

The Salt Reaper: Poems from the Flats

Lasana M. Sekou

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Lasana M. Sekou's collection is made up of sixty poems that span continents and a range of topics. Themes range from the call for Caribbean Independence to Dutch immigration to the issues of drug addiction. The poems are written in a mélange of Caribbean Creole, Dutch, French and Spanish.

Divided into two sections, the first part was written between 1990 and 1999 and the second between 2000 and 2004. The first poem in the book, "No Love Poems," sets the tone for the entire collection:

There will be no love poems tonight
no lullabies
no pleasant sing-songs
no snow-washed sermons
on the sacrifice of lambs
upon the altars of frocked Pharisees
who kiss up to them roman massa.

And in "Roughneck":

There is a poem coming
it is
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for recital
refined & respectful

The poet tells us to expect an explosion of raw poetry, poetry that shocks into action, rather than lulls one to dreamland. The poems will not patronize, kowtowing to any master.

Sekou becomes the mouthpiece of his beloved St. Martin—a nation that he sees as falling apart—in "Naming," where "Once upon a time/there/trees flourished/abundant with fruit/now fewer if any are/seen/now streets carry/their names." The only way forward, Sekou suggests in the next poem, "Roughneck," is for "Caribbean man/S' maatin man/study to do/step up for your land.../with reason & rightness."

But one cannot "step up" without remembering one's history. Therefore, the second part of the collection starts with the poem, "cradle of the nation," where "the pale" that was "a countenance, dripping moss cold /and wicked/ stormed eastward to its new story of eden." The poems

which lend their name to the title of the collection are also to be found in this second part: “salt reaping I” and “salt reaping II.” Sekou’s title is connotative of the labour Africans supplied to provide salt for the white masters in the Caribbean. So, without even going through the collection, one knows that these are poems that will speak to that; to the indignity of colonization and indeed in the two poems mentioned above, Sekou deals with the harshness of the labour the slaves had had to endure in a style reminiscent of slave songs: “going down&going in/was sweet/but the work, o/was hell.” And in “salt reaping II”: “we keep hearing how/it was sweet but hard/maybe so/it was like loving.” We feel his anger as well in “giving inches” when Sekou questions, like the Nigerian Igbo would, how far a handshake should go to no longer be considered a handshake, but an affront: “how do you know/when you have fight to go/and nowhere to sleep? /.../...the church.../...where you enter to a joyful noise.../is now in submission to not even groan:.../becausin it goin’ wake the tourists?” The poem is an angry question as to who owns the island of St. Martin. The tourists who come to escape the pressures of their lives or the people to whom it is home?

In the book’s final poem, “fore/closure,” the poet asks, “who are those among us all who have and have not/been laden and terrorized too? / here all cries of wolf and new hurt.” The poet tells us that there is nothing new under the sun and seems to be implying that just as America felt attacked by Bin Laden, his people have been attacked too, “been laden” and are still suffering from the after effects of the terror of colonialism.

Overall, the poems speak of struggle and pain. Of naming and identity. Of paradise lost and of hopes of paradise regained. However, in the poem, “el malecon” the reader gets the impression that Sekou lets the emotion of the poem take precedence over the art: “my Caribbean sea is soft/like a kitten’s kiss of licks upon itself/southward the sea/crashes on a coral of rocks/sprays itself freshly about/hmmm.” In “dm1,” we also feel the same urgency to pass on a message at the expense of the art: “who fears the dark man/his dark face/his eyes darkened by sun&sorrow&sights/of his stellar tomorrows/a darkly cast feast/his own civilization?”

Apart from these two, Sekou manages on the whole, to pass on his messages without sacrificing his art. One feels the need to read the other poems aloud, to chant them and to dance. This is indeed a remarkable achievement.