

REVIEW BY DIMAKATSO SEDITE

Allegories of the Everyday
by Brian Walter

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Brian Walter's fourth poetry collection (Dryad Press, 2019) takes us on a journey of textured and varied experiences, along small coastal towns, within alienating experiences of foreign countries, and back to the familiarity of home. It bravely faces the fate of death, ageing and loneliness. There is a fractured sense of belonging within shifting geographic and historical contexts, where solace is sought in the simplicity of daily life, which, at times, transcends what's human and real. This three-section book is a quest to put pieces together in ways that are surprising and unsentimental. The result is poetry with a swathe of un-patterned paradox, laden with humility within and about it.

Section I opens with "Ordinary Water", which ends each line with either an enjambment of a pause, creating a certain scansion within each line that makes us feel the character's weariness:

This has been a year of wakes
with three friends gone
each a fellow on this dark
and sorry way through woods
to the simple place of the dead,
with whom I so easily drank,
embraced in the night inns,
whom I travelled with by day

There is a rhythm and imagery of someone who walks a few steps, and then stops, walks a few more, and pauses again, burdened by the emptiness of loss. This pause forces the reader to focus on the last word on each line, revealing a message within a message:

wakes, gone, dark, woods, dead, drank, inns, day.

Each line carries that slow tempo, until assonance and alliteration surprise us with a comedic slant, as the pace suddenly picks up:

kindly kneading keening flesh
to keep a friend conjured up there

This opening poem, in more ways than one, sets the tone for what is to come.

In “Quest”, twenty three of the twenty four lines seem to sing, where the letter ‘s’ (and to a lesser extent ‘c’) is used liberally, creating a sound of something sliding just above the surface. This seamlessness that an ‘s’ creates, is hinting at the deep connection that the character may be having with the sea. There is an irony and an understatement in the playfulness that an ‘s’ creates, seeing that the poem is about death (of ‘a palm-wine drinkard’), perhaps alluding to the tranquility of death:

When the trusty wine tapster
of the palm-wine drinkard dies
it’s the old loss of a workless
paradise, or of his own psyche,
or that mid-way failing of soul;

In “Nilotic Triad”, the last stanza seems to ebb the flow of the poem, as the subject of grief suddenly changes, separating itself into what feels like a new poem on geopolitics, diverting from the wrenching pain of loss. “Dead Town’s Path” (with an excerpt below) is a poem so terse, so specific, it seems to unknowingly cart the grief in ‘Nilotic Triad’, forward:

I’m alone with my head
these days :
all my friends are dead.

(from “Dead Town’s Path”)

The character personifies his head as a separate entity, leaving him headless, and thus, lifeless. The end rhyme in ‘head’ and ‘dead’ feels almost nonchalant, a playing parody to mundane things like the age-old debate on rhymes.

The nine poems in Section I have a cohesiveness about them, on loss, loneliness, death, and the hereafter.

Section II casts wider, takes the reader to the ‘everyday life’: the familiar, like ‘krantzes’, the ‘veld’, ‘kloofs’ (in poem “Kestrel”), ‘leggevan’ (in “Spelling”), and ‘Maluti’ (in “Serote”); as well as the less familiar: ‘the ‘Hajj’ (in “Wells”), ‘baguettes’, ‘Bordeaux’ (in “Rags of Time”). The complexity of identity is explored, as constructed by religion(s), time(s), place(s), and languages-within-dialects-and accents. There is a paradox of both contentment and inner turmoil when home (in South Africa) and of alienation when in far-flung countries such as France. The latter country marks a contrast to the simplicity of small South African frontier towns the character may be accustomed to.

Several couplets in this section make the pace of the reading faster, leading to a crescendo of anticipation. However, in “Darkling Rainbow” the word ‘dusty’ could have been avoided when referring to ‘township roads’. That way, the poem might have unfolded on its own terms.

Section II also does not delve deeper emotionally, choosing to give detail *on* the context, but not embedded *in* it. This creates a variation in a book that keeps the reader’s interest.

If Section I has been about the helplessness of being mortal, Section II has expressed the helplessness of being plunged into an identity by fate.

Section III takes us back to that specificity and emotional depth of Section I:

In “At Work”, we are thrust into a past being told with an immediacy of the present:

In her old Prefect car with a radiator
that leaks warm drops of rusty water,
the car seats hot in their own smell,
long after lunch, my mother brought
us all to the beach: we’ll go home soon.

(From Stanza 1)

Onomatopoeia is applied with great success in the same poem:

This morning, she lugs the washing across
the lawn to the lines that my father strung.

(From Stanza 3)

There is continuity from the two preceding sections of the book, of inner turmoil and alienation, but this time it is expressed in a more

personal way. This is achieved through assonance, par rhyme and end rhyme:

I feel myself trailing clouds
of history, where every**th**ing I am
has become accusa**ti**on — my language,
being and educa**ti**on, work: and all.

(From ‘Stella Maris, Semper Virgo’)

There is also a sense of ‘otherness’: a form of alienation which, unlike in section I, is brought on *not* by the departure of people from this world, but by their presence.

Euphemism is evident in this poem, where subtler words are used, in place of stronger ones. This device is also quite apparent in the phrase ‘and all’.

We also begin to see more reference to nature in several poems: This makes the loneliness and sense of alienation being alluded to, even more profound:

Ag, I could share it with them
properly, but humans are all around
making me stiff and stern.

But the birds eye me,
seeing me, knowing better —
waiting on the fence.

(from Grackles)

The character’s interaction with the birds reveals something endearing about the kind of person he (and perhaps the writer too) could be.

In “Latterday”, anaphora is applied in the repetition of the word ‘old’; there is an oxymoron in the similes ‘as trustworthy as hell’, as well as in the phrase ‘old, old child’ and ‘puerile elder’. These lend a surprisingly humorous depth of emotion to the poem:

‘I have come full circle,
once an old, old child
— God’s trustworthy —

now a puerile elder
in the making
— as trustworthy as hell —

“Latterday” also starts with ‘I’ and ends with ‘I’:

I have come full circle

(First line of poem)

I know, I can tell:

I have come full circle, I.

(Last two lines of poem)

The ‘I’ gives emphasis final, certainty, and feels almost forceful. The poet seems to be confessional, referring to himself, in this poem. Being the last poem in the collection, “Latterday” seamlessly ties in with the opening poem “Ordinary Water”, as both tersely embrace some form of loss, with a surprising absence of self-pity. “Latterday” has compelling confidence that juxtaposes the hopelessness depicted in ‘Ordinary Life’, thus showing the character’s spiritual growth. The book thus starts well, and ends better, thus ‘coming full circle’, as the poet succinctly puts it.

Overall, the recurrent reference to Derek Walcott’s work (and, to a lesser extent, of Amos Tutuola’s) may, at times, disrupt the natural flow of the book. In addition, a few poem titles could have been lucid on what the respective poems are about. Lastly, the book might have read in a more fluid way without its division into ‘sections’. Having said that, it is also important to read a book for what it is, to listen, and allow it to tell its own story.

In conclusion, one tries, as a reader, to weave poems together to find a cohesive meaning. In this collection, Brian Walter challenges the reader to depart from this mind-set, as he frequently shifts the subject, mood and tone, between and within poems, whilst staying true to a cross-cutting theme of ‘loss’, in ways that are complex and multi-layered. This, together with honesty, empathy, and an ability to depict the richness of everyday life in all its forms, has resulted in poems that the reader will keep going back to; for each time Brian Walter’s poem ends, it starts to reveal itself anew. *Allegories of the Everyday* transcends its author, his world, itself and its times, whilst being of its times, in a way that only good poetry can.

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