



# BLUE AND GRAY

## This Era of Exile

Artwork by Kebedech Tekleab  
Poetry by E. Ethelbert Miller

Curated by David Keplinger

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Project Space

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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE

American University Museum



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# Curating Conversation in *Blue And Gray: This Era of Exile*

By David Keplinger, Professor,  
Department of Literature, American University

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It was held by the French Symbolist poets of the 19th century, as well as generations of their followers, that in the arts meaning could only be cultivated in the interstice, in the gap between two notions, ideas, visions, or sounds. To those artists, whom we call modern for their alienated suspicion toward structures and certainties, nothing meant anything absolutely except in conversation with something else. Due in part to the influence of those poets and such notions, collage and Dada and Cubism evolved in the visual arts, along with the extraordinary achievements we have seen in experimental works of all media through the 20th century and beyond until the present day.

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As an example, I think of the late Serbian-American poet Charles Simic, who once published a strange collection that stood somewhere in the space between art criticism, ekphrastic poetry, and biography. The book, *Dime Store Alchemy*, engaged with the surrealistic shadow boxes of Joseph Cornell, a figure whose life was equally mysterious among the blowing newspapers and diners of New York in the mid-20th century. Simic finds himself in conversation with Cornell, a curator of the moment's popular imagery, photography, and design. With child-like originality, Cornell would paper the walls of his boxes with stars or images from *Vogue* or create little slot machines in a world of green parrots and ball bearings. Simic seems to follow him along those streets, asking unanswerable questions. There is little critical language to describe exactly what this conversation is between Simic and Cornell. *Dime Store Alchemy* remains one of those works on the seam of many traditions intersecting, uniting but also emphasizing the strangeness of their parts.

Opposite: Kebedech Tekleab, *The Lost Words, Series #3* (detail), 2023. Woodcut, 22.5 x 27.75 in. Printed at Brandywine Workshop and Archives.

## “...THE SUBLIME AND DIRE SIDE OF SOCIAL MEMORY”

And I thought of that conversation again, its gauzy betweenness, as I began to engage with the American University Museum’s new show, *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile*, which opened in June, 2023. I found myself, a poet, in conversation with an artist, in conversation with a poet. The artist is Kebedech Tekleab, born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from Eritrean parents, who now, far from her place of birth, teaches and creates in New York City, and whose craft has taken a long path from representational to abstract/nonobjective art over her career of nearly thirty years. Her work, held in the colors of departures, arcs outward, their forms uncurling, a seemingly endless unfolding into a hard world of unknowns. These are the bent blue silver mesh and the gray fields of shattered letters that capture the emotional complications of the individual in exile, after they have had time to reflect on and gaze backward at historical and personal trauma. She writes that she seeks to “shed light on the sublime and the dire side of the social memory she shares with others.”

6 The two-sidedness of her work creates a dichotomy between the rigidity of form and the softness of experience: the porous mesh is often shaped into the patterns of crumpled linen, curled papers drying in the sun. In the Gray Series, pieces like *The Lost Words* evoke an interstitial space as well, calling up the moment that the old language for home dissolves, before a new language can replace it. This is the gray of boundaryless space.

The poet engaging with Tekleab’s work is Ethelbert Miller, whose books over fifty years have chronicled the experience of the exile-on-the-inside, looking at Black experience in the United States with Yeats’ “cold glance.” Blackness in a structurally racist society is a hard mesh, too; though one that Miller often shapes into humor; familial reflection; rich celebration. Miller’s work hinges on the unseen shape of his adopted home of Washington, DC—Miller was born in the Bronx, his father an émigré to the United States from Panama—though known to the world by a few buildings and streets. With the same swathe of love that Cornell used to embrace the wonder of his city, Miller’s poetry pairs the personal dimension of being born a poet with the public dimension of being born a Black poet in America. His poetry is mood music of the quotidian in our whole city, not merely a few of its





Kebedech Tekleab, *Crossing the Borders* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

parts. It arrives sometimes with all of its spontaneous Romantic outbursts, and sometimes it knocks softly with surrealistic lyrics and elegies. We have included in this show a selection that intends to reflect the emotional range of his work in our community.

Thus, *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile* zeroes in on this experience of two-ness: the insider exiled from safety in a structurally racist society; the exile/dissident who has fled political strife to an academic position in the United States, but whose work still reflects an active hyper-vigilance against the coming danger. Tekleab, herself a poet, includes here as well a selection of poems that have been translated from her native Amharic. So we find her in conversation between languages and between genres, as well as between Miller's and her creations. This multi-phased effect was part of how we went about curating the show, purposely aiming for a collage of shapes and sounds, translations of the shape of old traumas.



Kebedech Tekleab, *The Future Unfolding*, 2019. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

## IN EXILE

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Kebedech Tekleab's art embodies her experiences of war and displacement, the themes of her work from her realistic period, through an abstract period, and now in her non-objective work across three decades. In 1979, after participating in a student protest against the Derg—the military junta government that had overthrown Haile Salasse's Ethiopian Empire on September 12, 1974—she found herself a teenager exiled from her home, having to make a dangerous passage to Somalia, where she was then detained for ten years. What followed was migration to the United States, eventual study at Howard University, a Master of Fine Arts in 1995, and an academic position in New York where she now lives and teaches as a tenured Professor of Studio Art at City University of New York – Queensborough Community College. Her recent work has been shown around the world, significantly in Thessaloniki, Greece, as well as in essential exhibits at institutions such as the Museum of African Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Holocaust Museum in Skokie, Illinois, which acquired her work, *The River in Rwanda*.

Now, returning to Washington, her work is framed within the context of another capitol, and the pairing grasps within its interstices the acknowledgment of the millions of lives now displaced by warring, imperialist nations across the planet. While it doesn't directly depict this suffering, her art is deeply informed by it as to elicit an emotional reaction beyond rhetoric. It is an emotional and spiritual revelation, in other words, rather than a didactic

**“No matter what soil you land upon, you are still a citizen of interstitial space. It is a space to a certain extent ennobling of the spirit, where one is able to see the many sides of things. A panopticon-vision develops, which, if you are an artist, demands that you bend and reshape the absolutes, crumple them, and turn them inside out.”**

one. These issues, all the same, lie at the core of her concerns. “The recent fratricidal war in Ethiopia,” she writes of what drives her work, “the constant turmoil in Somalia, the current wars between Russia and Ukraine, the war in Syria, the unrest in Iran, Israel, and Palestine, and so many other countries continue to be responsible for the loss of massive human lives and the displacements of people.”

The very word exile connotes a kind of survival in betweenness. It means to have exited or escaped a situation of harm that had once been home. Exile is harm on its journey to find home again, though for the peoples described in Tekleab’s reflection, this final morphing of the state of escape into a place of arrival never comes. No matter what soil you land upon, you are still a citizen of interstitial space. It is a space to a certain extent ennobling of the spirit, where one is able to see the many sides of things. A panopticon-vision develops, which, if you are an artist, demands that you bend and reshape the absolutes, crumple them, and turn them inside out. Poets of exile like Paul Celan, a survivor of the Holocaust, did this with German language, breaking it open and sewing it back together to reflect a shattered beauty. Tekleab has done something similar with shapes, textures, and medium. She has evolved from the closed world of strict realism in the years before exile to her current work, where “colors set the subject’s tone,” she writes, “[and] texts merge as new elements; layers become expansive and more translucent, at

times opaque, and materials unusual and eclectic. The visuals are created the same way as the poems – responsive, less didactic, aesthetically tuned, and open-ended.”

These works, which Tekleab reveals in her statement, “blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture,” throw into question the whole nature of boundaries themselves. What is the difference between *this* and *that*? What is the distance from *here* to *there*? From the point of view of the traveler, time moves slowly; *this* never clearly separates from *that*; certainties are difficult to define. In the poems she mentions above, there is a kind of unraveling at work there, too, where layers of self are stripped away to find some essential identity beyond even “exile,” and for which there are really no words. I am very moved by her work in this regard, a quality found especially in a poem like “You ask how I survived”:

*I survived*  
*As a baby might survive a fall*  
*as a blown petal might survive the wind*  
*as a young frog might survive the mud*  
*as a young cricket might survive a miss of a tender leap*  
*no more*  
*no less*  
*I survived*  
*because*  
*I stepped on my own steps*  
*and missed.*

(Translation from the Amharic by the author)



Kebedech Tekleab, *Non-Buoyant Life Vest* (detail), 2017. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

## “THE PLACE WE FLED BEFORE THE CRYING...”

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And what of the exile who never left home? In Miller’s poetry, that same retooling of the home/harm binary actively must sing itself into the world, into a name, into a tradition, working all the same back from the trauma of erasure in all its disguises. But the difficulty for this particular exile, the writer of color in the United States, is that the bending back from erasure means the confrontation of historical and personal trauma can inflict pain even as it offers the solace of renewal. In his short story “Sonny’s Blues,” James Baldwin describes two brothers: one, a math teacher who would prefer to avoid the pain of injustice; and the other a jazz pianist and recovering addict who chooses to lean into the suffering exposed by his art. Baldwin himself acknowledged that as a Black writer in America, he was living in two worlds. “I don’t know you personally, I don’t have anything against you personally,” he said once to a white reporter, “but I know you historically.” The gap, for such an artist, lies between the personal and historical, the grief called up by what he knows happened, and the sense that life goes on, even so.

These same qualities in Miller's poetry, paired now with the poetry and art of Tekleab, bind together these two sorts of seeking refuge. Miller never left for Paris but has, as a writer and literary activist based here in DC, created a Paris out of our own city. He hosts a weekly morning radio show on WPFW called *On the Margin with E. Ethelbert Miller* and is host and producer of *The Scholars* on UDC-TV, which received a 2020 Telly Award. In 2015 he was inducted in the Washington DC Hall of Fame and in 2016 he was given the DC Mayor's Arts Award for Distinguished Honor. He has been nominated for a Grammy. His books and memoirs are many. He has made for himself an artistic legacy out of all this blue and gray hue of interstitial experience, as he describes in his poem, "The Blue Years":

*And then we walked out  
Into the rain is if we were walking  
To the sea, so many weeping  
Because of dangerous memories.*

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*Life is a flood of tears.  
We were born somewhere  
Between heartbreak and desire.  
The place we fled before the crying.*

*The blue years when we had  
No food or water.  
The blue years when many  
Were strangled by the air.*

*So much thirst.  
Too much blueness on our tongues.*

This poem, an unrhymed sonnet of sorts, beginning with the “And...” of continuation, suggests that here, too, is just another example of a long unfolding hue of blue—unfurling like the metallic sheets of Tekleab’s art—and a feeling of displacement, disorientation (the rain and sea melded, momentarily). Many are weeping, he writes, because of “dangerous memories.” Memory in this realm is threatening; while it brings us home to ourselves, it causes harm. Holding us here in a place of betweenness, “between heart-break and desire,” this is the poetry of exile. At the turn in the poem’s final line, there is “too much” of blueness; it makes one thirsty. Thirsty for what? Air. Spaciousness. A sense of arrival. Its sentiment figures at the center of this project which doesn’t seek to invent arrivals or an end to our collective strandedness in this world; rather, it calls up “the place we fled before the crying” with a kind of woe, a kind of wonder, embodying tradition and memory in all its hues of blue and gray, in order to molt again, to shed them and continue walking on.





# *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile* Overview of the Collaborative Project

By Kebedech Tekleab

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I was not looking for sameness when I proposed working with literary activist and poet E. Ethelbert Miller, for the second time since 2008, a few years ago. Instead, the challenge of merging two unrelated fine art forms to bring newness to my current path in visual art made me think about navigating new territory. Exploring new possibilities involves negotiating differences in reflections, expressions, format, media, and delivery.

E. Ethelbert Miller's poems illuminate global, historical, and contemporary political and social issues. He is also interested in contemporary visual art. Similarly, besides being a visual artist, I am a poet who writes mainly in Amharic, Ethiopia's national language. Both my poetry and artworks focus significantly on societal issues. Recognizing these common ties, I proposed working collaboratively with Mr. Miller for the second time. Our first collaboration in 2008 was for a group show at Elizabethtown College, the *Handprint Identity Project*, an exchange between artists and poets.

*Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile* relates, as a title, to the dominant palette of the body of work that bares the blue hue and the color gray as a metaphor. It also denotes the treacherous routes displaced migrants often take by water or land to reach a safer place.

In most of the poems, words for different shades of colors express emotional situations. The project explores human conditions, specifically the migration and refugee crisis, by combining the two forms—poetry and art.

Initially, Miller and I discussed some of my previous artworks, such as *Non-Buoyant Life Vest*, an installation I made in 2018 that commented upon the Mediterranean Sea refugee crisis. Miller sent me three short poems: “The Blue Years,” “Blue Freedom,” and “Oh those silver bullets,” followed by “One of Us is Missing,” a poem he wrote with the Japanese poet and translator Miho Kinnas. “One of Us is Missing” is about global displacement with despair and

Kebedech Tekleab, *Non-Buoyant Life Vest* (detail), 2017. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

hopefulness, and the first three poems are deeply rooted in American/African American culture. They also express emotions shared by people elsewhere. Broken promises, longing for freedom, war anxiety, hunger, and displacement are timeless threats that affect human beings across geographic boundaries.

I understood the poems as *references* rather than extended accounts of situations. They are also open-ended and interpretive but move us, nonetheless, one person at a time. Open-endedness and being interpretive are the essences of abstraction and non-objective artworks. Through my art, I responded to the poems in a visual language that doesn't narrate, but relates emotionally through its formal qualities, such as color, texture, and form. The challenge of reflecting on the essences of poetry and art, finding parallels between them, and looking for a means of integrating the two forms was challenging.

Some of my poems for the project are "witnesses" of situations, and I tried to give them voices that belong to the world community. "Cotton-life," for instance, was written when I visited the refugee settlement programs in Uganda when I started my project on the Mediterranean issue at the peak of the refugee crises in 2017.

"For the Parent of the Caged Child" was an instant reaction to the decision of the Trump government in 2018 to separate young migrant children from their parents at the US/Mexico border. I wanted to write them in such a way that they also relate to the global humanitarian crises, including xenophobia and disregard for human life. The juxtaposition of the poems submitted for the project by Miller and me, some witnessing particular incidents and others referencing history, dissolve the partition of time and boundaries, making the tragedy recurrent and widespread.

The recent fratricidal war in Ethiopia, the constant turmoil in Somalia, the current wars between Russia and Ukraine, the war in Syria, the unrest in Iran, Israel, and Palestine, and so many other countries continue to be responsible for the loss of massive human lives and the displacements of people.

To produce a new body of work that balances tragic situations, without disregarding the demand for aesthetics, has been challenging but also rewarding. As a studio artist, I always explore new territories. And my work has evolved from realism to abstract and non-objective, working on two-dimensional and three-dimensional formats. For the last twenty years, I have



Kebedech Tekleab installing her work. March 12, 2023. Photo by Leonardo A Correa Cifuentes.

focused on taming nontraditional art materials through investigative techniques to bring a personal identity to my work. Those works blur the boundaries between painting and sculpture. They also create new possibilities of layered spaces and translucency through folding and unfolding membranes. Thematically, societal issues and global humanitarian matters have become important contents of my work since my student days in graduate school, developing my theses. Besides life, fine art disciplines such as drama, film, music, and poetry influence most of my works, showing me ways to reflect upon dire and extraordinary phenomena without compromising the quality of the form.

This collaborative project has stretched the parameters of my evolving experimental and investigative process. To maintain the project's theme, I have applied improvisation and automotive responses to the media. Colors set the subject's tone; texts merge as new elements; layers become expansive and more translucent, at times opaque, and materials unusual and eclectic. The visuals are created the same way as the poems—responsive, less didactic, aesthetically tuned, and open-ended.

# BLUENESS: When an Explanation is Needed

By E. Ethelbert Miller

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All around the world people are on the move. One of us is missing. One either moves or dies. War, fires, floods, gangs, ethnic conflicts—take your pick. Which one would make you run and hide? Which one would you risk everything to avoid? Imagine being surrounded by too much blueness and being at sea in a sinking boat with hundreds of others with desperate eyes. What would you cling to? A cross, prayer beads, a young child’s hand? If I were Pablo Picasso, I would be entering my blue period and these would be the blue years. Poems written during a time of exile and depression. For Picasso it was 1901–1904, for me it’s 2020–2023.

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During the pandemic, I read Helon Habila’s novel *Travelers*, and the story of migrants trying to enter Europe pressed me against a wall, and I was once again back visiting the migrants attempting to cross the American southern border. I saw the wall the “Floridian” wanted to build. I read the poem “Floaters” written by Martin Espada, a haunting memory taken from a photograph. These are what I call “dangerous memories.”

In my poem “The Blue Years” I ponder not the inability to breathe but what if one was “strangled by the air” and also cried for one’s mother? There is hunger and then there is thirst. Which is worse? I often think about these things when I sit down to write. Now and then I find the inability to continue is due to the weight of blueness that weighs on my tongue.

This era of exile finds one terribly cold. The only thing colder is history. Think of the Middle Passage, slavery, the Holocaust, or the smallpox blankets given to Native Americans that killed them when they wanted warmth. My poems at time take comfort in exploring the past, they search for humor in what can be an upside down world. In “Blue Freedom” I placed Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Thomas Edison, and Bessie Smith in the same

**“This era of exile finds one terribly cold. The only thing colder is history. Think of the Middle Passage, slavery, the Holocaust, or the smallpox blankets given to Native Americans that killed them when they wanted warmth. My poems at time take comfort in exploring the past, they search for humor in what can be an upside down world.”**

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poem. How else to explain a major invention? Did Edison invent the light bulb and then the phonograph to help a person sitting in the dark better understand Bessie Smith?

The poem begins with Lincoln removing his top hat like a magician and pulling freedom from it and not the bunny. There is something abstract and colorful here. A nod perhaps to the surprise one finds in the paintings of Kebedech Tekleab.

When we collaborate, I find a grayness lifting from my life. Collaboration between artists is one of the first stages or levels of building community. It relies on trust. The artist seeks “home” in the work of another. The journey together becomes a journey of discovery and transformation. Too often we are in exiled from ourselves.

*Claude McKay once said if we must  
die let it be for love or a French kiss  
outside Paris.*

# Reflections on Imageries of Seductive Sublimity

By Rihab Kassatly Bagnole, PhD  
Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD)

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It is not easy to write about the work of a friend because the relationship, which of necessity includes feelings of admiration and intimate knowledge of the person, may cloud a neutral judgment. But am I writing to judge, assess, or critique? Or is it about how I see and understand the text and the images in this exhibition, *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile*, on view and how they relate to each other? I am going to be a trustworthy, yet responsible, ally who tells the truth about the works presented in this catalog, the truth about my understanding of the ideas and the works of art exhibited therein, and, as a professional, I will examine their combined artistic and expressive merits. While the “truth” I uncover may be personal and subjective, my knowledge and experience as an art historian who understands and sees possibilities of interpretation in terms of artistic styles and disciplines, will guide me. Thus, this brief discussion looks at how poetry and painting are essential art forms for the artist whose life’s purpose is to react to her circumstances and events ... and respond to them creatively. In this exhibition, the works of Kebedech Tekleab, include both paintings and poems presented in creative visual and sound displays for the reader’s appreciation, and exploration.

Such a discussion of poetry and painting is one with a rich pedigree. Creative acts based on active imagination and individual creativity are sometimes debated for the possible insights they offer. Plato’s Socratic dialogue in *The Republic* makes it explicit that the philosopher does not accept “seductive art,” particularly art that is based on the ingenious mind of an artist who presents a detailed issue through creative imagination. While Plato specifies the poet, the painter is implicated because of the similarities between the two art forms. The first depends on seducing the ear through the sense of hearing, while the second beguiles the eye through the sense of sight. To

Opposite: Kebedech Tekleab, *The Future Unfolding* (detail), 2019. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.



Plato, painting and poetry are not original sources of knowledge. They are therefore detrimental because they are merely imitations of something real or their sensual imageries are persuasive because they are charming and intoxicating. In other words, the beauty of painting and poetry, if evoked, precipitates an enchantment of sorts and stirs emotions that reveal the feelings of the artist, which, in turn, advance the audience's awareness of the artist's communicated ideas. It is especially important to consider the viewer/listener's willingness to give the presented art a chance to reveal itself in its layers while trying to peel away these tiers one by one to disclose the truths nested in each. The feeling of the audience might be likened to its admiration of a dancer of the "seven veils," who reveals her marvels one by one as the spectators detect their own sensations and desires.

Contemporary art pieces are not usually welcomed by an unmotivated individual who is accustomed to looking, seeing, and accepting styles of representational art and descriptive poetry that "spoon feed" the viewer everything, including an intended message and mood. Such pieces can be described by what Clement Greenberg describes as *kitsch* because they are predigested art that provide the spectators a shortcut to the pleasure of art.

The artistic style of Kebedech Tekleab is not in tune with a kitsch style or representational paintings or the lyrics of popular songs, nor with the "what you see is what you see" of Frank Stella, as he once described his early minimalist paintings, sculptures, or "objects." Tekleab's paintings and poems are mostly abstract/non-objective and loaded with layers of meaning. They are textured and harmonious designs and compositions confected of and on various materials including mesh, which has a special significance. Many of the artist's two- and three-dimensional works remind the viewer of African women strolling in their variously colored dresses. Some are blue and green, the colors of an ocean in the breezy month of May, with the waves thrusting forward like a band of Ethiopian or Eritrean dancers. Others are golden and silver/gray like icons in Ethiopian Orthodox churches that may also refer to heaven and earth. Some are brown and orange, in soft hues like the delicious African hibiscus. All these colors, sometimes in a desaturated and earthy mix of gray and blue appear in Tekleab's paintings in order to reflect her messages. *The Future Unfolding* in this exhibition is a stunning example with all the above colors in muted, neutral hues. The most dominant colors in this





Kebedech Tekleab, *The Lost Words* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on mesh, variable dimensions.

exhibition, in fact, are blue and gray. What is sure here is that while these works of art radiate beauty and sensuality due to the artist's careful attention to technique, movement, and color, they cradle serious social messages that are based on and contribute commentary to recent events and ideas.

In the included works of art, the artist weaves personal and collective experiences that are eclectic. On a formal level, she communicates her ideas through her investigative techniques that explore the boundary between painting and sculpture. While the material layers in the works foster transparency, they also create a path to transcendence for the viewers who can peel away the visual and the intellectual dimensions to reconstruct the sublime that the artist has made accessible. Kebedech Tekleab's paintings and poems also reveal her activist attitude because the works disclose the tension between human struggle in life and survivorship, which brings attention to desperate situations. For instance, in the verses of "Blue Years," which E. Ethelbert Miller composed in English and Kebedech Tekleab translated into Amharic, the readers sense the ambience of war and visualize its devastating



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Kebedech Tekleab, *Crossing the Borders* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

consequences. The poem is a call for action that is echoed in the painting *Crossing the Borders* or the installation dominated by the color blue, *The Looming Danger*, which deals with the theme of immigration and displacement that resulted from the miserable conflicts in many regions around the world.

The artist's technique of utilizing mesh, which varies in thickness and layers of paint, sometimes blocks the light and sometimes lets it pass through the controlled holes of the surface. This brilliant technique allows the viewer to meditate on the translucence of light and its effects. It has a spiritual quality that resembles the effect of stained glass in a Gothic cathedral. Light penetrates to illuminate the darkest areas in the physical and emotional spaces of the artist and the viewer. Its harmonious, shimmering beauty enchants viewers and individualizes their experiences.

The poems of Tekleab are also euphonious and rhythmic, especially those

read and heard in Amharic. The sound implies a subtle sense of musical composition. To those who do not understand Amharic, they may read and hear the translation which gives them an understanding of the topic. However, even if the listeners do not read music, a good composition does not hide itself. It is appreciated by most listeners. The musician and artist John Cage loved sounds that do not evoke specific meaning because they are pleasing and appreciable in and of themselves while providing the listeners the freedom to interpret them the way they feel.

Looking carefully at Kebedech Tekleab's art, the viewers may agree with me that what they "see" and "hear" may not be limited merely to what they see and hear, but each experience may transcend the surface level to allow the person to delve into depths of perception generated by the talent of this wonderful artist. Her vision and handling of the material and techniques, while dealing with serious messages, reaches for the poetic and the beautiful with intertwining aesthetics and perfectionism in the appearance and feeling of her paintings and poems. The gravity of her themes, the use of exquisite materials, and her vigorous control of paint and words all support feelings of the sublime, which seduce with their beauty and deliver a sense of urgency and awe.



# Why Refuge is Not a Right

By Seble Dawit, LLM

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## INTRODUCTION

That the human rights system, despite its valiant efforts, fails to adequately serve and protect the vast majority of migrants, refugees, and asylees is a result of a relatively new type of agreement between states. It is “new” because the first modern laws governing all three types were agreed in the 1950s following the massive dislocations of World Wars I and II. Many human rights thinkers and practitioners would agree that the implications for states of granting greater protections for migrating people could compromise the basic minimum protections already agreed to by states. Therefore, pressing states to accept more people through their borders *en masse* could cause them to retract the assistance they already give. In an era of massive international movement of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers, caution suggests that what states are doing is what they can do. However, as the works in *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile* suggest, when massive numbers of people cross borders to save their lives, the barriers that receiving states erect cost lives.

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States accept people into their territories for a variety of reasons, primary being their national interests. They help in ways that help them and help migrants, but that won't destabilize states internally. If this fine balance can be achieved, then certain human rights can be protected, receiving states look good and migrants are safer. In the current configuration of the global nation-state structure and the capitalist economic system that pervades it, it would make no political sense for states to do more than that. In this paper, I argue that the rights to *find* refuge, to migrate or to seek asylum that currently exist are incomplete. Of particular relevance for the *Blue and Gray* project, the entire framing of the right to refuge and/or migration allows states to accept just the refugees, asylees, and migrants that their economies can absorb, not necessarily the majority of those in need. This is because of an agreement between states and the human rights system.

Opposite: Kebedech Tekleab, *Crossing the Borders* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.

## HOW THINGS WORK NOW

Fundamentally, the right of people to leave their country has long been enshrined in international human rights law. But allowing them to automatically enter another one is not agreed. Refugees fleeing from persecution are better protected than migrants moving to find work or a better quality of life. This reduced protection of migrants has to do with the assumption that they are leaving their countries of origin of their own free will, not because they have been targeted or persecuted like asylees or dispossessed like refugees. A right to migrate, therefore, is more aspirational than actual. It depends to a great extent on the willingness of states to receive people. In an era of mass migration globally, receiving people is often a double-edged sword even for countries with a solid record of assisting refugees.

Migration, therefore, is one of the holes in the human rights system, a nether region where the rights of nation-states collide with the rights of human beings. Allowing migrants into a given country, therefore, has to confer benefits to that country that far outweigh the costs. If the refugees are fleeing war or persecution, states that accept them may receive the goodwill of other states and their moral standing in the world is enhanced. Alternatively, the influx of large numbers of people may seem like an existential threat to a state with declining “native” birthrates. Another state may see a similar influx as an uncomfortable beneficence but one that will add to the labor pool and, eventually, to the genetic pool.

The different categories of migrating people also matter differently to human rights. Migrating workers are harder to absorb than persecuted people. Refugees and asylum seekers are usually far fewer and, often, their cases are more pressing. For reasons to do with resources, identity, social norms, and culture, it is most often the reception of migrants that is most problematic for states. This is first because they are more numerous and secondly, because they “choose” to move. So, some countries have come up with ingenious ways to accept migrant laborers on temporary bases or in non-territorial locations. However, these arrangements can help only a small fraction of the world’s migrants. But what about those fleeing political persecution, war, famine, water scarcity, etc.? These are the refugees that flow over the nearest borders or within borders, whose act of moving is what they have

had to do to help themselves. If current conflict trends continue, refugees may very well become the majority of displaced people in the world.

Refugees are created by political and economic turmoil. As more governments fail to provide for their citizens, social unrest will become open conflict and opportunistic groups will form and seek to fill the vacuum. Large groups of people will move inside of countries, between countries and to very distant countries. They will calculate where they are most likely not only to survive but also to work, build a life, and thrive. Many of those will choose to come to the west and will risk everything to reach the frontline states of Europe and the Americas. They will put stress on the resources and political stability of stop-over countries on their way to their final destinations. They will get stuck in some of these stop-over countries as deals are struck to ensure that they don't advance and, certainly not in large numbers. For the hungry and the weak who find themselves inside of aid camps, the future is even more bleak. They cannot go back, and they are now dependent on gifts of food and medicines from the same powerful countries who are reluctant to receive them. This is the present.

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## MIGRATION BEFORE THERE WERE STATES

The story of migration is among the oldest stories of humankind. Like the search for food or the drive to propagate, migration is an integral part of the reality we have come to shape and to know. Whether voluntary or forced, it's a reality so pervasive and normal, that it blends into the background of life. The reality where large groups of humans leave one place and move in some spoken and unspoken accord. Part of the story includes a small band of hominids in east Africa who spread out to the rest of that continent and well beyond it. Those who migrated gradually travelled east across the Red Sea and north past the Mediterranean. In time, we came to populate the planet. We moved with the seasons, or out of curiosity, in search of more hospitable climates, in pursuit of game animals and/or to get away from violence. Migration is, in fact, a natural function of vast number and types of living creatures on this planet. It is not a human invention nor a strictly human pursuit. What makes it different for us, as far as we can tell, is that humans overlay on spaces we inhabit, the structures, identities, and histories that allow us to claim those spaces.

The story didn't change fundamentally, it just has more and more people in it and it became more complex. The more of us there came to be, the more we experienced the pressures of finite space, the limits of the land's food growing capacity, water scarcity, or group hatred. When one or more of these pressures rises to an unbearable degree, groups of people will begin to move in search of places where the pressures are reduced. Whether it's hunger due to failing crops or violence between groups, there is, deeply imbedded in us as creatures who feel pain, the drive to evade that pain or to avoid it or, as we evolved, to prevent it. At the simplest, we move out of the way. Just as individuals anticipate and prepare ourselves for a fight, we act similarly in groups when threatened. We observe the realities of life, we assess threats, we strategize about them, we implement various strategies, and, if all else fails, some of us leave in search of safety. We move out of the way of harm and toward self-preservation.

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Over time, physical structures began to overlay the way we humans conceived of divisions in the world. Conceptions of property yielded fences and fences became borders between neighbors which grew into polities with rulers who built walled cities and walled regions as communities sought to delineate who was in and who was out. Fortresses, walled cities, and walls across great distances dot the planet today, testament to the need to protect, defend, and delineate. "In" would be a particular town or region, perhaps overlaid with a shared ethnicity or religion, which would then help define who was out, those of other ethnicities or religions or other markers of difference. Some fortified towns gradually come to be the seats of much larger political entities now needing another kind of fence or wall, one that becomes even more conceptual. From walled cities, it is a relatively quick historical blip to large societies and states with borders. In earlier times, natural borders like rivers and the other bodies of water, high mountains, forest ranges, and so on, were useful and concrete demarcations of the end of one and the beginning of another polity. Some of those natural borders, especially rivers, persist today as political borders between states.

In fact, humans have overlaid on the planet an entirely imaginary map that reshapes land into countries. It is a planet-sized map that, based on imaginary longitude and latitude lines, attempts to lay out in the minutest detail, where countries touch, where inland seas may be shared by border



**“This map is artificial. It is artificial to the extent that human art has surfaced it, made it visible. Artifice means as much the art of surfacing as the art of deception and superficiality.”**

countries, where mountains begin in one country, traverse through others, and end in yet another. This map is artificial. It is artificial to the extent that human art has surfaced it, made it visible. Artifice means as much the art of surfacing as the art of deception and superficiality. It is artificial that we draw a map to show us where the boundaries are, first the boundaries of the world, then the landmass, then the seas and finally the boundaries of the nation-state. There are lands that correspond with where we understand a given country sits at a latitude and longitude we invented. That map has changed over time, shifting as political fortunes shifted, as powers rose and fell, as civilizations were destroyed by civilizations, as ideologies solidified then gradually broke apart into new ones. The geography stayed the same but the politics and the maps that represent them changed and changed.

All those maps shifting over and over, over thousands of years, has meant that many, many people, at one time or another, found themselves inside a country to which they did not belong or, as new states were created, some found themselves inside a new country where they now belonged more perfectly or still others ended up trapped inside of a country that was a mortal threat to them. Billions of people now live within these lines that, taken together, make up the nearly 200 countries of the world. The political map lines that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, solidified into the nation-state system are lines that determine not only where we each come from and where we belong but also, more importantly for refugees, where we may go. Within certain political parameters, then, the human rights system seeks to reorient the relationship between states and humans such that humans are at the center of all state endeavors.

## THE STATISM OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Statism is the idea that the state is right, that whatever actions it may take domestically and internationally, these acts are first viewed as necessary for its survival and, ostensibly, also for the citizens in whose interest it acts. It is a territorial entity with clear borders, representing a population of people, often with a shared history but of varied ethnic, religious or other identities, as well as the military capability to defend itself. It is sovereign primarily because it has these three attributes. Sovereignty, in international law, is sacrosanct. There is sovereignty and then there is law. States agree to obey laws that advance or, at least, support their interests. Where it advances its economic interest, a state will make trade agreements with other states and private entities such as corporations. Domestically, it will discharge the laws agreed to by the majority of its population. From time to time, the law trumps sovereignty, and states that breach international law are penalized. Even the fact that a state can be sued by another state is based on an agreement of the legal standing of each state. Sovereignty, then, is the legal standing to possess and wield political and economic power. But power over whom? Whatever types of treaty and trade relationships states make with each other, they do not and cannot violate the sovereign integrity so, it is not sovereign power over other states. The state is sovereign over the people and can be said to be their sovereign much like a king would have been in previous eras. States defend against infringement on sovereignty.

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Where human rights has inserted itself or tries to insert itself, is exactly where this sovereignty over citizens is discharged. By consular law, states have agreed over eons not to violate the rights of the citizens of other countries whose passport they recognize. However, until the mid-twentieth century, states hadn't legally agreed not to slaughter their own citizens, if that became expedient. Or perpetrate quiet, systematic violence on poor families. Or treat children and women as second-class citizens. How can we now hold those same states accountable for these acts? Human rights treaties try to do this. In a perfect world, these treaties are limits on sovereignty. In an imperfect world, they are guide posts, optional, useful and constitutive of a world order. Essentially, the human rights treaty system pressures states not to harm citizens, but it cannot force them.

There is a litmus test that allows practitioners to categorize states depending either on their commitment to protecting rights or their failure to do so and the range in between. Is it a state that protects rights, political and economic rights, rights of minorities, gender rights, children's rights? Or does it violate the rights of citizens in a concerning number of areas? Even to ask such questions is to assume that the given state has agreed, by treaty, to limit its sovereignty and agreed to be responsible for the treatment of its citizens. The more it agrees, the more treaties it signs. The more human rights treaties a state signs, theoretically, the less it violates its citizens' rights or, at least, makes a serious effort not to. Again theoretically, over time certain concepts become norms such as one person one vote, living wage, equal rights for women, and so on.

What makes human rights statist is that in order to have states agree to basic minimum human rights standards and thereby protect their own citizens, intra-state bodies have negotiated an entire international legal system with the state at the center. Nothing more clearly elucidates this about the human rights system than the numerous atrocities committed by states around the world with impunity. In fact, there is no concrete way to hold states accountable for violating rights. They may be found legally responsible, but states can only rarely be compelled in any way that compromises or limits sovereignty. So, they do a balancing act, and they protect some rights over others. If elections and democracy become important as a condition and result of protecting human rights, states work toward fair elections. Over time, the failure to hold fair elections becomes a paramount measure of a state's ability to protect citizens' human rights. There are other rights that follow close behind and come to form the core human rights. All the while, violence against women may be pervasive, trafficking in children rampant, and ethnic cleansing at a slow burn—these become tolerable yet unfortunate realities which will gradually be eliminated anyway. In pursuit of protections that may not exist without it, human rights has effectively struck a devil's bargain with national governments.

## NATION-STATES, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND REFUGEES

One of the rights that states have agreed to protect is the right of refugees to migrate. The international treaty relevant to migration is the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Regionally, there is also the 1969 Organization of African Unity Refugee Convention and the 1984 Cartagena Declaration covering Latin America. Under treaty law, anyone may leave her or his country and seek refuge elsewhere. Under the principle of non-refoulement, refugees may not be repatriated into countries they escaped and where they face persecution or death. This is the main reason that millions of refugees are trapped in “pass-through” countries or internally in camps for months or years. This limbo is the result of a right to flee without a right to be received.

In the 75 years since the founding of the human rights system, the law has tried to gradually and systematically bring the world’s nation-states into agreement on certain basic concepts. Torture carries an absolute prohibition. The right to life is framed as one not to be arbitrarily violated. The right to vote is a precondition to the individual’s political existence and so on. Economic rights, such as a living wage, housing, medical care, and education, are much more contested than political rights because they are expensive. States agree to work toward them but not to guarantee them.

The protection of refugees falls into a liminal space between these two overarching categories of rights. The right to refuge is not exactly a political or an economic right and it is also both. A clear and protectable right to refuge would also have within it a right to stay indefinitely or forever. A right to refuge could not differentiate between different types of refugees to determine who is more in need and who is desperate or what circumstances are more dangerous if refugees were returned. These kinds of questions beg deep and complex thinking; and even then, the answers will be enormously subjective and malleable, open to interpretation and political expedient. To decide on a refugee’s level of need in this way would require a level of complexity of problem-solving that human rights and states have simply not achieved. Therefore, the agreements that exist allow people to flee and escape from persecution or other harm but not to automatically enter the territory of another country for refuge.



Kebedech Tekleab, *Fragmented Ties: Alien Numbers* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on galvanized metal, 36 x 24 in.

Human rights aspires to more than this. Its treaties are packed full of rights that, if implemented, would yield a global utopia. But each treaty must be agreed by states, first by a few and, gradually, by more and more states as the rights move to becoming norms. In the twenty-first century, we have begun to see and will see even more human movement around the planet. Many of these will be refugees fleeing political persecution, ethnic and religious conflict and, more and more, they will be economic refugees. We understand persecution and violence but don't sufficiently understand the systemic violence of lack. The world's nation-states nor the human rights system do not yet agree that there is a right to be free from economic violence. The wars of the twenty-first century, no matter how they seem on the surface, will more and more be wars over economic resources. The refugees will be in the billions and will be without a right to escape and reach safety. It will effectively be the end of whatever limited protection the human rights system has managed to eke out from states. Indeed, it will demonstrate the failure of the nation-state model and of human rights. We need to rise to new paradigms well before that happens.



# Translating the Poetry of Kebedech Tekleab and E. Ethelbert Miller

By Chris Beckett

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What a truly profound and rewarding experience it can be to translate not only between languages, but also between art forms and countries! In the profound, of course, there are often experiences that are violent, that scar us. Migration is full of such traumas that last for years or even centuries after the journeys have been made. Migration itself is a kind of physical translation, an often traumatic flight from one landscape to another, one language and cultural environment to another.

I discovered the poetry of Kebedech Tekleab when I was looking for Ethiopian women poets to include in *Songs We Learn from Trees*, the first wide-ranging anthology of Ethiopian Amharic poetry in English which I translated/edited with Alemu Tebeje in 2020 and which Chris Abani short-listed for the Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry in 2021. A wonderful writer called Tibebe Bellete, former president of the Ethiopian Writers' Association in Addis Ababa, urged me to contact Kebedech in New York, because not only is she among the most interesting and respected of contemporary Amharic poets, but also the life story which lies behind her poems is urgent and astonishing. Now, I grew up in Addis Ababa, and my parents sent me off to school in UK when I was nine, so in my little way I know the pain of having to leave a country you call home. But my exodus was paltry compared to Kebedech, whose teenage activism forced her to flee Ethiopia, only to land in the clutches of Somali soldiers, then fighting a brutal territorial war against Ethiopia. She was interned for 10 terrifying years in a Somalian camp before eventually being allowed to flee again, this time to the USA.

So, when Kebedech addresses the subject of migration in her work, you can feel the rawness and authenticity which supports it, whether she approaches her subject directly/figuratively, for example in her moving

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Opposite: Kebedech Tekleab, *Too Much Blueness on Our Tongues* (detail), 2023.  
Acrylic on mesh, variable dimensions.

poem “To the parents of a caged child,” but equally in her more abstract/imagistic works like “Cotton-life” or “You asked how I survived.” In Amharic, Kebedech uses the full strengths of her native language, its plosive consonants, repeated syllables, insistent rhymes, and plays with line length and lineation, even with the look of a poem on the page, often chopping between longer lines and passages of shorter indented lines that look a bit like tails hanging from a poem’s branch. To catch such inventiveness in translation is very hard, arguably especially so in English which is such a soft language that we do not even like to roll our r’s! We have no plosive t (ጠ in Amharic, instead of ተ) or s (ጸ instead of ሰ) to add bite to our diction, and if we try adding it in performance, we can often end up sounding hammy. As translators from Amharic to English, then, we have to find ways of creating some parallel lines between original and translated versions of the poems. An example is the repeated d sounds of the past tense that we used in the English version of “Cotton-life” (removed/roved/combed), also the repeated insistence of ‘before’, both of which give the poem a syntactical tightness reflecting the claustrophobic atmosphere of the original.

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I find it fascinating, too, that Kebedech often uses wire mesh as the canvas for her visual art: there can be few knottier, un-smoother surfaces to work with! Perhaps it mirrors the patterns of interwoven rhymes and plosive consonants in her poems? For me, Kebedech’s whole literary and artistic project is about not allowing the self to get too comfortable, forcing ourselves to consider the many itchy unpleasant aspects of our lives and the context of migration and violence in which we try to pick out a more or less peaceful path, both physically and mentally. Over the sound- or wire- scapes of her work, floats the most radiant kaleidoscope of colors, like the deep blue ashes, the navy-kohl-decorated eyes and indigo dyed hair of the hesitant migrant, the terrified poet herself who feels she is stumbling blindly toward the Mediterranean, in “Blindfold.” *Color*, like her palette of poetic imagery which often conjures up the myriad beauty of color, is like a talisman, even a redemption in Kebedech’s work. *Color* is for the eye what plosive consonants of Amharic are for the ear: a joy but also somehow proof that we are alive, we the refugees, the human strugglers and stragglers have survived, maybe even thrived.



The importance of color, especially blue, is the common thread and metaphor that runs through the visual and literary work/translations in this collaboration. The beauty and sadness, the terrible slave history of African Americans and their Blues. It is intensely moving to read Miller's poems linking the old forced migrations to the life of their descendants today. He starts in the middle of these journeys: 'and then we walked out/into the rain as if we were walking/to the sea' ("The Blue Years"), concentrating our gaze on that awful moment of leaving, echoed in Kebedech's poem "Blindfold." The historical wrench is a blue thing, *so much blueness on our tongues*, which no amount of time can erase. 'Dangerous memories' cascade down the generations. Kebedech renders these haunting lines with a simple sensitivity into Amharic, sticking as closely as possible to the originals. I particularly love the last couplet of "The Blue Years":

*So much thirst.  
Too much blueness on our tongues.*

ይህ ነው የማይባል ጥማት።  
ምላሶቻችን የታበሱት በሰማያዊ ቀለማት።

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which sounds like this:

*yeh new yemaybal t'mat.  
milasochachin yetablut besemayawi q'elemat.*

'Milasochachin' means 'our tongues,' but it also perfectly replicates the repeated ch sounds of Miller's 'much thirst/ much blueness' just as 'yemaybal temat' mirror the Ts and Bs of thirst/blueness/tongues.

Miller's poems seem to me to repay this simplicity. His sentences are almost child-like in their charm, like generous brush-strokes on the page (from "Blue Freedom"):

*Last night a man named Edison came to me in a dream. His face  
was filled with light.*

Sometimes a translator feels inspired to wander off the direct line of a poem's meaning in order to better translate that meaning, perhaps because the words or the tone do not properly correspond in the target language. This happens to me quite a lot, as with Bedilu Wakjira's intricate long poem "Awnet malet new, yene lij/ Truth, my child" in Amharic, it is like a very affectionate sermon, but my translation felt irritatingly pedantic until I rewrote a shorter version in tercets in my own voice, almost not looking at the direct translation until I had finished. I did not know how to explain this to Bedilu, so I just sent him the version and asked him what he thought. I could not really explain why I had done this, why the direct translation did not seem to work in English, but I know it was to do with tone, which can carry such different colors in different languages and cultures. Translation is of course a collaboration, an act of trust, often in the dark! In this case, Bedilu trusted me enough to accept my version, which after all is only one way of translating his poem, and it has received much praise, although it is an obvious example of what Gilles Ménage once castigated as 'less belles infidèles,' the unfaithful beauties.

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So I take it as an act of true collaboration to see a few instances where Kebedech's translations of Miller's beautiful poems step slightly off his track. When her translation, so to speak, rethinks Miller's thought from her perspective as a relatively recent refugee, bringing her own experience to Miller's poem. An example of this is I think the last line/couplet of "One of Us is Missing" (By Ethelbert Miller and Miho Kinnas):

*Inside invisibility.*

*New possibilities.*

which Kebedech renders as:

የውስጥ ፍኖት ጨለማ  
የአዲስ መንገዶች ሻማ።

meaning something like:

*the darkness of the inside road*

*the candle of new journeys*

Perhaps there are Amharic idioms that equate 'inside roads' with invisibility, or 'new journeys' with new possibilities. But I would like to think that Miller's wonderful images, which are often abstract and searching, have set Kebedech's imagination to dream of equivalents for a recent Ethiopian refugee; that she is bringing her own colors of sadness and hope to Miller's poems, in a demonstration of true trust, solidarity, and collaboration.

I can also imagine that some of Miller's poems may be a response to Kebedech's art and poems, perhaps to discussions they have had regarding each other's history and experience. Likewise, I believe his words and colors are reflected in her art and poetry, that the act of translating his poems into Amharic has allowed Kebedech to dream a bit differently from before.

# When Blue Becomes Black

## Notes on Translation

By Kebedech Tekleab

I step out of my comfort zone to greet E. Ethelbert Miller's poems and bring them home. Often, home is where poems rhyme. There are differences in style between the old and the contemporary Amharic poems in terms of syllables per line from 1-4 to 1-18; nonetheless, most rhyme. My Amharic poems belong to the modern tradition, and I follow the sound to dance around the meters.

"The Blue Years" is a challenging poem for me to translate from Miller's submissions for the project. The loaded word, "blue," becomes a stranger, a yet-to-be-adopted word by the family of the Amharic vocabulary.

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Blueness reflects a sensibility specific to the poet's culture, referring to a state of mind far from happiness. It is a colored thread that connects African American history to their creative lives in a specific genre. This African American concept of blueness it is nonexistent in Amharic. Some Amharic words are translucent. If blue (ሰማያዊ) (Semayawi) were used for anything other than color, it would be translated, "celestial," with a spiritual connotation to it. Like adopting a child from a different culture and learning the child's sensibilities over time, I introduce the word blue (ሰማያዊ) to allow my readers to slowly discover its adopted meaning from the poem's context. To do so, first, I divert the attention of my readers from celestial to color by adding the term ህብር (hue) next to ሰማያዊ/blue. Then it becomes ሰማያዊ ህብር አመታት (Semayawi hebir ametat), loosely translated as years tinted in blue.

Assigning colors to emotional states is common in the Amharic language; however, our color symbolism might not match the English language usage. For instance, it is darkness/blackness that describes melancholy in Amharic, not blueness. So, I translated the blue years as ሰማያዊ ህብር አመታት instead of ጽልመት የለበሱ አመታት (*years covered with darkness*). One might wonder why I didn't use "darkness" instead of blueness since "black" describes the mood better. My reasons were:



Kebedech Tekleab with her new set of prints on the walls and the table in the studio of Alexis Nutini for her residency at Brandywine Workshop and Archives. March 26, 2023. Photo by Gustavo Garcia.

1. I wanted to maintain Miller's use of the word blue, which is relevant to his culture.
2. The intensity of darkness, ጽልመት (Tsilmet) or ጨለማ (Chelema), is different from the sensibility of blueness the original poem reflects.
3. In *Blue and Gray: This Era of Exile*, the artworks and the poems are unified thematically and aesthetically; blue is part of the dominant hue for the show.

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I appreciate translations that do not force faithful literalness, but seek to match the original poem's freedom of imagination and expression, among other things. However, that freedom should feel right in the context of the language used for the translation. At its best, a translated text could be transformative, introducing new expressions even within the source language.

## Cotton-life

This era of exile  
winds its spindle  
of raw cotton  
before the seed is removed  
and life bursts out,  
before the cotton is combed,  
before it is roved  
and made into thread,  
before it is woven into cloth,  
before its pattern is decided  
and its colours applied,  
before it is given a name,  
before it is worn as a garment,  
before it is put on as a cloak,  
before it is blessed...  
this age of exile  
spins without uncoiling,  
tangles without threading,  
and before its cotton-life begins  
it announces its end.

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## ጥጥ እድሜ

ይህ የስደት ዘመን አንገርት  
ያልተባዘተ ጥጥ እድሜ  
በላዩ ያጠነጥናል  
እደውት ሳይፈለቀቅ  
ጥፍጥሬው ከውስጡ ሳይለቅ  
ጥንጥኔማ ሞልቷል ይላል  
ሳይበዘት ሳይደወር  
ሳይሸመን ሳይቀመር  
ጥበብ ስሌቱ ሳይሰላ  
ሀብረ-ቀለሙ ሳይሰፍር  
ገና ስም ሳይሰጠው  
ሸማ ሆኖ ሳይለበስ  
ኩታ ሆኖ ሳይደረብ  
ቡራኬ ገና ሳይደርሰው  
ይህ የስደት ጥጥ እድሜ  
ሳይከር ይጠነጠና  
እደውት ገና ሳይሟሸ  
ግብአት ደረሰ ይሰናል

## To the parent of a caged child US/Mexico border

Keep the number they gave you  
if it is valid  
to reclaim your child  
like a backpack  
stuff  
an item a contraband  
you handed in by the entrance of a  
jailhouse  
pray your toddler is tagged properly  
you may not recognize the bud  
if you see the light again  
illuminating the flower  
no more tears for your child  
the well of sorrow is full  
enough for all the victims to come  
stand still your back is free  
your burden loaded onto your heart  
hold your love tight  
the mighty power  
that reaches across the wire cages  
across boundaries, anywhere fertile  
skipping the dry spots devoid of  
humanity

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# ለታሰረው ህጻን ወላጅ US/Mexico ድንበር

ዋጋ ካለው  
 ያን የሰጡሽን ቁጥር  
 ጠበቅ አድርገሽ ያኸው።  
 የግል በርሳሽ ይመስል  
 የግል ቋጠሮሽ ያህል  
 ከስርቤት መግቢያው በር ላይ  
 ያስረከብሽውን ልጅሽን  
 ያልበረታ ህጻንሽን  
 ዳግም መልሰሽ አንድታቅፊው  
 ጸልይ!  
 ልጅሽ ከቁጥሩ አንዲዛመድ  
 መለያሽ እሱ ነውና  
 ምናልባት ጸሐይ ብትወጣ  
 አበባውን ብታደምቀው  
 እንቡጡን አትለይምና  
 ጸልይ!  
 ቁጥሩን በቁጥርሽ እንድትለዩ።  
 ለልጅሽ ማንባቱ ይብቃሽ  
 የሃዘን ጽዋሽ ሞልቷል  
 ለዝንታለም ለሚመጡት  
 ሰለባዎች ይዳረሳል።  
 ቀና ብለሽ ሰማይ እዩ  
 እነሆ ጀርባሽ ባዶ ነው  
 ሽክሙን እልብሽ አውርዷል  
 የጫንቃሽ ጭነት ቀሏል  
 የልብሽ ሽክም በዝቷል  
 ፍቅርሽን ‘ጉያሽ ሸሽጊው  
 በልብሽ ማህደር ያኸው  
 የእስር ኬላዎች የሚሰብር  
 ድንበራትን የሚሻገር  
 ርህራሄ አልባውን ገድፎ  
 ለምለም ልቦች ላይ የሚሰፍር  
 ሰብዓዊነት ላይ የሚጸገይ  
 ሰብዓዊነት ላይ የሚከብር  
 ነውና።

## Blindfold

(For the Refugees)

Covered with gray dust  
I fall into the deep-blue ashes  
my eyes smeared with navy kohl  
blindfolded by grief  
I wrap my indigo-dyed hair with a  
piece of cloth  
cut from the garment of the Tuareg,  
the “Blue people.”

I step on the land of the Bedouin  
wrinkles of time on it  
gray cracks of the earth under my  
bare feet  
inked with dark maroon  
encrypt my future  
I trace the fault lines like braille.  
Toasted Lavash brushes my nose  
a Cape crow crosses my face.

I cross the land on my way to the sea  
to plead with the gods of the  
Mediterranean.

I stand in front of the angry sea.

Before I step on the boat,  
before it capsizes,  
I brush off the last sand from my  
sore feet.

I inhale the cerulean sludge like air  
the seafloor flat under my head  
inward, I see a slush of sapphire  
seeps into my bone marrow  
into the stream of my blood that  
turned cobalt  
since the village behind me  
flattened into ashes  
the people, into crystal-salt  
like Lot’s wife  
for reexamining just once.

# ያደን ሸባብ

(ለስደተኞች)

ግራጫ አቡዋራ ለብሽ  
 ሰማያዊ ህብር ባለው  
 የክል አፈር ተለውሼ  
 አይኔ በሃዘን ተሸብብ  
 ሰማያዊ ኩል ተኩዬ  
 በሰማያዊ ህብረቀለም  
 ጥቁር ጸጉራን በክዬ  
 “ከሰማያዊ ህዝቦች”፥  
 ከተዋራግ ጨርቅ አልባሳት  
 በተቆረጠ እራፊ  
 እራሴን ሸብ እንዳደርኩ  
 ሰማያዊ አመድ ውስጥ ወደቅኩ።

የበደውን ምድር ረገጥኩ  
 የድሜ ሽብሽቡን ማተርኩ  
 ከጫማ አልባ እግሮቼ ስር  
 ስንጥቁ ግራጫ መሬት  
 በቡናማ ህብር ቀልም  
 የፊት እጣዬን አትሞ  
 ስንጥቆቼን በግሬ ምዳፍ  
 እንደ ብሬል ዳሰስኩዋቸው  
 ለየሁዋቸው።  
 የትኩስ “ላሻሽ” ጥኡም ሸታ አፍንጫዬ ላይ  
 ሸው ይላል  
 የጠቆረ ትልቅ ቁራ ፊቴን አግድም  
 ያቁዋርጥል።

ወደባህሩ ለመድረስ ይህንን ምድር  
 አቁዋረጥኩ  
 የሜዲትራኒያንን አማልክት ልማጸናቸው  
 እያሰብኩ።

የተቆጣው ባህር ፊት ቆምኩ።

የጀልባውን ደጃፍ ሳልርግጥ  
 እሱም ባህር ውስጥ ሳይሰምጥ  
 የቆሰሉ እግሮቼን ጠረኩ  
 ቀሪ አሸዋውን አራገፍኩ።

ያን ሰማያዊ ልድልድ ፍሳሽ  
 አየር ይመስል ሳብኩት  
 ዝርጉን የባህር ወለል ከራሴ በታች አየሁት  
 የቀዘቀዘው መደድን አጥንቴን ዘልቆ ሲገባ  
 ከደሜ ጋር ሲቀላቀል አስተዋልኩት  
 ከተመረዘው ደሜ ጋር

ያኔ ገና  
 በስተ ጀርባዬ ያለው መንደር  
 አመድ ሆኖ እስኪጠፋ በሳት ሲገር  
 ሰዎቼ የጨው አምድ ሆነው ሲቀሩ  
 እንደ ሎጥ ሚስት ወደ ሁዋሊት ባተኩሩ  
 ሂደትን በመረመሩ።

## You ask how I survived

I survived  
as a baby fly might survive the fall  
as a blown petal might survive the wind  
as a young frog might survive the mud  
as a young cricket might survive a miss  
of a tender leap  
no more  
no less  
I survived  
because  
I stepped on my own steps  
and missed.

# እንዴት ተረፍሽ? ብለህ ጠየቅህ

መልሱ እንግዲህ እንደዚህ ነው  
ከመስፈርቱ ያላለፈው፤

ጫጫት ትንሸቼ ዝንብ  
ወለምታዋን እንደምትድን  
አውሎ ነፋስ ያናጋት  
የእንቡጥ አበባ ቅጠል  
እንደምታልፈው እንግልቱን  
አዲስ ፍልፍል እንቁራሪት  
ከጭቃ ክምር እንደምትድን  
የተወለደች ፊንጣ  
ባልፀኑ እግርቿ ዘላ  
እምርታዋን ብትስትም  
ውድቀቷን ግን ላትደግም  
ልክ እንደዛ  
እኔም ተረፍኩ  
የራሴን እርካብ ረግጬ  
የራሴን እርካብ ስለሳትኩ።

## One Of Us Is Missing

I missed the bus and couldn't remember...  
When did I walk from the shore to the shelter?  
My hair salty but no longer wet.

How will I survive without the others?  
What did my mother dream when I left her alone?  
I missed the bus.

How long should I wait at this bus stop?  
I might be waiting for the wrong bus.  
I must be in the wrong country.

I no longer know where I am going.  
I should sell my shoes for food.  
I cannot find a map.

Inside invisibility.  
New possibilities.

## አንደኛችን ጠፍተናል

አውቶቡሱ አመለጠኝ  
 እረሳሁት  
 መቼ ነበር  
 ከባህሩ ጥግ ተነስቼ  
 መጠለያ የገባሁት?  
 እርጥበቱ ቢተንም  
 ጸጉራ ጨው እንደላሰ  
 አመድ እንደለበሰ።

ሌሎቹ አብረውኝ ሳይሆኑ  
 እንዴት አዘልቀው ይሆን  
 እናቱን ትቻት ስመጣ  
 ምንድን አልማ ይሆን?  
 አውቶቡሱ አመለጠኝ።

ምን ያክል ጊዜ ልታገስ?  
 የምጠብቀው አውቶቡስ  
 ሌላጋ ይጥለኝ ይሆን?  
 ፈጽሞ ያጠፋኝ ይሆን?  
 ምን ቦታ ላይ ነኝ ያለሁት?  
 አጉል አገር ነው የደረስኩት።

የት እንደምሄድ አላውቅም  
 ያረገኩዋቸውን ጫሞች በምግብ ልለውጣቸው።  
 ካርታውን ከቶ አላገኘው።

የውስጥ ፍኖት ጨለማ  
 የአዲስ መንገዶች ሻማ።

## The Blue Years

And then we walked out  
Into the rain as if we were walking  
To the sea, so many weeping  
Because of dangerous memories.

Life is a flood of tears.  
We were born somewhere  
Between heartbreak and desire.  
The place we fled before the crying.

The blue years when we had  
No food or water.  
The blue years when many  
Were strangled by the air.

So much thirst.  
Too much blueness on our tongues.



## ሰማያዊ ህብር ዓመታት

እናም ወደ ውጭ ወጣን  
 ዝናብ እንደ ዶፍ አየጣለ  
 ሀሊናችን ወደሀዋሊት በሃዘን እየቆሰለ ያቋረጥነውን  
 ባህር እንደገና አየቀዘፍነው  
 አእምሯችንን በስቃይ ፊታችንን በንባ ኣጠብነው ።

ሕይወት የብካይ ጎርፍ ነው  
 እኛም የተወለድነው  
 በብሩህ ፍላጎትና በተስፋ መቁረጥ መሃል ነው  
 በዚያ ቦታ  
 ከዋይታችን ቀደም ብሎ በስደት ወደረገጥነው።

ሰማያዊ ህብር ዓመታት  
 የሚቀመስ ምግብና የውሃ ጠል የታጠብት

ሰማያዊ ህብር ዓመታት  
 ቁጥራቸው የበዛ ሰዎች ባየር ንፍገት የሞቱበት።

ደህ ነው የማይባል ጥማት።  
 ምላሶቻችን የታበሱት በሰማያዊ ቀለማት።

## Blue Freedom

They say Mr. Lincoln this afternoon took off his big hat and pulled our freedom from it.

The great man Douglass believes we will be citizens one day and even get to vote.

Last night a man named Edison came to me in a dream. His face was filled with light.

He promised to invent the phonograph so I could listen to Bessie Smith.

I don't know who that is but every day I rise with a strange music in my head.

I've never felt so blue.

## ሃዘን የተቀባ ነፃነት

ማምሻውን  
 ሚስተር ሊንከን  
 ሰማይ-ጠቀስ ቆባቸውን አውልቀው  
 ከውስጡ ንፃነታችንን መዘው  
 ሰጡን አሉ።

ዳግላስ ታላቁ ሰው  
 አንድ ቀን  
 ዜጎች እንሆናለን ብለው  
 አመኑ  
 ከቆውንም የምንመርጥ  
 ሃሳባችንን የምንሰጥ ።

ኤድሰን የተባለ ሰው  
 ትላንት ሌሊት በ'ልሜ መጥቶ  
 ፊቱ በብርሃን ተሞልቶ  
 ቤሲ እስሚዝን እንዳይመጥ  
 ፎኖግራፍ ሊፈጥርልኝ  
 ቃል ገባልኝ።

በየአለቱ  
 አሳዛኝ ዜማ እያዘመኩኝ እንቃለሁ  
 ምን አውቃለሁ  
 ቅኝቱ  
 የምን መሆኑን ባለደም  
 እንዲህ ደብሮኝ አላውቅም።

## Oh, Those Silver Bullets

Paul Dunbar wants to know  
how the Lone Ranger got his mask.  
Claude McKay once said if we must  
die let it be for love or a French kiss  
outside Paris. Langston knew the  
heart was a big sea and the blues  
nothing but a renaissance of sadness.

## አቤት እኔያ ብርማ ጥይቶች

ፖል ደንባር  
 ሎን ሬንጀር ጨንበሉን  
 የፊት መከለያውን  
 ኬት እንዳገኘ  
 ለማወቅ ተመኘ።

አንድ ጊዜ  
 ክላድ መኬ  
 መሞት ካለብን ፤አለ  
 እስቲ ለፍቅር ይሁንልን  
 ወይም ደሞ  
 ከፓሪስ ከተማ ወጣ ብሎ  
 የፍሬንች ኪስ ለመሳሳም ያርግልን።

ላንግስተን  
 የሰው ልብ እጅግ የሰፋ ባህር  
 ብሉገም የሀዘን ተሃድሶ ምስጢር  
 እንደሆነ ያውቅ ነብር።



Kebedech Tekleab, "As the Sound of Many Waters," 2020. Acrylic on galvanized metal, 36 x 24 in.





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Kebedech Tekleab, *Non-Buoyant Life Vest*, 2017. Acrylic on mesh, variable dimensions.





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Kebedech Tekleab, *The Future Unfolding*, 2019. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.





Kebedech Tekleab, *The Lost Words*, 2023. Acrylic on mesh, variable dimensions.



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Kebedech Tekleab, *Too Much Blueness on Our Tongues*, 2023. Acrylic on mesh, variable dimensions.



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Kebedech Tekleab, *Crossing the Borders*, 2018. Acrylic on mixed media, variable dimensions.







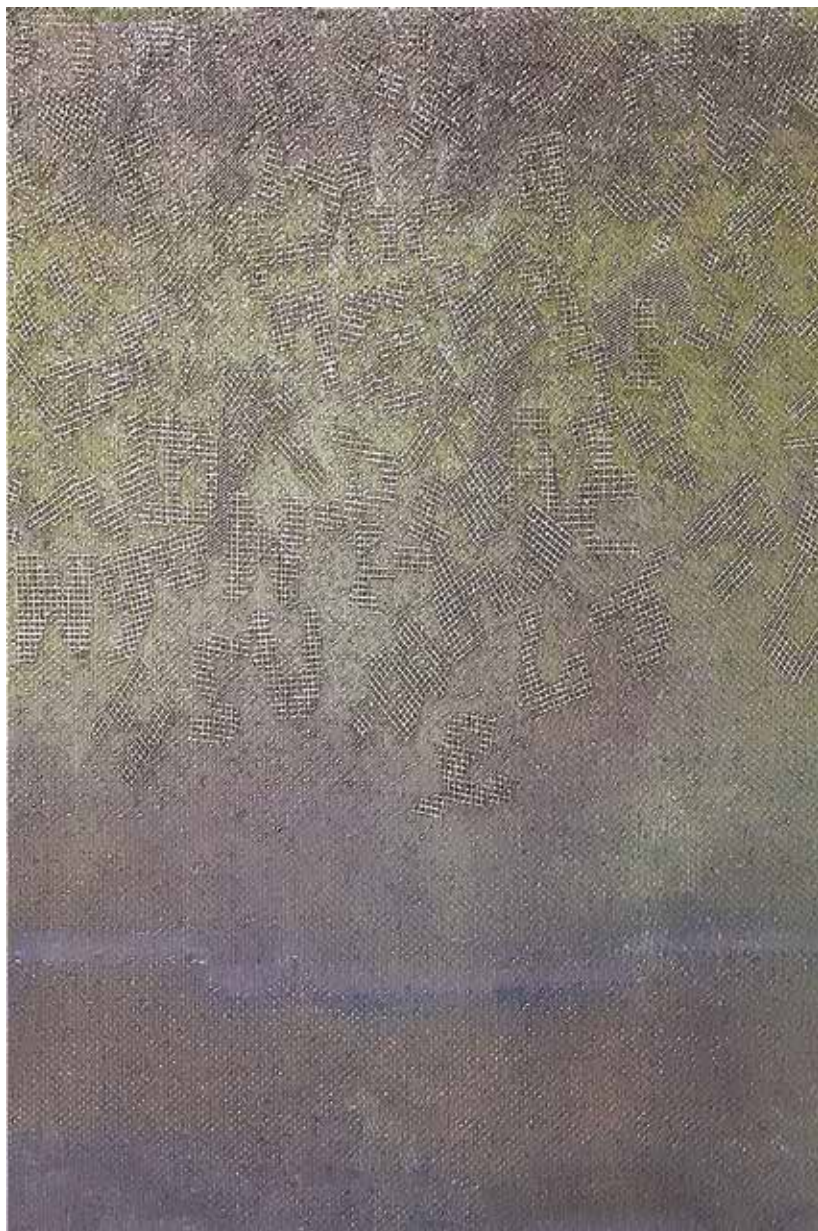
Kebedech Tekleab, *Fragmented Ties: Alien Numbers*, 2018. Acrylic on galvanized metal, 36 x 24 in.



Kebedech Tekleab, *The Lost Words, Series #2*, 2023. Woodcut, 22.5 x 27.75 in. Printed at Brandywine Workshop and Archives.



Kebedech Tekleab, *The Lost Words, Series #3*, 2023. Woodcut, 22.5 x 27.75 in. Printed at Brandywine Workshop and Archives.



Kebedech Tekleab, *Untitled #1*, 2023. Mixed media, 22 x 44 in. (Photo K.T.)



Kebedech Tekleab, *Untitled #3*, 2023. Mixed media, 44 x 30 in. (Photo K.T.)



Kebedech Tekleab, *Untitled #2*, 2023. Mixed media, 22 x 30 in. (Photo K.T.)



# Notes From the Sketchbook

By Kebedech Tekleab

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## ***Non-Buoyant Life Vest, 2018***

*“Tricked into death: 150,000 migrants’ life jackets - many of which are useless fakes - lie piled on the coast of Lesbos in grim memorial to those who died crossing the Mediterranean.”*

- Dailymail.com, February 6, 2017

78 My research on the Mediterranean Sea refugee crisis inspired *Non-Buoyant Life Vest*. 2017 was the highlight of the crisis, not the onset. My artwork is a prologue that negotiates dominance between traces of visual voices from various materials to speak in unison. Taming nontraditional art materials such as the porous silver mesh to receive the fluidity of acrylic paint was a significant part of the journey to create its visual language. The language accommodates the heaviness of the tragedies I researched; but without trying to find matching parallels between verbal, written, and visual expression. The optical response to the stories and the visualization of the victims in the Mediterranean Sea was suggestive, not direct, interpretive, not exact, subtle not blatant.

## ***The Future Unfolding, 2019***

In late 1999, my work shifted qualitatively from being two-dimensional to combining the essences of painting and sculpture. The in-betweenness also became a multi-spaced and translucent installation. As part of the installations I produced, using nontraditional art materials, *The Future Unfolding*, 2019, comments upon the socio-economic conditions of Africa’s political past — a past filled with despair and hope, victimization, and resiliency. It is about decades of political turmoil creating an influx of mass migration. The future unfolding, however, deals with a flicker of hope that sometimes occurs amid chaos yet to be seen if it is sustainable.



***The Lost Words, 2023***

In the lives of most refugees and migrants, language is the first to be missing from their identities. “Otherness” fills the void giving way to discrimination, misunderstanding, and vulnerability. However, the missing words sometimes survive destruction and add colors to the indigenous language of the host countries. This metamorphosis of a migrating language inspired *The Lost Words*.

Text becomes part of the elements holding color and texture. The intertwined Geez/English alphabet becomes neither decorative as a pattern nor meaningful as a word could be. It aspires to become emotionally accessible to evoke a personal connection. For *The Lost Words*, fragmentation becomes the metaphor for rebuilding a resilient life, a hyphenated identity that is constantly evolving. The double-sided installation is tedious and less forgiving as a detailed piece but liberating as an improvised whole unified through multiple panels.

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**“Fragmented Ties: Alien Numbers”, 2018**

Former president Donald J. Trump’s policy to separate migrant children from their parents at the US/Mexico border inspired “To the Parent of a Caged Child,” a poem I wrote in 2018, and “Fragmented Ties: Alien Numbers.”

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**RIHAB KASSATLY BAGNOLE** is a professor of modern and contemporary art history and art criticism at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). She likes many styles of art and supports women artists representing all genres and periods. A sample of her writing can be seen in “Reclaiming the Power: An Interpretation of Isis in the Era of Globalism,” *Emerging Perspectives on Nawal El Saadawi*, and “The Deliriously Tempting Complementarity of Syrian Food and Music” in *A Symphony of Flavors*. In addition to traveling and exploring the places and arts of various cultures, Rihab likes to study the relationships between peoples and their traditions.

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**CHRIS BECKETT** is a Ted Hughes Award-shortlisted poet and translator. He has published two collections about his boyhood in Addis Ababa: *Ethiopia Boy* (2013) and *Tenderfoot* (2020), also the first anthology of Ethiopian Amharic poetry in English, *Songs We Learn from Trees*, all from Carcanet Press. His website is: [www.chrisbeckettpoems.com](http://www.chrisbeckettpoems.com).

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**SEBLE DAWIT** is Associate Professor and Chair of Peace Studies at Goucher College in Baltimore. She holds an LLM in International Human Rights Law from Essex University in the United Kingdom and a BA in Political Science and International Relations from Howard University. She lectures in peace theory, international social movements, and human rights law.

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**DAVID KEPLINGER'S** eight poetry books include *Ice* (Milkweed Editions, 2023), *The World to Come* (Conduit Books and Ephemera, 2021), and *Another City* (Milkweed Editions, 2018). He has been awarded the 2020 Emily Dickinson Award from the Poetry Society of America, the 2019 UNT Rilke Prize, two artist fellowships from the NEA (Poetry and Literary Translation), the 2006 Colorado Book Award, the 2014 Cavafy Prize from *Poetry International*, and Mary Oliver selected his first book, *The Rose Inside*, for the 1999 T.S. Eliot Award. He teaches at American University, which named him 2022/2023 Teacher/Scholar of the Year.

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**MIHO KINNAS** is a Japanese poet and translator. The author of two poetry collections, *Today, Fish Only* and *Move Over, Bird* (Math Paper Press), she holds an MFA in creative writing from the City University of Hong Kong. Her book reviews, essays, translations, and poems appear in journals and anthologies in Asia and the US, including *The Best American Poetry 2023*, *Quixotica: Poems East of La Mancha* (Chameleon Press), *Tokyo Poetry Magazine*, *The Petigru Review* (2023 Pushcart Nomination), and the *Belletrist Magazine* (2019 Pushcart Nomination). She teaches haiku/tanka-based poetry workshops locally and virtually. Her third collection, *Where The Petals Fall* (Free Verse Press), and a collaborative poetry book, *We Eclipse Into the Other Side* (Pinyon Publishing), written with E. Ethelbert Miller, are forthcoming.

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**E. ETHELBERT MILLER** is a literary activist and author of two memoirs and several poetry collections. He hosts the WPFW morning radio show *On the Margin with E. Ethelbert Miller* and hosts and produces *The Scholars* on UDC-TV which received a 2020 Telly Award. Miller is Associate Editor and a columnist for *The American Book Review*. He was given a 2020 congressional award from Representative Jamie Raskin in recognition of his literary activism, awarded the 2022 Howard Zinn Lifetime Achievement Award by the Peace and Justice Studies Association, and named a 2023 Grammy nominee finalist for Best Spoken Word Poetry Album. Miller's latest book is *How I Found Love Behind the Catcher's Mask*, published by City Point Press.

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**KEBEDECH TEKLEAB** is a published poet, a painter, and a sculptor. Tekleab has had solo and group exhibitions in such venues as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC; The Holocaust Museum in Chicago, Illinois; Maritime Museum in Savannah, Georgia; Orlando Museum of Art in Orlando, Florida; and recently at Columbia University in New York, NY; and in an international exhibit in Greece.

Her commissioned and collected works are on permanent display at several institutions, among them the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie; the Navy Memorial Archives in Washington, DC; the American Embassy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; and the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC.

Kebedech Tekleab was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. As a teenager, she was involved in the student movement, protesting the military junta that brutally ruled the country. Because of her involvement, still a teenager, she was forced to leave her birthplace and cross the Ethiopian border's harsh terrain to join the UNHCR in Djibouti. However, she was ambushed by the Somali soldiers and was detained in Somalia for ten years. After her repatriation she joined her family in Washington, DC and enrolled at Howard University as an undergraduate student. She earned both her BFA and MFA degrees from Howard University.

Tekleab is an associate professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) Queensborough Community College.

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Cover: Kebedech Tekleab, *“As the Sound of Many Waters”* (detail), 2020.  
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Page 2: Kebedech Tekleab, *Untitled #3* (detail), 2023. Print, 22 x 30 in.

All images courtesy of the artist.

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