



## Exploring an Ethiopian Poet by Pure Accident

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It was a nice spring day and I went out for a quick shopping to the Hamden Plaza in Connecticut, and in the Stop and Shop I bumped into a dignified Ethiopian by the name Gashaw Lake. He was with his wife and daughter and when we were about to greet and introduce each other, in the traditional Ethiopian manner, which has now become increasingly a rare commodity, he lifted his hat and greeted me. I was delighted to encounter the best of Ethiopian values but I must admit that I was subconsciously compelled to reciprocate by bowing while shaking the hand of my Ethiopian brother. Then, we exchanged addresses and departed to our respective destinations, but soon after I emailed Dr. Gashaw and ever since we have been exchanging ideas and experiences including books that we have authored. But, I never suspected the day we first met that I have indeed explored an Ethiopian poet by pure accident. I must be grateful to the universe for meeting this wonderful Ethiopian, and it is for this apparent reason that I decided to pay tribute to Professor Gashaw by way of reviewing his poetry book entitled **ሰንኞች ከባህር ማዶ** (Poems Beyond the Sea).

One of the reasons I wanted to introduce Dr. Gashaw Yewenshet Lake to IDEA's subscribers in the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia is because I sincerely felt that unless his talents are exposed to a larger audience, they would be just like the tree that crashes in the middle of the forest and no one would witness the sound it makes. By the same token, creative ideas could vanish unless there is a receptive audience to get hold of it and appreciate it.

In appreciation of Dr. Gashaw's poem and in light of the title of this review essay, thus, I found it most appropriate to begin with one of his poems entitled 'Exploring'.

### Exploring

It is pitch dark  
I alone seek the stars,  
Shelterless and fused with love  
As that of husband and wife  
Drifting in the cosmos as one.

In reading Gashaw's poems, one would certainly be drifted in the cosmos because the many poems in the book are reflective not only of the human experience in general, but they also deal more specifically with individual people ranging from those who gave their lives for a noble cause to a girl who lost her sense of direction and to a stray cat that was destined to be run over by a car.

In the tradition of poetry, the power of Gashaw's poems authenticate reality by successive stanzas and cadences, and these are best exemplified by the many poems dedicated to either family members or random Ethiopian and/or African American personas. For instance, ለጋሼ ሲራክ is for General Sirak Tesfa; ምን ያለ ያገር ሰው is for the late Professor Asrat Woldeyes; እይዋት ስትናፍቀኝ is obviously for the late famous Ethiopian singer Tilahun Gessesse; ስንብት is dedicated to Abraham Weinsnet Workalemahu, and 'The Statue' is in honor of Whitney Young, an African American who struggled for human rights. 'The Statue', incidentally, has an emancipating power because it represents "a sanctuary for people's rights".

Of all the poems in the book that I liked and enjoyed reading is ምላስ (The Tongue), in which the tongue enters dialogue with the teeth in his abode (the mouth) and ultimately reconciles with his apparent nemesis. 'The Tongue' is full of metaphors and the latter are large conceptual frameworks in poetry. Although Gashaw is talented enough in the use of sophisticated formal techniques so that he can effectively reach out his audience, his skills are concatenated with the traditional literary and spoken culture of Ethiopia. In the final analysis, Gashaw is a byproduct of the rich Ethiopian legacy of literature, poetry, metaphors, as well as Sem'na Worq (wax and gold), figurative spoken and written words with double meanings.

The Azmari (song artists) in Wollo and elsewhere in Ethiopia don't need formal education in order to assemble lyrics and songs; the cultural apprentice is their school where they learn creativity and ethos since their childhood.

When Dr. Gashaw writes ቤት የሌለው ድመት (literally, 'A Homeless Cat'), that I have labeled 'stray cat' above, and ደግሞ ላላፊ ዓለም, he seems to capture the enigmatic and fatalistic universe, which I suspect he himself is telepathically connected to. Furthermore, Gashaw's inquiry of "how the stray cat feels" vis-à-vis the well-taken care off pet cats, reminds me of Paul Dunbar's *Sympathy*, in which he states, "I know what the caged bird feels, alas!"

One other poem that I found fascinating and which could serve as a good example of monologue (although intriguingly it could sound like dialogue) is 'Meeting', in which the author craftily dramatizes the meeting of his corporeal entity with his soul. Rather than comment on this piece, however, I am tempted to present it in its entirety so that readers could get the flavor and come up with their own interpretation. Here is 'Meeting':

### Meeting

I met my soul at the corridor across from my bedroom  
Two of us greeting with feelings of warmth  
A happy meeting before closure of the day!  
In my quiet bed in isolation,  
We were like a child, adult, and old all in one  
Wept and laughed at my deeds good and bad.  
My soul was greater than my body  
With radiating light brighter than the sun and the moon,  
Older and wiser than my body,  
A philosopher in its own right,  
Refined, and a literary giant.  
My soul spoke to me with a language never heard.

My body was content!  
It was like in a cage  
Enshrined with eternity ---  
I saw my mother with angel wings  
Flying far above the crowds  
And whispering in my eyes  
Thought of hope and grace;  
She pointed to my loved ones, my relatives,  
My students – African, American, Asian --,  
With smiling faces and great promise  
Urging me to act upon their deferred dreams,  
In the end all joined hands.

At the beginning of this review essay, I stated that Dr. Gashaw and I met by accident, but when I read ‘Worries’, I realized that we were in fact engaged in same wave lengths (perhaps connected via electro-magnetic field) in our appreciation of “blackness”. In my book *Cultures that We Must Preserve and Reject*, one of the chapter titles is አምልኮተ ነጭና አፍሪቃዊ ቀለም and I have argued that we Africans must be proud of our black complexion. In a similar vein, in “Worries” Gashaw states, “my daughter, black like ebony, a creation of beauty.”

The idea of “black pride”, of course, is not novice and we did not originate it. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prominent African American leaders were promoting the beauty of blackness in order to boost the self-esteem of the oppressed Africans in the Diaspora. For instance, Frederick Douglass, working with Martin R. Delany for the *North Star* newspaper, had the following to say: “I thank God for making me a man, but Delany thanks Him for making him a black man.”

Once the reader gets hold of ስንኞቹ ከባህር ማዶ s/he would not stop reading it, but s/he would also encounter the inexorable element or leitmotif in the majority of the poems: Death! Readers must be ready for some melancholy and anguish, but Gashaw is not simply entertaining imaginative impulse; he is trying to fully grasp the human experience by adorning factual contents poetically, but at times painfully expressed. I suggest that the reader reads between lines in order to really grasp the essence of the poems.

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Dr. Gashaw W. Lake is Dean and Professor of the College of Professional Studies at Kentucky State University, Frankfort, KY. He obtained his PhD in philosophy of education from the University of Oklahoma at Norman, OK in 1981 and has authored dozens of articles and poems and coauthored *Disasters in Africa – Experiences and Perspectives*. Dr. Gashaw is married to Weizero Leyuwork Makonnen and is the father of three daughters: Aeumro Gashaw, Weynshet Gasahw, and MeNore Gasahw. For educational and constructive feedback, you may contact Professor Gashaw Lake via [gashaw.lake@kysu.edu](mailto:gashaw.lake@kysu.edu)

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