

In detention-Chris van Wyk

He fell from the ninth floor

He hanged himself

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing

He hanged himself

He slipped on a piece of soap while washing

He fell from the ninth floor

He hanged himself while washing

He slipped from the ninth floor

He hung from the ninth floor

He slipped on the ninth floor while washing

He fell from a piece of soap while slipping

He hung from the ninth floor

He washed from the ninth floor while slipping

He hung from a piece of soap while washing.

Click on Stanza for line by line discussion.

Author biography and socio-political setting

Van Wyk was born in 1957 and lived for a few years in Johannesburg's Newclare area (adjacent to Sophiatown) before his family relocated to Riverlea, a mainly working-class 'coloured' suburb. He published poems in the literary magazine *Staffrider* (an outlet for many black writers after 1976), and his collection of poetry *It's Time to Go Home* (1979) won the Olive Schreiner award in 1980. Since then he has widened the scope of his writing to include children's books, short stories and, more recently, two very well-received memoirs (autobiographies) — the best-selling *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy* (2005), and *Eggs to Lay, Chickens to Hatch* (2010). He was strongly influenced by political events (particularly the Soweto uprising of 1976), and this is reflected in his writing.

Content

The title immediately places the poem in apartheid South Africa, and comments indirectly on the number of deaths in detention of political activists during these years (at least 67 people died in detention).

The poet's intention

In order to expose and attack a horrifying practice, Van Wyk uses the kind of explanations typically offered by the security police for deaths in detention in South Africa. During the apartheid era, laws were passed which allowed the security police to detain people indefinitely without having to give any reason. Many people were tortured, some committed suicide, and some (like Steve Biko) died at the hands of their interrogators (those who were questioning them).

Structure

The basic technique used in this poem is repetition and variation. By taking this to ridiculous extremes, the poet pours scorn on the shallow 'explanations' offered by the security police for

deaths in detention. One of these was the claim that the detainee ‘fell’ out of a high window. The poem explores the likelihood of the three standard explanations of that time being true: (1) the detainee ‘fell’ from a ninth-floor window; (2) the detainee ‘slipped on a bar of soap while washing’ (in the shower); and (3) the detainee ‘hanged himself’.

All these ‘explanations’ point to a grim reality: at least 67 detainees died while in the custody of the security police — and the explanations offered often bordered on the ridiculous. How could someone accidentally ‘fall’ from a ninth-story window? How could someone ‘slip’ on a bar of soap while washing, and die as a result? How likely is it that someone would ‘hang himself’?

Lines 1, 2 and 13

Throughout the poem the poet experiments or ‘plays around’ with these standard ‘explanations’, in order to reveal how absurd (senseless) they were. Look, for example, at what happens to the opening statement (line 1), and at the way this becomes mixed up with the other explanations, until we have the ridiculous and impossible ‘He washed from the ninth floor while slipping’ (line 13). In the last line, ‘he hanged himself’ (line 2) becomes ‘He hung from a piece of soap while washing’!

The writer’s comments are indirect, because he never actually tells us what he thinks of detention without trial. It is left to the reader to conclude that it was a cruel and inhuman practice, and that the explanations offered by the security police were often cynical (in someone’s own selfish interest) in the extreme. In this way the poem makes a very powerful protest at this gross violation of human rights.

Because the poet bases the poem on the words used by the security police themselves, it is also an example of satire. (Satire is defined in your glossary as ‘harsh or critical mockery’ which is intended to ‘show up an evil or a vice’.)

Summary:

The poem is satire which aims to expose the behaviour of the South African police during the apartheid regime. It comments indirectly on the number of deaths that happened during the detention of political activists by not mentioning any names (green). The speaker uses the explanations typically offered by the security police for these deaths. Repetition and variation is taken to ridiculous extremes in order to attack and expose how absurd and senseless these explanations were. With each repetition the statement becomes increasingly strange and incredible and the variations create the effect of distorting/twisting facts. That the police expect the public to believe such obvious lies shows that they are arrogant and feel secure in their position as officials.