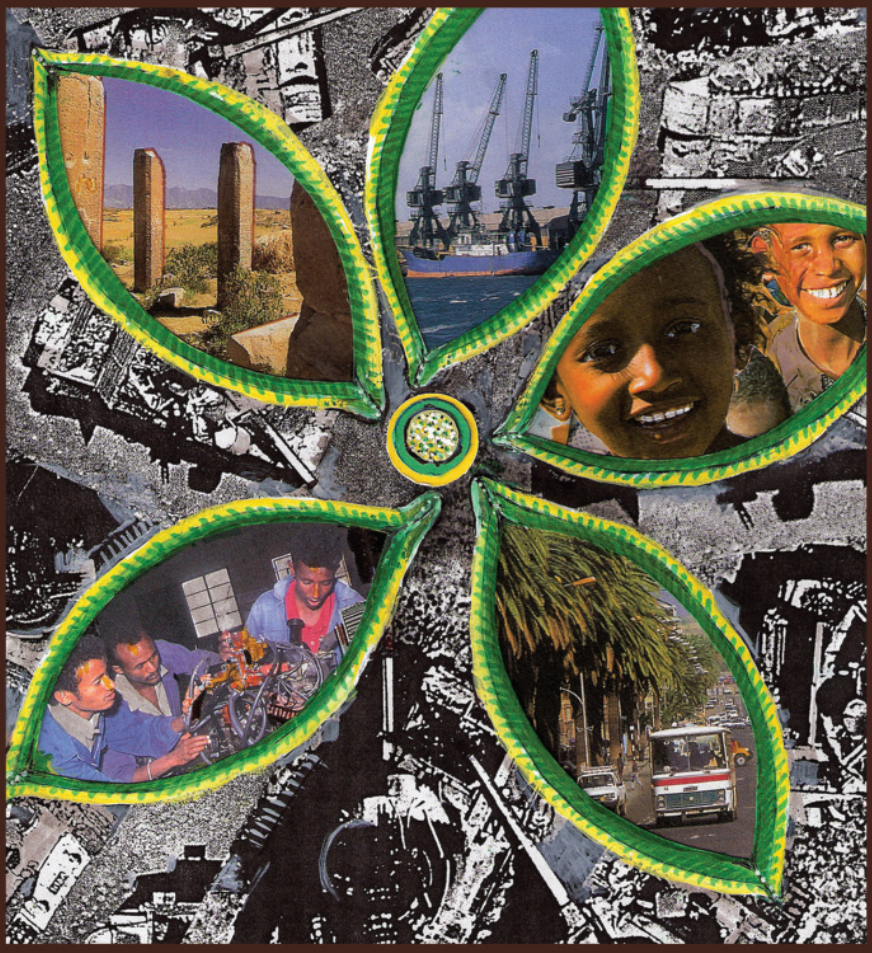
WAR & PEACE

in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry



CHARLES CANTALUPO

Charles Cantalupo has amazingly traversed the threshold of the once solitary land, where oblivious Eritrean poets, all on their own, wrestled with gods and demons to grope for meaning in the heat of war and in the burning desire for peace. The uniquely creative translation discloses a vibrant poetry rendered in languages hardly resembling English, yet all the same allied to the family of world literature. While the poets in *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* are only a small part of a vast body of ancient and modern poetry, this book offers a gate for poetics to triumph over the vitriol of politics as Eritrean poetry joins global forces in search of connectivity.

Beyene Haile, Eritrea's greatest novelist
Author of *Abidu'do Tibluwo* (*Madness*), *Dukan Tibereh* (*Tibereh's Shop*)

In *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry*, Charles Cantalupo writes about the poetry he is familiar with and which he has, more than any other literary or Africanist scholar to date, revealed to the world. In this study, Cantalupo is surefooted, proficient, and incisive. He deploys his scholarly expertise and personal experience of a poet into a discussion of the relatively young nation's rich poetic heritage. The concluding appendix of selected poems gives the reader an opportunity to ingest the ripeness of Eritrean poetry. This book is surely a welcome addition not only to critical works on contemporary African poetry but also to the subjects of war and peace in the Horn of Africa.

Tanure Ojaide, Frank Porter Graham Professor of African Studies and poet

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Charles Cantalupo

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Acknowledgements

In the reprise that concludes this book, I write that when I was translating the poems in the anthology, *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic*, upon which this book is based, I did not feel 'like an author writing a book in Private' but instead

> like one person in a Renaissance workshop
> Doing my part on a massive painting, only the subject
> Was war and peace in the Eritrean struggle to survive,
> Pictured in two local and two global languages worked on
> Over and over by many people's hands into poems.

The process of writing *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* was more conventional. It is the record of an individual's extended meditations based on reading a book in 'a room of one's own'. This was a primary aim for producing *Who Needs a Story* in the first place. The experience of someone reading a book of poetry and then wanting to write a book about it might seem unexceptional and commonplace, a 'given' in the study of literature, but in the case of contemporary Eritrean poetry, anyone who wanted to read it could only do so in the poetry's original languages, and then not in any kind of comprehensive way as an anthology might allow but only in the form of books by merely a few individual poets. Furthermore, since next to none of them had been translated, with the exception of the poetry of the Tigrinya Eritrean poet Reesom Haile, and his only relatively recently, a reader would have to possess a strong working knowledge of more than one of Eritrea's nine, nationally recognised languages, to begin to feel that he or she might have any kind of broad understanding of contemporary Eritrean poetry in all its linguistic variety.

The publication of *Who Needs a Story*, translating contemporary poetry in three of Eritrea's nine languages into English, broke through both the external, international walls of silence that had previously surrounded the work and also shattered some of the internal barriers among Eritrean poets themselves and their readers because, for example, a speaker of Tigrinya with limited Arabic or a speaker of Arabic with limited Tigre could now have easy access through the translation into English of the original language of the poem that he or she did not know. Indeed, such a reader could now indulge in the private pleasure of reading a book of Eritrean poetry in translation, reliving an experience, for example – again long taken for granted – like having access to Chinese literature while unable to speak or read Chinese; or having similarly ready access to the variety of literature in European languages while only knowing some of them.

Still, is something lost in translation? Undoubtedly. But is so much lost that basing one's reading on the translation ruins any chance for adequate interpretation? If the answer is 'yes', how does one evaluate the profound cultural influence, the teachings and the pleasures of – to take an outstanding example – the Bible, a collection of different works originally in a variety of languages that extremely few people now read or speak yet that nearly the entire population of the world can read through translation in their own languages?

Fortunately, I have not been alone in my efforts to understand contemporary Eritrean before I decided to write about it. This fact, too, should not seem unusual, since reading and writing about poetry usually includes the consideration of what others have said about the poems. In my case, however, resorting to books and articles about contemporary Eritrean poetry was not an option, since few existed, and those were mostly informational rather than critical or analytic. Furthermore, they had not been translated. Therefore, the secondary sources without which I could not have written this book had to be the people, Eritrean and others, whom I questioned about the poetry and who were unfailingly generous in their responses. I also had to depend on the generosity of grants to find the time at home to write and to travel to Eritrea, where I further depended on the generosity of the Eritrean people.

My work on Eritrean poetry probably would have stopped in 2002, after I had completed two books of translations of poems by Reesom Haile, but then Zemhret Yohannes, representing Eritrea's People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) and the PFDJ's Director of Research and Documentation, invited me to return to Eritrea to learn about more Eritrean poets whose work was critically distinguished and widely appreciated there. Ever since – yet before, too – Zemhret has provided the motivation, the means, the inspiration and the guidance without which this book would not have been possible.

I could never have written this book without Ghirmai Negash. The process of translating and editing the poems of *Who Needs a Story* together gave me a kind of word by word access to the work as their original languages and English faced down each other until they found as much common ground as is possible in a word. Subsequently, our readings and discussions becoming incremental accumulations of words, phrases, sentences, stanzas poems – always striving at the same time to ascertain their rhythms and music – made translation and interpretation a synchronous process.

In Eritrea, Said Abdelhay, Alemseged Tesfai and Solomon Tsehaye revealed contexts for these poems which I could never have imagined or discovered on my own. Friendship, openness, patience, understanding and solidarity

characterised all of my meetings with Eritrean poets, including Solomon Drar, Beyene Hailemariam, Angessom Isaak, Saba Kidane, Meles Negusse, Paulos Netabay, Mohammed Said Osman, Ribka Sibhatu, Isayas Tsegai, again Solomon Tsehaye, Ghirmai Yohannes (San Diego) and Ahmed Omer Sheikh. Also, I could always depend on the Research and Documentation Center (RDC) and Hdri Publishers' Isaac Yosief for invaluable assistance.

In the United States, Kassahun Checole provided my introduction – a life-changing experience – to Eritrea and its poetry, the first opportunity to publish my translations into English and, most of all, a secure sense that my efforts would always be welcome. As ever, Lawrence Sykes offered his wisdom on how not to be discouraged but to persist for the sake of creating a human and humane art. Neil Baldwin, Daniel Hoffman, Bob Holman and Ngugi wa Thiong'o generously listened to many an oral version of what appears on these pages and offered direction that proved right. My students in African literature at Penn State Schuylkill supplied great encouragement through their spontaneous engagement and fresh perspectives whenever Eritrea and its poetry entered our discussions. Closest to home, my wife, Barbara, my best love and my best colleague, and our children provided everything this writer could ever want, whether I was secluded on the third floor of our home in historic Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, seven thousand miles away in Eritrea, or anywhere in between, physically or mentally.

I have also relied on the generous financial and in-kind support of Eritrea's Research and Documentation Center (RDC), Hdri Publishers, Cultural Affairs Bureau, the American Speaker and Specialist Program of the Bureau of International Information Programs (US Department of State), and Penn State University's Schuylkill Campus, University College, College of Liberal Arts and Department of English.

A last word of thanks for earlier versions of portions of this book having appeared in *Drunken Boat*, *Global Conversations Revisited*, *Samizdat*, *Shaebia*, *The Road Less Traveled: Reflections on the Literatures of the Horn, Titanic Operas*, *We Have Our Voice*, *We Invented the Wheel*, and *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic*.

Foreword

To discuss the entire contemporary poetry of most if not all countries requires more than a book, and Eritrea is no exception. This book covers selected poems by Eritrean poets of roughly the last three decades and who write in three of Eritrea's nine languages.

The poets appear in the anthology, *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (Hdri Publishers: Asmara, 2005). All of the poems in *Who Needs a Story* appear in their original scripts of Ge'ez or Arabic and in English translation. Containing thirty-six poems by twenty-two contemporary poets and produced in two local and two global languages, *Who Needs a Story* is the first anthology of contemporary poetry from Eritrea ever published, making *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* the first book on the subject. Thus by necessity, the critical discussion of *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* examines in all but a few cases the poems in *Who Needs a Story* precisely because it is the first and only collection of its kind.

War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry can also serve as a kind of reader's guide to the poems in *Who Needs a Story*, albeit with three exceptions. The first is for the veteran fighter in Eritrea's armed struggle for independence and mother of nine, Zeineb Yassin – popularly known as Mother Zeineb. Her poem, 'Under a Sycamore', translated from Tigre, is a partial transcription of her performance on 16 January 2000 at the 'Against All Odds' literary festival and conference in Eritrea. The second exception is to include a performance poem by Saba Kidane, on 15 January 2000 at the same event, although *Who Needs a Story* also includes three other poems by her.

The third exception is for Reesom Haile. While *Who Needs a Story* includes two of his most famous poems, the fifth chapter of *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* offers an extended essay on his poetry to provide an example of the kind of in-depth analysis that the writing of many of the poets in *Who Needs a Story* deserves, and in time can no doubt generate, including Ribka Sibhatu, Saba Kidane, Meles Negusse, Solomon Drar, Isayas Tsegai, Solomon Tsehaye, Ghirmai Yohannes, Mohammed Said Osman, Mohammed Osman Kajerai, Ahmed Omer Sheikh and more. Many of these same writers also have books of their own, in poetry and other genre, and their work cries out for scholarly, critical study. Indeed, before his death in 2003, Reesom Haile had three book length poetry collections (two of which were bilingual Tigrinya/English), his poems had appeared in over half a dozen international literary magazines of high quality, he had been translated into ten languages, and he

was fast becoming the subject of literary analysis in conferences, journals and classrooms. For the work of a great poet to attract so much critical attention is to be expected. A similar expectation underlies the purpose of both the anthology *Who Needs a Story* and this book about its poetry. Inevitably, more Eritrean poets – based on the high quality of their work – should become the focus of more writers and scholars.

War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry primarily discusses the poems of *Who Needs a Story* in their English translations. As one of the translators, I tried as best I could to come close in my work to the originals, yet many speakers of the poems' original languages assisted in their translation into English and repeatedly scrutinised the results.

Nevertheless, in focusing on the English translations *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* can only begin to understand its subject. The translations themselves are only a beginning, too, since the history of translation suggests that subsequent translations can be still closer to the original. Moreover, essays and books by writers and scholars in the original languages of the poems in *Who Needs a Story* can substantially advance the beginning set out in *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* and are of the greatest importance.

The inaugural status of both the anthology of contemporary Eritrean poetry, *Who Needs a Story*, and of this critical analysis of its contents requires that the way in which the former first came into being cannot be taken for granted but warrants a discussion of its own. Thus, chapter one focuses on the means of cultural production that led to the groundbreaking publication of *Who Needs a Story.* Since Eritrea's existence as an independent nation dates back only to 1991, when it wins its independence through an armed struggle with Ethiopia, that few people know much about this new nation, with even fewer aware of its contemporary poetry, is not surprising. *Who Needs a Story* as well as any critical discussion of the poets whom it features exists in a kind of international knowledge vacuum. Yet the impetus for the anthology comes from within Eritrea itself. Chapter one focuses on this, describing the process and engaging the unique critical issues it raises, including contemporary Eritrean culture's aversion to copyright, the country's not being a part of a globalised system of book marketing requiring ISBN numbers, and even Eritrea's relatively short tradition of recognised individual authorship – ironically, perhaps, within a four thousand year old tradition of the written word.

All of the poets in *Who Needs a Story* participated in the Eritrean struggle for independence (1961-91) from Ethiopia as freedom fighters and/or as supporters in the Eritrean diaspora. Therefore, for the most part they focus

either on war or peace. As might be expected after such a long war, its presence in Eritrean poetry predominates. Naturally, more than a decade or two has to pass for this to change. Even then, since Eritrea's liberation in 1991 the nation has experienced the outbreak of war with Ethiopia again – resulting in over 100,000 deaths on both sides – subsequent to which the relationship between the two countries has been described as 'no-war-no-peace'. Yet this almost constant presence of war in contemporary Eritrean history only highlights the fact that its poetry also cries out for peace.

Thus the simplest way to begin to analyse contemporary Eritrean poetry is to break it down into the poetry of war, the subject of Chapter Two; the poetry of war and peace, the subject of Chapter Three; the poetry of peace, the subject of Chapter Four; and the poetry of Reesom Haile, the subject of Chapter Five as an example of the kind of extended analysis that many of the poets of *Who Needs a Story* should stimulate.

War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry concludes with a reprise of these chapters in the form of a kind of essay in verse, called 'Non-Native Speaker', focusing on my personal involvement in the work. The title derives from the designation for a panel in which I was invited to participate at a conference directed by Ngugi wa Thiong'o at the University of California, Irvine, 27-29 October 2008, called 'Global Conversations: A Festival of Marginalized Languages'. Considering the title of the panel, 'Enabling Practices: The Role of the Non-Native Speaker in Revival, Restoration, and Visibility', I attempted to discuss how I, a non-native speaker, personally became involved in the translation of contemporary Eritrean poetry.

As this book shows, subjects of war and peace in contemporary Eritrean poetry comprise a kind of spectrum, with poems that focus almost exclusively on war at one end, poems seemingly oblivious to war at the other end, and most poems falling somewhere in between. In *Who Needs a Story* poems in Tigrinya that find war inescapable are Fessahazion's Michael's 'Naqra' and Solomon Drar's 'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?' Similarly in Tigre, Mussa Mohammed Adem, more than any Eritrean poet in *Who Needs a Story* in any language, focuses on war to the exclusion of all else. Similarly in Arabic, an unremitting dimension of war chiefly inspires Mohammed Osman Kajerai, the oldest poet in *Who Needs a Story.* At the opposite end of the spectrum, Tigrinya poems in *Who Needs a Story* by Saba Kidane, Beyene Hailemariam, Reesom Haile and Ghirmai Yohannes can put war out of sight and out of mind. Similarly in Tigre, Mohammed Said Osman wants poetry only to make love, literally. Similarly in Arabic, Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh

finds poetry likewise devoted to love's reflection, albeit 'broken'. Ensnared to varying degrees in moments of war and peace, Eritrean poets in *Who Needs a Story* who counterpoint the two include in Tigrinya: Meles Negusse, Issayas Tsegai, Solomon Tsehaye, Angessom Isaak, Ribka Sibhatu, Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis, Fessehaye Yohannes and Ghirmai Ghebremeskel; in Tigre, Paulos Netabay; in Arabic: Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani), Ahmed Mohammed Saad and Ahmed Omer Sheikh.

Further exploration of work by poets anthologised in *Who Needs a Story* would reveal that their poetry concerns more than what is represented in the one or several poems contained here. A poem about war featured in *Who Needs a Story* might be by a poet with other poems that focus on peace but that are not included in the book. The same in reverse could be said about a poet whose anthologised work focuses on peace. Not surprisingly, most contemporary Eritrean poets have a varied body of work, with individuals having written many different kinds of poems covering a wide range of experience in war, peace and in between. Nevertheless, each of the poems in *Who Needs a Story* marks a distinct point in this spectrum of Eritrean experience. Each unfolds a distinct story of war, peace or both as a part of the larger story of a new nation coming into being and an old country reinventing itself.

In a poem called 'A Candle for the Darkness', which appears in 1988, towards the end of Eritrean armed struggle for independence, Ghirmai Ghebremeskel seems to foresee the category of Eritrean poets who in varying proportions write about war and peace in the same poem. Peace and its promise of freedom at times resemble a single candle – some light, at least, and even a bit of warmth, but doomed either to consume itself or to be snuffed out by

> murder
> And mutilation….
>
> devils and death
> In the shadows….

Later in the poem, however, the poet claims that

> a candle
> Comes out of the darkness
> And lights up the horizon
>
> Brimming with people
> Marching into the light –
> Candles and more candles
> Coming from all directions….

The vision seems like a triumph, 'brimming with people' who survive the war and whom the poet sees

> all refusing
> Any more death,
> And restoring, adoring
> And rejoicing in life.

But 'the light' is ambiguous. The phrase 'Marching into the light' has a religious or spiritual connotation, suggesting that for such a 'light' to be experienced it might have to be in the afterlife, which is, only experienced after death. This ambiguity suggests that 'The light' and death may be inseparable.

Ghebremeskel also seems to foresee Eritrea's current, most sacred and solemn national holiday and its popular mode of observance. Martyrs Day, held every year the day before the summer solstice, when the light is longest, commemorates soldiers who have died in Eritrea's war of independence as well as in its most recent war with Ethiopia. In Asmara, Eritrea's capital, after sunset and with the streetlights turned off, the main avenue fills with a spontaneous procession of people 'Coming from all directions'. They all carry candles and meet in the city's outdoor largest performance space, Bahti Meskerem Square, '[b]rimming with people / …Candles and more candles…'. Inevitably this somber spectacle to commemorate the war dead gives way to a general 'rejoicing in life' throughout the city, although not before a formal display of elaborate pageantry, music and drama. Thus the commemoration of Martyr's Day itself embodies the spectrum that seems to characterise contemporary Eritrean poetry, ranging from focusing on the extremes of war and peace – martyrdom and a national holiday – yet both at the same time, too. Yet whether we are looking at the poets who are included in *Who Needs a Story*, their work, this book about them, the civil servants who organise and prepare the formal observances and celebrations on such holidays as Eritrean Martyrs or Independence day, and the massive crowds of Eritreans who attend them, they all seem to embody a range of experience that typifies a kind of inseparability of war and peace throughout Eritrean poetry, the arts and Eritrean life.

Chapter One

The Story on *Who Needs a Story*

Eritrean poetry was with very few exceptions unheard of in the modern world of letters until poems by contemporary Eritrean poets began appearing in the first decade of the twenty-first century in distinguished literary journals like *Exquisite Corpse*; *Left Curve*; *Drunken Boat; Words Without Borders; Two Lines*; *War, Literature and the Art; Modern Poetry in Translation*; *Rattapallax* and more – even in the *New York Times* and on *CNN*.[1]

Recognizing this growing critical interest, Hdri Publishers in Asmara, Eritrea, tapped its scant resources to publish *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* in 2005.

Who Needs a Story is unique – a first in a world where literary anthologies of contemporary American poetry, Irish poetry, French poetry, Italian poetry, British poetry, and the poetry of most developed nations are abundant. Like many poets who write in African languages, Eritrean poets writing in their own languages or in translation could not be found on the shelves of the world's bookstores and libraries. But now contemporary Eritrean poets are well on their way to being known and enjoyed throughout Africa and the world, much as poets of other countries have achieved, however belatedly, worldwide recognition: for example, the way that contemporary Eastern European poets are first read widely in the 1970s or South American poets in the 1960s, and without whose influence most contemporary poetry in English and most languages is unimaginable since these poets explore and express a sensibility not widely recognised before them.

Yet the publication of *Who Needs a Story* is a story in itself. How did the first anthology of contemporary Eritrean poetry in translation ever published come into being?

In 2002, Hdri Publisher's director, Zemhret Yohannes, invited me to Eritrea to explore the possibility of translating and editing an anthology of contemporary Eritrean poetry. Previously, I had published two books of translations of Eritrean poetry in Tigrinya by Reesom Haile – *We Have Our Voice* (2000) and *We Invented the Wheel* (2002). *We Have Our Voice* was the first book of translations of an Eritrean poet ever published, and it included the poems in their original Tigrinya script. Both books were critically noticed and well received. Zemhret Yohannes felt that many more Eritrean poets deserved similar attention. After meeting with many of the poets, the chair and

founder of the University of Asmara's Department of Eritrean Languages and Literatures, Ghirmai Negash, and other experts in Eritrean literature, I knew Zemhret Yohannes was right.

In 2003 over sixty Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic poems were translated and evaluated in Asmara for their quality and accessibility to determine the actual feasibility of the project. The poets represented a wide cross section of Eritrean society, including men and women from their twenties to their eighties as well as scholars, professional writers, journalists, social scientists, cultural activists, teachers, actors, theatre directors and performers. Furthermore, most of the poets participated in the Eritrean struggle for independence as freedom fighters and/or as supporters in the Eritrean diaspora.

Rahel Asgedom and Nazreth Amlessom, both lecturers in the English department at the University of Asmara, made the first translations of about half of forty Tigrinya poems which would be short-listed for inclusion in the book. Adem Saleh, an Eritrean television journalist, and Dessale Berekhet, a columnist for the newspaper, *Haddas Eritrea*, and a senior student in English at the University of Asmara made the first drafts of poems in Tigre. Ghirmai Negash coordinated and supervised this first phase of the translations in Tigrinya and Tigre, translated the second half of the Tigrinya poems, read all of the translations and made changes for accuracy and readability. Ghirmai Negash would be the book's co-editor and co-translator with me.

The widely respected and senior journalist, Said Abdulhay, with whom I also met in 2002 to discuss the prospect of the book, accepted the responsibility of coordinating the translation of poems in Arabic. Since the Arabic poems' inclusion in the book was considered essential from the start, they were sent for translation to Mekki for Translating & Printing**,** an international translation office in Beirut, Lebanon, which provided translations of the Arabic poems' first drafts in English.

Receiving the first drafts in English of all of the translations by the end of 2003, I began working on their second drafts. Checking for linguistic accuracy and reading and rewriting the work as an English-speaking poet, literary critic and scholar, I produced a complete book manuscript, which I then returned to Ghirmai Negash, who read and commented upon it.

At the end of the summer of 2004, Ghirmai Negash and I met in Asmara for the final stage of the project. Basing our discussion of the poems on Ghirmai Negash's comments, we began an engaging, intense yet pleasurable dialogue about the poems in Tigrinya. In addition, we consulted with Said Abdulhay and Mussa Aron, whose knowledgeable and insightful comments on the Arabic

and Tigre poems respectively, along with their English translations, resulted in a similarly happy, challenging and productive process of literary collaboration. With the guidance and the critical corrections of the text provided by Ghirmai Negash, I then wrote the final version of the book.

One difficult decision Ghirmai Negash and I had to make concerned whom to include. The book's final version required that the number of poems and poets whom we had originally translated and planned to include had to be cut. We wanted to include more poets and more poems by them than we had space for – the dilemma of many an anthologist. Of course, we desired to present only the best and the most representative of contemporary Eritrean poets. Moreover, many of the poems we cut were too similar to these poets' work. We also cut poems that seemed too cryptic or opaque in their translation, although they could be wonderful in the original.

A more difficult decision had to be made about whether to include only written poetry and not Eritrean oral poetry, which has a long and rich tradition and which is still very important and pervasive in Eritrea. An objection to this critical decision would surely be just. I can well remember arguing about it ourselves. The importance of this decision spurs me to recall the exact spot in Asmara, rounding the corner of Tegadelti Street, and the blinding sunshine when we finally settled on only written poetry. Yet at the same time we firmly resolved that the depth, breadth and high quality of Eritrean oral poetry warrant a translation project and an edition of its own. Ultimately, we foresaw a mapping of the Eritrean verbal genome to include all of Eritrea's languages as well as their performative and literary dimensions, with *Who Needs a Story* making only several steps in such an endeavor.

The story of how *Who Needs a Story* came into being also stretches back to the literary festival held in Asmara, Eritrea, in January 2000: 'Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century'. For seven days, countries, universities, corporations, publishers, writers, scholars, artists, students, and children converged at a crossroads of centuries and a crossroads of cultures to make an historic intervention in Africa and the world, comparable to the first Pan African Congress of 1900.

The most important outcome of 'Against All Odds' was the 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures', co-authored by Kassahun Checole, Mbulelo Mzamane, Nawal El Saadawi, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Zemhret Yohannes and myself, and ratified by the entire gathering on 17 January 2000.[2] Since them, the document has been translated into a wide range of African languages and other languages worldwide.

Who Needs a Story is the fruit of many of the historic Asmara Declaration's most important points. For example, *Who Needs a Story* celebrates 'the vitality of African languages and literatures', specifically the languages of Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic in the contemporary poetry of Eritrea, 'and affirms…their potential'. Furthermore, *Who Needs a Story* 'note[s]…with pride that despite all the odds against them', the African languages of Eritrea – and Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic are only three of them – 'as vehicles of communication and knowledge survive and have a written continuity of thousands of years'. Corresponding again to the mandates of the Asmara Declaration, the Tigre, Tigrinya and Arabic poems of *Who Needs a Story* 'take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge of speaking for' Eritrea and more, embracing people everywhere who do the same in their languages and literatures. Also in line with the language of the Asmara Declaration, 'the vitality and equality' of Eritrea's languages and their poetry should 'be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment' of the Eritrean people. Also, '[t]he diversity of' Eritrea's 'languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of' Eritrea and is 'an instrument of' Eritrean 'unity'. Indeed, in the words of the declaration, '[d]ialogue among' Eritrean 'languages is essential', and Eritrean 'languages must use the instrument of translation to advance communication'. Yet again following the Declaration, *Who Needs a Story* would promote 'research on' Eritrean 'languages' as 'vital for their development'. The poetry of *Who Needs a Story* is written in the spirit of reinforcing 'what is essential for…the African Renaissance'. As a direct outcome of the Asmara Declaration, the book is a prototype for books of African language poetry to be published in other parts of Africa and the world.

In short, the Asmara Declaration is the theory, and *Who Needs a Story* is the practice.

My own experience in Eritrea went back five years before the 'Against All Odds' festival. When I first visited Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, early in the summer of 1995, I saw a new nation at peace and in action – with women fighters serving in the government, children learning in their mother tongues, a grass roots constitution process coming to fruition and so much more – developing itself with confidence, joy and incredibly hard work. This was four years after Eritrea's victory 'against all odds' – including overcoming the opposition of both the United States and the Soviet Union – in the brutal thirty year war for independence. Yet in 1995 Eritrea embodied an enlightened political and social vision intimated in the texts of Africa's greatest writers – like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Nawal El Saadawi and Wole Soyinka – whose own countries had lapsed for the most

part into unenlightened and visionless neocolonialism. The achievement of Eritrea was, indeed, 'against all odds',[3] yet considering the political and social problems of 20th-century Africa, the same phrase – 'against all odds' – perfectly characterised the struggle of these writers and many more of their African contemporaries in literature and its study.

Yet the story of *Who Needs a Story* would be incomplete without also considering the practical means of cultural production behind such a book. Little did I know when I began working on *Who Needs a Story* that the experience would sometimes feel like its own little 'against all odds', and that it would seems to echo the words of the title of my second book of translations with Reesom Haile: 'we invented the wheel'. Publishing books anywhere presents problems in editing, scheduling, printing, frustrating delays and more. For example, I could complain that publishing the book in Asmara took too long, longer than I have had to endure in publishing my books in the United States. Then again a book by so world-renowned an African author as Ngugi wa Thiong'o remained unpublished at a major American publisher after over four years![4] Nevertheless, 'the wheel' needed to publish a high quality book of poetry in four languages – two local, two international – and three fonts requiring different formats and new technology had never been seen before *Who Needs a Story* finally rolled off the presses in Asmara.

Writing a book is often a private, at times lonely, methodical process. Producing *Who Needs a Story* employed a huge cast of performers. At times each had his or her own script – meaning different versions of the same poem and different orthographies – as well as their own font, which brought together on a single page could wreak editing havoc. Or, *ut pictura poeisis* ('as is painting so is poetry'), as in the famous phrase from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, they came together in a kind of early modern period, European Renaissance workshop. It produced a kind of massive public painting or altarpiece of the Eritrean struggle in war and peace expressed in poetry, attributed to two co-authors yet the work of so many more, including faculty and students at the University of Asmara, Eritrean journalists and linguists in three languages, an international translation centre, Eritrea's People's Front for Democracy and Justice, staff at Eritrea's Research and Documentation Center (RDC) and, of course, the poets themselves.

Many of them gathered for a group reading one night just before Eritrean New Year's, the feast of *Meskerem*, in September 2004, at Asmara's most famous traditional restaurant, Giday's. Each poet performed his or her work in the original to the group seated at long tables and drinking *sewa*, Eritrea's traditional

barley beer, out of large porcelain plated metal goblets, in the traditional Eritrea style of Eritrea's oral poets, called *geTemti* in Tigrinya – *geTamay* for male and *geTamit* for female. After each reading, Ghirmai Negash and I alternated, reading our translations. This means of literary production, although performative and memorable, did not seem necessarily unique, until one of the poets who wrote in Tigrinya approached me. He said that our translations into English, a language he knew, made him feel for the first time that he understood his fellow freedom fighters, with whom he had marched and bled, who wrote in Arabic, which he did not know very well.

Another poet who performed his work that evening, Solomon Tsehaye, the author of Eritrea's national anthem, revealed an even stranger aspect, at least to me, of Eritrea's literary production.

We traveled together on a reading tour in 2005, when I was in Asmara to put the finishing touches on the manuscript of the book. We stopped in the city of Keren near its famous camel market and wanted to buy some of the region's equally famous mangoes to take back to Asmara. I bought some green chilies and tomatoes for lunch. As I held the bag on my lap in the car, Solomon suddenly remarked, 'That's my poem!' When I asked 'Where', he said, 'On the bag'. Three stanzas in Ge'ez script decorated the bag, although not without an error in one line, which Solomon corrected with the pen I had given to him with a request that he autograph the bag. In the second decade of the 1800s, might Francis Scott Key have found stanzas of his national anthem for the United States, 'The Star Spangled Banner', printed on the wrapping paper of some vegetables or crabs that he bought in a Baltimore farmer's market? Roughly a hundred years earlier in England, Jonathan Swift satirised poets who had pages from their discarded books end up as the lining of pie and muffin tins. Writing his own 'Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift' (1731) fourteen years before he died, the poet imagined when 'Some Country Squire to Lintot goes' and 'Enquires for Swift in Verse and Prose'. He's told, 'Sir, you may find them in Duck-lane: / I sent them with a Load of Books, / Last Monday to the Pastry-cooks'.

With a caveat about the critical limitations of applying western or any paradigms to unique African circumstances to make comparisons between them, I still bring up these historical instances to contextualise at least in part this moment with Solomon Tsehaye in the Keren market and, more generally, literary production in Eritrea as I have experienced it.

Literary production in contemporary Eritrea offers additional points of comparison with publishing history in the United States and England. For example, for American poets and writers from the 17th to at least the middle

of the 18th century – the time of Ann Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, Mary Hutchinson Philip Freneau, Thomas Paine and Joel Barlowe – American publishers, newspapers, broadsides, chapbooks, magazines and general support for writers were almost nonexistent, except on a few streets in Philadelphia just before the revolution, in comparison with London at the time.[5] Yet going back in English history roughly a hundred years more, a comparison between Elizabethan England and contemporary Eritrea reveals that the transmission of poetry in both cultures, with similar literacy rates between fifty and sixty percent, is identified more closely with speech than with text.[6]

Low literacy rates and both the lack of recognition and of opportunity in publishing combine to make the concept of an author as we know it inconceivable in England until the Restoration in 1660 and the literary career of John Dryden. Yet in Eritrea the concept of an author can be similarly blurred. Furthermore, for a writer to claim the copyright – nowadays a kind of absolute acknowledgement of an author for his or her work – is often viewed as unnecessary there. A new development in Eritrean publishing, in some quarters an author's claiming his or her copyright is even considered unwelcome, smacking of ego and a kind of individualism which Eritrea's thirty year armed struggle for independence simply could not afford.

Securing the now equally essential, bottom line kind of identification for a book, an ISBN number, presented an even bigger challenge than copyright in the case of *Who Needs a Story.* Hdri had never published a book with an ISBN number, and few books in Eritrea ever were, with the exception of several titles from Africa World / Red Sea Press, which had an American as well as an Eritrean base. Most books published in Eritrea stayed in Eritrea, which made ISBN numbers for the most part superfluous and/or irrelevant. The standard western practice of obtaining an ISBN designation so that a book would be entered into electronic databases and other records of 'books in print', leading to its recognition and sales through the internet yet also through bookstores nationally and internationally, did not apply. If *Who Needs a Story* were only to be published for Eritrean circulation, an ISBN number would not be required. However, precisely because the book was seeking an international as well as a national audience, such a designation had to appear on the anthology, and happily it did, although not without much hand wringing and persuasion. Thus, with an ISBN of 99948-0-008-6 *Who Needs a Story* added still another historic dimension – besides its being the first anthology of contemporary Eritrean poetry in the original and in translation, in two local and two international languages – to the history of publishing in Eritrea and worldwide.

As I have suggested, however, these historical comparisons between the means of literary production now in Eritrea and in the past in Europe and the United States are limited and can only go so far. For if we are talking about the history in Eritrea of written literature, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o has said about *Who Needs a Story*, 'For at least four thousand years – from the ancient stele in Belew Kelew to the twentieth century battlefields of Eritrea's heroic struggle for independence – into the twenty-first century, Eritrean poets have never given up writing in their own languages, which is why their poetry thrives'. Frankly, the literary history of Eritrea dwarfs England's and, of course, America's, too. Moreover, laid out between the Belew Kelew's stele with a sun and a quarter moon, the characters of the fragmented inscription – 'strug l agains ll od s wi', as I might translate it – can be readily identified as a Sabean forerunner of the ancient language of Ge'ez. I see this stele as the beginning of Eritrean literature. Standing among the longest and most continuous in the world, Eritrean literature and the means of its cultural production flow from the stele, outward to include Arabic and Orthodox Christian writing, through colonial Italian newspapers published in Asmara at the turn of the century, to the mimeograph machines that pumped out translations into Tigrinya of Gorki, Dickens, Shaw and Tolstoy – secreted in caves and away from the enemy MIGS trying to destroy them in the battlefields during Eritrea's long war for independence – to *Who Needs a Story.* Who needs a story?! Eritrea's incredibly long history of written literature provokes this question, and it can only be rhetorical. Ironically, such a long historical perspective can still produce, as I said in the beginning, a book of firsts.

This long history led me to a day late in July 2005 in Asmara, one of the rainiest summers most Eritreans can remember. *Who Needs a Story* was supposed to have been published nine months earlier when it was delivered to the printer. I needed a print out, at least, for a presentation I was making later that day. I called Sabur, the printing firm, and reached the printer. He said I could come over and he would print out a copy. Sabur stood in a kind of sparsely populated field aspiring to be an industrial park behind my hotel. I had to walk a zigzag pattern across a vast, red mud field to avoid the deep puddles. Sabur also stood contiguous to a UNICEF outpost wrapped in barbed wire, enclosing six huge satellite dishes and three towering communication towers. The path leading to Sabur's gate also led to the UNICEF encampment. As I approached, two and then four guards took up their guns and readied themselves to challenge me. A deep puddle caused me to make a sharp turn to the left around five yards from the UNICEF entrance to the Sabur gate, which two old men attended. They immediately swung it open, welcoming me in Italian with a leisurely '*entra qui'.*

Yet the story of *Who Needs a Story* and the means of its cultural production, including the pratfalls, cannot be limited only to what took place in Eritrea and/or the experiences of trying to publish a book in an underdeveloped nation. The book needed a distributor, and the publisher asked me to find one when I returned to the United States.

Nine months after surviving my confrontation with UN 'peacekeeping' soldiers with their fingers on the trigger of their guns pointed at me in Asmara, I received an email from a student in Asmara that the book had finally been published and copies were appearing in the city. He did not say where, and I wondered. In bookstores? On the publisher's desk? At the printer's? A week later I received two sample copies. They were sturdy and clearly printed, their four languages and three scripts near perfectly formatted. The cover by the artist, Lawrence F. Sykes – a kind of etched photograph of a green-jerseyed boy chasing an errant soccer ball over a pile of rubble and under three consecutive and crumbling arches in Massawa on the Eritrean Red Sea coastline – glowed elegantly in shades of orange and ochre. Equally important, the book's ISBN number appeared as it should.

Unfortunately, I was still having no success in finding a distributor. Big American distributors, whom I tried, like Ingram for example, rejected it. Nevertheless, in the process of making the rounds of book distributors I learnt about an aspect of publishing that, as an author with half a dozen previous books, I barely knew existed or simply took for granted. Familiar with how a book would proceed from the writer's mind to the pen or computer, to the manuscript, to the publisher, to the proofs, to the book's final form, and with an understanding that promoting a book could be equally important and difficult if it was to be read, I never realised the vital, practical importance of a book distributor, without whom most books would remain in their horizontal, dead position instead of reaching the hands of readers to stand upright and alive. Therefore, I felt fortunate and exceedingly grateful when *Who Needs a Story* was accepted for distribution by Small Press Distribution: a highly respected, well-known, American literary arts organization devoted to innovative, alternative and independent publishing.

But soon after reaching an agreement with SPD, I found out that it did not list its books and their ISBN numbers in the world's biggest and most important database for new books, Bowker. In the process of researching book distributors, I found out what they and most publishers and booksellers – if not many authors – already knew. Not only was Bowker an official U.S. ISBN agency; it provided, in its own words, 'the most authoritative title and publisher

information available worldwide', including 'book and serials title searching, information, and ordering services, to publishers, booksellers, libraries, and patrons'. Bowker also was the publisher of the all important, *Books in Print*, the largest web-based publishing bibliographic resource in the world, and before this an annual publication of eight 12' x 8' x 7' bright orange, hardback volumes containing millions of titles, authors and publishers nationally and internationally. In print or on the web, Bowker was *the* database to find a book that was not exceedingly rare.

I was disappointed when I learnt that SPD did not list its titles with Bowker. It seemed like such a necessity. One might cringe, as I did at first, at the fact that for a book to be noticed it had to be recognised by such a global, corporate entity. When I asked a representative at SPD about it, he justified not submitting any of its books to Bowker because it meant they would be bought through large booksellers instead of directly from the distributor or from local, independent bookstores other than giants like Barnes & Noble. Since SPD specialised in small and alternative press titles, its ability to make whatever profit it could off of these books' relatively small sales would be severely cut if they were available from larger, more mainstream sources. But the fact remained that if one wanted a book and went to a standard website like Amazon, Yahoo or Barnes & Noble to buy it, the book would not be listed there if Bowker did not include the title in its database. Therefore, if *Who Needs a Story* was to reach an audience beyond readers who might be poets and creative writers themselves, specialists in African literature and the few Eritreans who actually bought books – which would amount at best to sales of a couple hundred copies, a few more if libraries were included – to appeal to a broader, global reading public, I had to swallow my righteousness and pride and call Bowker. So I did in late April, and with little hesitation I might add. Marginalization was defeating and bad enough, but self-marginalization was self-defeating and seemed worse. I did not want *Who Needs a Story* to be a rare book. I wanted to sell copies and for a lot of people to read it – which wasn't going to happen if Googling the title only resulted in the distributor's website and only a few more notices that the book received.

Two days after I emailed Bowker to inquire for sure if *Who Needs a Story* was in its database, or about to be, I received a call from one of its customer service representatives. He advised me to send an email petitioning Bowker for permission to have it include *Who Needs a Story* in Bowker's database. In my email, again as I was directed, I stated that I was the author of a new book printed out of the country and had been authorised, as I was, by the

publisher to be its representative. My email also included all of the publishing particulars (title, authors, publisher, pages, languages, price and copyright), a brief description of the book and the publisher, as well as what I had once naively considered sacrosanct and the virtual key to the global book market: the ISBN.

A week later I received a call from another customer service representative who could not have been nicer or more welcoming. Warmly expressing interest in the book and asking about Eritrea, too, he asked me to email the publishing particulars to him, the name of a contact person in Eritrea, and also the name and address of the U.S distributor. Like many people, he had never heard of Eritrea.

Two weeks later I contacted him to ask if there had been any developments in Bowker's listing *Who Needs a Story* in its database, but there was not. The reason for the delay was the book's ISBN. Every ISBN has a country prefix number – another fact of publishing that I did not know – indicating the country where the book was published. The prefix number for *Who Needs a Story*, '999', signifying Eritrea, had never been entered into Bowker's database. Therefore the number was not recognised and suspect. We could have been a hoax? Even the prefix itself, '999', a kind of portentous number, sounded a little phony. I pictured a web technician uneventfully entering the 999… ISBN, as he or she had done with countless other numbers before, and being surprised, for the first time since having the job, to find out that there was no such prefix! 'The book was published where?' 'And where was that again?' 'Is it a nice place?' ('Or is this a joke?') Again, the Bowker representative could not have been nicer, but he reported to me that he spoke with the people in charge of adding the *Who Needs a Story* ISBN prefix to the database, and because of the complexity of this procedure he was sorry to let me know that it would take more time, and that I should check back with him in around a month. This was around the end of May. When I did check back, he told me we would probably have to wait until August.

In the meantime, I decided that I would look for another distributor, since the agreement with SPD did not require giving it exclusive rights. Checking with the publisher, Hdri, in Asmara, I had its blessing to expand my search. After several unsuccessful attempts, although this time with smaller book distributors than Ingram, I turned to African Books Collective, which welcomed my interest. ABC would list and distribute the book in the United States through its partner, Michigan State University Press, which did not require exclusive distribution, and through ABC's Oxford office, which did require exclusive distribution rights in the UK, Europe and Africa. In addition, ABC

also offered to distribute other Hdri titles. These could include recent works like its huge Tigrinya dictionary and its forthcoming Tigre dictionary – unique and unprecedented volumes that every research library should have – and books by great Eritrean writers like Alemseged Tesfai and Beyene Hailemariam.

In retrospect, I see that ABC was the most natural choice of a distributor for *Who Needs a Story.* The organization included over one hundred current publishers from nineteen African countries, and what could be more praiseworthy from the perspective of the entire project? Nevertheless, I wasn't only hearing strains of '*Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika*', 'God bless Africa', as I pondered ABC's acceptance. Based on my experience thus far in trying to obtain distribution for *Who Needs a Story* and seemingly bogged down in the process of trying to have it listed with Bowker, what impressed me most about ABC was its commitment to accessing the most important publishing databases: in North America – Ingram, Barnes and Noble, Baker and Taylor, amazon.com and, finally, Bowker; in the UK – Nielsen Bookdata, Bibliographic Data Services (BDS), Legal Library Services Ltd., amazon.co.uk and Bowker UK.

'Pilgrim, thy search is ended', I sighed. I had finally reached the end of the story of *Who Needs A Story* and the means of its cultural production – the day when I could go to amazon.com, type the title into 'search' and see it pop up for sale. But not yet – I was wrong again.

In mid-July ABC emailed Hdri and me that it had received a sample copy of *Who Needs a Story* that had been shipped from Asmara and once again wanted to confirm the distribution agreement, adding that ABC would even 'feel… honoured' to be our distributor. I had several copies on my desk at the time, as a typical July heat wave gripped Pennsylvania, where I lived, with a ferocity that I had not experienced since being in the Eritrean coastal city of Massawa a year before. Buoyed by a good feeling that finally the book could realise its potential for widespread distribution, I marveled that as most of the covers of my other paperback books had curled up in the heat and humidity, the cardboard-thick stock of the cover of *Who Needs a Story* still remained stiff and straight. Produced in Asmara, the book was exceedingly well made. Therefore, when I read further in ABC's email that it wanted to offer Hdri the alternative of sending the electronic files of *Who Needs a Story* or simply scanning the book so that ABC could provide print-on-demand copies instead of originals made in Eritrea, I thought, 'Thanks. But no thanks'. I also knew that Asmara had plenty of copies of the book on hand. Still I read on with interest as the email noted that over twenty African publishers worked with ABC in this way, producing over three hundred-fifty books, and that it resulted in better profit

margins for the publishers and ABC than did shipping books from Africa to Europe and the United States. But for me, again naively, the high production quality of *Who Needs a Story* and the fact that it was made in Eritrea outweighed 'better profit margins'. My attachment to and understanding of the text as well as its means of cultural production made me see it not merely as a commodity but also as an artifact. Furthermore, I tried to reason, that the email nowhere suggested the profits would be much 'better'.

I could not imagine Hdri wanting print-on-demand from ABC either. During the nearly four years since the project of *Who Needs a Story* was first conceived, the publisher in conjunction with the printer had labored long and hard to upgrade its facilities so that it could manage to produce books up to international and western levels of quality and not only for local consumption which, frankly, required less. When *Who Needs a Story* was finally ready to be published, it had to be put off for a year and a half due to the delayed arrival of new printing technology and equipment that, furthermore, once it was installed, had to undergo a protracted if necessary trial and error process of being mastered. Moreover, such a slow, at times plodding yet determined initiative to achieve publishing independence seemed wholly in tune with Eritrea's fabled self-reliance, fostered by its long, desperate and ultimately successful struggle for independence, and still the guiding principal most often invoked by Eritrea's government, to which Hdri had a close attachment. Against this backdrop, I could not imagine the publisher opting for print-on-demand instead of providing its own original copies instead. Although I emailed Hdri that I preferred the option of its providing copies, I believed that my input would be unnecessary and only echo its decision, seemingly so representative of the Eritrean psyche, to provide copies of its own. Furthermore, since ABC offered the two alternatives, I thought that Hdri's decision would close the matter. But once again I was wrong.

Later the same day – and seeming to have no connection to my morning's labors – I read the first review of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's forthcoming novel, *Wizard of the Crow*, in *BookForum*. It had a link to buy the book. Since I had first read an earlier, longer version in manuscript four years before, I had been anxiously waiting for the book to appear, and I heard the publication date would be in late August. The *BookForum* sales site offered the book for thirty U.S. dollars, with added shipping of five dollars or a trip to a nearby bookstore, confirming that the delivery date would be in fact late August. The review and the book's impending arrival spurred me to Google the title to find out if there was any other news about the book. To my surprise, among the first websites

to appear was 'walmart.com'. I went to the site and found Ngugi's new novel already being offered at a thirty-eight percent discount by the American and global corporate giant with shipping directly to my home for less than a dollar. Taking a minute to get over my surprise at the incongruity of buying a novel by Ngugi – his long anticipated, first major new work of fiction after twenty years, originally written in Gikuyu and translated by himself – I pressed 'add to cart' and 'proceed to checkout'. But in that minute before I did, I thought of all the difficulties in the purchasing, distribution and circulation of books in Africa, and how these frequently intractable problems beleaguered African writers and readers: economic problems – books priced for western markets but totally unaffordable for most African individuals *and* organizations; issues of censorship, putting writers and readers in mortal danger; and shipping problems, from poor handling and weak commercial infrastructure to exorbitant price add-ons by tax-greedy state and local governments. I thought of countless essays, articles, conferences, writers, scholars and NGOs passionately lamenting such conditions. Yet I also thought of how in the west most books by African authors suffered almost as much neglect as they did in their home continent. And now here was Walmart, at least in Ngugi's case and in North America, stepping into the situation and making his greatest effort, in his words, 'to sum up Africa of the twentieth century in the context of two thousand years of world history', the longest book ever written in an African language, except for the translation of the Bible, not only widely available but at a great discount.

About a month later and the same day my copy of *Wizard of the Crow* arrived in the mail, another email arrived from ABC. It said that since our last correspondence, ABC had experienced changes in its funding and, therefore, all new titles – including *Who Needs a Story* – could only be accepted on a print-on-demand basis. Quite simply, the email stated, the new technology of print-on-demand was cheaper and more effective than importing books from Africa – including shipping, warehousing, inventory costs and ready availability. The rationale was clear and, frankly, unarguable.

But I tried to argue anyway. First, melodramatically perhaps, but based on my sense of Hdri's exemplifying Eritrea's well known penchant for self-determination – along with which went a reputation for intransigence – I was not sure if Hdri would or even could accept this new condition. Also, again I recalled countless essays, articles, conferences, writers, scholars and NGOs on the vital importance of African nations producing their own books – as well as other products, besides oil – and their export. Economically, at least, a if not *the* major cause of Africa's declining share in world markets derived from its

inability to produce goods and services as cheaply as other developing parts of the world. Wasn't ABC's demand of print-on-demand in the case of *Who Needs a Story* another example of this?

I also recalled what Ngugi, Kassahun Checole, Mbulelo Mzamane, Nawal El Saadawi, Zemhret Yohannes and I had written in the 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literature' in 2000:

> African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility and the challenge off speaking for the continent…. Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages…. The effective and rapid development of science and technology in Africa depends on the use of African languages and modern technology must be used for the development of African languages.

I thought the means of cultural production employed by Hdri – for example, in 'Promoting research' along with the 'effective and rapid development of [publishing] technology' – in the publication of *Who Needs a Story* exemplified such ideals. Would they be compromised if this book made in Africa – unprecedented in content and just as uniquely and beautifully produced – could not be exported to Europe and North America except as an electronic file to be produced there? Still, I knew that publishing anywhere – including the United States – was fraught with change based on production and distribution costs. That very same day I had witnessed a good example of such change in Walmart's selling *Wizard of the Crow*? And I grabbed it immediately. Where were my beliefs in the African book as a progressive political tool and/or an artifact in that? And with whom was I arguing? Clearly an organization like ABC understood better than most and had among its founding principles the recognition of the vital importance of producing books in Africa and their export. But if ABC could no longer afford it, who could?

Replying to ABC, my disagreement with its decision to require print-on-demand for *Who Needs a Story* felt like I was only expressing my regret. The logic and pragmatism of their decision was only reinforced in ABC's reply. I could no more argue with it than I could with Ngugi or Walmart about the rightness of its distributing his book. Clearly ABC supported publishing in Africa, but Hdri was not necessarily typical. For example, many African publishers in African countries printed their books elsewhere than in Africa – India, China, Eastern Europe or other African countries. Furthermore, quality could vary, with many books published in Africa not up to minimum, western standards. Moreover,

a distinction could be made between the African publishing industry and its printing industry. Most importantly, perhaps, print-on-demand would require no more financial outlay from Hdri and it would receive fifty percent of net sales income, which were bound to increase with ABC's support. Therefore, I emailed Hdri to recommend that it accept ABC's terms and that we move ahead with production ASAP, and I held my breath.

Five days later I was Cc'd on a brief and cordial email from Hdri – without a whiff of indomitable self-reliance or ideological inflexibility – that the publisher accepted ABC's 'advice' and requested the documents to sign so that *Who Needs a Story* could begin production, as the email effortlessly put it, on a 'POD basis' – an abbreviation I saw for the first time and, even if I had seen it before, would not deign to use. On the same day, I heard coincidentally from Bowker that the '999' prefix number of the book's ISBN had been ascertained and entered into the Bowker database.

At this point, the conclusion of *Ecclesiastes*, 12:12 – 'My son, be admonished: of making…books there is no end' – entered my mind. I deserved to be admonished for my ignorance and naiveté about how, after being published in Eritrea, *Who Needs a Story* could make it anywhere else, even with its passport-like ISBN. Thinking that I would find a ready-made book distributor for what I thought was an African artifact instead of a commodity made me even guiltier. But at least I had reached an end of the story on *Who Needs a Story* and the means of its cultural production.

Notes

[1] Interviewed on *CNN*'s 'Inside Africa' by Sally Graham in 2001, Reesom Haile recited excerpts from several of his poems in English translation. In 2004, 'Inside Africa', featured another story on Reesom Haile, prompted by his death in 2003. The segment included Reesom Haile reciting excerpts from his poems in Tigrinya and me reading the translations and adding commentary. My translations of contemporary Eritrean poetry also include the following:

2009 'Our Path' (translation of a poem by Reesom Haile), http://www.poemsfor.org.

'Voice' (translation of a poem by Reesom Haile; video poetry with Mark Oliveiro), *Silliman's Blog: a weblog focused on contemporary poetry and poetics* (http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/ 17 May 2009) / http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AkWQ8rm9Qc.

'Desta' (translation of a poem by Reesom Haile), *Fire in the Soul: 100 Poems for Human Rights* (Rotherham: New Internationalist Publications).

'The Tithe of War' (translation of a poem by Solomon Tsehaye), with Ghirmai Negash, *Fire in the Soul: 100 Poems for Human Rights* (Rotherham: New Internationalist Publications).

2008 'African Leaders', 'Angel Fiqriel', 'Tell the President', 'Her Picture' (translations of four poems in Tigrinya by Reesom Haile), *Per Contra* (http://www.percontra.net/13hailecantalupo.htm).

'Under the Sycamores' (translation of a poem in Tigrinya by Zeineb Yassin), with Dessale Berekhet, *Per Contra* 10 (Fall issue): http://www.percontra.net/.

'Love in the Daytime', 'I Love You II', 'Ferenji and Habesha', 'Whose Daughter', Talking About Love' (translations of five poems in Tigrinya by Reesom Haile), *Bending the Bow: An Anthology of African Love Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

'Silas', 'Let Us Divorce and Get Married Again', 'Go Crazy Over Me', 'Juket', 'Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors', 'Abeba' (respectively, translations of two poems in Tigrinya by Beyene Halilemariam; one poem in Tigrinya by Saba Kidane; one poem in Tigre by Mohammed Said Osman; one poem in Arabic by Abdul El-Sheikh; one poem in Tigrinya by Ribka Sibhatu), with Ghirmai Negash, *Bending the Bow: An Anthology of African Love Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009).

'Who Needs a Story?' (translation of a poem by Ghirmai Yohannes), with Ghirmai Negash, *Side by Side: New Poems Inspired by Art from Around the World* (New York: Harry H. Abrams), pp. 62-3.

2007 'War and a Woman', ''Your Father," (translations of two poems in Tigrinya by Saba Kidane), with Ghirmai Negash, *UniVerse* (http://www.universeofpoetry.org/eritrea.htm).

'Remembering Sahel' (translation of a poem in Tigre by Paulos Netabay), with Ghirmai Negash, *UniVerse* (http://www.universeofpoetry.org/eritrea.htm).

'Freedom's Colors' (translation of a poem in Tigrinya by Angessom Isaak), with Ghirmai Negash, *Fascicle* 3 (http://www.fascicle.com/issue03/main/issue03_frameset.htm).

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[2] 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures' – English version (www.outreach.psu.edu/programs/allodds/declaration.html).

[3] I owe my associating Eritrea with the phrase 'against all odds' to Dan Connell, author of *Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1993).

[4] Contracted for publication by Random House, Inc., Pantheon Books in 2002, *Wizard of the Crow* did not appear in print until 2006.

[5] '[T]he premier commercial center and political capital of British America…. Philadelphia was also the acknowledged nexus of literary America…. [b]y 1775'. Neil Baldwin, *The American Revelation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), p. 31.

[6] For example, Shakespeare's plays were not collected for publication – and then not all of them – until 1623, in the *First Folio*. The first folio of Shakespeare's most famous literary contemporary, Ben Jonson, only appeared seven years earlier, in 1616. Furthermore, even twenty-four years later in *Wit's Recreation*, an anonymous poet mocked Jonson's desire for his work to appear in published form: 'Pray tell me Ben, where doth the mystery lurke / What others call a play, you call a worke'. See David Loewenstein, *The Cambridge History of Early Modern Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 115. *The World Factbook* (CIA) lists literacy in Eritrea at 58.6% (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/er.html). Although literacy rates in Elizabethan English are more difficult to ascertain, see Richard L. Greaves, *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 334.

Chapter Two

War

The Tigrinya poems in *Who Needs a Story* that focus unrelentingly on war are Fessahazion's Michael's 'Naqra' and Solomon Drar's 'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?' In Tigre, Mussa Mohammed Adem, more than any Eritrean poet in any language in the anthology, focuses on war to the exclusion of all else. In Arabic, war and little else inspires Mohammed Osman Kajerai, the oldest poet in *Who Needs a Story*.

Born in 1956, Solomon Drar is a novelist, historian, essayist, historian and poet. With an M.A. in Theatre Studies from Leeds University, he is the director of Hdri Publishers. His books include two novels – *Mekete* (*Challenge*: originally written in 1988, published in Asmara in 1992) and *Echa Hanti Sidra* (*A Family's Destiny*, 1994) – and a historical work, *Eritrawiyan Kommando: Qiya 18 Deqayiq* (*Eritrean Commandos: A Legend of 18 Minutes*, 1996). The original Tigrinya poem, 'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?' is from the anthology, *Mezmur Tegadalay*.

'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?' enacts a kind of perpetual 'martyrs day', commemorating a war hero yet an entire mindset of war that Eritrea's life and peace, the poem maintains, must always depend on. The poem's eponymous refrain, 'Who said Merhawi is dead', insists that the spirit of war can never be put to rest but must persist at the heart of peace. Even if it prevails to allow a 'Harvesting [of] the fields of gold', Drar perpetually hears 'His name, *Merhawi, Merhawi* / In the whirlwind / Of the revolution', which must also never cease. The image of 'the whirlwind' recurs repeatedly in Scripture as God's way of waging war against the enemies of the Hebrews, the Hebrews themselves or any individual requiring some kind of physical or spiritual punishment or purgation. Drar's poem would not be the first time that modern Eritrea has had a point of comparison with modern Israel: fiercely independent, self-determined, belligerent, a relatively new country based on an ancient culture, and often viewed as standing alone and persecuted. Yet '[T]he whirlwind / of the revolution' in Eritrea similarly promises little peace, although traditionally in literature the image of 'harvesting' implies peace and fulfilment. Nevertheless, for Drar the name, 'Merhawi', punning in Tigrinya on 'the fields of gold', suggests that their seeming to denote an image of tranquility and a kind of final reward or fruit of one's labors is ironic. Through linking and even equating the war hero and 'fields of gold', the pun on 'Merhawi' suggests a perpetually

embattled spirit – a constant 'whirlwind / Of the revolution' – '[b]uried in the ground', as stated in the poem's beginning, but also exploding in the fields.

Drar sees in the character of Merhawi a perpetual readiness for armed struggle, even if it must be turned inward on the human heart. Merhawi's 'mother stands proud / And his bed blossoms', but his memory and spirit foster a kind of perpetually aggressive attitude. The profound, mythopoeic image of the blossoming bed, later complimented by Drar's joining the heroic vision of Merhawi to the Eritrean present –

> Working together
> Like water and milk
>
> And a perfect fit
> Of hand and glove….

– barely conceal a perpetually warlike and restless spirit unable to be content with such images because ultimately their beauty can make one forget the harshest kinds of reality and violence that make them so attractive in the first place. Whereas Ghebremeskel envisions a kind of solemn, wordless candle-lighted procession *en masse* for Martyrs Day, culminating in transcendent and tremendous burst of light, Drar sees and hears a much more agitated demonstration:

> sisters and brothers
> Come and sing
> 'Thanks, Merhawi, thanks',
> As they stroll down
> Liberation Avenue….
>
> Who said Merhawi is dead
> And rots in a grave,
> Or that the Red Sea salt
> Eats him, and the frost
> North on Rora
> Burns his skin,
>
> If we see his blood
> Shimmering in our veins…?

For Drar, Ghebremeskel's transcendent 'candles and more candles' to 'light… up the horizon' pale in comparison with Eritrean 'blood [s]himmering' and cannot sustain the nation's hard won independence. It can only 'fall like unripe fruit / Into corruption', caught in what might even be the illusion of Ghebremeskel's dawn of peace. The specter of such dissolution stalks national liberation movements not only in Africa but worldwide, and Drar's organic imagery of rotting fruit

suggests that if a revolution merely follows its natural course 'corruption' may even be inevitable without the more dire perspective that the poem recommends. Such 'corruption' of the state internally allows '[o]blivion' to replace revolutionary values and 'Enemies' of Eritrea to 'pour in / From all directions'. The only alternative Drar finds to perpetual vigilance and readiness for battle is the dissolution of the Eritrean state and self, replaced by mere

> Selfishness and greed,
> And the rot spreads
> With no respect
> Or care until
> Oblivion cracks us
> Limb by limb…

Climactically, the answer to 'Who said Merhawi is dead?' changes, too, 'Meaning our end, too, / Instead of his vision / For our future'. Merhawi, that is, Drar envisions a kind of consummate, nationalistic light: 'One glorious beam / And millions of eyes… / With no needs for tears / And memorials…' Unlike Ghebremeskel's transcendent 'dawn' of 'candles and more candles', Drar's 'millions of eyes', seem to transcend nothing, rooted as they are visually in the local Orthodox painting style of accentuating eyes yet also in the rhetorical question that requires every Eritrean to take responsibility for keeping Merhawi alive or else to face the end of Eritrea itself. 'Only if the lion slayer', that is, Merhawi, 'Lives unrepentantly' can Eritrea live. Eritreans

> refusing
> Any more death,
> And restoring, adoring
> And rejoicing in life[,]

as Ghebremeskel envisioned they should, means the end of the spirit of Merhawi and of Eritrea as a sovereign nation, according to Drar. Better it should continue slaying lions, and unrepentantly at that.

Historically, Drar has a point. If at any time, or least for very long, during Eritrea's thirty year armed struggle for independence, and most of the years since then, Eritrea ever unilaterally decided to refuse 'any more death' and war, the nation would not exist. Eritrea's mindset for war is nothing if not empirical. Eritrea's state of war with the government of Ethiopia seems perpetual. War in the Horn of Africa seems like a given and, whatever country or countries in which it occurs, the rest cannot remain untouched or unaffected. For Drar in 'Who Said Merhawi is Dead?', war is his only *terra firma*, beginning his poem where Merhawi is buried, 'in the ground / Heaped with stones'. It is stark, but it is all that can be trusted.

Yet in poetry beyond Eritrea and the Horn such a mindset is traditional and hallowed, too. Homer's *Iliad* and *Exodus* in the Bible have a similar mindset of war, as do many national epics, like *Beowulf, El Cid* and *Le Chanson de Roland*. Simone Weil famously called Homer's *Iliad* 'the poem of force', or to translate the term from the original, *le poème de la force*. A similar poetics of force, although not epic, animates the work of Eritrean poets like Solomon Drar, Fessahazion Michael, Mussa Mohammed Adem and Mohammed Osman Kajerai. Drar might at least imagine, in Weil's words, a 'washed out halo of patriotism descends' on his hero, Merhawi's head. But in Michael's Adem's and Kajerai's poetics of force, as Weil puts it, 'The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality'. Yet all of these poets conclude, as E. M. Forster also asserted, that 'force and violence….is…the ultimate reality on this earth'. 'The true hero' of their poems, again as Weil said of the *Iliad*, 'the true subject, the center… is force. Force employed by' people. 'Force that enslaves' them, 'force before which' their 'flesh shrinks away. In this work, at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relations with force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to'.

Emerging from a violent century of two world wars, the cold war and many more local conflicts into a twenty-first century of global terror from seemingly all sides, long established western democracies' appetite for a poetics of force, ironically perhaps, may be sated or, if it is palatable, only from the distance of one or two thousand years or more, in the form of ancient or mediaeval epics. Horace's famous tag line in Latin, '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' (III.2.13) – To die for one's country is honourable and sweet (or satisfying) – has long been deconstructed to be heard only as ironic, as in Wilfred Owen's poem based on and titled with this line in 1917, recalling 'All went lame; all blind; / Drunk with fatigue' and 'In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning…'. No quality poem of World War I, World War II or subsequent wars in the west has been able to go back from Owen and recover the original meaning or heroic tone of the phrase in Horace's third ode.

Aware of Owen's perspective on Horace's famous line or not, contemporary Eritrean poets write as if they know all too well the horrors Owen recounts and their incongruity with Augustan platitude. Nevertheless, Eritrea's war poetry – be it totally about war or of war and peace conjoined – repeatedly takes an Horatian and/or Homeric stance on war, unflinchingly and profligately violent yet ultimately without regret if it serves the cause of Eritrean nationalism. A

poetics of force and war often animates the poetry of emerging nations, although to different degrees. The critical quality and achievement of such poetry, however, is questionable, especially if it is recent and if it is to be translated from its original African languages into languages of nations and cultures where a poetics of force and war poetry can only be viewed negatively if it is current. Precisely this critical problem becomes the challenge in translating and discussing Eritrea's contemporary poets and poetics of war. How does one find the language in English to represent such a contemporary and genuine Eritrean fact of existence and the indubitable emotion it generates if English has no such language in its poetry, as Paul Fussell has so convincingly argued in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, since roughly the beginning of the twentieth century with the exclusion, perhaps, of some poems by Rudyard Kipling? 'The Invincible', by Mussa Mohammed Adem, written in Tigre, exemplifies a 'poem of force' and a poetics of war.

Born in 1963, Mussa Mohammed Adem is a poet, short story writer and journalist. He has worked in Tigre radio broadcasting since 1992.

With a rage like Homer's Achilles, only anonymous, 'The Invicible"s potential for inflicting violence seems limitless, yet he can also seem quirky, irrational, overly sensitive, out of control, self-absorbed, arrogant and discontent: undoubtedly a hero without whom victory would not be possible, but not necessarily imitable or admirable other than for his brute capacity for violence – again not unlike Achilles. A combination killing machine and force of nature he takes 'aim with his spirit and his gun, / Measuring the last breath of anyone / Who forgets him and casts the first stone…'. The instability of his dual identity – seeming part cyborg, part force of nature – makes him more than an action hero with comic book force but a war hero with poetic force: conflicted, lyrical, ultimately alone. Not necessarily quick to fight, the initial sign that he has been provoked comes when 'he feels his first scar burning again'.

Ironically, perhaps, in a poem almost exclusively focusing on incidents of violence that requires a kind of brute physical force, Adem introduces a reader to 'The Invincible' through a kind of psychological portrait:

> he has that true killer look
> And dirges play like soundtracks in his head…
> Constantly
> Making him think, 'Encircle, attack, attack….'

Adem concludes the poem by similarly highlighting the 'Invincible"s state of mind. 'All that he understands' is 'the gift of life / Or death overflowing and in his hands': a polar opposite of the question, 'To be or not to be', with 'to kill or not to kill' instead. 'The Invincible', like Achilles, is no Hamlet or Odysseus.

The man whose identity becomes indistinguishable from the violence he inflicts, even if it does assure victory, ultimately seems out of place, incongruous and a little pathetic: in Adem's portrait, 'strangely…happy' but dying 'without finding his home'. Bracketing 'The Invincible' between psychological observations about his character, Adem's 'poem of force' achieves more than violence for violence's sake, although it is the poem's greatest substance and continually seen as overwhelming.

Every stanza includes murder, mayhem and casualties. Framed as a war hero who is human and vulnerable, 'The Invincible' is also a war monster.

> He sees enemies like sorghum bending
> And breaking, their heads spilling out all red.
> his bullets
> Fall like rain…and it floods
> As in the days of Noah, only with blood.
>
> He's blinding and leaves no time to react –
> Like July lightning, thunder, downpours and
> Fifty days straight of sandstorms uprooting
> Boulders like arrows…
> mercilessly slashing
> The tendons, crushing and splashing the marrow.

The violence is excessive and endless but also timeless. Adem reveals 'The Invincible',

> his entire flesh
> Bloody and broken with wounds and lead as the field
>
> Where he stands unafraid, letting no one
> Flee as he fulfills the ancient lines,
> Playing and singing them, too: history
> Repeating itself, prophecy come true…
> Welcome to free Nakfa, Setit and Belessa.

The conclusion prefigures the banner that greeted visitors who came to Eritrea just after its liberation: 'Welcome to Free Eritrea'. 'The Invincible' focuses less on the war's human toll – the concern of Eritrean poets who write more about war and peace together – than on sheer might and glory and the spectacle of battle and victory. Yet Adem's invoking 'ancient lines' of 'history' and 'prophecy' played and sung suggests his poetic self-consciousness that his portrayal of 'The Invincible' requires a kind of heroic poetry that cannot be modern or contemporary because of its violent yet unfortunately necessary subject: the continuing struggle of Eritrean nationalism at a time when most

nations have already established themselves and have been allowed to move at least partially away from force – including a poetics of force – as their only means of survival.

At the beginning of the poem, Adem seems self-conscious about the violent portrait he is about to offer, acceding to a reader's probable scepticism with the phrase, 'Say what you like'. As the poem unfolds, however, the poet becomes caught and seemingly enamored of his work's ever increasing violence and momentum, matched only by violent imagery of nature itself, which also seems attracted to Adem's hero. He contends with the elements of nature as they are contending with themselves: 'Like rainy season torrents pounding down / From the highlands with more storms behind them, / He comes to fight, saying "Try and stop me."' Only a hero as harsh if not harsher than the Eritrean terrain can succeed. Overcoming his enemies he overcomes nature, too, becoming the most violent animal of all: 'Crocodiles run away from his jaws. / He lives according to his law'.

Becoming ever more partial to his hero, the poet's initial self-consciousness gives way to a kind of boasting and self-righteousness as he reminds the reader that if 'Wisdom lets a lion or tiger sleep', all the more should 'Fakes and fanatics' fear disturbing his hero. The absolute force embodied by the hero levels everything else, even reducing the reader to a kind of enemy with 'nowhere to hide and no more to say' if he or she wants 'to play' with or question such a violent cosmology. Foe and reader alike are directly challenged with a '"Try and stop me."'

'The Invincible' can allow no other focus than on war and violence itself, and 'nobody's laughing'. Adem's hero – or is it Adem's poem? – 'throws…trees and rocks out of his path / And grabs his weapons' to fight in an 'impossible' world of 'Fields planted thick with mines / Desert sand and heat, crocodiles swarming / Rivers and gaping valleys', which the 'Invincible' promptly 'choke[s]…with too many dead'. So excessively violent, the picture almost seems unreal and again like an action comic or movie fantasy until Adem reveals its actual roots in history, unfolding from the Ethiopian 'third offensive' against the EPLF in 1979 yet also back to the famous battle of Adwa in 1896, where an Ethiopian army fatally defeated a previously thought invincible Italian invasion. In the present battle, however, the 'third offensive', much touted as *the* Ethiopian offensive, which was supposed to crush once and for all the Eritrean armed struggle to be independent, suffers the same fate as the Italians at Adwa. What at first 'explodes with sirens / And unrolls black clouds like giant bee hives / Disgorging armies' soon becomes totally 'out of control' to be 'knocked away in the swing / Of his crushing

sword'. Even the goal of Eritrean independence seems subsumed amidst such violence and the overwhelming reality that 'until we see the Red Sea dry', only the 'Invincible' determines 'life / Or death'. It is 'all that he', the poet or the reader is allowed to 'understand'. The war shatters every other nuance.

Mohammed Osman Kajerai, who writes in Arabic, also resorts to a poetry of force and a seemingly perpetual mindset of war, again providing little consolation beyond armed struggle itself.

Born sometime in the 1920s, Kajerai died in 2003, by which time he had been long recognised as a leading poet and intellectual figure of Eritrea, Sudan and the Arab world. He lived and worked in the Sudan for most of his life. Returning to Eritrea after its independence, he worked briefly in Asmara as a teacher and journalist and had a selection of his poems published in *Al-Taranim Al Sawyriya* (1984) by the Association of Eritrean Teachers.

In Kajerai's poem, 'Singing Our Way to Victory', his 'singing' is all but literally synonymous with his 'gun / And a thousand explosions / Declaring… our struggle / For freedom…'. The poem's epistolary opening, 'Dear friends', and pledge to be 'Faithful through the night', become throwaway salutations and relatively unimportant verbal niceties compared with what the poet really wants to say, resembling Adem in deploying the fiercest imagery without any hesitation:

> revenge…
> Crack[s] like lightning and thunder
> Across the horizon,
> Raining blood to feed the land
> [and] sow the seeds of hell.

A violent mix of the poet's 'singing', 'his gun', his 'revenge', his

> blood and…fire
> Will always glow,
> Consuming and drowning
> Any invader….

An Eritrean poetics of force requires little if any consolation from the Eritrean landscape: on the contrary, as Kajerai sings, 'the rocks…jut…out of the earth / Like the rage pounding in our chests'. Any beauty the poet sees in 'the moon, / [and]…feel[s in] the breeze and rain' or being 'together again' with 'dear friends' seems trivial compared with his mission to 'plant the landmines for our struggle'. Poets like Kajerai, Adem and Drar subvert any expectation that poetry or 'singing', the landscape, the elements and friendship provide a kind of transcendent moment or serve as a kind of respite amidst war. A

poetry of force simply requires that these tropes, too, serve the art of war. One and only mission, to 'serve revenge', remain, whether it is 'Calmly and cold' or like 'lightning and thunder'. So utterly determined, the poet also tells 'the prophets…[to] go home', as traditional religious faith must also give way to the poet's single minded and all encompassing desire for war: an urge synonymous with survival itself and 'sure to remain' as nothing else is. Kajerai cannot even spare the delicacy of a flower and its traditional associations with a natural cycle of rebirth and the serene as he also chooses to subvert the stock-consoling pastoral of the twenty third psalm. He blithely yet almost sadistically envisions reveling in the ingredients of a homemade recipe for a bomb:

> the gunpowder explod[ing]
> Into fire and smoke –
> The valley of death's shadow
> Making white mercury purple,
> Suffusing the horizon
> And lingering in the air like chrysanthemums.

In another poem, 'Woman of Eritrea', Kajerai enlists Eritrean women, too, in his poetry of force, purging any traditional representations of their being passive, powerless, domestic, long suffering victims. Instead, 'Elegant, exalted and true', they 'step…coolly through the flames of war'. Any suspicion that Kajerai might reduce an Eritrean woman to the role of merely being the inspiration of her male counterpart's military triumph disappears as he envisions and hears 'The horizon roar…' with their 'coming together' and 'naked power'. Furthermore, Kajerai locates in this kind of martial sexuality an ultimately apocalyptic desire for his Eritrean woman 'To reign down terrors like the end of the world...'. Yet if the male wounded expect Eritrean women to serve them in a traditional nursing role, Kajerai challenges this stereotype, too. Instead of providing medical attention, they urge an ever more warlike ethic, 'wrapping our wounds in struggle… / To be a martyr'. The poet enjoins an Eritrean woman, take no one to 'your breast', but 'go with high spirits and passion', like Adem's 'Invincible', back to war. Moreover, Kajerai even seems to consider an Eritrean female soldier to be stronger than a male fighter since she outlives him and goes on fighting. Yet if Kajerai's 'poem of force' transforms the benevolent image of an Eritrean woman's breast into the mere earth where she should leave her dead behind and go on fighting, the poet also enjoins, perhaps even taunts the reader. No more than the man or woman in the poem should he or she be 'sad'. On the contrary, anything but demure, Kajerai's 'Woman of Eritrea' can always be counted on for 'high spirits and passion'. The ethic of war and poetry become one.

In another poem, 'A Dowry to See Freedom', taking on the voice of a father who gives a dowry, Kajerai once more at first sounds gentle: 'The most precious dowry I can give, / Dear love, is for you always to see freedom'. Yet as in 'Singing Our Way to Victory', the gentle opening is a feint: a kind of mere lip service to what might be expected before it is almost literally exploded, although precisely such a dynamic is what war can inflict on the everyday norms of a society: the terror of one second – life – and the next second – death. Thus, contrary to any expectation that the word 'freedom' might trigger a kind of relief or consolation, Kajerai's poetics of force appropriate the traditional, peace and bond-creating significance that goes with a young woman in marriage for the sole purpose of making war. The dowry 'Pull[s[down all the walls of tyranny' and reveals 'our heroes sacrifice like thunder / And lightning crashing around our flags / Unfurling over our rocky highlands'. The poet cannot abide any lingering, at least for long, in 'the verdant fields of our grain' and 'deep in our groves…'. The dowry may be given 'to see freedom', but the poem stops short of such consummation, like 'Who Said Merhawi is Dead', and dwells instead in a present of 'lonely fortresses // …the hard ground…in Sawa' and 'the roads of sand into the Red Sea, / Right into the shocking, silver waves'. The poet puts aside any phrases 'echoing like a song: freedom' as well as any vision of 'Free Eritrea…shining in our eyes' when he spots 'any invader without our culture'. Such cultural or national chauvinism is assumed to be the only critical premise one can hold. The charming prospect of a dowry becomes an apocalyptic bounty of more revolution and war ahead:

> winnow…[ing] in shame,
> Chaff in the winds of our revolution,
> And disappearing like the dust of tyranny
> Blown into oblivion.

'[W]innow…[ing]', 'Chaff', 'disappearing', 'Blown', 'dust': the last stanza of 'A Dowry to See Freedom' revels in a pile up of obliteration imagery. 'Oblivion' or battle: Drar, Adem, Michael and Kajerai offer a poetry of force with no other choice, and it is Eritrea's unequivocally 'greatest glory'.

Kajerai's 'Wind and Fire' reinforces this bleak, exultant, unforgiving message in a sequence of brief, self-contained stanzas, as in a series of epigrams of war, each one of unflinching violence.

In the first stanza, war refugees cannot help but see and desire a motherland in Eritrea. She is 'sacred', but violated, 'broken and bleeding' – a kind of bloody or macabre religious image: a version of a *pieta*, the mother with her broken child spread across her lap. As the war's myriad civilian victims offer her 'poems,

love and flowers', the stanza stops short, with no prospect that the victims or the mother can see any improvement in their warlike conditions – 'no comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality', again as Weil observes. Moreover, the mother's and the refugees' mutually abject conditions seem to serve as the basis for the refugees' attraction, as a kind of covenant based on a symbiotic misery. The quatrain offers Eritrea as a culmination, essence and the incarnation of the plight of the refugee yet not to be escaped but to be wholly embraced.

The second quatrain of the sequence offers a straight, succinct, bordering on didactic explanation of the Eritrean struggle with no illusions about the role or the duty that a poet or any other Eritrean should first assume: 'my blood fertilizes the land'. Anticipating that a reader might require a more uplifting message to accompany his or her ultimate self-sacrifice, Kajerai's third and fourth lines stiffen: 'Bearing martyrs, martyrs and more martyrs… / … no greater glory or victory'. Yet even what he gives, he takes away since, compared with the distinct image of poor soil fertilised by nothing but blood, he can only admit to seeing, in the stanza's second line, 'a mirage' and, of even less substance, 'hope'. Without any spectacular action and no vision of dramatically violent exploits, such a conclusion seems even bleaker than Adem's in 'The Invincible'. '[M]artyrs, martyrs and more martyrs' – it is all there is, and it is enough. How else to explain the prospect of personal fulfilment in a mission that a soldier knows he or she cannot survive; or a suicide bombing; or why well armed colonial occupiers lose to ill equipped, rag tag insurgencies time and time again? They practice a kind of alchemy, transforming the dross of death and defeat into the gold of victory, even if it seems like an irrational pursuit, although precisely such apparent abandoning of the logic and science of war to embrace a kind of fighting faith has buoyed and given victory to many a liberation movement. Thus Kajerai directly and aggressively challenges anyone who would question this bleak conclusion: 'Understand?' – throwing down this challenge in the quatrain's last word, as if with a kind of contempt for the disturbed or questioning reader of such a conclusion.

Violent images – 'prison, chains, beatings…bleeding / … blazing fire… raging wind', // 'thugs, invaders, mercenaries… / … revenging' – dominate the third and fourth stanzas of 'Wind and Fire', again with no let-up except for the prospect of 'the dawn to fight again' and the 'struggle and determination' that defines 'being Eritrean'. Kajerai has no need of visions of liberation, much less of Axumite succession, linking the power of the throne of Ethiopia to ancient Israel's House of Dave – one of the Horn's ancestral, nationalistic dreams – or

of Jeffersonian democracy, what a U.S. state department might think of as a universal ideal. The poet reduces the purveyors of such rhetorical expansions to mere 'thugs, invaders, mercenaries' compared with the far more realistic and gritty reality challenging every Eritrean to 'never stop revenging…[his or her] land'. Any such alternative visions can only be 'without our culture', to echo the conclusion of 'A Dowry to See Freedom', which might sound hopelessly narrow and self-defeating except that all foreign invasions with their attendant visions of self-glory have unvaryingly sought the elimination of Eritrean culture. Such a kind of binary or polarizing conflict is not merely a mindset or the product of a nationalistic or ethnic predisposition. Such conflict is the evidence of Eritrean history. It leaves little if any hope for help from outside and creates a kind of cult of self-reliance, as pictured in the poem's concluding two stanzas.

The fifth stanza wraps 'The front', 'the veins and heart' of the poet's 'song', and the Eritrean flag around the poet configured as a 'martyr's body'. No other decoration and certainly no more poetic laurels are required or desired – at least for Kajerai. Furthermore, such a bloodied flag is the only intimation of immortality and 'glory forever', since the only respite Kajerai's concluding lines can 'provide' is 'liberation / Puls[ing]'.

Yet in the poems sixth and final stanza, as in the second stanza, the setting of a 'hopeless horizon … / … amidst dark days…darker nights' returns. Standing there, nevertheless, is the Eritrean 'struggle and revolution' – embodied in the political organization of '[t]he front' – to provide a kind of hope against hope.

Stressing self-determination, resilience and no respite from war and struggle, poems of force by Solomon Drar, Mussa Mohammed Adem and Mohammed Osman Kajerai sound defiant and exalted. Refusing to transcend anything and with peace not an option, they seem to revel in the violence and abject conditions they portray.

No such energy animates the Tigrinya poet, Fessahazion Michael's 'Naqra', about the infamous, desolate island prison in the Red Sea off the Eritrean coast.

Born in 1954, a poet, journalist and member of the editorial board of *Gedli Hizbi Ertra*, the official monthly periodical of the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) in the mid-1970s, Michael died in action during Eritrea's war of independence. 'Naqra' appeared in the January 1, 1976 issue.

Transcending nothing and seeing no prospect for peace, Michael's poem reveals an Eritrean armed struggle for independence '[a]t dead center' and '[s]uccumbed in despair / On Naqra'. Kajerai's 'hopeless horizon' almost seems bright in comparison, and his poetic form and human if strident voice positively lush. Amidst the reality of 'Naqra', Adem's 'Invincible' is vanquished and no

mention or trace of glorious past or heroic future as pictured in the figure of Drar's Merhawi remains:

> All that the storms and tides
> And the surrounding water
> Reveal
> Is desolation
> With nothing
> To keep a human
> Or anything alive
> Except the unreachable
> Stars above and fish below.

For Michael, 'The sea has nothing to show / But Naqra', offering 'our people / Fighting for our country / And imprisoned there' utter 'desolation' and 'the unreachable'. Enjoining a reader, 'You know the history', Michael offers a poetry of war with 'nothing…. // nothing…' else 'at dead center'. Michael's poem of force, like 'The sea' around Naqra, 'has nothing to show / But Naqra' – no heroes, no martyrs, no survivors, and barely even a poem beyond its skeletal scattering down the page. The place 'Smell[s]… only of death / And hell', with the war and its aftermath having also obliterated any semblance of a natural world that might be revived, since it now has 'no fish, / No ships, no storms and no tides…'. Yet it is the heart and 'dead center' where all true poems of force begin and end, and where a poet of force makes a final stand, again in Adem's words, with 'death overflowing and in his hands – / In the end, perhaps, all that he understands' -- all that a poetics of force understands, too.

Chapter Three

War and Peace

Most Eritrean poets, to recall Ghebremeskel's 'A Candle for the Darkness', allow more light – be it a merely candle' or even '[c]andles and more candles' – and greater prospects for peace, albeit fleeting, into their poetry than Solomon Drar, Mussa Mohammed Adem, Mohammed Osman Kajerai and Fessahazion Michael. The war and its aftermath remain constant but, however awful and seemingly all consuming, something remains besides it: even the barest minimum, but still a cause of poetic eloquence. Contemporary Eritrean poets who mix, although they may not always balance, moments of war and peace in the poems of *Who Needs a Story* include in Tigrinya: Meles Negusse, Issayas Tsegai, Solomon Tsehaye, Angessom Isaak, Ribka Sibhatu, Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis, Fessehaye Yohannes and Ghirmai Ghebremeskel; in Tigre, Paulos Netabay; and in Arabic: Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani), Ahmed Mohammed Saad and Ahmed Omer Sheikh. Each tells his or her story, involving war but also a revelation of peace.

Born in 1956, Isayas Tsegai is a poet, songwriter and theatre specialist. With an M.A. in Theatre Studies from Leeds University, he has been the director of the Sewit Children's Theatre and instrumental in the development of Eritrean theatre in general. His two poems in *Who Needs a Story* are from a collection entitled *Lemin-Leminey* (1998).

His poem, 'I Am Also a Person', exemplifies the feeling that even 'a hopeless horizon', as Kajerai sees it, can contain a voice and, however horrifying the losses, it cannot be denied.

> When I saw the world didn't care
> If I was stripped of everything,
> Even my dignity,
> And beaten like a slave
> Less than human,
> I lost all sense of peace except in saying
> *I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean.*

Stuck where '[n]o comforting fiction intervenes…[and] no consoling prospect of immortality', in Weil's words, Tsegai does not withhold a single syllable in describing the abject reality of war that Drar, Adem, Kajerai and Michael do not let a reader forget, but for Tsegai war is not the end – no more than death is in an elegy. Somewhere and somehow, however miraculously or

invisibly, it contains a turn and a movement towards life and peace. 'I Am Also a Person' engagingly self-dramatises this turn. It might emanate from the spare and bitten diction of the refrain, *'I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean'* or in the empty space around each word. On another level, the poet seems to adapt the Cartesian formula of being – I think, therefore I am – by substituting an Eritrean reality or identity for mere thinking: 'I am Eritrean, therefore I am.' Nevertheless, committing a kind of poetic act of self-elegy, Tsegai simultaneously focuses on an individual's destruction and, in an intimidating stroke of brutal psychological honesty, his or her self-destruction, too, be it justifiable or not. Moreover, the poet even sees himself 'embrace' such 'suffering, whatever its outcome.

> The wind wanted my bones…
> I wished I was never born…
>
> I left my home
> Because it abandoned me.
> I left my stream
> Because I would have drowned.
> I left.
> I couldn't bear the burden…

To which a reader must respond, 'who could'?

> The crumbled barn
> And livestock disappeared,
> The yard smelling only of dust,
> Nothing to make into bread…
> no harvest
> Nothing but drought ahead…
> the angel of death;
> Nothing but one horror
> Pouring over another.

What Kajerai would accept, what Adem would inflict – only in the person of his 'Invincible' on the enemy – what Drar wants never to forget, and what Michael finds and succumbs to on Naqra, Tsegai decides to confront with the poem's warlike yet peace-loving refrain: 'Clenching my teeth, I said it again…// *I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean*'. It echoes in the wasteland of war: in starvation, in the thirst of the dying, in the blasted and poisoned earth and in whatever one imagines as an afterlife. Yet for Tsegai, this requires more than a poetics of force because his individual self-assertion also lets him remember

Birds in the swaying trees…

The rhythm of the sea
And music in the stream –
They were our dominion and legacy;
We ate and dressed well,
Living and sleeping in peace
And devoted to good work.
I loved this country.

A poetics of force can contain no such note of disarming and romantic assertion by an individual remembering happier times before the war. Eritrean poets whose works blend war and peace, be it only a memory or something more palpable, join in an abiding faith, as expressed by Tsegai, that 'Peace, progress and freedom' can begin 'with…[their] words'. They also begin the reclamation of an Eritrean identity buoyed by prosperity and self-assurance in addition to merely grim self-determination. The penultimate stanza of 'I Am Also a Person' presents a kind of lush backdrop – even if it remains only as a mental landscape – that richly contrasts the more stereotypical, journalistic image of the dark, emaciated refugee swaddled in rags and left hopeless amidst barren, desert scenery. Recalling when he 'ate and dressed well' and 'want…[ing] it back', Tsegai humanises such an image and through his language frees it and himself from mere tragedy as a subject of pity and fear. Instead, he offers the irrepressible voice of a poet: a voice that for him is identical to his being 'an Eritrean'.

Contemporary Eritrean poems that juxtapose war and peace to varying degrees form several categories, including those seemingly written 'in the field' of battle, elegies, poems cast as memories of war and, less explicitly, poems that only allude to war or warlike conditions.

Writing in Arabic, Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani) offers two meditations from the battlefield, noting exactly from where in his titles: 'Letter from Aliet' and 'Singing for the Children of Ar'.

Born in 1955, El-Sheikh (Madani) is a poet and journalist who is well known in Sudan and the Middle East and lives in Saudi Arabia.

Published in a collection called *Al-Taranim Al Sawyriya* in 1984, both poems seem written during a pause in the fighting, ranging in tone from a prelude to a postscript. Epistolary and performative respectively, as their titles also indicate, both poems focus explicitly and unflinchingly on the violence at hand, yet both envision a future – albeit not very detailed – when their poetry is recollected in more than momentary tranquility. Both poems invoke not

merely life but a work of art in their conclusions, suggesting the tenuousness and the imaginative leap the poet must take in imagining such a future. 'Letter from Aliet' envisions '[t]he wounded under their triumphal arch', as in a kind of neoclassical history painting. 'Singing for the Children of Ar' also resolves itself in a kind of verbal painting, although more in the style of the social realism favored by the revolution: the stark reds and yellows, resolute musculature and chiaroscuro of

> a painting finished
> With the barrel of a gun – the soldier,
> Abraham, shot, carrying out the body
> Of his hero, Mahmuday.

Addressed to 'dear friends', 'Letter from Aliet' begins like a 'poem of force', dryly observing, in a kind of anti-pastoral, that 'I've been fighting so long here / That all the birds have died'. Typically Eritrean in defiance – 'I sing for… / Our basic rights…. / I won't beg for freedom…'. – the poem indulges, like 'The Invincible', in a kind of grotesque violence seemingly for its own sake. The poet wearily boasts, 'my gun has grown into my shoulder'. Even a healthy, intact and uninjured human body cannot escape being forever altered for the worse by war. The poet also pictures the incursion about to take place as a kind of self-conscious anti-epithalamion: a wedding song to making war not making love; yet not a bit modest or demure but overly aggressive.

> We're taking Barentu tonight
> And meeting like a groom and bride –
> Not with the usual ceremony
> But with guns
> Singing, bullets for kisses
> And shrapnel to caress us
> All over our beautiful bodies…
>
> exploding on top of the enemy.

Solomon Drar, Mussa Mohammed Adem, Mohammed Osman Kajerai and Fessahazion Michael would require little more from their paeans of force except that they should, as El-Sheikh (Madani) also contends, 'sing for all denied' and not 'stop singing'. Yet El-Sheikh (Madani) would take another step, signaled by repeating his salutation, 'My dear friends'. Not as transparent a moment of pseudo-epistolary nicety as in the greeting employed by Kajerai in 'Singing Our Way to Victory', the poet's vehemence still cannot be restrained for very long. Evoking the failure of the political process that led to the war in the first place, El-Sheik (Madani) is a true believer in the goals of the revolution and

a new era in which it is not betrayed. No one ever again should be fooled by the old ways of politics as usual with both sides paid, double deals, mere self-interest and power exercising nothing but corruption. Instead, he envisions a thoroughly redemptive political process succeeding after the revolution and banishing whatever failures of nerve and ideals that led up to it:

> No more rooms of our dreams gone up
> In the smoke of self-perpetuating
> Politicians pretending
> They will back our cause.

Politics, enlightened or corrupt, seems unimaginable on the battlefields of Adem or Kajerai or on the barren rock of Naqra. But El-Sheikh (Madani) in the field of battle is unable to write about it without the hope, unlike Kajerai, of a brighter horizon, and one day finally finding himself, unlike Adem's 'Invincible', in 'his home' and enjoying the more traditional kind of wedding – celebrating 'the art of peace' – than what the outset of his poem demonically parodies. Not that El-Sheikh (Madani) forgets or wants to escape the terrible cost of such a vision ultimately of victory: at the end of his poem, he still sees 'The wounded'. However, he imagines them 'under their triumphal arch': providing a detail of architecture that would be unheard of amidst the battlefield rubble of Adem, the prison rock of Michael's Naqra or the blasts of Kajerai's 'Wind and Fire'. Yet even if the better prospect offered by El-Sheikh (Madani) still seems unlikely, if only because of what he himself has written before imagining there could be more than a poetics of force celebrating the violent details of the battlefield, the poet enjoins the reader in the end:

> We'll make it
> On our land and for our land:
> Sunlight aglow in good work's sweat
> Farmers who wed the art of peace…
> And the trigger locked
> In the revolution's palm.

Literally more dramatic than El-Sheikh (Madani)'s 'Letter', 'Singing for the Children of Ar' includes interludes of songs as well as characters' voices other than the poet's, juxtaposing the status quo of unmitigated war and the fragile possibility of peace through a quasi-staged multi-vocal performance. The poet as ideologue, warrior, elder, chronicler of war and singer of canticles set deep in Eritrea's biblical landscape creates a *tour de force* of verbal styles for the 'Children of Ar' so that his 'story won't go away / …for all generations to come'. The nature of that 'story' and the prospects for these 'generations' remain, for the

most part, undecided precisely because of 'the children'. They are, to the poet's chagrin, willing to continue the fight, 'the 'martyrs and enemies' game', even after the poet has declared '*Enough!*' because '*the enemy*' is vanquished and '*gone anyway*'. The poem concludes that 'the children' still need to be convinced that war should not be an everyday reality but a matter of war memorials, paintings and veterans recounting old stories of famous battles and 'love in the forest and caves'. The poem's deployment of a variety of styles to make its case suggests its urgency, switching from style to style and voice to voice as if the poet feels insecure about whether he is being persuasive or even heard. The poet also displays a stark anxiety that his declared audience is children and they do not seem to hear or understand, much less follow his message that life and death, war and peace must be a deliberate choice on their part.

Published in 1984, the poem's injunction to Eritrea's children to be done with war once and for all still raises a question about whether it has been heard, understood or remembered – and further questions of by whom and how they have responded. Moreover, decades after the poem's composition, Eritrea's children must still grapple with the prospect of war, with the children El Sheihk (Madani) addressed, or their real life counterparts, armed and in the field, confronted still by a hostile adversary. A new theatre of war must echo the old poetics of force: Solomon Drar's chilling yet fiery refrain, 'Who said Merhawi is dead,' cannot go away, at least not yet.

The actual occasion of 'Singing for the Children of Ar' seems to be a march, with the poet / soldier on the verge of 'the final battle' that leads to the 'epic revelation' of the birth of the Eritrean nation. The poet is 'Singing for the children of Ar / …Before we reach the sea'. The poem's title also serves as its refrain, as if to keep time with the march itself. The poet sounds torn between 'Singing for…children' – a relatively peaceful form of entertainment – and what must necessarily precede it: 'no more talk but action' and war. Embodying this conflict, he needs 'peace enough to endure / Death stalking Setit on fire'. He feels 'songs of love and hate / Bursting from …[his] heart'. Unable to resolve this conflict – and what poet honestly could under such conditions? – he does what every good poet should. He expresses it, offering two songs that are intensely lyrical when compared with the marching song in which they are embedded. As in 'Letter from Aliet', when El-Sheikh (Madani) pictures the nighttime battle of Barentu like a wedding day and its nocturnal consummation, so does he join the erotic and the martial; Venus and Mars, one might say, if a reader was not asked by the poet directly not merely to read but to 'Listen' and hear what is in this region of the world a far more powerful allusion and more profound voice:

the singer of the *Song of Solomon*, an erotic sequence in praise of the love of Solomon and Sheba. The poet's first song applies the tone of the biblical song to an Eritrean landscape perennially harsher than war itself:

I am cactus and sand,
Barren with no rain,
A desert without green.
I am hunger
Eating your land,
Seizing your voice,
And your only choice…
To be a toy of death….

Instead of a poem that is a song of force, the poet offers a reader and 'the children' another choice that, furthermore, the poet through the poem has already enacted: *'you also sing…'* and, unlike Drar, Adem, Kajerai and Michael, *'you…sing'* of more than war and force, yet in a profoundly biblical and culturally resonant voice:

Beloved, I return.
I am coming like rain
To children who burn
In a sallow desert.
A flowering cactus….

As in 'Letter from Aliet', the poet subverts a song about making war with a song about making love, evoking the biblical erotic poetry of the *Song of Songs*. Indeed, Aliet is in the same region where the legendary Sheba lived and ruled, an ostensible if imaginary candidate for the identity of the woman to whom the *Song*'s 'beloved' – similarly thought to be Solomon according to the literary device of attributing scriptural authorship through a royal fiction – devotes his amatory intentions. Nevertheless, illustrating the poet's recognition that merely wanting peace and even draping it in lush erotic images – *'…like the sea / At twilight, stars / Falling into the forest'* – cannot assure peace and can even undermine its real prospect, this second song turns into a lyrical iteration of the opening message of the poet on the march: 'Singing for the children of Ar / Means no more talk but action'. However loving *'the dance',* it also forms the poet's *'dagger / Against hunger'.* In peace, the poet can *'plow it under / With all our frustration',* but not without, as he continues to assert, '*my dagger'* first *'shining deep within / The furrows, written in our blood',* that is, with the dagger in the poet's hand doing the writing. The image of a dagger and blood 'deep' in a furrow enacts a momentary, intensely visual poetics of force that might make anyone, poet or reader, stop singing. A brutal message underlies an intensely lyrical flight; peace and love cannot

come without a fight – and only then can the poet declare, *'I see victory'*. Nevertheless, invoking a biblical persona – 'I know I'm dark' – and appearing like a fighter – 'I know I'm…rough' – El-sheikh (Madani) needs more than a 'poem of force', with a candor that poets of force would never admit, 'To beat back my fear / Of dying in this war'.

Still more than the poet's 'fear / Of dying' distinguishes 'Singing for the Children of Ar' from a 'poem of force', although ironically, perhaps, the imagined audience for the poem's performance, 'The children' themselves, would be content with singing of force and nothing else. The poet's idealistic imaginings of how the children might respond are disappointed. Clearly, he possesses a lot more experience with war than with raising children – a poignant fact in itself for this young veteran. If only he had the chance to have the experience of raising his own children instead of being forced away from any such role and into the life of a soldier going from one battle to the next and unsure which one will be his last. When the children of Ar actually appear in the poem, they have not heard him or his songs. Instead of giving the poet their undivided attention, which he so seriously seems to expect, they are playing:

> *I'm first.*
> *No me.*
> *But you're only three.*
> *The oldest go last.*
> *How about me?*
>
> *…Me! Me!*

They are playing 'war', pretending to volunteer to fight, and fighting over who can go first. What a parent, even a parent in a war torn nation, might hear everyday from children and hardly pay attention to, the poet, overly sensitive, perhaps, cannot tolerate: I say, *'Quiet! Enough'*. For him children should be free of war, at least an escape from war and not its reiteration. Naively he expects them to listen to his demand if not to his song: 'But they talk back. *Now you be the enemy. / Let's fight*!' The poet implies that his response – *'I can't be the enemy. / They're gone away, / And you will stay'* – falls on proverbial deaf ears, since the children are neither seen nor heard for the rest of the poem. El-Sheikh (Madani) also implies, more direly, that the children's innocence notwithstanding, if they want to fight they will fight, even if there is no enemy, or if the enemy must be imagined, or if they must mistake someone peaceful for the enemy, or even if they must fight among themselves. But after all, they merely imitate the adults they see going to war. Moreover, in the end the children almost seem as disturbing to the poet as the war itself.

With no response to the poet's rejoinder that they should be thinking of their futures in a country at peace rather than at war, he ends the conversation abruptly and returns once again, if not in denial then at least dismissively, to the poem's opening and refrain, 'I sing for the children of Ar', only now not really singing for them but for himself, a reader and, perhaps, whoever else 'will stay'. With the prospect of winning the peace seeming less like a certainty than winning the war, the poet can only depend on what he knows and has experienced first hand. It is a stunning blend of art and life in which the confusion of the former with the latter offers a kind of solace – a kind of peace – that he cannot do without, even if he is unable to communicate its significance as he would like to children: 'a painting finished / With the barrel of a gun' and a 'story' of extraordinary military heroism that he hopes 'won't go away'. El-Sheikh (Madani) almost sounds tortured by the thought that he would have produced little more than a 'poem of force' if he did not also include in his song his desire for more than war but peace for 'the children' and his fear that they might not have it or even want it.

The poet himself escapes from the dire conclusions implied near the conclusion of 'Singing for the Children of Ar' by focusing on the painting of 'the soldier, / Abraham, shot, carrying out the body / Of his hero, Mahmuday'. Moreover, Solomon Drar's 'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?' might also be said to conclude – escaping if only momentarily its fierce demand for a spirit of perpetual warlike struggle even in times of relative piece – with a similarly tranquil image, envisioning 'Merhawi… / … the lion slayer' still 'Harvesting the fields of gold'. Nevertheless, for Drar, the poet of force, such an image is a kind injunction to remain fierce and warlike while for El-Sheikh (Madani) the image is one of consolation. Still, both poets can be said to find their greatest solace in an elegiac and heroic image, although similarly for both poets it is no more than a literary image: an image in a mere poem. Neither sees it as a lasting reality, at least not yet. Furthermore, Eritrean poets like Solomon Tsehaye and Ribka Sibhatu also include overwhelmingly elegiac moments in their work.

Elegy is a poetic form clearly suited to Eritrean poetry of war and peace, and Isayas Tsegai's 'Lamentation' and Fessehaye Yohannes' 'If He Came Back' are prime examples of elegy in full. 'Lamentation' bears the added distinction of seemingly being composed not in tranquility but, like the poems of El-Sheikh (Madani), written in the midst of the armed struggle itself. It is a dispatch from the front, although a commonplace among Eritrean poets talking about their work is the admission that they were not writers when they went to war and they learnt how to write poetry in the breaks between fighting in the field.

Like 'I Am Also a Person', Isayas Tsegai's 'Lamentation' begins in despair:

'I'm feeling overwhelmed by death. / If there is not life without it / Better to have never been born'. Also similar is the poem's reliance on self-dramatization. Absolutely desolate and heartbroken in the former, the poet survives by repeating the mantra, '*I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean*'. Not as alone as in the previous poem but still as a shell-shocked soldier who has lost a friend in battle, the poet in 'Lamentation' lacks certainty even about his own identity. With no self-declarations of who he is even at a bare minimum, he is all questions and worse:

> Why make any effort at all
> If death swallows everything?
> Why even ask the question if
> Nothing answers but death – death with
> No chance of justice or freedom
>
> And death essential as water
> Quenching everyone?

The piling up of terms like 'Overwhelmed', 'everything' '[n]othing but death', '[n]o chance', '[n]o…justice or freedom' and 'death' like 'water / Quenching everyone' sound absolute and like the conclusions of a tragic hero about to die. The ground zero of elegy is always tragedy and irreplaceable, irrecoverable loss. Regardless, the poet plays another role, shifting his identity to that of a character who survives at the end of a tragedy. He becomes the elegist who, however diminished, must testify to what he knows:

> The dead
> Sons and daughters of Adal
> And Denden and all the heroes
> Finally at home in their graves
> Know only one true answer if
> I ask, 'Is this the promised end?'

Confronting the tragedy of war not in the abstract but 'in the… grave', the poet's rhetorical question takes away even the minimum of certainty he had previously maintained with '*I am also a person*'. He undermines the very basis of the Eritrean struggle for independence itself: 'I don't know what to do or say. / "Victory to the Masses!" or / "Victory to Me!" What's the point?' He crashes one of the most oft-invoked phrases of the Eritrean struggle in times of war and peace, 'Victory to the Masses' – *Awet N'hafash* in Tigrinya – into a verbal wall of personal, cynical and throwaway disillusion: 'Victory to Me…'. Ubiquitous death's deconstruction of life into meaninglessness – yet the poet's personal devastation at the spectacle of how much Eritrea has had to sacrifice

to be independent – makes him simply 'want to run away'. Even his previous power of self-assertion, '*I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean*', has deserted him. Such a moment of painful self-abandon, nihilism, anti-triumphalism and total negativity is rare in Eritrean poetry or in what is usually accounted for the Eritrean psyche.

The moment when an elegy turns from tragedy to some form of recovery and eventually joy and renewal can be subtle and allusive, requiring a sudden leave taking from inscrutable horror towards a religious faith or at least the embrace of some transcendent power. It allows for a return of the order that prevailed before the tragic event and even to be strengthened by it. Confronting existential meaningless and nihilism as a result of Eritrea's devastation during its thirty year struggle for independence, embodied in the death of a soldier and a friend, the poet in 'Lamentation' wonders if he might 'hide in a monastery'. The poet asks, 'What other calling can there be / To real peace … // [and] Forgetting the pain of his death?' Such a monastic alternative is not merely fanciful in a country of many famous Orthodox monasteries practically as old as Christianity itself. In a harsh, perennially contested land of orthodox faith and historic religious enclaves, the poet's question borders on common sense as much as on spiritual fervor or necessity. However, it no more satisfies a contemporary Eritrean poet than it would most poets nowadays in the world.

Yet the basis of the poet's entering the cloister would not be faith but friendship, or rather a faith in friendship: 'Because I remember my friend. / I see his blood, bones and spirit'. Moreover, such friendship includes 'his fight and his struggle' and itself expands 'like a form of worship' of '[h]is heart' into a 'dream…of a land / Of more than death and of freedom…'. A faith in the purpose of the Eritrean revolution replaces the more traditional, religious faith: 'the kind that I might / Find in a monastery', in the poet's words. Such a truism of Marxist, revolutionary rhetoric might have sounded fresher when it was written than now. However, Tsegai juxtaposes it with a traditional sense of religious faith to suggest that neither can be ultimately satisfying compared with a more difficult, a more poetic faith.

Its voice haunts him in the form of his friend's voice 'Ordering me everyday: / "Get up…you can do it…you can..."'. But the poet does not want to be a saint, whatever the faith: in the orthodoxy, the revolution or friendship: 'Still, I want to forget this voice…'. Yet this antipathy and refusal call forth a fundamental tenet of this poet's faith: a faith in romantic nature. 'The land' cannot let him forget and repeats, '"It's you. / Your choice. Your strength. / Your sacrifice. This is your chance."' Poems only of force and war register neither voice and have no

such faith. For better or worse, they neither want nor recognise it. For Kajerai, blood curdles and dries in the sandy soil where nothing grows. For Michael, the rock of Naqra is forever unyielding. The conditions they describe transcend nothing. Tsegai knows this. His poetic faith and his elegy of 'Lamentation' dramatise being caught between the similarly overwhelming needs of force and feeling. Knowing firsthand the brute and necessary reality of force as it has dealt with his friend – 'I can neither see nor touch him' – he still asks in the very next line, 'But how do I forget feeling?' Tsegai's poetic faith finds the power of life and death identical, yet also identical 'To him and looking in my eyes / From beyond the stars…'. The poet, 'asking if / I'm dead, alive or in between', cannot resolve this conflict, – as a religious or a revolutionary might – but he can express it. Furthermore, his expression is not meant as 'escape' – as the religious or revolutionary might be – but simply, sensuously and passionately as nothing more or less than the poetry itself and 'praise for'

> His love pouring on us like rain,
> His voice so tender in the grass,
> His death giving life to the land
> And birth to deep satisfaction
> Within our nation….

Paradoxically, while the poet can compose this 'holy chant' – with a holiness of his own devising and not traditionally religious – he cannot 'join…it', either by identifying with it himself, with the 'nation' or even the reader. If a poetic faith is placed in art, it is merely a form of escape, too, particularly for Tsegai, as he suggests by using the words 'chant' and 'nation', again invoking the limits of a merely religious or revolutionary understanding of such a death. Despite the elegy for his friend, 'He would still not hear birds singing. / He would still not smell spring flowers. / He would still chew sulfur and fall…'. For Tsegai, being 'Dead for the sake of our nation' is good for the nation, but not enough for him, and nothing ever can be. Putting aside the needs of the individual for the greater good of the community and the nation is a truism about the Eritrean sensibility. In 'Lamentation' Tsegai posits the starkest of insights and simply the truth about an Eritrean individual who also happens to be a poet and a friend of a dead soldier.

The greatest elegies suggest more than an ordinary passion in their authors, and Tsegai is no exception. His passion for his lost friend consumes him and transforms him totally. Questions of life or death, the state or the individual, the religious or the revolutionary no longer matter. Instead, the poet would return to his origins as a human being and as a poet:

pray to be the soil
Of the shrine and hold his body,
Devote my words to his absence,
Live without touching or seeing,
Burn only with his memory….

Not only the poem but also the poet himself must be a war memorial. He must give his life as devotedly as the soldier and his friend. As soldiers must fight, poets must write. And Tsegai has for his example the ultimate sacrifice of his friend. Neither can know, much less be sure if it does any good. He can only 'hope his heirs will learn to thrive / On his dreams still very alive'. Against a backdrop of the Eritrean struggle for independence and its stark poetry of force, a contemporary Eritrean elegy, unlike the greatest elegies, cannot promise much more than 'hope' and 'dreams', at least not yet.

The poet Fessehaye Yohannes also offers little more than 'dreams' to offset the terrible reality of the death of yet another Eritrean war hero or martyr. Then again, what poet – or religious or revolutionary – really can offer more, although some dreams are more likely to come true than others?

Born in 1958, Fessehaye Yohannes is a playwright and journalist as well as being a poet. Written in 1988, his elegy, 'If He Came Back' first appeared *Mezmur Tegadaly* (1992), an anthology edited by Ghirmai Ghebremeskel.

The title alone of Yohannes' elegy, 'If He Came Back', suggests the tenuousness of any palpable and lasting recovery, renewal and joy that the elegy in the end can offer, at least to this poet. Compared with Yohannes' calling for nothing less than a resurrection, an elegy's offering the consolation of the passing of time, the realization of a greater good, or even the war memorial of soil, self and stone as imagined by Tsegai sounds so much more practical and plausible. The repeated use of the phrase, 'if he came back', in Yohannes' elegy resembles Tsegai's repeated wish for monastery in which to escape his grief. Yet like Tsegai with his adamancy in stating that neither a monastery, revolutionary rhetoric nor art can decrease the agony he feels since he can never again actually 'see' or 'touch' his dead friend, Yohannes concludes the first part of his poem plainly and realistically with an explicit statement that his refrain's hoping for a resurrection actually is hopeless: 'But nobody can change the fact he's dead / Or question it. He won't come back again'. The power of Fessehaye Yohannes' elegy is in the eloquence with which he squarely faces this stark reality. He articulates with equal intensity the life and afterlife of his 'hero of heroes'. The former is barely literal; the latter is wholly metaphorical and even wildly metaphysical, envisioning a range of physical transformations or metamorphoses – none of them human – that the 'fallen' would have to undergo 'if he came back'.

Yohannes' poem marks 'the anniversary' of 'our hero['s]' death. The fiery present of Eritrea's armed struggle has cooled and ended 'in victory', and he is very much 'a part of …[that] history'. Still the poet laments that his hero and friend

> didn't see…
> As we do now that the haze and darkness
> Burn away revealing unobstructed
> And smooth highway where we stand….

Reinforcing a truism that winning a war is sometimes easier than surviving in peace, the different occasions of Tsegai's and Yohannes' elegies – the former during the war, the latter just afterward – seem to affect their expressions of grief. Yohannes' desire for his hero's resurrection suggests that the prospect of 'a worthy tomb / For his remains', in the poet's words, may not be as satisfying as it would be for Tsegai. Yohannes wants to see beyond the tomb, but even in victory he cannot, if only because it reveals little of substance except the merely hopeful 'ever expanding fields / And the solid ground of our country's cause, / Where we stay rooted…'. 'If He Came Back' actually unfolds in a 'brutal place / Of too many heroes and martyrs' – a sardonic, second refrain of the poem – amidst the remains of Eritrea's thirty year struggle for independence. Observing the anniversary of 'the fatal shot' that ended 'our son's and struggle's brightest day' yet still surviving a 'harsh land', the poet is more concerned with death and imagining his hero's resurrection than with Eritrea's victory. A little like Horatio hearing the dying Hamlet chide him for wanting to die like his friend – 'Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this harsh world draw they breath in pain' – Yohannes can only end his elegy feeling restrained from a similar kind of 'felicity', that is, death: 'kept from following / Him now…'. Instead, the poet can only follow his hero as he lived, not as he died, although the ultimate goal of such a survival strategy is death, too, that is, to 'go forever to his side'. Surviving ultimately not to live but to die reinforces this elegy's repeated need to imagine its hero's repeated miraculous transformations through the power of a resurrection yet, ironically perhaps, as anything but himself amidst the bleak reality and literal circumstances of a war torn Eritrean present. The implication is that to come back as the hero really was or even as a mere mortal would only result in the same brutal fate. Nearly overwhelmed with Eritrea's ruin and grief, the poet reinforces this sense of ultimate fatality by offering an alternative that can only seem miraculous and surreal: 'Seeing such a target, the final shot / … [w]ould have disobeyed the trigger's order'. Precisely such miraculous events as the only alternative to death and destruction are the poem's primary focus.

The miraculous transformations of the dead war hero in 'If He Came Back' begin in the first quatrain with his being imagined as a 'precious pearl' to be protected 'from the roadside thieves'. In the second stanza, be becomes 'a stately tree providing / Shade but needing to be protected / Itself from the grueling sun to survive'. In both instances, the hero could not survive, unlike in the war, perhaps, without the poet's help, giving the 'pearl' protection and the 'tree' 'our purest water'. Post-war Eritrea is so 'harsh' and 'brutal' that even someone who has come back from the dead is vulnerable and could die twice!

The poet recalls in a series of hyperbolic declarations about his friend and hero that 'He rode the razor's edge for twenty years. / His feet never touched the ground, only thorns. / Every torch he passed burned with his hope'. The statements' departure from literal reality only heightens the similarly fantastical quality of the poet's wishing that 'the final shot / should have disobeyed the trigger's order'. As an elegy, 'If He Came Back' repeatedly becomes anti-literal, as if there is no expressive alternative to recalling a war hero's 'memory and name / and proudly moving on because of them'. Again resembling Isayas Tsegai, this time focusing on the literal grave itself, Yohannes wants to make

> the soil we buried him within
> Blessed and envied sheltering our hero
> And bearing light that's sure to spread and reign
> Throughout our land….

Tsegai's 'friend', Drar's 'Merhawi' and even Adem's 'Invincible' provided these poets with lifetime memories to console and even to inspire, in Yohannes' words, their 'Resistance despite despair at…loss'. However, for Yohannes neither the memory of his friend and hero's life, however extravagant its expression, nor a grave – be it 'a worthy tomb' or 'rough stone' – can suffice. Any image that the poet can still have of his hero and friend must be abandoned for another, and another, however unworldly and seemingly to no end. Visions of a 'pearl', a 'stately tree', 'the razor's edge', 'feet' touching 'only thorns' but not 'the ground', and spontaneously igniting torches give way to the hero 'shining forth and solid: the pillar / At the center of our vision…'. That 'vision' seems predictably nationalistic, perhaps, focusing on the 'struggle / And pain to make our nation – passion, / Courage and powerful art – like him'. But even this vision is not enough for Yohannes. The real greatness of his poetic vision is that it has no 'center' but scatters almost unaccountably from one image to the next. Of all contemporary Eritrean poets, he is the most baroque, at least in 'If He Came Back'. Whatever the poet compares to his 'fallen', Yohannes still 'need[s] to see him back with us', which makes the poet need to see him continually as

something else over and over again in different forms and shapes. In a rapid series of extended comparisons, the resurrected hero is again transformed, now from personifying the spirit of the nation itself to 'gold…tested in the fire', to a 'compass giving us direction', to a jealousy provoking 'diamond', to the most vulnerable 'green grass', itself a biblical evocation of the mortality of humankind and 'flesh', and finally to 'a lion, the strongest animal'. As if he becomes self-conscious about resorting to such a wild, metaphysical range of comparisons, Yohannes even offers as he nears his poem's conclusion a summary of his phantasmagoria, yet identifying each metaphor with a question mark as if to sustain its dynamic, transitory and ever changing nature:

> Like…a pearl? A stately shade tree needing
> Our protection? A pillar of light? Gold?
> A compass? A Diamond? The riches of
> Grass or flesh? The mighty lion?

Undoubtedly the 'harsh', 'brutal' reality of post-war Eritrea provokes such a poetic flight in Yohannes. He brings it crashing down, however, by confronting in the plainest terms what for a poet is the ultimate deprivation and reason to despair:

> Words
> And comparisons cannot say enough
> Of what we feel at the loss of our friend
> And his embrace….

Towards the end of his elegy, Yohannes recalls how 'our friend / …with his mere glance / Frighten…[ed] away our worst enemies'. A 'mere glance' 'at the loss of' his 'friend' and hero – his 'power quick as life / And great as change itself' – similarly frightens the poet from one sublime transformation to another: anything – even the death of the poet himself – except the literal reality of the 'fallen' dead and buried.

As might be expected, memories of war and its aftermath amidst comparatively more peaceful conditions thread the work of many contemporary Eritrean poets, although they choose other forms than elegy. Three poets in particular transform specific incidents of war or its immediate aftermath into moments of illumination hopefully to guide them to winning the peace as well as the war. To a varying degree, images and incidents of war stand out in the poetry of Solomon Tsehaye, Ribka Sibhatu and Paulos Netabay the way that abandoned tanks and other armaments of war still dot the Eritrean landscape. Sometimes they can rivet one's attention like nothing else; at other times their grim presence only confirms the greater and more enduring beauty, however harsh, of the land around them.

One of the sharpest, most poignant memories of the war in contemporary Eritrean poetry transpires in 'Abeba' by Ribka Sibhatu.

Born in 1956, Ribka Sibhatu is a poet, critic and scholar. Also an intercultural consultant in Italy with a Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the University of Rome, she writes poetry in Tigrinya and in Italian. 'Abeba' is from a bilingual book, *Aulò: Canto-poesia dall'Eritrea* published in 1993.

As if shunning writing about any kind of major battle, Eritrea's epic struggle, any 'hero of heroes', martyr of martyrs or large philosophical questions, Ribka Sibhatu focuses on an individual who might even be forgotten were it not for her immediate family and a friend like the poet. For her,

> Abeba, my flower in Asmara…
>
> lives in my dreams
> And refuses to leave,
> Knowing all my secrets
> And never letting me rest.

Poems of force as well as elegies and poetry seemingly written in the heat of battle reveal, in Yohannes' words, a 'commitment' to 'the cause we follow – / Resistance despite despair…at loss': a bold, pronounced struggle by the individuals involved, including the poet; a test of wills dramatically enacted, inevitably revealing a lone example or voice in spectacular flight albeit it doomed or against the bleakest of backdrops. This example or voice – again best typified in Isayas Tsegai's *'I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean'* – ultimately pits its own severity against any harshness 'the world', in Tsegai's eyes, throws at it, and this voice survives, somehow, and triumphs in some way, even it means death. But no poet articulates like Sibhatu the ultimate helplessness, futility and utterly devastated expectations that must inevitably accompany such individual acts of bravery. What if, she implies, a little like Fessahazion Michael in 'Naqra', one could no longer fight back; if all was lost? What should be done? Her answer eschews any public, perhaps even cathartic pronouncement for the more painful, private and world of 'secrets /… never letting…[her] rest…'. Her quietist, tender, delicate response focuses solely on the quotidian. She unfolds a poetics of the everyday, an opposite of the poetics of force. She even seems self-consciously to defy it, if only because it has led her 'flower from Asmara', Abeba, to an end much bleaker than anything on the battlefield. For Sibhatu, Abeba's greatness, even her heroism lies not in any struggle but is more

> Measured and subtle
> As her makeup
> And her finely drawn eyes –
> She spoke like poetry.

Sibhatu offers the feminine and the domestic as the greatest antidote to war. No mention of 'makeup', 'finely drawn eyes' and poetry itself appears in poets of war like Kajerai (not even in his 'Woman of Eritrea)', Michael, Adem, and Drar, and it even seems inconceivable. Nevertheless, Sibhatu shows yet another dimension of war. Abeba is an executed prisoner of war, and the poet is her witness, although it is to her private integrity and uniquely human beauty. Regardless of whether or not she does represent any superhuman act of valor demanding public recognition, Sibhatu can only valorise

> The food her family sent
> To prison everyday…
> The day her grave was dug…
>
> that night…
> The prison guard…
> the shot.

Precisely such details as the food and the makeup allow for 'the shot' to ring out more terribly and clearly than it might on any of her fellow poets' battlefields. Nevertheless, like Tsegai and Yohannes, Sibhatu makes her 'fallen' into a kind of paradigm that her poetry itself would embody. Their respective war heroes spur Tsegai and Yohannes in the end to want 'to thrive' and to 'stride', respectively. Sibhatu's far quieter hero might have enjoined such action, but she 'never blossomed'. In comparison, poets like Drar, Adem, Kajerai, El-Sheikh (Madani), Tsegai and Yohannes are inspired by individuals and heroic actions that have 'blossomed'. Recognizing a different, more subtle, even secretive yet sadder kind of hero, Sibhatu engages a less traditional, less conventional, perhaps more difficult subject: a war experience surely as universal, timeless and significant as the heroism recorded by her fellow poets, yet not nearly as widely sung. The fact that she is a woman fighter writing about another woman fighter must account at least in part for the uniqueness of her poetic statement about the war: focusing on the everyday, the domestic, the greatness and the heroism that 'never blossomed' as opposed to what did. However, Sibhatu clearly models her art, as do her fellow poets, on her subject. Drar, Adem, Kajerai, El-Sheikh (Madani), Tsegai and Yohannes all want their poetry to reflect or imitate the values of their heroic poetic subjects, and so does Sibhatu, only hers is different. She remembers that her 'cell-mate' 'Before she died / … wove a basket / Inscribed "for my parents"'. All of these poets write about the deaths of their heroes, and Sibhatu's male counterparts focus on how their heroes make war. In the end Sibhatu concentrates on how her hero makes peace, and the effect is as devastating as any contemporary Eritrean poem on

record, although the poet wants her words to be more like a unique Eritrean 'basket' than a battle.

After so many imagined 'Fields of gold' (Drar), 'ever expanding fields' with 'worthy' tombs (Yohannes), 'dreams' (Tsegai), dowries of 'freedom' (Kajerai), and 'triumphal' arches (Madani), Sibhatu's palpable if humble 'basket' signifying peace is a poetic breakthrough. A thirty year armed struggle for independence makes peace hard to recognise or even accept – an agonizing process recounted in the most precise and personal yet also palpable terms by Solomon Tsehaye in his poem, 'The Tithe or War'.

Ribka Sibhatu admits that the memory of her 'cell-mate', Abeba, continually haunts her, but the poet in 'The Tithe of War' seems to have as clear a conscience as the lapis lazuli sky in the Eritrean highlands.

Born in 1956, Solomon Tsehaye is a poet, critic and scholar of both Eritrean oral and written poetry. Author of Eritrea's national anthem and a coordinator of many Eritrean cultural projects, he has served as Director of the Cultural Affairs Bureau in Eritrea's Ministry of Education. 'The Tithe of War' is from his book, *Sahel*, published in 1994.

Tsehaye begins by reducing the marathon Eritrean independence struggle to a bare if welcome minimum: 'I struggled in battle, / Won the war / And earned a rest'. Was it really so simple? The poet hopes so, as have countless poets, resorting to the wish fulfilment of pastoral. He almost sounds as if he is writing his own epitaph, and an ultimately happy one at that. Yet he returns to a rustic, agricultural life: another Adam in a kind of Eden restored to his humble dominion.

> It flowered and multiplied –
> Watered with my sweat,
> Fed with my flesh
> And sweetened by my marrow.
> The harvest was good.

In a kind of lightning, radically localised synopsis of the biblical creation, the poet in his new beginning beholds his efforts and, echoing the God of *Genesis*, calls it 'good'. '[C]ontent' to be alone without an Eve, the poet seems to have two paradises in one, his 'sweat' and sweet 'marrow' joined in 'one flesh', as in the biblical creation's erotic highpoint immediately before the introduction of 'the serpent', but joined solely with the earth instead of a woman. He is an Adam but, unlike his biblical forerunner, he is content to be 'alone' without an 'help meet'. Nevertheless, however radical a revision of the original, Tsehaye creates a similarly short-lived paradise.

The poet claims to have once again established his primordial bond based on the fact that his 'bones ploughed / The ground of peace'. He assertion is 'romantic' in both senses of the word, signalling a kind of primal and imaginative connection between the lone poet and the power of nature as well as an erotic connection. Yet Tsehaye's brutal yet at the same time tender and loving lines recall one of William Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell': 'Drive…your plow over the bones of the dead'. Eritrea's long war of independence and its having to drive legions of foreign invaders from its land over the centuries surely has left no field inviolate by human bones. '[P]low[ing] over' their bones with his own, the poet's asserting his own and his country's survival and unalienable right to happiness could not be more dramatic or deserved. Who would want to deny him, 'content' with such basics as

> a blanket of earth,
> Bushes for friends,
> A mattress of dust
> And a pillow of stones.

Even the dead are at peace. The poet seems sure of it.

But then his 'spirit groans'. He hears the living, from whom he can no more withhold his attention than Eve can from the serpent in chapter three of *Genesis*. Specifically, the poet hears an Eritrean mother, and she could be every Eritrean mother since nearly all lost children in the war, which is why she is 'crying' and 'crying'. Furthermore, her effect is as potentially devastating as the 'serpent' and a lot less 'subtile'. Unable to remain inspired simply with a feeling of being happy just to be alive, the poet abruptly emerges from the reverie induced by his war weariness and his sense of accomplishment equally profound. Its pastoral fleeting as a dream and replaced by 'groans' and 'crying', the poem can now only address the mother. A simple and content first person description becomes a pleading to 'you, mother'. Unlike the poem's beginning, survival after the war is no longer simple. On the contrary, even remembering a 'basket' like Abeba's seems unbearable, inscribed to her 'parents' yet costing her and them her life. Similarly, any 'rest' and 'peace' the poet or any other survivor might now obtain cost 'too many heroes and martyrs', in Yohannes' words, for an Eritrean mother, if not for Tsehaye, to bear.

Once the poet hears a mother's 'crying' and his 'spirit groans' in an involuntary response quickly leading to his renewed loss of his newfound paradise, he sees her 'loved ones', that is, her children who have survived the war. Not as totally abject as their mother, they resemble

a little wheat remaining
In the gleaned fields,
Or like a few raw seeds

When there's nothing left to eat.

If the bare minimum they represent reveals not much less than what the poet actually has in the poem's beginning, they still seem far from 'content', unlike the poet on 'The ground of peace'. Directly addressing their mother, the poet contends that far worse for them and the poet than what little they can glean from the ruins of war is what they feel 'seeing you in pain'. Seeing her, 'They think, *should we have survived?*' Their guilt at being the few – the gleanings of nearly two generations of Eritreans – who have survived the war invites despair, compelling the poet to ask, in a frustrated voice bordering on a demand, 'How will they go on?'

The poet anguishes over why their survival should be questioned and why they should question themselves. Even more than Abeba's 'basket / Inscribed "for my parents"', they should be clung to by their mother and not left wondering if they only add to her pain, or if they are worthy to live when so many others have died. Moreover, Tsehaye's imagery is benevolent. Gleanings are good not bad. If they are to signify anyone's guilt, it is not to be attributed to those who gather the gleanings or who are compared to the gleanings themselves. On the contrary, they are an act of charity, even purposely left behind by those who claim 'the harvest' as their own to assuage any guilt they may feel in having so much. However, in this case, the harvest belongs to an epitome of unfeeling: death. The gleanings or 'a few raw seeds' are for the living – something at least, better than nothing – that the mother as well as the survivors might know but what they cannot wholly admit or embrace. Therefore, the poet must help them, as best he can, and he resorts to evoking a tradition all can recognise and that is directly connected to the purposeful leaving 'a little wheat remaining / in the…fields' to be gleaned.

The 'tithe' of Tsehaye's title refers to those who have died in Eritrea's war. Traditionally one tenth of a person's income or wealth, Eritrea's tithe is far more in its casualties of war, yet Tsehaye resorts to this time honoured mechanism to provide a clear if unemotional – at least at first – analogy to justify Eritrea's ultimate sacrifice for independence. He also invokes, at least as a metaphor, the traditional authority of the Church, an institution in Eritrea that has weathered whatever invaders and wars the country has suffered through the centuries. Clearly and most concisely, the poet stresses both the giving and the receiving of the tithe, specifically how it begins and ends: 'Who gives a tithe / And asks for it

back?' Suddenly, the poem shifts again, back into the first person, with the poet speaking directly to the mother in the most intense, terse yet emotional terms: 'Mother, I paid it'. Tough but loving, the poet not only wants his 'freedom' and to feel 'content' with a good 'harvest', as he says in the beginning of the poem, but now he pleads for his mother to join him and 'Not to cry but live', as if happiness depends on it, at least his happiness, although whether she can ever really be happy remains unclear and unspoken.

The logic of Tsehaye's analogy of the tithe borders on the inscrutable, calculated with cunning of almost a battlefield variety. The 'I' paying the tithe metonymically represents not only the poet but also the Eritrean defence forces, alive or dead. Given in a sacred cause – and the sacredness of Eritrea's armed struggle for independence can barely be overstated for Eritreans – the tithe assures that the donor's salvation as well as the future life of the cause cannot be overcome by eternal death, which would – and in the end shall, at least existentially – take the tithe and the entire 'harvest', only the tithe assures not yet. The tithe implies, furthermore, that the giver retains the remaining, much larger percentage, which connotes that the survivors in the poem – the poet, the mother and her children – not only can go on but that they are provided for, too. Most inscrutably, neither the poet nor anyone who has survived the war can ask for the return of those who have died or even for what the survivors have lost in fighting the war rather than in enjoying the fruits of peace, although Fessehaye Yohannes' 'If He Came Back' asks but finally must accept the logic of 'The Tithe of War', too.

The Tigre language poet, Paulos Netabay, might also accept the necessity and the logic – the relative peace of mind – of the analogy of 'The Tithe of War'. His poem, 'Remembering Sahel', still asks a question every contemporary Eritrean poet like every Eritrean must confront: 'Who could forget the war?'

Born in 1967, Paulos Netabay is a journalist, poet and songwriter. He has served as editor-in-chief of *Haddas Ertra*, Eritrea's national, Tigrinya newspaper, and as newsroom director in Eritrea's Ministry of Information. 'Remembering Sahel' first appeared in 1995 and is written in Tigre.

Like Sibhatu, whose Abeba 'lives in' in the poet's 'dreams / And refuses to leave', Netabay answers his own question, refusing to let it remain rhetorical: 'Who could forget the war?' War is 'the hell we've never left…'. His very next line, continuing after his ellipsis, 'Yet more,' commences a detailed account of life in the field or, in Tsehaye's terms, paying the tithe and surviving to tell the story.

Having '[w]on the war', Tsehaye feels that he can finally enjoy

a blanket of earth,
Bushes for friends,
A mattress of dust
And a pillow of stones

until a memory of what such simple pleasures cost shatters the scene. Netabay remembers the war first and foremost, yet he recalls its huge pains and small pleasures seemingly in the same breath. He subsumes whatever pains his memories bring back in the act of writing itself. Striking a kind of pact with the reader – 'Give me your hands to write / The names again now / And for tomorrow's sake' – the poet through the example of his poem implies that the greatest consolation in the war is now in uttering the names of the places in Eritrea's northern region, the Sahel, where he fought. 'Remembering Sahel' is also a perfect example of the kind of poem the British Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, offered as the ideal. It sounds like 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and seems to 'take…its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility'. The poet remembers the places of Sahel, but by writing the poem about them he takes 'one more step' and goes 'deeper / Into Sahel' than ever before. Netabay's not merely evoking but invoking his place names of war produces such an elevated state of mind that the poet imagines them speaking on their own and providing their own testimony:

Rora-habab, Asray,
Forts, say what you know.
Marsa-gulbub, Marsa-teklay,
Harbors, testify
To the brutality

We suffered to breathe freedom…

Of course, they are silent, except for what the poet has them 'say' or 'testify'. Yet they speak the language of things, and 'Remembering Sahel' highlights how they stay in the poet's memory, informing his life, his language and his art:

positive

Forgiving and faithful
To the places revealing
Who we are…

For Netabay, to recall the war, particularly in various places in Sahel, provides him with a *Genesis* like power to create, or at least to recreate, the world through language, yet also to perform the same with his own existence and identity. Invoking the place names of Sahel and what he sees there makes

him quite simply 'Remember to be', but he also claims, more dramatically at the end of the poem, 'They showed us destiny'. A literal and historical memory of Sahel is not only at the core of Netabay and his fellow fighters, but it must be similarly illuminated for the entire Eritrean nation if it is to survive the war into the future.

Netabay's poem can be split in half, the first part stressing more of the conflicts of Sahel and the second the consolations, with the breaking point marked by the poet's asking the 'Forts' and 'Harbors' to 'testify' as if he and even the reader need not only the poem but, a little like the soldiers when they were actually fighting the war, the intervention or incidental pleasures of the Sahel itself. For Netabay, Eritrea's victory is more than rooted in the Sahel, as history shows. So is Eritrea's future, since the same Sahel also 'protect…[s]' Eritrea's 'children'. Victory depends on its places being personified as marching to the same tune as the fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front:

> A chorus joined our war:
> Ayget, Qatar, Denden,
> Ashorm, Tikse, Koken –
>
> Rough song in a rough land
> Where lions also lived.
> But it delivered….

'[T]he war' may be 'hell', but the places of Sahel make it habitable, providing the land itself with a kind of heroic stature like the hero in 'The Invincible'. The lines, 'Rough song in a rough land / Where lions also lived', ring with an indomitable stature, grittiness and strength. The poet recalls 'The battles where we fell, / The awful sun, our wounds / Glistening like jewels' and being 'always barefoot' where there were 'Always thorns' making him 'refus[e] / to go on', until the Sahel beckons him 'one more step, deeper'. It is the ultimate and inscrutable instruction on how to march: simply to take 'one more step', nothing more, nothing less. In the war this step meant survival, but recalling it triggers the composition of the poem itself, since the phrase, 'one more step, deeper / Into Sahel…' directly leads the poet to ask, 'remember?' What saves the fighter's actual life in the Sahel produces the figurative life of the poem:

> Baquos, Ela-babu,
> Itaro – places still bright
>
> As the tears in our eyes
> Recalling how good
> And welcome we felt there.

Remembering the Sahel sustains the poet as it did when he was there, back then for fighting and now for writing:

remember
Armies of ghostly killers
On all night marches?
Sahel, I march again.

I don't forget
Your trenches in my head.

When the poet addresses these trenches in the second person and by name – 'Hal-hal, Arag, Nakfa, / You buried our dead' – the places answering him through a kind of physical language of things (albeit it invoked through the poet's art) –

rocks, caves and trees,
Where we hid in the shade…
berries…
your bed
Of sand and the juicy flesh
Of your prickly pears….

– further transform themselves into his hearing the dead themselves speak again: 'We hear them in your names'. Yet the names call forth the flesh, the sensual, and the delicious. Ironically in a poem beginning with the challenging question, 'Who could forget the war', a synthesis of place names and natural beauty provide a feeling of redemption, an encompassing sense of benevolence and eternal Eros:

Arwhe, Shagla, Kisra,
We lived under your care

And still see your herds grazing
With ostrich and gazelle
In the wild pastures.
Emhamime, Zara
Qabrwaat, we felt secure

Young and brave in your arms,
Fed on your love….

The harsh question that opens the poem remains: 'Who could forget the war?' Opening a poem that stresses the physical, albeit difficult, beauty of the Sahel, such a question bleeds into what may be an even greater theme: *Et in arcadia ego*. The Latin phrase translates, 'I am in Arcadia, too', with 'Arcadia' signifying

a kind of imagined, rural, perfectly rustic if naturally elegant paradise. Spoken by a personified figure of death or inscribed on a tomb amidst a scene of pastoral beauty, the phrase also functions as a *memento mori*, a reminder that mortality is everywhere and inevitable, human or natural beauty notwithstanding. The idealization of nature as a response to the pain of irrecoverable loss and death is a poetic convention. Pastoral elegy is a poetic form to commemorate someone in particular in this way. 'Lamentation', 'If He Came Back' and 'Who Said Merhawi Is Dead' all employ varying elements and degrees of pastoral elegy. Nonetheless, Netabay immediately qualifies his vision of a redemptive and restorative natural world of Sahel with his starkest memory of all: 'How we chose to bury / Our friends with no ceremony / And no shroud…'. From the beginning of *Genesis*, a kind of poetic rule has been that the greater and more ideal the natural world, the greater the poet's sense of loss and death, as both conditions – beauty and death, or some would say love and death – feed each other. In this respect, Netabay's experience and memory of the intense pain and suffering of the Eritrean armed struggle which took place in the Sahel can account for his ultimate poetic testimony to the region's beauty: 'to write / The names again'. The supreme irony of 'Remembering Sahel' is that, although the occasion of the poem is the war that was fought there and the widespread death that resulted, the poet finds it beautiful and through the artifice of his verse all but timeless.

Netabay's conclusion about the places in the Sahel – that sustain him during the war and inspire him to this day to believe 'They showed us destiny' – looks backwards and forwards in both his nation's and his personal history. Although his poem claims that he has 'never left', clearly he has, as a hardworking and successful journalist and editor in contemporary Asmara. Moreover, his experience of Sahel functions, in the famous phrase from St. Paul in chapter thirteen in his first letter to the Corinthians, as a kind of glass through which he sees the world 'darkly', that is, imperfectly and through its unredeemable pain and suffering on both an individual and social level.

More generally, the war itself functions similarly for most Eritrean poets, albeit it to varying degrees, with poets who focus on war and little else writing about it most 'darkly' perhaps, and poets who juxtapose moments of war and peace letting in a little more light to their work. Yet even Eritrean poets whose work does not explicitly describe or engage the war can still, like poets anywhere, 'see…darkly'. However, at the same time they also see – as if recalling that St. Paul's conclusion emerges directly from his even more powerful musing on the nature of love – a lyrical continuum or ode-like interplay of turn and counterturn, praise and blame, gain and loss in a kind of dance: where love

'Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things' and never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away' (*Corinthians* I.13.7-8).

With the war as a kind of starting point or inescapable given for contemporary Eritrean poets, they can be measured by how far they can or cannot get away from it, although without any implication that such a distance or lack thereof determines the degree of literary accomplishment or anything except the clear differences among them. If subjects of war and peace in contemporary Eritrean poetry do comprise a kind of spectrum, with poems that focus almost exclusively on war at one end, poems seemingly oblivious to war at the other end, and most poems falling somewhere in between, this third category of poems still contains its own variations: ranging from clear to not so clear depictions and echoes of war and peace and suggesting that the human condition cannot embrace one without the other, even as war and peace are locked in their own embrace.

Yet as writing of war and peace that seems to embrace both conditions more closely than poetry seemingly written in or close to the field and heat of battle, elegies as well as poems cast as memories of war seek either to contrast or to decrease the degree of its explicitness while maintaining that the great ache of the human heart is precisely its lack of peace. Such poems seek refuge in a kind of philosophical attitude to war. Poets who exemplify such an attitude, although again to varying degrees, include Ghirmai Ghebremeskel in Tigrinya, and in Arabic Ahmed Mohammed Saad and Ahmed Omer Sheikh – whose work still portrays the military conflict. Meles Negusse and Angessom Isaak, also in Tigrinya, barely allude to it, although both poets clearly react to and their poems seem determined by the terrible violence these poets have witnessed. Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis, who also writes in Tigrinya, internalises the war, conflating it with her inner being and finding the two so closely connected that war, quite literally, becomes her shadow.

Born in 1948, Ghirmai Ghebremeskel is a writer and critic. Editor of *Mezmur Tegadalay* (1992), the first anthology ever published of Eritrean poetry, he wrote extensively during the independence struggle and after and has served as Chief Executive of the Eritrean Civil Service Administration (CSA). 'A Candle for the Darkness' first appeared in 1988 and is from the same anthology.

Ghirmai Ghebremeskel's 'A Candle in the Darkness' begins with war's absurdity and near madness, fomenting a kind of hysterical desire to be a part of it. He begins by challenging a volunteer: 'Fight for freedom? / You want to fight for freedom / Because you love this country…?' The poet's incredulity at

the paradox of a deliberate decision to fight for peace is clearly audible, except to the volunteer who, drunk on his or her idealism, 'only want[s] to drink freedom'. The poem's skeptical, opening lines imply a back-story in which the poet becomes more and more impatient with the war fever all around him and for which the poem is an outlet. Yet with disturbing honesty and incisive maturity, the poet also can no more provide an alternative to fighting than he can a weapon or gear for protection. Instead he says, sounding either hopelessly romantic or like a fool in Shakespeare,

> Accept this candle and go.
> It is freedom and its promise,
>
> All you need to see,
> The only light
> And enough to keep you warm.

How is one to respond properly to such a stark gesture? Like a poet of force and force only, if only at this stage of the poem, Ghebremeskel wants his young volunteer to have no illusions about the darkness and cold of the world of war that he or she is about to enter and, even worse, perhaps, about a soldier's primary purpose where

> every day
> Is nothing but death
> And more death,
> Hunger and more hunger,
> War and more war,
>
> And you add to it,
> Because you're strong….

Nevertheless, addressing the young soldier with a transformation of the expansive idealism of wanting 'to fight for freedom / Because you love this country / And live to see it free' into the coldest darkness with only a 'candle' and 'its light', yet likening the candle to the soldier '[s]acrificing yourself… / Standing straight and tall', the poet knows that his most important role is neither to doubt, frighten nor disillusion the recruit. He or she can even be 'warmed to the heart' and inspired by such a seemingly impossibly bleak situation. Ghebremeskel wants more than a poem of force to compel his young fighter, however great and necessary the heat of battle and gratifying his or her violent action, to

> ask…why
> The murder

And mutilation
Of children
And anything alive?

The utterance of such a question would be inconceivable for Adem's 'Invincible', Drar's 'Merhawi' or Kajerai's repeated self-satisfied poetic acts of homage to military martyrdom. But Ghebremeskel, like Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani) at the beginning of his 'Letter from Aliet', returns to the paradox of fighting for peace because otherwise he can only imagine,

a world
With no birdsong
And no fragrant flowers
To attract the bees.

A similar thought immediately provoked El-Sheikh (Madani) to get on with the battle of Barentu, but Ghebremeskel's poem wants none of it and not a moment more of being

haunted
By devils and death
In the shadows,
Even scaring the angels.

Contrary to the individual heroism that a soldier or a poet bent on war and nothing but, albeit necessary and noble, would recognise in a candle in the darkness, this small light in Ghebremeskel begins to swell into an astonishing vision of peace, powerfully particularised and not at all as vague and idealistic as what the volunteer imagines at the beginning of the poem. Instead of the candle showing the poet how to fight and maybe survive, it reveals 'Days when the horror / Will end' and 'When the bees / Will dance of out the blossoms / With their honey…'. Ghebremeskel envisions a kind of natural paradise of peace. It is also prophetic and supernatural, echoing the beginning of the Gospel of John, as Eritrea's

future like a candle
Comes out of the darkness
And lights up the horizon
Brimming with people:

reminiscent of the divine light out of the darkness symbolizing the birth of Christ yet also, as already noted, anticipating the candlelight procession of Eritreans commemorating on Martyr's Day every June 20th those who died in the war. Most astonishing, perhaps, Ghebremeskel's candle illuminates an

Eritrea 'restoring, adoring / And rejoicing' and where 'life itself will breathe, / Normal again' – a poetic vision, however rooted in war, as remote as possible from a poetry of force and violence.

Writing in Arabic, Ahmed Mohammed Saad and Ahmed Omer Sheikh also focus on the light that leads them out of war and to peace, respectively a torch at dawn and the stars. Like Ghebremeskel, they take a full look at the worst of war but, unlike Adem or Kajerai, they see brightness and both personal and national salvation beyond it.

Born in 1945 and recognised as the first serious Eritrean poet in Arabic**,** Ahmed Mohammed Saad worked briefly in Libya after finishing a degree in agricultural engineering at Cairo University and before he died in a car accident in 1978. 'For the Tired' is from a collection of his poetry and plays, *Asheq Eritrea*, published posthumously in Beirut in the 1980s.

Saad's 'For the Tired' opens on a war weary note, forlorn and formulaically repeating that 'the adoring, 'our children' and 'the road builders' 'stranded outside' might think but cannot physically join him in simply saying that 'Freedom and my country / Make me love who I am'. His stark and fervent declaration of self-identity is, nevertheless, muted because he is alone, as if there is no one left to join him in a great feast once looked forward to by all. The poet 'burn[s] like a torch' but neither to wreak death and destruction nor to fight until his inevitable martyrdom. Instead, addressing his 'Dear friends', he yearns for their warm embrace, 'wrapped close in…[their] arms' with his

> flag on its lance
> Flying…
> high
> Amidst the harmony
> And pulse of … [their] voices.

Saad's being so firmly set on such a prospect leads him to offer a merely general description of the war, 'We have suffered too long', as if he simply doesn't want to go into it any more specifically, 'letting go of all the misery'. Saad's 'For the Tired' leaves war behind as a kind of foregone conclusion. The poet would apply war's rhetoric and its typical behavior – 'Fearing no one // And unrelenting / In resistance and marching' – in a different sphere. The 'tired' of the poem's title implies being 'tired' of war and its 'pain / Of humiliation, prison and chains'. A new energy and a new order can only be found in 'building the road' and making peace – a simple wish but, in light of the dominance of war in contemporary Eritrean poetry, a difficult desire to express and, moreover, even more difficult to achieve if few or none are left to help. Saad's refusal to be in denial about the war and its aftermath seems vital to any kind of peace he can imagine or even someday live.

A more ambitious, challenging poem, Ahmed Omer Sheikh's 'A Song from the Coast' expresses a similar faith in peace as the final outcome, although it is nowhere in sight and merely, as in St. Paul's famous definition of the virtue of faith, 'the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (*Hebrews* 11:1), and to be severely tested at that. The poem also functions as a kind of contemporary rewrite, in an Eritrean context, of a notable passage in *Genesis*, when God 'brought forth' Abraham 'and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be' (15.5).

Born in 1966, Ahmed Omer Sheikh is a poet, novelist and journalist. With a degree in Economics and Public Administration from King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia, he has worked in the Arabic section of Eritrean radio and television since 1992. Author of three novels – *Nurai* (1997), *Alashria* (1999) and *Ahzan Almatar* (2001) – and three books of poetry – *Heen lem Yaad Algareeb* (1993), *Tefaseel Emrah Khadima mien Alsudan* (1994) and *Rakset Alteyour* (2003) – he has won many national and international prizes, including the Raimok award for Arabic literature in 1995 and 1997. The poem 'A Song from the Coast', which first appeared in 1989, is from his first poetry book, *Heen lem Yaad Algareeb*.

'A Song from the Coast' begins,

> Listen closely. Look up.
> Do you hallucinate
> That the stars are dropping
> Out of the pockets of the night
>
> Or that your rage
> Upsets the universe?

The poem unfolds boldly to wonder and ask, like Abraham in *Genesis* when Yahweh takes him out into the desert and promises the patriarch descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sands at his feet, 'whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?' (15.8). Imagining and dreaming that someday he will live in a free Eritrea, the poet equates its current insubstantiality and his own mortality – 'Thinning like clouds, we age / And die' – as definitive. Nevertheless, with the voice of the almighty notably absent, only the act of poetry lets Sheikh see more, providing the poet with a kind of mystical apprehension again like Abraham's only more visceral:

> Beyond the threshold
> Contained in stanzas
> Of a poem so bold

It reels hearing the hum

Of the gleaming stars
Coursing in its blood.

Bold, romantic and metaphysical, Sheikh's intimations of Eritrea vanish as quickly as they appear. The poem radically, almost manically shifts back and forth between faith and scepticism. When the poet exclaims, 'if I could see more / Let it be my country', again he seems to echo *Genesis* again, only this time the biblical book's first chapter and not the story of Abraham. 'Let it be my country' echoes the creation itself: 'Let there be light….the firmament…. the waters….the dry land' (I.3-10). As God's word can be imagined creating the universe, so can the poet's work be imagined creating Eritrea.

However, other than in such a poetic utterance, Eritrea does not exist, and Sheikh subjects his own imaginings to the same withering scepticism with which he treats his imaginary companion at the beginning of the poem. The poet also holds back from imagining any Eritrea that might be or might have been, as in the first and second chapters of *Genesis*, a paradise. Any imagined connection or sympathy between the desires of the human psyche and the sky – in this case, the national aspirations expressed by the poet and political reality – can only be 'dreaming' and 'nothing' or 'Just another hallucination'. Barely imagining even 'the threshold / Of a future for my country', much less a modern state, the poem and its fantasy about an Eritrea that is more than a matter of faith feel like 'wind in a palm tree – / Restless, stirring, wandering // And lost in the wilderness'. 'The wilderness', of course, recalls the Moses of *Exodus* yet also the trials of Mohammed between Medina and Mecca as well as Jesus in the desert. Furthermore, such lines deliberately, one might almost say self-consciously since the poet has made himself the main character of his 'Song', describe the condition of Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed before their eventual triumph. Sheikh's secular and political re-writing of this condition in terms of the Eritrean revolution renders the 'voice' of the fighter – belonging to the companion at the poem's outset and the poet – as powerful as the voice of the 'Lord God' early in *Genesis*. The poet's expression can be nothing but a matter of faith, but the 'rage' provoked by its being only that and nothing as substantial as a country or even a military victory summons what seems like a kind of anti-creation to rectify the injustice of the first that would not allow for an Eritrean state.

To conclude 'Song from the Coast', Sheikh resorts to the language of the scriptural creation once more, only now it invokes not the creation but the anti-creation of his country – the refusal to let Eritrean nationalism have its way.

The poet cries out: 'Let the rage / Burn through your wounds. / Fight for what you've lost…'. The word 'lost' establishes the cause of Eritrean nationalism as part of a pre-established order, like the seed of Abraham, evoked in the poem's beginning as well as 'in the beginning' of *Genesis*. But even pre-established, almost as if in some kind of divine, at least revolutionary act of creation, the vision of a free Eritrea still seems almost hopelessly tenuous. Thus, in the end disarmingly honest, 'A Song from the Coast' argues that all a poet can do is 'find the voice to bring it back' and urge others to do the same, be they poets of force or merely imagining 'the threshold / Of a future'. The poet knows that the creation in the beginning of *Genesis* like the dream of an independent Eritrean state can at first only be an audible, one might say oral experience – acknowledging with due respect the oral tradition that precedes *Genesis* as well as contemporary Eritrean written poetry – and 'not seen'. Thus the first sentence of 'A Song from the Coast', 'Listen closely', becomes more than a command to 'pay attention', offering the only sure way the poet knows to create and fight for an independent Eritrea. The second sentence, 'Look up' goes on to suggest that one can look up, down or sideways all one wants, but without the poet's and the fighter's 'voice' first, the Eritrean cause is hopeless. Moreover, precisely such an absolute conclusion about the vital work that the poet and the fighter perform in the birth and survival of the state of Eritrea makes 'A Song from the Coast' an apt choice as the final poem providing the last word in *Who Needs a Story*: 'Fight for what you've lost / And find the voice to bring it back'.

In a poem called 'Freedom's Colors', the Tigrinya poet Angessom Isaak is at a 'threshold' similar to Ahmed Omer Sheikh's, and then he steps over it.

Born in 1963, Angessom Isaak is a poet and short story writer. Public relations and coordinating officer at the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the PFDJ, he has published three books: *Sewerti Biet Mahbus* (1987), *Belay Shida* (1992) and *Zinededet Kara* (with Michael Berhe and Ghirmai Yohannes) (2000). 'Freedom's Colors' first appeared in 1996 and is from an unpublished book of poetry.

Isaak begins where Ghirmai Ghebremeskel's 'A Candle for the Darkness' leaves off, amidst a rapturous and mystical vision of light:

> I saw a color
> Unbelievably bright
> And like a powerful wind
> Encompassing the sky
> And pouring freedom
> All around me.

However, while Ghebremeskel's vision is 'brimming with people', Isaak

finds himself alone, resembling Ahmed Mohammed Saad in 'For the Tired', but with a lot more energy and hope, at least at the start. Also, whereas Ghebremeskel envisions the brightest of futures, Isaak is remembering the past that in comparison resembles 'The one and only true / Color of freedom'. The poet claims,

> I never saw such white,
> Such red like blood,
> Yellow to pale all yellows
> And blue beyond God's grace.

With the 'white' as a kind of backdrop, by adding green, the poet creates a blindingly bright vision momentarily revealing three of the four colours of the Eritrean flag, but then it fades before the addition of green to the '[c]olor of freedom' can be fully realized as Eritrean.

Unequivocally observing that 'Freedom shines less now', the poet sees trouble in paradise and even fears it may be lost or, as Ahmed Omer Sheikh worries in 'A Song from the Coast', 'just another hallucination'. Isaak's vision of the past gives way to a present in which 'The colors run into each other' and he 'can't see one color alone'. The romantic poet-fighter caught up in a communal vision of struggle and victory in Eritrea's struggle for independence crosses the 'threshold' of Eritrea's birth as a nation not in the future but in the present: the 'threshold' in which he becomes a private citizen. Indeed, all poets who meditate on the realities of war and peace – and neither one exclusively nor too idealistically – must cross or at least face a similar 'threshold'.

'Freedom's Colors' stands as one of Eritrea's greatest post-war poems for its personal and powerful expression of doubt: self-doubt on the part of the poet as well as doubt in what the Eritrean victory has accomplished. 'Never could I have imagined', the poet admits with disarming honesty, 'My vision ending like this: black, / Blacker than a crow's eye'. Past and present, expansive brightness and fearfully confined and concentrated darkness turn and counterturn, manically reversing one another yet again leaving the poet alone with his own vision. At this point, ironically with the Eritrean struggle having ended in victory, Isaak might even be imagined as repeating the self-admonition of Isayas Tsegai in his poem that similarly counterpoints a happy past and a very sad (sadder than Isaak's) present: 'Clenching my teeth, I had to tell myself. / *I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean*'. For Isaak, however, bravery in a new, post-war political light can be realised precisely through doubt and an honest questioning of self and country: a kind of luxury that war and the battlefield could not afford or, perhaps, inspire. Such a stance also calls into question the viability or

usefulness of the individual romantic poet caught up in astonishing visionary moments and translated into rapturous language about the brightest of futures. Nevertheless, Isaak now sees the poet in the Eritrean present speaking to the people not from the privileged vantage point of nationalistic prophet but as no more nor less than any of them in his concern '[t]o survive'.

Shedding the role he has at the beginning of the poem, the poet becomes more content in addressing the frustrated and humbling realities of the present rather than the wild and heroic expectations of the past. Wondering why his vision of Eritrea changes, he becomes more honest than ever, answering 'I don't know why'. Not knowing rather than knowing inspires him to go on: confronting the riddle rather than pretending to know the answer; 'Whether my vision has changed / Or if I have become smarter – / Again I don't know'. At this point, the reader knows what the poet implies: his new way to see, to know, to 'experience freedom' is smarter than the way he thought before. Freedom becomes real and everyday instead of idealised and imaginary – not mere romance or infatuation but tried and, therefore, true love. No longer seeing 'Freedom in one color only', the visionary poet matures into a truer poet of the people than he was before. He must reflect what he sees among them rather than only what he dreams. He openly admits, as if adopting John Keats's formulation about the creature that as a poet he feels himself most like, 'I roll my eyes like a chameleon, / Becoming whatever I see'. Keats wrote, 'What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.' The poetic achievement of 'Freedom's Colors' reveals no absence of artistic delight in contemplating the nature of freedom and democracy in contemporary post-independence Eritrea, notwithstanding that the viewpoint is distinctly that of the poet and not the 'virtuous philosopher,' be he or she – to imagine their updated version – an Eritrean ruling party or an opposition critic. Isaak's poem reveals a profound awareness that 'they both end in speculation' and that the poet in his work is more concerned, to cite yet another of Keats's poetic dictums, that '"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' Yet again recalling St. Paul's famous writing about love in chapter thirteen of his first epistle to the Corinthians, a reader sees a poet who at the beginning of 'Freedom's Colors' seems to think and speak 'as a child' but who now, seeing 'through a glass' – or more poetically, a 'crow's eye' – 'darkly', sees more, 'more than one color'. Driven by reality out of his idealization and 'hallucination' of Eritrea as a political paradise and finding 'freedom / as more colors than

one', the poet finds 'More than I have ever seen, / More than I have ever heard, / And more than I can explain'. He sees a wide and complex world of experience and human history defying innocence and certainty and 'more' than 'one' person, 'color', system or revolution. 'Freedom's Colors' crosses 'the threshold / Of a future', in the words of Ahmed Omer Sheikh, into a kind of universal human condition, containing war and peace, certainty and doubt, and reflecting the entire spectrum of colours within the human heart. 'One' anything is impossibly narrow in comparison, except for the writer who, like Isaak in 'Freedom's Colors', admits this condition and who finds his or her ultimate 'freedom' and inspiration in addressing it.

The unique quality of 'Freedom's Colors' is Isaak's dramatization of the process of reaching such a realization. Might he not also have created a kind of template for what freedom fighters from around the world often experience as they must evolve with their nations from winning the war to winning the peace: a kind of manic condition changing from battlefield euphoria to the more practical everyday, protracted and often depressing matters of carving a livelihood and a society out of third world want, poverty and underdevelopment?

Also writing in Tigrinya, Meles Negusse dramatises a condition of transitioning from war to peace, too, in a clearly articulated reaction against the former yet tentative and unsure while desiring 'the threshold' of the latter. Negusse's 'We Miss You, Mammet' addresses the traditional Eritrean muse of poetry with the question of not merely how to survive – as in war – but how to live and even to write in peace.

Born in 1975, Meles Negusse is a poet and journalist. Nominee in the 2001 Raimok competition, Eritrea's highest award for literature, for his writing in Tigrinya, he studied psychology at the University of Asmara. 'We Miss You, Mammet' first appeared in 2000. In 2008, he published a book of poetry titled *Zelo eyu Zhlu*.

Another poem by Negusse, 'Wild Animals' seeks to reverse the traditional roles of the country and the city in pastoral, wondering if the city is more likely to provide real peace than the country. Both poems like Isaak's 'Freedom's Colors' dramatise the process of crossing over from conditions of war to peace for the most part dictating the material and psychological reality of the human condition, although never implying that the spirit of war and peace do not always persist and, perhaps, coexist, particularly in the human heart. A poet like Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis similarly dramatises such a transition by focusing exclusively on the human heart or psyche – particularly her own. Obviously contemporary poets of Eritrea who write without addressing or alluding to its

armed struggle for independence or war in general have no such dramatization to offer, other than on a general and universal human level of human emotion responding to everyday events. Yet all of these poets ultimately pursue, unlike poets of unmitigated war and force, a similar end when, in Ghebremeskel's words, 'life itself will breathe, / Normal again'.

Meles Negusse at first envisions the '[n]ormal' in 'We Miss You, Mammet' by addressing the traditional muse of Eritrean poetry, Mammet, as if she is gone: 'Mammet, where are you?' – a normal question for any poet anywhere wanting but unable to write without his or her muse. The poet misses, again ideally imagining the past, how the muse's

> rhythms
> Balanced truth and beauty
> In the word of a thousand songs
> Pulsing in and out of…

her 'And containing love so strong / It mastered…art'. Moreover, the poetic convention of the missing muse also typically exemplifies a blighted world, although not necessarily as nationalistically as in Negusse's poem.

For Negusse, invoking the memory and the name of Mammet functions a little like Tsegai's mantra for survival, '*I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean'.* However, specifically concerned with the survival of Eritrean poetry, its identification with the survival of Eritrea itself renders the muse's idealization not as imaginary, antiquarian or quaint as it might at first seem. Contemporary Eritrean poets of war and peace seem to uphold a meliorist perspective, believing that only a full look at the worst can allow for improvement. Negusse's strong faith in the power of Mammet, absent and invisible as she he is, stems from the war-devastated Eritrean present, particularly in the countryside, the traditional locale of Mammet's pastoral world: 'Among the hills and cliffs' that she 'ruled with…[her] poetry'. Invoking the power of the pastoral frequently in his work, at the same time Negusse either laments its passing or delineates to the point of justifying its demise.

Most of 'We Miss You, Mammet' describes the devastation of the Eritrean landscape and psyche through the lens of the death of Mammet, declared 'buried / And rest[ing] in peace, only / To inspire heaven'. The fact, however, that the poem is still being written and, furthermore, that the art of poetry has thrived in Eritrea despite its devastation by war makes the poem ironic and paradoxical. For a poet to claim that 'writers waste away / To nothing, silenced / … forever' while the evidence reveals not merely the survival but the remarkable strength of contemporary Eritrean poetry, including Negusse's

poetry, suggests he or she has a healthy ego. More significantly, Negusse can be seen readily to readily the spirit of the Eritrean struggle as a whole, especially concerning its poets whom, as already noted, are simultaneously fighters and writers. Thus, only seeming to be about the threatened survival of Eritrean poetry, 'We Miss You, Mammet' charts instead the great lengths Eritrean poets go not merely to survive but to thrive. Taking a full look at the worst around them, Eritrea's poets of force as well as its poets of war and peace from Tsegai to Negusse write with a maximum not a minimum of material for poetry at hand. Furthermore, they struggle with the conundrum that precisely such a reality, guaranteeing their poetic survival, makes their physical survival tenuous at best. Thus identifying with the spirit of 'Mammet' becomes as much a matter of self-definition as poetic identification. Caught between such extremes of life and of art and vulnerable to the crushing weight of both, the poet's only choice and only way out is the path of 'Mammet'. For a poet, the microcosm of overwhelming death and devastation wrought by Eritrea's armed struggle for independence would be unbearable if 'Mammet…[was] in her grave / Along with her rhymes' and 'Poetry…declared dead'. The poet who fights for his or her art to worthily reflect the calling and inspiration of such a vibrant and all surrounding poetic reality must choose Mammet or nothing. Without her the poet is like a soldier at war without a gun. Yet with her the poet is still at war, too, typified in the radically compressed and surreal image of El-Sheikh's 'gun grown into …[his] shoulder' in 'Letter from Aliet'. 'We Miss You, Mammet' laments the loss of the poet's muse, but poetry for Negusse and his contemporaries is hardly missing. On the contrary, the poem dramatically manifests a thriving Eritrean poetic spirit because it 'crave[s] / Seeing and hearing…[her] again' and 'the mysterious power / Of …[her] voice to return' with a 'sound of joy / To the poetry of today'. Negusse stresses the difficulty in finding this 'voice … // If merely for a moment' and 'feeling … / … forever abandoned', when he cannot hear it for good reason, although the manic low that comes with – before or after – the manic high of poetic composition are universal. Again both the nearly overwhelming threat to a poet's physical survival and the similarly powerful poetic subject matter in the violent context of the Eritrean present can only heighten an endless struggle to keep 'the mysterious power' of poetry alive in one's work. The way that Sheikh in 'A Song from the Coast' dramatises the process of seeing the 'the threshold' and finding his 'voice' and that of a free Eritrea, and as Isaak moves in 'Freedom's Colors' away from the mere idealization and 'hallucination' of Eritrea as a political paradise to finding 'freedom / as more colors than one' – 'More than I ever seen, / More than I have ever heard, / And more than I can

explain – so does Negusse's 'We Miss You, Mammet' dramatise being driven beyond a poet's ultimate devastation – 'wast[ing] away / To nothing, silenced' – 'for the sake of art'. Negusse returns to a formal invocation of the muse unlike most contemporary poets based on his individual attraction to the pastoral yet also out of the extreme circumstances – in life and art – that contemporary Eritrean poets must confront. Any poet addressing his or her muse might write, 'You can fall from the sky, / …and open our hearts / With your secret poetry's sacred key'. Negusse's unique power is in remembering and once again saying his muse's Eritrean name, 'Mammet', and in tracing the extraordinary distance between her heights and his depths. Connecting – or is it reconnecting? – such a traditional, literary historical figure as Mammet with the immediate present of contemporary Eritrean practice makes 'We Miss You, Mammet' a good choice to be the inaugural poem in *Who Needs a Story*.

A similar if more playful distance and contrast distinguishes Negusse's 'Wild Animals', an inversion of pastoral convention in which rural or simple, country life offers a kind peace and tranquility that the city or civilization cannot and even denies. Moreover, Negusse's poem invites the animals to 'Forget your jungle / And come to the city'. As in 'Mammet', once more the harsh realities of war spur the act of writing and what it depicts. The poem begins with panicking animals and the poet asking two questions: 'What are you running away from? / Where would you like to be?'

The answer to the first question conforms not to a pastoral nature but to a 'state of nature' where life is, in the words of Thomas Hobbes from his masterpiece, *Leviathan*, 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short': a nature where 'Not even one bush remains', with constant 'thunder / And the ground always shaking', 'mines instead of trees', and 'sulfur' instead of 'the breath of freedom'. Yet in Negusse's pastoral inversion, 'man' is 'wild' instead of the animals. He 'live[s] the way…[they] used to / But not any more'. His law of the jungle has replaced a peaceable kingdom of pastoral freedom with 'Sniffing blood' and 'Eating his own kind / Dead or alive'. The animals are 'running away from' the worst animal of all: man.

Negusse's pastoral inversion locates true pastoral in the city. In this, perhaps, he punctures the illusion of pastoral, since it is nearly always created by urbane and sophisticated poets of the city as a kind of psychological and imaginary ideal that real and not imaginary life in the country or anywhere else cannot, of course, resemble. In short, pastoral is an invention of civilization that has left behind its natural innocence, be it as in the beginning of *Genesis* – a composition from the time of the political rule of David and Solomon or the later rule of

the more priestly political class – or the images of the ideal natural world in Shakespearean plays like *As You Like It, The Winter's Tale* or *The Tempest*. One might even say that in locating his pastoral in the city, Negusse is disarmingly honest. Yet he measures and dramatises his ideal city's distance from the 'jungle' of man if not of the animals according to 'The comforts of civilization' that 'No one should be denied' – 'Young or old, women or men'; that not even an animal should be without.

Ironically, the poet of 'Wild Animals' despite his urbanity – the original impulse of all pastoral poets, their gestures towards simplicity notwithstanding, since they must be learnt and skilled in the technical aspects of their artifice – is also an Eritrean fighter who must be accomplished at '[s]niffing blood' and war if *he* is to survive. Furthermore, his replacement or inversion of the pastoral country with the city merely imagines where he would like to be in the guise of offering it to animals because the real 'wild animals', people, including the poet, have abandoned it for the Eritrean armed struggle quite literally 'in the field'. In 'Wild Animals' Negusse longs for a peaceful city, perhaps like Asmara or Keren with all their 'comforts', the way that he misses Mammet: even in the same place, 'Among the hills and cliffs' where 'Not a single riff / Of …[her] melodies remain'.

Yet the animals resemble masks when what the poet and his people seeming to resemble them in their actual not pastoral capacity for violence really need is to 'Leave …[their] fear outside' and give up the Hobbesian 'war of every man / Against every man' that truly 'belongs / in the jungle'. The question is how. The poet of force has no answer because he cannot really see it. The poet of war and peace similarly might not see it, but at least he or she imagines it as a possibility. However vast the gulf between such a brutish wartime reality and imagining something more, contemporary Eritrean poets like Isayas Tsegai, Solomon Tsehaye, Angessom Isaak, Ribka Sibhatu, Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis, Fessehaye Yohannes, Ghirmai Ghebremeskel, Paulos Netabay, Reesom Haile, Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani), Ahmed Mohammed Saad and Ahmed Omer Sheikh, in the words of Meles Negusse, 'Take the leap', although none, perhaps, with his distinct charm:

> Hey, tiger and deer,
> Try a little peace.
> Lion, lose the roar.
> You can rule with justice.
>
> Snake, you don't have to bite
> The dove when you kiss.
> And fox, forget the deceit
> When you talk with the rabbit.

Meles Negusse expresses an abiding faith, despite the horrors of war, that there will come a day when 'the gate opens' to 'the city' where 'we all get along'. While the desire for this and the prevailing conditions against it are hardly unique to Eritrea, it presents extremely harsh conditions and repeatedly powerful poetic utterance to imagine if not actually to see a 'change…[that] will be good'.

Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis ultimately cannot imagine such a change without first seeing it not 'in the field' or in the city but in her own self. Refusing to indulge in any poetic idealization of the country or the city, or even of conditions of war and peace, she has one battlefield and one battlefield only, and she carries it in herself: her psyche.

Born in 1978, Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis is one of Eritrea's most promising, young poets. She wrote her poem, 'Help Us Agree' in 2001, and she has an unpublished collection, *Ejam* (meaning "Share").

Dramatizing the gulf and the contrast between war and peace, poetry and painful silence, 'the comforts of civilization' and its profound and violent discontents in her own individual psyche, Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis finds such polarities to be as familiar and, perhaps, as necessary as her shadow. She cannot escape them, but she asks if they must destroy her. With her survival sounding even more tenuous than Negusse's 'Mammet' or his wild animals, her question leaves her at a personal 'threshold', if not of the birth of an Eritrean nation then the birth of an Eritrean citizen, rather like what Isaak imagined – as the 'colors run into each other' and he 'roll[s] his eyes like a chameleon' – trying to survive despite any personal or political demons generated by life in a nearly constant state of war. Any explicit mention of Eritrea's armed struggle neither spurs nor even appears in 'Help Us Agree'. Her struggle is psychological and existential. Nor is she armed – except with her intense powers of introspection. However, she is hardly a poet of peace or someone who writes as if the war has not happened. On the contrary, a kind of inner violence stalks her work akin to the power of Emily Dickinson's dire meditations on self. Psychomachia or spiritual warfare is her subject.

In 'Help Us Agree', Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis strikes the rarest of private notes in Eritrean poetry. Since poetry is a very public art, widely practiced and appreciated in Eritrea, most poems feature less private and less embarrassing, frankly insecure moments than her portrayal of someone engaged for an existential moment of reflection on her shadow. Yet she is a young writer trying to address independence for the individual as well as for the nation. Moreover, 'Help Us Agree' might be read as not merely a personal statement, since it can

function as a powerfully clear allegory about the conflict between individual freedom and national priorities, even in democracies. More extremely than in 'Freedom's Colors', the poet's awareness of freedom brings with it a feeling of dread and anxiety. Yet precisely such existentialist honesty carries one over 'the threshold' of peace and beyond the momentary, naïve elation of believing in 'one…true / Color of freedom', in Isaak's words, into a country and a world there true peace is not a romantic or rhetorical imperative but an everyday situation of being '[n]ormal again'; yet where, in words often attributed to Socrates, an unexamined life is not worth living. In this last respect, moreover, Ghebreghiorgis's life and as she conducts it in the poem seem eminently worth living, but the equally powerful tension of the poem is that she is not so sure.

Ghebreghiorgis suggests that peace might be entertained as a metaphysical reality, but physically, even literally, it seems impossible. She posits the existence of peace as a personal not a political question, although again the latter can be implied. The struggle of the individual soul with itself and what it perceives and ultimately with mortality renders true peace a mere hope. Dickinson lyrically deemed it 'The thing with feathers / That perches in the soul… / And never stops at all'. More orthodox, perhaps, hope for Ghebreghiorgis conforms to St. Paul's negative definition: 'Hope that is seen is not hope' (*Romans*, 8:24). Not only does Ghebreghiorgis not see it; her poem illustrates the question with which Paul directly follows his negative characterization of hope: 'for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?' Looking into her self as well as at the world around her, all she sees is strife. Not merely Socratic in her perspective, she is like Heraclitus, maintaining that discord, division and change are the natural conditions of the universe. She has no illusions, as Ahmed Omer Sheikh phrased them, that she can either 'Look up' and see 'the stars' sympathetically 'dropping / Out of the pockets of the night' or think that her 'rage / Upsets the universe'. Her first stanza clearly states her position:

> When will my shadow
> And I agree?
> Why won't it obey?
> Whenever I wear colors
> Darkness comes back at me.

A colourful shadow might not be an absolute impossibility, but only the manipulation of light can manage such an illusion, and Ghebreghiorgis wants none of it, especially to bleach out her sharp, self-afflicting wit. Nor does she deny the 'Darkness', although she questions it and sees it as emblematic of an inevitable 'a tug of war' besetting anything she can see or imagine. She suffers a

dialectic imagination amidst the Eritrean landscape with a vengeance. In 'Help Us Agree', even the '[n]ormal', with all the extra value it represents within the Eritrean context of war and struggle – and here Ghebreghiorgis would agree with Ghebremeskel, as suggested by her anguished state – inevitably 'slips into weird'. One might wonder if Ghebreghiorgis becomes too weird or obsessive in her seeing division and two conflicting sides even between 'Back or stomach, / Travel or road, / Field or river'. They may be 'never separate', but must they always represent 'opposing views', philosophically if not literally speaking? Cannot the back and stomach or the traveler and road work together? How can 'Help Us Agree' be more than a poem about someone who is merely afraid of her own shadow? Precisely here the poem reveals the poet with a mindset of war and force that cannot be escaped. It distracts or undermines and ruins what might otherwise seem perfectly '[n]ormal' to a soul, perhaps even to a country at peace. Shell shock, battle fatigue, post-shock traumatic syndrome, even panic and anxiety attack are medical terms to describe such a state of mind, but they also describe the mood of such a poem – addled, and for all too good a reason. Nevertheless, by objectifying such a condition, the poem offers a negative example with an urgency of expression of how to get beyond such an individual or national state of mind. Unfortunately, for the poet it has become natural, rooted deep in her nature: a nature like what Negusse described as not even fit for animals, although seemingly craved by humans in our near endless and ubiquitous wars: 'trading…sulfur / For the breath of freedom…./ Sniffing blood' and 'Eating…[our] own kind / Dead or alive'. In the world of Ghebreghiorgis, all things clash and 'fight like gun and knife / Until neither wins'. Such images clash and crash like metal striking metal yet to little effect. Conflict is constant, leaving the poet 'Always tied to darkness'. The poet's obtaining 'any rest' is as unlikely as her not having a shadow. Her mindset of war transforms what under '[n]ormal' conditions would be peaceful and consoling – 'hearing the waves and shore' – into yet another source of angst, 'As if they accuse each other'.

A poet of force and war – like Adem, Drar, Michael or Kajerai – can accept and even thrive in such a conflicted state that even the shore and the sea embody a perpetual struggle. Can she find an alternative or must this poet of war and peace accept such a struggle? 'Help Us Agree' is her statement that she simply cannot know. The poet asks 'Should I pray for my shadow and me / To try to agree', but her uncertainty merely in asking the question provides the answer. The poet's colours and her shadow's 'Darkness' can never be one and the same. Her only other alternative is 'simply [to] continue / This blind, sad battle' – 'blind' because she cannot see and does not know what she is constantly fighting beyond her own darkness, be it her self or her shadow. Nevertheless,

for the poet or anyone not to be 'Always tied to darkness' and a shadow means they are no longer alive in their body. Any living body, happy or unhappy, must cast and be connected to its shadow. Still, the poet asks one more question as her poem ends, and again something that, for her at least, does not allow an answer: is there any 'hope / That I will be redeemed / Before I fade away?' It is a thoroughly orthodox concern, although her only real certainty is her poem's simple, minimal artifice, which can only be described as triumphant.

The expression of life as a shadow echoes profoundly with a spiritual and religious resonance. Eritrea has no obvious mask tradition, unlike many other countries of Africa. Perhaps the waves of invaders who have tried to conquer Eritrea since ancient times have torn off whatever masks there were at one time in the distant past, or perhaps the inhabitants of Eritrea have torn them off for the same reason. Nevertheless, a new nation, Eritrea is an ancient culture. Its ancient language of Ge'ez, shares the same Semitic origins as Hebrew and Arabic. The sacred sense that attaches itself to Jerusalem and Hebrew or Arabic also attaches itself to Asmara, the capital of Eritrea: just as the legend of Sheba, the ancient queen, who bore Solomon's son, Menelik, along a stream near Asmara, and as he, years later, carried the Ark of the Covenant out of Jerusalem to the same area of Africa. Precisely such biblical characters and stories are the oldest masks and roles, bearing the most ancient rites of Eritrea as well as of the various nations and cultures alive today in these lands from which the gods of the Red Sea – of the pre-Christian Axumite empire, Christianity, Byzantium, Persia, the Torah, the Koran and more – emerged. In a similar vein, the Ethiopian poet and playwright, Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin wrote *Collision of Altars*, and he subtitled it, 'A Conflict of the Ancient Red Sea Gods'. The time period for his work was 587-629 AD, yet he contended that 'what is a power struggle today, behind the mask of ideological conflicts, was a power struggle then as now under the cover of religious cultures and political states'. While some contemporary Eritrean poets of war and force thrive in these same gods' darkness, their light lets other Eritrean poets write with war out of sight and out of mind. But contemporary Eritrean poets of war and peace go back and forth between the darkness and light of such gods, and clearly they still come between a poet like Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis and her shadow.

Chapter Four

Peace

Saba Kidane, Beyene Hailemariam, Reesom Haile and Ghirmai Yohannes in Tigrinya, Mohammed Said Osman in Tigre, and Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh in Arabic write as if either Eritrea's armed struggle for independence might never have happened, could be forgotten or, more plausibly, as if it need not affect everything in their lives and determine in large part how they react. Their poems abstain from the foundational myth or genesis of Eritrea at war and focus on what Ghirmai Ghebremeskel envisions in the bloody midst of it: 'life itself' breathing '[n]ormal again' and 'days / When the horror' has come to an end. Instead of wild animals, battlefields, pillaging, countless martyrs, prison camps, executions, graves, universal fear, betrayal, heartlessness, violence for violence's sake, endless struggle, war traumatised children, refugees and despair, these poets, in Angessom Isaak's words, 'experience freedom / as more one than one color' – or more than revolutionary red or death's black – and, unlike Isaak, feel free and able to describe what they see: the everyday realities of a post-war Eritrea yet of many a nation in Africa as well as all over the world. Not that the poetry of a country relatively at peace rather than engaged in war means that life is bliss. On the contrary, contemporary Eritrean poets of war and force can often seem happier or at least more fulfiled in their armed struggle than their counterparts caught up in their struggles to survive in an Eritrea that is finally victorious in war. The struggle remains, but it changes, becoming more domestic, humorous, civil or personal, engaging subjects like raising children, flirting, unwed mothers, computers, national pride without brandishing weapons, immigration, household products, dying but not as a war martyr, sex and even writing itself.

Born in 1978, Saba Kidane is a poet, performer and journalist. Presenter and coordinator of broadcasts on Eritrean television and radio, she also writes for newspapers. 'Growing Up' (2001), 'Go Crazy Over Me' (2001) and 'Your Father' (1999) and 'War and a Woman' (2000) are from an unpublished book of poetry.

A popular poet, Kidane does not merely read her work. Exchanging her contemporary and fashionable clothing for traditional Eritrean woman's dress, she performs her poetry, and the exuberant confidence with which she sketches what she sees in post-war Eritrea – not all of it rosy – makes her a powerful chronicler from a young woman's perspective of everyday events in Eritrea's

urban households and streets. While she also writes about the war in which she has served, she sees children growing older, boys and girls flirting and poor women begging in Asmara's streets as autonomous poetic subjects that need not be tied to or contextualised within explicit nationalistic or political concerns. Her underlying assumption might even be a question that could be profoundly challenging to an Eritrea, as exemplified by poets of force like Drar or Kajerai: why wage or win a war if it cannot subsequently allow for unfettered enjoyment and no self-consciousness, grief or ruefulness when beholding a child growing up or strangers flirting? Her searing portrayal of a poor mother and child begging similarly suggests that, at least as much as casualties of war, casualties of peace deserve the respect of being intrinsically addressed and not as a means to expressing a political or nationalist sentiment.

Kidane's 'Growing Up' might not be deemed a remarkable poem. It registers the signs that a young adolescent is becoming responsible around the house as he gets older. They would be familiar in most any urban or suburban household of modest means worldwide. A mother observes, 'My kid is growing up' because she can

> trust him to baby sit…
> run errands…
> take…messages
> When someone calls
> And…make his own snacks.
> He's getting to be that age –
> Measuring, he knows how much.
> Sometimes he beats me at math….
> He knows what I have to do
> And even takes care of our pets.

Nevertheless, 'Growing Up' is a remarkable poem precisely because it is by a contemporary Eritrean poet, and precisely because war and its effects seem to play little if any role in the narrative. Moreover, the same could be said about most contemporary Eritrean poems in which war plays no role. First, unlike in poems like 'Lamentation', 'The Tithe of War' and 'Abeba', the poet can present as reality a contemporary household of modest means that is relatively thriving – hardly a norm and rarely if ever a possibility during the war. Second, she can depict a child 'growing up' and 'getting older' in a peaceful setting, where she can try to help him with his math homework. While a father's not being present might suggest he has not come home from the war, a mother has come home. Furthermore, she can lead a satisfying and fulfiled life raising her child and more, leaving behind the previous definition of her worth, beyond being a mother, as a fighter, for example as Kajerai has portrayed her. Now that she is a

mother, her self-worth and satisfaction can be extended beyond the art of war to the art of peace. She realises that her son's growing up means that when he sees her 'brushes and paintings / …he remembers, "Don't touch"'. Seeing her, he also might want to paint instead of wanting only to play 'the 'martyrs and enemies' game' like the children of Ar portrayed by El-Sheikh (Madani). One can only wish that Ar's children get as much of an opportunity as Kidane's in 'Growing Up'.

Saba Kidane's 'Go Crazy Over Me' similarly portrays a situation that would be normal and unremarkable nearly anywhere in the world, but because the scene takes place in war ravaged Eritrea the poem becomes an exuberant and powerful statement of a human desire to live free of any conflict beyond deciding to flirt back when a stranger decides to flirt with you. To portray such an everyday occurrence in an Eritrean context against the background of how it has had to struggle to achieve independence and peace is positively if not more transcendent than the holiest of religious rites: at least that is the feeling one gets in her wildly appreciative audiences of all ages when she performs it. Survival itself is a kind of religion in contemporary Eritrean poetry and seems as sacred as salvation, a fundamental tenet Kidane humorously alludes to in her opening lines, as a kind of 'come on' or romantic proposition: 'Come here. / I want to pray for you'.

Parodying religious language for romantic purposes and mixing sacred and profane love exemplifies conventional libertine eroticism, offering the human mind as the greatest aphrodisiac. As a young Eritrean woman, Kidane moves effortlessly, adapting the voice of the prospective male seducer, from proposing with alarming directness, 'Take off those clothes' to the devil-may-care 'What do you have to lose?' However, she quickly develops such relatively artless, sexy if superficial and fatalistic comments into psychological, political and philosophical insights. The poem's title alludes to the age-old observation that love is a kind of madness, yet Kidane provides a perfectly succinct and lively illustration of the famous words from Shakespeare's comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact' (V.1.7-8). The lover who acts as a lunatic, 'all…frantic' (V.1.10), in Shakespeare's words, is readily imaginable and universal, but for the poet to move beyond this condition she or he must think a little like Hamlet, too, who can be imagined to have muttered to Polonius or the gravediggers, in Kidane's words,

> Compassion lets me play
> A slave or king,
> Happy to give away
> All that's given to me.

Kidane's poem moves rapidly yet almost schizophrenically, yet again conventionally in a mad lover's voice, between a seductive yet secure voice of sexual experience – 'Love is the only thing to do / And I know the way' – and notes of insecurity and even a fear of mortality. The lover's self-doubt darkly blossoms into self- recrimination for wanting to think rather than act:

> I don't want to complain
> That water is too thin
> And my shadow has run away,
> Leaving me with lies,
> Alone, bitter, vain….

Such complaints arise directly out of a fear or rejection, yet their proverbial quality reinforces existential questions about truth, happiness and the human condition. The performance suddenly collapses into the bare minimum of a voice so lonely and lost that it can only reach out for someone else or die. At such a psychological low point, reached through a dizzyingly rapid free fall, the poet unlike Isayas Tsegai in 'I Am Also a Person', invokes sanity and humanity rather than any national identity in being 'an Eritrean'. Replaying Tsegai's frank, grim conclusion only in a lighter moment of a streetwise romantic flirtation, Kidane subverts any notion of seriousness and sanity precisely to escape such a warlike frame of mind – perhaps prototypically or at least stereotypically a male mind set – that requires the starkest of self-assertions for survival. A time of peace when one can flirt while walking down the street allows for pretending to be crazy in love. A time of war, on the contrary, discourages such pretending, when simply walking down the street might get one killed. In fact, the warlike scenario is the craziest of all. In a time of peace, wondering if one is in love is not at all crazy but normal, as is pretending to be in love. Thus the poem in its conclusion denies its being crazy and denies as well its opening prayer that any possible romantic interest be crazy, too. First, the speaker playfully admits to 'going crazy' only if the source of attraction refuses the poem's opening, prayerful injunction to '[g]o crazy' first. But suddenly Kidane disarms her conceit with searing if practical honesty, revealing 'My prayer is not really true. / If you really went crazy / I wouldn't know what to do'. Extreme neurotic or psychotic behavior in times of war or peace is no joke. On a literal level, the wishful lover asserts that the goal is not to wish any harm on a romantic prospect, and going 'really…crazy' would end any chance of more than a flirtation. Kidane's Eritrean audience, moreover, no different from the characters in her poem, have experienced enough 'really…crazy' situations during the war. Pretending to be crazy, pretending to pray to be crazy, and then admitting that one is

pretending – yet all in the name of love – becomes an obvious statement of one's sanity precisely because peace not war allows and even encourages it as, once more in Ghebremeskel's words, '[n]ormal again'.

Saba Kidane's 'My Kids Are Growing Up' and 'Go Crazy Over Me' highlight not merely surviving but thriving peacetime conditions in which Eritreans enjoy everyday life. Clearly they are the fortunate, and they are free of the survivor's guilt illustrated in Solomon Tsehaye's 'The Tithe of War'. Of course not everyone who survives a war is as fortunate. In times of peace, poverty still wages war, leaving many casualties. Kidane's poem, 'Your Father', focuses not only on poverty but also on one of its harshest weapons, patriarchy. Begging on Eritrea's streets may be discouraged and sometimes even denied as even happening, but it is an inescapable reality there as in most cities of the world. Kidane and other poets who focus on an Eritrea at peace and '[n]ormal again' undoubtedly embrace its sweetest fruits, but she does not flinch from its most bitter. Her extraordinary poetic realism requires both. Would a male poet write such a work, defying nationalistic imperatives, strict political party orthodoxies, and painful, even personal gender stereotypes? The question is not unfounded because no Eritrean male poet ever has. Clearly Kidane relishes the joys of peace, not letting war diminish or qualify their savor, a little like Jesus admonishing his disciples in *John*12.8 to allow his feet to be anointed with 'a pound of spikenard, very costly', telling them 'me ye have not always'. Knowing his or her country's history, an Eritrean might similarly regard the state of peace as 'very costly' yet most often fleeting. However, Kidane also knows (and like the Eritrean nation better than most, perhaps) the wisdom of Jesus' saying that 'the poor ye always have with you', while her poetry does not abandon them.

As in 'My Kids Are Growing Up', 'Your Father' emphasises the bond between mother and son as stronger than anything else. Reinforced in the former poem, it is profoundly threatened in the latter, like the 'scarf worn to shreds' that the mother wears with her child 'half wrapped in the folds'. The poet sketches her in painstaking, even loving detail as if her body, like Netabay's Sahel, is itself a kind of living battlefield and female microcosm of the Eritrean struggle, haunted by heroism but facing despair.

> Propped on the sidewalk
> With a few coins on her legs…
> She holds out her hand in the cold.
> The modest bend of her head
> Says she doesn't want to beg
> But she must to feed her son.

Like the speaker in Isayas Tsegai's 'I Am Also a Person', she is 'stripped of everything, / Even…dignity, / beaten', and 'the world' doesn't 'care'. However, amidst such dire circumstances, Kidane offers a different kind of saving refrain then Tsegai's '*I am also a person, I'm an Eritrean*' – a more basic identity, at least for her. She must survive because she is a mother with an infant son. He is her 'struggle', in the best Eritrean sense of the word. She might even be seen as the country's personification in the last days before the revolution began in the 1960s: 'Left on her own… / She cried and cursed her fate. / Where to go? What to do?' With her love for her son as fierce and undeniable as Eritrean nationalism, 'She ha[s] no other choice – the street', again in the way that Eritrea's fighters embrace the harsh Sahel as their one and only refuge from an Ethiopian onslaught of strategic offensive after offensive overstuffed with American and Soviet weaponry. Moreover, again as Netabay also lovingly recounts, as the Sahel ironically becomes a rich source of support and inspiration for the Eritrean struggle, so is Kidane's abandoned, single mother buoyed by what at first seems her greatest burden: 'she sees he has grown. / Let me show you, he says, / Putting out his hand to play'. For the mother, the gesture is life-saving, triumphant, bordering on the heroic, and

> makes her laugh
> To see him imitate
> Her begging in his own way.
> She's not totally hopeless
> And can accept who she is
> As long as she has him.

The bond between mother and son suddenly becomes mutually sustaining. However, she realises that such 'play' has as little hope of surviving as heroism in war, because 'it hits her: what if / He has to beg for the rest of his life?' Poets like El-Sheikh (Madani), Solomon Tsehaye and Isayas Tsegai must confront the question if war is a constant in their lives. Poets like Kajerai, Adem and Drar are resigned yet euphoric that it is. Kidane confronts poverty and patriarchy as if they are the worst kind of war, waged even in the midst of relative peace, and she sees no rhetoric, however grand or heroic, offering a sure way out. Instead, she highlights a mother's special, spontaneous sense of the moment, warding off the world and all its destructive force with a gentle distraction when the pain she feels for her son as well as for herself is too overwhelming:

> 'Let's play peek-a-boo or…'
> She says quickly and afraid,
> Trying to make him forget
> Playing this one ever again.

Of course such a small victory cannot be maintained for long because the conditions of poverty and patriarchy that inspire it inevitably must return and all the worse. Who can stop them? A mother's awareness, resilience and power to save her son have their limits, far short of the forces bearing down on them.

> He goes along with what she has said,
> But one day he starts crying.
> She says, 'Let me kiss where it hurts,'
> Hoping to soothe the pain….

Perhaps she is also preparing another momentary distraction to withstand one more wave of the seemingly endless storm of human suffering she cannot escape.

> But then he kisses her
> And asks, 'Who hurt us?
> Who should I hit?'
> And demanding the name.

Suddenly, the mother in Kidane's poem cannot hold back a second more when the truth demands that she speak out, even when she knows she should not.

> 'Your father.' She lets it slip.
> Realizing what she has done,
> She keeps quiet
> Thinking she can still save her son.

On a literal level, the biological father is to blame and, for the sake of the family – what's left of it – any suggestion that the son should strike him could only be counterproductive, continuing a cycle of abuse and violence when the ultimate goal must be to get beyond it. 'Your father', moreover, might as easily be applied to patriarchy itself, or to the government of the country – yet any country – allowing for a society in which a woman can be left in such circumstances with no other alternative than to beg.

But can the mother in Kidane's poem really save her son from him or from the almost equally destructive need for the son to revenge himself and his mother against his father? 'Thinking she can…save' him suggests she may not save him, especially as she remains caught in a near constant state of crisis. Still, she has no choice but to try, seemingly against all odds.

Kidane leaves the reader with no illusions. Likewise, she writes as if she wants an Eritrea with no illusions. Kidane's writing to such length and with so much care about a woman begging in Asmara is a bold statement in a place where begging is officially discouraged, condemned and largely unacknowledged. As a poet, Kidane also may want to focus unashamedly on peace, happiness and

prosperity, but the begging mother she cannot take her eyes away from is as embattled as Kajerai, as imprisoned as a lost soul on Fessahazion Michael's Naqra, and struggling with all the force of Adem's 'Invincible', only she does so with the conscience of a woman – a poor woman forced to beg – whom neither patriarchy nor force can ultimately contain.

A poem by Saba Kidane called 'War and a Woman', which is not included in *Who Needs a Story* but was performed at the 'Against All Odds' January 2000 literary conference and festival held in Asmara, offers another kind of commentary on how contemporary Eritrea's poetry of peace often cannot quite suppress, no matter how hard it tries, every thought of war. The problem is that war can be a never-ending prospect in the Horn, as renewed fighting between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1998 after seven years of peace all too clearly indicates. Thus a poet like Saba Kidane, if she is to give any kind of extended reading and performance of her works, has at some point to confront this disturbing reality and, in the case of 'War and a Woman', even act it out, although again not without providing the special angle of her being a woman in such a situation. Moreover, her being a woman makes her relationship to war not only unique. It is presented as the only way that war might come to an end because, she sings, 'Only a woman / Can bring / Peace to …[her] country'. Not that she does not fight and avoids the conflict. On the contrary, '[o]nly a woman' can fight to truly win. This is because

> Only a woman
> Can sacrifice enough
> To overcome fear,
> Win the fight
> And still keep peace in sight.
>
> Ready for anything,
> She sacrifices herself….

Ironically, perhaps, the utterly self-sacrificing spirit of the begging mother also saves the nation when a woman who is also a mother enters the field of battle. The poetry of force recounted by Eritrea's contemporary male poets must move over to accommodate a source of strength that they can never embody. For Kidane, it is that a woman

> gives birth,
> Rocking and soothing
> Like a lion
>
> Licking her cubs,
> Who grow with her love.

Unconventionally, although not necessarily so in modern Eritrean culture, the maternal role of a woman focuses her powers not only within the home and towards her family and children but also outside and onto the battlefield if only because

> peace
> Demands more,
> Calling her back
>
> To the trenches.
> Guarding her children,
> She still can't refuse
> To fight….

The war 'calling her back' and her going, notwithstanding Kidane's thorough engagement with an Eritrean poetry of peace, recalls moments in the work of two of Eritrea's greatest poets of war, Adem and Kajerai, in 'The Invincible' and 'Woman of Eritrea', respectively. The former has only to 'feel…his first scar burning again', and he returns to the battlefield with a vengeance. The latter does not merely tend the wounded and dying. She also leaves them behind and returns to the battlefield 'with high spirits and passion'. Similarly for Kidane, a woman's self-sacrifice for her children in the home and her self-sacrifice for her nation on the battlefield may be distinguishably different and even separable, they but they must be embraced simultaneously, yet almost impossibly, as one and the same. Furthermore, a merely rational approach to such a potential conflict – of nurturing life and courting death at the same time – is a kind of unallowable luxury, since she cannot

> even think
>
> Of being tired,
> Parched, starved,
> Hurt or dead.

Her maternal powers joining rather than separating the responsibilities she has at home and on the battlefield, she is driven by her sexual power, too.

> She takes a breath
>
> And catches fire,
> Her breasts bouncing
> As she races,
> To join the fighters
> Marching again….

Maternal, martial and sexual, the woman fighter's power makes her march

differently, although it might not appear so amidst the military formations of gear, weaponry and soldiers, because she marches a little further, as only a woman can: because only she can sacrifice enough 'for peace'.

Writing about cultural and/or personal conflicts, Saba Kidane, Ribka Sibhatu and Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis, in comparison with their male counterparts in contemporary Eritrean poetry, construct more open-ended, ambiguous poetic endings. They do not reach settled or triumphalist conclusions like Negusse's 'secret poetry's sacred key', Isaak's reconciliation with the meaning of freedom, Yohannes' 'ever expanding fields / And the solid ground of our country's cause', Drar's 'fields of gold', Netabay's sense of 'destiny', Kajerai's 'news of victory' or his seeming contentment with 'martyrs, martyrs and more martyrs'. Contemporary Eritrean female poets seem to accept that their poems can stop without ending, that is, without building up some kind of comprehensive answer to the dilemmas they are confronting. Tentative, accommodating, spontaneous seeming gestures replace dramatic pronouncements or profound solutions, much in the way that the abandoned mother in 'Your Father' prefers to distract her son with a simple game rather than to have him angrily denounce his irresponsible father and feckless patriarchy while bemoaning the impoverished condition that he and his mother seem fated never to escape. In 'Abeba', her 'basket / Inscribed '"for my parents"' provides enough for Sibhatu without her adding any more thunderous notes of anger and resolve bent on redeeming such irrecoverable loss and pathos. Ghebreghiorgis' arguing with her shadow leaves her unsure at the outcome whether she, too, can 'be redeemed / Before… [she] fade[s] away'. These poets seem more resigned, less indignant and not as self-righteous and mortally offended by their suffering and by extension the suffering of the Eritrean people as their male compatriots. Outrage over people violating people seems tempered by the knowledge of such a condition as more the norm than the exception and a need in the poem to offer no unverifiable assurances to anyone, including the poet herself, that such a reality is overcome. Rather, it is withstood with resilience, and the poet offers her equally resilient voice as enough without any promise of ultimate victory or understanding. She provides a witness and her voice as an example, allowing a reader or listener to decide any question of right or wrong. What the poet does or rather the action she recounts stands alone, neither requiring or expecting any other cause, nationalist or existential, to redeem it. The poem functions more as an end in itself than as a means to further understanding according to any kind of philosophical, political, or religious outlook.

In this respect, Kidane, Sibhatu and Ghebreghiorgis accept the mantle of

Eritrea's most renowned female oral poet, Zeineb Yassin, known as Mother Zeineb and famous for saying, translated into English, 'Even the stones are burning', when asked to describe the course of a particular battle in her village during the first war with Ethiopia. Also a veteran fighter in Eritrea's armed struggle for independence and mother of nine, Zeineb Yassin, died at the age of 87 in 2005. She joined the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in 1977, challenging the tradition of a male-only fighting force and exemplifying equal rights for women in Eritrea as a vital part of her lifelong mission as a fighter and an oral poet. A poem titled in translation, 'Under a Sycamore', also performed at the 'Against All Odds' literary festival in Eritrea in January 2000, only in her native Tigre rather than Kidane's Tigrinya, perfectly characterises Mother Zeineb's individuality and defiance without any ideological or nationalist perspective to redeem it and no grand solutions or other profound questions. What her audience or reader sees is precisely what they get, as inscrutably offered as her poetic daughters, like Sibhatu and Abeba's 'basket', Ghebreghiorgis' 'shadow' and Kidane's beggar-mother. Without succumbing to a poetry that offers, in Weil's words, any 'comforting fiction…[or] consoling prospect of immortality', these poets or, to use the Tigrinya word, *geTemti,* still confront a poetics of force with a special if different force of their own. Zeineb's poem reads in full:

> I'm burning
> To boil you
>
> In liberation,
> Like raw,
> Delicate meat.
>
> But I'm too ancient
> For the army.
>
> Too helpless
> To be the minister
> Of education
>
> And too bold
> In this damn world.

She burns most with her audience or reader and herself. While she desires 'liberation', she cannot promise it the way 'the army' or 'the minister / of education' can, who remain remote and inaccessible and, perhaps, comparatively ineffectual. She even subverts her conventional status as an elder, conceding that she is 'too ancient'. Nevertheless, she submits the undeniable credentials of her poem and her voice. 'Too bold / In this damn world' might be anyone's words

to live by, however difficult their circumstances. Yet her phrase embodies a spirit as particularly Eritrean as a slogan widely used to exemplify the resolve her nation in its armed struggle for independence, 'Never kneel down'. Moreover, any note of resignation or accommodation in Kidane, Sibhatu, Ghebreghiorgis and Zeineb should never be mistaken for stereotypical female pliability or acquiescence. On the contrary, 'Too bold / In this damn world' makes an apt motto for all of them.

Contemporary Eritrean poets, female and male, who write either without explicitly mentioning Eritrea's armed struggle for independence or as if the war being behind them requires a totally new attitude to live in peace, might also be considered, 'Too bold / In this damn world', at least by other Eritrean writers, artists and critics who continue to maintain that Eritrea must continue to function on a wartime footing, which its art should reflect, or face destruction, indeed 'In this damn world'. However, Tigrinya poets like Beyene Hailemariam, Reesom Haile, Ghirmai Yohannes (San Diego), a Tigre poet like Mohammed Said Osman and an Arabic poet like Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh escape the strictures of writing only about war or only in reaction to war by resorting to two age-old staples of male poetic discourse: women and wit.

Focusing on women, attitudes of contemporary male Eritrean poets range from the sacred to the profane while also reflecting the more mundane reality of everyday relationships. Sometimes but not always such poems involve wit or humor. Yet when not focusing on women, these poets also use wit to characterise a similarly wide range of experience, be it critical or trivial (or both).

Born in 1955, Beyene Hailemariam is an Italian-educated poet and critic with a M.A. in sociology. Some of his poems stem back to his days a prisoner of war for nine years in Addis Ababa.

In 'Silas' and 'Let's Divorce and Get Married Again', Hailemariam lyrically depicts both the insecure feeling just before the start of a romantic relationship and the depression still with glimmers of hope after a marriage ends bitterly. In 'Silas' the poet counsels a friend, according to the age-old theme of *carpe diem* or 'seize the day', to say '*yes* to love' and a romantic relationship. The scene could take play almost anywhere, beginning with

> Silence so deep
> It can be heard,
> And a full moon –
> A peaceful night….

The poet bases his appeal on an equally conventional premise: the supposed

laws or norms of nature. He offers for Silas's consideration the proverbial example of the birds and the bees, or at least the birds:

> a bird
> Starts whispering
> *Chirp, chirp, chirp*.
> He wants his mate….
>
> Right away
> Another bird…
>
> Replies, *I'm here*
> *For you, my hero.*

However conventional, for a contemporary Eritrean poet to urge following a hero in love rather than a hero in war sounds a fresh, revolutionary note, although not in the overtly political sense. Yet relative novelty of this sort of appeal, perhaps not surprisingly, seems lost on Silas, at least at first, since the poet cannot merely highlight the occurrence but must go on to interpret it and to advise Silas on what to do:

> Silas, listen.
> Please don't be dense….
>
> What the bird says
> Is *yes* to love.
> Silas, say *yes*….
>
> Enough silence.
> Answer *yes*….

What the poet, the bird, the projected although unspecified lover and perhaps the reader can readily understand, Silas cannot. Without the poet's urging, he would presumably remain alone and silent, barely if at all noticing any of what the poet not only records – the evening's loveliness – but also interprets as providing the most important message: 'say *yes*' to romance and love or, to apply a scriptural imperative erotically, seek and ye shall find. The question remains, nevertheless, why Silas needs to be told. Why is he 'dense'? Might he be too wrapped up in the war and fighting for Eritrean independence, or worrying about Eritrea's difficult post-war politics, to notice the evening's beauty and to interpret its potentially erotic message? Such a mindset might leave him simply inexperienced, too, in matters of love and romance, although not necessarily so. Many contemporary Eritrean poets writing amidst battle or in reaction to the war at least record their appreciation of natural beauty. Furthermore, stories abound of Eritrean men and women who served together on the battlefield but who also took the opportunity to say '*yes* to love', sex and marriage amidst the

fighting. However, where are the poems recounting this personally romantic aspect of the war? While Kajerai focuses on the requisite dowry, it becomes, however compelling, a political and nationalistic abstraction 'to see freedom' as well as a call to arms to destroy 'any invader without our culture' – hardly an appeal to answer an erotic invitation. Most contemporary Eritrean poets who write of war certainly register a greater awareness of the beauty of their natural surroundings than Silas, even if they also serve as battlegrounds. A similar awareness must exist that they served well as trysting places, too. However, Beyene Hailemariam, like the bird the poet hears, chooses to break these poets' 'Silence so deep' about this fact of life and so 'want…[ing a] mate' that they sing 'Loud and clear // …*I'm here / For you'.*

Equally realistic if also focusing on the inevitability of love and romance, Hailemariam's 'Let's Divorce and Get Married Again' picks up the oft told, universal story of men and women at a different point: after the lustrous early days of a marriage wear off to reveal an irresolvable incompatibility between two people that ends in divorce. In a brief narrative, the speaker recounts the birth of a couple's first child and their estrangement soon thereafter. Making the young husband the poem's speaker and its primary focus, the poet constructs a manic, poetic, idealistic, naïve, self-centred if not wholly culpable or unusual persona. The poem only records the feeling of the husband, although he also articulates what he thinks may be the feelings of his wife. Such a presentation inescapably implies that solely emphasizing the husband's perspective on the relationship reveals the root of why it falls apart.

With a marriage counselor's precision and lack of embarrassment, although not adverse to lyrical flight, the first half of the poem focuses on the birth, the second half on the breakup. Beginning with the husband's fear – 'I worried about you / Having your first child' – Hailemariam portrays the overwhelming elation that the everyday miracle of a wife giving birth can inspire in her husband:

> rising like the star
> The wise men saw
> You overcame my fear
> And I bowed to your light.
>
> It felt like an earthquake
> As thunder filled the sky
> And the seas seemed to part.

The husband literally invokes heaven and earth, God and nature to describe his delight. What man can be faulted for hyperbole and histrionics in such a moment?

> My world went wild,

Making my poetry soar
In the ululation
Of your opening life's door.

Nevertheless, the husband's poetry lacks one vital part? The wife may be a like a 'star', 'light', 'an earthquake', 'thunder', parting 'seas' and 'life's door', but the entire description reduces her to an unspeaking, unfeeling, passive, inhuman object, and little else besides how the poet sees her. Such monumental terms leave her well-being – that should surely be a concern, too – out of the picture. Unlike in 'Silas', love is never mentioned in relation to either spouse. Perhaps the marriage is merely arranged and not based on either individual's passion or choice? Or perhaps the marriage is forced because the girl became pregnant?

Hailemariam's discrete focus requires that such questions remain unanswered. However, his scenario – absent of any real mutual feeling between the couple – renders the second part of the poem, socially if not poetically, predictable:

Not long after the birth
And christening, did someone make
You change, threatening
And pushing me away?

The husband might think his wife has changed in her affections for him, but the poem provides no evidence that she has had any such affections in the first place – beyond her duty not to run away but to remain in the marriage and give birth.

Furthermore, the poem similarly provides no indications of the husband's affections for her instead of for his poetic descriptions of her and his comparatively far less fervent worry about the birth and delivery. He can only sound deluded, paranoid and whiney when he cries, 'Could anyone give you more / Of his heart than me, / And giving it for your sake?' The self-martyring tone based on little if any indication that he has given much of anything – and certainly not his 'heart', which also includes his mind and practically his whole being in the Tigrinya sense of the word – prevents him from seeing much less understanding that his wife's seeking someone else to provide human companionship when he has failed at it is a perfectly natural impulse and even what might have led the two of them to go ahead with the marriage in the first place whatever its conditions.

Nonetheless, he may not be solely to blame for the lack of communication between them since the poem – even if it is written solely from his perspective – nowhere records her trying to communicate with him. Yet two young,

inexperienced people forced to marry due to custom or circumstances might be expected to suffer from such a problem. Nor should they be necessarily blamed without any better instructions or examples or even their most intimate feelings to guide them. Clearly, both the wife and husband have reached a desperate state in their relationship and what little he has, which he barely grants her – the power to express what one is feeling – deserts him: 'So now what can I say?' The answer, which is the title of the poem, 'whispered / In…[her] ear' sounds ever more desperate and absurd, suggesting that the wife before she agreed to be married was unhappy then, too, with or without him. The poem reveals a husband whom neither a marriage nor a child has matured but who realises that if he assumed responsibility once before he might be able to try to do so again, notwithstanding the lack of any guarantees. At least by the end of the poem he is concerned for the first time with how his wife feels. But again, Hailemariam's discretion prevails, allowing the reader only to imagine what she might say. Based on the evidence of the poem, the couple seem to have little choice but to continue their struggle and hope for the best, despite the wreckage – in their case, emotional – piling up around them, a little like the Eritrean nation itself – were this poem to be read as a political allegory – needing to rededicate itself more than once to its birth as a nation if it is to survive not being choked in the cradle.

Beyene Hailemariam's 'For Twenty Nakfa' recounts a brief, humorous anecdote that sounds almost like an expanded Tigrinya proverb. Another poet of peace, Reesom Haile, also makes many a poem out of mere nuggets of proverbial Eritrean wisdom. The incident Hailemariam describes might take place in any culture, but the poem has an Eritrean appearance. Ironically, it functions as a kind of parody, subverting the sense or message of Solomon Tsehaye's 'The Tithe of War', a deeply more serious work, in which the poet likens the suffering and death as a result of war to the act of tithing and the price for peace, yet a payment to be free of guilt and damnation rather than to be confirmed in them. 'For Twenty Nakfa' involves another kind of payment rendered to provide its speaker another kind of moment's peace. Hailemariam begins,

> An old friend of mine,
> A big bore and a wild liar
> With long hair like a monk,
> Asked me for twenty nakfa.

Using the Eritrean monetary unit of the nakfa, Hailemariam signals that his poem takes places in the new Eritrea, after independence, when the country

has issued its own currency rather than still being dependent on the Ethiopian birr. In a kind of political allegory, Eritrea has become responsible for its own finances and, with its own money, requires the use of no one else's. The speaker in the poem who has his own nakfa seems to be in step with the new order, but his 'old friend' appears as someone whom the revolution has left behind. His appearance 'With long hair like a monk' suggests that the new sectarian basis of Eritrean society – since the war included an effort to eliminate religious divisions between and among the Eritrean people – has passed him by, as if he is a particularly eccentric Orthodox character who belongs in a mountaintop monastery like Debre Bizen rather than on the cosmopolitan streets of Asmara. Or might the 'old friend' be a veteran, unable to adjust to the contemporary realities of civic commerce and discourse in an Eritrea at peace, perhaps due to conditions beyond his control? Yet described as 'A big bore and a wild liar', clearly he can be seen as trying to justify or compensate for his self-marginalization.

The second stanza of the poem reveals a counter-intuitive logic not to be taken for granted in a nation famous for its historic refusal of foreign aid.

> Was I stupid to say yes?
> What's twenty nakfa?
> It's a small price to pay.
> God bless him, now he stays away.

On the surface, the poet solves the social dilemma of having an 'old friend' who wants to borrow money without paying it back as if the friendship between them is strong when it is really strained to a breaking point. The poet knows that he might appear 'stupid' to the reader – even more so than the 'old friend' – because of the implication that in saying 'yes' the poet has been conned either as a soft touch – someone too weak to say no – or as naïve in not realizing that the 'old friend' will only waste the money anyway, as the poet's description of his friend suggests he is wasting his entire life. Nevertheless, the real confidence game, as the last two lines of the poem indicate, is the poet's in offering the 'twenty nakfa' as a way to get rid of the 'big bore', if not once and for all, then for a good while since twenty nakfa (at least at the time the poem was written) is more than spare change. Moreover, the poet's irreverence and disrespect in giving the money goes against the Eritrean grain of discouraging public begging – Kidane's 'Your Father' notwithstanding – as being counter to Eritrean values of self-determination, hard work, resilience and survival without asking for aid.

From another perspective, however, the poet's giving his poor friend – who might not be poor if he had a greater sense of personal responsibility

– resembles the actions of rich western nations and NGOs rewarding corrupt African governments with foreign aid. Such money also buys a little peace for the lenders, since they might be bothered by bigger, more substantial problems in these nations if their governments were not so easily bought off and allowed to continue in their irresponsible ways. Eritrea's oft stated official foreign policy has been to be different, neither asking for nor accepting such aid, hoping to appear more self- reliant and dignified than the prototypical 'big bore and wild liar' whom so many African dictators resemble in their courting western powers for financial assistance. Such a misguided, dependent foreign policy fails to establish any real, long lasting friendship, at least as demonstrated in 'Twenty Nakfa' between the poet and his 'old friend' and probably by modern political history, too. Precisely imagining the communication in such a relationship between an aid donor and his nation-client, the Tigrinya poet, Reesom Haile, also typifies the profound bitterness, although from a slightly different angle, underlying such a relationship in the poem, 'Foreign Aid': a brief, staccato and sardonic dialogue.

Beg.
I give.
Beg!
I give some more!
So why insult me for giving?
Because you make me beg.

More the model of discretion than Haile and keeping his vision local rather than global yet its politics implied and not explicit, Hailemariam does not explore but only mocks the discontents and pathos of his 'old friend' that drove him to such ruin.

A poet and scholar with a Ph.D. in Communications from New York University, Reesom Haile is Eritrea's best known poet in the west. He returned to Eritrea in 1994 after exile that included teaching and lecturing in western universities and working for international NGOs. His first collection of Tigrinya poetry, *Waza ms Qum Neger nTensae Hager*, won the 1998 Raimok prize. His other books of poetry include *We Have Our Voice* (2000) and *We Invented the Wheel* (2002). 'Voice' and 'We Have' are from *We Have Our Voice*. Born in 1946, he died at the height of his poetic powers in 2003, and hundreds of his poems still await translation and publication.

Haile reveals a powerful wit throughout his work, perhaps the most of any contemporary Eritrean poet with the possible exception of Ghirmai Yohannes (San Diego). Two of Haile's most famous poems, 'Voice' and 'We Have'

challenge his audience to join him in a powerful embrace of a free Eritrea and an incorrigible faith in its thriving as a modern democratic state. With none of the hesitation, letdown or disappointment of Angessom Isaak in a poem like 'Freedom's Colors', Haile writes in a near constant, elevated state, appreciating his long-suffering, little country's achievement of independence, in Isaak's words, as

> Unbelievably bright
> And like a powerful wind
> Encompassing the sky
> Mirrored across the sea
> And pouring freedom
> All around me.

The poem 'Voice' identifies what, after Eritrea itself, is Haile's greatest arena: the internet and '[s]peech online'. The Tigrinya title of the poem, 'Dehai', alludes to the very popular, mid to late 1990s Eritrean website that contained a free flow of all kinds of news about Eritrea in its early growth as a nation and that spontaneously accumulated as a forum in which Eritreans exchanged views, often fiery, about how their nation should act. For years Reesom Haile submitted his poems regularly, often day after day, sometimes even twice a day, and they became a welcome, integral part of the national online dialogue, as palpable as the daily bread of Asmara, be it fresh *injera* or Italian *pane*. Through this work, the reader and the poet are readily conceivable as saying together,

> Speech online
> Can set you free
> It lights my voice
> On a screen like the sun.

Haile's poems appeared on Dehai as strong and regularly as the sun in Eritrea, from incredibly bright in the rarified air of the highlands to scorching on the shores of the Red Sea and in the Danakil desert depression. With Dehai, Reesom Haile went from being someone who wrote very little poetry and almost no poetry in Tigrinya to an unofficial yet not only self-proclaimed poet laureate writing verses on nearly every aspect of his country's development and history. In a kind of perfect storm, his genesis and liberation as a poet emerged simultaneously with Eritrean independence and the growth of the internet – two sea changes, one national and one global – coinciding with his own personal transformation and prompting him to sing: 'Voice. Voice! / The net sets me free / To think in poetry'. For Haile, such a beginning both in personal terms and national terms signaled an almost biblical momentousness, fulfiling a promise like the beatitudes of Jesus,

included in the poem, that 'The sad will rejoice / The weeping will laugh'. Yet the 'voice' of Dehai itself as well as of Reesom's poetry both functioning as a kind of daily bread together raised to the heights of a daily communion – 'In the news like food and drink / In the dark with a candle to think' – became an instant and reliable source of solace and gratification as Eritrea faced problems in its few years of peace at least as great as in thirty years of war: 'In the dark with a candle to think'. One could say that Haile's 'Voice' picked up in reality, at least virtual reality, with the triumphant vision that Ghirmai Ghebremeskel left off: in 'Candles and more candles / Coming from all directions / …restoring, adoring / And rejoicing in life'. Haile did not merely dream or imagine but he actually saw and heard Eritrean 'Sisters, brothers, citizens, drums!' Furthermore, he had them moving to the fundamental beat of Tigrinya music and dance, as in the group circle of a festive *guyla*: a kind of two-step with one step forward and a half shuffle back, onomatopoeically and anapestically expressed by the poet as 'ezm! z-ezm! ezm! z-ezm! / ebum! b-ebum! ebum! b-ebum!' Haile tapped the Eritrean tradition of the poet not as a lone voice but as an immediately recognizable if unorthodox eminence reciting and offering his lines to be greeted and welcomed with more lines from his audience in response, be they in a public gathering or on the internet where he found 'We share the screen / Like the sun'. Moreover, offering his poetry so prominently and frequently online embodied a fundamental principle of his work – 'our freedom of speech' – as an end in itself but also as a means through which he with all his Eritrean 'Sisters, brother, citizens, [and] drums' would 'read…the poetry in thought'.

An even more powerful national affirmation, 'We Have', is one of the most popular poems of post-independence Eritrea: a kind of anthem for an Eritrea rapidly developing and widely admired as a newly independent kind of African country.

The poem's refrain, '*Alewuna, Alewana*', 'We have, We have' became a metonymy for the poet himself, since wherever he went in Eritrea and at whatever hour he would be greeted with the words, '*Alewuna, Alewana*', instead of his name, as if they were his name. 'We Have' made Reesom wildly popular in Eritrea. He attained a kind of rock star status, reciting his work at cultural festivals, rallies on national holidays, on television and radio, seemingly everywhere! The poem extols a reputed essence of the Eritrean spirit: self-reliance, resistance, resilience, steadfastness, triumph, men and women, against all odds, working together:

We have men and women
Who sacrifice their lives.
We have a nation.

We have women and men
To gather and provide.
Men and women who lead
We have independence.
We have equality and justice….
We have black, white, and red.
We have men and women
Without end in the struggle
To grow, study and persist.

The enjambment of 'the struggle / to grow' insists on more than a wartime struggle. The poem's repeating 'We have men and women…. / We have women and men' emphasises the power of those who have lived through the war to transform their society into a nation of peace, yet recognizing that the power of women makes them absolutely equal partners with men. The poet enjoins all Eritreans neither to hesitate nor to be held back, suffering none of the doubt, again as seen in Isaak's 'Freedom's Colors', nor any of the guilt of being survivors, as portrayed by Solomon Tsehaye in his 'Tithe of War'. Continuing with

We have women and men
Without the lust for power.
Who stand up or down
With our consent[,]

the poem envisions an Eritrea at peace and a democratic order replacing the military hierarchy of the armed struggle. The poet leaves the listener or the reader to decide whether such a change requires a change of leadership or in leadership style. The poem maintains almost an inscrutable simplicity on this critical point, since those 'Who stand up or down / With our consent' might refer to the status quo or its opposition, impatient and frustrated to govern. In fact, the poem maintains the utmost simplicity throughout, so much so that it can function as a projection of whatever party might like to claim it for their cause. 'We Have' has very few different words, with the same words repeated in slight variations like a litany or mantra. In this manner, the poem accumulates great strength, although far from being a poem of force. Nevertheless, 'We Have' hardly insists, like Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis in 'Help Us Agree', on a kind of privacy or self-knowledge separate from the concerns for the independence of the nation, since for Haile, 'We have men and women / Who belong in our nation / And we belong with them'. The poem affirms the presence of an informed and dedicated citizenry as avid to win the peace as it was to win the war. In the poetry's inexorable rhythm and repetition 'We Have' also implies

that Eritrea's people are fully prepared to rule themselves and that no one should think they might not be. Counter to any impression that Eritrea in the mid 1990s was a desperately impoverished, conflict torn nation, worn out and wasted by thirty years of war, 'We Have' reveals a poet in peacetime leading a charge of all kind of Eritreans both in country and in the diaspora – writers, children, artists, young professionals, publishers, homemakers, business people, working people, the elderly, government officials and more – fully confident to be building Africa's newest nation in the simple faith that they 'have God and a future'. Performing the poem aloud, Haile's rapid fire recitation epitomized what he idealized as the rush of Eritreans from every walk of life to 'have a nation', 'have independence', have 'God and a future'.

As a poet, Reesom Haile thrived whether he was fulfiling the role of rallying his nation under the auspices of its ruling party or, upholding the loyal opposition, as a gadfly of the state, as Plato in his dialogue, 'Apology', described Socrates. Either way, he exemplified a kind of irrepressible spirit, not necessarily the rule for all contemporary Eritrean poets, be they of war or peace. Certainly Mohammed Adem in a poem like 'The Invincible' displays a similar kind of individualistic, unmanageable temperament in praise of his hero's devotion to war. And at another extreme, Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh writing in Arabic and Mohammed Said Osman writing in Tigre, both in the role of frustrated lovers, present an irrepressible spirit of erotic love as the core of their being: Abdul El-Sheikh in highly elaborate terms and Mohammed Said Osman in very basic.

Born in 1996, the poet, journalist and younger brother of Mohammad Madani El-Sheikh, Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El-Sheikh won Eritrea's prize for Arabic poetry in 1992. At the height of his career, he died in a fire in 1998.

His poem, 'Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors', was first published in 1994. With its first line, even with its title, an erotic irrepressibility confronts a reader: 'Lust won't leave me alone'. Unhesitating, a scene of a masturbatory, poetic fantasy immediately unfolds:

> Confused and wanting you
> Bathed in juicy colors
> we fall on each other
> And I bathe like a hero
> In your body full of desire….

Applying the term 'hero' in such a context wildly subverts a value word without equal in contemporary Eritrean poetry, adding a kind of political betrayal bordering on perversion to the ultimately individual sexual burden the poet immediately confesses: 'But it's me hissing / And a little water / Before

I'm feeling guilty'. The poet sets himself a problem: how to connect a private, intimate, potentially embarrassing and some-might-think shameful moment to the all too public values of self-sacrifice, war and the cause of Eritrean nationalism. Moreover, while one cannot imagine such a problem being unique to the poet, his focusing on it seems uniquely, irrepressibly bold.

He makes his erotic obsession not the problem but the solution by shifting his focus from himself to the natural world around him, of which he feels almost mystically a part of, reinforced through his synaesthesia, too: 'I see these notes / Echoing outside and not unnatural / But as joy with passion'. The poet recognises the irrepressibility in himself and the world as a key to personal renewal, 'turning me upside down'. He must become 'Oblivious to any niceties / Of the thin water of reason' and 'remember love again… / …to write poetry'. The poet unequivocally if conventionally states which side he stands on in the traditional opposition between 'passion' and 'reason', but he goes on dramatically to reconnect a poetic creed and visionary style to the Eritrean revolution itself by recovering the concept of its heroes and 'martyrs' and applying it to the female object of his erotic fantasy. Furthermore, he insists on such a leap's being absolutely spontaneous and 'without' any self-consciousness or public demonstration, albeit histrionic, like 'carving it on my forehead'. For Abdul El-Sheikh if not for his brother, Madani, a reality like 'both sides of the river' cannot compare with 'look[ing] in the mirror of its flowing'. Unlike any other contemporary Eritrean poet, the associative, the surreal and a distinct lack of reality lead him to discover 'the power of revolution'. With the opposite of the singular poetic vision found in poets like Drar, Michael or Kajerai, Abdul El-Sheikh insists that he can only find love 'born amidst three stories'. He finds the spirit of the 'revolution' not in obvious military exploits or extraordinary acts of self-sacrifice but in opaque poetic images: 'Oleander covering my face', 'Writing…on the feet / Of some poor farmers walking by' and 'the peace we found in trees'. If the word 'apolitical' can be applied to any contemporary Eritrean poetry, Abdul El-Sheikh's seems to require it. His 'fascination' with nature and 'strong language like radiation' seem to render any political ideology fleshless and remote, unless it can abide

> When birdsong attached a meadow
> That bloomed only for my eyes
> Before my own tongue took over
> Prophesying a newborn amidst the sheaves
> Of wheat in the gleam of harvest?
> And why *this* chant sulking in the cypress
> Before tumbling through the branches

And overpowering a man
Known as a lily in the field?
Like henna lines we surrounded him….

Nevertheless, precisely such an unmediated, rapturous, unpredictable, manic, bordering-on-solipsistic 'dream vision' leads the poet to the same source as his more obviously martial and political colleagues. Although he identifies his version of the Eritrean armed struggle for independence with phrases like 'love in action' and 'heart to heart conversation', it still leads to the same 'thousand wounded, / Another thousand dead' and 'a song for our martyrs' remains'. The poet also suggests that the disquiet expressed at the poem's outset results from his forgetting this intimate yet inescapable and unbreakable connection between himself and the Eritrean revolution, no matter how remote it might seem from his personal concerns. Ironically, he goes on to determine that the basis of this connection is the 'one particular woman' he fantasises about at the beginning. Not at all a personal, sexual fantasy of escape, her imagined beauty embodies in one instant no less than the power of Eros and the Eritrean revolution combined. The poet reveals that he has been compelled to fantasise sexually about her because she has been killed in the war and has passed 'away forever to that far shore'. Caught now 'between…wanting and leaving her', whether she be herself or the embodiment of the armed conflict he might have been thought to be escaping in the poem's initial as well as its subsequent dreamy images, the poet has nothing else besides his own irrepressibility to carry him forward. He vows,

Never will I waste another day,
Never, even if I have no poetry,
Even if I reject every single word,
Never again will I waste a single day….

His consternation and mistake at the beginning of the poem are in thinking that his fantasy is an escape from rather than just another expression of his love, which cannot separate between his dead lover and the Eritrean revolution in its continuing aspirations. Although with 'Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors' he writes the poem to remind himself of this condition, he concludes that he should not even need a poem to remain aware of it, 'at least…as long as' he has the power of imagination, including sexual fantasy as in the poem's beginning. Confirming at the end of the poem that he 'see[s] her smile so clearly / And find[s] her body's wild curves / In the waves crashing to shore', the poet once again conjures a sexual image of his lover, but now he realises that indulging his fantasy need not leave him '[c]onfused', 'hissing', 'feeling guilty' and 'angry' but

'smoother than a lentil / And full of nurture overflowing' since she makes her love, his love and their country's love like 'three stories' in one.

Similarly irrepressible, the poet in Mohammed Said Osman's poem in Tigre, 'Juket', confesses his erotic frustration, but he achieves a more basic, less transcendent resolution than Abdul El-Sheikh. Instead of joining erotic love to a love of the revolution to express his conflict, Osman more simply resorts to the conventional poetic form of the lament of a spurned lover hoping that the witty portrayal of his suffering can win back his beloved. The Tigre 'Juket' might as well be 'Lesbia' in the Latin poetry of Rome's Catullus or 'Charis' in the Renaissance English poetry of Ben Jonson.

A poet and a journalist born in 1967, Mohammed Said Osman has also served as Head of the Program Development Unit for Educational Mass Media in Eritrea's Ministry of Education. He won the Raimok prize for Tigre literature in 1995 and wrote 'Juket' in 2000. He is the author of *Atrafie Wo Neweshi* (*My Surroundings and Myself*, 2003), a children's book in Tigre.

Notwithstanding 'Juket' representing a long standing and wide ranging poetic tradition of erotic poetry, Osman's poem also reads like a song: a pop song on the universal theme of boy loses girl and wants her back again. The poem also includes, slightly more originally perhaps, the interlude of a song within a song in the form of a praise poem mostly devoted to Juket's body. The persona of spurned, abject lover, reduced to a 'faithful dog' lamenting his fate could be heard singing from a radio in any language:

> Juket broke up with me and left.
> I don't know why.
> Not enough love? Another guy?
> What can I do?

His strategy to get her back is just as universal – from Mozart in *Don Giovanni* to James Brown – making a song out of his complaint and performing it for his beloved to obtain her pity and get another chance to be with her: 'Will she ever want me again? / Maybe one of my poems would make / Juket listen?' Nevertheless, the details of the poet's song within the poem create a distinctly Eritrean portrait or idealization of a physically beautiful, young Eritrean woman: 'eyelashes' long enough for the poet to hold onto, 'eyes as sharp as a gazelle's', 'teeth and smile… / like milk', 'long hair', 'round breasts', 'narrow waist', 'wine' dark, narrow 'neck'. and 'cheeks like chocolate cake'. Unabashed in his description, the poet is similarly bold in expressing his overwhelming desire to 'taste', 'drink', 'breath[e]', 'nibble' and bathe in all the sexual pleasures he sees his beloved can offer. Yet he might just as well be speaking allegorically of his powerful love for

and spontaneous embrace of the Tigre language to express the uniqueness of his love, realizing that his language is as unique as she is and must be the focus of his greatest passion. After all, the best erotic poetry must be, at least at in its composition, about loving nouns and verbs at least as much as the sexual parts of the body they refer to. Moreover, the poet thinks in a kind of libertine way that by being so explicit in his praise she cannot decline and can only embrace him. She is seduced by his erotic language first to sing, second to playfully express her pity, and third, which is left to the reader's imagination, to let the poet physically perform what he has poetically promised.

> Maybe something like this will bring
> My Juket back
> And she will sing
> *I see you suffering. Enough.*

'Suffering', of course, is not a word to be taken lightly when considering contemporary Eritrean poetry and the life experience of its poets of peace or war. However, the 'suffering' Osman conceives of is the result of being devoted not to Mars, a god of war, but to Venus, a god of love. Yet the poet expresses this result in a way that manifests itself, were the different contexts of war and love not apparent, in language similar to what might be heard from a poet like Isayas Tsegai in 'Lamentation' or Fessahazion Michael in 'Naqra'. Osman suggests that if Juket does not respond to the poet's blandishments, he can only be

> stuck
> Out in the cold
> With no one and nothing to make
> Life worth living.

Precisely such an application of the same kind of language of despair and lament to a love affair rather than to a national epic struggle for independence reveals the imaginative leap of a poet of peace like Osman who can create such a transformation, again as if the war never happened.

Born in 1961, Ghirmai Yohannes is an actor, poet and writer. His work includes television shows, children's programmes, videos, advertising, stand-up comedy and theatre. Poems like 'Like a Sheep' and 'Next Time Ask', first appearing in 1997, 'Unjust Praise', published in 1994, and 'Who Needs a Story?', published in 1996, typify a humor readily embraced, although not without its own, special kind of sardonic darkness.

Also known as 'San Diego', referring to the T-shirt with the American city's name emblazoned on it which he wore in the field during the armed struggle, Ghirmai Yohannes stands as an exemplar of a contemporary Eritrean poet who writes as if he has banished his wartime experience from his mind to create poems

about an everyday Eritrea and Eritreans who have enough problems as well as pleasures without constantly rehashing the war, too. His standing as one of Eritrea's most popular actors and comedians both onstage and on television might provide him with more poetic license than most Eritrean poets and writers to place a poetry of force and war securely in the past and to explore different aspects of a country that has fought so long and hard for the opportunity to appear, like most independent nations in the world, as something more than an armed struggle for independence and political self-determination. Like many Eritrean poets, he learnt his poetic craft in the field, notwithstanding the popularity of his post-war sensibility and persona: comic, ironic, at times detached, more existential than martial, absurdist, and more philosophical than political with twinges of self-contempt and a deep streak of fatalism. Nonetheless, San Diego's tone throughout his work remains light-hearted, however dire his conclusions. Yet even as a post-war poet, at the edges of his work a kind of survivor's guilt lingers to suggest that he and any citizens of the new, free Eritrea must live up to the legacy of their martyrs, remembering who they have been in order to realise who they are and who they must be if they are going not merely to survive but to thrive. In his poems Ghirmai Yohannes often picks up where the war leaves off, confronting a number of different experiences that everyday Eritreans would encounter in their various walks of life, both in and outside Eritrea – its people, attitudes, landscapes and stories.

'Like a Sheep' focuses on a casualty of emigration, someone who leaves Eritrea for the promise of greener pastures in another country. 'Blithely' innocent, like a sheep, he is 'Led with a rope around his neck, / …blindly follow[ing] the trader / And the butcher'. Crucially, not the poet but the process of being forced by personal circumstances to leave – compared to a rope around the neck – dehumanises the person. He is blind because he doesn't know or even suspect that those he pays for their assistance in his journey care about him only as a piece of meat to be delivered for a price. Neither a butcher nor a trader dare have any personal connection with his commodity. Although they might offer an 'official seal', it is fraudulent and/or forged since 'official' would mean the emigration was legal, that is, through proper government channels. Furthermore, his status as an illegal immigrant does not even come up to that of a refugee who, at least, maintains some official recognition. The poem's adding that those who help him say they have simply 'forgot[ten] / Or lost his documentation' and that 'he never [would have] bothered to get' it anyway reinforces the irresponsible basis for such a con game when unscrupulous human traffickers prey on someone clearly desperate but also innocent. In this respect, the poem portrays a situation worse, perhaps, than the all but hopeless situation of Tsegai's 'Lamentation' or Fessahazion's 'Naqra'. The former at least

retains the value of personal identity with 'I'm an Eritrean' and the latter at least can hold on to 'history'. The situation in 'Like a Sheep' affords neither. The illegal immigrant

> is stuck. What will he do?
> Are they his biggest problem?
> Back home he's forgotten.
> He forgets where he is, too.

Such hopelessness can ultimately be traced back to the devastation of the war, resulting in a huge exodus that results in a diaspora of refugees and immigrants, legal and illegal, but now the war is no longer the 'biggest problem'. The war might have at least offered a home, albeit it ruined, a national identity, however threatened and insecure, and a family, however dire its living conditions. But the illegal immigrant has none of these, perhaps the proverbial fate worse than death in a country like Eritrea where tradition and family ties retain a supreme importance despite their battering by war. Yet even worse, he lacks any awareness that he has lost them. Instead, he 'forgets where he is'. Home or away makes no difference. Neither place recognises him, and he seems unable to recognise either place.

Presenting such individual devastation, 'Like a Sheep' scrupulously avoids sounding judgemental. The tone remains objective, matter of fact, even hinting that such an end's inevitability should not arouse one's emotions and might even lead one to a kind of dismissive if rueful laughter, if only because the scenario is a common story. In this respect, the poet sounds sardonic. His objectivity also allows his poem to attain a kind of universal description of the perils of an illegal immigrant, be he or she ferried across the Red Sea, the Mediterranean or across the Rio Grande.

Another poem by San Diego, 'Next Time Ask', presents a similarly mordant voice, only its acerbic attitude encompasses not merely the sorry plight of an illegal immigrant but the entire range of human endeavor.

Fatalistic yet funny, 'Next Time Ask' shrugs off any emotion, ideology, aspiration or even personal attachment to confront

> One fact [that] won't go away.
> Tomorrow or today
> You know you have to die.
> Don't think of asking why.

A reader might be tempted to identify such an inscrutable conclusion with a quintessential Eritrean spirit that has survived wave after wave of invasions since ancient times. But a hard-bitten attitude that one's death is inevitable and that its time is predetermined no matter the circumstances reveals a sentiment

or lack thereof that can be heard anywhere. Moreover, the many often dramatic testimonies in contemporary Eritrean poetry about refusing to die or give up life's struggle make San Diego's poem a cultural anomaly just as much as it is the statement of a kind of world weary truth that someone or some nation that has escaped death repeatedly might offer in a cynical, ungrateful moment. Most of all, 'Next Time Ask' portrays a mood that could be experienced any time and anywhere, amidst a war or at peace, as if in a moment's reflection while sipping a cappuccino and reading a newspaper in a café, be it in Asmara, Amsterdam, Atlanta, Alice Springs or anywhere.

> The hole you never saw,
> The crash you don't expect,
> The condition no one detects,
> They're the law.

'They're the law' that leads to every headline because the law inevitably is forgotten as one goes about one's work and everyday activities whether a country is at war, at peace or, as can also be the case in Eritrea, stuck in between. The extreme of such forgetting comes when 'Full of trust and working hard, / You taste success, / Triumph – the crowd roars "yes!"' San Diego's observation on such a moment could not be more orthodox or ancient: 'dust is your reward'. Yet the key to his sensibility is that his conclusion avoids being dire and instead becomes lighthearted. As in 'Like a Sheep', 'Next Time Asks' typifies a kind of gallows humor, almost literally in the poem's last line. Lifting his poem out of the inevitable dust that every empire and human endeavor is destined to return to, San Diego reveals the ultimate folly of human rationality and its pretensions through a comparison with animals. He posits,

> At your reincarnation
> Why not raise your voice.
> 'I've been human before.
> Is it the only choice?
>
> Why must I always weep?
> Can I come back as a sheep…?'

Considering the conventionality of this comparison, at least from the time of the story of Abraham's sacrifice of a sheep instead of his son to the age of reason and thereafter when the limits of rationalism are widely satirised, one could say that San Diego's question has an added immediacy in a country where sheep and other animals appear not only in the countryside but in every city and town and on every street. A poetic colloquy comparing the wellbeing of human beings and animals also takes place between San Diego's

'Next Time Ask' and his colleague, Meles Negusse's poem, 'Wild Animals'. Yet the foundation for San Diego's preferring to be 'A monkey or a boar / To fall through the trap door' instead of a human rests on more than poetic convention. The poet raises a serious question in an invitingly un-serious way about what distinguishes the human from other animals. In 'Wild Animals', Meles Negusse highlights a human capacity for inflicting violence greater than any wild animal could, but he also implies that humanity's ability to be utterly non-violent might allow animals to escape their own natural propensity to violence in 'the jungle' as well as the violence that human beings can so willingly fall into. Negusse idealises the human city and '[t]he comforts of civilization' as opposed to 'the jungle' as the antidote for all violence in any animal, human or otherwise. But San Diego makes no such distinctions. He raises no expectations precisely because he sees them as fundamental to the human condition and its fundamental tragedy. For San Diego in 'Next Time Ask', a sheep or any animal maintains a state of innocence with no expectation that it is to be slaughtered, which he also implies about the illegal immigrant in 'Like a Sheep'. Insight or wisdom, which the immigrant lacks and which in 'Next Time Ask' the poet maintains but humorously wishes that he did not have, leads to the expectation of being slaughtered and/or to end up in '[t]he hole', '[t]he crash', with 'the condition' and eventually as dust. The tone of the poem suggests that the poet's wish is fatuous, but the logic of his poem concludes that the vanity of human wishes to escape by any means the lot of our fellow creatures and anything alive is even more fatuous. Although the poet in 'Next Time Ask' maintains neither the innocence of a sheep going to slaughter nor the vanity of thinking that his experience of life is to end any differently than the sheep, the poem renders both attitudes delusional. Ironically, the artifice, wit and irrepressible spirit of the poet in 'Next Time Ask' is quintessentially human, expressing and being anything but silent as a non-human animal about an irresolvable conflict. Yet as ironically and, one might hope, also quintessentially human, the poet cultivates an awareness about the limits of human understanding and expression in order to stress what might be humanity's greatest gift to both the world and itself as well as an ultimate insight for its survival. San Diego wants his reader to contemplate some of life's most basic questions about human survival while also making fun of thinking that one should contemplate anything, at least to any use.

The way that 'Next Time Ask' punctures humanity's pride in its own accomplishments, another poem, 'Unjust Praise', devalues one of Eritrean cuisine's primary ingredients – red pepper or *berbere* – and in the process gives new meaning to the phrase, 'salt of the earth'. Evoking the cultivation of salt around the Eritrean city of Massawa on the Red Sea, the poem begins with an

allusion to the beginning of the book of *Genesis* to suggest that salt came before God's creation of the universe:

> In the beginning
> The spirit moving
> Upon the face of the waters
> And in the breaking waves
> Tasted salt.

The religious note is not so much about connecting a necessary commodity to the divine as reconnecting to the land of Eritrea. In this respect the poem also evokes one of the most significant battles and milestones of Eritrea's struggle for independence: the liberation of Massawa in 1990, 'Operation Fenkil', which all but sealed Eritrea's victory in the war. Eritreans being able to savor the salt of their own land freely was a long time coming, and the poet revels in its presence – 'I see fields of it' – producing a kind of poetic, mini documentary in loving detail that any visitor to Massawa would recognise. Recounting a technology that could be as old as Eritrean poetry itself, San Diego beholds salt 'Drying on the shore' and considers himself a part of the process, too:

> We let in shallow lakes of sea
> To evaporate
> And the salt
>
> Accumulates along their edge
> Thanks to the sunlight.

Glorying in the simplicity, naturalness and beauty – from sun to sea to land – with which salt is obtained, the poet also sounds a note that cannot be taken for granted in a country frequently identified with bare subsistence: the salt is plentiful.

> Crystal white,
> Enough for every one,
> Harvested and sold
>
> In every shop and on the roads:
> Salt!

The way that San Diego's imagery of animals in 'Next Time Ask' has an everyday immediacy in an Eritrean context where they can be seen roaming almost any city or town, so does his focus on Eritrea's salt offer a readily identifiable and accessible image to provoke a reader or a listener again to reflect on life itself:

In proper measure
Bringing out the taste,
The flavor and spirit

Of our food, hot or cold….

Salt for San Diego resembles the Eritrean people, the 'masses' in Eritrean government parlance whose 'victory' all of the nation's efforts should uphold: or to use another popular phrase, 'the salt of the earth', the Eritrean earth. In this respect, the poet establishes a kind of fundamental equation: the Eritrean people give life and 'spirit' to the land of Eritrea, not vice versa. Eritrea itself might be considered a sparse, harsh and inhospitable place, able to sustain very little of anything much less a nation, but such a merely practical account fails to recognise Eritrea's greatest resources: its people. As salt, they may even be considered a minimal resource themselves, but behind San Diego's poem and within his image of salt there dwells a history of Eritrean self-determination as primary, profound and timeless as the power he calls to mind in his poem's 'beginning' with 'The spirit moving / Upon the face of the waters': a 'spirit' of the Eritrean people. Nevertheless, as the poet concludes, the 'Unjust Praise' of the poem's title still goes to 'pepper'. Eritrea's most famous form of pepper, berbere, which is red, can seem almost as ubiquitous as salt in making a strong impression in Eritrea's cuisine and its culture, and the quality and quantity of berbere in a meal can certainly provoke 'much admiration' among the diners. Ironically, many Eritreans even consider themselves not black like much of the rest of Africa but red. But even if Eritreans are red and thrive to no end on their red berbere, the poet's greatest praise, albeit 'in proper measure', locates their true 'spirit' in the 'Crystal white' salt. Elemental as the Eritrean people on the shore of the Red Sea, salt spreads from Eritrea's most towering highlands to its deepest, interior lowlands.

Praising Eritrea's salt, San Diego focuses on an element that he identifies with the 'spirit' of the Eritrean people. Similarly, he uses the consciousness (or lack thereof) of animals in 'Next Time Ask' and illegal immigration in 'Like a Sheep' to express other kinds of situations and predicaments that, with Eritrea's independence established and its war fading into a memory, still large segments if not most of the Eritrean population must confront. In the poem, 'Who Needs a Story?', however, San Diego contemplates the situation of a much smaller group, and one to whom this entire study has been devoted: Eritrea's contemporary poets. The incisive universality with which he dissects their position in their country and the world makes the title of this poem a perfect sort of questioning characterization to designate most contemporary Eritrean

poetry: thus the title of Eritrea's first anthology of contemporary poetry and what the present study is based on: *Who Needs a Story.*

The stated subject of the poem 'Who Needs a Story?' is not unique but conventional: 'I needed a story / And asked myself all day – / What can I write?' The poet ponders wanting to write a poem while not knowing what to write: a rhetorical or poetical occasion marked many times and in many languages. In the twentieth century, the Anglo Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, provides a famous example, as in the first line of a poem he wrote late in his career, 'The Circus Animals Desertion': 'I sought a theme and sought for it in vain'. Yeats explores the theme by flipping through a variety of poetic subjects – from Irish mythology to contemporary Irish politics – that have obsessed him over his long career, before he concludes, 'Maybe at last being but a broken man, / I must be satisfied with my heart'. Writing this kind of poem leads Yeats through intensely personal, poetic introspection finally to discover, 'I must like down where all the ladders start, / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'. Similarly, San Diego in 'Who Needs a Story?' also engages in an intense, extensive – 'It kept me awake all night' – form of personal, poetic and sometimes painful self-scrutiny to find out 'What do I have to say?' However, in the midst of his career, unlike Yeats contemplating the end of his, San Diego does not present a catalogue of his poetic accomplishments thus far but focuses on the writing process. Unlike Yeats, yet unlike many of his Eritrean poetic contemporaries, San Diego wants no 'story' of Eritrean myth or politics through which to project his own poetic concerns. Moreover, his situation suggests why he is so thoroughly a poet of peace and not of war and not even of war and peace in Eritrea.

San Diego's 'Who Needs a Story?' provides a perfect focal point to consider all of the stories that his contemporary Eritrean poetic colleagues employ in their work: most of whose choices of a particular narrative in some way typify an aspect of the story of the Eritrean nation coming into being during its long and violent struggle for independence and thereafter. Yet beginning his poem with the suggestion that he has no such story either about himself or his country, although he wants one – at an endpoint of the armed struggle in which he must define himself in peace – San Diego's poem might also be read as resembling an Eritrea and an Eritrean with no such narrative, neither in their own eyes nor in the eyes of the world at a kind of historic moment before the armed struggle for a national identity began seeking some kind of narrative either of nation or self. He does not even say, like Isayas Tsegai beholding the near total ruin of his land and his sense of self, 'I'm an Eritrean'.

San Diego's focusing on the process of determining 'a story' or the story for himself or, by extension, his country, cannot be taken lightly. What is

the story of Eritrea? Many versions have been offered. The culmination of an undeniable nationalism that fought 'against all odds' to gain independence? A rebel region really belonging to Ethiopia? An ancient yet a new, one-party state with a prickly attitude towards its neighbors and the rest of the world? Who determines the story of Eritrea that is most widely recognised? Who seizes what story and makes it stick? The same question might be asked about any nation. What is the story of the United States? The land of opportunity? A melting pot? Lone super power? Immigrant nation? Incorrigibly imperialist, fundamentalist capitalist democracy exporting war all over the world? A poet's story is likely to be different from a journalist's story. One might have a more local or cultural perspective; one might have a more political or global perspective. A government's story about itself is bound to be different from an individual's, at least if either is attempting to tell its own truth. Moreover, in Eritrea's case, its contemporary poets tell a different story about their nation than any government, including their own, journalist, NGO or scholar – yet a story that many Eritreans can recognise even if most of the world, including the poetry world, is waiting or not to hear. San Diego brings contemporary Eritrean poetry to a point where it can recognise its own story – a group of stories – yet ask if any of these stories are or should be the story instead of it being something more and in the future. Yet if it is, what will that story be? What will be its source? Neither San Diego nor anyone knows, beyond the fact that it begins with the poet: a fact that San Diego, more than any other Eritrean poet, insists upon. Let a thousand stories bloom, he implies, but let none of them deny – and here Isayas Tsegai's refrain can apply – '*I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean*'.

San Diego offers an absurd tragedy of illegal immigration, perhaps the equally absurd fact of extinction and oblivion for any person being as inevitable as any animal's, and the elemental reality of salt drying and accumulating on the Red Sea shore as some of his stories of who he is and the Eritrea he comes from. Just as important is his story that he needs a story and doesn't know what it is, because it is his story and Eritrea's, too. One might say that every person and every nation needs such a story to succeed. He struggles to find it, confessing that he has

> Emptied so many words
> And ideas out of my brain
> It would have floated away
> If not tied to my heart.

Uniquely identified not only with feeling or emotion but also with thinking, the Tigrinya word for 'heart', *lebi,* introduces a distinctly Eritrean quality to

San Diego's quest. As Alemseged Tesfai, Eritrea's premier historian and one of its greatest writers remarks in the documentary, *Against All Odds*:

> In most of our Eritrean languages, the heart is not just a life-giving organ. In Tigrinya, a wise man or wise woman is called *lebam*, and wisdom is *lebona*.… Like all humanity we think with our heads, but we say we think with our hearts. The heart is the creator. The pen is the creation of the heart. When I speak of the pen, I speak of the heart. I speak of how the Eritrean heart acted throughout the struggle. Performance also is the performance of the heart. Eritrean history is a struggle between forces that have been trying to write off Eritrea as a nation, to simply ignore it as something that did not exist, and the heart of Eritreans that refused to bend to these forces of destruction. As a writer I will speak from the heart.[1]

Such a 'heart' becomes a firm foundation for Tesfai's and San Diego's own as well as his country's struggle. Such a heart makes the struggle of the individual and the writer and the nation one and the same. But the problem in 'Who Needs a Story?' of San Diego finding a story for himself remains unsolved despite his undeniable strength because, as he immediately adds, 'Now I need…art'. Furthermore, the art must be his own, since he holds the 'Paper and pen' in his 'hand', suggesting that the contemporary poet who writes confronts a different problem in finding a story for him or herself than does the oral poet who can, for one thing, at least rely on a long and continuous tradition upon which to base his or her work. The traditional oral poet and the contemporary poet who writes ideally maintain an opposite critical premise about the respective story they impart – the former already knows it, the latter must find it. San Diego suggests that his 'heart' may be as strong and dependable as the traditional oral poet's, but it cannot begin to compare its powers of articulation since such a 'heart['s]' self assertion cannot measure up in terms of 'art' with the oral traditions' powers of poetic performance. Nearly overwhelmed with this realization, the poet wants to escape his dilemma, or at least put it off, by saying 'Tomorrow I w[ill] start'. However, a more self-defeating problem exists for him than mere procrastination in another question: start what? It provokes him to pause for a moment in his self-dramatization of the poetic process, adding 'But wait'.

At this point in the poem, the story of Eritrean independence and the story of the poet converge. San Diego asks,

> What is this all about?
> Do I really need a story?
>
> All this time and hard work –
> For what?

A poet or a writer is not a given or *a priori* assumption without a story, since he or she cannot even exist without it, notwithstanding the inevitable 'time and hard work' that realizing a story involves. Similarly, a nation must have a story and a host of stories forming a dynamic national identity, or it is not a nation. Moreover, Eritrea's distinct and unique story – its nationalism – that Eritreans maintain to have always known deep in their 'heart[s]' – that other countries could not or would not recognize – forced Eritreans to fight and win their independence. Quite simply, Eritreans recognised their own unique stories before anyone else did: a requirement, perhaps, for all successful independence movements. Yet a similar requirement exists for poets and writers, who also must recognise their own, individual stories before anyone else does in order to write them: to be determined enough to take 'Paper and pen in hand,' or computer keyboard and screen, and to expend the 'time and hard work' – and then to offer it to someone else.

At this point, San Diego's dramatised self-examination of his writing process becomes most unrelenting. His disgust over his work – signaled by the abrupt question, 'For what?' – at seemingly wasting his time thinking about what to write but producing nothing – except his excellent poem, ironically – turns to self-disgust: 'I hate myself for thinking this'. He hates himself either for thinking that he has no 'story' or for thinking that 'words', 'ideas' and 'art' are the source of his story. He hates himself for hating himself so much that thus far in the poem he has not thought that he is worthy of writing a poem or telling the story he knows best. He suffers not so much from a lack of imagination or information or writer's block as he does from a lack of both self-respect and confidence: a little as if Eritreans themselves throughout their armed struggle for independence thought like nearly every other country in the world that Eritrea really did not deserve or warrant being an independent nation. Yet similarly, the simple, undeniable strength of San Diego's self-recovery at this low point in his poem resembles Eritreans having won their armed struggle and then with a ninety-nine percent plurality voting themselves for their nation to be independent. The poet realises, 'I already have a story / That nobody knows and it's great – / I am the story'. Again, the conclusion is not unique, since he sounds, to take only one famous example, like the English Renaissance poet, Philip Sidney, in the last line of his poem about not being able to write when he wants to write, calling himself a 'fool' since he does not 'look in…[his] heart and write'. But the Eritrean context for such a conclusion makes San Diego's poem both a powerful statement for an individual Eritrean – poet or otherwise – and even a kind of anthem for this new nation assuming its rightful place

among the nations of the world. San Diego might hate himself in his poem because he has forgotten or initially chosen not to write about the story of his own struggle and Eritrea's struggle that gave him nothing less than his name, San Diego, in the first place. Or he might hate himself for thinking that he has no story to tell about his life or life in Eritrea either before the struggle or after the war when he is involved in his country's struggle for peace. Knowing either story or set of stories, should he be silent or search for some other 'words', 'ideas' or 'art' that either are not his or that he doesn't know as well? If he does or is silent, then no one in the world – besides a few Eritreans, perhaps, if Eritreans continue to survive as citizens of a nation of Eritrea and/or of ethnic and language groups with their roots in Eritrea – can know about Eritrea or him, and *that* is a situation that Eritrea's contemporary poets precisely through their poems refuse to accept – no more wavering than Eritrea's fighters who won their nation's independence.

Eritrea as a nation now is universally recognised if not widely known. Eritrea's contemporary poets are, for the most part, unknown and therefore not yet recognised. Nevertheless, they can all say, like San Diego, 'Who needs a story?', because they have so many of their own. This book has only presented some of them. Eritrea can be truly known, only when they are known. What nation can ever be known without its poets and their poems known? They have the stories, and what does the world know without them?

None of Eritrea's contemporary poets need a story. They all have their own and they are 'great'. If 'nobody knows' them, or if they are only known for the most part to Eritreans, then this book has a purpose: to make them known. Ghirmai Ghebremeskel is the story, prophesying towards the end of Eritrea's armed struggle for independence a multitude of Eritrean poets writing in a burst of light not only about war but war and peace. Solomon Drar is the story, asking repeatedly and demanding, 'Who said Merhawi is dead?' as he offers his war hero and those whom he inspires to be the conscience of the nation as they hold their candles and walk in the mass procession down Liberation Avenue in Asmara on Martyrs Day in late June. Mussa Mohammed Adem is the story, his poem, 'The Invincible', epitomizing force and a hero of epic dimensions whose identity becomes indistinguishable from the terrible violence he inflicts so that his nation can be born. Mohammed Osman Kajerai is the story, writing his own poetry of force. Offering little consolation beyond armed struggle itself and seeing 'martyrs, martyrs and more martyrs… / …no greater glory or victory' and, challenging any expectation that poetry or 'singing', the landscape, the elements and friendship provide a kind of transcendent moment

or serve as a kind of respite amidst war, still he sings. Fessahazion's Michael is the story, his poem, 'Naqra', indelibly imprinting in Eritrean history the desolate island prison in the Red Sea off the Eritrean coast as a place where all true poems of force begin and end. Isayas Tsegai is the story, barely able to utter on the brink of death, '*I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean',* but with these words fighting to win back his nation, in all its previous glory, even if it requires his being overwhelmed by all he has to bury. Mohammed Mahmoud El-Sheikh (Madani) is the story, writing poetry in the midst of battle, where he thinks about art and scripture, wants to paint with the barrel of his gun and, beholding the wasteland of battle, where he sings for his children. Fessehaye Yohannes is the story, stringing pearls of metamorphosis on a thread of elegy in the vain hope that he can bring back his friend killed in battle but whom the poet must ultimately follow. Ribka Sibhatu is the story, remembering her cellmate during the war and a basket – a thing of beauty but as difficult to contemplate as Naqra – that she made for her parents, as her last act before she was executed. Solomon Tsehaye is the story, happy to be back and simply working the land after the war but, haunted by an Eritrean mother crying for those who have not returned, struggling to pick up his life again without feeling guilty that he still has it. Paulos Netabay is the story, remembering the war by lovingly pronouncing place names of Sahel, as if their sound might be the only way to deal with the pain he still feels when thinking about it. Ahmed Mohammed Saad is the story, barely able to imagine anything but war yet unable to continue if he doesn't at least try to imagine something constructive, like 'building a road', when all he really sees is the 'pain / Of humiliation, prison and chains'. Ahmed Omer Sheikh is the story, a kind of biblical Abraham with Eritrean scepticism, reading the beauties of the natural world as a promise that the nation whose existence he fights for seems destined someday to thrive, but knowing that the promise can be broken, no matter how strong his voice or how hard he fights. Angessom Isaak is the story, dazzled by the unbelievable brightness of Eritrea in the dawn of its liberation, then crashing into an everyday reality 'blacker than a crow's eye' but still seeing 'More than I have ever seen, / More than I have ever heard, / And more than I can explain'. Meles Negusse is the story, surveying the wreckage of his country, reduced to a smoldering state of nature which even the animal's flee, and invoking the traditional Eritrean muse, Mammet, for her to reconsecrate it with poetry and more of the fruit of a peaceable civilization. Fortuna Ghebreghiorgis is the story, stalked by a kind of inner violence, at war with herself amidst the most inescapable of battlefields. Saba Kidane is the story, a poet who can focus on

an everyday Eritrea at peace, providing scenes of a mother watching her child grow up or two young people flirting with each other in the street without the specter of war hovering over them, although a young Eritrean mother and her baby son must beg to survive on the same street since their father – or is it their government? – has abandoned them, and this same mother's determination can spur a poetic call for all Eritrean women to return to the battlefield if necessary. Beyene Hailemariam is the story, another poet who has left the war behind him, once and for all, to write about everyday matters of love, divorce and reunions with not always desirable old friends. Reesom Haile is the story, finding the local and the global in the voice of Eritrean poetry and offering his refrain in Tigrinya, '*Alewuna, Alewana*', 'We have, we have', to crown an anthem of self-confidence and self-reliance based on true self-knowledge. Abdul Hakim Mahmoud-El-Sheikh is the story, surreally hymning a love both profane and sacred, devoting his love and unable to separate longing for his dead lover and the aspirations of the Eritrean revolution. Mohammed Said Osman is the story, in his lament of a spurned lover hoping that the witty portrayal of his suffering can win back his beloved, but all the while revealing a love for Tigre verbs and nouns at least as much as for her 'round breasts', 'narrow waist' and 'cheeks like chocolate cake'. Ghirmai Yohannes, 'San Diego', is the story, seeing Eritreans become the flotsam of illegal immigration when they are really the salt of the earth, comically but bitterly identifying human beings as the most proud and vainglorious of animals despite our pretensions to be more, and mock-asking the question, 'Who needs a story?' when he knows that he like all contemporary Eritrean poets of war and peace have plenty of stories to tell each other and the world.

Notes

[1] Alemseged Tesfai offers this observation in the documentary, *Against All Odds*. Nevertheless, his sentiment is a recurring premise throughout his fiction, nonfiction, historical writing and drama.

Chapter Five

Reesom Haile, *geTamay*

I

I first encountered Reesom Haile in Asmara in 1998, one evening during Eritrea's annual, outdoor, 8-day cultural festival in Asmara: a highly popular event, thronged with people from Asmara and from throughout Eritrea, and featuring all of the arts – agricultural, domestic, industrial, language, performing, technological, and visual. Taking place in the extensive fairgrounds called 'Expo', the festival's theme was 'Inheritance'. It encouraged Eritreans from all walks of life to experience their new nation through the many forms of its longstanding and highly valued multicultural and multimedia expression. Be it a poem, a computer program, a painting, an ancient manuscript, a display of tools, a dance, desert housing, a popular song, a camel, a coffee, a textile or a pile of particular wood to make a fire, people could look all around them at a wealth of highly varied examples of their culture, including each other, and marvel, in Reesom Haile's words echoing later that evening from the podium, '*Alewuna, Alewana*', 'We have…we have…'.

I was following the crowd to a poetry reading. The area where it took place seemed to be shaped like a basin, with children – whom I did not expect to see at such an event – seated in the middle, the poet and the audience at opposite edges. Actually, the arrangement was a mere platform with a podium and the audience gathered in a flat place in front of it – but my initial misimpression was telling.

To lament the marginalization of the arts in education, commerce, government and many forms of globalization is a commonplace, albeit confronted and defied by many artists, advocates and critics. However, the Expo festival situated the arts at the center of a national culture in a way that I had never realised – because it included so many different kinds of arts and people – and never had experienced before.

When Reesom Haile read his poems from a stage at the center of the Expo festival, again I saw a kind of artistic performance that I had never seen before. The communication between the poet and his audience was total and on all levels, banishing any questions of accessibility, aesthetics, purpose, and relevance. The audience and the reading space even seemed physically raised and level with the poet speaking his lines. The children in the middle were

joining Reesom Haile in what he recited, anticipating and echoing them, with great pleasure, too, especially when he spoke the poem, '*Alewuna, Alewana*'. It swept through the crowd and it was sweeping the entire nation and its diaspora with the verbal music of Eritrean affirmation in Tigrinya:

We have men and women...
We have women and men…
Without end in the struggle
To grow, study and persist.
Who think and think again
To teach, learn and know…
Without the lust for power.
Who stand up or down
With our consent.
We have God and a future.
We have men and women
Who belong in our nation
And we belong with them…
We have women and men.
Rejoice.

'Rejoice' – I was saying to myself as I beheld such a spectacle, and as I say now remembering it – when poetry can become a kind of daily bread or currency for all kinds of people – writers, children, artists, students, young professionals, working people, the elderly, government people – and create a rapport and a give and take among all, including the poet. This is a work of high value.

Reesom Haile came from a family of traditional farmers in Eritrea, in a valley roughly fifty kilometres south of Asmara, where he was born, raised and educated through high school. After working as a radio and television journalist in Ethiopia, he continued his education in the United States. Obtaining a doctorate in Communications from New York University, he served for twenty years as a Development Communications consultant, working with UN Agencies, governments and NGOs around the world before returning to Eritrea in 1994. Over the next nine years, until his death in 2003, he wrote over two thousand poems in Tigrinya. Most of them, including many in his first collection, published in 1997, *Waza Ms Qumneger Ntnsae Hager*, or *Lift Up Your Knowing Smiles*, remain untranslated. His first collection in English was *We Have Our Voice*, published in 2000. As he became more and more widely published and recognised for his revolutionary modernization of the traditional art of poetry in Tigrinya, Reesom Haile received substantial scholarly and critical

attention and extensive media coverage, including *BBC* (UK), *CNN* (USA), *Deutche Welle* (Germany), *RAI* (Italy), *dmtsi Hafash* (Eritrea) *Radio Vatican (*The Vatican), *NPR* (USA), *SABC* (South Africa), *SBS* (Australia) and *VOA* (USA) and more. His performances in Tigrinya and English inspired audiences throughout Africa, Europe and America. The enormous popular appeal of his poetry – in print and on the internet – was evident from the streets of Asmara to the far fields of the Eritrean countryside, where to stroll with Reesom Haile at any hour was to be approached by the young and old and all kinds of people who were delighted to quote his lines back to him: '*Alewuna, Alewana*…'.

Reesom Haile attributes the phenomenon of his popularity to the nature of Eritrean poetry and to its Eritrean audience:

> Our poetry is not something that has left our tongue and lived in the books for a very long time. Our poetry is participatory. When I recite my poetry at home, the people listening to me will say, 'add this to that, add this to that'. It is participatory. It's not something that we put on the wall and say, 'Oh, this is pretty'. Our traditional poetry form is *ad hoc*. Someone will just get up and say something to try to capture the spirit of that particular time. And people will add, 'why don't you say so, why don't you add this, why don't you extend it'. It is very much part of the tradition. I am putting it on paper because I think it is about time we start storing it for the next generation.

A poet with a small ego is a rarity, and Reesom Haile is no exception, but this does not necessarily disqualify him from being a voice of the people and a strong nationalist. Moreover, the poetry of Reesom Haile reveals a joining of words and worlds from the perspective of the collective, the community, the society and the nation of which he is a part. In oral if not in written form, according to Reesom Haile,

> Poetry is not a special activity of poets, for everyone is a potential a poet. Only that some people are more gifted than others in the art and their words and words more memorable. The poem is not an object separate and apart from its function: to ease the pain and to celebrate the pleasure of life. Women and men alike express themselves in music and poetry while at work or at play.

II

Reesom Haile considers his writing in Tigrinya:

> A going back to what God has given you and saying 'I'm not going to give it up'. It's your freedom, your speech, your self-definition, and

> your self-expression. You cannot give it up. If you lose your language, it isn't just the language you lose. It's the cultural codes imbedded in that language. It's the values, the sense of community, and the sense that I am responsible for my brother, my sister, my mother, and they are equally responsible to me. This is what I do not want my people to lose.

His language of Tigrinya and his writing poetry in Tigrinya become a kind of individual genesis and, by his invoking God, it returns him to a kind of biblical genesis in which the word is the primary means of creation itself.

Reesom Haile also writes in a spirit that is inseparable from Eritrea's century-long struggle for independence, so that Eritrea's genesis adds another dimension to his own, and vice versa. He contends, "The Eritrean struggle for independence is the primary motive force for my art…. We Eritreans have taken on all comers for our right to self-determination, and my art is but a continuation and an expansion of that struggle aimed at self-definition."

He views Eritrea's war for independence as simultaneously a war for its culture: its ancient traditions as well as its modern manifestations and transformations. He sees an undeniable historical pattern:

> Successive enemies of Eritrean independence over the years have tried defining Eritrea in ways that would justify the outrageous measures they would take to deny Eritrea its place in the sun. They have tried to diminish Eritrea politically, economically, militarily, and culturally into non-existence except as an appendage of the builders of colonial and neo-colonial empires. But Eritrea has proved a survivor….

War as a cultural education towards making peace requires not only the barrel of a gun but also the barrel of a pen, as Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes at the outset of *Decolonising the Mind*. The cultural bomb can be as deadly as bombs falling from the sky. Considering Ngugi's idea in the context of the Eritrean armed struggle and focusing on the Eritrean fighter / writer, Alemseged Tesfai argues that 'What is in the mind of the person holding the gun and pulling the trigger? The fighter and the writer not only need each other. They are often the same person – and always the same person in spirit'.[7] Yet as Reesom Haile also recalls:

> I returned to Eritrea in 1994 after twenty years of life in exile. I came back to find our languages and our poetry a bit battered, but well, considering they, too, had been targeted for extinction…. But we carried our languages and our art in our memories and our voices, and we used them as effectively as we used our weapons to defend ourselves throughout the struggle.

Vitally linked, Reesom Haile's language of self-determination and political self-determination produce a supreme poetry of resistance with the confidence to ask on behalf of his beloved language, as he writes in 'The Transit of Tigrinya',

But what did you assume
About Tigrinya?
Eritrea's daughter,
She wants respect,
The same as you.
Dare her,
She'll dare you, too.
She knows the way
To overcome
The invading tongues:
Her words, her names
Cut them off.

Confronting successive waves of nineteenth and twentieth century attempts to colonise Eritrea, Haile also considers his local language and its poetry as *the* means of survival, as he writes in 'Believe It or Not'.

Remember the Italians
Who invaded and said
Eat but don't speak?
Remember the English
Who invaded and said
Speak but don't eat?
Remember the Amharas
Who invaded and said
Don't speak and don't eat....
Believe it or not,
They want to kill us…

To deal with such an historical and political reality, Haile crafts a poetry of resistance that is inseparable from the life of the poet and of his country, as he deftly sets forth in 'esh!'

The dergue
Behaved better
Than the latest
Swarm of invaders,
Haile Selassie
Better than the dergue,
And Menelik

Better than Selassie….
But my country says
Forward,
And esh the Turkish,
esh Egyptians,
esh Italians,
esh the English,
esh Amharas,
esh Tigreans,
esh the locusts.
esh!
Like a flywhisk.

Yet as poems like 'Believe It or Not', 'esh!' and many other examples of Reesom Haile's work demonstrate, his poetry of individual and national resistance and survival does not require mere seriousness. Wit, intelligence and self-assurance are also key components.

While focusing on and from the standpoint Eritrean culture, Reesom Haile's poetry of resistance also has a global dimension as a part of, again in his words, 'the indomitable struggle of humanity'. He has a self-stated 'mission… to create links between my country and the world'. Celebrating a 'genuine', 'Eritrean culture' that expresses 'the essence of human struggle', as he sees it, his poetry can simultaneously partake of a literary impulse that is universal, making a literary truism breathe new life. His 'imagination' with his 'poet's pen', in Shakespeare's words from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'bodies forth / The forms of things unknown' (V.1.14-15). He '[t]urns them to shapes, and gives to aery nothing / A local habitation and a name' (V.1.16-17).

Yet if the habitation is African, let the name be African, as the resounding African word is universally understood – as if the story of Babel and the confusion of tongues are not true – by people of all walks of life, all ages and in many languages, local and international, as Reesom Haile's wide-ranging popularity makes evident during his brief writing career: from under the giant sycamore trees of arid Eritrea to the elegant arts venues of downtown New York City; from the poor, local communities of Johannesburg, South Africa, or Newark, New Jersey to the halls of some of the world's most distinguished universities.

Reesom Haile cultivates Tigrinya and its 'local habitation' with astonishing variety. His two bilingual – Tigrinya / English – collections of poems, *We Have Our Voice* and *We Invented the Wheel*, present a myriad of subjects, including: gender equality, colonialism, foreign aid, the use of knowledge, bureaucracy,

history, crime, priests, travel, daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, camels, books, education, homecomings, exile, money, computers, braggarts, religion, political leadership, hopes, delusions, bravery, civic responsibility, stars, God, illiteracy, ambition, divisiveness, survival, Satan, democracy, old friends, mothers and fathers, cities, small towns, cruelty, soccer, intolerance, impulsiveness, love, language, nightlife, freedom, writing, indecision, non-governmental agencies, learning, sex, super powers, bread, marital responsibility, competition, snails, American foreign policy, democracy, women's rights, global politics, casualties of war, love, the young, elders, the nature of advice, spousal abuse, cooking, cannibalism, coffee, self-image, sleeping together, proverbs, ethnic conflict, carousing, biblical stories, tourism, national identity, aging, values, the future, the pen, words, exile, shoes, masculinity, teaching babies to walk, videos of weddings, religious hypocrisy, history, body parts, suicide, funerals, taboos, freedom, independence, infidelity, flywhisks, community, temptation, unspeakable evil, spirits, old and new housing, frankness, circles, labor, ancestors, mothers, prayers, parenting, toys, food, starvation, war, donkeys, the millennium, Jews, Muslims, Christians, punctuation, political evil, weather, onomatopoeia, loss, wisdom, literature, peace, jokes, teachers, culture, hierarchy, individualism, letters, pastry, paper, poverty, hope, surnames, God, George Bush II, sacrifice, survival, African leaders, dictators, devils, language, relationships, regrets, dependable people, dissent, angels, and home – and often humorously. Reesom Haile wants to be sure he has a poem to match the interests or every kind of person he meets – Eritrean, African, or otherwise.

Yet offering such a wide range of subjects in his poetry, Reesom Haile's achievement is doubly powerful and unique, exceeding the range of any other African poet and doing so in an African language.

III

Writing in Tigrinya, Reesom Haile joins and becomes a leader in the growing movement of African authors who are now writing in African languages: their own mother tongues instead of colonial languages like English and French or, in the case of Eritrean writers, Italian and even Amharic, a major language of Ethiopia imposed on Eritrea before it won its independence in 1991. This rise of African vernaculars, paralleling the rise of truly independent and democratic African nations, promises a twenty-first century with the full potential be an African century for literature.

European literature's takeover by vernacular languages took place so long

ago that few but mediaeval and classical students and scholars want to or even can read the thousands of years of writing in Latin and Greek that preceded it. Yet the European Renaissance, also designated as the early modern period, precisely paralleled the rise of European languages other than Greek and Latin. Furthermore, the European Renaissance was inconceivable without the growth and development of vernacular languages, not only in literature and the arts, but also in science, government, politics, philosophy, religion, education, medicine, economics and social and personal development. Readers who limited themselves to authors writing in Latin would have missed the likes of Dante, Petrarch, Chaucer, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Cervantes and many others writing in their own vernaculars – and this was only the *literature* that would have been missed. To live during the European Renaissance and to miss these writers and the wealth of other written activity and information in European vernaculars at the time would have been to miss the Renaissance's greatest source of life. European vernaculars were, of course, always in use in everyday European life by everyone nearly all the time, but to have missed its representation in the literature and performance of these languages would have reflected a debilitating, exclusive aesthetic and a philosophy or belief about language that did, after all, prove fatal. Again, who of real or lasting intellectual importance was reading and writing only in Latin or Greek by the end of the European Renaissance?

Readers and listeners today who are limited to African writers in English, French or other Europhone languages risk being similarly cut off, although great African writers continue working in these languages and are second to none in developing them. But African writers have many, many more languages than Europhone languages – African languages. African writers also have many, many more readers in African languages – African readers. African literature cannot and does not exclude but accepts and continues to rejoice in African writers in Europhone languages because the reality of Africa means that they are African, too. Yet great African languages like Yoruba, Zulu, Swahili, Gikuyu, Hausa, Akan, Amharic, Tigrinya, hundreds and thousands more require what Europhone readers have not previously needed to read great contemporary African literature – *translators*. This new and widespread need for translators of contemporary African language writing should not be surprising. It follows a familiar, historical pattern and a natural need. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes, in the documentary *Against All Odds*, African language writers 'see their role as that of doing for African languages and cultures what all writers and intellectuals of other cultures and histories have done for theirs'. The goal still

is, in Matthew Arnold's words, which Ngugi does not shy away from invoking, 'the best that has been known and thought in the world'.

Thousands of African languages, ancient and modern, are spoken and / or written locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously states, 'to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life', and surely no language is an exception. Each is like a human being with his or her own complex biology, even including a kind of verbal genome. Would anyone who contends that some languages are not vitally important because they are spoken by too few people from tiny geographical places say the same about similarly sized and remote cultures that originated the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, or the manuscripts of Homer and Sophocles? Where or what would Europhone languages and cultures be – including their profound extensions in North and South America – without their translations of these texts from locales and populations that are small by both contemporary and ancient standards? The answer is inconceivable. The influence of such texts, however humble their origins, is ubiquitous, practically timeless and inseparable from any sense of self, soul, state or the beyond precisely because these texts have been willingly, eagerly and frequently translated. Reverenced in the original and translated continually, they create a desire for lifelong learning. To turn to African language writings, the rewards of their translation are considerable, and the promise of their originals is greater still.

The simplest, fairest, most democratic, economic and achievable way to improve African lives and livelihoods through the application of knowledge, science, technology, research and analysis is the empowerment of African languages. The vitality and equality of African languages should be recognised as the basis for the future empowerment of African people. African languages, including their translation into each other and into other world languages, offer *the* alternative vision of development in Africa, establishing African languages as a primary source for traditional and future social change, economic development and individual self-realization in Africa's twenty-first century. The incongruity of only colonial derived languages speaking for the African continent can only become more and more apparent as a new century and millennium unfold with more and more African language writers rejecting this incongruity and affirming a new beginning by returning to their own mother tongues. Furthermore, the question of culture, literatures and languages cannot be separated from the economic problems caused by colonial and neocolonial forces and their local allies. Realism and pragmatism dictate the teaching and use of international languages like French or English and others. But how can

they connect and not disconnect – with all of their resources and information – with the vast majority except through their own, mother tongues? As European vernacular languages feed a vast array of creative fires that burning into each other became the European Renaissance, so the African Renaissance simply and directly addresses the most basic demand and reaches out to a natural constituency of writers, teachers, readers and speakers in local languages – the vast majority of Africans – to encourage and enable all kinds of information dissemination in African languages. They are the keys to the development of a culture of peace and prosperity in Africa. Their diversity reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa itself and is the primary instrument for African unity.

A mirror image of Africa itself, African languages have had and continue to struggle 'against all odds' to be heard in education, political and social policy, government and the arts, where non-African languages generally are dominant. For example, other than for Arabic, a language of northern and other parts of Africa, no other language popularly spoken in Africa is heard in the Security Council of the United Nations. Even the Organization of African Unity (OAU) used no others, and its replacement, the African Union, includes only one African language – Swahili – in its deliberations. This marginalization or silencing of African languages results in the disempowerment of the vast majority of Africans, precisely because they do not speak non-African languages: the same Africans who are always the first and most long-suffering victims of war, poverty, epidemic, famine and other catastrophes. People speaking and hearing for themselves in their own mother tongues are the greatest force for peace and development. The exclusion of African languages from most African political, social, economic, educational and personal development is an aggressive act against African people, whether it originates from outside or inside Africa. The defence of such an exclusion based on a lack of financial resources or the alleged impracticality and even impossibility of comprehensive African language promotion and development is merely passive aggressive. Language rights are a part of human rights, too. How else are they honestly to be stated, communicated and understood? – especially by the vast majority of people in Africa who simply do not speak French, English or any other European or international languages? As Ngugi wa Thiong'o asks, 'If some of the best and most articulate of the interpreters of African total being insist on interpreting in languages not understood by the subject of their interpretation, where lies the hope of African deliverance?'

Geneticists now link all human beings to a single migration of a few hundred people out of Africa roughly 65,000 years ago. Contemporary linguists say

that human beings developed the full capacity to use language approximately 100,000 years ago, again in Africa. As reported in the *New York Times*, announcing the successful mapping of the biological genome, Francis Collins of the National Institute of Health in the United States characterises the event as 'the revelation of the first draft of the human book of life' (*New York Times*, 6/27/00). Bill Clinton, president of the United States at the time, claims that 'today we are learning the language with which God created life'. If God did speak such a language, it sounds like it had to be African!

Of course there are many great African novelists and poets in European languages like English, French and others, but in African languages there are far more, including age-old traditions of oral storytellers and poets – *griots, griottes, djalis, geTamo, geTemti* – throughout the continent. Furthermore, the list of African language artists – written and oral – is long and growing everyday, but who knows them? Or knows more than a relative few? Still, how can we not imagine that someday the list of African writers in African languages might dwarf and, perhaps, relegate to obscurity – even if it be undeserved – African writers who have not used them?

IV

Tigrinya, the language of Reesom Haile's poetry, is a Semitic language and, like the languages of Tigre and Amharic, derives from the ancient language of Ge'ez. It derives, like Hebrew and Arabic, from Aramaic, which is often thought to have been a language – along with Greek and Hebrew – of the original composition of much of the Old and New Testament and of Jesus.

While Tigrinya is a major language of Eritrea, Eritrea has no one official language but officially recognises nine languages. These nine languages are the basis of a progressive mother-tongue education system in Eritrea, which from the beginning of school up to the fifth grade. Also, news reports, judicial proceedings and government programmes and documents function in all nine languages. Obviously such a policy is not without its political and economic difficulties, but it is based on the simple and imperative realization that if the language of any group of people – however small in population – is not recognised, then the people who make primary use of that language cannot be recognised, leading to injustice and inequality if they are to try to participate and be represented in a democratic society. Moreover, what Eritrea lacks in financial resources it makes up for in the national will to implement its progressive language policy. Few African countries are as determined, although another notable example of such

enlightenment about its national languages is South Africa, having mandated that its new Constitution should exist in eleven languages.

Contrary to the idea that translation, by growing an audience, hastens the demise of mother tongues, international or global recognition and translation have enhanced and not endangered Reesom Haile's poetry in Tigrinya. Widely published – yet almost always, on the poet's insistence, appearing bilingually, too, in the original Tigrinya and, if possible, the Tigrinya Ge'ez script – the translation of Tigrinya and its growing audience become a means of preservation for the language itself and – as a medium of profound, local humanism universally reaching out – for our entire, endangered world.

Aiming to enhance and not to endanger the stature of the African language of Tigrinya, the translation of Reesom Haile's poetry still raises the question of the degree to which translations into English can match the style and music of the original. Addressing the literal, oral / aural, literary and poetic sense of the original, and more, impossibilities of translation arise. Not all of the levels of meaning and association that a Reesom Haile poem offers to anyone who hears or reads it in the Tigrinya original can be offered in English, but of what language and its translation could this not also be said? For example, the original Tigrinya contains an absolutely daunting abundance of rhyme that would be impossible in English of any period or any serious style, not even in dub or rap. Nevertheless, while speakers of Tigrinya and English know what any merely English version continues to miss, a poetic faith in the translation process never doubts that more is gained than lost and, furthermore, that great poetry should always carry with it, in its original language or translation, a universal music.

Yet the forms and genres of Reesom Haile's poetry have a unique and continuing genesis in Tigrinya and oral culture that most contemporary poetry in English can only palely reflect in writing unless it is appreciated with an informed and acute sense of literary history. For Reesom Haile in his poetry,

> The form of the poem is derived from its function. There are forms for work, for praise, for prayer, for bragging, for battle, for joining, weddings, funerals, criticism. My poetry makes use of all these forms, sometimes separately and sometimes in combination. And I have developed new forms for the challenges of building a modern, democratic nation.

There is a common but mistaken assumption that, because there are thousands of African languages, translating them is quixotic. The impression that there is a unique difficulty about Tigrinya and especially its poetry that makes it essentially untranslatable is similarly common, even among many

speakers of Tigrinya itself. But guided by the humble conception in Tigrinya of *gTmi* or joining, and the poet as *geTamay* or *geTamit*, a 'joining' kind of translation resembles a transmission, with its own special wavelength of poetry itself: a joining translation and metamorphosis of poetry to poetry, poet to poet, primarily and intrinsically themselves yet not without the mechanics of literal translation; a process of communication that is a distinct way of thinking in itself, applying the knowledge of two poetry traditions – in this case, Tigrinya and English – and realised in the verbal music or rhythm. It is a universal impulse understood at root with or without translation and a plausible connection between any two languages and among any languages of the world, particularly in their exchanges of the art and craft of poetry.

Politically, Reesom Haile is first and foremost a poet of conscience, like all great political poets. Without it, joining poetry and politics only produces propaganda. Furthermore, his poetry ranges freely yet artfully from international to national to local targets: from the politics of bedrooms to the politics of presidential offices. Because he frequently uses allegory, thick and thin, the local can be readily seen as universal and the national as a redemptive paradigm for the international. After all, the use and abuse of power are ubiquitous and, if it does not change, at least those who wield it can. Yet everywhere the stakes are high and hotly contested, justifiably so, since the prize is nothing less than individual, national and spiritual survival, as in the poem 'Freedom of Speech'.

Like animals
People can agree.
But to argue
Seriously or for fun
We have speech.

If we fail
To keep it free,
Not giving everyone,
A say, remember
Babel – it fell.

Reesom Haile's strong and prevailing sense of political struggle and ideals might be considered romantic if they were not so realistic, accessible and rooted in the unassailable Eritrean political experience of standing alone and winning its war for independence. Thus, joining ancient symbol and the modern Eritrean war for independence, through a medium of verbal clarity and wit, as evidenced in his poem, 'The Leader,' he could directly and easily address his

country's leader and, by extension, any national leader who needs to know or be reminded of the greatest source of his or her power:

You wear our crown of leaves
As long as we're free
To say 'yes' without force.
As in the beginning,
This covenant sways
With each other's words,
Leading to the good
And holding us together
Not apart in the storm
To a stranger's delight.
This way ? That?
Around? Between?
With this crown of leaves
We meet heart to heart:
With much to learn, but smart
Enough to know what hurts.
We choose you
To wear our crown of leaves.
It possesses no magic
But our history and your name

The poem's imagery, its 'crown of leaves', is more timeless than anachronistic, yet it is sustained by a timely, immediate, hallowed if always threatened principle as fundamental to the ruled as to the ruler: 'To say "yes" without force'. Only each other's 'words' can 'sway' the 'covenant' without it falling 'apart' due to internal or external strife. As if breathing the poetic air of Rome when it was a republic, Reesom Haile sweeps back even further in time to Rome's Rome, evoking a Greco-African model. Yet the lines can apply as effortlessly and elegantly to any state at any time – to England in the seventeenth century, the United States in the eighteenth century, France in the nineteenth century, the newly powerful nations of Asia in the twentieth and twenty-first century, as well as to the nations of Africa:

Greek seedling,
Dear democracy,
Please come with me to Africa.
I have water for the heat
And fire for the cold.
My medicine of local holy water
Will control the termites
And keep you rooted.
Forget your fear.

Come live with me.
I need your shade to rule
When the representatives meet,
With only an acacia
To prick me with its thorns.

Reesom Haile's 'joining' of 'Greek…democracy' with African imagery – 'termites' and 'acacia' – is natural and seamless. The 'seedling' of 'Greek… democracy', so often thought to have traveled and thrived only west and north of Athens, also grows in the south and east in the valley of Eritrea's giant sycamores – not far from where Reesom Haile was born and to where he often returned for inspiration – and where Eritrea's elders traditionally meet to confront and resolve their problems together. The scholars may debate her origins or even her existence, but a kind of black Athena is alive and well in Eritrea. Reesom Haile knows her, as he suggests in 'Eritrea's Daughter', one of his last, unpublished poems before he died:

Eritrea's daughter
Tells it like it is.
Facts are enough for her,
With God for a witness.
Eritrea's daughter
Puts gold in its place,
Knows hunger and the worst,
And feeds her children first.
Eritrea's daughter
Knows what it takes
To survive and make
A home for her family.
Eritrea's daughter
Overcomes her fears,
Dresses in bandoleers
And takes on the world.
Eritrea's daughter
Fights for her country.
She strikes like lightning
And drips her honey.
Eritrea's daughter
Joins the old and young.
Love her in all you do
And she drips her honey on you.

Reprise

Non-Native Speaker

White man and non-native speaker, could I ever understand?
Africa witnessed enough of my kind – as in the scene from
Lee's life of Malcolm: the white girl asks him, 'What can I do? What
Can I do?' 'Nothing', he answers coldly. 'You can do nothing'.
And didn't Biko believe the same? Black consciousness needed
No one like me to enable it and think I could do more.
Words like 'revive' and 'restore' are intimidating.
Someone like me making women, men and language they wrote in –
Language a decade ago I wasn't even aware of –
Visible where they were unknown and invisible before?
It seems unlikely, I know, and here I am to tell you how?

Ignorance first was my teacher, yet I knew I didn't know.
In 1970 I swore I should know my own culture
Rather than – at least before – my learning anyone else's.
Euro-American, Casaubon-like, fifteen years later,
When I saw Jericho's twenty ancient cities reduced to
Derelict refugee camps and dust, I felt my existence
Was an illusion and, one week later, I could have been on
Mars as I looked around Cairo's state museum and didn't
Understand anything – most of all I didn't understand
I was in Africa, and the bottom (literally, if
You think of it geographically) was falling out of
My oath to only know what I thought essentially was me.

Making a long story short – or six long, dense poems later,
Based on my going to Africa, and no more to Europe –
Africa seemed to take over my ideas and my English.
White man and non-native speaker, couldn't I still understand?
African writers – of course, in English – finished the picture,
Ngugi included, until I met him and saw it missing
African languages, as he gently but firmly told me.
Still as important as hearing him make this point, at least then,
(Which was an interview for a journal) a friend took pictures –
Only of Ngugi I thought, but two weeks later when Larry
Sykes sent me contact sheets, I was shocked by what he included:
Photos of Ngugi and me exchanging questions and answers;
Sharply contrasting and black and white: a dialogue, 'cultures…
Languages…translating…into their own languages', to quote
What Ngugi said in the interview itself, and which seemed to
Situate me in the picture, too, but not as I first thought.

As I continued to listen, Ngugi's African language

Arguements let me return to just how Renaissance Europe
Scared off the 'Ghost of the…Romane Language',
if I may quote Hobbes,
When writers started to use their native tongues and not Latin.
Why not in Africa but with English, French and whatever
Languages colonization imposed? Ngugi convinced me.
White man and non-native speaker, even I could understand.

But then I went to Eritrea and witnessed a nation
Using its languages – all nine – just as Ngugi envisioned,
And as it had for four thousand years, although 'against all odds'.
That phrase a writer used to describe the thirty year struggle
For independence the country had waged bloodily also
Could be applied to the way that writers had to survive in
African languages, leading Ngugi, Kassahun Checole,
Red Sea and Africa World Press founding publisher, me and
Zemhret Yohannes in Eritrea, the former fighter
Now a political leader and devoted to culture,
To hold a conference in Asmara called 'Against All Odds'.

Featuring African writers who used African native
Languages, funded by many NGOs and foundations,
And most of all with the people of Eritrea's support,
Hundreds of writers and scholars at the end of the meeting
Ratified African language independence, declaring,
'African languages must take on…etc'. – you can
Google the rest because here I must get back to my story:
Non-native speaker who practices enabling, more simply,
Translating, getting it into print and noticed by the world.

Travelling frequently to Asmara, planning AAO,
I met a poet – Tigrinya – who was popular and great.
Everyone loved him and I thought, why not try a translation?
'Translating poetry in Tigrinya? No one can. Too much.
Too many levels of meaning, rhyme, allusions and word play',
Kassahun answered when I shared my idea with a hope that
He would be willing to publish our book, first in Asmara,
Then in New Jersey, since he had staff and offices in both.
Hearing him say 'I would love to', was enough for this speaker
With no Tigrinya to go to Reesom Haile, the poet.
'No', he said matter of factly. 'It's too difficult. I've tried.
Our tongue has too much to get across. Our poetry has not
Lived in a book for a very long time. But I can email
Something if you really want to try', and half a year later,
'*Alewuna*' showed up in my mailbox – Reesom's best poem,
At least his most widely known, presenting me with the double
Challenge in poetry too great for translation and language
Also uniquely beyond translation (or so it was claimed).

'*Alewuna*' seemed to fit Charles Olsen's 'field' theory of verse,
Or so I thought as the poem in translation 'projected'
Energy onto the page – a first draft Reesom rejected.

But we got better and better, settling into a style half
Beat poet, half *Greek Anthology*, at least that's what I heard,
Not knowing oral traditions of Tigrinya performance.
Reesom addressed me as 'Joiner' – 'Mighty Joiner', I'd reply.
'Poetry' had no Tigrinya word but 'joining' for the art.

Now let an obvious point be made: a non-native speaker
First is empowered by native speakers, never the reverse.
Otherwise I wouldn't be here, frankly; Kassahun, Reesom
Zemhret and Ngugi revealed a way I couldn't find alone.
They controlled any reviving visibility – not me.

Happily I played along and handled matters in English.
Reesom and I finished one book, then another but always
Printing the poems on facing pages, even in journals.
Finding an idiom and poetics both of us could share,
My job as translator also meant I had to appeal to
My target audience – English speaking; what the Tigrinya
Actually sounded like or exactly meant could come second,
On the condition that first the English had to be measured
Next to the rhythm of the Tigrinya's comprehensive sense.

Making a poem sound good in English was my first calling,
Still only half of the bargain. I knew, but Reesom didn't,
How to get published in journals, garner invites to readings,
Festivals, rich U.S. colleges and line up reviewers:
In brief, I handled the cultural production and its means,
Other than publishing itself – maybe call this enabling?

White man and non-native speaker, in a country still lacking
Such opportunities, I could understand at least how to
Get Reesom's poetry known worldwide, and he became the first
Poet who wrote in Tigrinya, and who was Eritrean,
Famous outside of his country: poet laureate, some said,
Of Eritrea, although there really wasn't one, of course.

Yet this claim bothered a lot of poets from Eritrea
Good in their own right and speakers of Tigrinya, yet other
Speakers of languages also widely used there, like Tigre,
Arabic, Bilen – remember, there are nine – and when Zemhret
Told me the problem had bothered him, too, I was persuaded
That it was real and not merely ego, jealousy, or worse,
Politics stemming from Reesom's recent change of heart, joining
Parties opposed to the PFDJ government, which had
Formerly held him in high esteem, especially Zemhret.

Now he invited me back to Eritrea to translate,
Edit and publish a new book: an anthology; poets
Writing in Arabic, Tigre and Tigrinya...for a start.
To include every language wasn't possible. My co-
Editor, Ghirmai Negash, a really great Eritrean
Scholar, and I made the tough and still questionable choice
Not to include any oral poets – they deserved a book
Unto themselves, we agreed and planned on doing it someday.
Who Needs a Story, the present project, would be the first book
Of Eritrean contemporary poets in local
Languages and in translation: published locally, too, by
Hdri ,which Zemhret directed in Asmara yet, I hoped,
Marketed globally and not only in Eritrea.
I wanted readers to enter bookstores, find the shelves labeled
Poetry, go to anthologies, and there – with the standard
German, American, French, Italian, English, Chinese or
Whatever else has been there for ages – reach out for the book
That should have been there before but never was until today.
'*Who Needs a Story*? What's that?' she says in some Barnes & Noble.
'I never heard of this. Let me buy it. I kind of like it'.

Back to reality, or what led to this dream coming true.
'You'll be a symbol – just used for propaganda and seen as
Evidence freedom of speech is guaranteed by the regime'.
Growling at me through the phone from Brussels,
Reesom said 'Fuck you',
Ending our partnership. Others also told me not to go,
Except for Larry who said, 'The door is open, so go in'.
Post 9/11 and Eritrean politics aside,
I went and worked with great poets who knew beauty and said so.
Anyway I couldn't translate propaganda if I tried.
Poetry yes, yet the way things worked with Reesom – producing
Cultural means for the work's dissemination? – came up, too.
This time the challenge was even greater: with which I'll conclude.

Doing the book in Asmara was a story in itself.
Seemingly half of Asmara's university taking
Part in the translating process with Tigrinya and Tigre –
Ghirmai Negash was in charge of getting good first drafts to me.
Arabic poems were first sent to a translation center
Set up in Lebanon – Zemhret handled this – and instead of
Feeling as usual like an author writing a book in
Private, I seemed like one person in a Renaissance workshop
Doing my part on a massive painting, only the subject
Was war and peace in the Eritrean struggle to survive,
Pictured in two local and two global languages worked on
Over and over by many people's hands into poems.

Many got published in journals, good ones, too, and the map of
Poets worldwide now includes the poets from Eritrea,
Heard and made visible outside Eritrea in their own
Languages and in translation. OK. But let me tell you,
Getting the Arabic and Ge'ez scripts right where they belonged,
Recto from Latin, drove Ghirmai crazy. Hdri had problems
Figuring out how to use its new technology shipped from
I don't know where and with God knows what directions.
But even Stranger, at least so it seemed to me, were some other issues.
White man and non-native speaker, would I ever understand?
Copyright in Eritrea was discouraged since the war –
Smacking of ego and counter-revolutionary, too.
Ghirmai insisted I make sure Zemhret knew we must have it.
Globalization required a book have an ISBN.
No Eritrean book ever had it, with one exception:
Kassahun's. When I was certain Hdri got us our number
I thought our problems were solved, but Zemhret also assigned me
To find distributors, of which I knew nothing but learnt fast,
Getting rejected by mega firms like Bowker, who didn't
Recognise '999', Eritrea's national number,
First on its ISBN, since no book came from there before.
'I never heard of it. Where? The Horn? In Africa? Really?'
Said the nice customer service rep who didn't believe me.
Then there's the time when I went to pick up proofs in Asmara.
Crossing a field to the building of the printer, Sabur, led
Also to peacekeeping UN soldiers camped right next door. Barbed
Wire and six satellite dishes made them happy – I didn't.
Four of them cocked their machine guns, aimed,
        and Sabur's gate opened.
'*Entra qui*', an old attendant with a smile welcomed me in.
In *Joining Africa,* my first memoir, many more stories
Like what I've already noted reinforce what I've said here.
Call it enabling but, it must go two ways *and* back and forth.

Postscript: remember Hobbes's phrase,
        'the Ghost of the…Romane Language?'
I chose dactylic hexameter, the epic line –Virgil's
In the *Aeneid* and Homer's in the *Odyssey* – for this
Statement ironically: using Greek and Latin poetics
In my vernacular English, claiming African language
Poetry can be enabled by a non-native speaker.
Politics might say I contradict my arguement, using
Some other language's forms of beauty not really my own;
Arguing African language poets' should be more widely
Heard in their languages, meaning their unique poetics, too.
But here I have to confess my doubts political power
Comes from whatever enabling I do – it's about beauty.

Appendix

A Selection of Poems from

Who Needs a Story?
Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic

Mohammed Osman Kajerai

Wind and Fire

Victims claim my country as their mother,
Free of humiliation and betrayal
And sacred, yet broken and bleeding –
They greet her with poems, love and flowers.

***

As my blood fertilizes the land,
A mirage of hope gleams on the horizon
Bearing martyrs, martyrs and more martyrs,
But no greater glory or victory. Understand?

***

No more prison, chains, beatings and bleeding
Thanks to the gun giving me the courage
To fight with blazing fire and raging wind
And win, embracing the dawn to fight again.

***

You thugs, invaders, mercenaries –
I'll never stop revenging my land.
Struggle and determination
Define my being Eritrean.

***

The front fighting for my liberation
Pulses through the veins and heart of my song
Unfurling the flag for my martyr's body
To rest and fly in glory forever.

***

We unfurl on a hopeless horizon.
We protect you amidst dark days and darker nights.
Your glory in battle and your children
In the struggle and revolution, we provide.

النار والرّياحْ

يا بلادي أنتِ يا أمَّ الضحايا
اشرف الغدر على ذلِّ النهايه
لكِ مِنْ أقدس أعماق الحنايا
باقة الحبِّ وألوان التحايا

رفرفَ المجدُ على أفق سمائي
حين خضَّبتُ ترابي بدمائي
ورفاقي مِنْ رعيلِ الشهداءِ
توَّجوا النصرِ بأمجادِ الفداءِ

قد تخطيتُ قيودي وجراحي
ببطولاتِ سلاحي وكفاحي
بلهيبِ النار في هوجِ الرَّياحِ
عانقَ النصرُ تباشيرَ الصباحِ

يا نفايات العصابات الدخيله
لن ينامَ الثأرُ في أرضي القتيله
فأنا أحملُ ميراث الرجوله
ثائرٌ حرٌّ إرتري البطوله

جبهةُ التحرير يا صوت نشيدي
أنتِ في قلبي وفي نبض وريدي

تحت راياتكِ يرتاحُ شهيدي
وعلى دربكِ أمجادُ الخلودِ

نحنُ راياتكِ في أفق المحالْ
نحنُ حراسكِ في ظلم الليالْ
نحنُ أمجادكِ في هولِ القتالْ
نحنُ ثوارك أبناءُ النضال

Mussa Mohammed Adem

The Invincible

Say what you like, but step over the line
And he feels his first scar burning again.
Smell the smoke. He has that true killer look
Because he always sees war – it's ugly,
And dirges play like soundtracks in his head –
Shimber, Hebo, Wazafin – constantly
Making him think, 'Encircle, attack, attack . . . '.

He sees enemies like sorghum bending
And breaking, their heads spilling out all red.
Never missing the target, his bullets
Fall like rain hitting the lake, and it floods
As in the days of Noah, only with blood.

Fast and taking too many forms at once,
He's blinding and leaves no time to react –
Like July lightning, thunder, downpours and
Fifty days straight of sandstorms uprooting
Boulders like arrows winging from the bow
Of the hero mercilessly slashing
The tendons, crushing and splashing the marrow.

Like rainy season torrents pounding down
From the highlands with more storms behind them,
He comes to fight, saying 'Try and stop me'.
He crosses any desert, sets a trap
And waits for the strong to choke on their blood.
Crocodiles run away from his jaws.
He lives according to his law.

ኢልትደከል

ኢትሕመው እት ውዳይ ሐቆ ትወረዳ ለምዕጥን፡
ለቀዳሚት ግብእና ትልዔ ህሌት ወተንን፡
ለሞት ለአምር መራራ ሽምበር ሄቦ ወዘፍን፡
ወሐርብ ለአምር በሰሩ ዶል ህጁማት ወከብን፡
ምን ደም ከሲሙ ልትመለእ ኣሽራም ወለ
ከወክን፡
ክም ለፈሪክ ሐንከላ አስግደቶም ለአዳንን፡
ታክር ቱ ለኩፉ ክማ ዘህፈት ሸዋንን።

ለሶብ ኢትአጣንብ ለህለባልብ ወካትሕ፡
ክምሰል ዝላም ዐራት እብ መታዊት
ራግሕ፡
ሰረፍሪፈት ኤተቢት ዕንታት ዌረት
ቃጥሕ፡
እብን ወርወራቱ ለዓጭሞታት ፈናቀሕ፡
ኮናት ለህቱ ደርብያ አፍካክ ትወዴ
ገረምሕ፡
ህለ ክምሰል በዲሩ ህሙል ኢህለ
ወጃግሕ፡
ኢልአተርፍ መውዒታይ ወራር ለእቡ
ለአትጻበሕ።

ኢልትደከል ውሒዝ ረወሪት ለእበን ወዕጨይ
ለምለማ፡
ለህርቦ ምኑ እት መዐደይ ለዕራዩ ክምሰል
ትጋየማ፡
እታ ኢልስእዉ ጸንሕ ሰቦት እንዴ ጣየማ፡
እብ ወራር ወዘማቴ ሜራስ አብዕቡ ለታለማ፡
ኢልትከህል ዋራሁ አስጡር ድቁባም ላሸማ።

ቀዳሚቱ እምር ታ አፈች አለሚት ላጀማ፡
ለእላ ለአምም ወድያ ለከብድ እንዴ ጨምማ
ለሐየት ምን ደክሉ ሸዋሪቡ ሐቆ ተምተማ።
መንደላይለ አወንን ሉጺት ኢኮን ግመቱ፡
ጭሩም ህለ ከፈኑ ለቀርቀፉ ብሶቱ፡

Wisdom lets a lion or tiger sleep.
Seeing him, you better stay far away.

Fakes and fanatics may think they're heroes
And pluck a whisker but then, catching fire,
Caught in the eyes where they wanted to play,
They have nowhere to hide and no more to say.

He throws the trees and rocks out of his path
And grabs his weapons – nobody's laughing.
Fields planted thick with mines, impossible
Desert sand and heat, crocodiles swarming
Rivers and gaping valleys in his way
Reveal him close and watching overhead
Before he leaves them choked with too many dead.

The third offensive explodes with sirens
And unrolls black clouds like giant bee hives
Disgorging armies fleeing for their lives,
Out of control, surrounding him like knives
And helplessly knocked away in the swing
Of his crushing sword – his entire flesh
Bloody and broken with wounds and lead as the field

Where he stands unafraid, letting no one
Flee as he fulfills the ancient lines,
Playing and singing them, too: history
Repeating itself, prophecy come true
And the clear reality to witness:
Welcome to free Nakfa, Setit and Belessa.

Like thunder and lightning, it surprises
Enemy invaders and ululates
Continually to all who can hear

ሓጥር አና ለቤለ አዜ ልሽመክ ሕርበቱ፡
ምን ሰልፍኩም ትራዩሙ ኢትቅርቦ
ኣፍያቱ።
ሐሬ ለትዕስ ኢትነፍዕ አናብዕ ወለ ሻላቱ
እላታ ምክርና እግላ ጸዐዴት ጎማቱ።

ምናታ፡ ለለአትውሕሉ እብ እሳት ሰላም እንዴ
ትጋረፋ፡
ድመል አለባ ሰር-ሰሮ ለደም ሐቆ ትኾቀፋ።
አበደን ኢልትደከል ለስረር ክም ትላከፋ፡
ውሒዝ እረድቱ ገንዲት ሕመር ሻተፋ።

አተርኤቱ ወዴ ገርገራ አልቃም ሰርሩ፡
እት ቀበታ ገናደል እሳት እንዴ
ትመጭሩ።
ሰራር ባዶብ እብ ካቤቱ ወጀሐሩ፡
ሰራር አብሑር ለአልማ ዳይዕ ነብሩ፡
ሰራር ዐስተር ለዐውል እባ ደንበሩ፡
ወሰራር ጃዋት ፋስስ እቱ ለእገሩ፡
ኢትከይዱ ከራዊ ሞዳይ ለህቱ ለሐድሩ።

ግድም ተማ ለፍጉር ትነቅም ህሌት ንጋረት፡
ጊመት ሳልሳይ ወራር ተሆብል ህሌት
ሸግሊለት።
እግልካቱ ኢገሜ እንታ ዳቅብ በዐል ሒለት፡
ስለሉ ሰይፍካ ሐዳ ሐልፈት ደኪለት።
ለአማማ ኢልትደከል ኖሱ ለሕማጥ ቤበራ፡
በዲር ሓልፈት መሰሉ ሐሰት ሚባ
ወበራ።
እት ገሮቡ ለብሳ ባሮት ለእባ ዔደራ፡
ለአትሳቅር ወበርጅ እንዴ ታክስ ስረራ፡
መረብ ምላሽ ደግመዩ ታሪክ ደንደን
ወአድህራ።
ሳቦ ሰከይ አለቡ ቀበት ሩከት መዐሉ፡
ሐየት ናቅፋ ወሴቲት ኢልትወረር ኣሸፋሩ፡
ትሸህድ እግሉ በለሳ ፋርስ ረአስለ ቅታሉ፡
ጅሌል በልሳ ደለኣባብ ወህቱ አስምዓ ዕላሉ፡

No matter how much bombing and terror
Our country and its people have to bear.
Since the invincible guards our borders,
No more battles like Adwa can take place here,

Though he has seen plenty dig their own graves
Thinking it could if only they were brave
Enough to face him and die, and they did,
And not until we see the Red Sea dry
Will the verdict be any different.
Adi Hakin, Adi Mirug, Deda,
Bada, the deserts and wadi of Dahlak

And the Gash, tumbling from the highlands
Down where the lions drink after their prey,
Also testify to the gift of life
Or death overflowing and in his hands –
In the end, perhaps, all that he understands,

Taking aim with his spirit and his gun,
Measuring the last breath of anyone
Who forgets him and casts the first stone,
And ready to bear every burden
And horrible fire demanding his blood
Yet strangely leaving the hero happy,
Even when he dies without finding his home.

ዐለም ዲቡ ትፈክረት አበርቁ ወሀዳሩ።

ኢኮን ዘበን አሉላ ለሐልፋ እባ መደቱ፣
ለትዐደዩ ሕዱዱ ሰኒ ልደሀር ሕፍረቱ፣
ግሱይ ሀለ እት ሻባይ ሮማይ ታክየት
ብጥረቱ።
በዐል ገደቦ ወ ዕለል ገርብ ምና
ክትፈቱ፣
አትካመታ ረሳሳት ሐቆ ተሐደረት
ቅንቤቱ፣
አረይ ገብአው ወስለብ ረጅፈው ምና
ቃሎቱ።
ይብስት ኢሀሌት ኣዜማ ለበሐር ቆሪ ልገታ፣
ሕሩጥ ሀለ ኣፍርንጂ እግላ ጆራ ወሳሕታ።
አምዕል ዴዳ ወዐድ ሃኪን ቀጻፋቶም ናተፋ፣
እላ ትገብእ ቀላሉ እት ኢናዩ ለትገሀፋ፣
ዐድ ምሩግ ወ በዳ ደንከል ዲባ ሰቦታ፣
ምንቱ ዲቡ ለአትጋዌሕ ሓባል እንዴ ሻፈታ፣
ጋሽ መስከብ ሓዮት ወእወንን ድርይ ምን ከበሳ፣

ቀዳሚቱ ኢዳግም ምስል ሀርማ ለትበአሰ፣
ኩክት አመቃርብቱ ነብየ ምና ግንሐታ።

ኣታክር እቶም ምን ጀፈር ርሑም አስክ
ተኣባጽዕ፣
ልጀርቡ ሕማጥካ ጅልክ ፍትነት ለራቅዕ፣
ለናይ ማሌ ጽዋርካ ስሑል ሀለ ወባቅዕ።
ይእቤላ እብ አተባቃር ወይእቤላ እብ ወግም፣
በዲር ዐለት ወእዜ ሐሰት ኢኮን ወድግም፣
ለዐራቤ ለገሀራ ሃይሞት እንዴ
ትጀማጅም፣
ሐቆሁ በዐል አለባ ለምርወት ምኒት እት
ዓጭም፣
ህቱ ቱ በዐል ሰልፉ ሰብክ እባ ወ
ሳግም፣
ወ ህቱ ቱ በዐል ኣክራ ለኣቴ ምስላ
መላግም።

Ribka Sibhatu

Abeba

Abeba, my flower from Asmara . . .

Measured and subtle
As her makeup
And her finely drawn eyes –
She spoke like poetry.

The food her family sent
To prison everyday
Arrived as usual
The day her grave was dug.
I heard her cry.

Later that night
I also heard
The prison guard
Summon her out
And the shot.

She lives in my dreams
And refuses to leave,
Knowing all my secrets
And never letting me rest.
Before she died
She wove a basket
Inscribed 'for my parents' –

Abeba, my flower from Asmara . . .
Who never blossomed.
My cell-mate.

እቡበይ

……ኣበባ ጓል ኣስመራ
ኣብ ሓዝሓዝ ሰፈራ፤

ኣየወ… እቡብ ቅጭን፤
ዘረባኣ ኮሉ ብዕቅን፡
ከም ዓይንን ኮሕልን፤
ሓደ ሽምን መልክዕን።
ምስጢር ሞት ሓዚላ፡
ጋህሳ እናኸዓቱላ፡
ንዓለም ተእወየላ፡

ሰደደት… ኣገልግል ሕምባሻ ደይብላ።

ለይቲ-ምድሪ ካብ ጐድነይ፡
ብመቐኹሕ ተመንዘዐት እቡበይ።
……
ትመላለስ ኣብ ሕልመይ፡
ቀትራ-ቀትሪ ትገድፈኒ በይነይ።
ካብ ኣበየት ካባይ ምፍላይ፤
ሒዛታ'ላ መልሲ ሕቶይ፤

"መዘኸርታ ንወለደይ"
ትብል ኣገልግል እቡበይ
ኣምጽኡለይ፤
ናይ'ታ ከይዓምበበት ድዓረባ
እቡብ መተኣስርተይ።

Angessom Isaak

Freedom's Colors

I saw a color
Unbelievably bright
And like a powerful wind
Encompassing the sky
Mirrored across the sea
And pouring freedom
All around me.

I remember it again –
The one and only true
Color of freedom:
I never saw such white,
Such red like blood,
Yellow to pale all yellows
And blue beyond God's grace.

But freedom shines less now.
The colors run into each other.
I can't see one color alone.
I don't know why,
And never could I have imagined
My vision ending like this: black,
Blacker than a crow's eye.

Whether my vision has changed
Or if I have become smarter –
Again I don't know, but I don't see
Freedom in one color only,
As I roll my eyes like a chameleon,
Becoming whatever color I see
To survive.

I experience freedom
As more than one color.
I understand freedom
As more colors than one –
More than I have ever seen,
More than I have ever heard,
And more than I can explain.

ሕብሪ ናጽነት

እዚ ሕብሪ ናጽነት፡
ቅድሚ ናጽነት ይደምቕ፡፡
ሓይሉ ከም ሓይሊ ሰማያት፡
ንውቅያኖስ ንባሕረ-ቀላያት፡
ብሰፊሑ ዝኸድን ...
ዝመልእ፣
ዘህንጢ ድማ ...
ኣብ ካልኦት ምርኣዩ ዘቕንእ፣
ሽዑ...
ሽዑ ኣዝዩ ድሙቕ ሕብሪ ነይሩዎ፡
ከምኡ ኪኾኖ ኣለዎ'ለ ዝብህን፡፡
ከይፈልጥክዎ...
ሓደ ካብ መሰረታውያን ሕብርታት እዩ፡
ይደምቀለይ ከኣ ነበረ፡፡
ንሱ ዝጸዕደወ፡
ካብ ቀይሕ ዝቐይሐ፡፡
ካብ ብጫ ዝበጨወ፣
ፍጹም ሰማያዊ ... ከም ሰማያት ዝኸበደ፡፡
እሞ ሕጂ ድኣ ስለምንታይዩ?
ድምቀት ሕብሩ ነኽዩ፡
ዝተዋሰበ ዝመስለኒ፡
ምርድኡ ዘሸግረኒ፡፡
እቲ ቀደም...
ኣካል ሕብሪ ናጽነት ዘይመስለኒ፡
ጸሊም ከኣ ኣለዎ፣
ካብ ኪኽ ዝጸለመ ... ካብ ክፉል ጸሊም ዓይኒ፡፡
ምርኣየይ ድዩ ጸቢቡ?
ወይ'ስ ልቦናይ እናሓደረ በቐሉ ...
ካልኦት ሕብርታት ኣለልዩ፡፡
ከም ዙረት ዓይኒ ነፋሒዮ ዙረት ዓይነይ፡
ሰለስተ ሚእትን ሱሳን ዲግሪ እንተዝኸኖለይ፣
ንዝገጠመኒ ሕብሪ፡
ንዘውዓለኒ መዓልቲ
መሲላ ክትሓድር ... ምመሃርክዋ ንነብሰይ፡፡
ከመይ ...?
እዚ ሕብሪ ናጽነት ሓበጀረዋይ'ዩ፡
ከምኡ እዝኒ ብምስማዕ ...
ዓይኒ ድማ ብምርኣይ ኣይመልእን'ዩ፡፡

Reesom Haile

Voice

Speech online
Can set you free
It lights my voice
On a screen like the sun

Voice. Voice!
The net sets me free
To think in poetry
The sad will rejoice
The weeping will laugh

In the news like food and drink
In the dark with a candle to think

Sisters, brothers, citizens, drums!
ezm! z-ezm! ezm! z-ezm!
ebum! b-ebum! ebum! b-ebum!
Voice! Voice!

We share the screen
Like the sun
And our freedom of speech
Reads the poetry in thought

ደሃይ

ደሃየ! ደሃየ!
እንኪ ሓሳበይ
ስጥሕለይ ኣብ ጸሓየ።
ደሃየ! ደሃየ!
ኣጸናንዕለይ ዝጐሃየ
ኣብድለይ ዝሸየ
ዓንግልለይ ዝጠመየ
ኣስትይለይ ዝጸምአየ
ሰላም በልለይ
ንደቂ ዓደየ
ደሃየ! ደሃየ!
ኣብርህለይ ላምባየ
መሬት ምስ መሰየ
እስኪ ኸበሮ
እ-ዝም! ዝ-እዝም! እ-ዝም! ዝ-እዝም!
እ-ቡም! ብ-እቡም! እ-ቡም! ብ-እቡም!
ደሃየ
እንኪ ሓሳበይ
ስጥሕለይ ኣብ ጸሓየ
እንኪ ሓሳበይ
ስጥሕለይ ኣብ ጸሓየ።

Ghirmai Yohannes

Who Needs a Story?

I needed a story
And asked myself all day –
What can I write?
It kept me awake all night –
What do I have to say?

I emptied so many words
And ideas out of my brain
It would have floated away
If not tied to my heart.
Now I needed art.

Paper and pen in hand,
Tomorrow I would start . . .
But wait.
What is this all about?
Do I really need a story?

All this time and hard work –
For what?
I hate myself for thinking this.
I already have a story
That nobody knows and it's great –
I am the story.

ጽውጽዋይ ጽሒፉ

መዓልትን ለይትን ደኺመ
ረሪኻ ዘይድቅስ ጸር ሓሳባት ሓዚለ
ተጨኒቐ! ውሻጠ ኣእምሮይ ሓሊበ፡
ሓሳብ ንሓሳብ ኣጋጭየ - ቃላት ኣብ ሽክናይ ሓቑኑ፡
ዘዝጽዓየለይ መሪጸ ብልበይ ዛንታ ቀዊደ፡
ብርዐይ ወረቐተይ ኣዋሃሂደ-ተ-ዋ-ዲ-ደ፡
ትማሊ ምሸት ተኣንቲተ - ጽውጽዋይ ክጽሕፍ ሃቂነ።

ግን'ከ ከንቱ'ዩ ነይሩ ዘየድሊ ድኻም፡
ግዜኻን ሓንጐልካን "ንብላሽ" ምብኻን፡
ከመይሲ!.....
ጽውጽዋይ ምጽሓፍ ኣይመድለየንን ንዓይ፡
ዋላ ኣይፈለጥ ምዕራፍ መወዳእታይ፡
እኹ'ንዶ ባዕለይ ጽብቕቲ ጽውጽዋይ።
ኽላ ሎምስ ንዒቐያ - መዚነያ ነብሰይ፡
ጽውጽዋይ ከሸኩስ - ጽውጽዋይ ምጽሓፈይ።

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About the Author

Charles Cantalupo's books include literary criticism – *Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts*, *The World of Ngugi wa Thiong'o* (Africa World Press, 1995), *A Literary Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes's Masterpiece of Language* (Bucknell University Press, 1991); poetry – *Light the Lights* (Red Sea Press, 2003), *Anima/l Wo/man and Other Spirits* (Spectacular Diseases, 1996); poetry in translation: *We Have Our Voice: Selected Poetry of Reesom Haile* (Red Sea Press, 2000), which is also available on CD (Asmarino.com), *We Invented the Wheel* (Red Sea Press, 2002), *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (Hdri Publishers, 2005); and a memoir, *Joining Africa* (Michigan State University Press, 2010).

Cantalupo's essays, poetry and translations have appeared in numerous print and online journals, and he has given many lectures and poetry readings throughout America, Europe and Africa. His translations include poetry in Gikuyu, Russian, Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic. His plays have been produced in the United States, Puerto Rico and Morocco. In 1994, he directed 'Ngugi wa Thiong'o: Texts and Contexts', the largest conference ever held on an African writer. With major grants from the Ford and Rockefeller foundations, the World Bank and the Norwegian Agency for Development, Cantalupo co-chaired 'Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century', a seven-day conference and festival devoted to the presentation and critical discussion of the languages and literatures of all of Africa, held in Asmara, Eritrea, in January 2000.

He is the writer and director of the documentary *Against All Odds* (2007). He is also a co-author of the historic 'Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures'. He is Professor of English, Comparative Literature and African Studies at the Pennsylvania State University, Schuylkill Campus.

War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry focuses on Eritrean written poetry from roughly the last three decades of the twentieth century. The poems appear in the anthology, *Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic* (Hdri Publishers: Asmara, 2005; African Books Collective: Oxford and East Lansing, 2006) — from which a selection is offered here in their original scripts of Ge'ez or Arabic and in English translation. *Who Needs a Story* is the first anthology of contemporary poetry from Eritrea ever published, and *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* is the first book on the subject. Therefore, the groundbreaking effort of the former warrants a discussion of its means of cultural production. All of the poets in *Who Needs a Story* participated in the Eritrean struggle for independence (1961-91) as freedom fighters and/or as supporters in the Eritrean diaspora. Thus, contemporary Eritrean poetry divides itself between experiences of war and peace, although one can contain the other as well. *War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* also includes an extended analysis of one of Eritrea's most famous contemporary poets, Reesom Haile, as an example of the kind of extended analysis that many of the poets of *Who Needs a Story* should stimulate and, last but not least, a meditation on how the author, a non-native speaker, personally becomes involved in Eritrean poetry translation.

> *"War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry* — intellectual insurgency precedes, accompanies, and transcends any oppressed nation in search of its destiny. Such is the substance of the discourse of Charles Cantalupo, himself poet, scholar."
>
> Gilbert Doho, Professor of French and Francophone Studies
> Case Western Reserve University

Writer and director of the documentary, *Against All Odds: African Languages and Literatures into the 21st Century,* Charles Cantalupo has written books of literary criticism, translations, poetry and a memoir. He is Professor of English, Comparative Literature and African Studies at Penn State University.

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