

Elegy for Sudan

*I know that I am tired,
and that my country is no longer my country.
It showcases me at the auction,
for I am a poet and nothing else.
And what benefit are words for the country?*

—Mohamed N.M. Ali (trans. Fatima Elbadri)

أعرف أنني تعبت
وأن بلادي ليست بلادي
تعرضني في المزاد
فأنا شاعر ليس إلا
فماذا تفيد الحروف للبلاد
-محمد علي-

Silent lightning flashed
Thunderless rain dried
Last sighs rise like gas
Light fades from the eyes.

Earth can't hold more blood
Hearts can't bear more lies;
Sins' stains, seen from space,
Swallowed all tears cried.

Hunger's thunder roars
Famished, famine died.
Death swarms silently,
Alighting like flies.

Lands with hearts of gold
Stabbed in hearts to let
Golden wealth flow out
Like lava's sunset.

Trade deals and bad bets —
Meals made to upset —
Make our continent
So incontinent.

To fill the holes where
A soul once had dwelled,
They sell us for parts,
Consigned to twin hells:

One drowned in sins' well
They call paradise;
One buried alive,
Slaving in graves' mines.

Come wrap yourself in
This poem's blanket
Tied to a pigeon
Escaping all nets.

Flying above borders,
Fences, battle lines,
Beyond the jinn's winds
That's possessed their minds.

Rivers' flowing verse,
Niles' and Congo's,
Niger's tears burn black
As they reach their home.

They sing of the years
Sold, stolen away,
Inky, oiled tears,
Stretched like tar and frayed.

Our towers are made
From their shallow graves;
Earth, steel, glass, piled high,
Pits make peaks of waves.

We take all their jewels
And give them our trash,
Choking on plunder,
Hands washed in their ash.

What magic is this
That silences screams?
Ears, deaf, and hearts blind
To dumb tragedy.

Thobes have become shrouds,
Pyres replace dukhan;
Feast-laid silver trays —
Now days scraped from cans.

The teeth in the sand
Outshine starry skies;
Night's seen such evil
Sun's face fears to rise.

Blue, the fog of war
White, the bones of men
Red run the rivers
Stained by dead children.

Gray, the land and skies
That all once bloomed green
Black, our days and lives —
Silver moon, unseen.

Yellow is the press
Orange, dying sun
Purple are the lips
Last breaths rise up from.

Camels terrified,
Ants scatter and flee;
Crocodiles weep,
Vultures circling.

Hell wept in pity,
Angels quake with rage
At calamities
Unique to this age.

They say Time heals all,
But this time destroyed
All, even itself —
Shadows in the void.

Mothers and children,
Families ripped apart
Like bodies and souls
Split by death's dark art.

Why is the refuge
Of Your dear prophets
Refused all refuge
Save You and your blessed?

And if these mountains
Should all melt to ash,
Scattered in the breeze,
Would their love songs last?

How many times can
Hearts be split, broken
Until like atoms,
They unleash oceans?

Perhaps where all might
And power has failed,
Gentle mercy's rain
Will finally prevail.

When elephants fight
The grasses suffer
But beasts starve without
This grass's succor.

Oh God, please come down
The night is so dark,
Dawn is forgotten,
But for this small spark.

Ask the swift gazelles
At the windswept dunes,
Ask the turning stars,
Ask the waning moon:

Whose eyes have known sleep?
Whose hearts have dreamed tombs?
When will prayers' whirlwinds
Stem war's bloody bloom?

God pour out Your rain
On Darfur, Khartoum;
Consume the fires
In peace's perfume,

As long as lightning
Heralds thunders' boom,
As long as bright noon
Follows the dusk's gloom,

As long as our hearts
Carry your sweet tune,
And it carries us
Through the Day of Doom,

As long as doe eyes
Search the skies for You,
Faces turn, burn for,
And return to You.

-Oludamini
Jumada II 8, 1447