

**BERTOLT BRECHT**  
**1898-1956**

*Concerning the Label Emigrant*

in *Refugees: An Anthology of Poems and Songs*. Edited by Brian Coleman. Ottawa 1988

I always found the name false which they gave us: Emigrants.  
That means those who leave their country. But we  
Did not leave, of our own free will  
Choosing another land. Nor did we enter  
Into a land, to stay there, if possible for ever.  
Merely, we fled. We are driven out, banned.  
Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in.  
Restlessly we wait thus, as near as we can to the frontier  
Awaiting the day of return, every smallest alteration  
Observing beyond the boundary, zealously asking  
Every arrival, forgetting nothing and giving up nothing  
And also not forgiving anything which happened, forgiving nothing  
Ah, the silence of the Sound does not deceive us! We hear the shrieks  
From their camp even here. Yes, we ourselves  
Are almost like rumours of crimes, which escaped  
Over the frontier. Every one of us  
Who with torn shoes walks through the crowd  
Bears witness to the shame which now defiles our land.  
But none of us  
Will stay here. The final word  
Is yet unspoken.



## MISGANAW WORKNEHE ETHIOPIA

*All tomorrows are the same*

from *Tilting Cages: An Anthology of Refugee Writings*. Edited by Naomi Flutter and Carl Solomon. Sydney, 1995

Kakuma is found in Turkana district which is situated in the north-western part of Kenya, bordering Ethiopia, Uganda and the Sudan. The area where the refugee camp is located is dry, dusty and sunny. Sometimes you feel the heat as if the sun is only kilometers away. The air is full of dust particles.

At the far end of the refugee camp stands a lone plastic make-shift hut, as if it has no care for what exists in the world. The owner is also lonely; he lives by himself in an alien land. The shabby shelter is neither a house nor a pen. But it partially protects its owner from the sun and the big grains of sand and it is the only worldly thing which related Mesfin with property. He says "It is my house", but deep inside he knows that he does not deserve it.

When Mesfin feels the stress from the combined forces of loneliness, lack of love and hunger he usually loiters in the forest. Moreover, when there is a shortage of firewood, which is more often than not, he walks for about twenty kilometers to fetch twigs. The wood is essential to provide the energy required to boil the beans which are hard to cook. The firewood rationed is hardly enough to make a day's meals, so fetching wood is one of Mesfin's main activities. Buying charcoal is out of the question since money is hard to come across; collecting from around the camp is illegal and it would invite confrontation with the uncompromising local Turkana people. But having a piece of wood is the difference between eating and going without food. So, to cook and eat a decent meal, he has to rise with the sun and go in search of firewood.

Once he almost lost his life because of a bundle of firewood. Shame. On this occasion he walked very far from the camp. He collected fallen trees and branches, tied the pieces together with the rope he had carried with him and started his journey back to the camp. He braved the scorching sun from above and the burning heat of the sand under his feet. He took strength from the hope that he would reach home safely with his bundle, to cook and to eat his fill.

After traveling much of the distance back to the camp, sweating and panting under the load of the bundle, the unexpected happened. Unfortunately he met an aggressive local Turkana armed with knives and arrows and was asked to throw the bundle he was carrying down. Poor chap! He tried to reason with the Turkana forgetting that neither of them could understand the other. He tried to win his heart by showing submissiveness and bowing repeatedly, but in vain. He even tried to cry to evoke sympathy, but to no avail. The local was determined and uncompromising. He threatened Mesfin with his armaments and indicated the place where Mesfin should place the bundle of wood. Finally, when Mesfin understood his position and when he knew that he was beaten, he abandoned the bundle and restarted the



interrupted journey back home. He doesn't know how he covered the remaining distance, since he finished it moving as a corpse, cursing the star under which he had been born.

Back at home he lay on his mat. He forgot that he had eaten nothing the whole day and that his stomach was empty. He crouched with his head and knees together as a hungry dog and cried for peace. He wondered if it was proper to cry at the age of 40 or so, but it was the only way to keep his sanity; all he could do to keep himself from self-destruction.

When he sits and ponders what he is doing with his life or what is being done to him, Mesfin always ends up confused. He first fled his home country to the Sudan when the Marxist junta – which had stood for the down-trodden – won state power and started to eliminate the so-called reactionaries. He returned to Ethiopia when President Mengistu took his turn to flee the country and to join the refugees in Harare, and when the new Ethiopian Transitional Government came to power. He returned and stayed in the country long enough to see how fast Ethiopians were going "from the frying pan into the fire". Then he took off again, this time to Kenya. Born to run away as a rabbit at the first sight of a problem, he thought to himself silently.

He learned nothing from his running, but his long life as a refugee taught him tolerance. He knows that tolerance is the rule of the game and it is the way to sanity. That is why he is still alive. He remembered how many of his friends perished and how many went mad and disappeared into the desert, left to unknown fates. Once while wandering around somewhere, he had found an identity card, an Ethiopian one, near a partially decomposed body. He tried to see the face of the deceased but his legs failed him. He fell to the ground and vomited. When he had composed himself, he ran to the camp and hid in his hut for days.

He hated remembering, sitting on his mat, counting the days that he had lived in the refugee camp, enduring the unendurable. But here he was, sitting and remembering.

He tolerated the police who behave as if they own the world, and demand so much when they see a refugee. He tolerated the workers of the humanitarian organisations who think that they know the needs of the refugees. And he also tolerated the hunger, the thirst, the cold and the sun which are intolerable.

As he sat, he prayed for his deliverance. But he knows God is unfair in his treatment of individuals. The illogical God allows some creatures to wither away in a hot desert, in an alien land, while others are leading luxurious lives. Today, he doubts fairness.

Finally, he was tired and went to sleep, to wait for another tomorrow. In a refugee's life, all tomorrows are the same. No story to tell, no history to write and no future to plan. Tomorrow is just another miserable day.



from Sybilla Wilkes, *One day we had to run!*, (London, Evans Brothers, 1994)

## **ETHIOPIA – The past**

Ethiopia has one of the richest and oldest histories in Africa. One legend says that the first Ethiopian ruler, Menelik, was a descendant of King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba. During ancient Greek times, Ethiopia was thought to be the place where the sun set. Throughout its history, high mountains have protected Ethiopia from attack by other countries. The first invasion that the Ethiopians experienced was by the Italians, in 1895. The Italian army was defeated but Italy kept some territory in the coastal area of Eritrea.

In 1935, the situation changed when Italy finally conquered Ethiopia. The emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, was forced to live in exile in Britain until, in 1941, British, Indian and Ethiopian troops drove out the Italians, and Ethiopia became an independent country one again. However, the British ruled Eritrea until 1952, when an agreement was made to join the territory with Ethiopia. Under the terms of this agreement, Eritrea kept its own regional government.

Emperor Haile Selassie was killed in 1974 by a group of army officials who then took power. In 1977, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam became head of state and introduced a communist government which was supported by the (then) Soviet Union. During his 14 years in power, Mengistu built up a huge army and dealt ruthlessly with anyone who dared to question his government. Once, when a member of the government tried to question a policy at a meeting, Mengistu pulled out a gun and shot him on the spot. The whole country lived terror; over 100,000 people were killed, and thousands more escaped to neighboring countries.

In the late 1970s, Ethiopia and Somalia started to fight over the Ogaden region. Hundreds of thousands of Somalis living in the region were forced to flee as refugees to Somalia. Backed by the Soviet Union, Ethiopia won the war.

During Mengistu's rule, and after, three rebel groups were active in campaigning against the government. Eritrea was made a province of Ethiopia in 1962, going against the agreement made for regional government in 1952. This led to the formation of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). A second opposition group, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPFL) fought for greater freedom in dealing with the affairs of the region of Tigray. The third group formed was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the south of Ethiopia.

Ethiopia suffered from serious droughts in 1973-4, 1983-5, 1987 and 1989-90. Civil was helped to turn these droughts into famines. Regions seen as "rebel areas" by the government were deprived of aid. The famine in 1983-5 came to the world's attention following a news report on BBC television. Pop stars, led by Bob Geldof, took part in the "Live Aid" concerts to raise money for aid for Ethiopia.

In May 1991, the Mengistu government was overthrown, and by July a new government was formed that included representatives from all the various



movements in Ethiopia. At the same time, the EPLF formed a government in Eritrea and, in April 1993, Eritrea was pronounced an independent state. However, in Ethiopia disagreement about regional elections in June 1992 led to the OLF withdrawing from the state council. Fighting in southern Ethiopia followed and many Oromo people fled to Kenya. An agreement between the Oromo and the government in November 1993 meant that these refugees could begin to return home.

### **ETHIOPIA – The present**

Most of the 75,000 Ethiopian refugees living in Kenya returned home at the end of 1993. However, there are still about 5000 Ethiopian refugees in Kenya, many living in Kakuma camp. Most of them are "political" refugees who claim that their lives would be threatened if they returned to Ethiopia. Many are interested in resettling in Europe or the USA. But every year, fewer refugees are accepted by Western countries. This means that most of the Ethiopian refugees living in Kenya will stay there until they feel safe to return to Ethiopia.

Until that time, the Ethiopian refugees in Kakuma have established their own community. It is interesting to see the way that, with exactly the same equipment, the Ethiopians build their homes in a totally different way from the Sudanese. Many Ethiopian homes have "front rooms" built to provide a space for a shop. The Ethiopian quarter of Kakuma is the commercial centre of the camp. Here, there are shops, shoemakers and a "Hotel Intercontinental" where the Ethiopian refugees provide the entertainment.

Many of the Ethiopian refugees are professional, educated people. In Kakuma, they feel very frustrated. As one woman explained: "I fled from Ethiopia as a student. Now I am in Kakuma, in this heat, with no books and no work to do. I feel like I am wasting my life".

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