

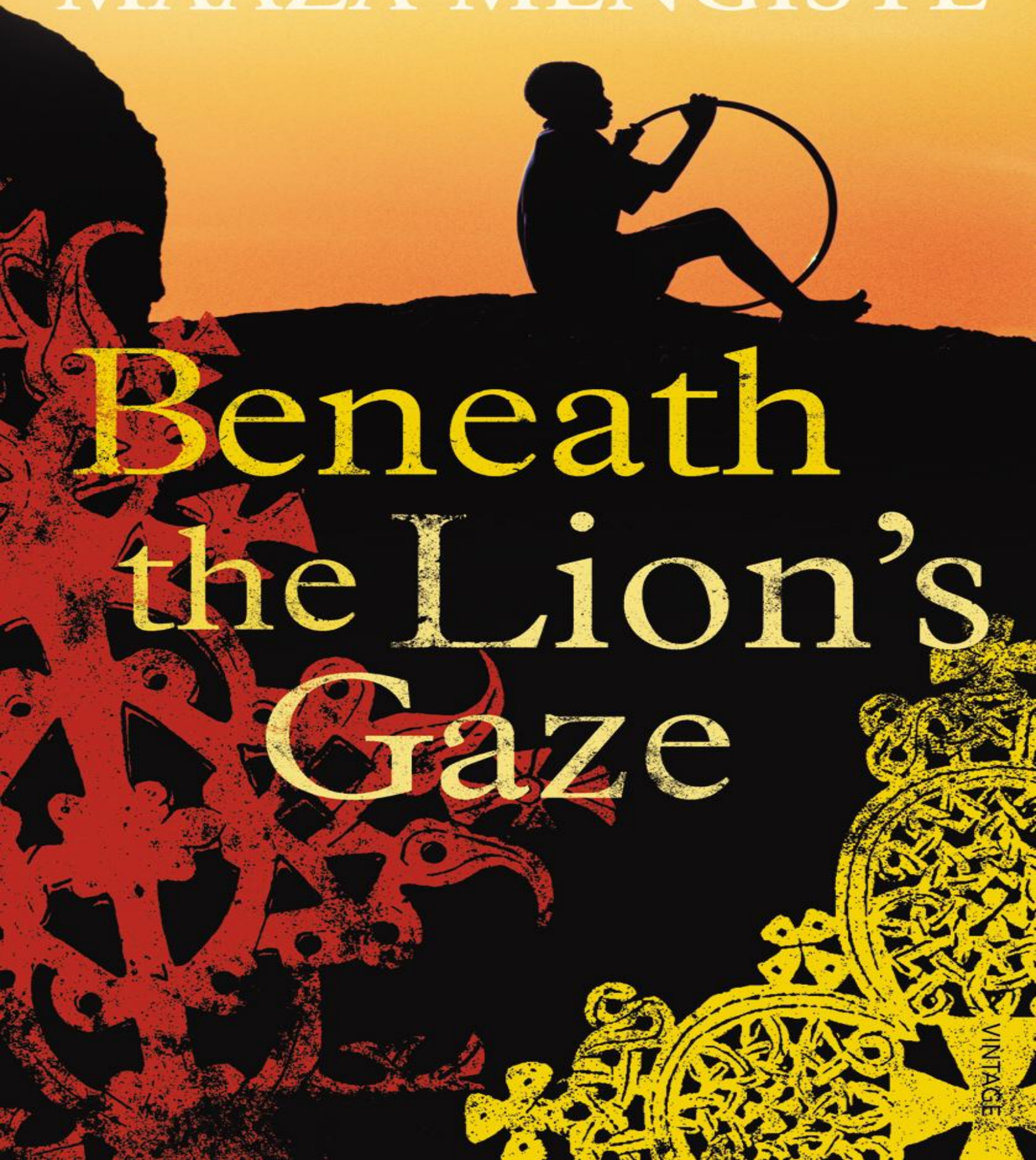
'POWERFUL... BRAVE... An important novel, rich in compassion'

*NEW YORK TIMES*

MAAZA MENGISTE



# Beneath the Lion's Gaze



VINTAGE

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## About the Book

*Beneath the Lion's Gaze* opens in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1974, on the eve of a revolution. Yonas kneels in his mother's prayer room, pleading to his god for an end to the violence that has wracked his family and country. His father, Hailu, a prominent doctor, has been ordered to report to jail after helping a victim of state-sanctioned torture to die. And Dawit, Hailu's youngest son, has joined an underground resistance movement – a choice that will lead to more upheaval and bloodshed across a ravaged Ethiopia.

Maaza Mengiste's powerful debut tells a gripping story of family and of the bonds of love and friendship set in a time and place that has rarely been explored in fiction. It is a story about the lengths to which human beings will go in pursuit of freedom and the human price of a national revolution. Emotionally gripping, poetic and indelibly tragic, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* is a transcendent story that introduces a powerful new voice.

## About the Author

Maaza Mengiste was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from New York University. A recent Pushcart Prize nominee, she was named 'New Literary Idol' by *New York Magazine*. Her work has appeared in *The Baltimore Review*, *Ninth Letter* and *420pus*, has been translated and published into German and Romanian for *Lettre International*, and can be found in the Seal Press anthology *Homelands: Women's Journeys Across Race, Place and Time*. She has received fellowships from Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Yaddo. She currently lives in New York.

*For my grandparents,  
Abebe Haile Mariam and Maaza Wolde Hanna.*

*And for my uncles, Mekonnen, Solomon, Seyoum,  
and all who died trying to find a better way.*

MAAZA MENGISTE

# Beneath the Lion's Gaze

A novel

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London



*We are the humbled bones  
Bent in the thick of your silence.  
Ask of your father God who elected you  
Why he has forsaken us.*

—TSEGAYE GABRE-MEDHIN

# **PART ONE**

# **BOOK ONE**

# 1.

A THIN BLUE VEIN pulsed in the collecting pool of blood where a bullet had lodged deep in the boy's back. Hailu was sweating under the heat from the bright operating room lights. There was pressure behind his eyes. He leaned his head to one side and a nurse's ready hand wiped sweat from his brow. He looked back at his scalpel, the shimmering blood and torn tissues, and tried to imagine the fervor that had led this boy to believe he was stronger than Emperor Haile Selassie's highly trained police.

This boy had come in shivering and soaked in his own blood, in the latest American-style jeans with wide legs, and now he wasn't moving. His mother's screams hadn't stopped. Hailu could still hear her just beyond those doors, standing in the hallway. More doors led outside to an ongoing struggle between students and police. Soon, more injured students would fill the emergency rooms and this work would begin all over again. How old was this boy?

"Doctor?" a nurse said, her eyes searching his above her surgical mask.

The heart monitor beeped steadily. All was normal, Hailu knew without looking, he could understand the body's silent language without the help of machinery. Years of practice had taught him how to decipher what most patients couldn't articulate. These days were teaching him more: that the frailty of our bodies stems from the heart and travels to the brain. That what the body feels and thinks determines the way it stumbles and falls.

"How old is he?" he asked. Is he the same age as my Dawit, he thought, one of those trying to lead my youngest son into this chaos?

His nurses drew back like startled birds. He never spoke during surgery, his focus on his patients so intense that it had become legendary. His head nurse, Almaz, shook her head to stop anyone from answering him.

“He has a bullet in his back that must be taken out. His mother is waiting. He is losing blood.” Almaz spoke quickly, her eyes locked on his, professional and stern. She sponged blood away from the wound and checked the patient’s vital signs.

The hole in the boy’s back was a punctured, burned blast of muscle and flesh. The run towards the bullet had been more graceful than his frightened sprint away. Hailu imagined him keeping pace with the throngs of other high school and college students, hands raised, voice loud. The thin, proud chest inflated, his soft face determined. A boy living his moment of manhood too early. How many shots had to be fired to turn this child back towards his home and anxious mother? Who had carried him to her once he’d fallen? Stones. Bullets. Fists. Sticks. So many ways to break a body, and none of these children seemed to believe in the frailty of their muscles and bones. Hailu cut around the wound and paused for one of his nurses to wipe the blood that flowed.

The whine of police cars flashed past the hospital. The sirens hadn’t stopped all day. Police and soldiers were overwhelmed and racing through streets packed with frenzied protestors running in all directions. What if Dawit were there amidst those running, what if he were wheeled into his operating room? Hailu focused on the limp body in front of him, ignored his own hammering heart, and put thoughts of his son out of his mind.

HAILU SAT IN HIS OFFICE under a pale light that threaded its way through open curtains. He stared at his hand lying palm open in his lap and felt the solitude and panic that had been eating into the edges of his days since his wife

Selam had gone into the hospital. Seven days of confusion. And he'd just operated on a boy for a gunshot wound to the back. After years as a doctor, he knew the rotations and shifts of his staff, the scheduled surgeries in any given week, Prince Mekonnen Hospital's daily capacity for new patients, but he could not account for his wife's deteriorating condition and this relentless drive of students who demanded action to address the country's poverty and lack of progress. They asked again and again when Ethiopia's backward slide into the Middle Ages would stop. He had no answers, could do nothing but sit and gaze in helplessness at an empty hand that looked pale and thin in the afternoon sun. He feared for Dawit, his youngest son, who also wanted to enter the fray, who was not much older or bigger, nor more brave, than his permanently crippled patient today. His wife was leaving him to carry the burden of these days alone.

There was a knock at his door. He looked at his watch, a gift given to him by Emperor Haile Selassie when he'd returned from medical school in England. The emperor's piercing eyes, rumored to hold the power to break any man's will, had bore into Hailu during the special palace ceremony to honor young graduates recently returned from abroad.

"Do not waste your hours and minutes on foolish dreams," the emperor had said, his voice cool and crisp. "Make Ethiopia proud."

The knock came again. "Dr. Hailu," Almaz said.

"Come in," Hailu said, turning in his chair to face the door.

"You've finished your shift." She stood in the doorway. "You're still here." Almaz, in her usual custom, turned all her questions into declarations. She cleared her throat and adjusted the collar of her white nurse's uniform. She matched him in height, very tall for a woman.

"There was a teachers' union strike," he said. "The emperor's forbid the police to shoot at anyone, but look what happened already." He sighed tiredly. "I want to make sure no other emergencies come in. And I need to check on Selam soon."

Almaz raised a hand to stop him. "I already checked on her, she's sleeping. There's nothing for you to do here anymore," she said. "You've already done your shift, go home."

"My sons have to see her," Hailu said. "I'll go and come back."

Almaz shook her head. "Your wife always complained about your stubbornness." She took his coat from the hanger on the door and held it out for him. "You've been working too hard this week. You think I haven't noticed."

Almaz was his most trusted colleague. They had been working together for nearly two decades. He could feel her searching his face.

The rattle of a heavy falling object echoed in the corridor. It was coming from beyond the swinging doors, from the intensive care unit.

"What was that?" Hailu asked. He stood up and walked over to get his coat. It was then he realized how tired he was. He hadn't eaten since the night before in Selam's room, and he'd spent the entire day operating.

Almaz shook her head and led him out of his office. She closed the door gently behind them and motioned him towards the exit. "I'll tell you later. Something with one of the prisoners."

In the last few weeks, the ICU ward, headed by another doctor, had become the designated location for some of the emperor's officials, old men well past their prime who had been arrested without charges and had fallen ill while in prison because of preexisting ailments and lack of medical supervision. So far, the hospital had been able to function

normally, no irregular activity to bring undue attention to their new, special patients.

From the direction of the noise came an angry male voice, a sharp slap, then a soft whimper. "What's going on?" he asked again, turning around.

"They've got soldiers watching one of them," Almaz said. She pushed him on, away from the ICU. "There's nothing you can do about it, so don't concern yourself." The expression on her angular face, with its pointed jaw and thin mouth, was determined. "Go." She walked away, into another patient's room.

Hailu looked down at the long hallway that stretched in front of him and sighed. There was a time when he could tell what went on beyond the hospital by what he heard from inside of it, when he could piece together the shouts and brake squeals and laughter and let logic carry him to a safe assumption. But these days of riots and demonstrations made everything indecipherable. And now, what was once beyond the walls had crept inside. He turned back and decided to leave through the swinging doors of the intensive care unit, a shortcut to the parking lot.

In the corridor of the ICU, a smooth-faced soldier no older than Dawit sat in a chair outside a room cleaning his nails with the edge of a faded button on his shirt. An old gun, dull and scratched, leaned against the wall next to him. The soldier glanced up as Hailu walked by, then turned his attention back to his nails. He chewed on a finger, then spit bits of calloused skin on the floor.



## 2.

AS MUSIC PULSED from his father's radio, Dawit danced, lost in the throaty breaths of a singer. He spun round and round, twisted and turned, shaking his broad shoulders like a bird preparing for flight. He leapt in the cramped space of his bedroom, a slender body hurling itself up, defying the pull of his own weight. He gripped an invisible spear, his heart galloped in his chest. The song had just begun but he was already spent. The first steps of his dance had started earlier, in the deadening silence that had descended on the house after his father's phone call from the hospital saying he was coming home and they would all visit his mother that night. She was no better. Those last words had sent his older brother Yonas to the prayer room, and Dawit to his room.

The day after his mother had been hospitalized, neighbors had arrived at their door to pray and visit with the family. His father had rejected their condolences. "She's on the best medication," his father said. "She'll be home soon. And we're praying for her."

"But you shouldn't bear this alone. It's not good for you or your family," the neighbors had protested. "We love Selam, let us come in and pray with you." They tried to walk through the door and Hailu had resisted, his sons watching in stunned silence from the living room.

"Thank you," his father said. "It isn't necessary. We have each other." He had shut the door softly and turned back to them, grief fresh in his face. He'd wanted to say something, Dawit sensed it in the way his eyes lingered on each of them, but he shook his head instead and sat down in his chair.

It was the lost way his father looked at his hands that made Dawit reach across the small table and cover them with his own. He couldn't remember the last time he'd made such a gesture towards his father, but on that day, in that quiet living room, Dawit ached for a parent's touch and he wanted that look out of his father's eyes.

"Abbaye," Dawit said, his voice shaking, his loneliness so sharp it made his chest ache, "I miss her."

It was the first time he'd ever seen his father collapse from the weight of emotion. He took Dawit's hand in both of his, cradled it to his face, and called Selam's name again and again, speaking into Dawit's palm. The display of sorrow had forced Yonas to turn away, then get up and leave the room.

His mother had taught him to dance *eskesta*, had spent hours and days with him in front of a mirror making him practice the controlled shiver of shoulders and torso that made up the traditional Ethiopian dance. The body has to move when the heart doesn't think it can, she'd said. She lifted his arm, clenched his fist around an imaginary weapon, and straightened his back. My father danced before going to battle; the heart follows the body. Dance with all your might, dance. She'd burst into laughter, clapping enthusiastically to Dawit's awkward attempts to move as fast as she was. You're like a butterfly, he told her, breathless from exertion. He'd reached out and laid a hand on her fluttering shoulders. He'd been eight years old and his adoration for her loving, gentle face smiling into his made him rush to her and hug her tightly.

The dancing lessons had begun after Dawit flung himself at his older brother one day. He'd kicked the much bigger boy with such pointed vengeance that Yonas had stumbled back, dazed, then fallen over completely, his hands still at his side. Selam's response had been swift and decisive. In two simple movements, she warded Hailu's blow away from Dawit and dragged the screaming boy up the stairs and

into the master bedroom. She'd held his shaking body, letting Dawit's tears soak into her dress as she patted his back and hummed his favorite lullaby. Then, without a word, she started clapping, her hands and feet moving to a silent rhythm that seeped into Dawit and soon enveloped them both. Like this, she commanded, bringing her hands to her hips and moving her shoulders up and down. Like this. Now faster. Don't think, move the way your heart wants you to move, ignore the body. Let the muscles go. There is no room for anger in our dances, pretend you are water and flow over your own bones. His tears stopped, his attention focused on his movement.

These days, Dawit was forced to stay in the confines of his father's house each night. It was Hailu's attempt to stop him from attending meetings where students planned their demonstrations against the palace. The tensions between them were drawn tighter lately. Only dancing seemed to ease his agitation. He felt trapped in his small bedroom, in his large house that spoke, if nothing else, of his father's dominion over the family. There would be another rally tomorrow afternoon. He was determined to go, no matter his father's orders, despite his promise to his mother to stay away from all political activity.

Dawit could hear his father in the living room, walking towards the stairwell. He wondered if he only imagined footsteps hesitating in front of his bedroom door. He kept on dancing. He whirled, his arms flung wide, extended wings in search of a rhythm to send him up, away from the reality of a house without his mother.

One day, Emaye, my mother, I will put water into my bones and dance until my heart obeys. Dawit spun, eyes wide open to take in the slowly darkening sun.

A FAINT MELODY slid from Dawit's room into the living room where Hailu was resting, and threw him back to the days of his youth, when his and Selam's families had gathered

inside his grandfather's *tukul* and drunk honey wine in celebration of the new couple's impending first child. His cousin's *washint* had filled the small hut with tunes of love and patriotism, the hollow reed instrument needling a plaintive voice into the revelry. She had been seventeen; he, an arrogant twenty-eight-year-old with an awkwardness around this girl who sometimes looked at him with childish mockery. I am your husband, he'd told her, sitting on the steps of her father's house, and I will remain faithful to you even while in medical school in England. She'd grown quiet, unimpressed by his chivalry.

You'll be changed when you come back, she'd said. Will you let me leave if I want? Will you let me come back to my father's house if I ask? Will you ever keep me against my will, as my father once kept my mother? And he'd sworn to her then that he would let her go, that he would never force her to stay with him. It was this promise, however, that Selam reminded him of last week, and it was this promise that he knew he could never keep.

Seven days ago, Selam had clung to his hand as she pushed words out with shallow breaths. There is this. This. It is silent and I am alone. This. She was shaken and weak, panicked to find herself back in the hospital room she'd been discharged from only weeks before. Hailu promised her then that there would be no more attempts to nurse her back to health, that he would finally obey her wish to be allowed to rest, that he would become, in the moment when she was her sickest, her husband and not the doctor he also was. The promise made more sense back then, when there was hope and the possibility of life, when he knew he was under no obligation to follow the path his words had made for him.

There is this to know of dying: it comes in moonlight thick as cotton and carves silence into all thoughts. She'd finally been able to form the words fully and lay them before him with a desperation that bordered on anger. This

dying, my beloved, is dark and I am tired and you must let me go. Seven days ago, he'd stood in Prince Mekonnen Hospital gripping his ailing wife's hand and heard from his mouth a promise that was already on its way to being broken. His wife was giving up and was asking him to do the same.

Hailu stared at the long shadows in the living room he once shared with Selam. How many nights, how many of these moons did I watch shrink back into sunlight, then dusk with that woman by my side? It is 1974 and I am afraid without you, he admitted for the first time. Nothing I have ever learned has prepared me for the days ahead if you leave me now.

He stood and walked through the living room into the dining area, resisting the urge to pause at Dawit's door and reassure himself that his son hadn't snuck out of the house. He'd told Dawit and Yonas to get ready to visit their mother. He'd seen the sullenness that had settled in Dawit's face at his strict insistence that the three of them go together.

"We're a family," he'd reminded Dawit, the words an echo of the many times he'd had to force Dawit to visit Selam with the rest of the family. His youngest son wanted no one around when he spoke with his mother, protective of their bond.

### 3.

HIS FATHER WAS talking but Yonas was trying not to listen. They were waiting for Dawit so they could leave, the wait made longer by Hailu's voice cutting through the early evening heat.

"It happens to many people." Hailu was matter-of-fact, his words clipped. "Their heart weakens, it fails to pump enough blood to the brain. Perfusion. The changes are dramatic. But it's normal. If I can control the blood pressure for long enough, she'll recover." He smoothed his tie and adjusted his suit jacket. He'd dressed his best to visit Selam in the hospital. "I don't understand what's going wrong."

A numbing weight pressed on Yonas and settled into an ache. "You've gone over this so many times."

His father continued as if he hadn't heard, a man trapped in his own language of grief. "Congestive heart failure," he said. "Nothing more than the weakening of the heart."

"It's time to go." Yonas stood up.

Hailu raised his prayer beads close to his chest. "She can be strong again. The doses of furosemide should have helped."

Yonas sat back down and let his eyes roam across the living room and settle on his father's polished prayer beads. His father had started carrying his beads with him everywhere only a week ago. It had once been a point of contention between his parents, with Hailu insisting that religion was a private matter for doctors, not to be put on public display. But you need prayer, too, Selam argued, looking to Yonas as her ally. Hailu had been resolute: no

one in his hospital or anywhere else should ever see that he had any doubts whatsoever about his capabilities. There are some, Hailu said, who mistake prayer for weakness.

"We should go before it gets dark." Yonas stood awkwardly in place. "Those soldiers stop every car at night"—he looked at his watch—"and we don't want to be late."

Hailu moved towards Dawit's room but Yonas held him back. "Not today," he said. "We'll be back again. You're too tired for another fight."

Hailu shook his arm free. "If he doesn't go with us, you know where he'll go. I treated a boy his age today."

Yonas wrapped an arm around his shoulders and led him towards the door. "We have to get home before it gets late. Did you see the car that was burning on the street last night? With the university closed, these students have nothing to do but plan more trouble. And besides," he added, "Sara said she'll watch him for you." After his mother, Yonas's wife Sara was the only one Dawit listened to, if he chose to listen to anyone at all. "You look exhausted," he said.

A BLUE HAZE drifted from eucalyptus trees dotting the hillsides of Addis Ababa and clung to the horizon like a faint, tender bruise. It was dusk and a hollow wind whistled through a crack in the driver's side window of Hailu's Volkswagen where he sat. Yonas was in front next to him, both of them quiet. Dawit hadn't responded when he'd knocked on his door, and only Yonas's pleadings had prevented him from getting his key and forcing his way into his youngest son's room. He slid his car out of the garage onto the wide dirt road used by motorists and pack animals alike.

Hailu's neighborhood was a series of newer houses with sprawling gardens and lush lawns, and the more modest old Italian-style homes made of wood and mud with wide

verandas and corrugated-tin roofs much like the one he'd inherited from his father. Some owners with large gated compounds rented single-room mud-and-wattle homes to poorer families. The neighborhood had neither the opulent villas nor the decaying shanties of other areas, and it was where Hailu had spent much of his years as a young, newly married doctor. It was a community, and one that, more and more often, he didn't like to venture far from.

The car dug into potholes on the rocky terrain, straining from the weight of two grown men. Ahead of them and all around, the green hilly landscape, crested with bright yellow *meskel* flowers, rolled against an orange sky. From this point on the road, Addis Ababa's hills blocked Hailu's view of the drab concrete-and-glass office buildings that had sprung up in the sprawling city in the last few decades, their ugly façades dominating every street, crowding out the kiosks and fruit stands that struggled to maintain the spaces they'd occupied for decades.

He'd grown to dread driving, the stalls, the false starts, the thick noise that pushed through the confines of his car and competed with his thoughts for attention. Everything seemed too loud these days: the exhaust fumes and engines, the brays of stubborn donkeys, the cries of beggars and vendors. The endless throngs of pedestrians. In his car, in the shelter of the regulated heat, he was comforted by the familiar parameters.

Yonas pointed out the window towards the stately high walls of the French Legation that were slowly shrinking in the distance. "I used to cut through the estate to go to school before they put that wall up." He chuckled. "The *zebenya* almost caught Dawit one day when he tried to follow me. He chased him with his stick. Dawit wanted to come back and find the old guard." Yonas shook his head, smiling and staring at the wall.

"I'm not used to seeing that stone wall, even after all these years," Yonas said. There were dark circles under his



eyes and he tapped the fingers of one hand into the palm of the other, a nervous habit Hailu saw only rarely.

They were on a smoother road now, rocky bumps giving way to a paved flatness that was far less damaging to his tires. If he had been alone, he would have sped up, but he wanted to linger in this moment in the car with his son and hear him talk of better days.

Along the side of the road, street vendors were taking down their stalls for the day, pulling out their long poles from the ground, folding large plastic sheets that served as awning against rain. Hawkers called out reduced prices on their wares, competing for attention in the noise and congestion. One young woman delicately balanced a baby on her hip as she arranged her neatly stacked rows of cinnamon sticks and *berbere* on a thin cloth in front of her, the bags of crushed red pepper bright as rubies. Shoeshine boys planted on every street corner squatted and whistled at businessmen rushing towards crowded parking lots. A lone voice climbed above the din and clamor, a prayer, and for a moment, a deep hush fell upon the scene and all that was heard were the churnings of engines.

They were approaching Yekatit 12 Martyrs' Square at Sidist Kilo, near Haile Selassie University where Yonas taught history and Dawit was studying in the law program. In the square was an obelisk monument that honored the victims of an Italian-era massacre. At the top of the obelisk, a stone lion gazed proudly across the city, defiant. Four imposing tanks rested at each corner of the intersection. Two soldiers paced, their gazes lifting from their shoes as Hailu drove by. They watched the Volkswagen pass, then turned their attention back to their boots.

"They're younger than some of the university students they're supposed to be watching," Yonas said. "Boys." There was an overturned bus in the distance and a small crowd of street boys milling around with stones in their hands, kept at bay by soldiers' kicks.

Hailu knew if Dawit had been there, he would have said something, would have made a passionate declaration about the need for a new constitution and freedom of expression, for land reform that gave the farmer ownership of what he tilled, for the removal of an old, tired monarch. But he wasn't, and there was nothing in the brief pause that followed Yonas's words but the rumble and rattle of trucks and cars whizzing past them and out of sight. Hailu slowed to let a young boy and his sheep pass. He stared at his hands, age spots now dotting the skin above his wrist, and he thought back to the day he first saw Selam's tattoos, inked into her hands a week before their wedding.

"It's God's mark on me," she'd said, blushing as he ran a thumb over a tattoo that was as green as a fresh leaf. "It keeps evil away."

His own mother had similar crosses gracing the lines of her jaw, but he'd wanted to goad the young girl into showing the temper her older brothers complained about. "What if I don't want a wife with a cross carved into her skin?"

"I'll tell my father to find someone else for me. He'll choose another man."

"And what if no one wants a rejected girl?" He had been a brash student, feeling very bold in front of this beautiful girl from his village.

She stayed calm. "God doesn't take without giving." Even back then, her confidence had shaken him.

"God doesn't take without giving," Hailu repeated now to himself, wishing he could summon up her certainty.

"Did you say something, Abbaye?" Yonas asked.

"Your mother's tattoos, the crosses," Hailu said. "I love them, I always have." He shook his head, and drove the rest of the way in silence.

YONAS HAD EXPECTED his father to disappear into his office and change into his white coat as soon as he entered the

hospital, to perhaps tuck his prayer beads into the large pocket in front, then hide his anxiety behind a professional demeanor. Instead, Hailu took the beads out of his pocket the moment he stepped out of the car. He held them in plain sight. Then he headed for Selam's room and became just another nervous husband on his way to see his wife, his steps so wide and fast that Yonas was left several paces behind him.

In the hospital room, in a small bed tucked beneath a small window, Selam slept with an IV snaking out of her thin arm. She was dressed in a blue hospital gown. Her gold cross necklace rested on a chest that rose and sank with the help of an oxygen tank. Hailu stood by her feet, poring over her medical chart. Yonas reached for her hands. He kissed the tattoos on the back of her wrists, and he closed his eyes.

I told your father these crosses needed their own space, his mother said to him long ago, holding up her wrists and angling the inked crosses into the sun. Yonas had been forced to squint against the light that seeped into the prayer room adjoining his parents' master bedroom. I told him he must build me a room big enough for the angels that watched over me, a place we could talk. Selam said this with a teasing smile, but as a young boy, Yonas had believed her and he'd held his own hands into the sun and wondered if his wrists, absent of crosses, were also worthy of holy ground. The story his mother told was that his father built the prayer room for her. Carved the space out of their large bedroom and erected a wall and door to mark where holy ground began and the physical world ended.

His father had traveled the 748 kilometers from Addis Ababa back to Selam's former home in Gondar, in northern Ethiopia, to find the wood to make the door. He used the bark from the largest tree on her father's land. It had roots that dug into the earth like hungry fingers, and I wanted to make a door from a tree that refused to let go of life, Hailu

once said. He brought the trunk back himself, tied to the top of his first car, a two-door with a grumbling engine, then dragged it on horseback from Debre Markos when the car had stalled on the treacherous winding roads back to Addis Ababa. The door was thick and knotted, it held scars that polishing could not remove, and Hailu allowed no one else to construct and cut it into shape. The last bit of wood from the tree was used to make the long rectangular table that was the prayer room's only piece of furniture.

Yonas was a thirty-two-year-old man now, with a daughter and a wife, but he knelt in the prayer room every day, held his naked wrists to the sun, and wondered again about his worthiness. His mother had been in the hospital for a week, but the slowing down of her heart had started years before. He alone witnessed the countless afternoons she came into the prayer room to weep by herself, unaware that her eldest son was pressed against the thick wooden door, listening. He was also the only one who knew that she'd stopped taking the medicine his father prescribed for her heart. He'd caught her throwing her daily dose down the sink one day, and had been so shocked and confused he'd merely stood there and stared. She'd looked up to find him, and given him a slow smile of resignation.

"My son," she'd said, her hand gently twisting the pill cap on. "You understand, don't you?" The light from the morning sun had been cold and gray on her face. "I'm tired of fighting what God wants."

She'd hugged him, then gone downstairs to make his father coffee. Selam had needed no words from him, had asked for nothing except silence from this son who abhorred lying. And it was this silence that fed a guilt that had become nearly unbearable as he watched his mother grow sicker and his father become more desperate to keep her alive. He let the soft ache in his chest die away before opening his eyes.

His mother was stirring, her expression changing from placid to tense. Her eyes were closed but she turned her head towards the window, then hid her face in her pillow with a sharp jerk of her neck.

"Emaye," Yonas said, laying a hand on her shoulder, "are you dreaming?"

Hailu moved to her side and held her face in both hands, cupping it tenderly. "*Emebet*, my lady," he said, "it's the medication. It's not real. Wake up." He glanced at the heart monitor, watched its rhythm increase. "Wake up, Selam. I'm here."

"Is she in pain, Abbaye?" Yonas asked. "Should I go get the nurse?"

"She's just waking up, that's all." Hailu kissed her cheek. "Selam."

She opened her eyes, recognition softening her frown. She looked around her. "Am I still in the hospital?" she asked. Her large eyes, her most striking feature, were focused on Hailu, who lowered his gaze to check her pulse. She looked around the room. "Why?" She let a finger trace the oxygen tube to her nose.

Hailu put her hand down. "You're getting better," he said. He cleared his throat and looked again at the medical chart, stern and professional. "The medicine will work. It's just a matter of time. I'm watching the dosage."

Selam looked at Yonas and took his hand. "Your father made me a promise, did you know this?" She had set her full mouth in the stubborn line Yonas recognized as one of his own angry gestures. "When we first married—"

"Selam," Hailu cut in, "this isn't the time. You need rest and you need to eat." He walked to the door and pointed at the bed. "I'm getting Almaz, she'll get your food ready." He walked out, running a hand over his face then letting it move to the back of his neck and knead tired muscles.

She looked at Yonas. "Yonnie, I want to rest, you know this. Talk to him." Her eyes were pleading, desperate.

Yonas patted her hand. "God knows what to do, Emaye," he said. "More than we do." He dipped his head and hoped she didn't notice the way he grimaced as he leaned in to kiss her.

"Dawit, tell him for me—" she said, then stopped. "Where's my other son?" She tried to rise and groaned in frustration at the tubes that stopped her. "Dawit's not here?"

Yonas brushed her hair from her forehead and kissed her cheek, he rested his face against hers. "Emaye," he said affectionately. "Emama." He heard above his head, through the small window, the faint sound of a car door slamming, a goatherd's whistle, the padded thump of a noise that could have been a distant rock thrown, a distant shout, another rifle discharging above the heads of restless students marching forward. "He'll come," Yonas said, because there was nothing else to say.