

DRIVEN TO WORK

Author: Donald Parenzee
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REVIEWED BY TONY VOSS

In a week in which the Anglo-American Western Deep Levels mine gas outrage has been made public, it seems appropriate to be reviewing a book called *Driven to Work*, Donald Parenzee's impressive and moving collection of poems. They are poems of scrupulous observation of what is more and more the life of ordinary South Africa's: to quote some titles, *Detention of an Ordinary Girl, Being Driven to Work, Fire in Bonteheuwel on 17 June 1980, Then the Children Decided, Miner's Demands*. "In the unlikely event" as the air hostess says, of a Parenzee poem faltering, it is because the reckless balance between the personal and the historical is disturbed. Generally the surprising inevitability of these poems gives them an assured rhythm from first to last. Each of the three sections of this collection has an epigraph from Yannis Ritsos but the poems remind me more of Montale and *The Hitler Spring*. Many readers will recognize what Parenzee is writing about — living in South Africa now, and the poet sees and says what he shares with children, miners, clerks; how little he can do and how much can be done; how we are victims and agents. And he earns his wide-angle detachment because he has faith: how powerfully he uses words like "always" ('First Steps', 'Always') and "forever" ('In the Morgue'). Like Montale he sees that

... this ulcered
Spring will still be festival, if it can freeze again
In death that death.

(*The Hitler Spring*, tr Maurice English)