

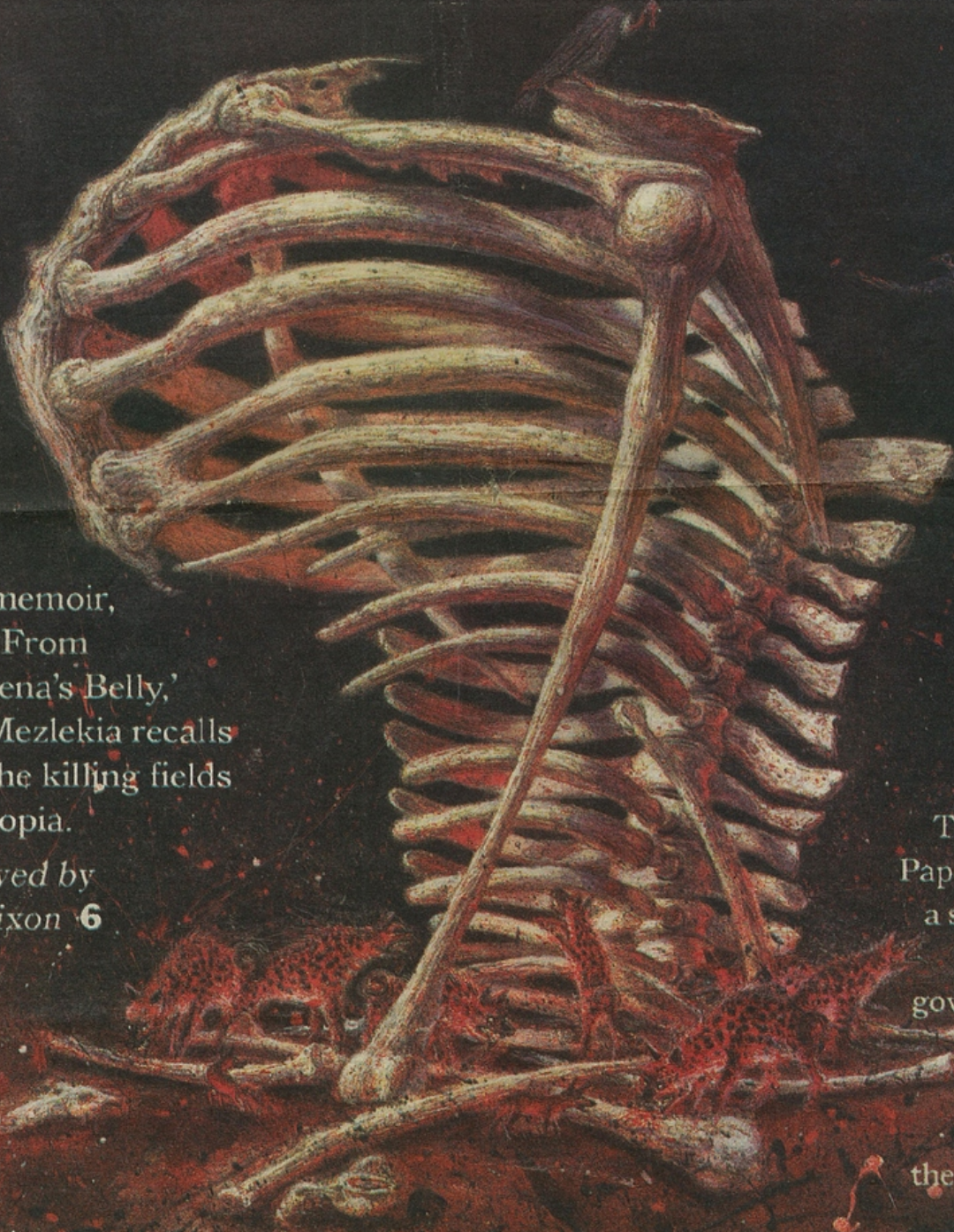
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Book Review

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Eating Africa's Children



In his memoir, 'Notes From the Hyena's Belly,' Nega Mezlekia recalls life in the killing fields of Ethiopia.

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Do 'The Tiananmen Papers' reveal a split in the Chinese government? Jonathan Spence examines the case. **10**

Fear and Famine

This first-person account of the horrors of Ethiopia interweaves politics, family history and traditional tales.

NOTES FROM THE HYENA'S BELLY

An Ethiopian Boyhood.
By Nega Mezlekia.
355 pp. New York: Picador USA. \$24.

By Rob Nixon

NEGA MEZLEKIA'S powerful memoir stands as a reminder of how media images of Africa can never substitute for African stories. Television has habituated us to an Africa of impersonal disaster through helicopter shots that hover somewhere between oversight and oversight. Such news flashes offer viewers in placid, wealthy lands the option of responding with pity or indifference. But, unlike Mezlekia, they cannot take us beneath the skin of experience. An Ethiopian who now lives in Canada, Mezlekia doesn't just show us the spectacle of famine: he reveals how it feels to shuffle across the desert in a column of 20,000 refugees while Somali militias are shelling you and your family.

"Notes From the Hyena's Belly" recounts this ordeal in a manner that suggests both the challenge and the testimonial value of such a memoir: "Apathy in the face of continual violence is something someone who has never lived through a war cannot understand. . . . When my family and I were seeking refuge, traveling slowly on the road to Harar, the heat of midafternoon was broken only by the treble whirr of falling bombs and the sight of the dead. People had long since ceased to huddle under their limbs at the sound. . . . Their frail limbs could not stop the bombs, their ears could not tell them where the bombs would fall. Death was random and continual, and people simply got on with what was left to them: the long wait in line for a bucket of water, the preparation of what food there was to be found."

Mezlekia's memoir traces the years from his birth in 1958 through his flight in 1983 to the Netherlands and on to Canada. Most North American families would not experience in four generations the scale of disaster that befalls his Amhara family in two decades. But the story that emerges is more than a saga of compressed calamity, for Mezlekia is as alert to the way the fabulous seeps into the everyday as he is to his people's quotidian sufferings.

From the early pages, a lively cast of characters tumbles forth, a cast worthy of Gabriel García Márquez. We meet a local midwife who matter-of-factly helps an angel deliver its children "with wings intact"; a nun fluent in "the language of the unborn and the dreams of the dead"; and the terminally idle Ms. Yetaferu, whose inventive piety requires her to honor "263 saints' days, 52 Sundays, 9 other Christian holidays, 13 *Adbar* days, 36 *Wukabi* days . . . and 12 days to worship her ancestors' spirits." We listen to Mezlekia's teacher as he conducts his lessons seated atop a

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giant tortoise shell, the stumps of his amputated legs hidden in a sack. And we're introduced to his headmaster, who seems a mere outgrowth of the "persuader," the whip he has fashioned from a bull's penis.

But no human inhabitant of the city of Jijiga, the author's childhood home, is as memorable as the hyena armies that descend nightly from the surrounding mountains: "The streets of my childhood were deserted after 9 o'clock, with no street dog, beggar or lizard in sight. It looked as though the entire town was under siege. . . . The hyenas . . . would devour you, your shoes, bracelets, linen and anything else you had touched. Beggars knew this; they might go hungry, but they always had shelter." As Mezlekia's teacher observes, "Homelessness is a vivid indication of a shortage of hyenas."

Despite the hyena gangs, the persuader's lashings and sundry low-flying devils, Mezlekia's childhood comes to seem in retrospect a kind of paradise. Nothing could prepare either author or reader for the wreckage to come, as wave after wave of human marauders tears Ethiopian society apart. By skillfully interleaving personal history, politics and Amhara fables, Mezlekia has created a remarkable account of what it takes (luck, among other things) to survive the complete shattering of civil society. To protest the feudal cruelties of Ethiopia's land tenure system, Mezlekia himself becomes a teenage warrior. He joins a guerrilla army of dissident Somalis only to find his life at risk from his Amhara-hating comrades in arms.

"Notes From the Hyena's Belly" may sound like a frontline missive from a remote society. However, the story that unfolds has a considerable amount to do with America. While Mezlekia shuns polemics, he shows how the Horn of Africa's appeal to cold war strategists exacerbated the region's serial calamities. In a cynical turn, the Soviets and Ameri-

cans traded client states, so that in quick succession the United States was arming Ethiopia against a Somali dictator's scientific socialist fantasies, then reversing its support, embracing Somali tyranny against its now Soviet-backed Ethiopian equivalent. Between them, the superpowers helped sundry juntas, dictators and feudal tyrants transform the Horn's poorly armed conflicts into vast killing fields. "Notes From the Hyena's Belly" reveals a world in which teenagers bent double under state-of-the-art weaponry cannot afford a bag of flour.

Mezlekia does double duty as political historian and family chronicler. Unlike American memoirists, who can follow the well-mapped route from trauma (bulimia, incest, addiction) to recovery, Mezlekia has simultaneously to chart his family's anguish and introduce his society to a foreign readership. For the most part he succeeds, finding a way to keep the writing personal while documenting a convulsive national history. On occasion, his writing becomes precious (bodies "carried across the bourne," lion after lion called "king of the beasts" and human history viewed, a few times too often, from the perspective of animal onlookers). But in the end these are quibbles when set against the author's fine storytelling instincts and the value of getting these stories told.

Catastrophe, Mezlekia clearly understands, deserves imaginative restraint. He trusts his readers sufficiently to complete the emotional life of his text. As always, that life emerges primarily through the details, which, even when summoning the most blasted circumstances, retain some kernel of humanity. Thus Mezlekia recalls how, amid the chaos and slaughter as his city's people fled en masse, his family clung to the belief that meals were sacred events requiring "complete and undivided attention. One's mind was occu-

pied only by the sensation of each small bite of stale bread as it broke against the teeth, by the barely discernible taste of the watery soup. Meals became exercises in the subtle detection of small differences, today a tiny pinch of salt in the bean soup, another day the effect of a slightly better grade of water." Whether evoking a family meal so spare it is almost foodless or childhood pranks playing chicken with hyenas, Mezlekia's writing at its finest rests on precisely such "exercises" in "subtle detection."

It is heartening to witness the emergence of a new talent in these fallow times for sub-Saharan African literature. Africa is at risk of becoming, among other things, a continent of lost stories as nation after nation becomes enmeshed not only in warfare but in the fight against AIDS. Yet African literature does not command the attention in the West that it did 20 or 30 years ago, and there are fewer great writers to bear witness to the continent's huge stories of heroism and ruin. The major figures — Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Bessie Head, Ousmane Sembene, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Buchi Emecheta — have either died or slid toward semi-retirement. Of the Anglophone authors, only the peripatetic Somali Nuruddin Farah still writes at the peak of his powers.

The reasons for this decline are both external and internal. With the passing of decolonization's high age, Western expectations of Africa — and Western interest in its stories — have waned. The continent's battered idealism has also bled sub-Saharan African literature of some of its former energy: it is impossible to imagine an African writer today producing a fiercely optimistic novel like Sembene's "God's Bits of Wood" or Ngugi's "Grain of Wheat." Most decisive, however, has been the gutting of African universities and other cultural institutions necessary for sustaining literary careers on the publishing periphery. To a degree true on no other continent, to be an African author now almost requires that one live elsewhere, remote from the everydayness of the societies one strives to portray. Europe and North America currently boast more venerable African writers than Africa itself. And the continent's most exciting new literary talents have followed suit: Mezlekia lives in Canada, the Ugandan Moses Isegawa in the Netherlands, the Nigerian Biyi Bandele-Thomas in Britain.

The Brazilian director Arnaldo Jabor once spoke of an "aesthetic of hunger" appropriate to traumatized societies that are nonetheless rich in potential stories. "Notes From the Hyena's Belly" belongs squarely to that tradition. Mezlekia has summoned, with imaginative directness and impressive tonal range, a world of uncertainty in which politics is never just background but permeates ordinary life — indeed, prevents it from ever being ordinary. He has produced the most riveting book about Ethiopia since Ryszard Kapuscinski's literary allegory "The Emperor" and the most distinguished African literary memoir since Soyinka's "Ake" appeared 20 years ago. □