

BITTERSWEET IN ETHIOPIA

Today I burn
with fever not my own.
Our conspicuous UN car
enroute to Addis airport
is slowed by Eritreans
crowding old Revolution Square,
forging history from exhaustion
voting to secede,
fractured by war
and amazed at freedom's face.
The boy returnee from the battlefield
resting on twisted remnants
of his shattered youthful legs
quietly accepts my outstretched coins.
I can almost smell the cordite
from the singed remains of afternoon.
Finally finished with the monstrous
baggage/passport checkin hassle,
elitely cloistered in the cool comfort
of the silver 727
the latest Herald Tribune headlines
blazing on our laps
Bosnia! Burma! Timor!
Waco's christo-pyrotechnic glow
and razorwire dihedrals
of the holocaustic shadow, inconceivably,
I hear actual human crying.
An ailing, aged frightened expat,
wrestled gently but with great difficulty
to his seat across the aisle
by wiry Ethiopians
in blue overalls
their job no doubt
to winch him into business class,
no more, no less.
Noone is untouched by his pain
that exiles him to Frankfurt
on this flight,
yet none move to his side.
He seems liturgic,
as if priestly in his public cries,
his spasms drawing us
to recollect the ritual agony,
wracked, pinioned
in the grey grip

of his private illness.
To me, bound unwillingly
by ticketed proximity to his fever,
his gasping song sings of psychodragons
that stalk our nations' countrysides.
Have we learned nothing
from brick ovens stuffed with bodies
mass killings in the Khmer Rouge fields
adolescents beating infant's brains out
by swinging them on trees
necklacing women in tires
filled with gasoline
ignited from a distance with a smile?
Girls are raped for sport or combat.
Boys hands severed
so they cannot fire a rifle.
Live on CNN in Addis,
fanned by Texas winds,
raging fires incinerated children
while we bore global, silent witness to their dying.
Where is the antidote
for such pernicious human venom?
Stealth technology, F one-elevens
can't lock on termites
in our soul's foundations!
How must we conquer the demons WITHIN?
Surely kneeling's not the answer
nor searching the dark clouds for heaven.
Suddenly the professional presence
of the flight attendant
in emeraldic uniform
and jaunty Ethiopian Airlines scarf
slips into the empty seat
beside the old, still weeping European man.
Talking to him, she leans toward
his shaking frame, her dark hand
questioning the shining cheek,
as their eyes meet, his apologise.
Most awkwardly, brocaded arms encircle
the once broad shoulders and white hair
and now his sobbing strangely yields
to her sweet spontaneous embrace.

John Lawrence, 4/23 1993