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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ POETRY

Love: A Gift Shared Charitably

Lebohang May
Ian Sliney, illustrator
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Lebohang May offers this apologia in his dedication: “I may not have mastered poetry in motion and its rules but this is my poetry in passion and aspiration.” Indeed, passion and aspiration pulse through this volume. May’s fervent hopes for a better world vibrate in his writing. He does not shy away from suffering and tragedy and human cruelty, yet he brooks no excuses for lying down and allowing the spirit to be crushed.

Raised in South Africa, May became involved in politics at age fifteen, and joined organizations that sought to force the South African government to change its policies toward the nation’s public schools. He was arrested for participating in a plan to attack a police station, and sentenced to eleven years in prison. President Nelson Mandela granted him partial amnesty in 1997.

Throughout his tribulations, May never lost his conviction that education is the standard that will “trounce all the odds.” He founded the Senzeni Literacy Club in Washington, DC to “help promote competency and to offer aid to students by preparing them for higher education and help them pay for it.” Proceeds from the sales of this book will go to this effort.

The poems are powerful, despite May’s inconsistent mastery of English (reproduced here faithfully). “Betrayal” addresses not a personal infidelity, but the large-scale treachery of a system towards its people: “Go make mountain out of a molehill … / and cry over spoil of the spilled milk. / Who can trust a corroded shaky system? / In all our days of unending stunning work, / it’s untrue that we build castle in the air.”

In “Decide,” May’s words inspire the downtrodden to raise their eyes to the horizon and dare to aspire to a better future: “Since our trust and mighty faith is slanted, / may sun bring us light for us to choose. / Mighty sun you have unveiled our sickness / and for those confined tell your faith, choose! / Hail sun again, that magnifies your liberty … / sun that brightens future and gives us hope.”

Yet, this book is not simply a collection of rallying cries. May explores love, friendship, and struggles of a more personal nature as well. In “Amazing Love” he writes: “perhaps I should not meet a splendor of a woman. / I never thought ever love open pores so deeply, / chiefly when passions crush left us sweating.”

“Drive Home Joe” reflects on a friend’s struggle with alcohol: “If Joe remembers that blurred hazy fuzzy night, / the mucky night that overturns his sight … when alcohol effect caused a night in police care.”

In these commanding works, the poet entreats his fellow humans to behave honorably and stand up to injustice: “Whether we are owed and owe, / we are all called to be capable, / we are all called to pay a price … / a price of genuine reconciliation!”

Perhaps part of these poems’ power lies, paradoxically, in the poet’s imperfect English. He acknowledges shortcomings and tragedies, and stands tall within them to proclaim his passionate faith in human goodness and his aspiration for a loving world.

KAREN MCCARTHY (February 16, 2012)

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