

# Shifting worlds, passing worlds

SHAUN DE WAAL samples the works of three South African poets as they get out of town

**I**t's good to find South African poets getting out of the country and discovering new, foreign vistas. This brings something fresh to our poetry, which has long been responsive to landscape, but usually the harsh (or, less frequently, lush) landscapes of our subcontinent.

Dan Wylie's *Road Work* (Echoing Green Press) is a volume of travel or travelling poetry (poems perpetually on the move), ranging from South America to Greece, with a stretch along Southern Africa's Great North Road in between. The press of consciousness against these scenes melds the external observation with the inner insight, and the business of journeying echoes the process of discovery. At the harbour of Rhodes, Greece, which the colossus once bestrode, the poet hears "the great ferries honk like hippos in pain" and mourns the absence of one to whom he will not be able, now, to describe what he sees. Travel to unfamiliar places (or return to old haunts) evokes absence, and death is the most intractable absence of all.

The sense of loss that informs these poems is countered by the gain in vision generated by such explorations, which also brings to them a sense of life's preciousness — of what must be cherished. Life is "a miraculous alloy — atrocious, / unstable,

unique, a cauldron / of waxen sadness, terror and awe, / tranquility, crisis, azaleas and shame" a "shifting world" that "offers less than enough". But the poet can also contemplate a sleeping child and wish: "For all of us, may the moon's / renewable ploughshare / grow shiny with use." Strenuous though

this inner and outer travel may be, the poetry that represents it is muscular and filled with an exciting internal drive and sense of motion. "What is simple is that we die; / It is not that the world should too," writes PR Anderson in *Foundling's Island* (UCT Writers Series), where "The dead are Demeter's people" — not just

the cropped corn but its fertiliser, too, pushing up from beneath the earth. Elsewhere, the "Judas goat" leading sheep to the abattoir, "in front of death", bleats "like a poet". Death and loss thread through these poems, as they do Wylie's, and the penultimate poem in this collection is also a travel poem, as well as being the longest (stanzaless) and longest-lined in a book of largely very condensed utterances.

