Review of Brian Walter's *Otherwise and Other Poems*, in *New Contrast* 167, volume 42, number 3 (2015), pages 90-96.

Review titled "Two Eastern Cape voices," written by Geoffrey Haresnape.

(Only the part of the review pertaining to *Otherwise and Other Poem* is reproduced.)

NEW CONTRAST

Volume 42, Number 3

TWO EASTERN CAPE VOICES

Two collections have recently appeared from poets who have been long associated with the Eastern Cape, although their reputations have spread far beyond the borders of that Province. Brian Walter's *Otherwise and Other Poems* offers 37 poems of varying length, one very substantial indeed. Chris Mann's *Rudiments of Grace* assembles 47 poems which — in a variety of styles —reflect a lifelong loving relationship between a man and a woman.

*

In 'Otherwise,' a poem which gives its name to Walter's new collection, the poet exposes the limitations of a recent new South African census which collected data in accordance with the same racist categories which had obsessed the old apartheid bureaucracy.

For Walter, his wife and children,. who show different degrees of pigmentation, the question 'is this family black, white, Asian or coloured?' becomes a conundrum. The enumerator offers to tick on the form the box marked 'Other, ' a non-solution which is embraced by all concerned. Why citizens with a birth claim to a country should be forced to call themselves 'other' is a question which hangs unanswered in the air. The poet, however, is happy to turn an evil into a good and to make 'other'- and its cognate 'otherwise'- his talisman. It opens a space in which he can be free to respond individualistically to all situations.

Endowed with the spirit of 'otherwise,' Walter travels to Ireland, England and Australia. Wherever he may go, he is conscious of being moulded by his Eastern Cape/African origins. This provides him with perspectives unattainable to the home-grown of those countries. His inclination is invariably towards the rural, the ancient and the well-tried. He is drawn to the countryside around Limerick where 'the landscape owns an indifferent awe' and in contrast with which the 'new glassy building' of his tourist accommodation seems 'trashily convenient' ('Head Count'). In 'Bradford on Avon' he is attracted by an 'ancient Saxon Church' newly excavated and 'now re-emerged into itself.' The poet is sensitive to the ancestors, 'the ghosts of the old people' from 'the Christian centuries' while the modern English seem oddly unaware of the full resonances supplied by the place where they live.

Australia's Sydney has the poet walking around in some confusion at the city's brittle modernity. In the extensive harbour the great ships come and go. A ship 'docked suddenly huge' on the other side of a street is 'as big as death when it comes' ('Traveller: and the World Between') It makes him think of the fragility of friendships. As a visitor from Africa, he sees the Sydney Opera House not as a wonder of modern architectural design but rather 'like hellish big cuttlefish

shells/prodded into sand/by some demonic hand' ('Crossing').

There is much strength in the home-grown poems of this collection. Walter's rapport with other living entities— in particular, the mammals and birds of South Africa— is palpable. 'Cautionary' deals with Adulphe Delegorgue, a 19th C explorer, who bragged that he could have made up 'the full cargo of a ship with a burden/of seven hundred and eighty-six tons' from the buffalo and rhino that he had killed in an eight month period. Such a gun happy attitude has led, Walter feels, to the modern situation in which 'we keep the last of beasts to hunt, or display, as if flesh has no weight or feeling.'

As a representative of *homo sapiens*, the poet battles with a tribe of monkeys over an apple tree on a property at the Hogsback. He has 'pruned and shaped' the tree back into fruitfulness and becomes its guardian against those 'who take any fruit any tree will give.' Once the excitement is over, he reflects upon the lifestyle which has disciplined his hands. He contrasts his with the hands of his 'primate cousins.' Their kinship is such that he is driven to wonder 'whose hands I would rather be?' ('Nonsuch and the Samangos') In 'Sanctuary' he welcomes the sight of 'three Knysna louries- parrot-green,/white-tipped crests and/sudden red wings' and hopes that the wild terrain in which they live will be allowed to remain- an Eastern Cape version of G M Hopkins's 'Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.'

For me, a key poems is 'Of Shale Beds and Shamans.' This is both a plea for the respect which needs to be shown towards ancient Khoisan culture and also a caveat against the dangers of fracking. Walter perceives a direct line of descent from the first arrival of the Dutch East India Company in southern Africa to the contemporary presence of global companies wishing to exploit the Karoo. The poet writes: 'Me: I want to remember the old land,/her shale beds intact and richly asleep,/ and go gently into the future/ with wise technology, clever stuff,/ like small bows, tools shaped to hand,/ memory sticks of painting pigment/mobile to the seasons.' He is suspicious of those who 'will scoff/ at the old seasons' ways' because they will be likely to violate the 'holiness in our southern dry' without even realizing what they are doing.

No review of *Otherwise and other Poems* can omit *'Notlokoma,'* a version of the story of Narcissus and Echo, with which the collection concludes. Sub-titled 'Ovidius Africanus', the poem is deeply grounded in Walter's Eastern Cape experience and is an Africanisation of the old European myth. It is presented as an *ntsomi*, or traditional isiXhosa tale. *Makhulu*, an old lady, looks into 'the old well of tales' and finds the narrative there. Walter skilfully creates *Nontlokomo* (or Echo) whose 'diet is always other folk, who give her voice' and her infatuation with Narcissus. This youth, setting out to hunt, stops to drink from a rural river and becomes in turn infatuated with his own image reflected in the water's glass. The conversion of the Italianate Narcissus into a beautiful, dark African is convincing. The reader participates with the children who listen with 'believing disbelief' to *Makhulu*'s tale and sense the ambience of the veld and mountains. Will the cross-cultural syncretism which *Notlokoma*' exemplifies prove acceptable in South African literature as it moves forward into the future? I hope that it may.

*