

Book Review: *Thoughts Abroad*, by John Bruin. Del Valle, Texas: Troubador Press, 1970. 28 + 1 pages.

John Bruin's collection of twenty-eight short poems is somewhat more than a random gathering of his thoughts; it is a complex view of the mind of a dispossessed South African. The structure of imagery that the poet uses to describe his thoughts creates a tone for the collection that is at once despairing and hopefully expectant, and we are given, through Bruin's poetic imagination, a rare insight into the pain and hope of the black man.

Bruin has given his poems the titles of cities throughout the world, but his subject returns repeatedly to South Africa; however distant the cities, his mind is never far from his homeland. On the island of New Zealand he remembers the prison islands in South Africa where many of his countrymen are imprisoned; at the Taj Mahal, he thinks of his "eight years in exile"; and his thoughts about England lead him to conclude that he "must be faithful to a land / whose rich years, unlike England's, lie ahead."

The pattern of images in the collection consists of two opposing substructures that create a kind of tension in many of the poems. One side is the cold sterility of the north and winter--a white despair. The other side of the pattern is warm, sensual, green, fertile, and black--the hope of spring and of South Africa. The central conflict of images is especially seen in poems with northern titles. In "Finchley" the "November sunlight . . . suffuses the gruel-grey sky," "lacks all virtue," and is "devoid of warmth." Stockholm is "in a world where winter never ends." In Belfast, "the town is cold stone." But while it is cold in the North, the Southern hemisphere enjoys the summertime, and the poet finds some reassurance in that thought. "Light, green-yellow luminescent, tender / seeps through these deep-foliaged weeping willows" at Zoo Lake in Johannesburg, and the green loveliness of his homeland can create "a balm that eases and erases all [his] hurt." Finchley is cold, but "Southwards in a steady blaze / like a sheet of molten lead heat pours down."

There is also some promise in the young and in spring. Though Belfast is cold, young men live there, men "who have seen firebright nights," and they are "warm and fiery / with a dear-won human fire." The young are the hope of the cold city; they are the promise of future heat. This promise is also seen in London and Finchley. Though the poet feels that his time is past, that his summer is gone, and that he is unseasonal, he celebrates the coming of spring in these cities. "Summer returns, fleshy and foliated" in Finchley, and in

London "the roses burn / red flames and orange, / tea-rose pink and white / smouldering in the dark foliage." A sensual sort of heat reinforces the idea of hope appropriate to spring.

The tone of the whole collection is thus both despairing and hopeful. In some poems the poet feels his dejected situation ("I am alien in Africa and everywhere"). But his situation, the predicament of the exiled, black South African, also offers a challenge, and he can thus maintain some hope. In Australia, as the atmosphere of the white society becomes hostile, he hears in his baggage "the ticking explosives / of reproach, and threat, and challenge." In Grenoble he sees "new perils" as "from the debris of defeat [he] crawls / emerges debouching on a vaster plain of challenge." He hopes for, he senses, a better future "of things coming to fruit . . . fitting into place" like "bits of stained glass / fitting crookedly / that make the stained glass window."

Thoughts Abroad shows us a modern imagist at work, one who can create a network of meaning by using contrasting patterns of images to poetically express the frustration of a predicament which is, to most of us, beyond comprehension. The collection ends with the thoughts he has while flying high over the Mediterranean--the space between his continent and Europe. From this higher perspective he seems to find a resolution in a more comprehensive view of the world: "all the world is mine and to love / and all of its humankind."

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