

Long Journeys. African Migrants on the Road

Edited by

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OUR JOURNEY

Dagmawi Yimer

EDITORS' NOTE

The following narrative was recorded shortly before its author, Dagmawi Yimer, started his training as a filmmaker in one of the audiovisual seminars of the Archive of Migrant Memories (AMM) in Rome, Italy. Dagmawi's narrative is drawn from a series of interviews held in December 2007–January 2008 at the Asinitas School for migrants in Rome.¹ As Dagmawi explained, "I wanted to be a lawyer in Ethiopia; I ended up making videos in Italy. When I decided to leave my country, I would never have imagined this ending, but perhaps there is a sense in all this, I don't know. With my camera I try to give back some humanity and justice to the 'clandestines'; that's how you call us, right?" Since 2007, Dagmawi has directed or co-directed several documentary films and shorts on the issue of migration to Italy, most notably *C.A.R.A. Italia* ('Dear Italy', 2009), *Soltanto il mare* ('Nothing but the Sea', 2010), and *Benvenuti in Italia* (Welcome to Italy, 2011). *Come un uomo sulla terra* ('Like a Man on Earth', 2008), his most important film to date, has won numerous awards and has been screened more than 500 times throughout Europe and North America.

The collective ethos that inspired Dagmawi and the AMM to document and share his and other migrants' harrowing journeys has continued and taken new shape in the participatory methodology of the Archive's collection and production of migrants' narratives. Dagmawi's testimony, including this narrative (and that of others), is much needed today, not merely because of the immediacy of first-hand accounts, which bring us closer to nearly incomprehensible experiences of forced migration, but

¹ Dagmawi's narrative was the first of a series of in-depth interviews held with recently-arrived Ethiopian migrants in Rome. Brief extracts from these interviews are in M. Carsetti and A. Triulzi (eds), *Come un uomo sulla terra*, Rome: Infinito Ed. 2008, pp. 37–81. The Italian version of Dagmawi's narrative has appeared in Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Silvana Palma, Alessandro Triulzi, Alessandro Volterra (eds), *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici. Attraversamenti di memorie, identità e confini nel Corno d'Africa*, Rome: Carocci, 2011, pp. 339–56 (Italian transl. by Jehanne Marchesi, editing by Maaza Mengiste; see www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net).

also because these narratives offer an important window into the untold stories of countless migrants making long and seemingly impossible journeys to Europe. Dagmawi shares the Archive's view that scholars have a collective responsibility, perhaps even a moral obligation, to listen to, document, and critically understand migrants' journeys and experiences. Unless they are documented, these narratives would be lost in the march of time and so, too, would any possibility for justice.

To be sure, listening to migrant voices, memories and silences—including their hopes, aspirations, and creativities, as well as their tremendous 'traveling pains'—restitutes to all of us a less incomplete sense of humanity and justice. As Dagmawi told one of the co-authors of his film, 'Nothing but the Sea' (www.soltantoilmare.eu), "During my journey to Italy I kept a travel diary. I took notes whenever I could, I often wrote at night, before sleeping, with the help of a small torch tied up to my lighter. I wanted to leave some trace of this absurd adventure, and often thought a film should be made of our experience. When you arrive at the end of such a journey, exhausted and empty inside, fearing everything, and surrounded by indifference and carelessness, you'd rather forget what you went through and mind your own problems. But I could not, and something inside me kept saying that I should do something about it. To work together with other migrants on my documentary at the Asinitas school in Rome helped me to get rid of a big weight. When the film was finished and started showing around I suddenly felt free and innocent, like a man on earth."

A NARRATIVE

I was born and grew up in the neighborhood of Qirqos in Addis Ababa. Like all of Addis Ababa's neighborhoods, Qirqos is divided into *kebelè* that divide the city into administrative and population control units. It has been this way since the time of the Derg. I was born and grew up in n° 12, the railway men's *kebelè*. Yes, because in Qirqos, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city, there's *La gare*, the train station of the only Ethiopian railroad built by the French at the time of Menelik II, to link Addis to the sea in Djibouti. For thirty years, my father worked as an engine-driver in the *Chemin de Fer Ethio-Djibouti* company until Melles Zenawi's government decided to abandon and close the railway line.

I told no one when I decided to leave my country, especially not my father. He would never have accepted my decision because he would have considered it an escape from my responsibilities as a law student,

a betrayal of all his sacrifices so that I might study in the best schools in Addis. However I did tell my mother and sister who had been living for some years in the United States and would have to help me with money during the various stages of my journey. I phoned my father only after I arrived in Sudan. Only then did I tell him that I was going to Europe. According to the Gregorian calendar it was the year 2005 when I decided to leave Ethiopia, while for the Ethiopian [Julian] calendar it was 1998. The night before we left, my friend Mekdem and I spent the night at the Omedia Hotel: we did this in order not to arouse suspicion in the neighborhood. After the night in the hotel, early in the morning we took the bus for Metemma, arriving after about two days. I had planned to meet Daniel, a friend from Qirqos, in Khartoum. He was to leave two days after me.

We spent the first night in Dongola and crossed Bahr Dar and Gondar on the second day, reaching Metemma late that night. The next day we changed our *birr* into Sudanese dinars. It was easy to find people who changed money along the way. After crossing the Sudanese frontier at Gallabat we suddenly realized that everything was out of our control, particularly because of the change in language, which had switched to Arabic. Because of this we lost the ability to negotiate or defend ourselves. When I first thought of leaving Addis I had started learning a little Arabic, a few words, but it wasn't enough. Luckily there were twelve other youngsters from Addis with us, and some of them could speak Arabic.

Everyone who sets out on this journey brings a copy of a letter sent by the first one from Qirqos to arrive in Italy. A letter containing all the necessary information and warnings, in particular the costs, for the journey to Libya. We too had this letter, but unfortunately, it wasn't much help because things had changed since the first Qirqos guys had made the trip five years earlier. The name of one of them who wrote the letter is Escisciu; he is now in the United States.

At Gallabat we hired a Land Cruiser driven by a Sudanese man to take us to Gedaref. There, we spent the night. There were 15 of us in the van. We slept in a compound in the open along with four women who were on their way back to Ethiopia from Khartoum. They hadn't been able to raise the money to continue their journey. Inside the compound was an old Ethiopian gentleman, a strange figure, who spent his time sitting in a chair. I wondered what he was doing there. I thought he was a spy until someone told me that the house belonged to a certain Mulugeta, a strong opponent of the Weyane [Tigrean] regime that rules Ethiopia. When we were about to fall asleep, a Sudanese man who spoke Amharic came to sell us tickets for the bus to Khartoum. It was at that point that my friend,

Mekdem, suddenly said: "Enough, my journey ends here." He didn't feel like to continuing.

Mekdem and I had been schoolmates at the French school and, after his diploma, he started working with the French at the Alliance Française library. He also earned good pay as a tourist guide, up to 1500 *birr* a month. Before we left Ethiopia together, he had already tried to go to the United States. He had flown to Dubai, then Moscow, and from there to Cuba, but he couldn't make it to the States, so he had returned to Ethiopia. At Gedaref, we had tried to phone our intermediary (*dallala*) in Khartoum, a man called Mesfin, but we hadn't been able to find him. We were told he had been arrested by the Sudanese police. This news discouraged Mekdem. In addition to that, everyone we met who was returning to Ethiopia told us terrible stories about the journey we were about to make. But my mind was made up: I was in the thick of it and I didn't quite believe the stories we were hearing. They weren't coming from people I knew and so, I didn't trust them. This was the idea I started out with: don't trust anyone. Those who returned spoke mostly of the difficulties along the way, rather than the dishonest intermediaries. They didn't mention Mesfin, the one whom we were advised to get in touch with in Khartoum. I was convinced that I should not turn back without first trying or verifying.

The next day, Mekdem returned to Addis, and I think he did well, because he wasn't suited for the kind of journey we were about to face. He was too frightened and agitated, always tense. For this journey, besides good luck, one has to have a lot of self-control. And possibly the reason for his journey was not deeply rooted inside him and would not have sustained him in the face of difficulties. That night in Gedaref, I managed to convince him to come as far as Khartoum. So he, too, had bought his ticket but then, at the last moment when he was already on the bus, he got down and didn't want to go. The other Ethiopian boys who were with us on the bus were very surprised to see someone from Qirqos renouncing the journey because they are known for their courage.

In the meantime, Daniel, my other friend, had left Addis two days after us and he reached Gedaref after I had already left for Khartoum and Mekdem had turned back. In Gedaref, he met the women with whom we had talked who told him that they had met us: "One was tall, the other short. The short one who was covered in tattoos done in Cuba turned back." So Daniel was sure that I at least had reached Khartoum because he and I had agreed to meet in Khartoum and I was determined not to turn back. Also, Daniel didn't have enough money and I would have ruined the journey for someone who counted on me. The bus that took us to Khartoum

was a fine one, with air-conditioning, and food and drinks served. It was on that bus that I felt for the first time that I had really changed countries, and that I was only at the beginning of my journey.

I arrived in Khartoum at 3 p.m. At the station I found a boy who was one of Mesfin's employees. He was there to receive the travelers and take them to Diem, the *Habesha* district of Khartoum. I told him that I heard Mesfin had been arrested; he answered that it wasn't true, that it was a rumor spread by the Eritrean intermediaries to increase their own business: "If you want, I can have you speak directly to him so that you can be sure," he said. I spoke to Mesfin on the phone but I couldn't be sure that it was really him because I had never heard his voice. So I mentioned the name of Fuad, another Qirqos friend whom we had arranged to meet in Khartoum. Luckily, Fuad was right there with Mesfin. He handed him the phone and I spoke to him, so now I was sure that I had fallen into the right hands.

I was taken to a house in Diem where I was able to have a shower and change my clothes. Later I was told that a *rickshaw* was waiting to take me to Mesfin. When I arrived there were six other boys talking to him about the journey in the desert. I was introduced. He was very silent, tall, about thirty-five years old, from Gondar. He was confident and sure of what he was doing. "It's not only for money," he said, "but also to help Ethiopian boys leave their own country." This was part of his policy, he said, but he also did this work because he had a long history in Khartoum as an opponent of the Ethiopian government, the Weyane regime. And this was true. Mesfin is a professional man who earns a living through this activity but he tries to do it in the best way possible, and if someone who hasn't any money needs help, he's always ready. Many Ethiopian boys left Khartoum without paying the 250 dollars needed to reach the Libyan border. Over time, and through his way of doing things, Mesfin has become a haven and a guarantee for all the Ethiopians who arrive in Khartoum. He has a large warehouse in which he puts water, food and everything that's needed for the journey. His work is that of an intermediary. He collects those who arrive, finds them lodgings and organizes their transport to the Libyan border. Many people work for him, but he is a modest, reserved person, a man of few words. Nobody knows where he lives or what protections he has in order to carry out this activity or how he started.

I phoned Addis Ababa from Khartoum when I arrived in the city, looking for Daniel. I was told that he had left. I counted the days that he would need to arrive. Then I went to the bus station to pick him up at about the same time that I had arrived. Daniel came with another Qirqos friend of

ours, Tullu, so the group that had arranged to leave Addis together was now reunited. We were myself, Fuad, Daniel and Tullu. We would be meeting the others in Libya—in Benghazi or Tripoli. During the November 2005 protests in Addis Ababa against the rigged parliamentary elections and the crackdown of the opposition, we had hidden in Daniel and Jonas' house. Jonas, Daniel's brother, had left before us. When we got to Khartoum, he was already in Libya. Daniel had been a policeman in Addis and had a small piece of land in the country that he wanted to sell to pay for the journey. He hadn't had enough time to find a buyer since we had to get out quickly after the protests and couldn't wait. So, Daniel didn't have enough money to leave then.

When Mekdem and I had decided to leave I had the money ready, but Mekdem had told me that if I wanted, he could lend me almost 800 dollars. I took his money and used mine to give to Daniel. It would hopefully get him at least as far as Tripoli. Daniel and Jonas have another brother who lives in Germany who had paid for Jonas' journey. This was why no one could help Daniel for the second part of the journey from Libya to Italy. The agreement between Daniel and Jonas was that Jonas would leave a few months ahead in order to allow the brother in Germany to accumulate more money to send to Daniel after Jonas' arrival in Italy. So, instead of waiting for us in Khartoum, Jonas had left earlier for Libya and was about to embark for Italy.

We stayed for two weeks in the house of an Ethiopian woman who worked in Khartoum. She wasn't good to us; she was bad-tempered and brusque and, above all, she made us pay for everything. Since this wasn't a very welcoming house, when we got to know other Ethiopian women we went to eat and rest in their home. We told Mesfin that this house wasn't suitable and he answered that he knew what the woman was like and would move us as soon as possible. The new house belonged to an old lady who welcomed the people Mesfin sent her and also gave them beds. Mesfin sent us breakfast there every morning. After a few days, we organized our departure for Libya. He told us to be ready to leave at any moment because we would have to go as soon as he called us. We were warned three times to be ready but nothing happened. The fourth time, at night, a minibus was waiting for us. It took us to Omdurman where we found a lot of people, including those who had left with us from Addis Ababa. Daniel and I separated from Tullu and Fuad, who went on ahead of us, because I was still waiting for part of the money.

This is one of the many laws of flight: one tries to stay with friends and help one another as much as possible, but then in the end one can only

react to events as an individual. So Tullu and Fuad left. We spent the night in a camp and Mesfin distributed all the essentials for the journey: blankets, sunglasses, water, jam, biscuits, glucose, powdered milk, sugar.

The next morning, before dawn, we loaded the vans. First we put the water in, then our bags and then the blankets. We were twenty in our van. We crossed the Sudanese desert for a day and a half until we came to a valley where the Libyans were waiting for us. This was the first “hand-over” of the trip from the Sudanese to the Libyans, though we were still in Sudanese territory. We paid them 300 dollars and they said that they would take us as far as Benghazi. Half an hour after we left we stopped again, this time at a place where there were some abandoned huts. The Libyans settled down in a hut that was further away. We waited in the desert for three days until some nomads who owned the huts arrived and made us move under two small trees. We built a shelter with the blankets because the wind blew the sand into our faces. We gathered wood for cooking. Daniel tried to cook spaghetti but it was difficult because the wind blew sand into the pot. Mesfin phoned us and asked how we were managing. During one of these phone calls he told the Libyans to kill two sheep for us to eat. The Libyans told him to send more people because twenty were too few to enter Libya.

On the second day, while we were waiting in the huts before moving under the two small trees, the Libyans told us to go with them to the well to fill our water cans. So almost all the guys went, while the three girls stayed with the other two boys one of whom was the fiancé and the other the brother of one of the girls. The Libyans who had remained told the two boys to go for wood, but they refused because they understood that the Libyans wanted to take advantage of the girls. They quarreled and when we returned they told us what the Libyans had tried to do. And so that evening, we held a meeting and decided to go to the Libyans. Some in our group spoke Arabic well because they had been in Khartoum for some time. We all went together and told the Libyans very firmly that they must never approach the girls again. As we talked we surrounded them, and the girl's fiancé took a burning stick and wanted to hurl it at the Libyan who had tried to abuse her but he pulled out a pistol. Everyone was shouting and Daniel cried out: “None of us will come out of this alive.” Then the Libyan leader called one of us over and they came to an agreement and the situation finally calmed down. The next day, we had finished our cigarettes and the man with the pistol was smoking Marlboros. When one of us asked him for one he answered: “You call the girl and I'll give you a Marlboro.”

We stayed in this desert valley in Sudanese territory for seven days. Up to this point, the journey had been an adventure for me, I wasn't worried. I enjoyed what I was experiencing: the desert, campfires, cooking, sipping tea with my friends, the stars at night, our being together. But this feeling left me as soon as we crossed the Libyan border. There, the journey changed and the Libyans showed that there was no limit to what they could do. Mesfin couldn't help us any more. On the seventh day, before leaving for Kufrah, 22 other Ethiopians arrived. Mesfin gave them more food and water for us, as he had done when we left. They also brought cigarettes from Omdurman. We left with three vans, and a fourth carrying two small camels. The Sudanese van was the most crowded because they paid less. We traveled through the desert for five or six days until we reached Kufra. In Kufra, they threw out all the bottled water and everything Mesfin had given us and reduced the vans from three to two. Now the water was in petrol cans and the Libyans distributed it once a day. They made us get out of the vans and line up and gave us a glass each once a day. It was their way of weakening us and making us obey their orders.

When we arrived in Kufra the Libyans became merciless. They treated us like animals. They insulted us and beat us whenever they could. When we were standing in line, if anyone slowed down or came out of step they beat him. We no longer had the strength to react and couldn't oppose them. In Libya the power was in their hands. Those of us who spoke Arabic were beaten more than the others. In Kufra we left the vans and were loaded into an old pick-up with a covered trailer. 18 of us got into it; we sat with our legs pulled up to our chins, we couldn't move an inch, people were crying and moaning. We longed for times when the tires sank into the sand so that we could get out to free them and breathe for a few minutes. We soon learnt the commands 'Get in!' and 'Get out!' because if we didn't understand, they'd beat us. They said: 'Animals, get out', 'Animals, get in'. I also remember a guy who made brilliant quips during the journey. He was a born comedian: he made us laugh and for a while we forgot the pain and the heat.

Meanwhile, Mesfin was still in contact with us. Before reaching Ijdabia [Ajdabiya] we stopped at a place that grew very cold at night. It was damp and we couldn't sleep. Mesfin phoned and he told us to ask for water, to tell the Libyans that we only wanted water, but the water was undrinkable because they kept it in oilcans and it was hot. The Libyans had a 'fridge' and their water was fresh and one day I managed to drink a drop. Another migrant saw me and he, too, tried to drink it, but they saw him and beat him on the back of the neck with a stick. At Ijdabia they

hid us in a house, one room for the Ethiopians and one for the Sudanese. We took showers and changed our clothes. Next door there was another house that belonged to the people who would be taking us to Tripoli or Benghazi. With our money, we sent out for cans of broad beans, tomatoes and onions and then we rested. I saw that there was Amharic writing on the walls left by the people who had come through before us. The Libyans had tried to cover it up with white paint, but one could read through it. The writing warned us: "Don't believe them."

After we had showered, other guides arrived and told us through an interpreter that they would take us to Tripoli for three hundred dollars. Daniel and I knew this wasn't true. We had only one hundred dollars so we told the Libyans to take us to Benghazi, while all the others paid for Tripoli. After about two hours travel in a closed pick-up they transferred us into a taxi that took us to Funduk, the center of Benghazi. At this point in the journey, the group consisted of Daniel, two others from Qirqos and myself. There was also someone else who had already made the journey the year before. He had been arrested by the police and deported to the desert, where they abandoned him with other people on the Sudanese border. The survivors had been found in the desert by other traveling vans and brought back to Kufra.

We asked the driver to take us to the part of the city where the *Habesha* lived. We went into a house where there were some Eritreans. We slept on mattresses on the floor and paid one dinar a day. The Libyan owner behaved very badly towards us: he shouted, smoked hashish, struck people, and we were afraid that he would report us to the police. We were coming to the end of our money and didn't have enough even to phone our families to ask them to send more.

In this neighborhood we met some Ethiopians who acted as intermediaries between Benghazi and Tripoli. They lodged us in an empty house that was used specifically for people like us, those just coming through. After we had assured them that the money would arrive very soon, they told us not to go out because they didn't want us to meet other intermediaries. They intimidated and frightened us, forcing us to stay cooped up indoors. After waiting there for ten days, the police arrived. They arrived precisely after three of us, myself included, had given our code numbers to the intermediaries to draw the money from Addis at the Benghazi Western Union. The police arrived the next morning: the first policeman who came into the house clapped his hands in joy at having found us. He was glad because he hadn't expected to find so many people; actually they weren't looking for us but for another Eritrean who had escaped from

prison. This Eritrean was very famous in Benghazi because of his work as an intermediary; they told us that he escaped from prison by cutting through the bars of his cell. He is in Italy now. That morning Daniel and some others managed to escape from the police. I couldn't, I didn't have shoes on and we were taken by surprise. Those who had shoes on were made to take them off. I was wearing a comfortable pair of military pants I had used during the journey through the desert; when they arrested me without shoes and with these pants on I looked like a captured soldier.

When they arrested us in Benghazi we were cleaning the room and I was writing a sentence on the wall: "If you don't die in the process, this period" and I wasn't able to finish. I wanted to write: "... will blow over." One of us managed to escape and a neighbor, a Libyan, tripped him up as he was running so the police caught him too. (I have also been told that if you tried to escape down the street, Libyan drivers would suddenly open their car door to knock into you so that the police can catch up with you.) They shouted 'Jews' at us as an insult. I had with me only my wallet, a necklace and a small compass I had bought in Addis. I lost the photos of my family, my clothes and a few music cassettes when they arrested me. The police made us get into a small covered metal van. One could see the street through some small holes. There were fourteen of us and the siren was blaring. They took us to a local prison and took our fingerprints on a block of yellow paper that would be used to prove to the European and particularly the Italian authorities that the Libyan government was engaged in checking clandestine immigration. They would receive money for each one of our names.

It was a good thing that I didn't understand Arabic because in prison the police insulted, threatened and tried to force a reaction from you in order to beat you. I didn't understand them and acted dumb. One policeman kept coming up to me and saying that this was the second time he saw me. He would say I would never get out of prison. This was what the others told me when he moved away. The women were more easily released from these clearing and transit prisons than the men. For this reason, fictitious engagements and marriages occurred so that the men might follow the women to their new destination, and thus, avoid spending too many months in these clearing camps. Through the servers who brought food and were prisoners themselves, men and women sent letters from one area of the prison to another to introduce themselves and offer friendship and agree on these fictitious marriages. In the end, some of them discovered that they really liked one another and got engaged and

stayed together even after getting out of prison. This was also why many women became pregnant during the journey.

I didn't have time to get to know any of the women because right after my arrest, the truck was already waiting to take us back to the Kufra prison. With us were a four-year old boy and his mother. During the whole trip, I watched this little boy and kept asking myself how it was possible that he was traveling with a hundred other people packed like animals in a container, like those used for fruit, without air to breathe or space to move. It was a 21-hour journey, where people urinated where they stood because the toilet door was blocked by the people in front of it. We traveled from four in the afternoon to 1 p.m. the following day. During the day, when the driver stopped to eat we were left shut up in the trailer under the sun; it was airless and everyone got up, panic-stricken, because we couldn't breathe and wanted to get out. It was even harder for those at the back. Looking at the child gave us courage and every time the truck stopped we put him by the small window. His name was Adam.

With us there were Eritreans, Ethiopians, Somalis, a few Sudanese and Nigerians and also a man from Cameroon with a Bible in his pocket who prayed out loud. He didn't want to go to Europe but had immigrated to Libya from Chad for work. I used the French I had learned in school in Ethiopia to talk with him, and he told me about his incredible journey from Chad to Libya. The truck stopped at least three times in the desert for the drivers to eat and pray. Towards one o'clock we reached Kufra. The truck stopped for thirty or forty minutes and we shouted and prayed in Arabic for him to let us out in the name of Allah. We had had nothing to eat throughout the journey. There were 110 of us, including six women, four-year-old Adam and his mother. As we were about to enter the Kufra prison, the driver had someone translate that if, when going in, we banged on the metal sides of the container he would wait even longer before letting us out.

Policemen don't know how to count. They line you up under the sun and the minute you move they lose count and start again. They insult you and the counting goes on forever. Four of the Libyan police would count mentally, then the head man came and asked them how many we were, and the counting would start again. The Libyan policemen had no common sense. They treated us like animals. After counting us and separating us as if this were a complicated job, they put the Eritreans and Ethiopians together in a large room with a broken, waterless toilet that stank horribly. The heat in the room took our breath away. They chose two of us

and two men from Chad to cook. They served white rice with nothing but salt and a few scraps of tomato skin which one discovered every now and then. They brought the rice in a pan and before serving it told us to sit down 'Six, Six', and if you didn't, they didn't serve you and you had nothing to eat until the next day. The first days, we didn't understand what they wanted and so only three or four of us sat down. When you're hungry you want to eat right away so you pick up the rice in your hands and get burned because it's scalding. During those days I got mad at myself because I didn't understand that the rice was boiling hot and that I had to wait. One is ashamed of being there and having to put up with things like that. You ask yourself why. It was one of the many ongoing humiliations. There was also that smell coming from the latrine. They did it on purpose to make you feel ashamed. And then in the Kufra prison there's a sickness called *asasia*. It's a prison sickness, a skin disease that makes you scratch until you injure yourself. The rumor went around that Kaddafi used the prisons to deposit chemical substances in them. Almost all refugees get sick in the Libyan prisons.

We had mattresses to sleep on, a tee-shirt and shorts, but we had no shoes. There were lice in prison and the fleas were everywhere, in the mattresses, in our clothes, in our hair. It was better to sleep on the floor than on the mattresses, it was more hygienic. In prison they put a Cameroonian in the same room as a sorcerer, a Chadian who was alone in his cell and had many personal items with him. The Libyans wanted him to work for them, they asked him to foretell the future and tell them about remedies and healings. The Cameroonian had his Bible in his pocket and the sorcerer didn't want to be near him.

We remained in prison for several days until the Sudanese intermediaries came to buy us from the police. They, at least, were better at counting! They bought us for thirty dinars. I couldn't ignore the symbolism of the price. Thirty dinars was also the price at which Judas sold Christ to the rabbis. They led us into a police pick-up truck and took us to a camp where the Sudanese who were to buy us came and took us to another place where there were many people. The Sudanese intermediary who bought us sold us in turn to another Libyan intermediary, who chose us according to which people he thought would be able to get more money from their families. Then he transported us to an oasis in the desert where there were trees and water. There were no houses but huts made with palm branches. Here there were two Ethiopian female prisoners whom the Libyans wouldn't release and kept as prostitutes. They were sisters

and one could see that the older one prostituted herself, trying to protect her younger sister.

We stayed in this oasis for fifteen days. There were almost sixty of us. We contacted Mesfin again in Khartoum. It was he who had received money from our families. I was able to call on a satellite phone the Libyans gave me. They thought I was calling for money and instead I phoned Mesfin and explained all that had happened to us. I couldn't receive money in the desert and therefore needed Mesfin so that my family could send him the money in Khartoum, which he would give to the Sudanese and they to the Libyans. I asked my family for 400 euros, but I didn't want to pay all this money out immediately. So Mesfin told me, "When we speak again I'll tell you how much they have sent and you, in Amharic, will tell me how much money you want and how much I should keep to send you when you get to Tripoli." And this is what we did because I trusted Mesfin completely. He sent me the rest of the money when I got to Tripoli without retaining the transfer expenses.

When one phones one's family from abroad nobody really understands the situation. There's a funny story going around which explains how the families simply can't imagine what Libya is like, a kind of joke which tells of a person who phoned his mother and said: "Mother, send me the code number to receive the money" and she thought he needed it in order to send her money, the first money earned thanks to his migration. The day after they have you phone your family, a Sudanese calls together all the people in the camp who have phoned and orders them to get in line. A Sudanese with a cell phone calls Mesfin in front of everyone, who gives him the name corresponding to the code he has received. I was the first to be called. The man wanted 400 dollars for my stay in the oasis and the journey to Tripoli. So I told Mesfin to send me 350 dollars and then the rest when I got to Tripoli.

While we were waiting in that oasis, another small group arrived who had been saved at sea by the Tunisian Port Authorities. The authorities had then handed them over to the Libyan police, who in turn had sent them back to Kufra. They had been sold again through intermediaries and brought to the camp. Some of them told us that a number of people had died at sea during the rescue. Another group arrived after having been bought in the Tripoli prison. They moved those of us who had paid to another camp, handing us over to the Libyans and profiting from the transaction. This was also a way of frightening those who were still there and didn't have money, pressuring them to pay as soon as possible. We

spent three days in this new place and then set out on our new journey from Kufra to Tripoli, again with Libyan drivers.

We left in the afternoon and changed vans four times during the trip. We stopped at Ijdabia because one of the vans had a problem and they divided the passengers between the others so that it was very crowded and we had to stand. During one stop, I tried to hide and move into another less crowded van but a Libyan saw me. I started running but he caught me and beat me with a stick. The Libyans don't only have sticks, they also carry daggers and swords and they sometimes threatened us with these weapons. After Ijdabia, during the last part of the trip, we were transferred from the vans to a tarpaulin-covered truck. In all, there were sixty of us. They put the women in front of a small window and made us stand so that everyone would fit in. Then, using the word '*gams*', they shouted at us to sit down, because if we had all sat down as we climbed in we wouldn't have fitted in. I didn't have room and remained standing. They started hitting those on the head who remained standing to force them to sit down. After they beat me the first time, I thought they couldn't see me so I got up again. But they saw my head against the tarpaulin from the outside and I got another whack on the back of my head.

There was great tension in the truck. I couldn't breathe and felt as if I was going to die. I had a pen with me and started making holes in the tarpaulin until it tore. A little air came in and everyone wanted to come to where I was. At the end of the journey, I looked at the tarpaulin and saw that it was full of holes. We breathed one at a time, you got some air and then made room for someone else and so on for the whole trip. One guy felt ill and wanted to get out, to tear the tarpaulin. He started shouting so we made a bigger hole and placed him under it so he could breathe better.

Everyone was pushing because there wasn't enough room. I made the whole trip bent double with the tarpaulin pressing on my back. In times like that, you didn't want anyone to touch you; everyone was on edge. A man kept pinching my thighs to make me move and the potholes made us lurch against one another. When I touched him, he got angry so we started punching each other. At the end of the journey, we both apologized. During the trip we drank warm water mixed with petrol. During a stop to drink, the Libyans saw the holes in the tarpaulin and started beating us. There was an elderly Ethiopian in the truck named Mandela. Two days after our arrival in Tripoli he was arrested for the third time and sent back to Kufra. When I met him months later in Tripoli he said: "You know, I made this last trip like you did, standing up: standing with my

back bent down by the tarpaulin.” Mandela died during the sea journey. He died when I was already in Trapani.

On the third day, towards evening, we arrived outside Tripoli and they locked us in a small house. They gave us water and we put a little on our faces, hands and feet. I found some clothes to change into, out of my military pants that drew too much attention once we were in Tripoli. They made us pay ten dinars for the taxi and we went to the Gurji neighborhood where all the Ethiopians live. Some of us knew where to go because they had already been to Tripoli. For some, like me, though, it was the first time. We got out of the taxi near a café run by Ethiopians and went in and explained that we had no money with us. They were good to us. They fed us and let us call our families to ask for more money. The next day, in this same café, I met a woman with whom I had traveled in Sudan. She was glad to see me again. She welcomed us and looked for a house for us to rent when our money arrived. In Tripoli, you live in constant fear of being arrested and taken back to Kufra or some other prison. As time passes this fear becomes a real obsession. Many spend months indoors, terrified of going out and always afraid that the police will come. To escape from the police one man threw himself out of the window of a house in the very poor Krimea neighborhood of Tripoli, where only immigrants live. He died. The police found 3000 dollars in his pockets and some of the men were saying: “Today not one but three people died.” 3000 dollars means the cost of travel by sea for about three people.

After about a month Daniel arrived in Tripoli from Benghazi and another of our friends, Hailu, went to pick him up. Hailu, an ex-police officer in Addis, also from Qirqos, was living in a house with another of our friends, Sintayehu (Sinti). I wasn't staying with them but with others in another neighborhood. From where I lived, I often went to Abu Selim, a big market for black Africans where there were Ethiopians, Eritreans, Nigerians, men from Niger and Chad, Sudanese, but also some Maghrebians. For the Ethiopians and Eritreans there were *Habesha* women who ran cafeterias, and these places were very important meeting points. I felt safer in this neighborhood because the police kept out of it, but the big problem was getting home by taxi. Almost all of the Tripoli taxi drivers are policemen. They say they'll take you home and instead they call a friend who arrives in a police car and steals your money. Luckily, this never happened to me. Before getting into a taxi, I spent about ten minutes choosing a person who didn't look like a policeman, and if he asked me where I came from I said that I was Somali. Because unlike the Somalis, the Ethiopians and Eritreans were there to leave for Italy and therefore had more money

with them. The Somalis are also treated better in Libya because of their religion. I started learning a few words in Arabic to be able to converse a little. I told them what I knew about the situation in Somalia and spoke disparagingly of the United States. This made the drivers relax so I could hope that he wouldn't report me to the police. If you want to survive in Libya you have to anticipate every move, everything has to be done with circumspection and care, you can never relax, you must never lose your concentration. Before leaving the house you had to check whether there were people in the street and coming home, too, we never moved in a group but one at a time. We spoke quietly on the street and tried not to look anyone in the eye, not even children.

Daniel lived in the Gurji neighborhood with Hailu and Sinti. There, the children and young people you meet sitting by the shops on the street shout: 'Police, Police', and then '*Gib ruba*' which is an order that means: "Come and give me a quarter of a dinar", and if you don't, they throw stones at you. When I went to Daniel and Hailu's house I met many Ethiopians and Eritreans. The owner lived on the ground floor with his family; he had divided the house into many small rooms in which seven or eight people slept. He was an elderly man who had been a lawyer and so was on good terms with the police. If he didn't like you, he had you arrested. Everyone called him 'Baba' and when his daughter got married and needed the house, he had everyone arrested even though they had already paid the rent. But this happened after we had left, they told us about it when we were already in Italy.

I didn't want to negotiate with intermediaries for a boat because I was sick of hearing all those stories of swindling, lies and falsehood. So I left it all to Hailu who knew what moves to make. My sister sent me money from the United States to survive in Tripoli. When I had to collect it, I asked an Ethiopian to lend me his passport. It didn't matter that the photo didn't look like me because nobody worries about things like that. I used to go to the MoneyGram to collect it. The most dangerous moment was coming out of the bank. Western Union and MoneyGram are on the same street, and the police and drivers are well aware that we go there for our money. They wait outside and rob you as you come out. It happens constantly.

Through the women who work in the cafeterias, I had met a Libyan who had a car that wasn't a proper taxi, though he transported people, Ethiopians in particular, in it. So I used to call him when we needed to go out, and especially when we went to pick up money. He, too, was afraid to wait for me in front of the bank, telling me to give him a ring when I was through. He would wait for me a short distance away to bring me back to

Abu Selim, the market district. Hailu was looking into the matter of boats. I still did not want to be involved.

When I arrived in Tripoli, Daniel was still in Benghazi. A few days after my arrival someone with whom we had traveled through the desert but who had arrived before me, came to fetch me and take me to his house. On the way he told me that Daniel's brother Jonas and two other Qirqos boys had died at sea. When I met Tullu and Fuad they confirmed this news. There was no Ethiopian consulate in Tripoli, only an Eritrean one, so after the bodies had been recovered and buried, the Libyan police sent all the documents and photos of the deceased to the Eritrean consulate. The Eritrean consulate had been given Jonas' wallet, in which there were family photos including one of him. The wallet had been recovered because it was attached to his pants with a chain. The Eritrean consulate couldn't trace Jonas' identity and had had leaflets printed and pasted up in Gurji asking whether anyone knew this person. Now all the Qirqos boys in Gurji knew that Jonas was dead. They said that the sea was very rough when Jonas' boat sailed. The intermediary for his journey was an Ethiopian woman, she shouldn't have made the boat leave without checking the weather conditions and the force of the wind, which should never blow more than 10/15 km an hour.

Hailu took down all the leaflets in Gurji before Daniel arrived in Tripoli. When he arrived, we didn't have the courage to tell him right away that his brother had drowned, but he already suspected something because he had had no further news of him. I remember once, when we were in the market, a boy said that he had heard that three Qirqos youths had died and Daniel asked him insistently whether one of them was called Jonas. I signaled to the boy to make him understand that he must hold his tongue. Hailu, Sinti and I decided to tell him the news together. Hailu would have liked to keep it a secret because he was afraid Daniel would return to Ethiopia. But Daniel had become insistent, constantly asking other people for news of his brother, so Hailu decided one day to tell him because he didn't want him to find out from others. After telling him, Daniel and Hailu went to the Eritrean consulate to verify his brother's death. There they gave him Jonas' personal belongings.

At the time Daniel didn't have the money to leave because his brother in Germany, who didn't yet know about Jonas, didn't want to send more money before knowing for certain that Jonas had arrived in Italy. We had to tell him the truth. So we went to Tullu and Fuad's house in another neighborhood of Tripoli and phoned him from there. Daniel started speaking but he simply couldn't tell his brother, so Hailu took the phone

and told him that Jonas had died and how he had verified this. Daniel's brother disappeared for many days, he didn't phone and we couldn't trace him. Then he called back and spoke with Daniel, asking him to return to Addis and not take the risk. He would send him the money, but only to go back, not to continue. Daniel said no, he would continue because turning back was as complicated and dangerous as going ahead.

Finally, Hailu came to an agreement for the sea journey with a Sudanese intermediary who spoke English. We told him Daniel's story and finally convinced him to take him on board without money. Many months had passed since we arrived in Tripoli. One day, we went to the Sudanese intermediary's house to make arrangements. We were all there: Tullu, Fuad, Sinti, Hailu, Mamush Jamal and me, as well as other boys from Addis who lived with Sinti and Hailu. The next day, around ten in the evening, they brought us to the sea where there were already other Eritreans and Ethiopians. Our captain was Ethiopian. We had agreed that the boat must not carry more than twenty-five people but we were more than forty waiting to board, including a ten-year-old boy with his Eritrean uncle and a boy suffering from polio.

On our way down to the sea the Libyans pointed to a large spotlight at us and we thought it was the police. In my hurry I fell on a rock and hurt my knee. "Oh God, I won't be able to leave," I said to myself but then, plucking up my courage, I said "No, I can't stay here." I forgot the pain and walked on. People said that usually, the first to get to the boats were the ones to leave, but it wasn't so this time. They stopped us and chose who got on. The Sudanese wanted to send us all together, but there was a Libyan with him who said this wasn't possible, there were too many of us for the boat. After quarreling, they moved away and we saw them smoke hashish together and then agree on 32 people.

It was dark and the Sudanese chose the people who were to leave. We had agreed that Daniel would be the first to board and instead, he was the last. When the number of people chosen reached 33, the Sudanese took hold of Daniel. Just then, a police car arrived and we were all suddenly afraid of returning to Kufra. I begged the Sudanese to take Daniel on board. I implored him and he answered: "You have to go now. Run. Don't worry, I'll keep him at home with me and send him for free with the next trip." I tried to keep a hold of Daniel's hand but the Libyan separated us, and I had to leave without him.

In moments like that, you think of prison and returning to Kufra, and the only thing in your mind is that you mustn't lose the money you've spent. My sister in the United States was good with me because she said:

“Don’t think about the money. If you don’t feel up to it, if you don’t think it’s a good idea or that it isn’t safe to leave, forget about it.” She had no idea what a journey of this kind required. Before the boat arrived to pick us up, there had been a problem with the captain who was to pilot it because the intermediary had promised him some money which he hadn’t given him. So we told him that we would pay him on arrival, and he accepted. At the last moment they told us: “Run!” My thoughts were with Daniel, and Tullu, too, wanted to go back to him, but the Libyan pushed us towards the sea. I walked slowly towards the boat, in despair for Daniel, whom we had left in the dark. There were rocks in the sea and walking was difficult. The boy with polio couldn’t manage so, thinking of Daniel, I helped him while his cousin and uncle who had abandoned him were ahead.

They loaded bread, water and petrol on the boat. There wasn’t a torch. There were no tools, not even a pair of pliers. They had confiscated our lighters because it’s dangerous to have them on board with the petrol cans. I had a lighter with a tiny torch inside it and before handing it over I had dismantled it and kept the torch. When my friends saw me they started laughing, but I was sure that it would be useful. I also had the compass I had brought from Addis and always kept it in my pocket. A Libyan got into the boat and came with us for three hundred meters; he indicated the direction with his arm, told us to keep the compass always pointed between zero and ten degrees North-West, then jumped into the sea and swam back.

The first day and night at sea were calm. The second night, the sea grew very rough. Tullu and Fuad were resigned. They sat, motionless, and kept asking me: “Is the water as it was yesterday? The water isn’t rough, there aren’t problems are there?” and I answered telling them not to worry, that the sea wasn’t very rough. The water was coming into the boat and Jamal bailed it out and threw it back into the sea. On the second day we caught up with a petrol extraction platform and were happy because they say that if you get beyond it, you’re in international waters. The sea was calm during the day but grew rougher at night. On the second day, while the captain was resting, someone else, inexperienced, took the helm and made the boat compass swivel around and the compass seemed to go crazy. It had demagnetized and lost its direction. Luckily I still had my compass with me and we were able to get back on course.

On the second night, the sea was rough again. An Eritrean orthodox deacon prayed, singing. I had the impression that there were trees and hills all around. On the morning of the third day the sea was still rough and we sighted a military ship. It seemed to us that it was moving away,

but instead, it was maneuvering to approach. When we looked at the flag, it was dirty and we thought it might be Portuguese or Spanish. We didn't recognize the Italian flag, but the important thing was that we were sure that it wasn't the flag of an African country. We thanked God and climbed on board where they searched us one by one and made us hand over our belongings. Then they called the Coast Guard, which picked us up and took us to Lampedusa. After saving us, the Italians let our boat go adrift, only taking the motor. When I saw our boat from the ship fear seized me: it was like a fragile eggshell in the middle of the sea.

When we arrived in Lampedusa, there were many tourists sea bathing who looked up at us in surprise. I was ashamed that they should see me without shoes and so thin, but I was also happy. A new phase of my life was starting. But one thought was always in my mind: that of Daniel, who had remained in Libya. After we landed on the island they took our fingerprints and gave us clothes. We showered and they gave us a three Euro phone card to call home. I didn't know where to call because my father was in Addis Ababa and my mother in the United States. I called my mother first but she was out, so I spoke to a woman who knew that I was making this journey, and I said: "I'm Dagwami, tell my mother that I've arrived in Italy," and she started shouting: "God be praised, God be praised." They thought I was still in Libya. Then I called my sister, but she too was out, then my brother in Addis and he was very happy. In the end, with the money left over, I called a girl in Libya whom I always went to see at the café she worked and with whom I had left my diary. She too was very happy. Soon after I arrived in Italy, I heard that she had also managed to come. In the camp at Lampedusa, I met a terribly thin boy from Ivory Coast who told me that his group had been at sea for fifteen days and all had died except for him and a few others. We spoke in French and he had good feelings for us because a boat of Ethiopians had stopped and given them a can of petrol, even if this wasn't enough to save them all.

If I could go back in time, I wouldn't set out on this journey again, at least I don't think so. At every step, I cursed my government for having thrown away the lives of so many young people and forced them into flight. I was ashamed of belonging to a generation with no other option but to flee from their country. This journey isn't comparable to the imprisonment one would suffer in my country for manifesting dissent against the present government. If I compare this journey to being in prison, I think that if you survive prison, people consider you as a witness to the history of your country. Whereas if you survive this journey, you're

nothing except to yourself. You're just one of those who left. This journey is a worse punishment than prison. And yet we leave because there's nothing else to do. In Ethiopia there isn't even the privilege of sacrificing oneself or dying for one's country in the hope of real change. At present, the death of one of us in Ethiopia would be a useless sacrifice.