

Mantis Poets (Guy Butler and Patrick Cullinan)

Ed. Jack Cope.

David Philip, Cape Town,

Chosen by Marie Dyer

Instead of a review of this collection, we print two extracts which are likely to be of interest to readers of **Reality**.

1) from **Natal 1497. Words for a Christmas Cantata**: Guy Butler.

(Guy Butler writes of this poem: "As the performance of miracle plays on board ship was common practice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, I imagined the feast of the Epiphany being celebrated on the flagship of Da Gama's small fleet during the Christmas Season, 1497, when Natal was given its name. In mediaeval times the three kings were given the names I use and allocated to the three continents; from which three continents the present population of Natal comes." This extract consists of the words of these three kings.)

Melchior, King of Macedon

The Fateful star burns fixed above a ruined stable.
Is this the cosmic concord our philosophers foresaw?
How kneel upon these cobbles, bow to Hebrew peasants,
How leave my gold among these animals and straw?

Chair' O Panmegiste.

Yet why should I now recall how the woman of Mantinea,
Diotima of mysteries, replied to Socrates:
'Great love is always poor, roughskinned and weatherbeaten,
And couches out of doors with those of low degree?'

Chair' O Panmegiste.

I kneel within the centre of my burning question:
Can this poor swaddled thing among the colts and calves
Be that half god, half man, nor mortal, nor immortal,
Who saves the Universe from falling into halves?

Chair' O Panmegiste.

III

Casparo, King of India

'Whenever virtue fails
And lawlessness arises
There do I bring myself
To powerful incarnation.'

Recalling Krishna's words
To the trembling charioteer,
When all the signs were dark,
Incense I bring, and prayer.

O may your house, dear Princè, be peace,
And not walled in on every side.
And may the windows be large and open
That changing airs from all the oceans
May move through quiet rooms.

Chorus

Shantih, shantih, shantih

May you be cooled and fed by them,
And not dismayed, nor blown about.
May none of your followers try to capture
Your house for a restless inn or a prison;
O may your house be peace.

Shantih, shantih, shantih

Balthazar, King of Africa

O boy with the oxen
 you ask a hard riddle
 far darker than battle
 that none here can answer,
 Our prophets hear thunder —
 a terrible river —
 they say you will cross it;
 they stay in the mountains.
 We know when you've crossed it,
 we know that your mother
 will wash from your body
 red mud of that river.
 We pray that all peoples
 will bind up your spear wounds,
 and so we have brought you
 this myrrh, my small master.

Chorus

Bayete, bayete,
 bayete, bayete

THE FIRST DANGER**Patrick Cullinan**

With the first danger we gave ourselves
 Another name. We made
 Less noise in the evenings
 And used dry fuel for the fires,
 Though by then it was known where we lived.

Threatened again we changed our language
 Entirely, using the tongue our neighbours spoke.
 Alert, we moved our fields
 After the first sowing. From then on there could be
 No ceremony of the first fruits.

We lay silent in the forest,
 Not sure what we would surprise. It seemed, turning,
 The path would ambush us. How could we kill
 If we did not know the hunted? To disembowel
 The unknown would be wrong. It could die wrongly, being

A thing not to be played with, touched: as
 Above so below.

But when it did not rain we knew
 That we were lost, and knew
 We could not speak our own language.

We had forgotten the songs and how to dance
 The old way: the slow revolving steps,
 The rites of coupling. What we ate
 Was raw or half charred, the meat
 And pelt and gut of rats.

We had ambushed the shadows,
 Stuck knives into the shade of ourselves.
 A threat was not caring, power was
 Lightning that bloomed on the horizon,
 A fire that left us arid, untouched. □