

Poems from Africa

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Morning in Kampala

The morning comes up sluggishly.
Kasubi Hill, where dead kabakas* sleep is still immobile,
The neighboring hill with a well-known church at its summit begins
to blink with cars
The sky wears a trace of smile as some distant rooster announces his
daybreak.
The cars are first to arise.
Then the familiar stretching and yawning of silverware, tables
awakened by the dishes,
Windows open their eyes
How sharp and unfrayed the morning shadows,
Alert and responsive.
Children try the first cry of the day to rouse the laundry still pinned on
the line

Some trees walk in the sun while others stand locked in sleep like horses.

One bird now prods the sky
A human whistle tickles the air
A rude hammering shocks the timber of the cells of a new building
As a truck farts up an incline.
Everyone's up now,
The morning is unshuttered.

* kabakas were the kings of the Baganda tribe before Uganda became a British colony and later a multi-tribal country.

In the African Market

A boy is needed.
A poor boy without shoes.
Nothing separates him from
Reality
Of soil and cement.

To bargain is necessary.
He must ask in his African tongue the
Cost
Of African tomatoes.
His bare hand grasps my
Physical reality
As he fills the straw basket,
His dark essence
Paling my light shadow.

In Africa

In Africa,
There is such a luxury of beauty,
That the trees by night discard their exquisite bloom.
By day,
Men with fir boughs
Must bend to sweep the riches into refuse piles.

Uganda Mission Church

Both arms raised
Nailed to air
As from each throat
Intoned like song
The private laments
Bound in a bundle
Blast of crickets
Serrate incantations
Crushing the Sunday sky
Beneath a weight of woes
Discretely
Together
Only Jesus could
Divine
Their drowning screams

Military Band

A Uganda band
Held me braked in first
(My foot clutched down)
As the practiced steps
Had to be run through to the last
Note of music
Irreversibly inevitable..
The sound slapped me
Increasing my breath
To see their uniformed bodies
Work in unison.
The precision and order was grand
And yet what power
Concerted all these men to
March to its design?
The possible beauty and abuse of Man
Vanished with music
As I intersected their passing route.

Sad Bride

Led from the car like an old woman
To the pose that would stare from their bedroom dresser
The bouquet of flowers suggested death
As it rested on her mooning belly
Her tiara twinkling with shiny beads
She sat in the place of honor
Seeming to sail over the festive
To the final demise
Like Rembrandt's Jewish bride
Feeling the grave grace
Of her changing body

I wrote this poem about a Baganda wedding we observed. After the ceremony, some of the women sang songs to the couple, advising them not to listen to mischievous rumors that they might hear about each other. The bride was very pregnant.

In a Mountain Hut

Within the mountain hut
Dark faces 'round the round room
Sheltered from the mountain cold
Sharing the sleep of night
Contiguous placement of bags
Drawing in the contained air
Hearing only the noise of each life
Lassoed by the metal walls
To disperse like seeds
In day
Not even knowing the name
To mark the final issuing forth

The mountain was Mt. Elgon, which requires an overnight hike to get to the top. We shared the shelter with a group of Ugandan Boy Scouts.

Picnic on Lake Victoria

By the grayness of the waves
Edged by our straw mat
We shared the light and air
As our sandwiches remade us
Kingfishers and fish dined.
Yet we dared not touch a drop
Of the dangerous body
So liquid in sound
Harbinger of invisible risks
Mocking the skull beneath our
Breaded lips
While small black feet
Shrank not from wet delights
Wading deeply
Smiling
At their tenuous life

Lake Victoria contains tiny parasites, which enter the body through the skin.

The Trees Are Swaying

The trees are swaying
As the air combs
Each leaf
The clothes line
Gently jumps
While dangling dresses
Dash up the fresh wave
My face and body
A rock in the stream
Over which the air forms
A flowing stillness.
The hemlocks nod
In a dreamy trance
Casting a spell on the
Silent grass

Lying low
Woven by the wind
While birds high
Seem suspended
By slender strings
Drawn to delight
Some pulling child

The Sun Shone On

The sun shone on
The hill and house
Where we had walked
Past the tombs
Dressed in sweat
Climbing the road
A Red Sea parting
Banana-tree seas
And knots of men
Sucking beer through long straws
That hill alone
Stunned
In a morning still full
With leaking liquid
The footprints washed smooth
No sign of our walk but the
Warmth now poured
From the fire greening jug

From the Balcony

From here it all looks cool,
Perhaps not neat,
But each random house or tree
Planted,
Set carefully down,
Yielding the delight of an accidental pattern,

The next stitch not planned,
No conceptual vision like tragedy.
It could have ended every other way.

It is cool from here,
Only the outlines visible,
Not the infinite differences that I can see
In the skin cells of my left arm
No two alike,
A confusion of differences
Distorted by my feelings.
It is distant in time,
It is so many footsteps marking paths
Through minutes from my straw chair.
I am looking at the future.

That's why it's cool.
It has not caught my heart
Nor irritated my eyes.
It's just a construct on my retina,
Its reality open to question.
If you do not see it
I cannot prove that it's out there.
How can it be so quiet and cool
And exist?

Beetle

I could not take my eyes off the
Beetle
As he slowly grasped forward,
An ancient man,
Testing before placing the full
Weight
Of his beetlely body forward.

A casual night visitor to my balcony
Left from the night's play
Up-ended,

Traumatized from walking on the sky
Only to be
Flipped
By my pencil.

Now his occasional movements
Attend his coming
Death
As I too strain to penetrate,
To fathom the
Transmigration to
Heap,
Crust-
Aggregate,
Lustrous
Stone.

Lion in the Grass

Lion in the grass
Stilly taut
Revealing each fiber
Flexed to firmness
Opposite my gaze
Ready to leap
Or to stand
Primordial presence
In a state of grace
Within himself
Strong amongst the straw
The tall grass,
So many spears at his side,
Mere symbols of the
Power he possesses
Thrust up
Against the sun itself.

Our family camped in the game parks and once actually viewed a lion from our campsite. More comfortably on other occasions, we viewed lions by looking out the sun roof of our VW camper.

O Giraffe

O giraffe of the long legs
With a neck
God pulled from the clay
And kept pulling from sheer
pleasure
Mosaic fur crowned with rounded feelers
Running along the sky on invisible tracks
Your well-lidded eyes screening
The lion of the sun.
As you graze on the light leaves
Your ungainly bow
Spays out with your front feet
A devotional
To the sun and moon and air
Who swaddle you,
Eternal infant heir

You Latinized Butterfly

You Latinized butterfly
Of the Mpanga forest,
Why do you rest on that stump there
With wings bobbing up and down
On an invisible tide?
Don't you know that as you
Dry your wings
Your stained-glass colors evaporate
Too,
The winged body windwardly
Rising
As your soul slips
Soundless,
Into the chrysalid earth

Mountain Rains

Then the rains
Sieved downward
And my blue poncho
Flowered on the mountain
A hooded bloom
Impermeable to the
Gift of the Gods
Letting the streams touch only its
Surface
Not sucking from the
Breast of Sky.
The path could not
Absorb the
Profound waters
Overflowing with
Cloud-juice
As their veins raced
Mountain mud and seed
In furious haste
Creating another mountain
For another day.
In wetness
I knew only the
Discomfort of my life
Sure only of the
Also shifting soil
Of my liquid face.

The Rains Rained Rainy

The rains rained rainy
And rainily wettened
Earthy Earth.
She, full-breasted and buttocksed
Gave off her sweaty perfume
As the watery streams outlined her shape

And slid and coursed and jerked
Down her sheened surface
Resting restfully under a blanket of soil.

The beaded mantel lightly covered
Hemlock shoulders and dripped
Deeper into the grasses' fur,
Meditating on a root,
Admitted at last into other forms,
A hundred nirvanas
Nirvanas
And what was is not

But the rains had rained rainy

The Sky Has Few Landmarks Today

The sky has few landmarks today
It has washed itself clean
Mopped its floor with soap.
Already it begins to undo itself
Off in a corner I see bits of fluffy dust
Accumulating,
Just the start of a mountain
It is still mostly swept under the horizon

Some of the sky has spilled onto the land
Running the trees into one another
Blurring the neat outlines of the houses.
Or maybe if I ran my fingers over the roofs
I would see that it is dust
Shaken from the blank grayness
Over there, in the western portion
Appears a luminous spot.
It threatens to open a big hole
To tear apart and
Break the even continuity of the sullen surface

It is too late anyway,
Another worn spot reveals some blue

And now some fray has bunched into bands of hills
And other skymarks and trceries
Do their day-shift work,
Which shall in turn be sponged off
By night, bathed in blackness.