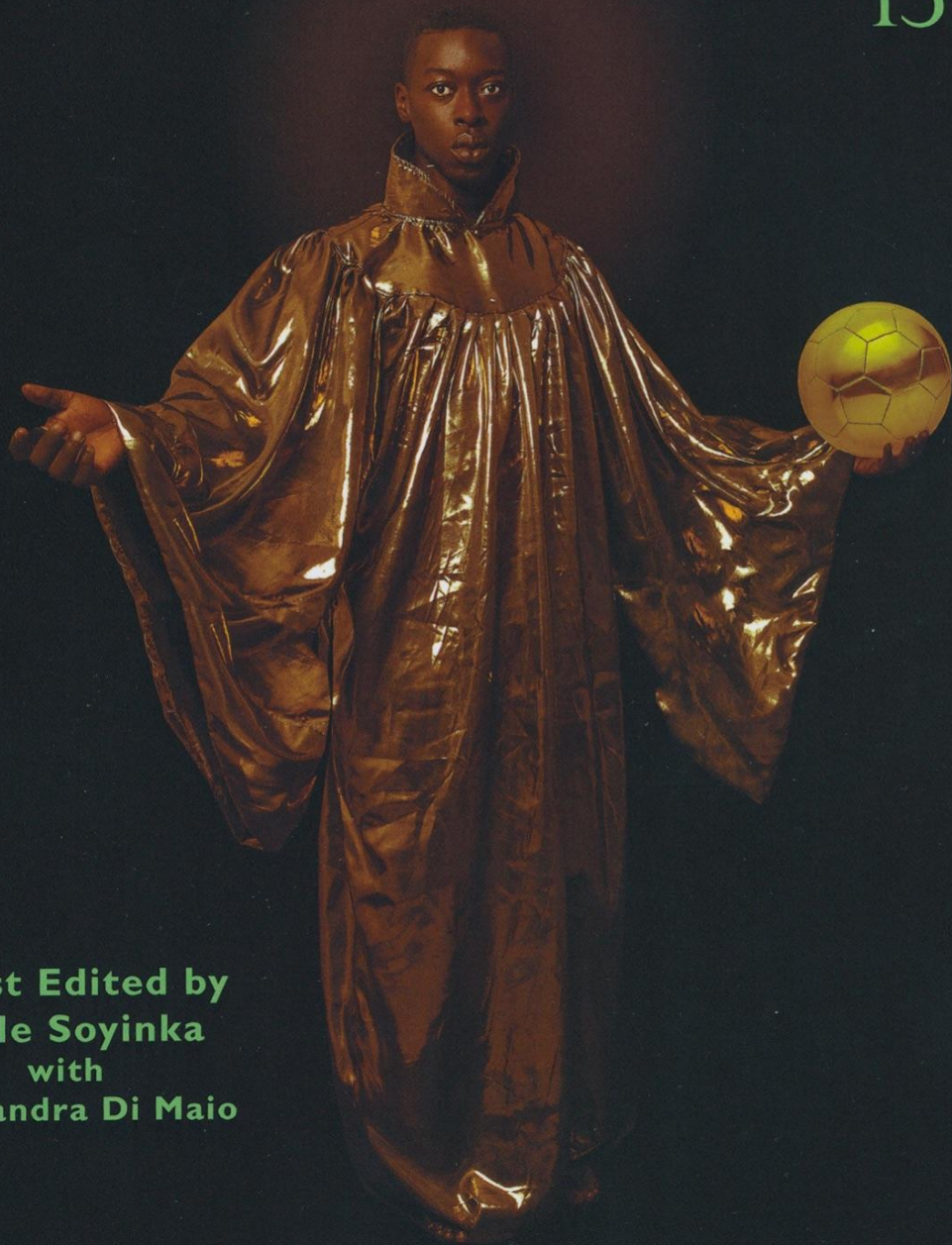


TRANSITION

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with
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THE BLACK IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BLUE
The Anniversary Issue

This Is What the Journey Does

Maaza Mengiste

I WATCH THE young man getting ready to cross a busy intersection from my table inside a café next to a large window. The orange glow of a late afternoon sun drapes him in thick sheets, laying across his shoulders and accenting his face. I recognize him for the East African that he is, a young man of Eritrean or Ethiopian origin with a slender frame, delicate features, and large eyes. He has the gaunt look of other recently arrived immigrants that I have met, a thinness that goes beyond a natural state of the body. He moves differently from one accustomed to the space he inhabits; his gait is a series of cautious, jagged steps forward. He appears frightened, overly sensitive to those who brush past him. He seems as if he is trying to coil inside himself, shrink enough to avoid being touched. Though I can note all of these details, I know there is nothing really special about him, not in Florence, Italy. He is just one of the many refugees or migrants who have made their way here from East Africa, a physical embodiment of those now-familiar reports and photographs of migration.

Pedestrians amble past on the narrow sidewalk, casting long shadows in the golden light of dusk. They are caught up in their private conversations, lost in the steady rhythm of their exchanges. They are unaware of the young man I am watching through the large window, brushing past my own reflection to get a better look. They do not realize that he is picking up speed behind them, his body stiffening with each passing second. He bends forward at the chest, slightly at first, then as if he might tip from his own momentum. He moves that way for several paces before he starts to push past pedestrians, oblivious to those he nearly trips. He is a wild, wayward figure careening carelessly through the busy sidewalk, distracted by his own thoughts.

Then, abruptly, he stops. He is so still that curious eyes turn on him, this sunlit figure stepping calming into the middle of the busy intersection. He stands there, immobile and slightly stunned as cars come to a halt and motorcyclists slow. Traffic waits for him to move. Instead, he begins to gesture, a conductor leading an invisible orchestra. His bony

arms bend and extend, propelled by an energy only growing stronger. Each sweep of his hand pulls the rest of him upward then twists him in an awkward circle. He continues as observers pause, then shake their heads and walk on by. Soon, he is working his mouth around words, and even before he starts, I know he is about to shout.

I let everything else disappear so I can focus on the developing scene. People move past him, irritated but still polite. Motorists carefully angle around his intruding figure. Everyone ignores him as best as they can, treating him as no more than a mild disturbance, un-

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remarkable. He continues gesticulating, his head turning one way then the other, his actions getting progressively faster. There is a strange kind of rhythm beginning, an erratic dance that is leaving him desperate to keep pace. While I watch, something squeezes against my chest and makes me take a sudden breath. I don't understand the ache that fills me. Or maybe I just do not want to recognize it. Maybe I do not want to find the words because to do so would mean to tumble down somewhere else, somewhere dark, far from this bright and busy street.

I have come to the café to escape the day's barrage of disturbing news. I have come with a notebook and my pen to distance myself from reminders of the turbulence continuing in America, in Ethiopia, in the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, in Europe: everywhere. I have come to find a way out of what I know in order to make my way towards a space where I can imagine, unhindered by unnecessary distractions. I have come to be alone, to write in solitude, free of the noise that has seemed to follow me for months, or perhaps it has been years. It is hard to know how to measure time, how to orient oneself when horror and shock begin to embed themselves into the pulse of daily life. It has become easy to live in the present moment, to spin from one disturbing event to the next, to move so quickly between disasters that entire days are spent in stupefied surprise.

Lazarus, I think, as I keep watching this young man: A defiant body refusing stillness, resisting quietness. A body using noise to stay alive, to move, to be seen. The waitress comes to take my order and smiles down at my notebook. I notice the couple next to me eyeing it warily, as if they are afraid I am taking notes on their conversation. No one seems to be aware of the drama unfolding outside the café where a young black man with unkempt hair is spinning in increasingly wide circles, motioning wildly, shouting incoherently at passersby. He is a spectacle without an audience. He is an actor in Shakespeare's tale, full of sound and fury.



He spins and flings his arms. He throws up a hand and snaps his wrist. He closes a palm over an ear and listens to his own whispers. He frowns and smiles, laughs alone, then twirls and catches another stranger's stare. There is anger in his spastic energy. There is sorrow and confusion in his eyes. He is breaking, I say to myself, and doing what he can to keep himself together. My reflection catches my eye and so I put my head down and in my notebook I write: "You did not leave home like this. This is what the journey does." It comes again, that ache in the middle of my chest. For a moment, it is so strong that I am sure he can feel it. I am certain it is a tether binding us together and he will turn in just the right way and I will be exposed. If he looks at me, then our lives will unfold and in front of us will be the many roads we have taken to get to this intersection in Florence and we will reveal ourselves for what we are: immigrant, migrant, refugee, African, East African, black, foreigner, stranger, a body rendered disobedient by the very nature of what we are.

When I glance up again, the young man has quieted down. Now, he looks almost bored as he weaves between pedestrians while twisting a lock of hair around a skinny finger. He moves lazily, as if he has accomplished what he set out to do. From where I sit, it looks like he is walking towards me, but he is simply following the sidewalk, and soon it will force him to proceed directly past the open door of the café where I am. As he saunters past, I notice a small bald patch on the back of his

**Todd Gray,
the hidden
order of the
whole (venus)
(2021).**

Courtesy of the
artist

head. It is a perfect circle, as if a round object was placed on his scalp to burn away his hair through to his skin. I tell myself that I cannot possibly know what it is, that it could be an illusion, it could be just a leaf stuck in his hair, but that is not enough to keep myself from flinching.

Stories come back to me, told by a friend who crossed the Sahara to get to Europe by way of North Africa. He spoke of horrifying treatment at the hands of human traffickers and police in detention centers and makeshift prisons. He shared what he could and skipped the rest. In moments when several who made the journey were gathered, I would watch them point to their scars to help fill the lapses in their stories. Sometimes, there was no language capable of adding coherence to what felt impossible to comprehend. Sometimes, it was only the body that bore the evidence, pockmarks and gashes forming their own vocabulary. Staring at the busy intersection, I don't want to consider what this young man might have gone through to arrive in Italy, to be in the street on this day. That he is alive is a testament to his endurance. What he has been subjected to, what might have caused that scar, what was too much for his mind to balance—these thoughts lead the way to far darker realities than I can possibly know. I look back at the first note I took upon seeing him: "You did not leave home like this. This is what the journey does."

Lazarus was gifted the chance to walk again in the land of the living. On one hand, it was a simple proposition: He obeyed the command to stand up and he was able to live. The rest of his days pale in the brilliant light of this astounding miracle. It is easy to imagine that he moved gracefully through his new existence, a man pulsing with this exposure to divine grace and might. We want to think that when he rose from the dead, he did so untainted and unburdened. That it was a rebirth, free of unsettling wisdom. But Lazarus was an ordinary man who opened his eyes to find himself incomprehensible. Somewhere between the end of this life and his second chance, he shifted forms, became a miracle and a stranger, remolded from loved one to aberration.

Medical science understands death to be a process rather than a single event. Though it might feel cataclysmic and sudden, the body undergoes several functions before it no longer lives. The various organs that support it collapse one by one. They all must cease all activity for an extended period of time in order for a person to be declared dead. It is not sufficient for the heartbeat and circulation alone to stop, for example, they must cease long enough for the brain to also die. The end of life involves a journey, a series of steps before that ultimate destination. A body requires certain signposts to nudge it in the right direction. An abrupt shift in that progressive movement disrupts the order of things. It deforms a natural process and leaves behind something warped and unrecognizable.

Perhaps this explains Lazarus's complete silence in John 11 and 12 in the Bible. To give him a voice would mean to grapple with the messiness that his resurrection created. It would be to insert a complex, human component to a direct and potent lesson. Though the Sanhedrin wanted to kill him along with Jesus Christ, though his resurrected life and all that it represented was as much a threat to them as the claims of Jesus, he is not allowed to speak. Lazarus is a muted miracle, still alive today as a metaphor for uncanny second chances. We have found many ways to make use of his example, but we do not know what to do with the living man. In part, it is because the Bible reveals so little about him. His story ends when he is no longer convenient. But to assume that he became worthless once he stepped free from his grave is to shrink his life down to its most significant moment. It is to believe that nothing else can possibly matter after so great a feat. It is to embrace the idea that we are, all of us, simple beings relentlessly pivoting around the same occurrence, trapped by the enormity of an important event, as if it is both the sun that guides us and the darkness that leaves us spinning in uncertain space.

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There is a phrase found in medieval Chinese literature to explain the biological phenomenon of an ailing body that revives, suddenly and briefly, only to collapse and die. It is *hui guang fan zhao*, translated as "last glow before sunset," that brief shimmer before night. I think of this as the café where I sit begins to empty and a new set of patrons streams in. A DJ near me starts to spin his music against the slowly darkening sky outside. Through the window at my side, I gaze past my own reflection to focus on the unbroken flow of pedestrians and motorists at the intersection. The young man I observed earlier is gone, and in his place, routine and repetition have stepped in. I see him for a moment, though, leaving home, wherever that might have been, and making the tortuous trek through the Sahara. I see him trapped in containers and overloaded trucks and crowded boats. I see him struggle with a deadening stillness, then step onto land to face the boundaries set up in Europe. The journey is designed to test the body's resilience. Its intent is to break a human being and rearrange them inside. Every inch forward is a reminder of one's frailty. You do not arrive the same as when you left. You will sometimes look at a stranger and recognize yourself reflected in that new life: impossibly alive, walking through the lingering glow of a splendid sun while trying to spin free of a permanent darkness. ●