

## PROFILE

# Gebre Kristos Desta

By Mitiku Adisu

I don't know what recollections my readers have of the late-poet/painter Gebre Kristos Desta [GKD] but I have two of my own. Please indulge me while I recount them.

I believe I was in fourth grade when suddenly I and a bunch of classmates found ourselves jostling over pieces of yellow colored flyers being thrown into the air by the head teacher. To make it short, I managed to get my copy of GKD's poem *Ye Tteffer ByTawar* [የጠፈር ባይተዋር] when a charitable gust flew it right into my arms. True to reality in our part of the world, it was by sheer accident, therefore, that I was introduced to this incredible poet. And I never could forget him after that one incident. I hastened to read the first few lines which I also managed to commit to memory thereafter,

ግማሽ ቀልድ አላውቅም  
ሞት እንደሁ ልሙት፤ በሴኮንድ መቶኛ  
እንቅልፍ እንደ ሬሳ ዘላለም ልተኛ።  
መንገድ ስጡኝ ሰፊ ...

*Gmash Qald Alawqm  
Mot Endahu Lmoot, baSekond meTogna  
enqlf endaRessa zeLalem Ltegna  
mangad siTugn saffi ...*

I was speechless, and instantly fell for this alien and enchanting intonation of what I thought was a novel perception of reality. I did not yet realize you could do what GKD just did – refuse to abide by traditional parameters and at the same time be true to your own cultural identity. One reading and I could not do it a second time. It was simply too much for a heart of a lad my age and build. May I intimate that it felt like mounting a rocket engine onto a baby Fiat?



Gebre Kristos Desta | Landscape painting Title, size and date unknown

The range of emotions the poem evoked at the time was not easy to pin down. But I know it involved an invitation to exploration, a sense of liberation and danger, longing, and fear of the unknown. I folded the poem and quietly stuck it within the pages of my textbook. For all I remember I did not need to open to those pages every time I wanted a lick; often just thinking about it did the job for me. A [yellow] hiss here. Folded. A [yellow] sigh there. “*mangad siTugn saffi... mangad siTugn saffi*”, it hissed and sighed.

Eight or so years later, I was at the Commercial Bank near the National Theatre waiting for a friend draw some cash. Once again, for the second time, a friend pointed out the poet/painter to me in real time and in real life. GKD was in *sanforized* khaki shirt and pants ceaselessly scribbling on the back of a bank slip standing to the side of the teller's window. Pretending to be waiting in line I had my protruding and almost bursting eyes trained on his swift hands but all I could make out was lines lines more lines angry lines confused lines crazy lines... alien lines alighting on fast shrinking space. These must have been the tell-tale signs for a man who had rendezvous with death for he did not live to be fifty [1932 – 1981]. What struck me watching him that day was the white spots on his hands and his face which I later learned were the result of a rare skin disease. [Were the spots battle scars caused by

the Arts and the Sciences dueling over his soul?]<sup>1</sup> And the crazy lines? These I was told were the warp and woof of the Abstract painter. I had no clue what Abstract painting was or could figure out why someone did not simply copy Nature without complicating an already complex and mystery-ridden life. Alas, I could not muster the courage to get closer to shake hands or talk with him; and that was to be the last time I would see him. Talk of missed opportunity! [“Missed opportunity” being the moniker for every educated Ethiopian 45 years of age and above.] The interesting thing is that I was able, with little luck, to ransack discussion forums and the blogosphere for few GKD poems. And just recently I came across a bundle neatly compiled by Amha Asfaw<sup>2</sup> [himself a prolific writer, poet and translator]. What struck me this time is the poet/painter’s preoccupation with death – certainly, a subject for another day. For now I take it we’ve become fast friends already through this brief recollection. And so, without further ado, I leave you with my rendering into English of *Ya Tteffer ByTawar*.<sup>3</sup>

## The Alien<sup>4</sup>

I care less for half jokes  
let me die, die in split-seconds  
and fall into an endless sleep like a corpse  
make way, broad way, for me  
so I can move from end to end  
with the speed of light, let me go past [galactic] worlds  
and be sun, radiant sun, all-illuminating, like the firmaments of God,<sup>5</sup> let me  
be a volcano, a molten lava, its ashes, flood, flood of fire  
intense, a million-, nay, a billion-fold

Make way, make me a broad way  
let me move in darkness, in black, pitch-black darkness, where eye sees nothing, to still regions where  
time is motionless, to airless, endless empty caverns  
let me flutter and survey it all ... for me the star is a plaything

A piece of earth, I write about earth, on black paper, on parchment of sky  
as I glide recharging with celestial spark  
I move and move and ransack<sup>6</sup> the heavens, storm bolted gates  
Till non-being comes into being, silence woken  
With huge strides I move  
From earth to moon to star, from world to world  
I move and move and create  
I make the sun my habitat,  
Let me burn a million-, aye, a billion-fold than *Seol*, and a million more than flames of *Gehanam*  
make way, make a broad way for me...

Happy Ethiopian New Year September 11, 2010/Maskaram መስከረም 1፣ 2003 አዲሱን ዓመት የሰላምና የጤና ያርግልን፤  
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<sup>1</sup> GKD joined the University College [later Haileselassie I University] to study Agricultural Sciences but changed course two years later to pursue his life’s passion; the rare disease struck thereabouts.

<sup>2</sup> I suggest readers contact Amha Asfaw for more information. Appreciations to Amha for compiling the poems for public use.

<sup>3</sup> The Amharic version [as altered] is on the next page. My recollection is አንድሁ not አንዲሁ; ቤት not ቤቱን, ... For some reason I had always thought the title to the poem was መንገድ ስጡኝ ሰፊ ... Not የጠፈር ባይተዋር or የጠፈር ምርኮኛ፤ More research is needed to clear the confusion.

<sup>4</sup> Flow, faithfulness to the poet and his culture and avoiding excessive literalism were considerations that governed this translation.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase approximates ፅርዓ ኣርያም the highest seat of power, the very Throne of God.

<sup>6</sup> Attests to the poet’s determination and his insatiable desire to unlock mysteries.

# የጠፈር ባይተዋር

ግማሽ ቀልድ አላውቅም፤

ሞት እንዲሁ<sup>1</sup> ልሙት፤ በሴኮንድ መቶኛ፤

እንቅልፍ እንደሬሳ ዘላለም ልተኛ።

መንገድ ስጡኝ ሰፊ . . .

ልጉዋዝ<sup>2</sup> ከድፍን<sup>3</sup> አጽናፍ

ልፍጠን<sup>4</sup> እንደብርሃን፤ አለማትን<sup>5</sup> ልለፍ፤

ፀሃይ ልሁን ፀሃይ፤

እንደ ፅርሃ አርያም ሁሉንም የሚያሳይ።

እሳት ገሞራ አመዱ ረመጡን፤

ጎርፍ፤ የሳት ጎርፍ ልሁን፤

ከሲኦል - ሚሊዮን፤ ሚሊዮን ነበልባል።

መንገድ ስጡኝ ሰፊ . . .

ልሂድ በጨለማ እይን ከማያያበት<sup>6</sup>

ዋቁር፤ ከከሰለው<sup>7</sup> ከጠቆረው<sup>8</sup> ፅልመት

በፀዋታው ቦታ ዘመን ከቆመበት።

በዘላለማዊው ባይ ቦታ ዋሻ፤

አየር በሌለበት አድማስ መጨረሻ።

. . . ልንሳፈፍ ልቃኝው፤

ለኔ ኮከብ ጠጠር ኩዋስ መጫወቻ ነው።

የመሬት ቁራጭ ነኝ፤ ታሪክዋን የምፅፍ፤

በዋቁር ወረቀት፤ በሰማይ ብራና፤

ስጉዋዝ እየተሞላሁ በጠፈር ላይ ፋና፤

ስሄድ እኖራለሁ . . .

ሰማየ ሰማያት እመዘብራለሁ

የተዘጋውን በር እበረግዳለሁ።

የሌለ እስቲፊጠር፤ ዝምታ እስኪነቃ

በትልቅ እርምጃ ከመሬት<sup>1</sup> ጨረቃ

ከጨረቃ ኮከብ፤ ካንዱ አለም ወዳንዱ

ስጉዋዝ እፈጥራለሁ . . .

በፀሃይ ላይ ጎጆ - ቤቴን እቀልሳለሁ

ከሲኦል ሚሊዮን ቢሊዮን ልቃጠል

ከገሃንም እሳት ሚሊዮን ነበልባል

መንገድ ስጡኝ<sup>2</sup> ሰፊ . . .