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ESSAY REVIEW

RECENT ZIMBABWEAN POETRY

THE PUBLICATION IN 1978 of the anthology *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*¹ gave readers their first chance of a comprehensive view of poetry by Zimbabwean Blacks. Almost all of this verse was drawn from local poetry magazines, in particular from *Two Tone* which was for most Blacks and Whites alike, though not the only, certainly the major channel for many years through which one's poetry could be made available to the public. Since Zimbabwe's independence, however, in the space of two years no less than six volumes of poetry by Blacks have been published, a second anthology and five texts by individual poets. This essay review attempts to assess the quality of this verse and to identify some of the features of its vision.

The introduction by Stanley Nyamakufudza to the first of the books under review, Freeborn Muronda's *Echoes of My African Mind*, commends his poems for their accessibility.² They are said to be 'elemental' and to express 'a wider, popular dimension of the African predicament' than most Zimbabwean poetry to date which, it is asserted, has not tackled 'issues on a wide continental and historical scale'. No one would dispute the first of these claims. The poems read easily and present no difficulties in either thought or language. And the sentiments will evoke an approving popular response since they are those which have been expressed and applauded many times before. But there is no satisfying poetry in the book. It offers nothing that is fresh or arresting in either thought or language. The thoughts are commonplace. There is no thrusting and intelligent exploration of 'issues' or 'African predicament'. The language never catches fire, the words come easily and lifelessly, like the thoughts off the top of the pack. Here is half of the first poem in the book:

I was born in a now defunct racist country
called Rhodesia
all Africans born in that country were without
political rights
human rights
or any kind of rights
but in spite of it all
my spirit was always free.

This clearly is just a piece of unexciting prose chopped up to resemble verse. The only significant rhythm that it has is in the central catalogue of rights which ends in an empty phrase. Hence there is no emotional pressure, neither from rhythm nor from a figurative element or a phrase with a genuine lift of feeling in it. In fact there is nothing to attract the attention of the reader's mind which now, like the poet's, runs lazily down a well-worn groove to the languidly asserted conclusion. No doubt Muronda expects us to understand that the things he says here are important to him, that he feels the deep injustice of having no rights and exults in his

¹ K.Z. Muchemwa (compil.), *Zimbabwean Poetry in English* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1981).

² F.E. Muronda, *Echoes of My African Mind* (Harare, College Press, 1982), 48 pp., Z\$2.75.

strong freedom of spirit. But nowhere are the lines informed by any such passions. No-one who attends to the evidence and sees the casual manner in which the conclusion saunters into view will be convinced by it. Muronda is imprisoned in words and abstractions. In seeking to reach a wider dimension, a continental scale, he has lost touch with the ground, the local, the substance of life. The poems accrete round particular words or concepts such as freedom, motherhood, the Third World, oppression, but these are never made vividly real and present. In an untitled poem beginning 'In these old bricks' (pp. 28-9) the subject is ghetto life. But lice and mice, the 'rank liquor' and 'rotten meat' that the poet employs to embody this life never actually do so. The words remain a dead lump of likely-looking terms. Never are they sparks struck out of an encounter with the thing itself.

By contrast Musaemura Zimunya is strong in his firm grasp of actual, the human or physical situation, the point where all good poetry begins and to which it constantly returns. Zimunya has written an astonishing amount of verse over the past few years. Readers of Zimbabwean poetry will recollect his contributions to *Two Tone*, the inclusion of a good deal of his work of the early 1970s in the anthology *Zimbabwean Poetry in English* and the 1982 volume of his verse called *Thought-Tracks*.³ At his best he enables the reader to see and feel and know things. It is his awareness of the physicality of things and their sharp individuality that is so attractively central to his poetic vision. A generous sample of his earlier poetry forms part of the post-independence anthology which he helped to compile and edit, *And now the Poets Speak*,⁴ and a few lines of his poem there called 'Rooster' will help to illustrate this and other points relating to that book:

herald at the edge of time, Rooster, Rooster
awaken thunder with your wings
throw your eyes to the sky
and seizing the anguished moment in a throat
echo the overdue Hope
until Vhumba and Matopo answer:
else what dawn would you let us hear you announce?

It is a catalogue of hyperboles and apart from that one may initially have reservations about some of the words ('herald', 'thunder' and the capitalized 'Hope') used in this well thumbed, dawn cock-crow context. But having said that, reflection compels the recognition of the energy and passion working through and with these expressions. It is fatal and yet easy enough to bring to the poem a mind dominated by a vision of history (and the poem is about a significant moment in history) made up of a steady succession of human defeats and false dawns. That vision is part of our Western inheritance. T.S. Eliot's lines about history in 'Gerontion' (1920) are only one powerful focus of twentieth-century scepticism about historical Hope. This scepticism is a fluctuating but pervasive and persistent element in the climate of thought and feeling. George Steiner recorded his awareness of it in 1980 in the observation that 'even the young have the strong intuition that every hope goes wrong'.⁵ To such minds Zimunya's Hope may seem

³ See below, fn. 12.

⁴ M. Kadhani and M.B. Zimunya (compils), *And now the Poets Speak* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, (1981), 178 pp., Z\$3.20.

⁵ *The Listener*, 3 Jan. 1980.

naive and the whole passage may resemble a tense moment in an old-fashioned romance story. But these lines have the force to suspend disbelief. If one attends to the glad, exulting rhythms and the panoramic, physical hyperboles the lines become the bearers of a passion that carries, in Wordsworth's phrase, 'the truth alive into the heart'. There is this world of crucial difference between Zimunya's poem and that of Muronda in the power of the passion with which the lines are invested. Our acceptance of the herald is dependent also upon our recognition earlier in the poem that something real and itself is being conveyed. These lines speak about a growth in stature and responsibilities through time and experience. The herald is the latest stage in this development which had its beginning in the common realities of village life and the political events of the 1960s and 1970s. When the poem, in speaking of those dark days, relates that the rooster's 'neck-stretched seizure of time/gave yellow dawn the form of sound', we realize with that pleasure that poetry can give that we are in touch with a thing of flesh and blood. It is no dressed up literary image but very centrally something alive and rather tough and stringy that nevertheless can interpret the revolution of the times. The rooster is not only or simply the symbol of a political party. It is very fundamentally the bird itself in its sharply realized, ordinary and exultant existence lending its total life and vitality to what is seen through it, the aspirations of a generation.

The assimilation of a thing into the word is a process in which all poetry either falls down or succeeds. That risk is highlighted in an individual way in the kind of verse that we would expect and do find in a volume of 'poems inspired by the struggle for Zimbabwe', that is, verse with a clear patriotic, moral and political drive to it. Patriotism has not been a prominent feature of English verse since 1915. The last substantial body of politically committed verse was that of the 1930s and in particular that which, subscribing to international socialism, emerged out of the Spanish Civil War. Virtually none of this survives as common reading nowadays in comparison with that other largely different kind of war poetry written by Owen and Sassoon. But since that time, a great deal of verse, both of a specific patriotic nature, and of a kind committed to Africa and African-ness, has been written by poets from all over the continent. Crusading and patriotic verse with its tendency to a fierce polarization of feeling and its preaching manner is not easy to write successfully. It would be strange if a large collection like *And now the Poets Speak*, which despite its narrower focus contains a greater number of poems than the anthology *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*, managed to avoid printing some material of this kind which will soon be forgotten. In some of the verse which offers to speak of the central revolutionary ideals the language is often so tired and threadbare, so much a part of the continuous background noise of politics that it does no good to those great human aspirations. Language on these occasions ceases to perform one of its major functions in verse, that of awakening the mind into a fresh awareness of the nature of life's possibilities. A focus for these and graver criticisms is the poem 'Commission to Zimbabwe', by Wanda Kawadza. The title gives you fair warning, but what the unthoughtful and uncontrolled lines add up to is anybody's guess. The speaker of the poems seems to be a dogmatic prophet figure holding forth in the fiercest Old Testament mode. He credits God with the liberation of Zimbabwe and instructs the Blacks to follow this success and 'drive out the White and/the White Black remnant'. The reason for this is that there is a bizarre combination in them of two hateful characteristics, namely, their daughters

have 'alluring ripe breasts' and their industrial gods are deceitful. Britain's industrial gods have been known suspects for a long time. The other temptation seems to belong to a world that never was. The Blacks are then exhorted to 'heartily extend mercy' when there seems to be no one around to extend it to. 'Commission to Zimbabwe' is no more than a wild thrash in shallow water masquerading as a demonstration of swimming. It may also be observed of this and other poems in the volume that they cripple themselves from the word go by using an antique idiom. The best poetry is undoubtedly that in which an individual voice is heard using its own idiom to give expression to a distinct vision. 'No bird,' said Blake, 'flies too high if it flies with its own wings', and one can observe the wisdom of that advice in the many poems that do not attempt to get into orbit by means of a biblical or borrowed booster.

Eddison Zvobgo's poem 'My Companion and My Friend' is one of them. It begins and ends with a human figure in a common context, the political prisoner in his cell. What we are offered is not a political poem in the ordinary sense, but an individual experience of being cut off from the *polis* which on this foundation can speak to any who, even in the absence of brick walls, know this condition. The whole cohesive, exploring movement of the lines grows out of an analogy between the predicament of the imprisoned speaker and the bonded brick in the wall of his cell. Both have suffered 'banishment to these edges', to the margin of existence where the enforced idleness, the uncreative mode of life dominates. In its arrest of time this unnatural status is similar to that described in another poem about prison experience by another man in league with collective processes of growth, Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', and in Zvobgo's poem the Spenserian-Keats image of the absence of productive life, 'and no birds sing', slides easily and unpretentiously into place in the African scene. The conclusion is a balanced statement, level-headed, wry, self-observing, sardonic, a controlled accommodation to the actual.

In their Commendation which forms the preface, the editors state that

this anthology looks in two directions: first, in the direction of the revolutionary war; secondly, in the direction of the constructive peace — *A luta continua*. In the first part, poets portray our historical experience of colonial domination, rampage, imprisonment and the blood that flowed. Parallel with this preoccupation runs a second concern: suggesting ideas for the creation of a morally superior alternative.

The second concern is clearly a necessary part of any revolutionary strategy. In the bush during the war, while some of the Whites and no doubt many of the Blacks who fought in the Rhodesian armed units, had no clear answer to Wilfred Owen's question, 'What are we doing here?', the guerillas certainly did. What that was, what they were fighting *for*, ought to be here in the poetry. If, for the purpose of concentrating on that 'second concern', those poems that deal largely with what was being fought against are set aside, one is left with a few poems that set before us modes of living that may be realized in the future, and a number of others that are less concrete and, as poetry, less successful.

Revolution is about how we live and how we might live. The last few words of that statement belong to the great English revolutionary socialist William Morris, and they serve well enough to focus also the main concern of politics. One poet whose work is well represented in this anthology, Eddison Zvobgo, has been a man

of considerable political status for a long time, and a leading figure in the Government since independence. Of his five poems, three, 'My Roulette', 'My Companion and My Friend' and 'Sounds', are prison poems. They are inward-looking poems, not aggressive or protesting in a blunt, forthright manner like those of Zimunya, but more subtly subversive, speculative and witty, drawing strength from the individual mind. 'Grandmother at 90 o'clock' celebrates the strength of African traditional culture and the historical record in a very tender elegy. Zvobgo's creation of the figure in this poem, so substantially realized and so representative, is one of his great achievements in poetry. Grandmother's endurance, her tough, rich central being generated out of the manifold triumphs and torments of the African past, is a victory of the human spirit. This is a root that Zimbabwe may increasingly draw on in the future, and the role of literature in the recovery of history is touched on later. The last of his poems, 'Woman', records a strong, individual response to the moment of the birth of Zimbabwe in 1980. Zvobgo is a socialist, but this verse is not distinctly political. There is nothing here to suggest the presence of a developed political theory giving his work a particular mode of address to events and experience and the future.

That is true of most of the poets in this book. A number of poems could be cited to show that when they speak of the future, of what the revolution or continuing revolution will bring about, there is little more than an expression of simple idealism. This is sometimes so simple that nothing substantial or specific can be attached to the words. In a poem called 'Restoration' the speaker's vision of the revolution and its immediate consequences takes an apocalyptic form: 'Let the whole of Zimbabwe flood in blood/All take a new order for an old order'. The words in that last line are really no more than a noise. Apocalypses and other Christian images that signal a sudden and decisive change are not uncommon. Guerillas return after the end of the war 'Bearing arms on their shoulders/and palm branches in their hands'. The poem 'Commission to Zimbabwe' is a lengthy, programmatic piece speaking about what ought to be done in the future, but its limitations have been referred to.

The weakness, as poetry, of some of the verse in the book is that it either withdraws from or never gets into touch with the actual human world. Poetry does not work well with abstractions. Liberty and justice and redemption, when they are unembodied in a representative human context, are good only for philosophers and theologians to talk about. Wordsworth said of his poems that he had endeavoured to keep the reader in touch with flesh and blood. An awareness of this, of the need for some sharply realized human drama, is at the foundation of Cain Mathema's poem, 'The Mud Hut'. The speaker of these lines knows very precisely what he wants and does not want in the new Zimbabwe:

I don't want no mud hut
For a sitting room, bedroom and kitchen
I want a cement house
With a sitting room, bedroom and kitchen
And internal toilet and running water.

This is a very successful poem of its kind. Its power depends in part upon a cumulative effect which this extract only faintly indicates. That insistent tone of voice, that endless stream of demands, arguments and accusations, is maintained

throughout without one slip. It is a more forceful and informative description of injustice than many poems that bandy that word about. This does not even mention it. It goes on to give the reader in dramatic terms the basic elements in the class struggle without using that term or any of the others associated with it. Socialist intellectuals may say that the voice in this poem is naive and has not asked for the right thing, but it is certainly alive and very human.

In some poems the success of the war of liberation heralds a future that returns simply to an undisturbed pattern of the most basic elements of life. Samuel Chimisoro's poem 'On Independence Day' celebrates our freedom to bear children who will not become soldiers, to toil, and to sing. Perhaps these sentiments, which are referred to the future, record a return to some kind of normality changed from that of the past simply by the fact that the people and the country are one. No continuing revolution is envisaged, but the people are expected to put their backs into keeping the country going because they are free. This poem is not one of Chimisoro's best. It is very much a manufactured poem, regular and schematic in shape, into which the straightforward ideals of the future have been uncomfortably fitted.

A much more interesting vision of the future that has a significant presence in the anthology may be introduced through one of Charles Mungoshi's poems. Mungoshi has, if one considers all that he has published in English, a great talent as a writer of both poetry and prose fiction. His work is characterized not only by the ease and sophistication with which he uses language in its literary modes but by a comprehensiveness of vision, a wide range of sympathies and an uncommon thoughtfulness. He is not well represented in this anthology, a fact which is more an indication of the resistance his work offers to being labelled and pigeonholed than of anything else. In their acknowledgements the editors fail to mention that his poem 'If You Don't Stay Bitter and Angry for too Long' appeared in at least two earlier collections of verse.⁶ They also appear to have decided that it needed punctuation, and, the ethics of this apart, they have made a botched job of it. Readers of the anthology should know that the texts of some of the poems may be unreliable. There is no simple way of checking the accuracy of those texts that have not been published before or since elsewhere. But that there is a problem here for both the attentive reader and the professional scholar is made clear by comparing the texts of Chenjerayi Hove's poems in this anthology with those given in his recent publication *Up in Arms*.⁷ In the text of 'Death of a Soldier' there are three very obvious and damaging misprints. This is just one example.

The editors' decision in placing Mungoshi's poem seems unusual and tends to wrench its meaning away from what it plainly is. In *Zimbabwean Poetry in English* the compiler put it where it almost rightly belonged, in the first section called 'Tradition: The Search of Roots'. The editors of the present anthology put it in a section dealing with the war at its height, 'The Storm'. It is in fact a very fine poem that has nothing to do with war. It grows out of the experience of urbanization. In the context of the poem, 'to go back' is not a going back after war, but a return from town to country. It is a poem that will be read with immediate understanding as long

⁶ In *Zimbabwean Poetry in English*, where its composition is dated to 1975, and in *Rhodesian Poetry* (1976-7), XIII.

⁷ See below, fn. 10.

as man continues to experience the alienating pressures of urban life. Here is the first half of it:

If you don't stay bitter
and angry for too long
you might finally salvage
something useful
from the old country

a lazy half-asleep summer afternoon
for instance, with the whoof-whoof
of grazing cattle in your ears
tails swishing, flicking flies away
or the smell of newly turned soil
with birds hopping about
in the wake of the plough
in search of worms

or the pained look of your father
a look that took you all these years
and lots of places to understand

It is clearly in no sense a poem with a programme. Mungoshi is no crusading back-to-the-land prophet. Its tentativeness is prominent and a major part of its wisdom. Some readers may dismiss it as romantic sentimentality and nostalgia, or, more fiercely, as a diversion from the aims of progressive agriculture. It would not be difficult to defend it against the first two accusations. The third is based on a prescriptive view of life and literature and here there is a head-on collision, for Mungoshi, on the evidence of this poem, has no wish to order people around or even to tell them in plain terms what is best for them. A broader view of his work would confirm this and suggest that he sees human relationships and the processes of communication on which they depend as delicate mechanisms easily snarled up or smashed by prejudice and fear and our continuing sense of insecurity. Few people are strong enough to be their relaxed and open selves. He expresses the shifting, unresolved tensions of this area of life. He records in this poem the puzzling inevitability of the experience that the shortest route to father is the longest and most unlikely way round. He then goes on in the remaining lines to speak of the grandmothers who belong to 'the old country' and their wisdom which you do not understand but cannot forget. Zvobgo's magnificent grandmother was someone that he understood perfectly. In his poem she becomes an embodiment of the self-creative struggle of the Zimbabwean Blacks within the historical process. The whole record and its lessons stand clear before him. The past is transparent and unambiguous forming a seamless whole with the future into which that known Black identity forged in the encounters of history can stride with confidence. The 'old laugh' of Mungoshi's grandmothers says that 'nothing matters but death', whereas in her death Zvobgo's grandmother says very distinctly that nothing matters but life. It would be a mistake to forget that Mungoshi's poem is not an extended vision of history in the sense that Zvobgo's is. To do so might lead one to the erroneous conclusion that what the grandmothers' laugh says is the message of the poem and that by this all human striving in history is despairingly undercut.

Mungoshi is not a man with a message. Instead he offers an apprehension of life in images that thrust against one another without ever coming to a point of balance or rest. To Mungoshi life and history are not neat and tidy structures. Zvobgo, however, looks at his grandmother and sees in her mind all the 'computed data' of the past. The image he uses is indicative of the way he sees the past. When, as the poem then goes on, this data is printed out 'then you drown in the African deluge'. Zvobgo does not intend that this should be taken as a chaotic, bewildering flood of information. The deluge is not Noah's but a gift, a good downpour. The computer's memory banks release an abundance, but in and through this they provide answers. The unconstrained life at the beginning of Mungoshi's poem is valuable just because it is being itself. The grandmothers' unspoken words do not mean, in the context of the whole poem, that now that life does not matter. But there is now a shadow in the poem.

Lines that have a close connection with Zvobgo's poem will be found in II and III of Peter Gonzoguru's 'Three Poems from Transition'. Like Zvobgo he anticipates the acquisition of authentic and nation-building power in the reconnection of the present with the Zimbabwean past. It is no salvage job on a junk heap where something useful may be picked up. The bustling, breathless movement of his lines conveys confidence and excitement. He asserts that the past is a gold mine and that now 'prophesies of archived history come true/Munhumutapa on bare foot . . . Lobengula in Bulawayo.' Statements of this nature derive from his need for a dramatic way of stressing the importance of a living awareness of history. About half a dozen lines serve to spell out in specific terms what is actually recovered from the past. This is a less successful poem than Zvobgo's where grandmother's life serves as a focus for all that is valuable. Gonzoguru is distracted from the essentials by the dramatic effects and stage properties that crowd his lines. That this is, in fact, the way in which the poem fails can briefly be demonstrated by attending to one line of the text: 'suddenly "culture in silence" becomes talkative'. The line is insisted upon, being repeated twice more between verse paragraphs. Its main surface meaning is clear. What is, however, also made clear is the sort of attitude to culture which is being expressed. This is embodied in the word 'talkative'. The sole meaning of this word is 'chatty' or 'garrulous'. Undoubtedly Gonzoguru does not wish to convey that notion of the talk and discussion now taking place on culture. But that is what the word means and his choice of it focuses the general impression given by the poem. It seems to whirl around its important subject without ever stopping to have a good look at it. He seems also to foresee no problems when 'man unites with his culture'. The poem is of course one that is included in the final, celebratory section of the anthology and so shares in a mood that looks forward with confidence to the future. The simplifications of the issue induced by those circumstances dominate the poetic thought. Many writers in the last thirty years have spoken of the real dimensions of this area of life, not least our own Mungoshi in *Waiting for the Rain*.⁸ Many historical novels have been written and these attempt, with varying degrees of success, to reach back to the past of Africa in order to make that an active element in modern consciousness. When the great Zimbabwean historical novel comes to be written the author will be faced with the choice of which ghost to wake up to play the hero. That this choice is, within the

⁸C. Mungoshi, *Waiting for the Rain* (London, Heinemann, 1975).

pressures of the present day, no easy decision may be seen by looking at the most recent work of Ayi Kwei Armah. Armah, who now writes from a firm socialist position, has reached the conclusion that no single historical figure can bear the burden of heroism. In his latest book, *Two Thousand Seasons*, the people becomes its own hero.⁹ The artistic problems that this strategy raises are considerable. These centre, in his case, on the virtual elimination of life within the collective hero, life for the purpose of this comment being thought of as a network of relationships in constant, shifting tension, in the manner in which a family or an ecological system is a perpetually unstable balance of oppositions.

The influence of Armah's way of thinking about heroism can be seen in some of the poems and is perhaps most forcefully put in Carlos Chombo's 'Poetry'. This poem, which the editors use as a 'choric prelude' to the anthology and in which they have discovered a 'power of intellect, control of rhythm and style well combined and married to idea, action and reflection', is not the complete success that those words suggest. He uses high-voltage images to shock and a disco beat to hypnotize. He can produce a striking image when he brings his mind to bear on what his imagination has thrown up, but that is then obscured by images in which only fancy is at work. Chombo's partiality for rhythmic and verbal patterns crucifies the content. In this poem the image of the peasant is a solid achievement, merging the figure with the land he works and that land with his suffering. Here the sound of the words works with the meaning. But in the next two lines pattern takes over from organic flow, sound becomes a plaything and fiction replaces fact. In giving the farm labourer problems which he has never had and not mentioning those that he does, the man becomes the victim of a self-regarding art. This happens in his other poem, 'Smile, Mother'. Chombo's art seems to work backwards from a message or moral conviction and tailors experience to fit it. This poem attempts to reconcile the living to the lives lost in the war by recounting what has been and will be achieved through that sacrifice. The collective speakers of the poem, who are the dead sons of Zimbabwe, console and encourage the motherland:

Our wounds bloom in Manicaland
 Our blood blossoms in Tete
 Our hopes sprout in Gaza
 Our death redeems Zimbabwe.

We do not hear the Mother's voice. This structure enables Chombo to express in an unqualified manner the redemptive aspect of the death of those who died willingly for her since it is only their voices that we hear. In the first half of the poem the speakers describe the Mother's anxiety and grief. The second half tells of how they fought for Mother and of the redemptive nature of that act which ended in death. The clear-cut division embodies a little apocalypse, a decisive reversal. Grief ends and is replaced by a smile. It might be said that this is not representative of the common experience in such human situations, that life is not like that but is more untidy and mixed up, and that grief and consoling thoughts live on together in the mind for a long time. The collective voice that is used (which is also Armah's latest narrative method) shows Chombo following his own advice given in 'Poetry' where, taking up a socialist perspective he asserts that what he calls 'The Real

⁹ A.K. Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (London, Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1979).

Poetry' is 'Not a private paradise/Nor an individual inferno/But the pain and pleasure/Of People in Struggle'.

A very different response to the death of one guerilla, this time in the voice of a living relative, is recorded in Hove's poem 'Death of a Soldier'. Hove yokes what is achieved through death, which at no time shifts in a positive direction from what is signified by the metaphors of cleansing and manuring the land, to the grim physicality of death itself:

He died in summer greens, and mud,
 enmeshed, bathed in sorrow
 of stinking unsheltered nature
 caged in open skies:
 Nothing romantic: I saw him
 flooded with christened hate
 and fouled with justice and dread
 sinking into piggish death,
 as at the butcher's.

Words that clash violently against one another are used to convey the ambiguities and unresolved tensions of the situation. 'Christened hate' contains a contradiction as does 'fouled with justice'. He advances the possibility that the execution of justice entails injustice, while destructive hate may be an agent of love. Paradoxes like these leave no-one untouched. The ending continues to record ambiguities as the drama unfolds in time:

Brother, when you follow
 you harvest
 the grain of pain in mourned death
 which the living shall scorn.

There is an awkwardness of expression in this startling conclusion which obscures the meaning. The verb 'follow' seems to mean 'understand'. The two personal pronouns can be read as 'one' while retaining their usual meaning. The word 'grain' has at least two meanings and its rhyming link with pain dissolves that word's firmness. Though the poem is in no direct sense Christian the pain of the brother's death produces grain, it gives a yield, and the process is analogous to that embodied in the paradoxical words of Isaiah concerning the slaughtered man of sorrows: 'the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed' (Isa. 53:5). The last line of the poem continues the parallel: 'He is despised and rejected of men'.

And now the Poets Speak is an anthology that offers much of value to those who would know what the feelings and aspirations of Black Zimbabweans have been over the last fifteen years or so. But beyond that, the best of it speaks with a power that keeps the unique texture of that past alive and will stimulate the attentive reader into reforming his own position in relation to the liberation war and the actions that caused it and the future that will flow from it. The editors and the publishers deserve thanks for all the work they have put into producing it. It could, with advantage, have been shorter and biographical details would have made a useful addition. Should a reprint be undertaken doubtless the whole text would then be checked for accuracy and faithfulness to each writer's intentions.

Hove's new book, *Up in Arms*, contains 45 poems, a dozen of which readers of Kadhani and Zimunya's anthology will have met with before.¹⁰ It is an impressive collection in itself and Hove is fortunate in having Mungoshi as his editor. The introduction is packed with just and perceptive observations on what Hove is attempting to achieve and how he goes about it. Hove, he says, 'is up in arms against laziness and slipshod thinking, working beyond words, feeling out and trying to give the reader the feeling of direct experience'. That is worth saying and well said. We all use words, but only poets become aware of their full power and recalcitrance. At times language seems to be 'a potential Orphic song', and then again it becomes a 'stubborn structure'. If one combines the fact that poets use words, with Mungoshi's suggestion that Hove is 'working beyond words', words may then be thought of as gateways into the wordlessness of experience, or as entrances into an older human world, into a more sensual existence when language did not form a barrier between man and the rest of creation. Here is a short poem of Hove's called 'Exiled Farmer':

Don't close the window
or curtain it,
For Africa speaks outside:
The spatter of raindrops on the heart
sings eternal songs:
Would my drummer were here.

Mungoshi, in referring to this poem, speaks of the 'unsaid loneliness' that is present 'in the space between the lines'. That is true. The uneven pulse of the movement of the lines creates an emptiness which is full of a longing which is not directly mentioned. But the words point to a moment of quick apprehension, a sudden illumination that is both an unasked gift and the revelation of what has long been sought. The poem shifts its metaphors from one that refers to language to a number that contain other sounds, from 'speaks' to 'sings' and 'spatter' and 'drummer'. And what this is suggesting, not in the form of an argument but simply and very powerfully as something known in experience, is that Africa is most intensely felt and known in wordless modes; that these have a power of communication beyond that of words and that only the drum can match their expressiveness. The poem is a marvellous achievement of control and of the release of power through simplicity. No word is superfluous, nothing detracts from the pregnant, unembroidered statements of the last three lines.

Mungoshi rightly commends the shorter poems in this book and Hove's attentiveness, evident in the care with which he uses language, to accuracy and compact fullness of statement. The poems in the first section deal with the war and Rhodesia, while the titles of the last two sections, 'Industrial Blades' and 'Country Tears', indicate the main areas of experience and something of their nature that the contents explore. Hove writes best when he lets the experience come through without the interference of what Keats called 'a palpable design on the reader'. The mode of the last poem in the book, 'Country Life', allows him to be both relaxed and observant. He is not so sure an artist with poems that make out a case by argument. The poem 'A Boy' is a mixed achievement because in part of it Hove utilizes a mode that he is not good at, constructing an argument instead of letting the events of

¹⁰C. Hove, *Up in Arms* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1982), 71 pp., Z\$2.95.

life be their own spokesman. However, the editors of *And now the Poets Speak* rightly commended him to their readers and this new volume of his poetry clearly demonstrates the individual and genuine talent he possesses.

That which may most powerfully and engagingly draw the reader into Zimunya's new volume of verse, *Kingfisher, Jikinya and Other Poems*, is an element which has always been part of his response to the world around him, but which his experiences during the liberation struggle overshadowed.¹¹ And that is his delight in a wide but neighbouring world of physical presences, of trees, insects, pumpkins, rain and children. The delight in the glad, individual life of these comes through continuously. It is as though that rooster of his has been demobilized and is now free to do its own thing, strutting about in the wider world. Occasionally Zimunya's choice of word and expression evokes a prettiness, a picturesque, poeticizing note rather than that which he can, at his best, achieve, an unembroidered revelation of living structure and movement. These poems range, too, over human situations that are part of the common life and in these depictions the humour and laughter that were in abeyance find their place, and freedom and love have a bigger scope for their creative thrust. The least successful poems are those where the conceptual assertions are made explicitly alongside, as it were, the true text of the poem. 'Underground' is an ambitious, visionary poem that has strength in its opening paragraphs which convey the manifold, changing movement of life. But the message-laden second half with its verbal inversions and deliberately employed archaisms is only dull, solemn preaching. 'Anniversary' is full of indignation and judgements that will involve the reader in fellow-feelings, but it lacks real teeth and creative anger. It falls away into awkwardness of language ('there is a leaking leak in our Liberty') and the commonplaces of denunciation. Zimunya has written quite a lot of aggressive verse but he seldom gets it right. He produces his best poetry when he is not being angry. Poems in this volume like 'Rezende Street: One Morning' and 'Rain and Fire' simply and most effectively let their subjects be themselves. In the poem 'You Were', speaking of 'the flesh of love', he writes:

But henceforth
I will carve my jewels
from her thousand kisses
will write my songs that will sup and suck
and roll in her mirth.

That programme (maybe without the jewels) points to the source of his strength that his still developing talent must hold to.

Zimunya's other collection, *Thought-Tracks*, is not a 'Collected Poems' but it reprints a great deal of the verse he has published over the last twelve years.¹² The first five sections are largely made up of such work. Part VI contains a number of poems written in and about England. Zimunya seems not to have been touched or excited by the life of that country or indeed by anything beyond the cramped and suffocating houses and streets and the weather. These poems convey rather laboriously a cold, grey, unpeopled urban wilderness. He was, of course, not there

¹¹ M.B. Zimunya, *Kingfisher, Jikinya and Other Poems* (Harare, Longman Zimbabwe, 1982), 64 pp., Z\$1.95.

¹² M.B. Zimunya, *Thought-Tracks* (Harlow, Longman, 1982), 132 pp., £1.75.

of his own choice, and that along with the circumstances of England's responsibility for what was then (the mid-1970s) happening in Zimbabwe, was not the best preparation for a full and free response in a Zimbabwean patriot to the English scene. The contrast, in terms of feeling for the individual life of people and their contexts, between these poems and those in Part I is enormous. The figures of the early Zimbabwean poems (children, the old farmer, the herdboys) to whom Zimunya so readily and warmly responds have no counterparts in the English poems. Only when he gets back to Harare's Rezende Street does the urban scene come alive again. In *Kingfisher, Jikinya and Other Poems*, many of the poems are spoken by a voice that strives for a slick, ebullient, racy tone, the voice of a high-living, deep-thinking, sardonic intellectual. And this is fine as long as a keen-edged and witty inventiveness can be sustained. But that is not easy in long poems and the first poem 'Jikinya' collapses into commonplaces when the wit runs out.

My love, what is a dance
without a challenge
but relish without salt
so come and let us share
this rhythm.

The dance comes to an end in lines like these where the fire and rocking fluency that the sense demands make an appearance neither in the words nor in the rhythm which flops around uncomfortably on flat feet. But, despite the presence of this sophisticated voice in much of his recent verse, Zimunya's central stance is that of a romantic with all that word's variously judged attributes, its innocence, its fierce, intolerant honesty, its endless capacity to be open to the wonder of creation from potatoes and tarantulas to freedom and humanity, its endless faith in existence.

In contrast to this, though not in negation of it, Mungoshi's voice gives expression to an ironical vision which is yet tolerant and generous towards both the aspirations and the failings of the figures who appear in his poems. His verse is in consequence more relaxed, his attitude more detached, his feelings more complicated since his sympathies lie with widely varying standpoints. This is what one would expect of a great writer of prose fiction. But what is surprising is that this mature vision is firmly present right at the beginning of his literary career in the volume of short stories *Coming of the Dry Season* of 1972.¹³ This selection of verse, *The Milkman Doesn't only Deliver Milk*,¹⁴ amply illustrates the power of his rare talent for seeing into his own life and the lives of others without distorting what they are in the interests of a moral scheme. In contrast to Zimunya his poems are full of people. Zimunya, as befits a romantic, sees landscapes and vast panoramas spread out in visionary significance. His home is in the Eastern Highlands where man is lost in the immensity of huge, irregular natural forms. His sympathies flow naturally to such forms and to the colossal, irregular achievement of Great Zimbabwe which in a similar fashion at once discloses and conceals a grand meaning and wisdom. Mungoshi comes from the flatlands, from Manyene and Chivhu, Cripps's Charter Country, where if the immense plains dwarf the human figure it is yet not lost but exposed and revealed as the one moving and

¹³ C.L. Mungoshi, *Coming of the Dry Season* (Nairobi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1972).

¹⁴ C.L. Mungoshi, *The Milkman Doesn't only Deliver Milk* . . . (Salisbury, Poetry Society of Zimbabwe, Mopani Poets 5, 1981), vi, 26 pp. Z\$2.60.

significant irregularity on their bareness, the focus of the eye of the spectator. And that which Mungoshi particularly notices about the people of his poems is the fact that they are victims of the ironies of time's transformations. 'Turning into furniture' is the wry subtitle of one group of poems that describe this process: for instance Virginia, the one-time sexual vampire, the swinging gin-and-tonic siren of the down-town night-clubs, now making the best of her burnt-out stage by baby sitting. One of the finest poems in the selection, 'Winter', focuses a change of this kind overtaking the once flourishing White sub-culture of Pioneer Street with its strictly functional bars, the small engineering workshops and junk-yards, the whores, the deep-drinking salesmen and mechanics. The speaker of the poem observes the demolition work that has left just a few of the old buildings standing 'like the serrated teeth of the aged impotent', and also, not without sympathy, a survivor of that life, the human debris stumbling through the rubble.

He stops to pick up some breath
in the lee of some half-demolished wall
his eyes and nose running from the dust that was his yesterdays.

Then, quickly, he sees me spying on his memories
hurries on, stumbles, and pick himself up
fingering the wilted rose in his buttonhole.

He mutters: they are pulling down most of the buildings
we used to know. His breath whistles like a cold wind
through the ghost town of his mouth.

The shadow of time passing falls across the lives of the people of these poems, often relentlessly as in 'Career Woman' and 'What Are You Going to Do now, Virginia?', but occasionally benignly as in 'Lazy Day'. And to convey this vision, which reflects both the pathos and the humour of the human situation, the loss of bright life and the often absurd survival strategies, Mungoshi's unstrained language is the perfectly fashioned medium. Nick Alexander's excellent introduction to the poems points to this among other features: 'limpid, low-key, the language has often an urbanity of understatement'. And this is not only a great achievement in meaningful expression in its own right. It is doubly welcome when so much of the verse written in Zimbabwe during the last few years has put its trust in the power of bombast and melodrama.

In these volumes of poems by Black Zimbabweans published since Independence there is much that the reader will enjoy and return to, since at its best the verse focuses the dilemmas and aspirations, the meanings and bewilderments which make up our lives here. There is also, as this essay has attempted to show, much that is simply lazy and unthoughtful in its language and rhythms and in its neglect of the individual truth of experience. But Zimunya, Hove and Mungoshi are poets who are alive to the hard and delicate life of this land and whose work can be a direct entry into its being.