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Photograph of Earth from Space

On the outskirts of Luanda, Angola,
Gerald Nduma has walked an hour to school
carrying his chair, which is really
an empty coffee can. Nine years old,
he holds in his other hand a mango,
which will be his lunch. At school,
which is really a tree, Gerald
places his lunch beneath his chair.
This day, a missionary has come
with magazines. Gerald takes what
is given him. Soon he does not hear
his teacher's instructions. He does not hear
the students' chatter. He is looking
at the photograph of Earth
floating in a dark sea
which Gerald imagines
is plenteous with fish.

Happiness in Ghana

The morning is a new egg.
Roosters cannot keep the secret.
Not yet sunrise,
lizards go about their business
scraping walls with their little nails.
Already in the dark, a child with braids
erupting like fountains all over her head
brushes her teeth in the next yard.
Women and girls will load up their heads
and walk and walk to the centre of town,
the street thickening with the scent
of pineapple and sewage.

We rub our eyes. Sun is rising.
All night water has trickled into the tank;
time to start the motor, pump water
up to the tank that sits like a hat
on the roof of our house.
The child with clean teeth helps her mother,
a sandal seller, fill a tub with sandals. Crammed
like crayons in their box, the sandals might
bear names on their thin sides: Tomato. Papaya.
Sky. Moonrise and Murky Dawn.
The motor growls like a lion.
Our children crane their necks like lizards,
sun gleaming their eyes.
As the woman raises her tub arm's length
over her head, the water tank overflows,
a sudden rainstorm. The children squeal
and jump. They must tell Thomas, who has arrived
pushing his motorbike, delivering a crate
of pop in bottles. The bottles dance.
The woman with sandals on her head

starts down the road, but she walks too close
to the wall; all we see is a tub of colours washing by.
Then comes a display case laden with pastries;
later, a sewing machine, toothbrushes
and toothpaste: tub of dental hygiene.
While he's here, Thomas will iron the pyjamas.
Tonight the two pink children
will go to bed clean and crisp. No matter
that they'll wake rumpled
from sleeping in the night's open mouth,
from dreams of home. The women
will wake again before dawn,
balancing the day on their heads.

Peppers

Living in Ghana

If the truck does not start, if it
ignores you as though asleep,
lift the hood,
pluck out the yellow wire
and scrape it against the battery.
Immediately
you will wake the car.

Every morning
a man with pants torn to the knees
arrives to coerce water out of buckets
and onto the plants. He tips
the bucket, nudges water with his hands
as one might urge a child to play.
Therefore
we have flowers; we have peppers
which the young watchman, Anthony,
hands us in his exhausted cup —
breakfast, red as stoplights.

He imagines us wanting without peppers.

Beatrice, elegant girl
with a short wool of hair, gold
in her ears shining like moons
and shoes roomy as canoes,
shyly rattles our door
and finds us sweating into our hot chocolate,
peppers blooming on the table.

Cecilia, who aches for earrings, rushes out
with Beatrice into a river of school uniforms
and the sharp snag of bell.

In Africa's denominations
she calls attention in her translucent skin,
a continent of hair
plunging down the map of her back.
Children call her; women
bring babies to see her, rare
and blushing as ripening fruit.

Our son desires merely
the habit of parents,
wants neither bumpy blackboards
nor desks risky with splinters.
He hides under his hat, face
bright as a pepper.

But the fruits that sting his eyes
hold seeds of good luck.
He tastes the air.
He chews on Africa.

Dusty sandals slapped to his feet,
he scales the seat of the truck — dead-still, asleep.
Anthony leans into the gate that groans
with the weight of a new day
already old as centuries.
Packed elbow to elbow on unruly springs,
we hold our breath.
Tail lights fire.
Luck smiles on us.
The truck clears its throat, then sings.

Doing Laundry in Ghana

Simply, there were casualties.
Some required stitches.
Without grace, Selah assaulted our clothes.
Wednesdays and Saturdays
two pans massive enough to bathe in
scraped across the yard, alarming the lizards.
In one pan, she tortured colours
with bleach. In the other, she slapped shirt into sock,
forced a fight among the underwear
which, before, had existed peaceably
in the same drawer. Now
armholes bulging, necklines
swollen, new treaties
will have to be arranged.

Giraffes and rhinos marching in even line
across Drew's good shirt
she drove nearly extinct;
by imposing borders
she split the herds asunder.
Result: a shirt
full of watering holes.

Neither is the sun kind. Dresses,
straining and grimacing, flatten on the line.
By the time Thomas the tailor arrives
to iron them into squares, stacked
like crackers in a box, everything has lost
the spirit that was its former nature.
By morning, dressed and clean,
we won't recognize each other.

Fugue

Three girls are walking through the ochre streets
of Sunyani, Ghana. They bend toward each other
and giggle, their smiles brilliant half-moons.
They balance bowls on their heads,
water in plastic bags.

Three girls walk through the ochre streets
as men on motor scooters and in taxis zip past,
raise clouds of dust. The bags of water
wiggle like jellyfish, though the ocean
is a hundred miles away and they

have never seen it. The world, too, is far
from Sunyani, Ghana, but for the purr
of sewing machines in the open door
of the tailor's shop, bottles in the shade
of the beverage store cheerfully toasting

something — perhaps this day without rain.
Like jellyfish in an ocean they have never seen,
the water shimmies in bags; the young men zipping past
in taxis and on motor scooters wave and sometimes
stop to buy. The girls, fourteen, maybe fifteen,

with their three half-moon smiles, dream
of learning the computer, dream also
of having a baby, because to carry a baby
is better in the streets of Sunyani, Ghana, than
to sell water, giggling together under

the sensual sway of bowls on their heads.
Yet there is nothing more beautiful in the world
than they, walking there beside the open doors
of the tailor's, the beverage shop, the bottles
toasting their brilliant teeth, their oceanic eyes.

In other places the world is zipping past. The girls
want to learn computer, hear it purr, peer
into its open door onto the ocean of the world.