



AGONIZING WOUND

By Yilma Tafere Tasew

Price: \$NZ 15.00

Book Review By L. E. Scott

Yilma Tafere Tasew, an Ethiopian, lived and struggled and survived for eight years as a refugee in Kenya before coming to Aotearoa New Zealand towards the end of 1999. Yilma says of that struggle to stay alive: "It is a puzzle. Sometimes you are left wondering. You don't understand what is happening to your life. Every day strange things happen to you. I lived as a refugee in two camps in Kenya, where wind and dust blow their trumpets, threatening you, leading your life in the direction they want. In that time I suffered a lot. The first refugee camp where I stayed for more than two years, 125 kms from the border with Ethiopia, was a nightmare. Malaria, typhoid and hunger killed people every day. Unknown armed gangs in the bush often killed refugees. You heard guns firing every night and the sound of munitions exploding in the camp. You didn't know what would happen from one day to the next. Your life was not in your control. Sometimes there is no difference between a refugee camp and a prison. You are thrown from the world you know into the middle of nowhere."

The beginning of Yilma's long journey to Aotearoa New Zealand started in 1991 when he fled Ethiopia, angry at the constant violation of human rights and fearing for his life. He had been arrested and held in prison for a year and a half, not knowing if he would live to see the next day.

His crime? "I was a sympathizer of the opposition political party."

Yilma's will to survive came in part from his belief in the power of the written word and a conviction that his story and those of other refugees have to be told. He tells his story through poetry.

There are poets in this world who write from dreams - they can be magical, creative, cute and sometimes clever. There are other poets who write because they have seen, felt, lived, smelled, eaten and swallowed the ugliness and fire that humankind can inflict upon its own. Yilma is a poet born of this fire. This man, this poet, has been baptized in the wretchedness of man's brutality against his brother. This is the source of Yilma's creativity. It is not abstract, it does not feed off dreams in a soft bed, it is not a muse of fantasy. It is a source that harbours the shadows of the living and the dead, the free and the not free and the shadows caught up in the fires of corrupted madmen drunk on power.

Yilma's poems are powerful because they reveal humanity in its struggle to live and grow and its determination not to lose sight of the truth that love exists even in the face of endless acts of evil and genocide from the dictator's hand. There is strength to be drawn from the belief that the human spirit does not die easily.

That belief shines through in Yilma's work and is also reflected in his decision to send any profits from the sale of his book to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya to support refugee aid projects there - projects that he was involved in himself when he lived in that camp.

In a recent interview, Yilma talked further about the plight of his homeland. "I left Ethiopia in June 1991. I left out of fear of persecution and because of the violation of human rights in general. When I was young, I was a sympathizer of the opposition political party, which was called the Ethiopia Peoples Revolutionary Party. Because of that I was arrested during the time of Mengistu (Haile Mariam) and held in prison for one and a half years. When the new government came into power (in May 1991) I realized there was no difference between Mengistu and the Meles (Zenawi) government. For me they were two sides of the same coin. What I feared would happen has happened/and continues to happen with the existing government in Ethiopia. Just as Mengistu was using the name of communism, these people are using the name of democracy. Mengistu was killing people on the streets, 'legally'. These people in power today are killing and arresting people illegally, using 'democracy' as a screen."

Past Whispers
The whispers of the past
Always there, in the mind
Going in and coming out
Always there in me
Buried, wholesome.

It may seem to some that Yilma has lost faith in his fellow human beings. But that is not so. What is clear is that he has seen human behaviour at its most vile, but he has not allowed that to suffocate his own humanity. Rather, his experience has given him a drive to challenge the destruction of humanity in others. "Any human being with a normal mind would not choose to be a refugee while he is able to work, while he is able to help himself, his family, his parents and his country. People become refugees because of situations, political situations. I wish the countries, the governments that produce refugees would consider this. If they would make people more comfortable, if they would stand up for their own people, then truly, honestly, I think the refugee problem could be solved. The refugee problem in Africa can only be solved if we Africans (by this I mean political leaders and everybody else) try to find real solutions to our conflicts. That means we need to stop solving every conflict with war and start using, instead of arms, our brains and we need to sit together to discuss our differences. If we do that, then the one who is in power, when he loses it, instead of running to the bush to fight, can choose to solve the problem through discussion. We must learn to share power and we must learn the true sense of the word 'democracy'."

Yilma has now been 'safe' in Aotearoa New Zealand since 1999 and is slowly rebuilding his life. He has found a job and is also studying at Massey University at Wellington. Who would blame him then, if he turned his back on the nightmare that forced him to flee his homeland? But he has not done that, for he is not that kind of man. Life, not just his life but life itself, means more than that. He cares about those he left behind. He lives with their shadow - their pain, their hurt, their hunger, their need, their desperation, their struggle to LIVE. Yilma's life is locked into theirs and he could no more turn his back on their lives than he could his own. So this collection of poems, the first to be published by an African poet in Aotearoa New Zealand, is part of his mission to ensure that the plight of refugees - wherever they come from - is not forgotten. We must see, and know, that we are our brother's keeper - and his jailer. There is no fork in this road.



Yilma Tafere Tasew: attending a poetry reading.

Note: "Agonizing Wound" will be published in May 2001. Orders can be made through Kwanzaa - The Afrikan Shop, 119 Manners Street, Wellington, New Zealand, telephone 64-4 801-7773. Price: \$15.00

Nothing Matters
For those
whose rhythm
is sorrow,
whose song is
hunger, disease,
whose
flute, guitar
is the earth,
whose lamentation
is always
deep, deeper
grief!
Nothing matters.