poems, reflections on the minutiae of a personal life and responses to significant historical moments. In the poem "Countries" she writes, "the first one is nature/ . . . it buries itself in your endocrine gardens," while "the next and the next and the next/ are choices yours or someone else's" (*Home* 30). In similar vein, linking private and public, Ingrid de Kok's "Small Passing" remains for me one of the most powerful poems to have been written in South Africa in recent years, pointing as it does with such aching poignancy to the way that apartheid's racializing might trivialize individual suffering.

While white writers may feel the need to apologize or atone for a system they tended to benefit from –even as they abhorred it –(as in Douglas Livingstone's slightly bathetic apology to Shozi Bhengu "Brother-poet, verbose and gallant,/ I mourn the sands that waste our talent" ("The waste land at Station 14," 116)), the emergent black writer Seithlamo Motsapi stands out in this collection as the definitive post-apartheid voice of South African poetry, moving beyond the old binary hang-ups of Europe/Africa and black/white to a posture in which, as Schwartzman has it, he can "tak[e] for granted the African worlds out of which the poem is created" (13). Thus, Motsapi sounds less like the self-alienated Nortje, the anguished Jensma, or even the BC poets Serote and Gwala.

The poets he most calls to mind are other contemporary African poets such as Kofi Awoonor, Kojo Laing, or Niyi Osundare, poets crtiiquing global culture, the global apartheid of Euro-American capitalism from an Afrocentric perspective where readers are expected to pick up on references to Songhay, Asante, Ras and "ityopia" more readily than to Shakespeare or the Bible, and to expect Swahili sayings no less than quotations from French.

While warmly welcoming this exciting anthology and applauding Carcanet for promoting South African poetry, it is intriguing to note Schwartzman's decision to move away from "representative" anthologies, and instead "to make available to an international readership a substantial selection from the work of each of ten South African poets" (1). He leaves rather vague his criteria for selecting each of those ten, and in the process skews things toward a de-politicized aesthetic in line with his opting to focus on *poets* rather than *poetry*, that is, on individual artists, rather than the context in which they have emerged.

It is notable, for instance, that Schwartzman more or less writes off the struggle-poetry of the 1980s and spectacularly omits some of the strongest voices of that period, including the superb work of Jeremy Cronin and the innovative trade union praise-songs of the poets of *Black Mamba Rising*. Maybe he is just holding those back for *Ten More South African Poets*. Let us hope so. In the meantime, I refer readers fired up by *Ten South African Poets* and *Home* to Denis Hirson's *The Lava of This Land: South African Poetry 1960-1996* (Evanston: Northwestern, 1997), which, although unable to carry such full selections, includes no fewer than 53 poets in its 328 pages.

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