

Jan Carew

THE HIGH ROAD TO HARRAR

For Roberto Retamar.

I'll take the high road to Harrar again,
the Freedom Road,
and walk past dusty Dira Dowa in the morning
just after the rains
when the verging sand is littered with wild flowers

I'll hurry down that ancient road
with the camel trains,
knifing my way through hills rising
like mounds of elephant bones
bleached white by the Ogden sun;
and when that serpent-tongued gopeller
beaming conflagrations
from his single messianic eye
topples from blue pulpits in the burning sky
to die in embers of his own fire,
I will lay me down
anywhere that sleep surprises me,
spreading my goatskin on the opulent sand
watching low stars and the eyes of jackals
kindle like torches on ramparts of night.
Listening, with my ear pressed to the ground,

I'll hear wild flowers growing,
and the night wind,
winging its way from the Arabian Sea
as quietly as fish eagles,
will whisper secrets as old as sin to me,
resurrecting the muffled tramp of soldiers from Axum
marching to the tune of drums and flutes
and sharp commands barked by mounted Centurians;
caravans bedding down for a long night;
minstrels serenading camels in the moonlight;
concubines strumming lutes and mandolins indifferently;
sleepy camel drivers muttering obscenities
in the name of the Prophet;
masters bellowing for their slaves;
and from another age wafted sounds
sneak into my mind's ear:
Janissaries of the Ottomans
shattering plangent silences
with the martial rhythm of cymbals,
announcing to sly traders in bazaars,
ebony farmers in sorghum fields
and golden horizons of ripening corn,
that it was tribute-time again.

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For the Emperor's no longer there
perched on a gilded throne
with sorcerers bending his royal ear,
whispering of tiny treacheries,
while at the ornate palace gates
tall Danikil guards spring up overnight, they say,
like a spawn of Dragon's Teeth
from fertile valleys of the Nile,
to stand as still as Kushite monuments.
These sentinels from legends of Orphir
smile imperceptibly as they hear,
clearer than Coptic bells at eastertime,
titanic tides of mounting rage
gathering from icy Siemen peaks
to the scorching Ogden plains.
Not long ago, the Emperor,
had turned his hooded eyes away
from armies of the innocent dead
parading aimlessly across the Wollo plains
where Famine, that agate-hearted robber,
stole a million lives.
While vultures, too gorged with human flesh to fly,
fell from the sky like stones,

the Emperor fed steaks
to sated lions drowsing at the palace gates;
and in the emptiness, Barons of the Land,
walked hand in hand with Death,
measuring vacant lots with greedy eyes.
How long can a man live
with a million piercing cries of pain
exploding in hollow casements of his brain
echoing tyrannies as old as crocodiles!
Mengistu felt tides of rage
rising inside his lion's heart;
but the anger of one man soon ebbs away
like rivers in the Afar sands after the rains.
The molten magma of Mengistu's wrath
joined tributaries of fire
flowing from thirty million hearts.
"First we must change our way of thinking", he said,
"then together we will shape hammers and anvils,
for if you're a hammer, you must strike!"
I'll take the high road to Harrar again,
the Freedom Road,
crossing parched throats of dusty riverbeds,
following the camel trains;
I'll walk beside Galla women,
who bold as burnished moonlight,
have long since cast aside their Moslem veils

to scan boiling horizons with fearless eyes.
I'll walk into the future with these lissom belles
who smell of honey-wine and wild sage.
The lion-hearted Mengistu
has opened the palace gates wide
for the first time since Taharka,
the Pharoah with black velvet skin,
had ordered his High Priests
to chant orisons to deaf gods
in Temples of Isis;
or Sheba looked on Solomon with silken eyes;
or Claudius, the crippled god,
had sent ambassadors from Rome
to trade in wild beasts and rainbow-colored slaves.
Outside ancient battlements of Harrar
where cassons of the Janissaries still creak
in the night wind,
the jackals have been driven to their lairs,
they cannot stand the blinding glare,
for between the morning of awakening and victory
are thirty million incandescent hearts of fire.
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