Watery Graves*

Alessandro Dal Lago

. . . You make yourself
obtuse with false imaginings; so that you cannot see
what you would understand had you dispelled them.

Dante, *Paradiso*, I, 88-89

I.

"African Migrants Perish on the Other Side of the Ocean"
Associated Press, Friday, June 2, 2006

They had left Africa on Christmas Eve in search of a better life in Europe. Instead, the migrants met their deaths as their boat drifted more than 2,000 miles off course in the Atlantic, washing up on the Caribbean island of Barbados.

By the time a fisherman discovered the boat on April 30, the bodies of the 11 young men remaining on board were virtually mummified from the sun and salt spray. Before dying, one of them had written a farewell note: "I would like my family in Bassada (Senegal) to have a little money. I beg you to forgive me – goodbye."

"It appears that the boat left Senegal with 52 people aboard," stated Barbados' justice minister, Dale Marshall. At a length of twenty feet and equipped with small sleeping quarters for the helmsman, the boat was probably headed for the Spanish Canary Islands, a bridge to Europe situated in the Atlantic about 200 miles from the Moroccan coast.

"This is how my life ends, in the great Moroccan Sea," wrote the young Senegalese, having no idea of his exact location. The 11 bodies are in the care of a funeral home in Barbados. According to Marshall, identification of the victims will be difficult.

II.

Barbados is the outermost island in the Antilles, lying just east of the Caribbean Sea. A paradise of white crescent beaches, rocks covered by mangroves and palms that stretch skyward above deep blue waters. A watchtower; a sentry. That said, if the island did intercept the boat it was only due to the unpredictability of the currents since what remained of the craft was nothing more than a speck, a negligible presence on the ocean's

* "Fluidi Feretri." In *Prediche per il nuovo millenio. Dall'assedio delle ceneri*, a cura di Gabriele Frasca e Renato Quaglia (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008).

vast surface. Another breath of wind and the boat would have veered northwest, only to become entangled on the reefs around Saint Lucia, homeland of the Nobel Prize poet, Derek Walcott, the Homer of the Antilles. Or southwest, a little north of Grenada, in which case it would have been swallowed up in the endless Caribbean void, stranded after weeks of drifting across the waves, across the deserted beaches of Venezuela or – hundreds of miles to the west - across the coast of Nicaragua. What is certain is that the warm water and sun would have eventually melted the tar that secured the joints, weakening the rotting planks and loosening them from their rusting nails. The water that leaked through the wood would have first flooded the bilge and then risen as high as the oarlocks, closing in around the mummified bodies after a final gurgle as the last seagull hastened away. And therefore, what happened to the Senegalese would have remained pure conjecture.

The 11 mummified bodies (their thin skin pulled tautly across a fragile framework of bones, like parchment across a canvas) are laid out in an organized fashion, eyes plucked out by seagulls and arms in a resting position, although the jagged marks left by a shark are visible on the shoulder of one, there, where the arm was cleanly amputated. And this most certainly after the man was already dead given his indifferent, almost serene expression and the position of his head resting against his shoulder, his arm abandoned over the side.

When they went out to fish in Dakar, Mbour or Saint Louis, the boys never paid much attention to the seagulls. The birds flew behind their long, narrow, multicolored boats in a wake of screeches and batting wings, wrangling over the worthless, striped fish with big, transparent fins tossed overboard. The gulls came down to the beach at dawn pushing their way between the baskets, walking elatedly in the muddy water with heads upright and ravenous looks. The boys never paid attention to the seagulls until one of them made its nest in an oarlock. It stared into their eyes, fearful of their immobility. But the gulls that followed them when they fished fifty miles from Dakar, Mbour and Saint Louis were different. Yes, they looked the same, the females white and the males with speckled backs, but these particular gulls nested on the smaller islands that rise up out of the Caribbean, in deep crevices between the rocks and on the promontories of Barbados, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and Grenada. By the time these seagulls crowded onto the boat, the light had long vanished from the mummies' eyes.

On a map, the crossing from Senegal to Barbados looks like a straight route out of range of equatorial storms; the simple gesture of a child bent over an atlas drawing a line across the page. But we know there is more here than meets the eye, complexities a child cannot comprehend. Directly off Senegal's coast two currents converge. The first, from the south, originates in the central Pacific. It makes its way to the Indian Ocean, skirts the Cape of Good Hope and runs along Namibia and Angola as far as the Gulf of Guinea and up the coast of Senegal. The second,

from the north, is an offshoot of the Gulf Stream. Originating in the sea that fronts the Yucatan Peninsula, it heads out towards the North Atlantic reaching as far as Iceland, and then turns back to the Faroe Islands. Moving southward, it coasts along the British Isles, flows into the Bay of Biscay, passes Finisterre and descends along Portugal to join up with its southern sister just slightly below Mauritania.

Pushed by winds and the earth's rotation, the two currents converge and turn at a 90 degree angle, appearing to head directly towards the Caribbean but in reality follow a gentle curve of two thousand miles (we know that in nature, straight lines are non-existent). Energized by both, this conveyor belt of solar heated water runs towards Guyana, the Antilles, and the southern Caribbean islands until it finally deposits the boat carrying the mummified Senegalese on a Barbados beach. It then merges with the source of all western warm waters, the Gulf Stream, which turns clockwise in the great Atlantic void to take up its northern course again, stirring up hurricanes in Central America and along the southern coast of the United States.

Senegalese fishermen pride themselves on their knowledge of these currents. In interviews that followed the discovery of their mummified compatriots, they claimed to know how to reach Guyana's coast. The fifty-two, however, weren't headed to the Caribbean but to the Canaries, situated at a latitude of 28 degrees north and a longitude of 15 degrees west, about 700 miles or 2,000 kilometers from the border that separates Mauritania and Senegal. Going against southern crosscurrents, a motorboat can travel roughly 10 knots an hour, reaching the Great Canary Island in about seventy-three hours or three days. The boat that went aground in Barbados had no motor. A trawler or another fishing vessel had been towing it. Perhaps a rock sliced the connecting cable, but it is more probable that the smugglers, warned by a military ship (whether Moroccan, Senegalese, Spanish or that of any other European country that patrols the Atlantic along Africa's coast) untied or cut the cable leaving the boat to its destiny - already written and recorded - adrift on the ocean's long reaching waves.

Planning on a trip of three days, or at most four or five in case of bad weather, the Senegalese probably filled their backpacks with bottled water, canned meat and chocolate bars. They are dressed in blue jeans, jogging suits, sweatshirts, water repellant jackets and tennis shoes. A few wear their baseball hats backwards as is common elsewhere in the world. They probably tried to be as quiet as possible when they boarded, sloshing through the low tide with their shoes tied around their necks and their hard-earned monies in the pockets of their camouflage pants, not worrying too much about the guards who were smoking and drinking in the guardhouse. At that very moment (it is Christmas Eve) millions of young men in Europe and the U.S., similar in age and with baseball hats worn in the same fashion hurry off to dinner, the pub or the movie theatre.

III.

Open your eyes and see the boat cross the oil tanker's wake too late to be seen. At sunset on the first day (or the second or the third) the black mass of a cargo ship that had left Bahia or Montevideo or Cartagena or Maracaibo, headed for Casablanca or Cadiz or Lisbon or Genoa or Hamburg, comes upon them like a thunderstorm. See them scream, pressing up against one another trying not to fall off the boat, tossed about by the cargo ship's wake. But the sailors at supper don't hear them, and the lookout high on the bridge cannot see them. Or maybe he did see them and a sailor gave the alarm, but the captain is thinking of the emeralds in the coffee crates and the bags of cocaine hidden in dolls or in fake pre-Colombian statues or even - with careful precision - in pineapples. He's got to unload his cargo and he doesn't have time to think about that lump of humanity clinging to the boat below. He can't take a detour towards the Senegalese or Mauritanian coasts, and he really doesn't relish the idea of a military official coming on board. So he keeps his gaze fixed ahead ignoring the helmsman's look.

But even if they wanted to the crew could not possibly see the four or five or six men thrown from the boat into the foamy waters. The forty-eight or forty-seven or forty-six who remain shout as the ship grows smaller against the dark horizon. See them crying out of anger even if they haven't yet despaired because they don't yet know. The seagulls follow them for hundreds of miles. The forty-eight or forty-seven or forty-six are exhausted, and in the dark they don't pay attention to the lights of cruise ships headed towards the Caribbean, lights suspended between sky and ocean. In the clear night, the satellites' bright points twinkle.

See them die hour by hour, day by day, of thirst and hunger, dehydrated, on fire, frozen, incapable even of fighting over the last drops of water. After a week they all must have been dead. But ask yourselves how forty-eight young men disappeared so completely, leaving no documents or any other clues behind (no signs of cannibalism were found on the boat). Perhaps a storm shook the skiff, carrying off most of its contents. But open your eyes and see them there, grouped together by village or city of origin, friends and relatives saying good-bye if they have the strength, then slipping overboard day after day where the sharks await them, circling under the boat's dark shadow. The eleven who remained were the youngest, the strongest, the most alone.

March 30, 1997, see the *Kater I Rades* drag one hundred and eight men, women and children to the bottom of the Otranto Channel while Italian authorities rant about an Albanian invasion. No one was convicted, not the commander of the Italian frigate, *Sibilla* that rammed the ship, not even the person who established the rules of engagement for the Navy charged with intercepting these aging sea vessels. See the *Yohan* capsize

in the Channel of Sicily, a rusting iron coffin for three hundred Tamils, Pakistanis and Indians who left the shantytowns of Karachi and Mumbai and the Ganges Delta where they take oil tankers to be dismantled in mud filled with dioxin, rust and asbestos, by half-naked men who dream of Western suburbs. For years the Italian and Greek governments denied the existence of the *Yohan*. See the boats, always smaller, set sail between April and October from Bengasi, heading towards Malta and Lampedusa, a one hundred mile stretch where half of Europe's patrol boats and minesweepers cross paths, where satellites photograph anything larger than a life vest. See them go up against cold northwest currents born in the Atlantic that move east through the narrow passage of Gibraltar and along Algeria's coast, rounding Tunis and spreading out into the Sea of Sirte, intercepting the unwanted tourists in these hostile waters.

In the warm season, this stretch of sea pulsates with Italian, Maltese, Tunisian, Libyan and Greek fishing vessels. Sometimes the crews catch sight of the boats (only the biggest appear on their radar screens) but they rarely offer assistance anymore. At most, they report their presence via radio and sometimes wait for the patrol boats to arrive. But put yourselves in their shoes. They have barely set sail from Mazara del Vallo for the Atlantic where swordfish are abundant. The largest of the vessels fish the coasts of Maine and Newfoundland. They freeze their catch, selling it around the world, and once a year the crews return home by plane to their villages for the feast of the patron saint. If they were to take illegals on board, their boats could be impounded and prosecutors would inevitably open a file for aiding illegal immigration. Squeezed between honor and necessity, between the law of the sea and that of personal interest, the captains have little choice. The bright points disappear off the radar screens and the little boats behind a wave.

Somewhere in Brussels or Rome or Milan, the legal counsel or immigration expert or deputy or senator who wrote the law drops off to sleep, just a bit uncomfortable after dinner in a restaurant near the Grand Palace, the Piazza della Scala or the Pantheon. He doesn't think of himself as a serial killer. On the contrary, in good or bad faith, for sincere motives of principle or raw political ambition, he tends to see himself as a defender of laws, demographic equilibrium and our children's future. Or simply as what he is and what he always will be – someone who does the job he has to do. But see him in the hour before the dawn waking with a start, his throat dry, trembling and sweating in the bed of his Brussels' residence, his beautiful Milanese home or his Roman apartment. For some time, a nightmare has been tormenting him. He sees shadows emerging from the sea at night beckoning him, and he doesn't understand.

See these women and men heading down thousands of rocky paths or making their way onto rickety buses somewhere in Eritrea, Senegal, Somalia, Nigeria, Sudan, Chad, Mauritania, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan. They are fleeing the bombings, the chaos along the front lines, assassins in pickup trucks, manhunts, desertification, ONG,

charity in a place of agony, "democracy", the International Monetary Fund, forced cultivation conversion, boredom, statistics and the worst position in the Pil classifications. "We are all born from a divine seed," these men and women reason. Our father is the sky and our mother the earth, our common nurturer. Our great grandparents sat in front of their shacks and mud huts, smoking pipes in beautiful red or blue or khaki uniforms they had worn while fighting in the Ardennes, the Pas-de-Calais, the Libyan desert and at Amba Alagi, earning the grade of sergeant at the end of their honorable service. Foreigners fighting in a foreign land; foreigners to each other. And we who have been made stronger by this legacy and by the blood of our ancestors shed in far off lands, head out to those places where our common history converges, where the heartbeat of the world economy pulsates, where what for you is infamy and subordination for us is simply survival, in restaurant kitchens, dockyards and the cesspools of cities; in deserted factories, on cattle and pig ranches, in tomato and bergamot fields; in the steel and metal industries, on fishing boats and in any other line of work you might offer us.

See them clinging to the naïve, outrageous idea, long abandoned by more advanced societies, that the world is one nation and that until death welcomes us in accordance with whatever beliefs and rites we might hold, the earth we walk belongs to all of us, as does the sea that enfolds it and the sky that quenches our thirst at its whim. See them animated by this blind faith, ignorant of geo-politics and geo-strategies, incapable of discerning our far-sightedness. We who invade their lands now refuse to welcome those who flee the invasion. See them fan out towards ports of departure on aging buses, in taxis from the colonial period and on trains that never arrive at their destinations. See them pay customs' officials, police and consulate clerks; at stops in Dakar, Tripoli, Tunis or Casablanca they even pay out for lottery tickets promising U.S. citizenship. One hundred and three degrees in the day's shade; freezing nights spent atop tanker trucks. See them as they grasp the barbed wire at outposts in Morocco, camping out in front of Ceuta and Melilla and Tetouan, slipping through past the guards. See them head out at Dakar, Nouakchott, Tangiers, Tripoli and Tunis towards their destiny. The sea belongs to everyone - but only when you are dead.

Not all the dead rest peacefully in seaside cemeteries like their brothers out on Porto Palo's small promontory. The drowned victims are puppets tossed about by deep currents; small fish give chase to one another through their eye sockets and eels wait patiently in their rib cages. Their destiny quickly turns them into calcium phosphate, the inorganic flour that fills the space between amphorae, submarine wrecks and refrigerators abandoned overboard. They will not feed the earth in the way that is our common destiny, nor will the earth nourish flowers between their graves. Reflect how injustice follows them even in death. No longer alive but not dead either, foreigners even to that ill-defined territory between existence and non-existence. Think, as they embark on

this final journey, of relatives left behind nearly five thousand miles away. See the grandmothers and mothers congratulate one another on the good fortune of grandsons and sons housed in some public shelter that protects them from the rain in Europe's freezing cities, when one at the end of his shift wraps himself in the warmth of the other heading out to work. See relatives dreaming of those first letters, hoping for those first remittances. They are lost to them forever in the intimacy of the dinner hour but not in the air space streaked with satellites or in the bubble of messages and global networks.

They do not know, nor will they ever know, that stripped of both life and death their sons and grandsons are now in the limbo of the non-living. Nor is the fate of the mummies any better. Nameless and buried hastily on the island of Barbados, all that differentiates them from their brothers who have disappeared in the great Moroccan Sea is the dubious dignity of a number, but a number that is meaningless, unworthy of becoming even a percentage. No government reclaims them; no one wants them back. Not a soul will place a hand on their flag-draped caskets. Nor will their relatives have an arm to lean on as the tambourine beats slowly and bystanders remove their hats. None of them can claim the right to a name, except perhaps the one who left a note indicating his village of origin.

Reflect on how the same imagination that allows us to dominate the globe is blind when faced with the deaths of others. If I write a name on a piece of paper, or group as many names or possibility of names and assign them a number or a column of numbers, I have to know that those markings, that chain of cross-references, ultimately correspond to faces. And given that it is impossible to actually see them, since the range of both our senses and their electronic devices are limited, we use our imagination to draw those faces in the air. And the faces are similar to our own. They view the same world with our same eyes. See them, they were once beautiful and tall as we are. We are descended from the same common mother; they are our relatives and brothers; in their veins our blood once sang. In the brush, this common mother gave birth and rested beside a well before continuing on the road to the encampment. We have breathed the smoke of the same refugee camps; we were nomads and hunters who followed the same wandering herds. Born of a common mother, we all left arid lands and settled on the banks of lakes and seas. We became fishermen and merchants. We armed our swift ships and launched them towards our enemies. We killed and were killed. But our common birth did not lead to a common destiny, and that is our history.

Long before laboratories confirmed our common origin, we knew that our lineage was one alone and that the fair skin of some or the dark color of others could not shield us from a common fate; that lullabies sung to a suffering child on the outskirts of a far-off village echo within the stone vaults of our cathedrals. We hear their voices and we cover our ears with the palms of our hands. We know but we do not want to know, and

our imagination stops at the border where the map changes color. The blindness of those who see, of mapmakers, framers of constitutions, scribes, border guards and statisticians; the deaf ear of those who officiate, swinging the thurible only over our caskets. See the bureaucrat, the statistician, the lawmaker and the miserable programmer wipe out with a swift keystroke any trace of the lives and deaths of thousands of our brothers and sisters descended from the same common mother. See them as they make those faces disappear along with the names attached to them. And curse them, so that in the hour before the dawn when they awake from their murderous sleep, they too will be deprived of life and death as justice dictates.

Our dead rest in seaside cemeteries. Out on the promontories, sanctuaries keep vigil and bishops decompose in crypts. Ingenuous depictions on church walls recount stories of sailing ships saved by divine intercession as they passed through the Straits of Magellan. The men at the helm with their cropped beards and heavy cloth jackets with gold buttons died at the beginning of the last century, in their beds. This is our common fate and the thought is not particularly upsetting. We will bequeath property to our children; our houses will be theirs. But consider if you will the fates of those women and men on the bottom of the ocean. The calcium phosphate that once flexed muscle now coagulates into coral, and delicate fingers turn to mother of pearl. What once were strong arms like our own now flower into sea anemone. Swarms of microorganisms envelope them. We who are descended from the same common mother don't concern ourselves with the fates of souls who have disappeared. But this invisibility does not excuse us because I believe that invisible natures are more numerous than those we see in the universe of beings.

Open your eyes and see them wandering amid the remains of bodies now turned to marine flora and fauna. Their contours are hazy and their colors iridescent, like jack-o-lanterns. But their profiles are as human as our own because they are no longer alive and they are not yet dead. The barracudas and sharks do not fear them; they play with their reflections on the ocean floor. No longer bodies but not yet spirits; unsettled souls deprived of solace, incapable of hate. They follow the shadows of boats that ferry their brothers towards Spain and Lampedusa, to the Canaries and Barbados. If they could speak they would alert them to the patrol boats on the perimeter of territorial waters. If they could, they would dance in front of the little prows, steering them away from squalls and whirlpools. But they are no longer alive and they are not yet dead; they do not speak and they are not visible. They can only welcome the newly arrived among them.

IV.

When the coral invades the ports and cuts the keels of the ships, these lost souls, no longer dead or alive who were once tall and beautiful as we are,

will reunite on the ocean floor. There are thousands and thousands, and amid all the flotsam and jetsam there is no more room for them. Cast out, even from that place where corporeal existence has turned to coral. Imagine them if you can, heading towards the coasts and the rocks that rise up out of the sea. But who will describe them? Who will tell us about their families and their homelands? And their class and their relations? And who will provide the details of their lives? What they were and where they lived? The human mind has always struggled with questions of invisibility, but in vain. I believe, however, that it is a good thing to contemplate, with the help of our imagination, the possibility of a far more inclusive world in which invisible beings surround visible ones. Unless of course your poor intellect hasn't dried up, consumed by daily tasks and overwhelmed by trifles.

But be vigilant about what is true and recognize the balance of things and the subtleties that connect them, so that what is certain remains distinct from what is uncertain, like darkness from light. And therefore, don't try to see them at that hour when a heat wave bakes the sand and torments tourists. Rather, sharpen your gaze at dusk when St. Elmo's fires light up the mast, when the dying sunlight sets the clouds' rims ablaze. They will slip in beside you by the thousands, imperceptible as veils, emerging from the undertow. They will pass through your bodies because their nature is incorporeal. But do not fear for your safety because they are not vengeful. If they have crossed deserts headed towards their mineral destiny, it was out of necessity that vanished along with their bodies, out of a reasoning that escapes our understanding and gets tangled up in faraway offices when a European bureaucrat raises his weary eyes from the paperwork.

Reflect if you will on their existence that no scale can weigh, much less that of human justice. If they drowned, it was due to the force of the currents and the monsoons. Curse the earth's rotations, the changing of the seasons and the rain that fails to fall on their fields. If the smugglers abandoned them, it was only because they didn't want to be bothered with an acquittal. If the customs' official took their watches, it is only because profit is nature's law. And if a bureaucrat wipes out any possibility of a future with a stroke of his pen, it is because he is ordered to do so. And so he doesn't understand, in the hour before the dawn, why the nightmare returns with such insistence. And he gives no credence to the intangible figures that crowd around his bed.

But you who see them, just as they saw our world with our eyes, you who understand and who do not speak out because your minds are too preoccupied with insignificant matters, curse him, because it is he who has set the earth rotating, unleashed the monsoons and stopped the rain with a stroke of his pen. Curse him so that in the hour when he senses his own end and attributes physical discomfort to bad digestion, he will be deprived of life and death as justice dictates.

See the judge pondering the sentence. Ship captains can do nothing in the face of storms caused by the caprice of winds and currents and therefore by the divine will of the Omnipotent, since the size, scope and direction of nature's forces are willed by the Prime Mover. But even if he did condemn them, ruminates the judge, what would change? Our laws are imperfect because they are based on precedent, on past fatefulness, on something we can do nothing about since it no longer exists and not, as justice would have it, on what could be and what should not be, on preventing evil that we cannot know until it has already taken root. Doctors don't cure the tumors of dead people, but they do dissect their bodies so others may live. We are judging when death is already a reality.

The judge sighs as he closes the file, and the rusted coffins are hauled off for dismantling. If no one sells them, their iron will produce refrigerators and rail tracks. All things considered, ponders the judge, we must admit that the ships' commanders never really intended to kill anyone when they took their brothers on board in the ports of Singapore or Mumbai or Izmir. Once they passed the Straits of Malacca or reached the Nigerian coast, they wisely stayed far off shore, fearing pirates. When they passed Suez they sealed the holds and hid their human cargo in containers. If the migrants starved to death or died of dehydration, it is only because they didn't want to arouse suspicions. And finally, when the storm caught them by surprise between Crete and Sicily, they were forced to abandon ship and flee in powerboats since survival is nature's law and this law is set in motion by the Prime Mover. How can we consider them guilty? How can hearings and notes scribbled on pads attest to what is action and what instead is merely potential that never turned into action? In fact, if everything that is moved is necessarily moved by something, it also follows that this thing is moved by something else. And if in turn it is moved by another moving thing, this necessitates the existence of a Prime Mover not moved by any other force. And therefore, if we go back and retrace the chain of events, and we untangle this thread from all the others that were only potential acts and never became actions, we must recognize how foolish it would be for the law to try and condemn the captains, for they are powerless in the face of storms and winds. And in the beginning, it was the Prime Mover that imprinted the world with movement that will cause it to turn for millennia, wrapped in clouds and winds until it is reduced to a bare rock adrift among the stars.

Comforted by this thought, the judge's sigh dissolves into relief and he can now turn his gaze toward the calm sea on this beautiful summer evening. And he doesn't know that at dusk, when the sky turns indigo, the souls of those neither dead nor living will accompany him on his short journey home. And he will attribute the premonition of death to exhaustion and paperwork. But you know, if your minds haven't dried up consumed by routine tasks, how a simple gesture can, at any moment, make the difference between what is and what is not; and how the

bureaucrat and the statistician and the captain and the judge could have, at any moment, made power beholden to justice. But they refused because they are bound by the duty of their office that is not nature's law, but rather the product of intellect and will. And so curse them, if you have justice at heart, so that they will be deprived of life and death, just as they deprived their brothers of life and death.

V.

Open your eyes and see them. They slip in among us, fleeing the searchlights. They crowd around those material comforts that are useless to bodiless creatures, and their reflection dances across the store windows. Meditate on the scope of their dreams when they were still tall and beautiful as we are now and could not predict their incorporeal destiny. What for us is excess and we leave to rot, for them was necessity and survival. That which fades quickly from our memory, for them was food and sleep and tranquility. But think, if your intellect isn't drowning in a sea of trifles, how their dreams (so unworthy to share in your wealth) followed a reasoning too difficult to be detected: If our common lineage is one and the earth is our common mother, the first person to dig a boundry ditch around a city committed matricide. As if the fate encoded in our very cells was not sufficient cause for worry, as if every night before dawn we did not torture ourselves enough, measuring the time we have lived and the time we have left to live, our countries now revel in the bloodshed.

We locked them up in the fort on Gorée, corroded by salt spray, and it doesn't excuse us that slavery was also practiced in the kingdom of Morocco, nor that the Saracens took control of Otranto. We suffocated them in the holds of ships and enchained them on plantations in the Antilles. Think how the mummified fifty-two drifting towards Barbados were guided in the wakes of black slave ships. Portuguese and Spanish, French and English all exploited the same current, that great conveyor belt of warm water where the vortexes of the Pacific and the Gulf Stream merge. When the manhunt was no longer lucrative, we enlisted them in Ogaden, in the Congo, in Bengala - and Adua and General Gordon's fate don't excuse us. When they appeared on the hilltops armed with spears they caught us by surprise, but only once. We learned our lesson and no longer relied on the fact that our skin was white. We sent our drummer boys ahead and regrouped under the cover of cavalries and Howitzers. Our rapid fire honed by centuries of discipline decimated them wave by wave, until the last line of attackers became bogged down in their own blood. We taught them a lesson they would never forget. We dragged them off to die at the Somme dressed as Zouaves. We quartered them in desert barracks and stripped them of the weapons they now used with expertise under our command. We suppressed revolts with canon fire and conferred the rank of sergeant on those who survived.

Open your eyes and see, if your intellect hasn't been completely overwhelmed by trifles, all those we have killed on land and sea who have been victims of our wars but who have never involved us in theirs. If they were to show up at our doors, we wouldn't have space to breathe. We could stand shoulder to shoulder with the dead and our public squares wouldn't be big enough to hold us all. But this is nothing but a retrospective fantasy when we reflect on the singular leniency of history that never punishes the guilty. And all the while imbeciles comfort us with their editorials: Just because we are descended from the same stock does it mean we have to pay retributions for our ancestors' deeds? Aren't these ex-slaves free to realize profits in their own countries? And why should the leftovers we toss to our dogs or leave for gulls feed the suffering child who stands in front of the cameraman?

So if reading newspapers hasn't numbed your intellect, reflect on the possibility that justice is beyond the comprehension of judges and journalists and statisticians. If the Prime Mover set the world in motion it was for all of us, born of the same mother, and I don't believe that the invisible doesn't exist in our world simply because you can't see it. If the world has turned its back on injustice, I believe that an invisible force, equal to that which sets the earth rotating on its axis and stirs up monsoons on the waters, aspires to equilibrium. And if these dead and no longer living crowd around us while indigo turns to ink and call to us in that hour before the dawn when we sense our end is near, it is because justice makes its appeal to us from a place beyond. And if these shadows that were once like us and who looked at our world with our same eyes do not want revenge, let it not be that way for you.

Because if you don't curse all those who with a mere stroke of a pen have killed their brothers by the thousands, turning their gaze away from the cargo and profiting from the shipwreck, blind to where the map changes color, you are impeding justice. And therefore, you be damned.

Translated by Elise Magistro