

TRIALS የተስፋ OF ፈተና HOPE

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To hear Yirga reading some of his poems, please follow this link:



TRIALS የተስፋ OF ፈተና HOPE

YIRGA GELAW WOLDEYES
ይርጋ ገላው ወልደየስ



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ይህ መጽሐፍ እውነተኛዋን የኢትዮጵያ ማንነት በሕይወቷ አስተምራች ላለፈችው
ለውድ አያቱ ለእማሆይ ታጫውቴ ተካልኝ (ለአታተይ) እና የማይታጠፍ ደግነትንና
ተስፋን የተሞላች ህይወቷ ምንጊዜም ለማይረሳኝ ለውድ ጓደኛዋ ለገጣሚ እስከዳር
አልማው መታሰቢያ ይሁንልኝ።

I dedicate this book to my grandmother, Emahoy Tachawutie Tekaligne
(Etatey), whose life symbolised the real Ethiopia.

And to my dear late friend, Eskedar Almaw, whose unwavering
kindness, activism and hope never escapes my memory.

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Acronyms

AAU	Addis Ababa University
CBIS	Community Business Information System
EDU	Ethiopian Democratic Union
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EWP	Ethiopian Workers Party
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UWA	University of Western Australia

እንኳን ደንና መጡ / Welcome

I offer you my life – wind, fire and water – told here through poetry and prose, in Amharic and English.

According to indigenous Ethiopian philosophy, humans have seven characteristics that belong to their bodies and souls. Our flesh is embodied by wind, fire, water and soil. Our souls consist of language, knowledge and immortality.

Our being mirrors the world we inhabit. It is said the world is made by the four forces of the body: the soil which lies on water, the water on fire, and the fire on wind. Wind is the core, holding everything. Wind is special, associated with childhood. Young adults are fire, mature adults are water, and the elderly are soil.

I am in the water stage. The freedom of wind and the energy of fire still blaze within me sometimes, though increasingly I feel the weariness of soil approaching. I hope, when soil comes for me, I will feel more settled.

The connection between humans and the natural world is tied into everything, even our God. In Ge'ez, the ancient Ethiopian liturgical language still used today, God's name is Egziabher (እግዚአብሔር). It is created from two words: Egzia, እግዚአ (Lord, divine) and Bher, ብሔር (country, place). Ethiopian Christianity is indigenous, truly African. We were the second country in the world to become Christian, around 300AD. Our bible has the largest number of books in the world; our spiritual books about saints and holy people are immeasurable. As the name Egziabher suggests, it is a faith rooted in place. It is based on love towards others, where 'sin' is not a word used to punish or demonise

people, but a concept that describes moments where we fail to love each other. Egziabher is a different deity to the Christian God of other places; most references to God in this book shall use His Ethiopian name.

From ancient roots, I was birthed. From ancient roots, I was torn.
This is my story.

ገፋሽ – Wind

ዝናቡ አሳድገኝ / O Rain Please Make Me Grow

አንተ የሰማይ ውሃ ከላይ የምትወርድው፤
አፈር ያልነካኸው ጉድፍ ያልተሸከመኸው፤
ከተበለሻሸው ከምድሩ ሳትደርስ፤
አፈር ትቢያ ልሰህ ባገር ገላ ሳትፈስ፤
የተራራው እንባ የሸለቆው ለቅሶ፤
ውቅያኖስ ሳይገባ ባንተ ተለውሶ፤
ሰማይ ሳይመለስ በሐሩር ተጠብሶ፤
መልክ ቀለም በሌለው በንጹህ ጠብታ፤
ልዩነት በማያውቅ የሰማይ ስጦታ፤
ጉድፍ የሞላበትን እንካ ራሴን ምታ።

O rain of the heavens that descend from above
pure, untouched by soil, unburdened by dirt
before you reach this spoiled world
before you lick soil and stone, and pour down
on this country
before you wash the tears of the mountains
and the cries of the gorges
into the ocean
before the sun burns them
and they return to the sky
with pure droplets unconscious of beauty or
colour
with the gift of heaven that does not know
distinction
please hit this head of mine which is full of
dirt.
O rain please make me grow.

‘ተረት ተረት’ / Teret Teret

ያኔ ወደማታ ከብቶች ሲሰተሩ፤
ለዓይን ሲደነግዝ ሰማይና ምድሩ፤
ጋቢያችንን ለብሰን፤
ከአፋፋ ቁጭ ብለን ስትል ‘ተረት ተረት’፤
እኔም በመጓጓት ብየህ ‘የመሠረት’፤
‘ከዕለታት አንድ ቀን ...’ እያልህ ስትናገር፤
በጨረቃ ዙሪያ ያሉትን ከዋክብት
እንመስል ነበር።

ስለአንበሳ ግርማ ስለጅቦች ክፋት፤
ስለነብር ድፍረት ስለጦጣ ብልሃት፤
ስለበሬ ትዕግሥት ስለበግ የዋሃት፤
ስትነግረኝ በተረት፤
ሰማይን ደግፈው የቆሙት ተራሮች፤
እሳት ያነደዱት የመንደር ጎጆዎች፤
ጓደኞች ሆኑን አብረውን ታደሙ፤
በነፋስ ሽውታ ተረት እየሰሙ።

ተረቱን ስትጨርስ ‘አንቆቅልህ’ አልከኝ፤
‘ምን አውቅልህ’ ስልህ ጥያቄ ጠየቅኸኝ፤
መመለስ ቢያቅተኝ ‘ሀገር ስጠኝ’ አልኸኝ።
ከሰሜን አንስቼ ሰጠሁህ አድዋን፤
ከደቡብ አንስቼ ሰጠሁህ አዋሳን ፤
ከምስራቅ አንስቼ ሰጠሁህ ሐረርን ፤
ከምዕራብ አንስቼ ሰጠሁህ ጎንደርን፤

in the evening when the cattle returned home
when the sky and the earth were brushed by
twilight
we sat at the cliff wearing our *gabi*
and you said *teret teret!*
with excitement I said *yemeseret!*
so you spoke *once upon a time ...*
we looked like two stars sitting around the
moon

the grandeur of Lion, the treachery of Hyena
the courage of Tiger, the smartness of Ape
the endurance of Ox, the innocence of Sheep
when you told me *teret teret*
nearby mountains that held up the sky
faraway villages that lit small fires
became our friends and joined
listening to the wind that carried your tale

when you finished you said *enkokilish!*
I said *minawuklish*, so you asked the riddle
I failed to answer
you demanded countries
from the North, I picked Adwa
from the South, I picked Awasa

‘ሳሊበሳን’ ብትል፡-

‘እሱማ ልቤ ነው ከሆዴ ’ማይወጣ፤

ለሰጠሁህ ሀገር ይልቅ መልሱን አምጣ፤

በማለት ጠይቄህ ፍቼን ስትናገር፤

ምላሹን ስትነግረኝ ለሰጠሁህ ሀገር፤

በእንቅስቃሴ ፍቼ በሳቅ ስንፈራፈር፤

የሚሰሙኝ ሁሉ ይቀኑብኝ ነበር።

ዛሬ በባዕድ ምድር፤

ተሰድጄ ስኖር፤

እነሆ በሰማይ ከዋክብት ፈዘዋል፤

ደምቀው አያበሩም በጭስ ተጋርደዋል።

ከስሚንቶ ክምር ከብረት ኳኳታ፤

ታሪክህ የለውም የሚያርፍበት ቦታ።

ቢሆንም ቢሆንም፤

ልጄን ‘ተረት ትረት’-

ማለቴን አልተውም።

from the East, I picked Harar

from the West, I picked Gondar

you asked for Lalibela

I told you, that’s my heart

it cannot depart from me

I gave you countries

now give me the answer

as you finished the riddle

I laughed exceedingly

till those who heard me felt jealous

today I live in the land of others

behold my stars are dim, covered with smoke

in a pile of cement, among the noise of metals

your story cannot find a place to rest

and yet still to my son, I say

teret teret!

ቅዱስ ላሊበላ / Saint Lalibela

የዚህ ሰው ጽናቱ - ከድንጋዩ ጽናት -	this man – his will is stronger than stone
እጅጉን አየለ፤	in his hands
የተራራውን ልብ - እንደ ባቄላ እሽት -	the hearts of mountains hatch
እየፈለፈለ፤	like sprouts popping open
ዛፍ ከማይበቅልበት - ከአለቱ ገላ ላይ -	no tree grows
ገነትን ተከለ።	yet he plants a garden
	in the rock

ልጅነቴ / My Childhood

ልጅነቴ ፣ ልጅነቴ፣

ነፋስ ነበር እኔነቴ።

መጮጥ መደበቅ መዝለል፣

በዋሻ ውስጥ እንደፍልፈል፣

በጫካ ውስጥ እንደ ጥንቸል፣

ደሞ እንደጥጃ መፈንጨል፣

እንደ ጦጣ ከዛፍ መዝለል፣

በካርቶን ሄሊኮፒተር ውስጥ፣

በገደል ላይ መንከባለል።

ልጅነቴ ልጅነቴ፣

ነፋስ ነበር የእግሬ ኮቴ፣

ቁጭ ማለት ነበር ሞቴ።

My childhood

my childhood

I am the wind

hiding like a mongoose in the cave

running like a rabbit in the bush

skipping like a calf in the field

jumping like an ape in the trees

up cliffs and flinging myself off

in cardboard helicopters

oh my childhood

the winds are the soles of my feet

sitting is my death.

ከተራራው ጫፍ ወጥቶቼ፣

የጅራፍ መብረቅ አንጉቼ፤

ከገደል ማሚቱ ጋር፣

ቁልቁለቱን ተንደርድራ፣

ወንዛወንዙን ተሻግራ፣

ለቃቅሜ የዱር ፍሬ፤

እሸት ከማሳው በልቼ፣

የምንጭ ውሃ ተጎንጭቼ፤

መዝፈን ነበር ልጅነቴ፣

ዝም ማለት ነበር ሞቴ።

Running up the mountain

standing on the top

whip crack thunder with my stick

chase the echo down

crossing rivers

collecting fruits

eating sprouts

drinking springs

singing is my childhood

silence is my death.

ወደ መስቀላ ጠጋ ጠጋ፣
 አከክ አከክ የእሷን ዳልጋ።
 እሷም በሽካራ ምላሷ፣
 ለስላሳ ፊቴን ሞዥርጋ፣
 ቅጫማም ጸጉራን ፈትጋ፤
 የጋቷን ወተት ሰጥታኝ፣
 እንደጥጃዋ ተመልክታኝ፤
 ሜዳ ላይ ሣር ስትግጥ፣
 እኔም ደብተራን በመግለጥ፤
 እንደመምሬ በግዕዝ፣
 እንደ አስጎብኚ ሰው በእንግሊዝ፤
 የማስተምራት በጨሽቴ፣
 ነፋስ ነበር አንደበቴ፣
 ዝምታ ነበር ሞቴ።

My cow Meskela
 I scratch her neck
 as she licks my face
 takes the mites from my hair
 with her rough tongue
 she sees me like her calf
 offers me her milk
 while she grazes in the field
 I open my notebook
 I teach her
 in Ge'ez like a learned priest
 in English like a tourist guide
 I shout like the wind
 silence is my death.

ሩጨ፡-
 ከአቅራቢያችን ትምህርት ቤት፣
 መማርያ ክፍል ገብቼ፣
 ከአስተማሪ 'ቸክ' ቀምቼ፤
 ሰሌዳ ላይ ስጨነቁር፤
 ሩጨ፡-
 ከከተማው አደባባይ፣
 ከስብሰባ ተገኝቼ፣
 ከሰው ትከሻ ወጥቼ፣
 ሕዝቡን ግራእጅ አስወጥቼ፤
 አብዮታዊ መፎክር፣
 ጮክ ብዩ ሳስፎክር፤
 ሩጨ፡-
 ቤተ ክርስቲያን ተሳልሜ፣
 ከባሕታውያን ዋሻ ቆሜ፣
 ውዳሴ ማርያም ደግሜ፤
 በጠባቂ መላእክት መሃል፣

I run
 to a nearby school
 invade the classroom
 snatch chalk from the teacher
 scribble on the board
 then flee
 I run
 to the town centre
 to a public meeting
 of revolutionaries
 a man hoists me onto his shoulders.
 raise your fists!
 repeat after me!
 I lead the chat, call the slogans
 then flee
 I run
 to the church

ተሽሎክሉኬ ተፍገግማማ፤

ሩጨ፡-

አንደገና ወደቤቴ፤

ገደብ አያውቅ ልጅነቴ፤

አደገራ የአገሬ ኮቴ፤

ዋ! ልጅነቴ፤

ነፋስ ነበር ማንነቴ።

invade the caves of hermits

I praise Mary

quick pitter-patter between angels

then flee

to my home

my childhood has no boundaries

my untamed footsteps

I am a child

I am the wind.

Wind Reflection 1: Pitter-Patter between Angels

I ran, full pelt, through complete darkness. The soles of my feet raced like the wind, soaring through a tunnel deep in the earth where the sun couldn't reach. I pushed myself as fast as I could, anticipating the moment when light would find me. Then, it came: a pinprick of white. The tiniest dot. It grew as I ran, until the red rock walls of the tunnel grew out of the dark. The tunnel's exit was now visible, an opening from the underground labyrinth. Behind me, laughter followed. I was being chased, my friends at my back. We emerged from the tunnel into the blinding light of the courtyard of Bete Merkoriwos, a nine-hundred-year-old church carved out of a mountain.

A *bahtawi* emerged from one of the small caves beside the church. The *bahtawi* are hermits, spiritual men and women who live completely separate from society. They live in caves and forests, eating a meagre handful of chickpeas per day, and only emerge and speak to people when they are given messages from Egziabher. This man had long hair, large prayer beads made of wood and shabby clothes.

My friends and I froze as he approached. He bent down to us and pointed at the church.

‘What do you see?’

‘We see the church,’ we replied at once.

‘Do you see anything else?’

We shook our heads.

He beckoned us closer, and then said quietly, ‘You may not see them, but there are angels right there. They worked with Saint Lalibela when he built the churches. They don't die or go hungry. They live here because

this is Heaven. During mass, you can feel them falling before the altar. They're guardians of this whole place.'

My friends and I glanced around. We saw nothing, but the air changed.

The *bahtawi* continued, his voice soft and kind. 'They do not like much noise. They want you to be like them. To come here, to listen, and gain blessings.'

We nodded rapidly, eager that he should see we understood. He then stepped back and disappeared into the caves.

We tiptoed carefully up to the church, and then competed with one another over who could make the most *sigdet*, a form of prayer where one repeatedly bows low to touch their head to the ground. We got our blessings, found the tunnels and then ... we ran! Again through the darkness, through the rock warren full of holy people. Knowing we now shared the churches with angels, we tried to run on our toes, moving quickly but quietly with respect. When we got too fast, our laughter escaping as we tore around the tunnel's bends, we assured each other that it was okay. The angels were probably inside the churches by the Tabots, the sacred replicas of the Ark of the Covenant that sit in every Ethiopian Orthodox church. Yet we felt the wind as we ran, like gusts from feathered wings.

This was my playground.

This was my home.

It still is, even as I live so very far away.

Lalibela. Home. The place of my birth. It is an ancient holy town in rural Ethiopia. I was born at a time when the traditional monarchical system was overthrown by a military power known as the Derg. I was called Yirga, which loosely means 'let it be stable'. My name was a wish for calm, a hope that the world would settle around us. But I never knew stability was needed. The world was beautiful and I was free.

So little of Lalibela is level. Even the fields slope up and down like waves. Long ago, rock sprung out of the ground and mountains erupted from parallel plains, carrying greenery and life. From this rock, my ancestors sliced into the earth and carved eleven churches, mighty feats of architecture and faith cut from single pieces of stone. The Lalibela churches were crafted in the twelfth century as testaments to our long-held faith. Nearby, there are many other smaller churches, some dating back to the sixth century, each carved out of mountains and rocks.

Here is where I grew, on the body of mountains. Our house, a circular hut made entirely by my father's hands, nestled at the foot of Zayit Woyira, Mount Olive. It was a simple house of wood, grass and mud. Ethiopia imported one thing from Australia: eucalyptus. My father used the wood to build our home. The roof he made from a long, strong grass called *sembalet*. Sometimes, part of the inside of the house was painted with *ebbet*, cow dung. The excreta of herbivores, cows and oxen were not regarded as dirty. Before I can even remember, I learnt how to collect it, dry it in the sun and use it as a fuel.

We kept animals, first ten sheep and later two cows. Our most beloved cow, Meskela, was named for the beautiful cross on her forehead. She loved my mother, the only person she allowed to milk her. Whenever she heard my mother's voice, she came running. She was affectionate to me too. Whenever I scratched her neck, she licked my hair like a cat grooming its kitten.

The mountains, the churches, the fields and the grass: they were all mine. I could run to any house, go to any person, and be given food. I learnt to cultivate the land from my father. I became a shepherd around seven years of age, taking Meskela to the field with my friends. The world was my classroom. In the cool rock churches and out in the fields, monks and scholars taught me stories of creation, history, philosophy, mathematics and over two hundred characters from the ancient Ge'ez Fidel alphabet still used today.

And poetry. They taught me poetry.

As a child, I was continually exposed to powerful poetry crafted in the traditional system through the *Qine Bet*, the House of Poetry. Ethiopia has an indigenous system of education and scholarship linked to the church, with *bet* or ‘houses’ that range from teaching the alphabet all the way through to complex philosophical and spiritual interpretation. As a child, I received this traditional education, alongside newly-introduced western education, until I was around sixteen. In the *Qine Bet*, I learnt that poetry was not a skill, but a genuine attempt to connect and communicate all the things that were bigger and holier than ourselves. One cannot simply describe the Divine. One cannot simply describe the beauty of the world, the depth of connection, or the fury of injustice. When words fail, poetry is needed.

So I came to know the world through poetry and stories. From neighbours, I picked up riddles and rhymes in my native language of Amharic, snatching them and adding them to my collection to share with whoever crossed my path. I stood on a rock above my friends, reciting songs I’d heard from church leaders:

<i>Nitfaker eskenimewut hale hale luya!</i>	Let us love each other till we die.
<i>Nitfaker eskenimewut hale hale luya!</i>	Halle-Hallelujah!
<i>Alem halafi nat kemetselalot.</i>	Let us love each other till we die.
	Halle-Hallelujah!
	For the earth will pass like shadow.

In the same breath, I chanted slogans I’d heard from the Derg:

<i>Esey esey dess maletu!</i>	Victory, victory, how sweet!
<i>Keminged laay tezergito metayetu.</i>	The sight of a body razed on the street.
<i>Ya mindegna ye’ehapa kitregna</i>	That sly treacherous rebel
<i>bekey shibir temetito sitegna.</i>	hit by Red Terror ¹ and sent to the
<i>Esey esey dess maletu!</i>	Devil.
<i>Keminged laay tezergito metayetu.</i>	Victory, victory, how sweet!
	The sight of a body razed on the street.

1 The Red Terror was a Derg campaign that involved the mass killing of political opponents.

I never felt the discord between the two messages. I only wanted to share what I knew. The reason I didn't feel what was happening in my country was because it didn't touch me – not yet at least. The people of Lalibela didn't rely on government or state institutions. We relied on community. We made our own food, we made our houses, every piece of furniture and utensil, and we cared for one another. Every aspect of our wellbeing was met: physical, intellectual and spiritual. My belly was fed by the labour of myself and my community, by the earth itself and its bountiful wild produce. My soul was fed by sitting at the feet of holy people – the *bahtawi*, monks, nuns and priests – and by the churches and the many holidays, services and traditions that revolved around them. My mind was fed by the scholars of our traditional indigenous education system, many of whom studied more than thirty years before passing on their wisdom to us, and by the adults who treated me as their son.

This kind of life is barely known in the west, in the place I now call home. Even in Ethiopia, people in the cities struggle to conceptualise the fact that it is possible to live complete, fulfilled lives without needing assistance from governments or paid employment from a company or institution. Back then, more than ninety percent of Ethiopians lived in rural places. No one was unemployed. We worked for ourselves. We lived for ourselves.

Even more startling for some, perhaps, is the fact that my entire identity as a child was forged without any influence from the west. This is a luxury not afforded to most black people. Indigenous life in most parts of the world has been damaged by European colonialism. Most black people come to know themselves as 'other' early on, growing up with the legacies of slavery and colonialism that still live in their communities. For me, this was not something I faced until I was much older. Ethiopia was never colonised. Every foreign footstep that sought to walk on our land with ill intentions was defeated or sent back. We had a proven way of life that sustained our independence for millennia.

Those occasional moments of intrusion from outside – Derg loyalists shouting slogans on the street, foreign aid workers, the creation of a state-funded western school in the town – were things easily transformed by a child who was so deeply rooted in place. At six or seven years of age, I went to public rallies, chanting on the shoulders of revolutionaries, not knowing what I was saying, seeing it as a game. Aid workers brought little of use, except that which could be refashioned by a child's eye. We made drums out of discarded plastic bottles. We made sleds, cars and helicopters out of cardboard boxes, sliding down the mountains in our makeshift machines, sometimes convincing friends that, 'Yes, don't worry, the helicopter most certainly will fly if you jump off this cliff.' And the school – as young as five years old, I demanded to go there, not to learn but *to teach*. I would run to the school and *bang, bang, bang* on the metal gate with my tiny fists until they let me in. All the students rushed out, chanting and shouting.

'*Yirga metta!* Yirga is here!'

The teachers quickly learnt that just as I wouldn't stop banging on the gate until it opened, I wouldn't go away until they let me take over their class.

'It's my turn! I want to teach!' I shouted, stamping my feet. 'I want to teach them now!'

The teachers gave in. I took chalk and wrote on the board in nonsense scribbles. I said a few words, turned to the students and pointed at what I had scrawled. They laughed and repeated what I said. Then, when I finished, I ran home, leaving the teacher with a room of giggling children.

In a town where every house was my house, where every classroom was a pulpit for me to preach or teach or tell stories, I never knew that we lacked anything. I didn't know I was 'black' in the eyes of the world. To know that some people thought me 'poor' would have bewildered me. I was the richest here. I had everything. I had a place. I belonged. I was free.

I was wind.

የሰከንድ ጉዞ / A Second's Life

እግዜር አፈር ወዶ፤

ሕያው እስትንፋሱን ካፈር አዋሕዶ፤

ለደቂቃ ኑሮ በአፈር ሲተነፍስ፤

ሰከንድ ቀርታለች፤

አፈር ሲበታተን፤

ፈጣሪ ሲያነጥስ።

Egziabher loves the dust

mixing with it

an everlasting gust

He lived for a minute

breathing in the dust

a second is remaining

till the dust scatters

when the creator sneezes