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Poems

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Rubriek vir skeppende werk

Litera is 'n rubriek vir die publikasie van skeppende werk in al die tale wat gewoonlik in *Literator* gebruik word. Die Redaksie wil daarmee 'n geïntegreerde beeld skep van die verskeidenheid nuwe skryfwerk wat Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers kan bied.

'n Elektroniese kopie van elke bydrae moet voorgelê word. Die naam en adres van die insender moet regs bo-aan die eerste blad vermeld word. **Verstrek ook 'n telefoonnommer, faksnommer en e-posadres waar u bereik kan word.** Elektroniese bydraes kan gestuur word aan Susan.Lourens@nwu.ac.za

Bydraes kan ook gepos word aan die Burohoof, *Literator*, Personeelbussie 251, Buro vir Wetenskaplike Tydskrifte, Privaatsak X6001, POTCHEFSTROOM 2520.

Section for creative writing

Litera is a section for the publication of creative writing in all the languages that *Literator* usually caters for. Through this section the Editorial Board wants to present an integrated image of the diversity of new writing by South Africans.

An electronic version of each contribution should be submitted. The name and address of the author should appear at the top right of the first page. **Please include a telephone number, a fax number and an e-mail address where you can be contacted.** Electronic submissions can be send to Susan.Lourens@nwu.ac.za

Contributions can also be mailed to the Head of the Bureau, *Literator*, Staff Box 251, Bureau for Scholarly Journals, Private Bag X6001, POTCHEFSTROOM 2520.



Chris Mann

Growing Pains

Ten years old and in my pyjamas
I stood on the staircase of a hotel
and saw my father talking in the bar.

It must have been well after dinner
in a small country town, Bothaville,
Kroonstad, it doesn't matter which.

We'd driven all day in his Dodge.
Maize stretched to every horizon
as car after chrome-trimmed car

cruised down the hot straight road
towards the watery bright shimmer
floating at the top of every rise.

This was the deep south of Africa,
its shacks, goats and skinny dogs
a kind of rural Mississippi ghetto.

and ours that festive cavalcade
the Mobilgas Economy Run
whose Pegasus flew on every car.

Dad was the Regional Manager
and I was so proud. In every town
men at the garage shook his hand.

I can still see how he stood in the bar,
a beer in one hand, his white shirt
open at the neck, the collar turned up

as he slung an arm around a mechanic
who'd come into the bar in overalls
when everyone, all of a sudden, laughed.

I turned on the stairs and sliding a hand
along the banister went up to my room
and lay on the bed, baffled and miserable.

I was, I realise now, discovering
separation, foreboding and love,
all feelings a boy had yet to name.

My mind was a windstorm, shooting up
and whirling thoughts that went nowhere
like dust-devils scampering on a plain.

Saying Grace

Wine-glass in hand, I look across the table.

The young are at the stove, heaping their plates
with mutton goulash, rice and bright green peas.

Far off inside me, my shades start murmuring.

‘Eat up!’ My grandmother’s scolding voice.

‘We had to scrimp and scrape for every penny,
I’m not, I’m not going to let you leave the table
until you’ve finished every scrap on your plate.’

Then my mother. ‘After the war I’d find an apple
behind a cushion, then mouldy bread in a drawer.

I said nothing. Your father had lain for months,
hiding in a field, half starved to death in Italy.’

And then an uncle. ‘After the blitz nobody knew
when next they’d eat. I found an egg in a gutter,
just dropped and left there, so I scraped it up
and carried it home wobbling in a cabbage leaf.’

Then Dumi at my Durban gate, talking politics
in that ironic Zulu of his when sanctions started
and factories laid off staff. ‘How will that help?

My young tonight will eat hot water, as before.’

Last a friend, after visiting relatives in Harare.

‘The suburbs had no electricity, day or night.
The taps were dry and when I opened the fridge
nothing, nothing except a small grey lemon.’

Voices, laughter and then I hear, 'Hey, dad,
 food's getting cold!' How can I say where I've been?
 I look at the faces around the table, at the hands
 outstretched, the rice that's gleaming on my plate

and say into the silence, *Benedictus, benedicate.*

Rites of Passage

1

Hoarse shouts of *Get him! Get him!*
 echoing from a few hunched anoraks
 lutching beers in a row on the stand.
 My brilliant dash below the floodlights
 was nearing its edge, its dive into fame.
 Ahead of me the try-line, the corner flag.

Ahead – what I was panting to achieve,
 what all young bucks I guess are after,
 points on a board, backslaps from a team.
Wham! Hit sideways round the knees
 I was over the side-line and falling
 when some heroic idiot rammed my back.

The whistle shrieked. The highveld grass
 rose up to meet me in a rush. *Crunch!*
 Gasp. Wheeze. Open eyelids. A crack.

Observe moths. Whizzing round floodlight.
 Red socks round ankles. A hairy leg.
 Sweating faces, staring from the sky.

2

Strange. I knew who the fellow was
 before I'd even hit the ground.
 A mining engineer, pursuing like me
 the mystic grail of higher education
 among Gold City's groves of academe.
 He'd sought to make men of us freshers,

inviting us to down-down vodka and beer,
to cleanse our straggly hair in toilet-bowls
and birth a barbed-wire brick on stage.
Which chivalry me and my brave knights,
the sad-voiced minstrel with a lyre,
the media squire, had graciously declined.
So when that stubbly prince of darkness
smote me and my imagination flat
I took it as a trial, a test of my *corage*,

and leapt up and dusted off my shorts
as nonchalant as if a sleeping-bag,
flying in the wind, had brought me down.

And when, next day, concealing a limp,
I carried my tray of porridge and eggs
across the dining-hall of College House
and saw him glower at me across his toast,
did I disclose my knees resembled oysters,
my bardic ribs were sorely bruised?

Not then, not then my knights, but now,
when men with hair-loss, bellies, bonds
and inner scars no longer don their shorts _

and sprint down raucous passageways
of club supporters onto hard fields,
but perched on bar-stools, mugs in hand,

pass into the oblivion of an anecdote,
a laugh, or it may be, live on a bit,
their red socks still around their ankles,

within the fixture, the sport of a poem.

Chris Mann

Fruit-trees in Deserted Fields

At times I've run a country road at night,
toiling slowly past scrub and lonely gums
to dull the ache of absence by fatigue.

Because tonight I feel so hollowed out
I've lost the will to pant along that road,
a basket man who yesterday was whole.

And so I brought a book of poems to bed
by Chinese hearts alive a thousand years
who wrote with sturdy eloquence of friends

whom work or war had torn from villages
and far-off lovers, with butterfly hands
whose painted lips grew still as ivory buds.

I loved the rows of green on every page
for they grew fruit-trees in deserted fields
and lined the seedlings in this aching gap
for you my distant loved one and my friend.

Cairn

Last night I heard 'cairn'
in my sleep of shattered scenes
as you walked with me so gracefully
along green growth and a sidewalk

as long as fortune. We have never

met before, I had never felt your
Hazel mid-length hair before
You appeared a rocker. Pants half-
way down your buttocks hanging
ivy from the cove you kept in a
side road.

Cobble street. 'Cairn' I hear you say.
I'm in a lucid state, answer myself with
what I know: 'Glencairn'.
Airy syllables act in my
auspiciousness.

But then you kiss some other girl in
front of me, I retaliate, take a stone,
walk up your road and make love
to someone strolling by. Stone shatters at my side.

You are a stranger.