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BOOK REVIEW

Home from Home. New and Selected Poems. By Chris Mann. Fish Hoek, South Africa: Echoing Green Press, 2010. iv+182pp. Paperback, R150.

Well known in his native South Africa, Chris Zithulele Mann deserves wider recognition as a poetic voice that speaks with universal resonance. This collection of his poems, which are grouped into a series of sections with titles such as Animals, Blessings, Garden, Love, Satires, Sports, and Violence, reflect epiphanic moments in our lives that linger in the memory and imagination as ‘homes from home’, rooted in the world and everyday experience as well as the broader fields of national events and more universal spiritual realities.

Mann’s writing is technically refined and at the same time accessible and penetrating, with echoes of the biblical and classical worlds in moments familiar to all of us in the daily business of shopping, human encounter, chance experiences on holiday, at work or with family. In ‘Mandela’s Cell’ Mann catches the momentary vision of the imprisoned man in:

a cage of bricks and bars
as gloomy and as cramped
as racial bias in the mind.

He comes as a tourist, staring into the past, caught between the horror of the years of entombment and the moment when, as a latter day Lazarus, Mandela ‘walked out into the sun’. Time and space are explored in multiple dimensions: from the politics of modern South Africa we shift to Mann’s contemplation of fossil remains which leads him in the imagination to the lives of the animals that they once were so many millions of years ago, and from there to the ‘curse of Sisyphus’ which is upon the modern person of business trapped in the daily grind of the office.

Other moments are more intimate and personal, as the poet sits with his wife at ‘Evensong in Grahamstown Cathedral’, reflecting upon the ancient sung liturgy in which ‘you were lost in time’ and upon the experience of growing old—‘love maturing’ or ‘ruining time’?—as time moves at different, simultaneous paces, the liturgical, the human, the eternal, and the temporal. Mann does not judge or condemn. Being a true poet he does not see that as his business, but rather it is to show us, and to offer up the everyday for our contemplation and perhaps our sympathy or just better understanding. Through his eyes and in these various epiphanies

we come to see a little more clearly through the limitations, the foolishnesses, and the sheer ordinariness of the everyday to things of more enduring importance to be found in weddings, in bars, in the old persons' home, or in the simple event of a child and her father mending a lawnmower.

Everywhere there is a touch of humour, but light and one to which we can readily relate; as for example, in the description of the cricket match between fathers and sons with its anxiety not to let the lad down in front of his friends, or the moment when the son at the crease faces 'an alpha-male, now bald', who bowls—but the boy survives. Nature is ever present in the flowers, insects, and animals—as are music, suffering in age and death, poverty. The spirituality of these poems is lightly present in the simple and difficult task of seeing the eternal in the present and the spirit in the material. Is a poet, finally, a translator, working always on the limits of what is understood and what is possible to express?

Translation, of language and experience,
is often like that, a tricky choice
among illusions, none of them complete.

Chris Mann is a poet who deserves to be better known, his voice a gentle and articulate reminder that within the limitations of habit and custom there are moments of revelation hidden even and perhaps especially in the simple narratives of human experience and encounter.

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