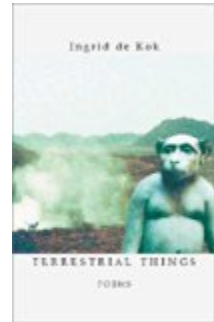


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Ingrid de Kok. *Terrestrial Things*. Roggebaai and Plumstead: Kwela Books, 2002. 63 pp. \$7.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7957-0146-7.

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Some Blessed Hope?

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Ingrid de Kok's latest collection of poems takes its title from Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," a poem specifically dated December 31, 1899, and responding to a bleak midwinter landscape which represents for Hardy the "century's corpse outleant." In the midst of this desolation a "blast-beruffled" thrush pours forth an "ecstatic caroling" that baffles the pessimistic atheist Hardy, prompting him to a highly qualified, highly conditional suggestion that despite all the evidence "written on terrestrial things" there might still be "some blessed hope." As Hardy was writing "The Darkling Thrush," the Anglo-Boer War (6,000 miles away from his wintry Dorset) was getting the new century off to a start that would seem to justify Hardy's un-illusioned vision. The technologized violence and viciousness of that war, with its long-range artillery bombardments, trench warfare, and imprisonment of civilians in concentration camps, might indeed stand as a mild precursor of the worst horrors of the twentieth-century.

Yet the blessed hope that Hardy's thrush almost symbolizes (with total absence of ornithological justification) continues to manifest itself in human beings. There is still lyric poetry after Auschwitz, and on the cusp of a new century, facing backwards to the barbarism of South Africa's recent apartheid past while eyeing the ongoing catastrophe of the AIDS epidemic, Ingrid de Kok's flawless lines and un-illusioned observation suggest that without such stubborn hope the terrible beauty of tragic events is lost and we are left with meaningless, inexplica-

ble calamity. The process of singing as well as the poet's struggle with words, meaning and rhythm is the hope. It is not an externally oriented hope for the future so much as an internally oriented hope that we can continue to assert human values, no matter how marked the age is and has been by inhumanity.

In response to apartheid atrocities, as related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and to AIDS, de Kok confronts the near-impossibility of making sense. Like Hardy a century earlier, de Kok cannot unequivocally affirm her own art even as she practices it. In "Parts of Speech," the first in the TRC-related series "A Room Full of Questions," she describes stories that "don't want to be told," stories that "refuse to be danced or mimed," and asks incredulously, "Why still believe stories can rise/ with wings ... / Why still imagine whole words, whole worlds?" As with Hardy's thrush, though, the framing of the question provides its own answer, in a litany of poetic faith whose powerful emotive and intellectual effect cannot be erased by the terminal question mark that follows "the flame splutter of consonants,/ deep sea anemone vowels,/ birth-cable syntax, rhymes that start in the heart,/ and verbs, verbs that move mountains" (p. 21).

De Kok's awareness that digging into South Africa's recent history might overwhelm us with an overload of "evidence" that will not cohere into any sort of an "account" (p. 25) takes us back to one of the sparest poems of her first collection, *Familiar Ground*. In that poem, "Stones, sky, radio," she demonstrates how the very land-

scape, especially the South African landscape scarred by decades of segregationist legislation, resists meaning. At the particular level, the poem implicitly critiques the effects of that legislation, but at the general level we realize that we are in a nightmare world if terrestrial things are merely themselves, where “the sky is immense as the sky,/ the sun is as hot as the noonday sun,/ the red ants are industrious as ants”.^[1] In “The Archbishop chairs the first session” de Kok indicates the nightmarish quality of a world where facts are merely facts. Similarly resisting figures of speech, she opens the poem with a piece of reportage broken into lines narrating how Archbishop Tutu “put his grey head/ on the long table/ of papers and protocols/ and he wept” (p. 22). When she comes back to this image seventeen lines later she simply repeats the information in a slightly varied word-order, before concluding after a line left blank: “That’s how it began” (p. 22). That line left blank, and the blankness of the poem qua poem, resonate in other equally affecting poems in this sequence, especially “The Transcriber speaks” and “The sound engineer.” In these poems de Kok further pushes against the boundaries of language and its ability to account for things even as it describes them. “How to transcribe silence from tape?” (p. 32) she asks. “Is weeping a pause or a word?” (p. 32). With tightly controlled wit, de Kok sets sounds, words, and meanings off against their imperfect technical conveyors—the mechanisms of tape recorders and editing machines, the human engines of voice-box, eardrum, brain, and tongue. “The sound engineer,” responding to the fact that “of the professionals engaged in Truth Commission reporting, the highest turnover was apparently among reporters editing sound for radio” (p. 33), suggests that to “Bind grammar to horror” risks causing one’s own “tympanic membrane to tear” (p. 33).

Yet de Kok not only continues to listen, while in her own way she repeats, transcribes, and edits the evidence of terrestrial things around her, she maintains the extraordinary equilibrium—cool and understated at the linguistic level, but deeply compassionate and poignantly evocative—that marked the fierce humanism of other apartheid-era poems such as “Small Passing”.^[2] In this present collection, balancing the tentative Utopianism of “Small Passing”’s “place of mothers,” de Kok attempts to transcend race in trying to determine the kind of man who ordered and/or carried out apartheid-era torture. In “What kind of man *are* you?” de Kok begins with torture victim Tony Yengeni’s outraged inability to make sense of his torturer’s behavior, but proceeds to consider the question less and less rhetorically and more

and more genuinely, inquisitively interrogatively, moving eventually by way of answer to a description of Benzen as he now stands in the TRC hearing: “apparently depressed, possibly sedated,/ shuffling lumbering cumbersome body” (p. 26). Through this description de Kok wrongfoots a reader looking either for a vindictive or even psychological or metaphysical explanation, and then renders the question generic by adding a concluding section: “This kind, we will possibly answer,/ (pointing straight, sideways,/ upwards, down, inside out),/ this kind” (p. 27). Here de Kok dramatizes Hannah Arendt’s observations about the banality of evil, and leaves us with the chilling suggestion that for every Utopian “place of mothers” there might be a corresponding site of evil where any of us might walk. This moment, challenging the reader to shift from privileged position of observer and judge is the most chastening in a collection which does not flinch from implicating its readers in the material they are reading about.

So far I have mentioned only two sections of *Terrestrial Things* (the “spectacular” rather than the “ordinary” ones to use Njabulo Ndebele’s distinction). In fact, there are four sections, the first of which contains a series of poems set in Italy, where de Kok had been able to spend time at the Bellagio Conference Center in 1999, and the third of which comprises a section of what we might call family poems. Despite the difference in their subject-matter, these sections are not separate from the TRC and AIDS sections, however. The former section, “Foreign and Familiar,” for instance, opens with a poem that connects the violence of the South African scene back to Hardy’s midwinter Dorset via an Italian custom of keeping a wild canary caged up through the winter, and releasing it in spring to sing, thereby luring other birds to farmers’ guns. Even the elegant surroundings of Bellagio and Venice cannot keep de Kok’s mind off South Africa, its bird, plant, and animal life, and the “contradictory seas crash[ing] in tidal war” at Cape Agulhas. In the “Stretched Horizon” section, de Kok is at her challenging best, poking and prodding at the individual life to see how in the midst of public turmoil one can hang on to the personal. With a lesser poet, this essential tenet of liberal humanism might simply smack of anachronistic bourgeois Bloomsbury-dom. With de Kok’s compassion and powers of evocation it becomes a complex and careful reassertion that despite all the evidence of terrestrial things there is not only the Boethian consolation that if we could see all, all might seem good, but also the consolation that poetry such as this which bears such telling witness to inhumanity is itself hope in action, its aes-

thetic precision itself a kind of activism.

Notes

[1]. Ingrid de Kok, *Familiar Ground* (Raven Press, 1988), p. 58.

[2]. De Kok, *Familiar Ground*, pp. 61-63.

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