Poem: ‘Can You Tell Me?’  
Yilma Tafere Tasew

Yilma Tafere Tasew is from Ethiopia where he was a primary school teacher and published small newspapers. He has always been a writer. He was living in a small rural town in southern Ethiopia in May 1991 when rebels overthrew the Marxist Dergue regime. He heard shooting and, not knowing what would come next, decided to move to the town his parents were living in. With many roads blocked, he found himself, with thousands of others, crossing the border into Kenya. He never guessed it would be a one-way trip. The Kenyan government was not accepting refugees as permanent residents, and for the next eight years he lived in a series of refugee camps in arid northern Kenya. He says of that period:

The first refugee camp where I stayed for more than two years, 125 kms from the border of Ethiopia, was a nightmare. Malaria, typhoid and hunger killed people every day. Unknown armed gangs in the bush often killed refugees. You heard guns firing every night and the sound of munitions exploding in the camp. You didn’t know what would happen from one day to the next.

He became a community organiser in the transit camp at Walda, and was then transferred to the refugee-town of Kakuma, with its 47,000 residents from many countries. In September 1993, Yilma started a refugee-run newspaper *Kanebu* that published news articles, short stories, poems, artworks and interviews with UN officials about conditions in the camps. From 1997 he was employed by UNHCR in Nairobi as an assistant translator and transport officer. In 1999 he moved as a refugee to New Zealand where he now lives. He is an activist on behalf of refugees from all countries and his poetry is central to his activism. A collection of his poems *Agonising Wounds* was published in 2001 by the New Zealand Refugee and Migrant Service. He believes that this is the first book to be published by an African in New Zealand. He says of his own writing: ‘Through my writings I have cried with my pain, I have shown my hunger, my thirst, my homesickness. I have shown my views and ideas to the world to say I am a human being who is part of the world.’

In the poem that follows, he asks the anguished questions which so many exiles utter when they have left family members back home.
Can You Tell Me?

The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?
How my Mum is doing? Is Mum hungry?
Thirsty? Sick? In agony? Naked?

The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?

Our small cottage
Is it strong like before, or tilting?
The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?

Is my Mum’s hair full of grey?
Her face wrinkled?
Strong enough to collect firewood?
Has she planted cabbage, pumpkins, potato like before?
The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?

Is my brother alive
Who was forced to join the army ‘National Service’?
Is my sister who eloped coming back to visit Mum?
The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?

What’s my Mother’s income?
Is she brewing local liqueur, beer, ‘Tela Arecki’?
The shining moon
Surrounded, guarded by twinkling stars
Can you tell me?