Selected Poems & Commentary

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SELECTED POEMS

& Commentary
I SAW IN THE MORNING LIGHT

(the hanged, multiple to a single tree—
from a photograph of the time)

I saw in the morning light
a tree most rare full in fruit
And I saw the sighing bent
of branches holding
painfully unbreaking
in the open gaze of the sun
And I saw the harvest, plump
and darkly rich . . .

Alas, fruit . . .
How long you have strained
till the flow of juices
You have so become overripe
dripping blood
From your rusted hold
barely yielding
to the wind’s probing nudges
You have turned cold
against all
Against even the heart
that is chilling in its warmth
TENDER SHOOTS

A girl touched me.
Was it accident or
Was it design?
The fact is both.

She held her hand
In her hands.
Was there pleasure or
Was there pain?
The truth is both.
Pleased her hands were clean
Or else there is doom
From the black disease
She already had,
Even before she touched me.

But disappointed she was . . .
Has been robbed of her argument,
The proof mummy put in her hand:
The passion of a lifetime
Destroyed in a moment of daring,
The daring to touch me.

She will sure tell daddy
How she sees things now . . .
That another name is needed
For the being she touched.

The little girl touched me
And now her labour has begun.
Will she bring forth life?
Yesterday says no.
With mummy and daddy for mid-wife
Stillbirth is the rule.
A DAY IN NINETEEN NINETY TWO
-columbus/500th
-van riebeeck/340th
-ccil john rhodes/...
-etc. ... etc. ... etc. ...
i cross them all with the waters
of the four corners
with the Babel of every tongue baptized
be cool as the bread
of the baker’s dream
kindred birds have come
carrying their borrowed beaks . . .

II
The ghosts, everywhere like seed
From their dead mothers’ womb
Death as rain, as flowers of the crimson trench
As wind, as slate, as worm-scribbled text
A black inkwell stalks the night, scrapes, a spear blade of Dearth

From Cecil’s weighted foot:
Every toe a flame,
The mob his heel
Upstream to the bleakish moon, a scroll upon the Nile
Where unsaintly winds disperse the seed, papyrus wild
Upon the three returning ships
And a queen at last may read
The book she sent . . .

III
I am the gel of the breeze in the haze at dusk
The dark mist pocked in search of lard
The row of corn in the path and bleeding chucks

The bird truant beyond the ark
Telling the worlds I’ve seen
Of the little ghosts that are lingering long
By the lost theme of the thombush leaf

A storm of scowls, I beat walls
In quaint dissipating hauls
One and not at the oasis pout—stiff still at horns
The bared stain-lock

From the drooping thinnings
Of star-gush
    I walk on steeps
Eyes on flints
And creepers I wade . . .
NO SCARECROWS
IN CAPITAL’S JUNGLE
—“The Gulf War”

Eat, child, eat
The flying giant
    Is coming
He has wings
    Made of steel
He has fire
    In his tail
And a huge, single,
    One-dimensional eye:
Corporate interest
    And hell
To the rest

Child, eat
He is loosed
    Of the Cold War doom
His cough dislodged
    A billion stars—
Boom! Boom! Boom!
Have you
    Ever heard:
Beam some oil
    Up here?

Heard the chant
of late:
The scud must go
Its death is slow
In the deadliest scythe
In the Bagdad sky?

. . . well then, eat

. . . What UFOs?
What “alien mix”?
When the UN is in?

And, O, they always come
For the child
With words, eat!

... You? Where to?
All watery trips
Have thinned
Now the gates
Are barred
And this earth
Of ships
Now disowns
That barge

... Cannibals?
They are well fed
... Pork and salad etc.
... Three and snack, eat
Your pap*

... Oh yes, they will, eat!
... Maps! Radars!
All eyes of darkness! Eat!

... No! No!
They have quarreled
With a mode of birth—
On the vine, all
Withholding hands

... Ah ... only adults?
A curse of roots
Will spare the bloom?

... Of course, child
But only their own
    They call “children”
See child,
See in smoke
The break of tales:
A loaded hearse . . .
An ache-broken spine . . .
A jet rash of weals
On a skin of blue . . .

This, here
Is an owl
Its eye unfolds the clouds:
Harvest dews
Are break of shells

A monstrous green
On suckling tongues
. . . It means . . .
Eat!
Be sweet-in-briefs
From this earth
You’d pick your salt

(1991)

""Pap"" (in Afrikaans: South Africa and Namibia) a dish made of cornflour, sometimes eaten with meat stew like mush potatoes, mostly, but not exclusively, by the poorer sections of society (which of course may vary by country and world region). Common English translation is “porridge” though this seems to connote mostly the thinner variations such as “broot” which is also pap."
AND IF YOU SPOKE?
(for Ngaizepi Ngaruka)

As if you were known
to grope for words
or seek the hush
in the sweep of thunder
The loud fifth voice
to the wind’s torrents,
and not once
would you answer?

A hollow drone of gourds
trails your path unfilled
They whom deftly
to time you left
and the sifting
forehead rings of age
As if amply each may drink
from the old springs of wild
and each the rage
of tongue may shed
for breath-sounds
keener than words

I remember the posture
of a naked shrub in winter
Its disrobing leaves
to the marrow chills
of season’s peak
A lone witness stump
when birds have flown or fled
And you spun no tales
around the kernel pit
as you always did
No time-eating yarns
to sleep’s redeeming hour
no chiding childish quests
As if this were a matter
of a different order

I remember my confidence
in that continental hour
That south-ward sweep
of freedom’s wind
The black purifying strain

of breeze from Ghana*
The New-Age finger
on each historic strand:
   You are light
   almost white
   grandmother . . .
   Africans are dark!

And I remember the silence,
its dreadful purse of lips...
That bridle-draw of mind
on a tilt of head
That sideways cast of eyes,
their pinching nips
on the play of dark
that spurned the sun
As if by such riven shards
earth dome in breadths you saw:
Its fern-palm of red
on remnant cells
Its mock-burial reefs
where worm-picked ghoulish fins
for gleans may rise
to the upward earth
Its smooth walk as bridge
and oiled griefs
on cobweb threads

Its patched horizon seams
Vale you alone
could enter and dwell
and the words
that never could gel
And I remember your absence loom
and ask my age
and of earth
and of wind . . .
When alone unclothed
I stood at the stone
of your presence—
The imperious night
of your sharp weaning . . .

*Ghana, being the first of African countries to attain political independence, became inspiration and symbol of liberation for the rest of the continent.
FROM WHERE TO WHERE?
—a childhood quest*

I meet you there then
at the dormant heel
of the silted ages
There where a restless spark
buries its pointed sharpness
in the sediment sheath
And shrunken time-barks,
the cycles shed
in season’s ceding,
drop off the rump
of the endless ring

There together we’ll sit
on the ring’s rim
of unknown years
Casting vision’s flights
past creation point
into the zero count
where genesis returns
to lay its head
in the unity of the chasm

O restless void
The pain of silence
Visions I’ve wished
to stalk it there
breathless unlife
in careless slumber
calmly immortal
in the folded fist
Time caress before
time was born

The tongues I’d drink there . . .
witched sojourner of afar
With elder wildness
holding hands
sipping the freshness myths
I’d shout the silence
and be dumb to my world

* One question of my childhood was, What was there before
there was anything; specifically, how that situation would
look or feel like. Sometimes the quest would be so intense,
leading to frustration and a sense of helplessness. Another
was, less troubling perhaps, How the moon exactly looks like
from the other end. I believe in part this poem has some
relation to such early questions. But the stimulus to (though
not the object of) the poem is the so-called "prehistoric" and
“historic” divisions of existence, which was significantly
emphasized in one particular text (a casual reading during
my graduate studies)
THE FINE PRINT:
SOME TO THE LEFT
OF THE CLOSET . . .

I am no sage
I swear
But ask me
a question
in an English
manner
and I
take note
of your
Englishness . . .
DEATH OF THE OLD
A DEATH OF THE WORLD

Tiles on the wall, peeling.
Losing
gcko suctions on drying palmskins.
One by one in quick succession.
Rocks,
from mountain sockets.
And the world is a sieve
unto howling winds.

Aged ageless—
immortal symbols
that have been false.

A slipping mind’s grip
on the universe’s fidelity—
there, within,
holding on transparency.

Growing long, spirit and bone,
and we are there
where they were
when we looked
the immortal world.
THE INDIFFERENCE OF TIME

Today is but another moment
Unyielding as the day to come
Unfinished as the day before.
It is today only by the dream
Of a conqueror.
**A LENGTH OF NIGHT**

*AIDS*

O relent
    you flame of night
Relent
    your hold on me
Lest I too draw you out
unto planes
where landmarks fail

Where warmer winds
walk in rounds
stark as quests
That are robbed
of shells

They turn loose
on a hingeless heel
Their turns unfleshed
they welcome thirsts

The breeze,
itself tongue will fall
You and me
its fevered song

When fences fall
I live by you
You yourself
a falling star

(1994)
THE RISE OF THE DOUGH

There is concern
dismay
a consternation
about the harvest fermenting in the fields
but not a moment’s pause
at the venomous laying of the seed
The whip is blunt, it is said
and the law.
Yet against the rocks already
a tide is raging

What brand of tyranny is there perfect
to quench a murmur?
And how gentle is the path of the storm
that never stirs a rubble?
The finger is swift to silence the word
while its thunder raises the dead

Horses speeding to battle
pass the cradle of the young
waking in the hoofbeat
And anger is flamed

Have you seen
dead stones rising?
missiles wheezing?
And the tender blood
nursing not a flower’s bud?
... AND NIGHT COMES
(for Hilda Cokely Chenango st.,
Binghamton, NY)

... and night comes
to melt the chasm of things apart
dissolve their mark
absorbed in oneness
unmapped outlines
I’d lie there down
the light out gone
needing
to see nothing


**EVICION**

Sleep is light
on borrowed bed
Terminal shades
in every knock
TIME

Time is that
which clings
with salted palms
like the sea
Like sand
its weight ingraining
till the hour
of hearing
ELIJAH

camel’s hair
is nature’s leaf?
and far-off winds
the oils of green?—
not cured of earth
their seeding seed?

matters melt
in the prophet’s step
and deep
the jordan sinks
her silver ware

hail down, elijah
hail fire and crown!
all silken wools
are claws of loom?
THE WEB OF EARTH

You are a finely woven
Web of earth
Gone is the chasm
Between mirth and tears
Hope and frown rise together
Both at dawn
Nothing is hailed or cursed

Then again you were dead
If you read the lines
In bold relief
Those cobra coils
In the scroll . . .
BOUND TO EARTH

(A May Day Song)

Call him not at ease
    who dreads my peace
Nor him unshackled
    who binds my feet
He is but a bond slave
    free when I am chained
Shamefully tied to my form
    the object of his scorn

(1985)
THE INFORMER

Before the birds’
First flight
Off the morning branches
Before their
First stampede wild
Averting the stalk
Of crimson fingers
The falcon
Was just another bird
Itself as if prey
Feather-breasted
On the twig

(1989)
THE NATION

(frantz fanon)

in the cooling trail
of the dream of the time
the slowing clock
withdraws inward
to recount its bolts—
springs them first apart . . .

(5-11-1996)
Rwanda

There are no scavengers
in the sky
no more quarrels
in the thicket
every tooth has its corpse
A windfall thunder
has shaken the leaves
and clogged
the red river’s throad
to the sea
PRIVATE WORLDS

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a publication of Northwestern University

He always does it
as I receive the wage:
wringing my face with his eyes,
groping for a hint or a revelation.
And I, with a studied indifference,
always deny him this:
barring him access to the depth
of my soul.
I please myself
in this inability of his
to interpret me.
Though too, I know
that he congratulates himself
in the thought
that puppet and steadfast alike
are subject to his pay.

Puppets are his favorites
and he cultivates them.
Thus on such occasions
he seeks to behold in my eyes
the budding flower of submission;
the day when I,
with open gratitude,
will acknowledge the few rands* to be the due fruit of endless labor.

Today I laughed,
and so broke my rule.
At this he smiled . . .
and I,
in my own world,
I mused
at what he thought he knew
and smiled at what he failed to see.
In his experienced eye
he could see finally
the ground that for so long
paused under my feet
reluctantly edging
toward its genuine destination,
as I now
with some honey
try to catch a rand or two:
“bonus for good disposition.”
Meaning, in proper language,
that if sweat and toil bring you nothing
you sell yourself for even less,
happily drawing
a bonus of humiliation.

The fruit is ripe,
when I value nothing in me,
for what trouble dwells in nothing?
He can far more cope
with thieves and crooks—
“Look at them,
what else do you expect”—
than he can stand to see in me
some love for self.
To him it is a failure of the law
that the likes of such do survive.
For if the order was the rule
then the question is eternal:
how can black love black?
And now as it is,
that they don’t feel trapped
in the cast of ebony,
how fickle is the stand of arrogance?
For forbidden grounds are only sweet
if somewhere in vain
someone else is trying to enter.

For the first time
he liked me,
seeming to fathom me,
thinking I was becoming nothing,
when I only laughed
at the mockery of a pay.

*A “rand” is a South African monetary unit presently in use in Namibia.*
Commentary

Festus Ngaruka

Readers’ responses to the poem “Private Worlds” have raised two interesting issues on which I wish to comment.

One of these is the perceived element of ‘fear,’ presumably of reprisals, should the narrator reveal his true identity or true position on the (racist) political situation. In the context of an apartheid workplace (in the Namibia of the time) which informed this poem, such an interpretation seems legitimate. But if that is the case, why not be friendly with the ‘boss’ since after all this is what the ‘boss’ himself wants. Why stand out as the ‘unfriendly’ and problematic one, which only prompts extra and potentially ‘dangerous’ scrutiny? If there be ‘fear,’ it seems to me that it lies elsewhere. It is the ‘fear’ of playing ‘friend’ with someone whom you know has nothing but utter contempt for ‘your kind’ (whom he of course also genuinely fears).

The other issue is more important at present, given the implications involved—which is why I have attempted to give it a more comprehensive treatment. Though a common one, it was raised to me by a white American fellow student (though much younger than I and no classmate of mine), who was opposed to racial definitions as something which divide people and does not allow them, all, to be seen as human beings. He was disturbed and felt alienated by the fact that, in the poem, the ‘black’ man seems to understand (or know) the ‘white’ man, but the latter is unable to do the same. That is, why is it not a 50-50 thing if they are both in constant interaction with each other?

First, the prevailing narrow conception of ‘race’ plays havoc with our understanding of the issue, i.e., ‘pigmentation’ versus ‘pigmentation’ (or for that matter, ‘identity’ versus ‘identity’) and no structure, to put it shortly; conversely, we still hear that ‘race’ and racism cannot exist among people of the same pigmentation, etc. This will be too much to go into here. In the poem it is at least clear that we are dealing with an unequal (power) relation between the ‘boss’ and the worker, with things seen from the latter’s point of view, a race-class relationship (to impose upon the poem), which, outside the poem, happened to be an extension or manifestation of the larger social structure.

Obviously people in power know something about those over whom they rule; otherwise social inequality will not endure for long. But do they thereby also experience social hierarchy in the same way that the dominated does?

First, colonists, for example, and other social groups in power have, as we know, been hardly concerned with knowing the ‘lower’ and/or indigenous cultures, even language, of the peoples over whom they rule. At best this knowledge has been left to the specialized works of anthropologists, ethnographers and specially appointed administrators—all useful for governance, but never a matter of a persona/human to human approach to knowl-
edge on the part of the ruling groups as individuals. This is of course because the ball-game is played on their turf. They are not compelled to know much beyond the basic logistics of power, except of course to amuse themselves with tales of ‘exotic’ peoples and ‘bizarre’ cultures, as is for example evident in the current (non-colonial) context of the U.S. public channel (PBS) and National Geographic magazine. A colossal waste of resources if the public did not pay for it and ‘demanded’ to be ‘educated’ in this fashion. It is of course a simultaneous reinforcement of Western notions of racial/cultural superiority and thus identity, all in the name of (now) ‘diversity’ and ‘getting to know’ other peoples, though some may dispute this charge, since what is depicted seems to ‘really exist.’ Of course it does, but would it appear the same way if the goal was to depict real humans in a different social context, and not abstracted and stereotypical archetypes? While, fortunately, not everyone in the U.S. and elsewhere is bent on nursing his or her ignorance (even with you as an accomplice, ‘the horse’s mouth’), for an African, for example, not to verify the ‘real Africa’ of these mediums is to cause some disappointment on the part of some, sometimes with implicit or explicit charges of ‘trying to impress us.’ Or you are, like the terminally ill or an alcoholic, ‘in denial.’ Once a while you may run into outright annoyance, even anger. One personal anecdote should do here.

I once used to talk to a remarkable elderly woman who, having put all her children through college, decided to come to Binghamton University (then SUNY-Binghamton) to get her own degree. We used to run into each other on and off in the basement of the library in the vending machines area in the evenings—she coming from her class, I from teaching a different one. After several conversations she asked me one day: since you have been away from home for so long, when you get back home, what kind of a (special) meal will your mother prepare for you to welcome you back? Being unprepared and having to think quick, I started speculating with the most likely items. Perhaps some beef or other form of meat (which I would hope myself to be goat), perhaps as stew. I also mentioned something else I can’t remember, which apparently also went down well with her, or was at least tolerated, ruling out in my mind corn meal (oruhere), our daily stable of southern Africa, as definitely not a thing of special occasions. The problem started when I also took to speculating with ‘potatoes’ and ‘beans,’ among other things, as possibilities. Apparently at this point she had heard enough. Her tone alone surprised me. ‘Don’t tell me what you want to eat when you get there. I want to know what your mother can find there!’ I couldn’t trust myself to say a civil word, so I left. Just as well. She needed an Africa which I could not give, one which only she could give. That even potato and poverty, historical bedfellows of so many regions of the world, cannot be imagined together in Africa, was stunning—or, for that matter, a peasant family that can grow a bean or two. Let alone regional variations, which are commonly not envisioned for such a large continent of diverse climatic conditions and social histories, including those of European colonization and their varied cultural impact. No doubt, a West African, Central African, or East African would have fared much better with this lady, for the great variety of agricultural produce, and hence the diversity of local ‘truly African’ dishes. And wouldn’t she love just the names: *kre-kre*, egusi soup, petete leaf, cassava leaf, jakitomboi, groundnut stew, jollof rice, to name just a few of those I encountered in West Africa (Sierra Leone and Liberia). By contrast, Namibia is a very different place, except for parts of the north with higher rainfall.

The very desert (Namib) derived name of the country itself should speak volumes, even for the casual expert of the ‘real Africa.’ Livestock and mining predominate, but so also food imports. The very ‘obnoxious’ beans and potatoes derive mostly from this trade. At the same time, the impact of European colonialism between say West Africa and south-
ern Africa was quite different. In the former case, the main emphasis was on trade and commerce, with gradual and more indirect impact upon local institutions and cultures (despite the earlier, quite drastic impact of the slave trade upon many West African societies). Much of southern Africa, on the other hand, became areas of significant European settlement, attracted mainly by the mining revolution in the region, which meant a more direct and drastic impact upon local institutions and customs, including land ownership. Unsurprisingly, long after (black) majority rule, the ‘black’/‘white’ race question continues in such countries as South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia, which is not the case in other parts of Africa, though this does not rule out other forms of racial questions in those parts. A little more people oriented public education should easily turn such geosocial, cultural, and historical differences into a more genuine form of knowledge of real peoples in different social contexts, instead of the abstracted ‘exotic’ archetypes.

But the question is, What upset the lady? Is the mention of certain foods enough to cause annoyance even if one believes that such foods never set foot on the Africa continent? I suspect that it has to do with the fact that most of the said foodstuffs are also part of American life, while ‘exotic’ peoples are supposed to be different in every respect from the one defining them. Thus to attribute to Africa foodstuff familiar to her own table was to cause a mini crisis of identity in her—or, is to raise the ‘commons’ to a point of in-distinction. That even otherwise real issues and genuine problems, and indeed real differences, of Africa tend to be cast and consumed in the ‘exotic’ of the ‘peculiar’ is one persistent effect of this form of ‘knowing’ (as power). Even well-meaning individuals have problems, given what they have to work with, including being ‘educated’ through the ‘everyday anthropology’ of the media.

I am not saying that the situation of the colonized, the ‘peripheral,’ or ‘third world’ peoples, both within and outside the West, is the direct opposite of that of the dominant, from the point of view of human oriented form of knowing. In fact I doubt whether the narrator in the poem, or anyone from that context, could be easily brought to think of his ‘boss’ as a human being. He is not a man, he is a ‘white man.’ Such a thinking is, of course, social, not natural, in origin, that is, it is from being treated not as a man, but as a ‘black man’ (or ‘kaffer,’ the cross-Atlantic equivalent of ‘nigger,’ in the apartheid lexicon), with the actual social implications being more important than the ascribed ethnonyme. Yet even within this form of knowing there is a critical difference, inscribed by the very relation of inequality. As is well-known, it is often the colonized and ‘peripheral’ peoples, who have tended to speak the language of the ‘master,’ including numerous multi linguists in the other dominant languages. Not to talk of the knowledge of the dominant’s literatures and general culture, including that of histories and institutions. Beside enforced ‘civilization,’ as under colonialism, there is also the felt individual necessity to do so since it is the dominant who defines the rules of the game and the playing field. As someone said, when you are in bed with an elephant you better watch which way it is turning. That is, you cannot afford to be ignorant in such a relationship; let the elephant be. For you can be crushed even when you are on your right side of the bed.

Obviously the issue, being one of an unequal power relations, is not limited to the race-class question. Gender relations, for example, bring about the same question of different ways of knowing or the different meaning of the relationship to the parties involved. But to limit ourselves to race-class for now (in the global context of capitalism), we can conclude that we have at best two different ways of ‘knowing.’ Both these forms of knowing have nothing to do with the humanity of the people involved. Both can be viewed as ‘strategic’ forms of knowing, one offensive and legitimating (the status quo), the other defensive and
resistant to it (both, here, in their most immediate reference to the underlying power relationship).

It is thus important to distinguish this context (of power) from other contexts of ‘inter-racial’ interactions. Such as that of persons from the same neighborhoods who grow up together, attend the same schools and so on, to use only one example. Racism of course may still be rampant in some such neighborhoods, but so is also the potential for genuine human relationships, and thus the knowledge of one another as people, rather than racial categories (even if such relationships are always in tension with the larger societal or global definition of people as ‘races’).

Unfortunately, while such genuine relationships continue to be ‘normalized’ features of society, and have served to demystify racial identities as ‘fixed’ and unchanging attributes of peoples, as well as to liberate those who have no interest in racial distinctions, they themselves are no model for the resolution of the race problem in modern society as a whole. ‘Race’ as a structural social phenomenon (despite its ever changing forms of manifestation and representation from pigmentation to ethnic hierarchy to national and geographic origins and so on, or to ‘cultural differences’ in the current global discourse, as the basis of racial ‘difference’) cannot be resolved by simply appealing to individuals to live in harmony, i.e., ‘can we all live together.’ Its basis is not physical or other visible differences, but social hierarchy. That is, people did not just start hating each other as groups because they looked different (physiologically, linguistically, culturally). Human beings have always looked different for millennia. The problem is when such existing ‘differences,’ which may have not even appeared as ‘differences’ in themselves at one time, even from non-racial points of view, (or newly created ones) are used as tools to construct and maintain unequal social relations. It is this which makes ‘race’ a structural phenomenon, and not just a question of ‘attitude.’ As such, its ultimate resolution is bound up with the movement towards a more egalitarian society (both national and global). But this is a different issue.

In any case, what may be called the question of ‘knowing’ in this poem, if it can be so defined, is closer to the relation of inequality rather than that of simple ‘racial differences’ (whatever this may mean socially speaking). However, understanding the real or basic problem of ‘race,’ whether or not one agrees with its treatment above, should not be alienating to concerned people. On the contrary, other than serving us with a dose of realism concerning the magnitude of the problem, it should help us to better sharpen our tools and strategies towards bringing about the kind of a world we look forward to.

K. F. Ngaruka
12/31/2002
To my friends,
Emmett Schaefer & Collette Perrault,
who showed the first interest in my poems
and encouraged me to keep writing

&

FOR THE WELTY’S
Rick, Pablo, Monica, and Debbie
(Jackson Ave., Endicott, New York)

To you, yes, to you,
all the years...

And if I should find no words
to trade in arts
or choice phrases
to groom my speech
nor finer craft
to mug the winds
I am not the only one
not to fail at heart
For it so happens
that they that give
know nothing of giving
left bare of all a-counting
They live, not act

(Ngaruka)