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## In the Daily Chaos of the Horn of Africa, How Could You Not Write?

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Panel: Why I Write The Way I Do

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## IN THE DAILY CHAOS OF THE HORN OF AFRICA, HOW COULD YOU NOT WRITE?

### I. Natives of Poetry

I was born in the bush, to a large family of nomadic shepherds that traveled between the Republic of Djibouti, the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, and the State of Eritrea. When my mother decided to put me in a French school, we had to cross hundreds of kilometers on foot to get from Ethiopia (where we were with our animals) because my father refused to listen to a thing about the colonizers' school. But my mother held fast, in spite of the enormous sacrifices it cost her.

A few years later, she had to intervene again in my teenage life when my father decided it was time to end my schooling. She had my birth certificate changed, and I left for France at age fourteen in order to continue my studies.

My mother, who had never been to school, understood quickly—as every woman does—that the life of nomads was on the decline and that it was important for the last of her offspring to go to school. I understood that in searching for and acquiring knowledge, I was first my family's representative and then the representative of all nomads. But, in growing up far from home, I began to believe with all my heart that in our part of the world, we are all natives of poetry.

I wrote my first poem at age fourteen. “La femme qui brûle,” or “The Burning Woman,” was, for me, an outburst of anger against tradition, against the power of men, that of the fathers that I thought of as the godfathers of repugnant social rules. Why this poem? A female friend, very young, had decided to signal her rebellion by burning herself alive; in front of her father and her mother, she had set fire to herself. What she burned was not only her handsome body but also the outdated social rules under which she suffered, the complicit silence of society about the conditions of women. Yes, “the fire spoke after the silence,” and following this act, more than twenty other girls immolated themselves as well, burning themselves to get rid of arranged marriages, to say no to the tyranny of their fathers, to denounce the unreadable gaze of our women. There is a lesson that I learned from all of this. That suffering should express itself is primordial, but it shouldn't be soothed—rather, transformed.

But I know that our books, once written, no longer belong to us. They have their own existence. They make their way in the world tranquilly, furiously, prudently, or urgently, carried along by forces that exist apart from us. So to write, to rewrite becomes, for me, a pleasure, an enormous suffering, a voyage to the depths of myself. Writing becomes a vacuum that I must fill. One has to go further. As French poet Mallarmé writes: “there is no explosion but a book.” A book does not consist in putting together a laboriously assembled totality but it should be a burst of noise and silence that could not be without the book, itself coming from a burst human being, violently overtaken, pushed aside from his own being: the book then points to its own violent exclusion, the lightning refusal of what is possible.

### II. Writing as an Absolute Necessity

“Why do you write?” is a question that people often ask me but that I have never asked myself. Even if my responses lack elegance, depth, and sincerity, I have tried to respond each time, from politeness, from solidarity, from friendship, and also from convention. I often turn it into another question: “which road do I travel when I take to writing?”, when I go deeper into myself, my loneliness, my sadness and my contradictions as a free human being lost in his inner silence, amidst the daily chaos that plagues our countries? It is in that sense that I say we are haunted by the commands that come from books!

So—how did I react to this open book of a city here in Iowa, where there is a permanent explosion of books? What effect has it had on me, this Iowa City, as orderly as a poem about greenery, where it is sweet to be the castaways of literature, where we seem to be little atomic sparks sent out to have our modest exchange with human beings, rich in their difference, that the explosion of books has gathered?

At the beginning, the city threw my own chaos back in my face, but what followed was happier. What tremendous richness it offers to men and women who can profit from the knowledge acquired by past and present generations; to construct (not just tirelessly reconstructing and re-destroying, as in our countries) and improve forever, giving a chance to participate and to work, together forever, unceasingly and for the good of all. Does this not constitute a complete and priceless world heritage?

When one lives and works in Africa—and especially in the Horn of Africa—the question that plagues us is “How could you not write?” For it is this question that leads us to the “why,” which began to lose meaning long ago—at least for me.

I refuse to be a part of a writing that becomes a sign of survival and not resistance, a sign of powerlessness and not hope. To write means to cast off all self-consciousness in order to offer yourself to the dawn, throw yourself into dusk, and taste, at noon, the drops of a stubborn sun. To write means to love solitude and deal with suffering, to taste both with patience like a bitter and dangerous fruit, to accept suffering in all its amplitude, without falling into pretty, humanist complaints.

First, I have to tell myself that I write for myself, to translate the silence and find a haven, a simple link to life, a support, an inheritance of all the paths that are ours. To write, then, becomes an absolute necessity, a question of life and death, without any fear of unexpected experiences or our lives’ dizzy spells, because I know now that all these distances change and transform us just as a home is transformed by the presence of a guest: we don’t know what was changed, but something, nonetheless, is different inside our house (after people like Mr. Kim, Mr. Turusbek, and Mr. Naqvi have come in!) which must expose us to change.

Me, the African, how could I not write in this chaos? And now, how do I tell others about these gaping holes in our daily lives; how do I make them conscious of these wars in Somalia that still tear us apart, uproot our past, and obstruct all plans for the future because they drag on, because they always affect the same communities, and, above all, because the ones they tear apart and throw into the street are the youngest, the women, and the oldest—those who have served as an example, whose words are reduced to rubbish, whose acts are abhorred, and whose live are empoisoned. Those who want to make us dream, to make us love, to make us admire. Our books can speak a little bit in their place, echoing their suffering, testifying about their impact just as Baudelaire says in his poems, *Fusées*:

“I will leave these pages behind because I want to give a date to my anger, sadness.”

We are required not only to write but to act, not only to weep but to transform, not only to cry out but to suffer in silence, transform the fear, live the solitude, refuse it if it is not grand enough. Yes, to write means to love solitude, to enter into the amplitude of disaster, into a rude reality, to accept being indulgent of oneself and of the “Other,” seek out its fullness, a little accent of joy in the day, stars that enter into you and dance in the rustling of the trembling evening.

To write also means to try rendering the big questions audible, without worrying about the richest or the most powerful men on earth:

“Yes, if we are able to save the private banks that have ruined so much of the world by using the world’s money, how easily we could save thousands of children in the world that have never ruined anyone!”

To write also means to be a part of this divided world, interdependent to the tip of its toes, this world where, to buy beauty products in certain countries, one can spend in a month the same amount that, elsewhere, a family spends in a year on food, clothing—on survival.

Yes, in these areas, it’s important to communicate with others, never to close off but to exchange our knowledge, share our doubts, get rid of our exemplary solitude, talk about our distances, and to accept our existence, its harshness, and accompany it as far as it can take us; to be courageous in the face of what we meet, above all that which is new, that which is difficult, that which is impalpable, heart-rending, changeable...

And in order to accept these exchanges, the danger lies in entering into a literature without observing the silence, the deep solitude that helps us to experience the sounds of violent winds, the smell of the nearby or far-off sea, the humming of cities, the sadness of the mountains—because this awareness gives us the opportunity to transform ourselves.

Are we prisoners of silence because we go to these places without landmarks, the naked peaks of mountains, the crests of bald hills? No, we must recognize that the abysses—if there are abysses—are our roads, our questioning of today and of tomorrow, which excludes nothing.

And so to write means tasting the hours in which our dignity and our love grow in solitude, where the standing silence permits us to look inside ourselves; to write means refusing to believe that silence is golden but realizing that it becomes a space where indignation is born, takes flight, takes root in dissent, is engulfed in combat. Yes—it means going further than what we write and what we say; it means honoring action, word, human nature.

Allow me to finish up with my desert, my Horn of Africa, where, they say, the real language is sadness. What are the most beautiful routes?

They are not those that we traverse in tranquility, with bounding brooks, cliffs that take the breath away, or plateaus where grass flourishes—but those that we have built with our own hands, with our blood, the fear and the terror anchored in our stomachs.

The most beautiful route, for me, is the one that I built at age five, with little pebbles edging it, for my mother and her friends, who went barefoot everyday to get

brackish water from a well several dozens of kilometers away. That route, traced in the resonance of solitude with several friends, will never erase itself from my memory. And writing makes me believe that I am, every day, at this turning point of my existence, somewhere in the heart of the rude reality of our world.

“Listen, lend an ear: even pushed to the side, books that are loved, books that are essential, have begun to rail.” – René Char

**Trans. Addie Leak**