

October 12, 2007

An encounter with Wopko Jensma

Filed under: literature, poetry, dye hard press — ABRAXAS @ 8:16 pm



It was late 1991 when a friend drew my attention to an article in Penthouse about white tramps in South Africa. Among the list of outies was “a promising young poet”, whom I was astonished to discover was Wopko Jensma. According to the article, Jensma had walked out on society, become a tramp, and was living in the Salvation Army Men’s Home in Johannesburg.

That evening, I telephoned the Salvation Army and made an appointment to see Wopko the next Saturday morning. Visiting the Men’s Home was an experience in itself. Outside the gates, a red-faced outie stood clutching a radio: the expression on his face was one of dissolution and loss. Inside, another outie sat on the steps, his head in his hands.

I went in by the side-entrance, and found myself in the kitchen. I introduced myself to the kitchen supervisor who, after shaking hands, said: “Oh yes, we told Wopko to expect you.” He suggested I wait in the TV room. After about five minutes the supervisor returned with a tall, grey-haired man, in an orange shirt, with a blue jacket and trousers. Despite his height, the man seemed unassuming, an anonymous face in the crowd. The supervisor introduced us: “Here’s your visitor, Wopko!”

As we shook hands I noticed his hands were large but soft. His eyes also had a soft, moist expression. When I started telling Wopko that I admired his poetry, he looked frightened for a moment, and rubbed his hands nervously. He started talking about how he had just returned from Swaziland, where he had been working as a mechanic. At first I thought there had been a mix-up, and that this wasn’t Wopko. Before I could say anything, however, he had taken items out of a plastic bag: a Bosal Africa catalogue, an empty coffee tin, some old magazines. He pointed to the bar code on the coffee tin and said: “That’s a good poem.”

I decided to press for some biographical information. He was born in Middelburg, in the Cape, wasn't he?

Yes, he had spent his childhood there.

And he studied at the University of Potchefstroom?

Only for a year, and then he decided to study Fine Arts at the Pretoria Technikon. The only thing he remembered about Potch was taking a trip to Durban and buying a large tin of pineapples, which he sent back to his parents. When his father opened the tin, the fruit was rotten.

Hadn't he lived in Mozambique for a spell?

Yes, but only for a very short while, but that was long ago, back in the sixties.

And his work in Botswana?

Yes, he worked as an artist for the department of information.

And what sort of writing did he do in Botswana?

It was here that Wopko made another illogical statement. In answer, he spoke about a little boy who used to siphon petrol from cars and then sell it in order to get money to go to bioscope.

He had published only three collections of poetry, was that correct?

Yes, there were only three. His job kept him so busy that he was unable to produce much work.

I asked him which jazz musicians he liked.

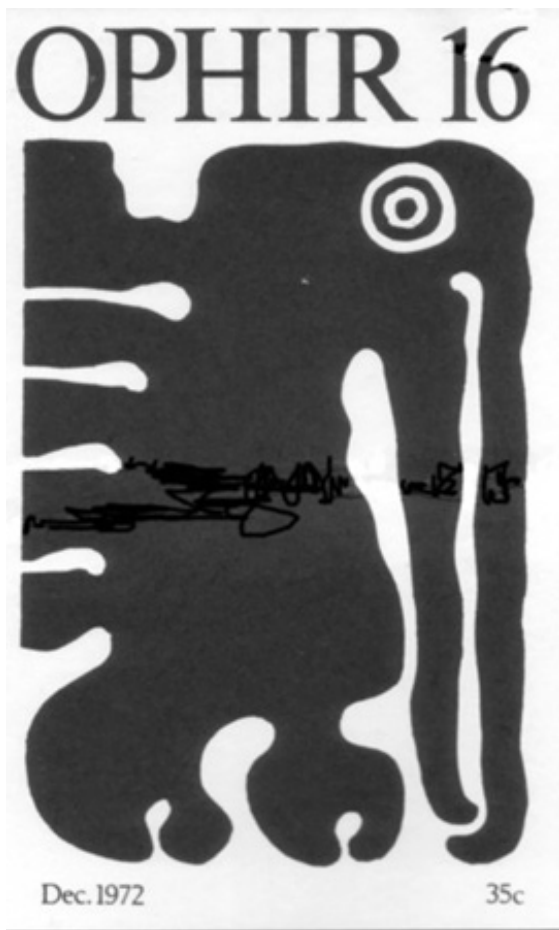
"Don't speak to me about poetry," he replied. "Speak to Lionel Abrahams."

Next Wopko took up the Bosal catalogue and started leafing through it. He pointed to a key diagram of some implement: this, he told me, was a wonderful poem.

Then he pointed to a photograph of a pulley: this was an instrument used to drop crates on people walking the street. Looking at another photograph, of a high-powered drill, Wopko said it was a torture machine designed by Hitler.

By this time I was beginning to feel uneasy, when Wopko himself broke the spell by saying that he had to go now, or else he would miss tea. As he started walking off, I said it had been a privilege to meet him, and asked if I could visit him again.

No, he said, he didn't like visitors. Then he laughed, and walked back to his room.



i don't want that suburban house
i don't want a second car
a swimming pool a lawn a boring Sunday
no, none of that

i am tired, so very tired
tired of the hate stare
tired of broken telephones
tired of non-white entrances
tired of being a burden
i am tired, tired of hating

i don't want the soothing colours
Of tv. the news and drink some more
to wash me clean
no, please none of that

(Wopko Jensma, from *I Must Show You My Clippings*, 1977, Raven Press)

Note: Wopko Jensma disappeared from the Men's Home in 1994. Nobody has heard of him since.

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3 Responses to "An encounter with Wopko Jensma"

1. Johan van Wyk Says:

February 12th, 2008 at 9:02 pm

Very interesting. What exactly is the address of the Salvation Army's Men's Home? Apparently Wopko's body, without a head, was found...like he predicted in one of his poems.

2. Gary Cummiskey Says:

February 12th, 2008 at 9:53 pm

hi johan,

The salvation army men's home used to be in simmonds street, downtown johannesburg, right by the highway, but if burned down shortly after wopko disappeared. i know there was speculation that he might have perished in the fire, but he had left before then. i know also the headless body story, but as far as i am aware there was no hard evidence that it was in fact wopko. the headless body believed to have been wopko was found in northern cape, as i recall. it is however more than likely that by now he is dead, just another forgotten unknown stranger found somewhere in the street or whatever.

gary

3. Fernand F. Haengi Says:

April 17th, 2008 at 10:46 pm

If anybody is interested, please email me and I can send you a PDF of a number of articles on Wopko Jensma which we have in our archives in Basel, Switzerland - I have not yet had time to put up a page on Wopko on our archival site which is <http://www.art-archives-southafrica.ch/>

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