

The James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature
Number Eleven

Names and Bodies

Tales from across the sea

Dagmawi Yimer

Department of Literature
University of California, San Diego
2015

Names and Bodies
Tales from across the sea

The James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature
Number Eleven

Names and Bodies

Tales from across the sea

Dagmawi Yimer

Department of Literature
University of California, San Diego
2015

THE ELEVENTH JAMES K. BINDER LECTURESHIP IN LITERATURE

The James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature, established in 2005, is the result of a generous bequest from the former Carlsbad resident who chose this gift to the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego as an expression of his gratitude to the State of California.

The department is pleased to honor Mr. Binder's wishes that leading European intellectuals be brought to campus to provide a forum for rigorous discussions of literary topics and to enhance interdisciplinary learning and scholarship among academic departments.

In the inaugural year of the lecture series, two eminent Europeans were invited to present the James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature: Klaus Scherpe from Germany, followed by Tzvetan Todorov from France. In 2006, Gianni Celati from Italy presented the Lectureship, followed by Belen Gopegui from Spain in 2007, Almudena Grandes from Spain in 2009, Mario Biagioli from Italy in 2010, Roger Chartier from France in 2013, Serenella Iovino from Italy in 2014, Franco Berardi Bifo from Italy in 2014, and Mercedes García-Arenal from Spain in 2015. The lectures are published and available from the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego.

Dagmawi Yimer

Dagmawi Yimer was born and grew up in Addis Ababa and was a second-year law student when he left his country, after the 2005 postelection unrest in which hundreds of young people were killed and put in jail. After a long journey across the Libyan desert and the Mediterranean, he came ashore on the island of Lampedusa on 30 July 2006.

In Rome, after having participated in a video-making workshop in 2007, he co-authored the film *Il deserto e il mare* (*The desert and the sea*) along with five other migrants. Subsequently he was co-director with Andrea Segre and Riccardo Biadene for the 2008 pluri-awarded documentary film *Come un uomo sulla terra* (*Like a man on earth*). He shot the documentary *C.A.R.A. ITALIA* (*Dear Italy*) in 2009 and *Soltanto il mare* (*Nothing but the sea*) in 2011, along with several other short films. In 2011 he coordinated the collective film project

Benvenuti in Italia (Welcome to Italy), and directed one of the five episodes. *Va' pensiero* walking stories 2013. *Asmat- Names* 2015 short film in memory of all victims of the sea. Co-founder and vice president of the association Archives of migrant memories (AMM).

Director Yimer presented the James K. Binder lecture entitled "Names and Bodies: tales from the other side of the sea" on May 6, 2015. A listing of lectures in this series may be found at <https://literature.ucsd.edu/news-events/binder.html>.

If I am here to speak to you today about those who didn't make it, those whose lives ended in the sea, it is only because I am lucky enough to be still alive. There is no glory in having reached this side of the sea-shore. The day I arrived in Lampedusa I was marked as "the one who survived": my duty is to recall my friends who drowned. This is why I have chosen to give a personal account of the African migrants' journey through desert and sea, and what we endure to reach the other side of the shore

1. The small room

It was the last afternoon, in a little windowless room of a small building in Zwara some sixty miles from Tripoli, along the Libyan coast. I was with a group of migrants, all from Ethiopia and Eritrea. We were waiting for the last call, the final step before taking the boat, which was to carry us across the sea. It was a moment of great tension; we were supposed to be as quiet as possible. There was no way to escape if the police arrived. The intermediaries had locked us inside the room and gone away. I knew we were near the sea. I had realized it a few hours before, when they brought us here. Most of the migrants in the room were youngsters from my homeland; they all came from my neighbourhood. The tighter you are as a group, the easier it is to defend yourself. This is one of the reasons why we decided to stay together, at least for the last segment of our journey. It was not always so. In the previous months I had mostly traveled with strangers. Although ultimately you are aware you cannot count on anyone, traveling with people you know is safer in case of death, injury, fraud, etc. In all such situations somehow it helps to be part of a group.

I still remember many details of that day: cigarette smoking, body heat suffocating the room, everyone sitting on the ground

leaning on the wall in order to feel the cool cement. I was trying not to move in order not to heat up my body. The youngest among us was a ten-year-old boy from Eritrea accompanied by his uncle. There was also an Eritrean guy with polio. I wondered how he made some 3,500 miles from his country to here, a distance equivalent to New York–San Diego–Seattle, across the desert, in the back of a pick up, with twenty-five to thirty people at a time. I was twenty-eight-years old but most of them were in their early twenties. In my experience, in such an anomalous group, there is always one who wins the position of group leader. Leadership depends on many factors, but in Africa the type of person that gets the consensus of the group is usually the eldest, the one with most experience or wisdom. Anyway, there was this young man, who was the eldest among us, who had become the “leader” of the group. He had been a police officer before fleeing from Ethiopia so it was natural for him to look after the herd, making sure that nobody raised his voice; he also appointed himself to speak with the “intermediaries,” distribute supplies, etc.

Waiting was anguish. Every second seemed endless because nothing happened; we were just waiting. Towards evening we heard footsteps, everybody held their breath, terrified by the idea of being caught by surprise. We were relieved when we realized they were opening the door with the key. When the heavy noisy iron door opened, the *smugglers* came in with three other new guys from Ethiopia. The group was increasing, which meant someone would be left behind. The boat we had been promised was supposed to be for twenty people and by then we were more than thirty. We tried to gather more information about our situation before the *smugglers* disappeared again. They just told us “wait and keep silent.” What mattered for the moment was that we hadn’t yet paid them and to that point the *smugglers* appeared to be trustworthy. The newly arrived young men were from Ethiopia: one of them was meant to be our boatman and the others were his “assistants.” The boatman offered to conduct us through the sea; in exchange for his service, he and his assistants wouldn’t pay, while everyone else would have to pay 1,200 US dollars. Since it might be the last journey of our life, it didn’t matter how much it cost as long as we could pay.... If you arrive safely, good and well, if not, it seems like you had already paid for your own funeral expenses, and grave. The only thing that we desperately needed was to go away from that country. From his words it seemed that our boatman was experienced, but nothing could

guarantee this; by the time we would find out it would be too late; we would already be in the middle of the sea.

We were caught up in a system with a strange chain of command: the lower rank intermediaries consist of ex-migrants, the middle rank consist mostly of Sudanese who have lived in Libya a long time, house and car owners, taxi drivers, etc., while the higher rank are prevalently Libyan officials, government authorities, policemen. A huge economy moves the system around migrants. There is a supply because there is a demand, and those who are caught in this system don't have any other option. In that phase of our journey, "the final step," our direct contact was a Sudanese *smuggler* who had close ties with Libyans, mostly police officers in plain clothes. The cruelty of the situation creates other monsters along the chain of command: most of the lower rank intermediaries are usually "failed" immigrants who ran out of money, were cheated or were robbed along the way. They recycle themselves in the system and become merciless predators because they know the psychology of the traveler, know how to exploit the newcomers. They start with the idea of earning enough for the journey but end up loving the easy way of making money. Once they become aware that half the boats they dispatch never get to their destination, they give up the idea of traveling; death can wait for them. Yet, for these intermediaries, the more boats that arrive safely the more their reputation rises.

One of the ways to test the success of the boats is the phone calls we receive from Italy once the migrants arrive. If I have a friend back in Libya I will certainly call to give him or her the good news and he/she will think that my intermediary is good. If there is no news from the travelers, the intermediaries spread rumours that the boat has reached Spain. With those vessels and the sea patrols, it is impossible to reach Spain from Libya. But since no one knows this, everybody believes the rumours. In the end "Spain" becomes a synonym for sinking. I verified this when one of my closest friends, Yonas, was put on a boat from Libya and we heard no more from him. We started asking around; when we contacted the intermediary, an Ethiopian woman, she claimed that Yonas had called her from "Spain." We soon discovered, however, that he had died at sea along with two other teenagers from our neighbourhood.

When we were in that room waiting for the last leg of our journey, some of the boys started to fantasize about their life in Europe. They had already reached Britain, Switzerland, Norway, or Germany; Italy was just a place of transit. They drag you in with their fanta-

sies and get you involved unwittingly. There is something unsaid in this kind of journey: one of the things that kept us mentally alive in spite of the suffering and the abuse, losses or torture, is the fact that around us there is always someone who manages to make you laugh till tears come out; laughter is a good therapy to take away worries and suffering. I still remember a lot of those moments, even in the middle of despair. In that windowless room, while we were all tense and worried, we couldn't help bursting into laughter at times....

2. Towards Zebtya

I remember my first arrest in Benghazi, the second biggest city of Libya. From that experience I learned that I must never get distracted, even when inside a private house. No matter how hot the weather, I always slept with my clothes on. While I was asleep I always kept my shoes close to me and told myself to remember to bring them with me before fleeing: this is a journey where the most important thing is memorizing some phone numbers and having the right trousers or shirt in which you secretly stitch your money. You learn to be constantly alert—as a soldier at the front. You live with the feeling of an endless persecution; you are in total linguistic and geographical confusion.

On that day, I was with sixteen other migrants in an abandoned house. When we arrived it seemed that somebody had been there before us and had left in a hurry: all the personal belongings were scattered on the floor, empty bags, women's clothing, Bibles, etc. We were supposed to wait a few days till the intermediaries organized our transfer to Tripoli. After a couple of weeks, I started writing on the wall: "if you don't die in the process..." but I never finished the last words of the sentence, which were "...this period will come to an end," because somebody knocked on the door; one of us went to open it with no hesitation. An unarmed policeman stood in the door surprised to see so many people and started clapping his hands "Mash' Allah" (what God wants) while making his way in cheerfully. We discovered he was not alone; the entire area was surrounded by armed policemen. That was the first time I saw their uniform. Only a few of my friends managed to hide and escape. I can still see the neighbourhood surrounded by armed police officers, with a crowd of onlookers while we were taken away in a row, barefooted, with shouted orders that we did not understand. One soon learns that what you have to do is to follow the person in front of you and everything will be all right; you should never meet the gaze of the officers.

We were fourteen by then, and they made us get into a small covered metal truck. Some of my friends had managed to hide somewhere. Why should I run? I didn't commit any crime. They brought us to the local police detention center with the siren blaring. The name I gave the police was Daud Omar (David in Arabic). Nobody had suggested I give a false identity, I did so by instinct. I found a name and surname in Arabic that was phonetically close to mine so that, when they called me, I would not be confused. The list of names along with our fingerprints would end up eventually in the hands of European/Italian authorities, showing us as "stopped illegal migrants" by the Libyan coast guards. In return, Europe (in this case, Italy) covers all the necessary cost to detain and eventually expel the Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali refugees from Libyan territory... there was no other type of identification procedure or translator to inform us as to why we were arrested. They did not search us since we were barefooted; we were probably reported as "caught by surprise"; I was barefooted but I still had my diary and wallet in my pockets. The place where we were locked up was a real prison for criminals, not a detention center for administrative offences such as not having a residency permit.

The cell was already full of detainees, all Ethiopians and Eritreans. There was a desperate need to have fresh news among the detainees about the world they came from. Almost all of them had been there for months without a trial. Quite naturally, at every noise of the opening door, one paid full attention, especially when it wasn't at meal times. Whatever the reason, the opening of the prison door means new faces, new orders, something unexpected. It's unbearable, as a prisoner, not to know what is happening outside the cell, in terms of politics and current affairs. But inside there was not only the curiosity for the outside world, but also for those around you, people ready to talk about what they had gone through, about the internal regulations, when and how they had arrived there, who was the worst jailer, etc.

We took possession of the little free space left at the center of the cell. We informed them how and where we had been arrested. Some of them were injured; one, a certain Sami from Ethiopia, was terribly bruised and was restless for his aching legs. He told us that he and some friends had tried to escape the previous night, but while two of his friends got away he was caught, which cost him a beating before he was brought to his cell. There were others injured with serious bruises who had been in the same cell with the fugitives; though

they hadn't tried to escape, they were brutally beaten as accomplices. They hadn't escaped because they were afraid or were unable to pass through the crack in the wall. We found out also that two of the run-aways used to live in the house where we had been caught that same morning, which is why we got a police visit and that 's why the first policeman clapped his hands in satisfaction: they came to arrest two fugitives but instead found fourteen new migrants.

If an arrest is inevitable, as it is in Libya, you should hope that it happens during the summer time; otherwise you may languish in prison for months waiting for other migrants to be arrested in order to be expelled towards the Sudanese border, in the desert. The odd advantage of being "expelled" is having an opportunity to try the same journey again, instead of wasting months and months in prison, without a trial or conviction. The time of mass arrests occurs during the dry season when there are many people who try to take the boats heading to Europe. It's funny, you find yourself in prison wishing for the arrest of many more: more arrests means no place to keep the migrants, so there are more frequent expulsions to the no-man's land toward the southern borders of the Libyan desert. I remember that most of the detainees were paradoxically happy when the time came to be expelled. It was not easy for a new traveler like me to understand why "expulsion" would bring joy instead of worry. We were told we were lucky, because the prison was already full: in a few days we would be deported. We were arrested in the morning and by the time they put us in jail lunchtime was over. We would have to wait till dinner, but I wasn't very hungry, because so many disturbing but also intriguing new things were happening around me.

It was not difficult to find a person with whom to talk. So, we gathered around this guy Sami, the failed fugitive. He was a friend of Jimmy's, and we knew Jimmy because he was supposed to be, along with a certain Tamrat, the intermediary, who was to send us from Benghazi to Tripoli. They were the ones who brought us to the house where we were arrested. They were identified according to the neighbourhood they came from in Addis Ababa: Jimmy was from Piazza, Tamrat from Megenagna, Ermias from Kirkos, and these were the nicknames given to the Ethiopian intermediaries. Jimmy (may he rest in Peace) was a special guy. He left his house with nobody backing him financially. He was one of those who made their way struggling against everything. He was a boy with great courage acquired from pure survival instinct in his past life in Addis and also during his travels. Unlike many intermediaries, he just wanted to earn enough

money to continue his journey to Europe. I remember one night he came to visit and update us about our departure for Tripoli. Since Ermias of Kirkos, who was another intermediary, was talking to us, he started a fight with him in spite of his small stature, thinking that the other wanted to take us away from him. Once we settled the dispute and we remained alone with him, he started telling us that he was tired of Libya and just wanted to earn some money in order to get himself a boat to Europe. While trying to explain the reason for his behaviour, he burst in tears. Unfortunately, we were caught by police before he managed to organize our journey and hence earn some money. Later I found out that he died while crossing the sea in 2008, which means that he made it in a way, although nature betrayed him.

We were still around Sami getting information on our destiny late in the afternoon when the jailers came to open the cell door. They started shouting orders in Arabic; the prisoners got up on their feet and I followed them. The order was to form a line and get out of the cell. I noticed that every cell had a sort of a pentagonal free space in front of the door. Here I saw a Libyan man with a long beard, wearing a clean white "Jalabya" seated on a beautiful Persian carpet surrounded by holy books, the Koran, fruits, and some personal belongings. They told us that he was considered a fanatic and was arrested because he didn't want to shave his beard... he greeted us with a smile while we were going outside. The sun was so fierce and blinding us, the gravel was burning, and I was still barefoot. The jailers made us sit on the ground in the middle of the courtyard and started counting while informing us that we were going to be expelled. I remember loud voices coming from another block, men's voices probably Nigerians, Ghanaians. Libya is the second African country to support the African Union economically, yet paradoxically it is the first country to arrest, imprison, and expel so many African migrants from her territory. Unlike we from the Horn of Africa, Nigerians and Ghanaians get expelled and sent by air directly to their country, an operation that takes a lot of time.

A huge crowd sound came from behind the wall that separated the courtyard from the cells. No one knew how many of us could be taken and how many would be left. After a few moments they let the women out in the courtyard. Then they asked them to point out their husbands who were to stand up or raise their hands to be identified. Some were really their husbands and some not. This is one of the strangest things that we found out staying in prison. "Ladies first" is a rule that works also in such places. Whenever there is an

expulsion, ladies come first and with them go their husbands. I don't see any logic in this practice unless it is based on cultural or religious notions. There were about eight women all "married" who had arranged for their fake marriages by sending secret messages through those who served the daily meal, the servants being chosen among the prisoners. Because no women should be expelled or liberated from prison without her husband or brother. A woman is an asset that should belong to someone and could not be secure and safe on her own. We spent half an hour or so sitting there, observing the strange scene that took place before the departure.

3. The iron

Those of us who came from the Horn of Africa gathered together. There were some fifty meters from the courtyard to the gate and we could see the back of a truck parked just outside. It was our container. There was some confusion and more armed policemen lined up outside the gate. The women were led to the gate first. Then the jailers started counting us. We were about seventy or eighty but these jailers were unbelievably dumb: as soon as someone moved or if they heard a voice, they got distracted and restarted counting. They seem to do it deliberately to weaken us under the burning sun. Some of them even made fun of their colleagues' mistakes in counting.

The first to enter the container truck were the eight women, most of them young girls from Eritrea; one of them had a little four-year-old child called Adam. Once they got in the container, their respective "husbands" followed suit. After using the small ladder to enter, the first group occupied the front side of the truck; it was apparently isolated from the remaining three long rows of iron benches that occupied almost the whole container. Every single part of the container was made of iron. I went to sit on the left side of the container, which I preferred to the center row. The benches were in bad condition. The welded joints were detached and inclined; one could hardly sit correctly. Inside it was already hot and dark, and I wondered what it would be like once they closed the door. Soon there was a lot of confusion to get a better place: in four languages—Tigrigna, Amharic, Somali, and Arabic. Once everybody got in, the policemen started to beat the metal door and called for attention screaming. Immediately, everybody kept quiet. We were looking towards the policeman who was speaking in Arabic; it was definitely an order and not a briefing to orient us as to where they were taking us, or why we were packed in such a defenceless way. Thanks to some who

translated for us, I understood that he was introducing himself as the main truck driver; he literally threatened us to make our travel worse if we made problems, protested, or made noises during the trip: “wolahi,” in the name of Allah, he swore that he was not bluffing. I didn’t understand what he meant by those threats. While he was speaking, he stood on the last step of the ladder and seemed to have some difficulties looking inside the container, shielding his eyes from the sun’s rays since we were in the dark.

Looking out from deep inside the container through all the heads, I could only see blinding sunlight forming a de-saturated silhouette of the policemen and the driver. They didn’t dare get in; it seems that they themselves were afraid of that huge dark iron hole. That place was no-man’s land, where you make your own rules, you fight for your seat as for a vital space. The iron hole was soon full and, apart from the ladies and their respective “husbands” who were from Eritrea and Ethiopia, the rest of the men were grouped according to their nationalities. Half of the container was occupied by teenagers from Ethiopia and Eritrea, then at the center there were Somalis, at the back end of the truck near the exit, there were other migrants from Sudan and Chad.

It was about 4:00 p.m. when the driving started, with almost one hundred human beings packed in the container. All kinds of black youths were doing that painful journey locked inside a suffocating and noisy place. The only clean air came from two very tiny holes above the ladies’ side. Instinctively we stood up to reach the little ventilating air, but the people at the back of the container started to protest because we were blocking their air. Not everybody who was standing wanted to go back to sitting, but we were urged to do so by everybody else. In such a situation, the only thing that distinguishes the human being from revealing his animal instinct of survival is having a language, social control, and powerlessness. Although having the same language does not help much, and not every human being remains lucid in such a difficult moment. In that container as well as in many similar circumstances of the trip my philosophy was the following: I could bear any burden as long as I was not the only one to bear it. If you see others having the same fate you feel the burden less, especially when you see a four-year-old kid bearing the same deafening noise, pain, and baking heat.

When I am writing out my Libyan voyage—I am already here in here Italy—by chance I met one of the girls who had been in that same container with me. When we realized we had been in the same

place at the same time, the first thing I asked her was if she knew the fate of the four-year old boy, Adam, and of his mother. I was very happy to know that they eventually made it to Malta, and were now living in the U.S. If I can get their address I would like to see them very much. I wish I could see that boy; he must be around twelve years old by now.

As the journey continued I became aware that night was coming, when I saw that the little piercing light that passed through the crack in the door had disappeared. The state of the road made the whole container shake badly and one's body got pressed against the others. I wasn't hungry, even though they packed us in without giving us food, not even a piece of bread. I saw the driver carrying a bag full of bread while he was talking to us but he left it outside the door after he closed the container, thus making it unreachable to anyone. They weaken you physically in order to break and control you.

This is an evocative voyage of black Africans being piled together. Among all the things I will never forget is the noise of the iron container on the ruined asphalt, a horrible endless noise I could never get used to. You can't see since your eyes cannot adapt to darkness, you can't sleep because you barely have a place to sit, and an endless lament of people reminds you of your fate. I tried to fit myself under the benches in order to extend my legs. It worked for a while and I was relieved. But then the truck slowed down and stopped. We heard voices outside and we were happy thinking that we had arrived in Kufra, our destination. Instead, we heard the door opening and we saw some neon lights. A few minutes later, another dozen immigrant prisoners entered the container. We were not in Kufra but in Ajdabia, the nearest city to Benghazi. The newcomers remained trapped in by the door; you could feel increasing nervousness and dispute inside the container. We continued traveling in the same conditions, the heat giving way to freezing as the night approached.

I tried to imagine what would be my father's reaction if he were able to see where I had ended up. I have always been the black sheep of the family, but to find myself in this place exceeded my own imagination. Who are these people I don't know? What do we have in common? Everyone in the container probably thought they were relatively special, each one different from the other, and no one could believe that he or she had ended in such a place. In fact, the only soul that was special in that container and did not deserve to be there was little Adam. He hadn't chosen this journey. While other children enjoyed their sleep under a roof, he was crouched in

the embracing arms of his exhausted mother. I wonder how many of those adults had experienced such a dramatic childhood as Adam. I might be wrong because Adam was still a little child and if he is lucky enough to make it (as he did) he would be spared and build his own future.

We were a group of human beings caught as fish in a net that mixed up all kinds of stories, cultures, background, nationality, creed, strength, weaknesses. So many times I wished not to see myself inside this “movie.” Yet this is what I’m doing now while writing the story of those months in Libya. Thanks to the years that have gone by, I’m detached from my emotions and am finally able to look deeper into the details of my travels as I try to remember and reconnect things of the past.

It was dawn when the truck stopped again and the container ceased making its infernal noise. Suddenly the doomed souls started to move once more like at the beginning of our journey. I heard that we hadn’t arrived yet but the driver had to take a break, eat, relieve himself, and do his prayers. I can imagine him stretching his legs, and then sitting on the soft sand of the desert looking towards the break of the day and making his ritual ablutions with water, water that was denied to us, a hundred and ten people including baby Adam. The driver would wash both hands up to the wrist three times, and again his arms for another three times, rinse his mouth and spit the water three times, he would sniff the water three times, and wash his tired sleepy face three times before bowing and saying, “Glory to my Lord.” Allah listens and responds to the one who praises him. And while he is kneeling he would say, “oh my Lord forgive me, oh my Lord forgive me” and conclude his prayer asking his God to send grace and honour to the true followers of Mohamed... Yet, half of the container was full of true followers of Mohamed...

We waited till he finished, and in the meantime almost everyone got up on their feet to move our strained muscles; some lost their seats and there was a hurried exchange of places. I found myself near a young boy from Cameroon. In his hand he had a pocket-size Bible. I started talking to him and he looked at me surprised and glad to find someone who spoke French. That was the moment when I almost forgot I was in that iron container. We talked about a lot of things; what amazed me was that he was the only Cameroonian and I wondered how tough it must have been for him to arrive in Libya. He believed that his King James pocket Bible protected him from evil: he had never abandoned it since leaving home.

He traveled through Chad along with other Chadians; in the western Sahel desert the only thing he had in common was the French language, which is partially spoken in Chad. Apart from being the only stranger, he was also the only Christian in the middle of Muslims and animists, who made his travelling difficult. At every possible occasion they shoved him towards the edge of the pickup truck. One time, as the pickup capsized and hurled all the passengers onto a rocky road, he was the only one who managed to jump in time and almost everybody got injured. The fact that he didn't get hurt disturbed the other travelers, so he and his Bible became the scapegoat. Their road would never be safe with a person like him, they protested, and tried to leave him in the desert. But it didn't happen and he managed to get to his destination. He was proud and strong in his belief and he told me his adventures smiling and sometimes laughing at what he'd gone through. Unlike most Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis, he never intended to cross the sea to head on to Europe. He just went to Libya trying to find a job; nevertheless, they arrested him. It was a relief having met this guy; we spent hours talking together.

I grew up in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Addis Abeba but I attended the only French school in town and my classmates were children of ministers and high authorities of the regime, élites, African diplomats, the upper class. I spent my childhood between these two extremes: the poorest neighbourhood of Addis Abeba and the prestigious school for riches. My father was a person who believed in the education that he could not have—he was a simple train driver, a railway worker with a modest income. He spent all his money to send my sister and me to an expensive French school. Living between two completely different milieus was very important for my understanding of society, and my childhood was based on these continuous goings in and out of different social settings. The Cameroonian boy reminded me of some of my schoolmates of grade school, who were the sons of Cameroonian diplomats. How many of us are aware that our well-being depends on the exploitation of others? A boy like him, no matter how smart, determined and intelligent as he might be, is not enough to break the circle of nepotism and corruption that colonizes Africa. The iron container held stories and bodies that are the result of economic, social, moral, and spiritual subjugation going back long before the birth of all of us who were locked inside it. We were simple pieces of a puzzle.

As the container advanced, the sun of the desert got stronger and stronger and inside it was stuffy; there was not enough air. We had no idea how long we had been traveling, perhaps nineteen or twenty hours, when the truck stopped again to allow the driver his usual routine. This time we were exhausted and we shouted so that the driver would hear us. It was a relief to gasp some air, soon after the truck was on the move again. The only explanation I can give for why people in the container survived was that we had the resource of language to communicate with each other; if beasts had been packed in the same manner not all of them would have survived. We were told the trucks were donated by the Italian government to Libya as a way to control irregular migration. These are Italian-made trucks known as Industrial Vehicles Corporation (IVECO). With them the Libyans assembled the containers we were traveling in.

4. The ants' nest

Zebtiya: this word was introduced into Ethiopia following the fascist occupation. It is Turkish (*zaptieh*) for "prison guard." The Zebtiya corps was administered by the Italians; the prison guards were the Ascaris colonial troops from Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia. In case of death sentences, the executioners were the poor Ascaris recruited continuously since the late 1880s in Eritrea. At that time, being an Ascaro (mercenary soldier) was one of the few ways for local men to earn their daily bread; they did so by acting as guards to the few Italian merchants in the portal area of the Red Sea. The Ascaris were recruited at first as policemen among Eritreans, but in time they became colonial soldiers employed to fight against their own brothers; in the battle of Adwa, they fought against Ethiopia under Menelik II, then fought for the conquest of Libya under the Italian flag at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Almost all the present African countries were created by the colonizers when they "scrambled Africa" and its borders at the Berlin Conference in 1885.

The colonial strategy of using ethnic divisions to broaden Italian territories later became a springboard of convictions that allowed many to take arms and fight for "independence" and new boundaries. Colonialism has officially ended but this poisonous divisiveness has remained amongst the people. Subsequently nothing has ever resumed its natural course; it's as if some wild animal has disrupted the ants' nest. The Horn of Africa has become a dramatic stage for war. When the 1977 Ethio-Somali war burst out I was just a newborn

baby. The war between Ethiopia and the Eritrean separatists lasted thirty years. I was almost fourteen years old when Eritrea was finally separated from Ethiopia. Right after the “independence” of African countries, there was no time to make national or regional reconciliation as the cold war started raging in many parts of Africa and especially in the Horn. What was named “cold war” in Europe, in Africa was the battlefield of ideologically clashing parties of communists and capitalists. Countries like Somalia and Ethiopia, instead of looking for reconstruction and development, were seduced alternatively by the capitalist and communist blocs to buy arms and fight. My generation is the first to be born having on its shoulder infinite national debts. Are we, the migrants or refugees, the real cause of shame for Africa, or are we the result of continuous misgovernment, abuse of power, conspiracy, overthrows, suppression, exploitation, war, and neocolonialism? Are we, the cursed children of Africa, to pay the debt for our country’s past? I was about nineteen years old when the umpteenth war between Ethiopia and Eritrea broke out and thousands of young men from both sides of the border lost their lives. Many young Eritrean soldiers deserted and are still fleeing from their homeland, crossing the desert and the sea heading for Europe. The great grand children of the Zaptiya jailers in Libya are still receiving orders from Italy to arrest and mistreat the present immigrants coming from Addis Abeba and Asmara.

In “If all Africa” Kapuscinski writes: “In Africa it is extremely difficult to present antagonisms as a conflict between reactionaries and progressives, or between exploiters and exploited: in the mind of simple Africans these images become distorted and falsified by the racial sensitivity.” There must be an explanation for this: colonialism of course played a big role in dividing the existing unity, but also in forcefully unifying regions and peoples for mere administrative purposes.

When colonial powers left, the ants’ nest had been unsettled for good. This is why we still see conflicts and instability in Africa.

From the notebook of Zaher Rezai

Zaher Rezai was an Afgan boy who had traveled all alone from his country, Afganistan, then died after having reached a few miles from the Italian border. He died smashed by the same truck under which he was hidden to enter into Italy. A notebook that contained some personal notes and verses had been found in his pockets. Here are some.

*This tired and thirsty body
May not make it to the sea.*

*I do not know which dream will reveal my destiny,
Promise me, God
That you will not let spring pass.*

*Oh, my dear, the pain that waiting holds,
Promise me, God, that you will not let spring pass.*

*I have travelled long days and nights on the boat of your love,
In the end I will either be able to love you or drown.*

*Gardener, open the garden gate; I am not a flower thief,
I have turned myself into a rose, I do not search for other flowers.*

*If one day in exile death decides to take my body
Who will take care of my burial, who will sew my shroud?*

*Place my coffin in a high place
So that my scent might drift back to my homeland in the wind*

*I do not yet know which dream my destiny will reveal
But promise me, God
That you will not allow this spring of mine to expire.*

Zaher Rezaï

Names without bodies

On October 3, 2013, many young people with names such as Selam (peace) or Tesfaye (my hope) left us all at the same time. Naming our children is a way of telling the world about our hopes, our dreams, our beliefs, or about the people and things we respect. We choose meaningful names for our children, just as our parents did for us.

For years these names, and their load of flesh and blood, have left their birthplaces, going far from home, composing something like a written message, a message that has reached the threshold of the Western world. These names have defied manmade boundaries and laws, have disturbed and challenged African and European governments.

If we can understand why and how these names fell so far away from their meaning, we might be able to transmit an endless message to our children and through them to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Although the bodies they belonged to are gone, those names linger on because they have been spoken and continue to live even though they are removed from their human constraint. Deafened by a chaos of poisoned words, we can't hear them. But those syllables are alive because they have been inscribed in the cosmos.

The film's images give space to these names without bodies. They are meaningful names although it might be difficult for us to grasp their meaning.

It is necessary for us to count them all, name each and every one, to make us aware of how many names lost their bodies on one single day, in the Mediterranean Sea.