

INTRODUCING

Introduced and translated by David Ball and Nicole Ball

Nicole Ball first came across Abdourahman A. Waberi in 2002, when she was browsing through new arrivals in the Smith College Library. She has had a particular interest in francophone literature ever since she translated two novellas by Maryse Condé some ten years ago. (Waberi calls her his friend and mentor, but of course Nicole didn't know that at the time.) The book was *Rift Routes Rails*; these powerful short pieces made such an impression on her that she took the book along to the ALTA Conference that year and re-read them on the way. She bought *Cahier Nomade* ("Nomad Notebook") over the summer in Paris. The following spring, when we were putting together a special francophone issue of *Metamorphoses*, David translated two pieces from that book for the issue. When we sent the publication to Waberi, he was delighted, and we entered into a friendly electronic correspondence that has lasted to this day.

One of the pieces in *Metamorphoses* is a kind of prose poem spoken by a corpse floating downstream with many others; the second is a biting account of his native Djibouti eleven years before it gained independence from France. It ends: "The governor had lobotomized all the men so that they could never again whisper the painful secrets of that August '66. Unfortunately for him, he had forgotten the babies—the promise and threat of the future. I was one year old." In 1985, Waberi immigrated to France, where he still lives.

When we were looking for a book-length project last winter to submit to the French Embassy's Cultural Services for their new "French Voices" series, we asked him if he had something new out. And indeed he had: his novel *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* had just been published, and was receiving impressive coverage in many important French-language journals and beyond. It seemed a natural for this series. We translated a hefty sample and were fortunate

enough to get the grant. The translation will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2008.

This partly satiric novel is a new departure for Waberi in many ways. Here, an excess of wealth, comfort and culture are found in the United States *of Africa*, while Euramerica houses the wretched of the earth. Those whites who flee, “refugees from bloody, desolate Euramerica, press against [Africa’s] borders or wash up on the beaches of Algiers and Djerba,” or else toil away at low-paying jobs in the midst of Africa’s consumer society. The old trick of turning the world upside down makes us see it in a different way. The evocation of the suffering of the post-colonial world acquires a new sting when it’s about *us*. So does the parody of anti-immigration discourse (Africans saying Close the borders, send ‘em back to Europe!) or the story of a miserable immigrant worker from Switzerland (an impoverished country ravaged by age-old ethnic hatreds)... or the pastiches of travel writing, particularly about women of the exotic, sensual West.

The story centers on the quest of the young heroine, rescued as a child from France by an African doctor on a humanitarian aid mission and then adopted, to find her “first mother.” The journey takes her from the hideously squalid streets of Paris (particularly the slums around the Place Vendôme) to the hopeless poverty of rural Normandy. The simple story and its *Candide*-like chapter headings suggest an important feature of the novel: it is a tale, as well as a satire.

The novel also gives the Western reader an appreciation for the culture of Africa and its diaspora. Waberi celebrates that culture as his artist heroine develops her art: the book is studded with the names of famous black artists, writers, singers, and political thinkers and leaders. In the end, the main achievement of this remarkable tale may well be to give the western reader a feeling of “identification, projection, and compassion” (Waberi) for the real populations of Africa and Asia.

Today Waberi’s reputation is rapidly growing in Europe, Africa, and the United States. His novels, short stories, poems and

essays have received many prizes: Prix biennal « Mandat pour la liberté » du P.E.N. Club Français (1998), Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Afrique noire (1996), Grand prix de la Nouvelle francophone de l’Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Française de Belgique (1994), among others. He was honored as Guest of the Berliner Künstlerprogramm in 2006. His work has often been republished and anthologized in France and elsewhere. It has been translated into many languages—eight, the last time we looked—including English: *Land Without Shadows*, his book of poetic short stories set in Djibouti, came out in 2005 (University of Virginia Press), and a dozen of his shorter texts have appeared in English-language anthologies (*The Flamingo Book of New French Writing*, *The Picador Book of African Short Stories*) and journals (*Grand Street*, *Metamorphoses*, etc.) His work is often concerned with immigration, exile, and the miseries of the colonial past and post-colonial present.

Part I: A Voyage to Asmara

Chapter 1

In which the author gives a brief account of the origins of our prosperity and the reasons that have thrown the Caucasians onto the paths of exile.

He's there, exhausted. Silent. The wavering glow of a candle barely lights the carpenter's bedroom in this shelter for immigrant workers. This ethnically Swiss Caucasian speaks a Germanic dialect, and in this age of the jet and the Internet, claims he has fled violence and famine. Yet he still has all of the aura that fascinated our nurses and aid workers.

Let's call him Yacuba, first to protect his identity and second because he has an impossible family name. He was born outside Zurich in an unhealthy favela, where infant mortality and the rate of infection by the AIDS virus remain among the highest in the world today. The figures are drawn from studies of the World Health Organization (WHO) based in our country in the fine and peaceful city of Banjul, as everyone knows. AIDS first appeared in Greece some two decades ago in the shady underworld of prostitution, drugs and promiscuity and is now endemic worldwide, according to the high priests of world science at their Mascate meeting in the noble kingdom of Oman.

The cream of international diplomacy also meets in Banjul; they are supposedly settling the fate of millions of Caucasian refugees of various ethnic groups (Austrian, Canadian, American, Norwegian, Belgian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, British, Icelandic, Swedish, Portuguese....) not to mention the skeletal boat people from the northern Mediterranean, at the end of their rope from dodging all the mortar-shells and missiles that darken the unfortunate lands of Euramerica.

Some of them cut and run, wander around, get exhausted and

then brusquely give up, until they are sucked into the void. Prostitutes of every sex, Monte Carlans or Vaticanians but others too, wash up on the Djerba beaches and the cobalt blue bay of Algiers. These poor devils are looking for the bread, milk, rice or flour distributed by Afghan, Haitian, Laotian or Sahelian aid organizations. From the beginning of time, little French, Spanish, Batavian or Luxembourgian schoolchildren, hit hard by kwashiorkor, leprosy, glaucoma and poliomyelitis, can only survive with food surpluses from Vietnamese, North Korean or Ethiopian farmers.

These warlike tribes with their barbaric customs and deceitful, uncontrollable moves keep raiding the scorched lands of the Auvergne, Tuscany or Flanders, when they're not shedding the blood of their atavistic enemies—Teutons, Gascons and backward Iberians—for the slightest little thing, for rifles or trifles, because they recognize a prisoner or because they don't. They're all waiting for a peace that has yet to come.

But let us return to the shack of our flea-ridden Germanic or Alemanic carpenter. Take a furtive look into the darkness of his dwelling. A mud floor scantily strewn with wood shavings, no furniture or utensils. No electricity or running water, of course. This fellow, poor as Job on his dung heap, has never seen a bar of soap in his life, cannot imagine the flavor of yogurt, has no idea of the sweetness of a fruit salad. He is a thousand miles from our most basic Sahelian conveniences. Which is further from us, the moon, polished by Malian and Liberian astronauts, or this creature?

Let us cross what we might call the threshold: swarms of flies block your view and a sour smell immediately grabs you by the throat. You try to move forward nonetheless, but you can't. You stand there, dumbstruck.

Your eyes are beginning to get used to the darkness. You can make out the contours of what seems to be a painting with crude patterns. One of those daubs they call primitive: clueless tourists are crazy about them. Two crossed zebu horns and a Protestant sword decorate the other side of the wall, a sign of the religious zeal that

pervades this shelter for foreign workers in our rich, dynamic Eritrean state, where, by the way, our values of solidarity, conviviality and morality are now being threatened by rapid social transformations and the violent unleashing of the unbridled free market. The Afrigeltcard has replaced our ancestral traditions of mutual aid. The ancient country of Eritrea, governed for centuries by a long line of Muslim puritans, deeply influenced by the rigorism of the Senegalese Mourides, was able to prosper by combining sound business sense with the virtues of parliamentary democracy. From its business center in Massawa or its online stock market on Lumumba Street to the very high-tech Keren Valley Project and the military-industrial complexes in Assab, everything here works together for success and prosperity. This is what attracts the hundreds of thousands of wretched Euramericans subjected to a host of calamities and the deprivation of hope.

Our carpenter is muttering in his beard. What can he possibly be saying with his tongue rolled up at the back of his throat? God alone could decipher his white pidgin dialect. He is racked by the desire to leave the cotton fields of his slavery—quite understandable, but let's get back to the subject.

Still more dizzying is the flow of capital between Eritrea and its dynamic neighbors, who are all members of the federation of the United States of Africa, as is the former Hamitic kingdom of Chad, rich in oil; and also the ex-Sultanate of Djibouti that handles millions of guineas and surfs on its gas boom; or the Madagascar archipelago, birthplace of the conquest of space and tourism for the *enfants terribles* of the new high finance. The golden boys of Tananarive are light-years away from the leaden wretchedness of the white Helvetic carpenter.

You're still standing? Ah, there we are! Now you recognize a familiar sound. You try a risky maneuver, taking one, then two steps into the darkness. You walk through the tiny door. You can make out the first measures of some mumbo-jumbo full of shouts and strangled sounds. An antediluvian black and white TV, made in Albania,

dominates the living room of the shelter for destitute Caucasians, with their straight hair and infected lungs. After an insipid soap opera, a professor from the Kenyatta School of European and American Studies, an eminent specialist in Africanization—the latest fad in our universities, now setting the tone for the whole planet—claims that the United States of Africa can no longer accommodate all the world’s poor. You might be taken in by his unctuous voice as you listen to him, but in fact his polished statements, all cheap lace and silk rhetoric, fool nobody—certainly not the immigrants from outside Africa. His idea can be summed up in one sentence: the federal authorities must face up to their responsibilities firmly but humanely by escorting all foreign nationals back to the border, by force if necessary—first the illegal immigrants, then the semi-legal, then the paralegal, and so on.

Chapter 20 (last chapter, Part I)

*In which we tell of a strange people of the night
whose fate is not to be envied. Nay, not one jot!*

“We by night

If the sea turned into ink, it would not exhaust all our dreams, our words, our stammering, our reiterations, our pages to read-write, our future books of wind, in the same second, the same fever, the same breath. All the desires of our blood, all the will-to-live of our guts, all the clandestine passion of our words. Our words well up from the deepest night, a black night, but black bottomless blue-black, with no rhyme or reason. A night violating all the mornings of the world, all the mornings of life, yours as well as ours. A night no different from the sun that skins you, the sun that detaches retinas, throws out blackish flames, drags around live embers, fire-brands fed by pure oxygen, vigorous infernos, cyclones of acetylene followed by floods of ash for days and nights all mingled together. Thus it is night and what about the skies lit *a giorno* for all eternity? What about our drifts, peregrinations, divagations, hallucinations? Maelstroms of zephyrs and trade winds corrupting the lava-flows driven to the Baltic Sea and even to that damn Mediterranean separating us from you and your fat, well-fed Africa, belching with comfort and boredom. Ah, that great overfed Africa will soon be something for our teeth and claws! Yum, yum! Yes, us, clustered on the cliffs, caves, ridges, dunes, rocks and backwash of the opposite shore. Us, stuck to its walls like an oyster to a rock, like hot-air balloons prevented from taking off. Us enough of it all, sick of it all, fed up to *here*, fed up to our asses, basta and amen to stewing in the Cayenne pepper of hunger and thirst... Us, wanting and desiring, and begging to drink, eat, be nourished, live, urinate, defecate, belch, and even bathe in the blood of the industrial slaughterhouses of fat Africa, devoted to fitness and face-lifts. Us, wanting to cross open spaces, mountains, oceans, inland seas, straits, estuaries, wanting to

go through doubts, loneliness, mourning and sadness. Us, up from afar, from the Ardennes, the Urals, Bohemia, the Black Forest, Cornwall, and every famine. Us, called chain-gang bandits, castaways from Gibraltar, drowned-saved from the beaches of Tunisia, survivors of old tubs sailing under Liberian or Filipino flags, sunk-and-escaped from Albanian smugglers, stateless fugitives claiming to be Kurds, enlisted-rejected Bosnians, Ukrainians, children of the Bosphorus born in the crevasse between feverish Europe and misty Asia, refugees surrounded by their bags and brats. As we wait for them to be killed, all of us must rise above our own imprisonment through the great escape of the word, through the calligraphy of our dreams, through poetry, so we can say everything, spit out everything, write everything. Everything. Us, wanting to be cheek and jowl with the well fed, well housed, well off: mouth-to-mouth with all those snotty girls, a good heart-to-heart with all those bored old guys chafing in the hospices of death from Asmara to Praia. Us, giving you heart after your heart, cancer, gullet, chest operation. A brand new heart for all the bachelors, the lonely women, the mateless souls—the broken hearts, the hearts up for grabs, standing, sitting or lying down. Us, trumpeting, raging, fulminating, bursting with health and utopias, ready for daring hand-to-hand combat with athletes, dancers, rope or trapeze jumpers, foot, car or bike-racers. All that for free. Us not far off, soon to appear in your country. Us, already at your door, at your barricades, your fences, your cinder-block walls. You, already huddling inside your cities, stations, airports, parks, and the sound of apocalypse ahead of our every step. Us, wetbacks, split-heads, white skin-and-bones, mangy dogs, poisonous turtles, irascible billy goats, motherless little rats, salt thieves, pallid gypsies, ashen zombies, and a whole tankful of curses as yet unheard... Ah, if the sea could turn into ink, we could name and recover the flavor and value of every insult you throw in our faces, at our heads, and our backs too.”

These words from beyond the grave come from a letter the Coast Guard found in the pocket of a potential exile lying on the beach of Port-Sudan. He must have been a fine writer, a poet or

philosopher, a thousand miles away from the stereotype of the naked immigrant, primitive and fierce. His abrasive language and unbridled style unquestionably attest to this fact. These hammering, clashing words, spread through the Web by an anti-globalization site well-known to activists (www.restorehope.org), have moved many citizens of the first continent. You can bet that poet's dead and gone!