

in poetry's socio-political duty. Unfortunately, despite Espada's admirable real-life radicalism, the poems in *The Republic of Poetry* are rhythmically flat and lacking in surprising images: in the title poem, poets "scream for joy" while the people are "blinded by grief". When Espada tries for something more adventurous, the results are often infelicitous, as when Neruda's mourners are described as having "lips sewn up by the seamstress grief". Characteristically, this image is not sustained beyond the line break. The most satisfying poem is the most atypical in this regard: in 'City of Glass' Espada finds an image that can hold his attention.

Espada claims to celebrate the power of poetry, but it would be truer to say he celebrates poets. Yusef Komunyakaa is serenaded: "we have no words for you;/ there is no name for the grief in your face..." and the sequence describing a visit to Chile makes Espada's aspirations clear:

a man with stonecutter's hands
lifted up his boy of five
so the boy's eyes could search mine.
*Son, the father said, this is a poet,
like Pablo Neruda.*

(‘Black Islands.’)

But Neruda is valued because he wrote memorable poems; Espada has not done this here. It is a bitter paradox that poets flourish under persecution, while nothing silences them like reverence. Excessive regard for forebears and a wish to speak for (rather than challenge) a constituency leads to platitudes, not poetry.

In 'A Poet of the People' **Mervyn Morris** registers his disdain for poets who foreground "loud and clear" meaning in return for "immediate applause". Instead, Morris opts for "smouldering restraint". He shows what this can achieve in 'Post-colonial Identity':

The language they're conducted in
dictates the play of these debates.
Good English, as they say, discriminates.
White people language white as sin.

Here, each word has been weighed judiciously: that "as they say" is priceless. It is only fair to say that not every poem in *I been there, sort of: New and Selected Poems* is so rewarding. Many are short missives like 'Eve':

the garden
seemed

a proper
paradise

until

she buck up
on a serpent
talking nice

This seems too content with its own transience, with only the Jamaican locution “buck up” to hold our attention, though even here Morris’s worldview is likeable enough to draw the reader on, and his poems gather a cumulative power.

Morris smoulders more brightly in the earlier poems selected in the second half of this book. *The Pond* and *Shadowboxing* contain more openly angry work, and *On Holy Week* is a more conventionally ambitious sequence, spoken by various characters pertaining to the story of the Crucifixion. These re-visionary monologues return Judas, Doubting Thomas, Pilate et al to an identifiable human context. The concept that poems might be vehicles for ideas seems currently out of fashion, and is one of many valuable adjustments we should expect to make when reading a fine English language poet from a distinct tradition.

Togara Muzanenhamo’s *Spirit Brides* is an impressively assured debut. His poems favour fractured narratives (as distinct from anecdotes) and are written in long lines that cross and re-cross the borders of prose-poetry, utilizing speech-rhythms without becoming prosaic. Muzanenhamo grew up in Zimbabwe and is well-travelled, so his subject matter is broad. A natural story-teller, he has the confidence not to signpost a poem’s significance. For example, ‘Strangers’ describes queuing for days for petrol in Zimbabwe. The poem takes its time, apparently idling like the queue, but alert to minute changes in the men’s watchful camaraderie:

Someone mentions a journey to South Africa –
Then talk of the cricket,
The World Cup and how the boys are faring,
Then the news.
An awkward silence.
No one says what they’re thinking,
Realising we’re amongst strangers.

The collection’s finest achievement is ‘Gumiguru’, a long prose poem concerning Muzanenhamo’s father’s funeral, but excerpts would not do it justice. Here instead is the final stanza of ‘The Last Days of Winter’, displaying characteristically exact observation and a fully inhabited language:

...frost scars the windowpanes framing the milk-spilt sea, the glass
Splintered and cracked by the wind’s horned rage. Now, no more words
Rise to the ceiling in the dark, just warm movements of love where
A polished sigh shoots up like a spark and bursts into the wrestle of a fuck.