

Apollo Cafe

Always I have meant to write of Apollo Café
Apollo Café has everything you need
Open on Sundays at 9:00 for the news
Open after-hours for bread and milk
On the corner-stand at 6th and Church
Johannesburg S.A. below the ridge
Always I have meant to write of Apollo Café

There are many Apollo Cafés in this poem
Each has his own with blue awnings
And moustaches smoke Winston and Good and Clean
And a catalogue of newlines and braaiwood
And the greased-over windows of curiosity
Packed with last-minute supergoods
Each has his own with overpainted frames

And prams and banana-peels and the City Council bin
And the leak of paraffin from a silver pump
Siphoning the poor juice of a spirit-stove
Between nets of bulbs and a shaking fridge
A necklace of cardboard Outspan oranges
And the sawdust of sandals and boots and straws
Each has his own or her own Apollo Café

The corner of commerce in a sluggish suburb
Meeting-place of caught-out consumers
Eggs in design boxes soap soup Coke
Crackers and Mars Bars dope racing forms
Crinkle chips sliced polony biltong and sweat
Condensed milk rusks biscuits instant balloons
Always I have meant to write of Apollo Café

And in this purple city of Johannesburg S.A.
When the jacarandas refine the air into sap
And the roots swell under tarmac pavements
Ready to bunch up the stone for bare feet
And the lethargic cleaner in a wide straw hat
Sweeps blood into a municipal bag that's when
It's time to write about your or my Apollo Café

When the secret life of things can no longer be hidden
When mine-dust in the eye-duct generates pain
The grass instead of waving and shining crawls forth
And the railway borders tumble up to billboards
And shunting and connected the cattletrucks bellow with heat
Christmas beetles bring down the thunder
That is the time to write of Apollo Café

Where the blue Fords of the Brixton Murder and Robbery
Crackle with rape and disaster and greetings
And Allied Publishing drops Sarie and Huisgenoot in bundles
And the butcher's delivery swings a calf's head
And the black poet's BMW stops for ginger beer
At the refreshment station on a hot afternoon
That is what Apollo Café is there for ever

Yours or mine it stays while we go by
Apollo Café is a fixture needs a face-lift
Probably isn't even called Apollo Café
Tram Terminus or Springbok or Madeira
Boland or Vyfster or Mixolodeon
On five thousand South African corner plots
But always Apollo Café is what I remember

In Johannesburg S.A. this purple city
Which feeds the hungry and cares for the poor
Which balances the GNP almost daily
Which emanates mercy over the wide land
Which stays a people town and loves the lame and the halt
In which I live save my soul
There is always a special Apollo Café

Its yellow-framed door is always open
For pawpaw and lichees and watermelon
For catfood and iced suckers and Marmite
And drinking yoghurt and bubblegum and lard
And cheddar cheese and mousetraps and brooms
Tuna peas bacon butter carrots chops
Matches candles fittings jelly Doom

And despite the reign of avarice and greed
Despite the sweepstakes and the price of gold
The rampant dollar and the declining rand
The pegging of the fuel-line and the ANC
The boycott of arms and sports and plays
Despite the ministers on TV with faces like frogs
At Apollo Café necessity holds sway

For a coin that's devaluing at Apollo Café
You can buy comic books and make a call
Buy liquorice and vetkoek and the wing
Of Farmer Brown and Dreyer's ice-cream
And milkshakes and coconut and samp
And return the empties and collect the tops
For a coin you can insert a silver jukebox tune.

STEPHEN GRAY