

The heartbeat of Africa

Poems by Jim Smith

Western forms of poetry work well in the West. But is there a specifically African form of poetry? If there were, it must flow from a sense of history, the timeless nature of Africa, the sense of belonging to the earth and the struggle to survive. I have been trying to capture some of this from the things I see round me every day here in Ghana

Africa's child

I was watching a young girl playing in the sand. She shone in the African sun. She turned to me and smiled. This poem came into my heart. I tried to capture not just her, but Africa's past and Africa's sense of belonging.

Tiny diamond splinters
set in a dark sun.
The eyes of
Africa's child
dancing to amuse
or confuse
all prejudice

Colours on black skin
dazzling.
A golden light
born from centuries
of blue sky -
her heritage

Warm she lays
no fears can break
the caravan of distant treasure
nestling in her heart
Africa's child -
forever secure

A child of her time

I was standing at a small shop near my home in Ghana, talking to its Owner. A young girl came up, carrying an even younger girl on her back. Timeless Africa! She offered money for some bread, and I said to her "You are very beautiful." She smiled an African smile and when I was alone, I write this.

Sister on her back
she comes to ask for bread
shining sun filled eyes

smile at me and laugh
the laughter of her history
echoes from the past

Golden earrings flash
and her laughter lights up
the whole of her face

A child of her time
yet enfolded in her past
A child of Africa

The Trader

Many Africans trade by the roadside - selling to the Motorists. It's a long, hard dusty day and it has been going on for centuries. I noticed one woman by the Accra/Kumasi road late one evening as I was coming home. Somehow I seemed to understand her, and I wrote this -

Sun burnt weary face
sells to hands which reach to her
but only a small sale

Feet on the hard road
serving those who never care
just to run again
and chase some more

Weary dust filled eyes
tired arms longing to rest
but still the cars come

She wants to find rest
her broken body aching
but there is no chance

Breaking and broken
fighting for the food she needs
children cannot wait

And so the days pass
sucking her life from within
there is no escape

The road is her life
and the death of her beauty
there is no way out

One day she is gone
her body can stand no more
no one even cares

Others come to sell
memory of her erased
the road just goes on

What's for tea?

Life can be tough in Africa. Recently we had a food shortage, and one mother used to boil stones so that her children would think food was coming. Another burst into tears when we visited with food and said "I have nothing in the house at all for my children." That led to "What's for tea?"

He called out
"What's for tea?"
"Nothing" the empty
plate replied
"Why?" he asked
tears show compassion
but do not feed

Despair the companion
of the poor
knocks at his door
and drives him on
"Miss are there
any leftovers?"

This child's agony
breaks the heart
of the world

Perhaps in that breaking
there is hope.

Bending - but not breaking

How do Africans manage then? I'm sure there is a basic gene of survival deep in the African spirit and every African has it. Survival is written deep into our history - even in the palm trees.

Coco palms bend
but do not break
in the fury of the storm
they stand
and laugh

They have faced
many storms
and one more?

Africa has to bend
to many storms
which would have
broken others

But Africa has learnt
to endure
and smile.

Pounding

Every day here in my Office I hear from outside - "Thump! Thump! Thump!"
Women are beating the Plantain. It's time for Fou Fou or Kenkey. The
women beat the plantain into a dumpling and serve it with a spicy soup.
"Thump! Thump!" is one of the heartbeats of Africa.

Whip cord arms pounding
Banku, Fou Fou and Kenkey!
Soup to warm the heart

Kele wele green
steamed and fried
and pounded flat.
Africa's delight

Drumming out the sound -
"Come and fill your tummies up!"
Thump! Thump! "Here I come."

Beautiful

I was watching some children dancing in the street. Somehow they seemed to sum up so much of Africa - its past, its rhythm and its beauty. I tried to capture it by feeling it in my spirit. These words came into being.

She dances
in many colours
Her face
sun blessed
gazes deep
into her homeland
her heartland
her own land
which,
though scarred
holds her timeless
in its eternal
God-breathed
security