Three Poems from
*The Cows of Shambat*

Alphabetization of the Workers

The Colonial master taught me the names
For the general tasks of road maintenance:
- A was for digging gravel
- B was for carrying it to the roadside
- C was for making gravel heaps
- D was for filling holes with gravel
- E was for maintaining culverts
- F was for digging channels
- G was for cutting grass
- H was for something else ...

The colonial mistress taught me the names
For the general task of house cleaning
- A was for sweeping house
- B was for taking rubbish away
- C was for making tea
- D was for warming water
- E was for waking *bwana*\(^1\) up
- F was for waking *memsab*\(^2\) up
- F was for serving them tea
- H was for making beds
  and throwing condoms away

\(^1\) boss, sir

\(^2\) lady, madam


When we changed tasks
I was asked what was H?
When I answered ‘H was for something else’
I was sacked for being cheeky.

**Messed Up By English**

English, you are not my tongue
But you have fucked me up
What is this notion called ‘being clever by half’?
Could the bat’s hesitation between becoming a bird
And remaining ordinary grain-eating rodent qualify?

English, you are not my tongue
But you have messed me up
I couldn’t love you more than Wole Soyinka
Plodding through the Advanced Oxford Dictionary
(un-abridged)
To amass the words that frightened Renage Lohiya’s
Papuan son in Waigani
Whilst maintaining my inherited place amongst the Acholi
and Bari-speakers.

Am I too clever by half
Abandoning earth
To clamber on a tendril
Intent on saying ‘yes’ to God in Hopkins’s tongue?

English you are not my tongue
But you’ve lost my way for me
The mores that I know barely fill a market basket
But my mind is stuffed by Calvin, Luther, Nietzsche,
Wilberforce and Jesus knows -

My stock of moralizing words grows vaster than cancer -
Taking the string of revenge away from my hand
Thus disarmed by words that I prized I am caged in ethics.