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CREATIVE NONFICTION

“It is Kind of Rough Out Here”: The Hard Work of Mobility

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SUMMARY *In this story, I trace how the compulsion to work has shaped the lives of Elias and Biruk, two men who left their home country, Ethiopia, and now live in the US. Despite working hard at multiple jobs, work was not something they celebrated. Working hard was the embodiment of their precarity, simply the main currency in their lives of mobility. Were Biruk and Elias refugees? Undocumented migrants? Alien residents? What they told me about their lives over the phone did not help me understand their status in the US. Face to face, I had a chance to ask them a straightforward question, but Biruk and Elias did not reply by saying: “I am this, not that.” Their status would be stable and definable only when they got a paper recognizing they had a right to be in the US. Before that all-important scrap of paper, they were in a state of constant becoming. All they could do in the meantime was work and work. Because “if you do not work, what the hell are you in the USA for?” Elias said. [mobility, precarity, work, Ethiopian workers, life trajectories]*

Voice message

You have one new voice message.

Message received at eleven twenty-three on Saturday thirteenth of August 2016.

“Hey, man. This is Biruk. Monday lunch is good. Come to Pentagon City.”

“Where are you at? I am about to get there. ... Or wait, I can see you,” Biruk told me on the phone. I scanned the street, trying to spot Biruk somewhere in the heat. “Look in front of you; I am in the car in front of you.” My eyes had slid right over him. Biruk was at the wheel of a long, black car with Elias in the front seat.

“What do you want to do? Where do you want to go eat?” Biruk asked.

“Well, you know the city better than I do,” I replied.

*“Ethiopian?” Biruk asked, with a face saying *no way you want to eat Ethiopian here.**

“Not sure,” I said.

“Indian is better,” Biruk said.

“It is crazy, man. When I saw you, I felt something; it is like seeing an old friend after a very long time,” Elias told me. “We have been knowing each other

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for a while now, right? How many years? Six years I believe. How do you see us? We got fat, eh? Anything you eat in the USA makes you fat.”

“How are you doing?” I asked Elias as we took our seats at an old diner now transformed into an Indian buffet restaurant.

Elias was working as a cashier in a takeaway. His boss was Italian and had employed many other Ethiopians in the past. His boss had come to appreciate how fast guys from Addis Ababa are when they are at work. Elias emphasized, “But I am relaxed, you know? I go at my own pace. The boss asked me, ‘Are you from Addis, really?’ But there is a lady from Addis who works there and told the boss about me, ‘Elias is not just from Addis. He is from the inner city!’”

Biruk had been in DC longer than Elias. He worked the cash register at a gas station and had changed bosses a few times since arriving in the US. When he first arrived, he had worked for an Ethiopian, but his current boss was Pakistani.

“How did you get the job?” I asked.

“Well, I just went there, asking for a job, and I got it. And, let me tell you, I am definitely overqualified for this kind of job,” he replied. “I am now a senior in this job. I have experience in this work. I know how to price things, how to deal with the suppliers. Sometimes I work at the pump; I know more about how to manage a gas station than the owner. Sure, he could kick me out anytime, but he knows that if he loses me and replaces me with someone less qualified, they would lose money.”

Elias and Biruk shared a room in an apartment in the suburbs of Alexandria, Virginia. They had lived there for the past year and paid a lot for their shared room: seven hundred dollars a month. Life in the DC area was expensive, Biruk told me, and it was hard. It was even more difficult if you considered their average pay was between eight and fifteen dollars per hour after tax.

But, Biruk continued, their house in Alexandria was surely a step up from the house he lived in before Elias’s arrival just a year ago. That had been in DC itself, on Georgia Avenue, which cuts across the entire city. It was a townhouse that the owner had converted by carving out five rooms. The kitchen and bathroom were shared, and Biruk had paid around five hundred dollars a month for his room. The arrangement was okay, but the AC and the other appliances often did not work, and “the owner did not give a shit.” Biruk told me with a grin.

I first met Elias and Biruk in 2010 on the streets of inner-city Addis Ababa, where I was researching street hustlers, urban marginality, and street life. Biruk and Elias were not “hustlers,” though they had certainly hustled in their youth. Elias had sold tissues and chewing gum on inner-city streets. Biruk had done the same and was also a part-time minibus conductor and tout until his mid-teens. They viewed their “hustling” past with both pride and distance. They were proud of their street smarts but also glad that education had provided them with alternatives to a life of hustling. As they put it, Elias and Biruk were now *chewa*, “good guys”—those who continued their education and searched for a future away from the street economy.

After giving up hustling, Elias and Biruk completed university degrees. Elias then found a white-collar job with a private company. He could now fulfill family obligations, such as helping his mother buy food and enabling his younger siblings to continue their education. Yet, he struggled to see a way to achieve

economic security. Jobs did not open avenues of social mobility: Elias's wages were simply too low for him to see himself as a successful professional. Biruk struggled even more. He found part-time jobs with salaries that were no more than pocket money.

Elias and Biruk's unachieved dreams of comfortable, professional lives spoke to a relative deprivation spreading across the African continent alongside the expansion of education. Education wields the promise of collective and individual futures of economic and social emancipation. Yet, as ethnographic and sociological research has shown over the past decade, graduate unemployment and underemployment have increased, especially among people like Elias and Biruk, who do not come from economically secure family backgrounds. This produces new forms of marginality, inequality, and disenfranchisement that revolve around the persisting disjuncture between growing expectations and limited opportunities.

Elias and Biruk initially dealt with these challenges with a conviction that hard work, self-determination, and dedication would help them get ahead. A few months before I met him for the first time, Elias enrolled for a second undergraduate degree. He did not believe that a second degree would lead to a better job but working during the day and studying at night helped keep him focused. "You need to get busy if you want to stay focused," he told me. Biruk also invested in education. He passed the competitive selection process for a Master's at Addis Ababa University, the best university in the country.

Yet, as the years passed, Elias and Biruk began to lose hope. They were educated, focused, and motivated, yet unable to see a way towards that better future. When I returned to Addis Ababa in 2013, Biruk had already left. "He is safe, and he is doing well," Elias said, sipping a *macchiato* in a café in inner-city Addis Ababa. I could feel that Elias was also preparing his departure. "When I am in Vegas, I will be at peace," he told me.

When Elias boarded the plane to Washington DC a couple of years later, he was closer than ever to that dream of First World abundance that "Vegas" represented.

Eventually, Elias was rewarded for his courage: his friends took him not to Vegas but its cheaper East Coast equivalent, Atlantic City.

Soon reality struck, however.

Vegas turned out to be further than he expected. Life in the US soon revealed itself to be other than the adventurous life he had imagined. For an immigrant, it was all about hard work.

"Here, I learnt what it means to deal with time," Elias told me as we were about to board the Washington Metro a few days after our lunch at the Indian diner.

"What do you mean? You were working also back home," I said.

"Yes, but here, time flies without you realizing it."

Back home, he had been a white-collar worker who managed his time, finished his tasks at his own speed, and went home. In DC, Elias was a busy man. His job at the restaurant was hectic, and queues of anxious customers could stretch for meters. This fast pace might last for a couple of hours at a time during a ten-hour shift. On weekends his workload nearly doubled. Elias got a second job in another café where he did whatever was needed, from cleaning to

entering the bills into the cash register and re-stocking shelves. He was working eighteen hours a day.

"Holy shit," I replied.

"Sure, I could stay in my room, watching movies, but I don't want to lead myself into bad thoughts. I prefer to work, make money, do physical work, cleaning, doing whatever it is needed, making money, you know?"

Having time for himself meant letting himself wonder and think about what he could have done, how life could have been otherwise had he done this or not done that. He did not want time for that.

A year after he landed in the US in search of his adventure, Elias embraced what America offered him: hard labor and low pay. "Working and working and working. I ought to make money, you know? If you do not work, what the hell are you in the USA for?"

Were Biruk and Elias refugees? Undocumented migrants? Alien residents? What Biruk and Elias told me about their lives over the phone did not help me understand their status in the US.

Sitting in a bustling café in Silver Springs, I had a chance to ask them a straightforward question, but Biruk and Elias did not reply by saying: I am *this*, not *that*.

As I understood, listening to Biruk and Elias recount their journeys, you are something stable and definable only when you get a paper that recognizes you have a right to be in the US. Before that all-important scrap of paper, you are in a state of constant becoming. Your condition cannot be defined through a single term or a status. You are swimming in a sea full of waves, and the only thing you can describe is how you will get to shore.

Biruk and Elias could rattle off the steps needed to get to the shore. When you get into the US, you apply for refugee status. Then, one hundred and fifty days after your application, you are entitled to apply for a work permit. The work permit might take a couple of months. But you don't need to wait for a work permit to get a job; in the US, you can work off the books and get paid in cash.

Elias received his work permit long ago, but his status in the US would remain uncertain until his asylum application was approved.

For Biruk, the waves were almost behind him. He had had his interview, and his refugee status had been approved. He was now waiting for a Green Card.

Biruk had to go. His evening shift was about to start.

Elias and I stayed a bit longer with our empty coffee cups in front of us. We sat next to each other in silence, as we often had in Addis Ababa, watching people pass by outside.

"You know," Elias said, as if to break a train of thoughts, "I was the one who introduced Desta to politics."

In our long afternoons back in Addis Ababa's cafés, we had learned to talk about each other's aspirations and hopes for the future. In cafés, I had heard Elias and Biruk's frustrations turn political. They felt that the glass ceiling they continued to hit with their quests for a better life was a political product.

Opportunities for social mobility and professional futures depended on families' economic backgrounds or political connections. The regime that had ruled the country since 1991 had a firm grip on the country's politics, and its tendency to repress any form of dissent and protest, was getting in the way, Elias and Biruk believed.¹ Something had to change.

But with politics came troubles. Now sitting in a café that reminded Elias and Biruk of home, I could hear how their journey was not just about a destination, the joked-about quest for a Vegas. The regime had come very close to knocking at their doors. And it was scary.

Elias and Biruk had grown up with Desta; Elias and Desta had been neighbors. While Elias and Biruk volunteered to act as electoral observers for an opposition party, they kept any political engagement behind the scenes. Desta, however, campaigned on the streets for the opposition, handing out leaflets and critiquing the regime's injustices.

Being open about one's political engagements had a cost. A few months before Elias left for the US, Desta was jailed with other grassroots activists and key opposition leaders. He was released three months later, but some of his comrades remained in prison, a few serving life sentences.

"I saw when they arrested Desta," Elias told me. "It was in the afternoon. I called him and told him to meet me after work. We did a small business together, a simple thing, but we made some money. I called him, 'Look! We are going to drink as many drafts of beer as we can until we pass out!' When I got home, I saw Desta, handcuffed, being taken out by the police. My instinct was to go towards him and help him. A policeman stopped me and told me, 'You, you better run, boy.' Iskender, you know that guy living on the floor below me, heard that. Also, his brother's wife heard that, and she started crying and shouting, 'uuuu uuuu.' They distracted the police and pulled me out. The day before all of that happened, we were all drinking at the same café. Desta and I bumped into the others, those other guys who got arrested. They were also drinking there. We chatted a bit. We drank a beer and left. It was evening, and I wanted to go back home. Now that I think about that, I believe they wanted to catch us there when we were all together. Who knows why they did not? It was crazy, man. It was like being in a movie."

Meeting Biruk and Elias in DC was not easy. They were busy working ten-or-more-hour shifts every day. And when they were not at work, they were busy, either trying to relax, sleeping, or on the way to work. Our meetings often revolved around eating. They had to eat at some point. And this is when I could join them in their days.

"You coming, right?" Elias texted me an hour before our appointment.

"Okay, meet me around the food court. Around Starbucks inside the mall."

When I arrived, Elias was sitting at the table, looking at a Chinese buffet stall inside the Fashion Centre, a massive mall attached to the metro station.

"Are you hungry? I am starving; I have not eaten since yesterday night. What do you think of this?" Elias asked me, pointing his head at the Chinese buffet food stall. "I like it because I can point at what I am going to eat. In some restaurants, they tell you that there is not pork, but they might mix it

with some other meat, and you would never know. Here, you know what you are going to eat.”

A few weeks had passed since our lunch at the Indian restaurant. It was now the end of August, a crazy time for many Ethiopian migrants in the US as Meskel, Ethiopian New Year, was just around the corner.

“The ladies I work with are Ethiopians. They work eighteen hours a day every day,” said Elias. “They have families here, kids to look after, bills to pay, and then people back home to send money back to. New Year is approaching, and it is now even crazier. Even me, I got to send money to my family but also friends. Some of these ladies have their papers, and they are planning to go back to Ethiopia, in early September, for the celebrations. So, you have got to work to send money, buy stuff for people you are going to visit. Then, during those days in Ethiopia, they are not going to work, and they need money to stay in Ethiopia. Added to that, they have to pay bills and rent in advance to have a house to go back to when they fly back to DC. And you know how these capitalists are—if you don’t pay, you are out.”

“And what will *you* be doing for this New Year’s Eve?” I asked.

“Most likely, I will be working my ass off, doing two jobs, working the day before, on the day, and the day after that. There will be a lot of work now that people are going to Ethiopia for the holidays. Lots of people are leaving, and vacancies will be opening up. I have already applied for some. I have got to make money, you know?”

“But Biruk has taken some holidays, right?”

“Yes, he is in Virginia Beach, just for a couple of days. You know he has been working crazy for the past three years, twenty-four-seven, ten hours a day. Now that he has his papers, he is relaxing.”

“How was your holiday?”

“I was sick the whole time, man!” Biruk said. “I had flu. I was vomiting and vomiting.”

Holidays were a rare treat. Paid holidays were not a privilege given to Biruk and Elias. They had to save money before they could take a holiday and then work hard to make up for the money they did not earn during that time. Biruk was doing exactly that. He had come back to DC on Wednesday night and was already at work by dawn on Thursday. He was back to work on Friday and finished his shift at ten pm. Today, Saturday, he was back to work at six a.m. and would get off at two p.m.

When Biruk finally got his holiday, exhaustion simply caught up with him. He had arrived in the US three years earlier and, since then, had worked long shifts every day, with only Mondays off. These were spent settling his papers and ensuring his application as a refugee in the US went smoothly. His hard work had paid off: his status had been approved a year ago, and Biruk was now confident that he would have his Green Card safely stored in his wallet in a couple of months.

Near the finish line and burdened, Biruk went on holiday to celebrate. But the tiredness that had been accumulating for months reasserted itself. “I might have gone out to the sea, I think, two hours at most. Most of the holiday I spend in bed, down with the flu.” What a holiday!

The day before, the then US presidential candidate Donald Trump had delivered an anti-immigration speech, telling his supporters that no amnesty for illegal migration would be implemented during his presidency. On his first day as president, he said, two million people who had entered the country illegally would be kicked out.

I asked Biruk what he thought about Trump's speech. "That man is making so many announcements and speeches like that. But the reality on the ground is very different. I heard he wants to create an enforcement agency, but he has got to change how enforcement works on the ground. And that would be a very long, difficult, and tiresome task, with much potential conflict over jurisdiction between federal and state agencies. Good luck with that."

"Do you think that?" I insisted.

"Look at Obama; he told his voters that he was going to close Guantanamo. But he has not done it yet. When you are running for elections, you raise the issue and get the votes. But when you are elected, it is a completely different game."

"What do you think you are going to do after you get your Green Card? Would you go back to Ethiopia to visit?"

"Who knows? I would like to, but that could happen only when I get citizenship. There are different kinds of Green Cards. Mine is an Asylum Green Card. We can travel anywhere but in Ethiopia. In case we are in Ethiopia, and the government catches us while holding an Asylum Green Card, the US government cannot do anything about it. When you are a citizen, the Embassy can push for your release."

But he admitted that this principle of citizen protection does not always apply. In 2014, Andargachew Tsige, an opposition activist born in Ethiopia but holding a British passport, was arrested at the Sana'a International Airport in Yemen and extradited to Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government had labelled Andargachew Tsige a "terrorist" and had sentenced him to death in absentia in 2009, well before his arrest.² His British passport did not seem to give him a pass to freedom.

"Perhaps the US would have done the same," Biruk reckoned. "There are strong American and British interests in Ethiopia, and both the US and the UK are looking after themselves. One person could be given away to protect those large interests," he said. "Ethiopia is a stable country; it helps the US and the UK to fight Al-Shabab and all of that. And the UK and US need Ethiopia to be politically stable. Insecurity and instability are not good for the US and the UK."

On my last day in DC, we met at Chipotle in the middle of the city. There was a remarkable view down Chinatown. After the Chinese gate, a long line of restaurants opened up. We walked out of the restaurant to Biruk's car, parked beside a Starbucks.

"Do you want a coffee or something before you go?" Biruk asked.

"Yes, why not?" I still had so many questions to ask him.

We ordered the coffee. Biruk was not having one; he had wanted to treat me to a coffee.

"I am so happy we managed to meet. I see you are doing good," I told him as a goodbye.

"Yes, of course, man. But it is kind of rough out here!" Biruk said. "You have to work a lot, a lot. Here in the USA, you have to focus on the present. You wake up, you go to work, you come back thinking that you have to get to work the next day."

"Did you expect the US to be like that?"

"No way. You know I was doing good back in Ethiopia. I had my job. Then, I was doing my Masters in the evening. When I came here, I thought I was going to work a bit, do some side businesses, and achieve my dreams quick."

We got into the car, which he had worked hard to buy. A car helps you get around, go to work without having to rely on others to drive you. Buses are too slow if you want to get to work on time.

"You know," he continued, "there are three reasons why I don't like America. The first is that health is very expensive. The second is that education is crazy expensive. And the third is that you have to work crazy hard for anything."

Hakimu, one of Elias's older siblings, closer to Biruk in age, had offered to help. Hakimu is in Dubai, doing relatively well, buying and selling cars for a fee. "When I talked to Hakimu, he told me that he would be happy to send me some money so I can study. He told me, 'Why are you putting yourself on the other side of the line, working like that?' He is telling me that, but he does not know how it is out here. He is thinking to come here, though. I really would like him to come here. You know, Elias is like family; he is like a brother to me. But he is still a friend; there is a limit to how far you could go. Elias offered to take care of some bills, so I can have some more time and money to go and study. I was very moved by his offer, but I cannot allow him to do that for me."

Our time together was nearly over. Biruk drove me back to the house where I was staying in a hip part of Bloomingdale, DC. After that, he had to drive for another thirty minutes to attend a funeral. The sister of one of Biruk's friends had died back in Ethiopia the day before.

"This friend is like me; she got an asylum Green Card and she cannot go back for the funeral. Back in Ethiopia, you might sit in your house for fifteen, twenty days, with people coming to visit you and comfort you. And being there, it helps you deal with the death of your dear one. If you are here in the USA, it is much more difficult to make sense of it. But at least you have your friends here, who help you to go through it, even though it is just for a couple of days since we all have got back to work. Everybody is so busy here, running, working hard."

Notes

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1. Following the downfall of the socialist military Derg (1974–1991), the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—a coalition of regional ethnic and multi-ethnic parties led by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)—ruled the country for over ¹twenty-eight years. In November 2019, the EPRDF was formally dissolved by Abiy Ahmed, a former EPRDF member who had been appointed as Prime Minister over a year earlier following years of street protests throughout the country.
2. Andargatchew Tsige was released in May 2018, following the appointment of Abiy Ahmed earlier that year.