

Module	ENG1501
Year of Publication	2002
Title of Publication	The New Century of South African Poetry /Chapman, M
Edition	
Publisher	AD Donker Publishers
Chapter number	
Chapter title	The New Century of South African Poetry (various pages) / cM. Chapman
Page	108, 109, 223, 226, 227, 298, 299, 333, 334, 348, 349, 357, 401, 409, 410, 427, 428, 439, 441, 444, 445, 448, 449, 458, 459, 469



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Higher Education

When my thinking was but folly,
Then I dreamed of satisfaction
If I read my books and studied,
Pondered learning, mused on wisdom,
Striving for some understanding:
Now, today, my mind is weary.

I have spent so many years
Turning over leaves of books
Whose authors' skins were white;
And every night I sat alone
Until the new day's sun arose:
But now, today, my eyes are throbbing.

And poets who were black I called on,
Those who sang of kings' ambitions,
Those who praised our brimming bowls,
And their wisdom too, I thought on,
Mixing it with white men's teachings:
Now my mind's a battlefield.

He who does not know these things
And sleeps untroubled through the night,
Never reading till the dawn,
Not knowing Cicero or Caesar,
Shaka, Ngqika or Moshweshwe:
He, today, is light of heart.

Those I grew with, those unlettered,
When they meet me, they despise me,
Seeing me walk on naked feet
While they travel in their cars,
Leaving me to breathe their dust:
These today are chiefs and masters.

Should I try to change my ways
And pick up crumbs such men may drop –
These, my fellows who have prospered?
But I know that I am fettered,
Prisoned by my love of learning:
What I am and love, enslaves me.

But now I think about the time
When age and weakness must defeat me;
Now I search my bags and pockets,
But I find there, only books;
These, no matter where, pursue me:
Let me then resolve their message.

I see the names of all the nations,
I see ancestral eyes regard me
While ancestral shields are hidden
As, from their tombs, the spirits listen
And tell me I should come and share
Their bowl, for I am not forgotten.

So I absorb and add and store
Wisdom for the Zulus' children.
The day may come to see that treasure,
The day may come to have discussions
And learn from all my nightly writings,
Never written from ambition:
For you, ancestral spirits, urged me,
Inspiring me through hours of darkness!

But then I shall be here no longer.

(tr. isiZulu D. McK. Malcolm and Louie Friedman)

Nightfall

I watch the darkness falling
And hills withdraw their shadows:
The sun, like ochre, reddens.

The swallows are at rest,
The sea-wind still and silent;
Above me fly the bats.

The Single Voice

Of me there are many:
one, and one, and one ...
Of you there is one
as of a people, a continent.
When you speak drums magnify your voice
which belongs to all the silent, who cheer.
While I speak a dozen voices
express other things.
In even the intimate final cell
you are not alone – all your brothers
are there with familiar history to claim
the thud of your bruising,
the crackle of your shock.
My own words take, remake and celebrate
the wrestled meaning of my hours.
I add this separate tale to tales
from one, and one, and one,
and you as one, all piecing out
(as da Gama's maps pieced out
the half-known line of Africa)
this human shape.

To Halley's Comet

Good evening, little visitor.
We know you're there, it's in the news.
But who'd have thought you'd be so shy,
so hard to spot, among the stars?
Who'd have thought, instead of streaking through,
flashing that famous double tail,
autographing the prophetic sky,
you'd do an elusive Garbo act?
Perhaps it's because, this time round
you find we know too much
about a dirty undense snowball
only as big as Table Mountain, say,
that only shines because the sun
lends it a bit of common light.
You've lost your ancient awesome mysteries
your sign-dimension that could move
the old Wise Men, King Harold and Mark Twain.

this learning poem is for you

this learning poem is for you
my sleeping child
before i become confused and forget
which is the star and which you

but you are so much more than any star
that even i, forgetful as i am
unused to separating light from light
find yours the brighter of the two

why should i compare you to a star
when the brown earth glows like the sun
water gleams, and autumn leaves
fly like sparks from a whistling wheel

god has given light enough
to those who seek it
but i am learning too
his special grace in choosing you

are you the river or am i

are you the river or am i
do i flow into the sea or do you flow into me
why is it when i try to slake my thirst you disappear
when you try, i appear

you have never stopped calling me
i have never stopped answering you
whose longing elicited this longing in me
whose love buried me in sorrow

i, even i, even as i am
know the loneliness of separation
as sails of clouds, like memories
flee across the windswept sky

you are all that i love, all that i can love
yet how do i love you, know you, know that i love you
when all that you are remains unknown to me
and all that i am is known only to you

i carry within me the grief of all loving
would you be different if i knew you
would i be different – can a flower know
what it means to be a flower

all the silt of my journeying
all the salt of my yearning flows into you
and all longing, every love, all knowing, every loss
everything you are comes to rest in me

they call you *mister steve biko* now you're dead

they call you *mister steve biko* now you're dead
and though your death
may leave them cold, may leave them cold
they who tormented you when you were alive
call you *mister steve biko* now you're dead

so many garlands others have placed
around your neck, around your neck
and you've been given coverage
the size of a rugby field
now you're dead, but you're dead

the best advocate in the land
was your voice, was your voice
and what does it matter what was said
at an inquest the best advocates in the land
may speak for the dead, but they're dead

they call you *mister steve biko* now you're dead
and though your death
may leave them cold, may leave them cold
they who tormented you when you were alive
call you *mister steve biko* now you're dead

Sometimes when it rains

Sometimes when it rains
I smile to myself
And think of times when as a child
I'd sit by myself
And wonder why people need clothes

Sometimes when it rains
I think of times
When I'd run into the rain
Shouting 'Nkce – nkce, mlanjana' [drizzle – drizzle, stream]
When will I grow?
I'll grow up tomorrow!

Sometimes when it rains
I think of times
When I watched goats
Running so fast from the rain
While sheep seemed to enjoy it

Sometimes when it rains
I think of times
When we had to undress
Carry the small bundles of uniforms and books
On our heads
And cross the river after school

Sometimes when it rains
I remember times
When it would rain hard for hours
And fill our drum
So we didn't have to fetch water
From the river for a day or two

Sometimes when it rains
Rains for many hours without break
I think of people
Who have nowhere to go
No home of their own
And no food to eat
Only rain water to drink

Sometimes when it rains
Rains for days without break
I think of mothers
Who give birth in squatter camps
Under plastic shelters
At the mercy of cold angry winds

Sometimes when it rains
I think of 'illegal' job seekers
In big cities
Dodging police vans in the rain
Hoping for darkness to come
So they can find some wet corner to hide in

Sometimes when it rains
Rains so hard hail joins in
I think of life prisoners
In all the jails of the world
And wonder if they still love
To see the rainbow at the end of the rain

Sometimes when it rains
With hail stones biting the grass
I can't help thinking they look like teeth
Many teeth of smiling friends
Then I wish that everyone else
Had something to smile about.

Tatamkhulu Afrika⁴³

Sudden Yellow Sign

I say to myself: Now,
now I will rest,
sink back in the soft mesh
of this sun, rest:
enjoy flowers without twisting them
into tortuous metaphors,
savour a wind,
crisp with a sea's salt,
or spicy with cinnamon,
without trapping it in the wind-sock
of my niggling search for
pretentious sense.

Yes, just rest now:
sink back on a green grass
that is just a green grass,
not a botanical outburst
of fecundity excusing
my own accountable excess:
listen to a bird singing
clean, clear notes of uncluttered,
utilitarian birdspeak,
wings pinned, fluttering,
on a blue, wide sky void
of everything save space.

Get on my bicycle,
turn down the hill,
wind sighing through the spinning wheels' spokes,
ride all the way down through Woodstock's
grey shops, grey streets,
sharp, grey flints on a building-site,
churchbells' dolorous, slow tongues,
small rain starting from
the dropped belly of the sky,
rallying in sudden rivulets,
getting the first debris moving along.

I pedal faster, head down,
heading for the sun,
not to eulogise, analyse:
just to lie in it, rest,
be creation's insentient kin.
Then the Indian corner-shop's yellow sign bursts
through the grey
like a shout of pure joy at its yellowness,
and I am jumping inside with that yellowness,
arse over tip for a metaphor
that will reduce it to sense.

Ummi

I looked at my hands last night,
and remembered her:
and the rickety stairs that writhed
up to the floor she had made her fief,
where sometimes she rented out
a grudging space to carefully screened,
practising Muslim gentlemen –
of whom, it seemed,
she had decided I was one.

Tall and gaunt,
arthritis remodelling her limbs,
menacingly black,
old-style walking stick
gripped in her large
as a man's hands,
she prowled like some lame tigress through
the monastic, small rooms,
strangely flaming yellow eyes
telling of a rage I could not comprehend.

Evenings,
she prayed,
all her flesh except the face
voluminously swathed,
the rooms suddenly alert
with terror of the God brought close –
and as suddenly distanced when she rose,
casting off her sanctity as she did her robes,

were not a person but this pure
necessity.

I found it strange
one day to see you do a handstand
and land back, not kneeling but
turned all about, your belly
proffered to the air, a slice of midriff
bared. Young, supple, separate.

This still stands clear
when other thousand-things have silted
down. We think we walk alone. But see,
I'm still a child who takes her steps
inside a web:
where you
have always been.

Balancing on Air

This poem arose during a course of radiotherapy

At Devil's Peak, bright
blustery days bring seagulls in
to float against a green so steep
it seems hung there, reduced by height,
or painted in with meditated care,
like those miniature Italian groves
beyond Renaissance sitters.

Undaunted, seagulls rise:
sheer scythes, all wing
and body; they tilt the eye
in watchfulness,
a patent hungering.

Below, I lean into the wind
but wearily, called by disease
to that Great Barn★
that gathers in the dying and the live,
though no one knows who'll harvest whom
among such moping stooks and sheaves
as line these shuffling corridors.
Day after day I go for rays
invisible and strange

that bore through air and scorch the flesh
and would scorch bone but for the care
the handlers take.

I trust them, as I must.
But with reluctance go
to enter those gloomy portals, leave behind
wind, sky and hill. The ancient words flash in.
So I lift my eyes – and meet
the seagull's glide,
that hanging in, the sidelong
slide into a thermal. Then
a wobble. At once corrected,
but I've seen, am left conjecturing
why one whose element is everywhere
moment by moment still needs refine his skill.

Standing, I stare.
This then's survival:
not passive drift, nor fear,
but jaunty, sword-edge joy,
extempore:
this
balancing on air.

*Groote Schuur – the name of the hospital means 'Great Barn'. [ed.]

Outeniqua, Tsitsikamma, Storms River gorge – this
nostalgia
is thicker than water, my family,
between generations is all space
half filled with childhood rhymes, joined
by some uncertain wires.

Motho ke Motho ka Batho Babang
(A person is a person because of other people)

By holding my mirror out of the window I see
Clear to the end of the passage.
There's a person down there.
A prisoner polishing a doorhandle.
In the mirror I see him see
My face in the mirror,
I see the fingertips of his free hand
Bunch together, as if to make
An object the size of a badge
Which travels up to his forehead
The place of an imaginary cap.

(This means: *A warder.*)

Two fingers are extended in a vee
And wiggle like two antennae.

(He's being watched.)

A finger of his free hand makes a watch-hand's arc
On the wrist of his polishing arm without
Disrupting the slow-slow rhythm of his work.

(*Later. Maybe, later we can speak.*)

Hey! Wat maak jy daar?

– a voice from around the corner.

No. Just polishing baas.

He turns his back to me, now watch
His free hand, the talkative one,
Slips quietly behind

– *Strength brother*, it says,

In my mirror,

A black fist.

Soon they'll tell me
Why women confront the mother
If the infant refuses her breast
But accepts that of a stranger.

Is it because they are asking
That this world is changing?
Or is the world changing
because they are asking?

Being Human

In my life
I planted seeds and seedlings
Which had brief appearances.

Though very few
I also planted trees,
Whose shade now cancels my shadow
And whose heights dwarf my ego.

Raising young ones is lovelier
And toughest by far.
Their easy laughter
Puts a spark in my life,
But each time they break
It kills a part of me.

'So? Didn't I warn you?' you asked.
And I, that frayed riposte, 'Was there
a choice? Besides, we're different

and hands long bound are always limp.'
The sun ovened the mountain air,
the road seemed steeper than before.

Prickling with sweat, I drove slowly,
scheming like the hunter-gatherers,
the pastoralists who came before

ways to survive in that landscape,
to extricate vision from sight
and track the eland through the thorns.

Testimony

I do not love you anymore.
I used to, when we were young
and words like love were tumbling in our thoughts.
The scent of jasmine in the streets of spring,
the press of starlight through a sky of leaves
was what such words then meant to me.

But when I track back through the years
and see what we have shared,
the bliss and strain of parenting,
the stress of work and terror at the loss of work,
the illnesses, bereavements and despair,
I reach a truth we thought we knew
but only glimpsed in ghostly silhouette,
that more, much more's enfolded in love's gift
than youth and starlight and the scents of spring.

Ah no, my subtle-fingered, humorous one,
stepping back a moment from your easel, brush in hand,
oblivious to the ringing of the phone,
I more than love you now,
I cannot bear to think of life outside your plenteous horn.

And when I recollect your flying curls,
your mulberry-coloured jacket and your black beret,
and see you standing in a midnight doorway once again
where jasmine's fragrance drifted through the dark
and stars outlined your tilt of head,
your fling of hair, the white camellia of your throat,
that love, if such it be returns,
that wild, sweet, fiery exhilaration storms back
and cloudbursts through my mid-life's shaken heart.

Seitlhamo Motsapi⁴⁶

shak-shak

& the carnival entered the last streets
of the shantytown of

my soul // lightning speed rhythm
light moving heavy swinging hip

& so the poor wd throw pots of paint
curdled in the heart to the drowsy skies

so the portraits wd sprout, paint
of our joy colouring the clouds

riotous multicolour, righteous marching
shak-shak prophet majaja in front

riotous bell & thundering drum
shak-shak mthembu foot

sore from his impatient corns

& the carnival entered the last street
shak shak landscape grey

hunger a mere sunshine away / & yet
& yet the joy – profuse like air

mirth in madness, spirits rejoicing

& so the madmen – the high
voltage jolly demons, feet

shoo shoo shifty snap shuffle

& so the merry madmen of my soul

hand the season's last stomp
after the chafe & bruise
of the 8 to 5 tortures

& while the electrick carnival
kicked the weals off
for the redeemer

already there's a sign
in the sky
for those who see

already the graffiti's up
the walls of my soul:

HISTRYS ON DE SIDE OF DE OPRES

enia

my love is like a river or a fist with forty fingers
my love is like a river that swallows mirrors & saxophones
& spits out the purple pink salt of songs without heads
while the skies dance like loa grandmothers

my love is a forty-headed fist
sated on the scented innards of mediocrities
that smile like overdressed rainbows
while temples run into my frenzied wounds
my love is like a road that has grown wings
travellers drum their contemptible corrosions
up the walls of my head
that spits out the tasteless feet of nomads

my love growls softly slow into a child
or a knot of long-legged affirmations
tranquil & ray-banned like ancestor khoisan
against the boiling wiles of the sun
that is silent like the battered death
that sleeps on the skeleton coast

Mungu ndiye ajua kila kitu
the elders say

God is the one who knows everything
God is the one who knows everything

conversations

1

i say constantly to God:
leprosy is everything in the bone
with its own sea and its own sadness;
and from the north pole its disease all comes down
in one go, bearing its cross
and wearing its guise –
dying as always in someone's palms.

2

it is good to be trivial when the time allows
for men like termites will gnaw and tear at your soul,
and in New Brighton at the strike of 10
simply hijack your soul.

3

sometimes all our lives sing out of tune,
all in a choir with a single purpose,
everything in many directions is spoken out,
aloud there.

4

sometimes we talk of trivial things,
of nothing at all
and only there my brother
each piece of human sadness pierces the winter air like a bang,
throttles in its ribs
a gulp of air.

happiness

For Saphokazi

i know i have forgotten you
like the sea that forgets the blue sky, like the sun
that forgets to heat the land,
a pain so deep settles in all familiar places,
and i am deeply disturbed, and i am sad.

i wrestle with the quills of madness:
dead melodies of joy, where will i find you?
i know i have missed you with a number so deep,
and what the eye doesn't see, my heart feels.

a sea-shell sings to me the music of earth,
the last soil sells to me a heritage,
the madness of the land heals my name.

love poem

your lips are full of thunder.
in my mind your eyes open,
are full of gold –
are numb.

some fanfare resides there,
stars fall, are splattered
on tiny shoots, on seeds
beneath the grass, in the windmill's shade.

sunday school was a bore but mamoruti
was a sweetie giving out sweets
i laughed at nate moruti's gap between teeth
& had nightmares of hellfire & modimo pointing
his accusing finger thru the roof
i screamed knelt confessed my sins
fought when my brother got amused
didn't know i lost my lastborn status when i
boasted that my sister tumi came by flymachine
in classroom it was not worthy
reciting wordsworth's solitary reaper
to a teacher with a cane in hand
i waited anxiously for the sound of schoolbell
it was cool after school
shirts untucked
wearing our pants loose below the waistline
i imitated bra eddie twisted refilee's arm
took her bracelet trying to fall in love

endofaya

twenty fifty two zone nine meadowlands
was the address i dressed
with pride in delela style i learned
to survive on the blade of oukapie

love's greenery

when your heart pumps love in my veins
I see no greater joy under the skies
hand in hand in love's greenery
we trip & fall
we trip & fall
your lips on mine to paint the scenery
love deeper than a bottomless ravine
we keep falling
& rolling
affection echoes from heart to heart
as we float in the tides of passion
love wearing the captain's cap
we sail on
& on

& still on
there is nothing
more fulfilling

shela

echuuu ...
you step on my bosom's toe
your eyes
chew my heart sweet & slow
hela ngwana
is your name
the same as the flame
that lights up my candles
show me your handles
i want to hold so moja
cos you go to my head like spoja

There have to be both of them or it doesn't work.
Grandfathers, light and dark.
They've been here all the time,
waiting for you. You have to be willing
to let yourself be kissed by invisible lips,
to unfold yourself on the lawn
while a truck hoots and seagulls with second sight
are laughing at you. Take it in good spirit.

For us, the world gets better.
We have passed the time of decay
and are unwrapping new skin for our century of happiness.
Come Oupa Schaapje and Oupa Boeli,
you must be here
to smell the fresh bread of the early mornings,
there's enough for you, more than enough. I will adopt you.

To live in the place where your grandfathers lived.
Imagine.

Seaworthy

Not retreating
from your cuts and your sores
plastered over,
from your caverns
where rats buy endless rounds of drinks,
from your weeping pavements
and your salt glare,
not shunning the burnt skin
you burnish like shields
and your acid kisses,
not hiding here in my green heart
I am rising,
with my ropes of hunger and my bare feet
I am coming out
to gird you,
your northwest memory
and your southeast curses,
your holds full of golden bones and baby hair,
your raw hull torn through the soil
and filled with seeds,
I am casting my nets

over your glass sails with their arrogant wings,
over your moontrapped mast
and the diamonds stashed in your wicked crow's nest:
holding all your ends together
drawing you close to me,
welding you to my childhood shoulders,
lifting you through the first swell
I breast the ocean waiting for us, sure
of your weathered shadow that will be my raft,
and my hand-knotted song, your sounding line:
now we are sailing into the deep century rising under us,
not sinking

Black Things

the moon was cozy above karam's cafe
where the half-ous hung around
warm in the haze of stompie-ways and pacman machines
where i free as the koeksiester behind the counter
twisted sweetly and smiled
posing my way through a *scope* magazine
so far far away from night

we all heard the pavement crack
and our noses swam to the pool of blood
but our tidy shadows slipped away
from that black thing
that darted desperate eyes through our dream

they say tsotsis swiped his Friday pay
fucked him up till he flopped on the street
like a stick of thick biltong
his tight lips torn towards the tar
to give his driest kiss

i say a man is neither man nor dog
face down in the dust
there were no brothers nor bitches
when the moon collapsed
just blood and blackness
big blackness of our street
and a horrible, hollow black nothing
that dangles from a cuphook in our souls

Gone are those spicy words ...

Gone are those spicy words I smelt
on my lady
once a blackboard
always a book
which I paged through
flip-flap
 flip-flop
lekker insidious scents i read
on her farmyard face
with its kiepie cage mouth
that always kept me from pecking

the mealies of her mind
and two muddy pond eyes
where laughter splashed
and none-of-my-business news rippled
to whirl into the wetness
gone
she's gone
with her sugar-cane voice
that grew tall and green in my urban daydreams
and i didn't even kiss her cage goodbye
didn't say how
how much i needed
to hold
her body's breast to mine
just so long as to erase my fears
my sore yet fruitless fears
of losing, of loving
but she's gone

Kelwyn Sole⁴⁶

Whales

Their lugubriousness.

The daintiness of huge bellies
hung in infinity

an oil of laughter
 beached
by waves on hermeneutic shores
among condoms and crumpled valentines,
boomed into the fetid caves
where my desire scuttles.

Deep in the valleys of the ocean
aquamarine with distance
they lift their clown faces,
dance, display
the ease of a ponderous
grace

that glides
beneath all surface storms.

Invention of Tradition

As they work, hum
I watch the morning flash
against broken bottles in the veld
delustre and diminish
on grimed bus windows
that swing past

the glare strengthens
outside the classroom
sun like a peel
in the empty lot
with garbage rustling