

The Music of Ordinary Things

How frightened we were,
you clutching a handkerchief to your mouth,
me looking back, then jumping sideways
as a snarling Alsatian, fangs bared, leapt at my arm,
both of us running as fast as we could,
running with hundreds of people
away from the dogs, the soldiers, the teargas
as the music booming across the show-grounds,
the gum-trees in the car-park, the cars
suddenly went quiet.

This was laughable, homicidal, insane,
as mad as the day I stood on a stage,
guitar ready, with Mandla and the band
and looked out over the crowds on a field
and saw the riot squad vans arrive
and people run stooping over the grass.

Leave, leave right now!
said the policeman in baggy blue trousers
who'd leapt on stage and grabbed a mike,
The magistrate has declared this gathering illegal.

This was more, much more than madness,
it was a sepsis, a paranoia
which loathed the Orpheus of the Other
and choused the psyche, got worse and worse,
was only bearable as yours, beloved,
yours was the music I came home to each day.

Yours was the plainsong that sustained me
throughout the cacophony of those terrible years,
yours was the cheerful, resilient, unwavering
and unpretentious music of ordinary things
that kept love's polyphony playing in my mind.

I mean the country ballad twang of your voice
sorting out a squabble between the kids,
the call and response of a village *ingoma*
as you talked on the phone with family and friends,

the night-club diva's whispered croon
that shattered bright ecstasy from grim despair,
the *Hail gladdening light* in a Sunday pew
igniting hope in the darkest of weeks.

And that is the music which still sustains me
years after the day, when back on the grass
after playing my guitar on a stadium platform
I watched a helicopter drop like a chariot
out of the heaven of a hot blue sky
and sang with the crowd, with all the earth
as a man in a shirt of many colours
slowly ascended the steps of the stage.

For yours, yours is the voice in the garden at dusk
that calls me to look at the small green beans,
yours is the laughter in the passage at home
that's on the phone to children long gone
and yours is the band I listen to
when I lay my head on your breast at night

I hear in its stadium a song
inseparable from love's resilient counterpoint,
whose music will still be playing
when our two songs have ended
and we're at one in the hum of the molecules
that sing in the dust and dew of earth
as well as the roar of the stars.