

Chris Mann

Home from Home: New and Selected Poems

(Fish Hoek, South Africa: Echoing Green Press, 2010)

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Chris Mann's poetry is not well-known in the United States, but as the world is globalized, his is a voice that needs to be heard. Editorial copy on his very first collection acknowledges: "His poems spring from South African reality, the South African voice. Yet they also embody and echo cadences from the whole tradition of English verse." Mann resides in South Africa where he is Professor of Poetry at Rhodes University, in Grahamstown. Among his numerous awards are the Newdigate Prize for Poetry from Oxford University, the Olive Schreiner Prize, and the Thomas Pringle Award. In his acceptance speech for the Pringle Award in 2008, Mann said that Pringle's poems, written nearly 200 years ago, "were sensitive to the natural environment and critical of human injustice," qualities that Mann himself values dearly. After more than a dozen books, *Home from Home* marks the first comprehensive sampling of poetry since Mann's *First Poems* was published in Cape Town in 1977.

The book (180 pages of poems) is designed alphabetically in triplets. The sections run *Animals*, *Art*, *Bees*, and so on, for 40 sections. Each section contains three poems drawn from across his oeuvre to represent the category. The book contains poems from every book he has published plus more than two dozen recent poems not previously collected. If the reader is unfamiliar with Mann's work the sense of reaching across time may be lost. For example, "In Praise of the Shades" comes from his first collection of poems. The concept of the shades, the presence of those gone before us, is foundational in Mann's work. The shades whisper, "You are not what you are, / remember us, then try to understand." Mann's poetry is always about trying to understand. And understanding takes place in a larger context than the individual; it must consider the universal scope.

Another poem that focuses on this understanding through a cosmic chain-of-being, is "Seahorse." In his acceptance of the Pringle Award, Mann identified this poem as addressing "the restless, aching desire to belong" to something much larger than a single, human body. "We heal the separations, the apartheid in our minds," he goes on, "by acknowledging that our inner life is saturated with

the shades of other people completely different from us in personality and culture.” In the poem a pair of seahorses who live “in the estuarine tides of mythic time,” meet each day to renew connection as they hold tails together and dance. In the speech, Mann explained that the seahorses became a reminder, and thus the seminal image of the poem, showing through “our anthropocentric hubris” that “we belong most when we love.”

“Saying Goodbye to the Romans,” a poem in the category *Transitions*, addresses “the apartheid in our minds” with subtlety and charity. In post-apartheid South Africa, it has become too easy to point fingers and cast blame. The poem is written in three numbered parts, the first describing the violence that took place when the Romans withdrew from England near the beginning of the fifth century, the second assessing the unchangeable alterations that have taken place in their culture, and the third identifying the “old if bitter consolation” of their unwanted presence. One does not have to look far to realize the parallel between Roman-occupied Britain and South Africa under apartheid. And Charlie Marlow’s first words of *Heart of Darkness* strike alarmingly accurate: “And this also [. . .] has been one of the dark places of the earth.” The poem, written less than a decade after Nelson Mandela’s government began unifying the New South Africa, points out the necessity of character reform rather than government reform, concluding, “As if an end to the Romans / could bring improvements to the soul!” Personal responsibility toward the human and natural environment takes a higher role, in Mann’s mind and his poetry, than fault-finding. The speaker ends “Saying Goodbye to the Romans” with “I miss being able to shrug and say, / Not us, not us, the Romans are to blame,” pointing out the role of the reader in making a positive difference in the larger world.

A final poem that I would like to single out is “Bougainvillea.” As with “Saying Goodbye to the Romans,” this poem reads more than one way. It is ostensibly about the flower, which is identified in the first stanza:

Late spring, the bougainvilleas
in lank, thorn-spined clusters
of purple, crimson and orange
sprout in Grahamstown’s streets.

The poem is about the harsh living conditions under which the plant exists. But just as the Romans might represent people beyond themselves, so too might the bougainvillea. No people are named in this poem, with the exception of a “you” and a “her.” The “her” is a possessive pronoun for “a slow shadow whose young / live overseas” and is not even given a humanizing noun in reference. And yet this poem is very much about people. The “you” witnesses “shoot-outs // and rape on the midday news,” and the “season of dread” which initially appeared to modify the habitat of the plant becomes applicable to the hiding human

inhabitants as well. The people, it must be inferred, are hunkered into their own safety strategies, just as the plants and animals have done, the cycad, termite, and tortoise named in the last stanza.

The collection as a whole is like a Whitman's sampler box of chocolates. The poems each have a similar character, but inside each one has its distinct flavor. And Mann has been mixing and testing flavors for more than 30 years. It is time that his readership moved from regional to international. *Home from Home* is the book to do that. In five of the poems, Mann (or the editor) glosses words that may be unfamiliar to global readers. But for the most part, any unusual words (whether South African vernacular, Afrikaans, or various Zulu dialects) are clarified in context and give flavor to his diction.

Home from Home is available through the website at Echoing Green Press (www.echoinggreenpress.com). The book is illustrated by his wife, Julia Skeen, with delicate monotone drawings that enhance the mood of the poems. The appendix of the book contains four "song-poems from the show." The show referred to is a multi-media presentation at the National Arts Festival where the book was launched.