

Night Transit

PR Anderson (Dryad Press,
2023)

‘Transit’ is both conveyance and passage, strongly implying experience over, across or through, and the word has a spatial, temporal resonance, and astral implications, as in ‘the transit of Venus’. PR Anderson’s poems explore and evoke transit in various ways.

The collection has five sections: as I read the sequence, the first is about beginnings, initiations; the second, generally, about the experience or imagination of times and places beyond South Africa; the third evokes and recalls South African history and experience; the fourth is a group of intimate poems, evoking or addressed to friends and loved ones, encountered or remembered; and the last is a group of poems about rest, acceptance and closure.

This is complex and sophisticated verse, often effervescent in its headlong flow of images, dotted with uncommon words deployed with lexical delight. Sometimes the poems are immediate and sometimes, when syntax and sequence are complex, they ask for and repay repeated readings. Many poems are best when read aloud, a rich tapestry of aural texture bringing them alive.

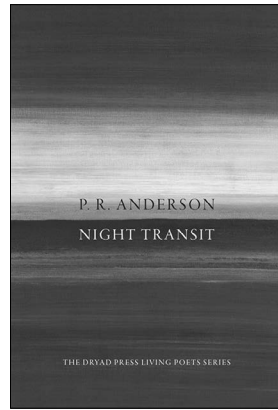
Formally, the poems are generally unrhymed and shaped into stanzas—including nine sonnets—although the fifth section of ‘The Goldfinch Variations’ (‘The Nativity’) is a prose poem, which issues in a beautifully observed and rendered account of Piero della Francesca’s painting. (A slightly more extensive set of notes at the end of the book could make the reader’s task a little easier...)

The first poem in the collection is ‘The Folded Lake’, which begins as a landscape but becomes an account of the imagination:

*I dreamed I took a lake out of its valley,
folded it over my arm and traversed a range

more home than ever home was.*

But the poem needs both poet and reader in the generation of meaning: “Help me shake out the lake again.” Anderson’s ear for



the pun might be at work here too. Is the lake “folded” geologically? Section 1 also includes ‘The Coming Poem’, an uncanny account of poesis as a strange concatenation torn between inspiration and desperation: “parturition”, but the poem is “harking” and will “travel where we may not”. Early in the poem we get “What I want is voice” but the conclusion is assured:

Come:
home is the hunter with his hare
by the ears. Tell us what we ought.

Section 2 takes us to Poland, the DRC, Germany’s eastern front in WWII, Belgium, Italy, Egypt, and Mozambique, but also looks out to the heavens (‘*Umnyele*’, ‘The Other Stars’) and into the “entoptic”, what the poet sees when he closes his eyes (‘Under the Eye’). Beautifully as the world evoked here is (‘The Goldfinch Variations’, set in Italy, is particularly fine), the poet is alert to the human threat to the planet (‘Late in Time’) and to the laborious business of air travel (‘Landfall’, ‘Equator’).

The joys and enjoyment of poetry are everywhere here, and as with his earlier book, *In a Free State, Night Transit* is beautiful on birds: goldfinches, owls, wild duck. ‘Take Art (Burning the Pictures)’ gives us “A kite of ibises” and “an alphabet of cranes”.

The South African settings of Section 3 open with ‘The War of Makhanda’, a grim recollection of what was once known as the Battle of Grahamstown and its aftermath:

War is economy
and it never stops and history is not over
for the hungry who chew on plugs of grass,
tightening the famine belt...

The Eastern Cape is also resolutely evoked in ‘A Short Walk in the Zuurveld’. More recent South African history, and perhaps the poet’s youth, are recalled in poems of transit like ‘Seventeen Depositions on Two Mechanical Breakdowns’, ‘On Trying to Sleep at Kareedouw’, and ‘Witwatersrand’, one of the sonnets, in which we find “occasional vultures tow the skies”. The eponymous ‘Night Transit’ is one of the poems in the collection that might be called a dramatic monologue. Located in “~ *Transvaal, c.1989*”, the speaker describes a taxi journey “crossing KwaNdebele”. The itinerary takes us from Ntwane to Dennilton, where the “Brotherly

/ love” of the passengers anticipates the lights of the Philadelphia Hospital going down at dawn.

We cross the Winterveld
to Monday. Work. This world
the one sleep wakes us for.

This (the only rhymed poem—some full, some half) is beautifully made, an achievement of the sympathetic imagination, in which the poet finds the voice of a distant but fully realised fellow South African. In the next section the poet speaks more directly, in his own equally assured and generous voice, of present and past love and lost friends.

Section 5 opens with ‘Last Things’, a poem of transit and departure from Italy: “the / runway cleared, and down below / the months become a postcard sent yourself.” ‘World Enough’, whose title alludes to Marvell, is a beautiful elegy, in which the momentum of emotion and recall is sustained in a sequence of precise and resonant imagery, which evokes both the one lost and the world which that one lost inhabited. The last poem of *Night Transit*, ‘The Once’, is a sonnet, a love poem of transit and daybreak.

These are challenging and rewarding poems that will bear much further analysis.

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