

Songs for Ibba

11 Jan 2026

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notes

Aubade

They would soothe us in the mornings
with their sweeping. Outside our cabins
a moving view, shifting like antelope.

We watched as the girls progressed
across the whole school. They suggested
that, in time, we would move too:

a voice might stand upright, two then three
by the dust and piled bricks
where foundations had been laid;

a caravan carry bright yellow
buckets to the dormitories, a choir
assemble, clothes be lain on lawns

to dry in the breeze; cleaners,
strident in their uniform, in their sun,
might approach our rooms.

I could see almost to the gate,
the compound as it came awake.

Departures

I heard one girl burst into tears
when she saw the showers;
and after she learned the class was full

another slept overnight in the hallway,
her father having trekked with her
three days across the land.

In the village, they saw staff from the school
astride bikes, precarious at first
before they became fluent.

Would walk fourteen kilometres to Maridi
to man a one-mango market stall.
Now, departures are painful,

billets-doux are passed between hands.
The girls embody salt
they carry back to their villages,

often returning marked, or muddied
at the commencement of each term.
They take their leave in formal English:

'If you want to open this letter, open it with peace.'
'I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus.'
'Esther Joseph Aquila sends her greetings.'

Compound

i Dusk

On Fridays, the women dress up, sit together at a distance
and look back to the school.

Wheelbarrows, water tubs, chapatti over coals;
the kettle hot with kindled fire.

Dust stirs, armed guards sit under thatch and drink tea:
it begins to rain as men make mortar.

Under canopy, girls sew.

ii Sister

Jovia from Uganda is revered
for her beauty. A nurse,
she sweats with the fever
like anyone

*lemons pressed
to marmalade, bottled
in her garden*

administers Artemisia,
prescribes bucket showers,
squints in the *bhundu*
over the stools of the missing

*before the tending
comes the scything
and slashing*

A man with little sight
is discussing
the girls' progress
over a potage of beans

*though he is nearly blind
able men plunder vegetables
from his garden*

iii Vigilance

One week away with the shakes,
I track the bird's shadow across dust.

A teacher orbits the desks,
his chalk mined in a factory in Kampala.

Nocturnal hunters send antelope across
the boundary into the school.

Two shots –

the snoring guard snapped from his sleep
by the sprayed gunfire of toppling fruit.

Boundaries

The cow slipped a gate
and because it was African
its horns went before it

(the charcoal is brought
to the brazier, glowing in a ladle,
as the guard recounts last night's story);

bought for slaughter, it had thought
to slip the net under the horns
of a new moon;

a posse set out into the *bhundu*
all machete and rifle
to hunt her down.

Trying for a little touch
(to replace the herdsman's hand)
it had scared the local children off

with its clumsy hazardings
at reaching out, received
a swipe before its face,

volleys of rocks, retired
to a scratching post at the far edge
of the compound.

*

So the girls behind the desks
burning in their uniforms.

Hearts seek hands seek hearts
as birdcalls pierce our sleep,

buckets slosh over the floor
and leaves spill from their banks.

The plane will come from the West
to take away their visitors.

*

And still they sweep (the ants
in the sugar work no harder)
this morning dressed in football strips,

raindrops exaggerated against tin.
The guards laugh and make off,
and the morning is more spacious

like creaking rivets at the evening's
cool relief, grateful for the stretch;
the girls mark out their boundaries,

attempt to lay the unruly cookhouse dust,
as we await the arrival of chapatti
wrapped ten-deep inside the cloth.

Testing, Testing

A detonation from the barracks.
Shock waves ripple through the night.
And it's kill the generator, serve the quiet –
here's glass and dish and rice and stew.

The children's voices release
on the air – one breath.
Kite strings cut, I sleep with door unlocked,
the country to my ear like a watch;

I lift the night-light to the ledge
and pressing a finger to the faintest pulse,
take the kettle from the brazier
as girls from the school sweep

the dust from the dust,
stand to salute the South Sudan flag,
assemble at the struck tyre-hub
that hangs from a frame by the school block.

The shushed environment is breathing
once more and morning has found us
with the stir of the *bhundu*,
the same steady challenges.

The Dust is Bad Today

Last night, Sapana sat under the stars
and waited for delivery of his dinner.

He saw this compound built, now can't stray
for fear of being thought a Rebel.

Each morning, up before the English,
he sets the kettle on the brazier.

Each evening, the generator goes down
and the volume of voices increases.

In Juba, this is the hot season,
time to drag your mattress outside,

though now it is too dangerous –
here are the girls in uniform

sweeping up the dust,
their sashes a cool white.

Departures (ii)

1,392 miles to destination

We await the plane all morning,
exchange songs – *Goodbyes are so hard,*
We wish you well in your endeavour, O Great Redeemer –
and an avalanche of letters.

Susan prefers the school to her home.
She would tap out a rhythm on the bench;
the span of finger against skin,
bat of palm, slap of thumb.

She plays once the suggestion of her playing
has almost passed, speaks
without eye-contact, side-on; no glance.

In the outdoor kitchen,
oiled fingers lift discs of dough
and drop them into a pan
propped over the fire.

An empty rum bottle for a rolling pin.
Malarone nags at the band of my sandal.

Teacher Agnes calls from under the Acacia tree:
‘Welcome to my classroom!’

*

The girls are a catalyst as I drag my heels –
the thought of their sweeping –
the later I rise, the nearer they will be.

I want to take in their approach over black coffee.
The guards asleep on the roofs.
The pilot wearing aviators.

Songs for Ibba

The plane full to capacity, each passenger is seated by weight.

'I just ask You go before us,' the pilot offers up a prayer.
And to me: 'There are five points to the seatbelt...
we've a crosswind, so we might go high.'

He hooks away from the window to his jottings.

We leave these girls behind.

*

I gasp, and back amidst my nets
the whirring fan's shoo-shooing such
the compound is soaked through. And is that
a lightning flash or a detonation from the barracks?

The pharmacist warned me of side-effects:
disassociation, waking dreams. I cannot tell
if I am in the air or on the ground.

Daedalus gleans a maze from the winding river.

A father stumbles over his youngest son's name.

I can't free myself from the netting of the plane.

Tell your girlfriend that may God help you and her get married

May God bless you on the road

Thank you for teaching us with song

If God wish you to come 2020 which type of gifts will you bring to me?

Testament

I will miss my confidant, John.
His counsel each morning, his diplomat's tone.

These three weeks, I have had the chance to earn my keep,
be fed, appreciated.

It is my faith I fear, clutching the rail
advancing towards the cool of the altar.

John says it is good for a man to kneel down
and rise up, to do good work.

Notes

These poems are based on a visit to Ibba Girls School in Western Equatoria State, South Sudan. The school aims to develop female leaders to steer their country. In South Sudan, there is a higher probability that a girl will die in childbirth than that she will finish her education.

The reference to salt in 'Departures' derives from a sermon loosely based on Matthew 5:13 which equates flavour with goodness. In the pastor's eyes, this goodness is education: 'What happens to salt without flavour? Throw it on the fire!'

'Compound' – each villager has their own spot in the jungle to defecate and this can prove informative should someone disappear without explanation.

'Testing, Testing' is set on an evening of lightning storms when the neighbouring army camp took to testing hand-grenades in the bush (*bbundu*) without informing either the villagers or the school in advance. As a result, the school cut all power and the girls ran to their dorms as armed guard patrolled the grounds. Many villagers spent the night sheltering in the jungle.

'The Dust is Bad Today' – Sapana Abuyi is Deputy Governor of Western Equatoria State. As well as establishing many of the roads to the school, he also played a large part in the construction of the school itself. At the time of writing he is unable to travel outside of a few prescribed routes for fear of being thought to conspire with Rebel forces.

'Departures (ii)' – unlike the Dinka tribes to the North East of the country, none of the girls in Ibba are familiar with cattle. MAF is the Mission Aviation Fellowship, a Christian organization which provides aviation, communications and learning technology services to more than 1,000 Christian and humanitarian agencies, as well as thousands of isolated missionaries and indigenous villagers in the world's most remote areas. Malarone, or Atovaquone, is an anti-malarial medicine which can induce waking dreams. I often had the impression while flying that I was at ground-level lying in bed with my eyes closed, and vice versa.

For more information about Ibba Girls School and how to contribute: www.ibbagirlsschool.org