

PERCEPTIONS OF A PAST TO COME

A collection of original poems

By Ernest Antwi

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, and all the staff, lecturers and students that have passed through her.

It is also dedicated to the Department of Arts, Accra Academy, where it all began.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am immensely indebted to the great writer, Ayi Kwei Armah, distinguished author of the much celebrated **THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN**, as well as several other renowned works of literature, for his blunt critique of this work a few years ago. Never had I been so happy to be corrected and to embrace correction. The emails we exchanged are treasured, and his pieces of advice will stay with me forever.

Furthermore, I reserve special mention for Michael Yamoah, Umar Farouk and Florence Laryea, née Ntsiful. We spent a few glorious years at the University of Cape Coast, and, together with our friends, who are too many to mention, we discoursed, analysed, defended and ridiculed nuances of English grammar and literature.

My appreciation also goes to Mr Essel, and to Professors Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang and Naana Jane

Opoku-Agyemang, who inspired my entry into poetry writing.

Lastly, I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the late Mrs Beatrice Abla Lokko, a former Headteacher of Accra Academy, who, together with many other teachers, guided my forage into English Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of a Past to Come is a cauldron of experiences, emotions, and incidents, which brutally decries religious charlatanism, political tyranny, sexual perverseness and social injustice. It ruffles one's perception of slavery, capitalism, justice, self-preservation, faith, and many more, projecting the current state of individualism and decadence as a direct result of the depravity of the human nature.

This foreboding atmosphere is redeemed only with the introduction of concepts and interpretations of love, hope, perseverance, and the belief in oneself, and one's unearthed abilities.

Most of the poems were written within a Ghanaian context, and, as a result, they project the social, political, religious and economic landscape of the country in both the colonial and post-colonial eras. They discuss colonization and slavery; the uncertainties of the 1970s and 1980s amid forced restructuring of government; the period following the re-emergence of democracy, the

rise of cultural, educational and social entrepreneurship; and the maturing of a free press in the 1990s.

This notwithstanding, to accept the totality of this body of work, i.e. concepts, settings, imageries etc., in the literal sense would be to deprive yourself of the ability to conceptualise, re-interpret, re-imagine, debate and question ideologies and practices that transcend beyond the borders of the country.

The use of Ghana is largely an extended metaphor, that represents developing countries in particular, but can be used to erode or confirm the perception of developed/western countries as either a façade or a true image respectively. Thus, those poems written while in the UK do not change much in tone, but in interpretation and description, challenging all to take a long inward look at their lives, societies and actions.

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THE GOVERNOR

Above the dungeon
Reclines the church, crowned
By the governor's residence
His celestial palace
Sitting like the symbol
Of a monarch's tyranny

He howls his hymns
To the constant rhythm
Of blood dripping staccato
From the tips of whips
To the gaping mouth
Of the hard, cold floor
Hymns inspired
By the organ of
Groans and moans
That rumble feebly
From the weeping eyes
And gnashing teeth beneath

In the evening the governor
He rides to his balcony
Straight from the last meditation
After fornicating with the greedy chiefs
Those who watch the sparkle
Of worthless glass beads
Through poisonous bottles of cheap rum
And sing, "Yes sir"

For entertainment
He selects by fancy
From the pool of slaves below
The daintiest of slave-girls
To prove he is a man, but still a man
Somebody's daughter
Another's wife
Scrubbed sore and raw
They are marched naked
Far beyond the church to his lair
Where he rapes them
After saying grace

He carouses until the beginning of day
Then rushes off naked
For he cannot be late
For the morning devotion
Where he prays for strength
Where he prays for wealth
For full dungeons and fuller ships
For family and pets across the ocean
And for the best slave girl
Or boy for the night

THE MEGALOMANIACS

On the feathers of Lucifer's fall
They ascend fast
To slap the Eternal Craftsman
With a scented glove
In His own backyard

They ascend chest out
Under glittering wooden crowns
And cloaks of velvet
A tapestry of human flesh

They challenge their gods
With the duelist's loose tongue
And constipated facade
Wearing self-imputed knighthoods
And compete to outdo one and the other
In the size and length
Of names and letters

Their temples are filled
With shrunken bodiless souls
Scourged with a spiritual strike
A choice
Made for them by the fat collared ones
Who rob
The streets of heaven of cobblestone
Who pinch
Holes in the shrunken purses
And where the last pesewa trickles out
Demand a pound of flesh

These bodiless souls worship in awe
The bejewelled deities before them
Blinded from the The-Great-I-Am
By a slithering forked tongue
The sons of Midas forget
That gold melts
Where the fire burns hottest

THE RIVER BETWEEN

What shall I call you

Dear sir

This or that I don't mind

Man's man

Chameleon your name

For it mirrors who you are

And wax louder the bones

That rattle in your body to be heard

Go as thy heart leads

Be true

Don't let the song in the bushes call

Two I know

Dear sir

Who despise secretly

The swords that knighted them

One wears the crow's white throat

Pure grunge underneath the strip

The other the statesman's hat

Polished smooth in front
Moth-eaten behind

One they hail
The other they hallel
One possesses the first serpent's tongue
And the other, Iago's dutiful smile
They stand reeling in their drunkenness
Between them, the river runs deep
Wine red with Egyptian plague
With filed teeth, they take huge bites
Of infantile feet, which look on
With wordless soundless cries

Across the river
A bridge of pregnant women
Lying on their backs unshod
They mount the bridge
With the climber's tool
And change sides at the meeting point

On their backs

They search the bodies of painted toes
Which steal the sizzling fat
From stomachs fighting undercover
Wriggling their feet in childlike ecstasy
The two scream, "look at me"
Between them, the river runs deep
With damnation fire

THE BLOOD DONATION

Those who have eaten well
Have the power to draw blood
And fill our veins
With war and hunger and death
They donate to us blood poisoned
With the civilization of the bomb
And the education
Of empty pleading bowls
Preaching to us a god white as clay
Who created man on the sixth
And the black man on the fifth
Hiding from us
The One without colour
Who is all colours

HIGHER EDUCATION - GHANAIAN STYLE

He is neither here nor there
Everywhere and yet, lost
Just another ant in the great anthill
Trained to pass the book
Untrained to pass the world
Soon,
Soon he will be kicked off the force
And still cannot answer, "Plans?"

He knows for the immediate he must
Give his service to the motherland
But he will come back
Either as Aristotle's pet
Or maybe to a place
Without rain or shine he will go
To train the miserable larvae
To become lost ants
Or to join the chorus, "yes boss"

Or to scamper up on foreign soil
The torched lady with the spiked hat
Chased by the American dream
Washing washed bowels

Seed of Nkrumah hunchbacked
Would your hunch were fronted
That you would stand with some dignity
But soon,
Soon he will be kicked off the force
And still cannot answer, "Plans?"

Three big anthills
Smaller ones
Training ants to eat the eggs
And the red soil
Higher education-Ghanaian style

THE FORLORN TRAVELER

The night is old and about to wither
The sun threatens to slay the darkness
The polygamous darkness
And send a-scatter
The evil spouses he harbours
In the shadows of the confusion
The Traveler stands
On the aged brows of cloud-kissed rocks
A last glance over his shoulder
A village
A shadow in the distance
A shadow in a past to come
Where Happiness evades him
And knocks him down for dead
Aurora, at last, sucks her thumb in sleep
Sun wins the struggle
And shouts wordless, "Victory!"
With smiles that gild the earth

And wash The Traveler's body in gold
As though touched by that foolish king
Who drools for things that glitter
The shout of victory makes no peace
His heart still pounds cold, slow
No honey here!
A woman at a door screams in his head

Dust for shoes
Feet of Steel
To defy the jagged rocks of earthly teeth
Shirts with pockets many
The maker will shake his head
“I did not make those”, he will say
A step and another
Another and again for many a day
No rainbow to bring a cheer
No twitter in the land, no chirp
The Traveler, blind, deaf
But with eyes un-misted,
And ears un-stoppered

Aged Night again withers
Aurora again to bed she goes
Sun rises from a sleep deep
And splashes Earth with a painter's oil
Silhouette against the blazing light
The Forlorn Traveler squats
Between the breasts of rocks
That caress the skies
The painter's oil touches not his skin
The pockets in his shirts
They are fewer but larger
The maker will shake his head, twice
"I did not make those," he will say, twice
Feet of steel weeps painful tears of wine
Shoes grow newer with age
His steps are few
His strength is gone
He knows not when he will fall
But he goes on

A crawl and another

Another and again for many a day

No honey here!

A woman at a door screams in his head

GENTLE WAVE

Gentle wave, blue as gold
Lapping her feet, wagging his tail
Kissing her toes making her smile
Little child a month and four
Screaming her glee
Red-gold-black-green
Creating figures in the sand
With seashells of colours as hers
To one she says, "repent"
To another, "forgive"
And to all
"Love and care for seashells"
Gentle wave, turning
Savage wave, devouring her feet
Biting her toes making her cry
Little child a month and four
Screaming her pain

He sucks her into his throat
Belches, smacks his lips
Little child
Her drums are quiet
She stares blindly
At the bottom of the ocean
The seashells weep
Gentle wave lapping her body
Washing her white
Making her full
The sun hides his face

I KNOW WHAT HE DID

A collared man dwarfed and ugly
Who took an early bath
In the pot of palm oil
He bears the name of Philip's son
Un-mightily horsed,
Cannot conquer his demons
I know what he did
Indeed I do
Without a thread on his back
He capered after her with a winning plea
(Her prospective untangled himself)
When his wife crossed the water
Church bells, Sunday bells
He howls and growls from the pulpit
The audience applauds in awe
But I know what he did
My anger crouches
Soon I may let my tongue fly

So tell me, who is in charge?

COCOA

I saw the first seed bringer
His feet rooted into the black soil
His arms stretched in a tearful welcome
Around his neck hangs bars of gold
Metallic yellow and milky brown

The bleached fat foreigner
He stuffs his belly with mangoes
Some rotten and others plucked too soon
Besides him his Interpreter stands
In a jacket and the hangman's noose
"I will take you for a pound", he sings
"Take it or leave it".
The Interpreter, he interprets
Tetteh Quarshie bows his head and nods

DRY BONES

They forget too soon
That they were once
A sea of Spartan bones
Like Pausanias strong
They bow
To their Medism
Their robes
Sweep the ground
Leaving thorns in their wake
Despising the hope
Swallowing the trust
Like Anowa's husband
They corrupted their art
Now they take and take and take
The sunrise and the sunset
Son of man
Can this flesh live?
Pray the black-robed prophet

To take the sinew and the flesh
With his gavel pound
Pray the mighty wind
To sleep the sleep of death
That it shall be true to see
A valley of dry bones
Waiting in vain
For flesh once again

They forget too soon
That once they were
Grains of sand
Living on
The Holy Kiss of life
Perpetually
Freely and graciously given
Since the beginning
Now the commission is corrupted
They multiply and increase
Leaving in their wake
Desolate cities

Empty wells
Would the Potter
Holds His divine breath
Would the Word
Holds His tongue
That we may truly
See them as they are
Crumbling down in confusion
Mere grains of sand

Perhaps they have
Never from the scrolls read
That once upon a creation
They were
Pieces of nothingness
Gliding in emptiness
They rape bloodily
The land with the people
They sing
As in their dreams
And breath

As one's nightmare
On the Acropolis
They gather dust
The only movement, the sound
Of their munching teeth
And suckling lips
From the Acropolis
One can see the temple
Of God forgotten
A gem from afar
A germ when nigh
From the unholy place
One smells
The Academy
Weep Plato
For labour in vain
For dreams corrupt
Look from heaven
To decry the increase
Of rotten tongues

The instructor is stoned
The pupil rapt
Absorb
The festering wound
Of an open mouth
Life forgets sadly
The second court disintegration
Disintegration awaits
The cosmetic array
Of Bones run dry
Bathing motionless
In the sand

Call me naive
I choose to live right
For my mind knows
Life can escape
With the breath
It rides on

DAILY BREAD

The Earth sucks in her stomach
To possess another's
Another's,
Full with three fiery lives
Restless now
She lies as on a pyre face down awaiting her share
Her dirge the cacophony of the nine tailed cat
Mewing, clawing on her corrugated flesh
While the Earth incubates her unborn to preserve
The tripod life
Of the taker's mixed blooded harvest
Her crime, the heaviness that made her slouch
When making bricks from clay without straw
Beside her, yet another genuflects
In anticipation
For a hot bath at high noon
Soon before noon
The hot lard is benevolently given

The bather fiercely rubs head face and arms
Till his red flesh burns fiercer than the sun
His reward for looking the master in the eye
A life lived without hope is a life dead
Why else will bearers
Take the bolt from the infant jaw
To clasp in rejection of food and water but death
Why will the tall hired one slash off his living
To deny the hirer the breed
Though trapped with one in a doorless shed
He will have the key still, deny satisfaction demanded
Beaten bodies
Beaten spirits
Beaten souls
They cry for a deliverer to demand the second time
“LET MY PEOPLE GO”

NAMELESS

He sits regally on a stump of wood
Teetering on one broken foot
Underneath the desk
The wooden termite hill
His leprous hands scratch sore
His lifeless womanhood
At the foot of the termite kingdom
He crouches pompous
Poised to pounce to protect his realm
Three centimetres of space
A dark empty box as quarrelsome
As a mother hen
A flinching cringing room
Insecure, his lips tremble
Eyes blazing behind two smothering moons
Graced dark with pitch
Two dumb-bells on thin webbed lips
Made thinner and redder with

The stinky home-brew
He farts and scowls and hopes none sees
Where the patch reddens the inside of a black thigh
He waves his slimy left wand
With the five bony prongs deeply emaciated
He squats arrogant,
A glorified king of all he sees
His wife has not whispered into his ears
That his five sons were fathered by a buffalo
When on broken cushioned knees
He mocks pompous
A strenuously teary prayer
To a million unknown gods
Envious of The One who has all and can answer
A demanding charade of a prayer
To gods selfishly created
A demand for live beneath
For fire in the undergrowth
To turn his little toe into a foot
His wife fails to say that his daughters
Even the one he adores with such vengeance

Were sired by a dove
But he sees it, smells it, tastes it, knows it
How else could he father such complete men
From whence came such comprehensive womanhood
He has seen them
They are not his
His pride guillotined he vents his shame
Angrily from behind his desk
He loves none more than a student to bow and weep
“Sir, I beg you”
But in effect, he is a dream awake
An unending nightmare torments him
A faceless nobody we shall not dignify with a name
Nameless sits spouting

TO CONSUME HIS OWN

The subtle temptation
Slithers through the leaves
Of the pregnant tree
Labouring painfully, lustfully
In the ninth month
Seeking deliverance
On a rib, twice his own and yet not his

What demon possess
The souls of men at birth
And commissions constant
To lust the birth of a daughter
To squander the germination of a seed
To flog the womb of a wife
To tongue lick the plate dry
When the meal is expended
Like the father before him
He looks twice

At a daughter's nakedness
Ashamed, he prays to a foreign god
His own conscience that depletes
In the knowledge of the ways of men
That brightens his eyes
To dissect the mote
He traverses across the bathroom door
Fear of a mate's fury
His only arrest

At night his heart pounds
Besides a sleeping wife
The subtle temptation hisses forever
For a daughter a wall apart
He shakes his head
Again and again and again
But the demon resides
To consume his own

A mind lust weakened
A heart to Hades lost

A soul to truth dead
A body earthly bound
Should be twice killed
That it may suffer hell for two eternities
Such a being should be flogged
With a prayer a stroke
Thirty-nine stripes
To burn Oedipus's folly from his head
And into his flesh the Savior's mark

A PREACHER FOR SALE

The billboard screams like a baby
MIRACLE ENCOUNTER WITH ...

The name fights
With the billboard for space
His picture struggles
With the moon for radiance
His smile fences
With the sun for warmth
His teeth matches
The shark for menace
His intentions challenge
The devil for rule

At the bottom
In a corner
Just an after-thought
A picture of Christ
Painted sleeping in a boat

PEOPLE

I see men and women
Mere infants stuck fast in their gloom
To a white ceiling
All their moments
Of wakefulness and sleep
Slumbering in a constant twirl
Five different intensities of momentum
But still suffers
The fate of the grinning horse
Merrily prancing on the carousel
No growth, not the reverse
They age only in rust
And in wear and time
But still a constant twirl

I see boys and girls
Mere fetus
Lying in the comfort

Of a wombed bosom long past
The resurrection of the ninth moon
They forever prey on the umbilical bond
They grow bearded and wrinkle fast
But still, see no light

I see life
Brilliant and fiery as the sun
Fiery as the colour of blood
The sun
Stuck cold like Caesar's star
This constancy
That breeds weeping wounds
The unkindest cut of all
Lies in a hammock
Like Nebuchadnezzar's dream
Head of gold feet of clay
He shares not his head nor his feet
Remember the stone comes
A pebble from a shepherd boy's sling

THE THING CALLED LOVE

Love breeds hatred unbound
And fosters affection profound.
Love does not conquer all
But surrenders to every fall.
Homaged emperors and knights succumb
To the desire of this oppressive thumb
It divides and unites clans
And renders foolish one's careful plans
Acquiesce not but seek to part
All company with the throbbing heart

Pray, listen not
I talk with the tongue of fools
Embrace the hate love breeds,
Ignore the love hate pulls
Like arrows from the winged child bows
Strive
To sew together with pain

The breath and the life

THE LONE MOURNER

Mourn

Dry not your tears

But rest for strength

Then mourn again

Mourn the birth of a baby girl

Rue her ejaculation into this labyrinth

There can only be eternal gloom

From whence could come light

When all stretch pallid poisoned paw

To take a piece of her frail failing flesh

Ah! I mourn alone

Beat your chest

Palm your head

Mourn,

For the drummer has hanged his trade

His drums

Polished smooth and beautiful

So beautiful
Hanging on his wall
So pretty he fears to touch
Fears to look even
Lest it breaks under his gaze

I am the other drum
No polishing can soften my skin
The Carver did not make me for admiration
But to make a good player the best
To make the crowd hail his craft
I am too ugly for the wall
I sit face down in the tall grass
My bottom stare at the sun
Fed with earth and worms
I am a bed of weeds
The Sun takes my cloth,
The rich one I used to wear
To grace the drummer
The Sun takes
And clothes my nakedness in black

My tears dry before they fall.

I mourn alone.

I rend my clothes to rags

I change my hair for ash

I mourn.

I mourn for the drummer

Who is lazy as in slumber

Who does not play

But scratches his crotch

And like an idiot sits and watch

A brown box spewing strange music

I mourn for a people prosaic

Dressed in shrouded whites

That hurt the eye

They do not know how

To dance to this strange music

They do not understand

I mourn for the father of the baby

Who licks his chops

And counts the dowry

And the man of many stomachs
Who gives the money
And for the five-year boy with the hoop
Who will never marry
I mourn for a thousand
But I mourn alone.
Alone!

SCREAM IT

Give tongue to frustration

Lend voice to disappointment

Grant heart to rebellion

SCREAM IT!

Live it

It is the life

There is none other

To live is to live free

To live free in mind

From a mind

A mind that slays body from soul

To live free in body

From the providers of death.

Tell!

Tell them you,

You will not eat from the leprous hand anymore

Scream it!

The crown is tainted
The sceptre is stolen
Rulers refuse to open their mouths
For none must see the stump
Where there was once a tongue
They have kissed the stranger who carries death
And have broken faith with their stools
Refuse to clamp lip to lip
Say you will not be content
Scream it!

The man wears a full dress of cowries
Some passed to him under the rug
Some plucked from dying trees
On many are printed the names of others
Some dead some dying
Tell him you know Truth
Let him know he cannot grab any more
Except for death by the beseeching thigh
Scream it!

Give an impatient tongue to utter frustration
Lend a hoarse voice to total disappointment
Grant a wrathful heart to perpetual rebellion
Scream it!