

**Child Soldiers**  
**by Isabelle Balot**

*(translated from French by John Brown)*

Awash in the sun of timeless Africa  
The beast-king goes robed in light  
A murderous heat stirs in his thigh  
As he crouches in the brush or bed of a creek.

In the fire of noon when all seems dead  
When everything sleeps in the saffron haze  
This warrior lurks in the deep bush grass  
A glint at play in his lambent eye.

A sudden surge, and a great, tawny blur  
Flashes up and descends in a fantastic bound  
Strikes and crushes the prey to the ground,  
Kills in one blow of sovereign power.

I know of other kings under African skies  
They, of all hope and royalty bereft,  
Warriors without helmets, armor or heft,  
Go ragged and shoeless, in leathery skin.

Nomads without pity at the road's bend  
– Fatality writ in their dark eye's depth  
As in a crypt where shadows drift –  
Come to sow death, grenade in hand.

Behold the child soldier, the murdered child,  
Sent in battalions into the sun-scorched light  
For diamonds, for ivory, black gold or white!  
Pencil in hand, he would sketch only death.

Under stubborn brow and crown of black hair  
What memories cling from the days of innocence  
– that balm that pours from the flask of infancy –  
Form a thread too fine for a mind to retrace.

In combat, there's nothing can thwart his will;  
This more than a child, this man not yet,  
Is a god and a king, an unripened adult  
Who thinks he is immortal, lives only to kill.

When the combat is over, he sits in ashes;  
With a rifle smeared with blood and sweat  
He tortures a golden or silvery cricket  
Idly crushes a salamander or scarab.

Sprawled on a cartridge sack what does he see  
Behind wide open eyes, the sleeping warrior,  
What does he hear when he dies under fire,  
In the mortar's blast and the buzzing of flies?

Drugged, drunk, stunned by the sun,  
Does he dream of lagoons and a glittering source,  
Does his forehead feel a mother's kiss  
Through his final sleep, what images run?

Pardon, Lord, but when this battered Africa  
Wants to bind up its wounds and begin to yearn  
For peace that sinks deep through its dark domain,  
When the altars light up at the hour of prayer,

When peace is promised and even celebrated  
I see amidst glittering constellations,  
In spite of myself, a lion-god of diamonds  
Whose fierce pagan eyes laugh from the dark.