DUST, ASH, FLIGHT

BY MAAZA MENGISTE

Mercato

I

They would begin digging for bones tomorrow. Alfonso stood next to the jail staring at the flat landscape of the Addis Ababa military base. He'd come today because he wanted to see the site before Lara and the other forensic scientists started, wanted to quietly rest his photographer's eye on the grounds they would soon be shoveling. He wondered if he'd be able to identify a femur from a humerus or distinguish what made one set of human bones young and another old. The Argentine scientists were in Ethiopia looking for the remains of prisoners who had been taken from their families and never heard from again. He came to photograph those remains, to trap between shutter and aperture fragments of prisoners like those he'd been forced to photograph in Argentina. Alfonso adjusted his camera to zoom in on a pick leaning against a wooden fence. Would there be anything in this drab compound that would remind him of the grassy land behind the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics in Buenos Aires?

It's not what you're used to, Lara had said the day she finally agreed to let him join the team traveling to Ethiopia. *Your subjects won't be alive*, she said, her light-brown eyes sharp as she took in his stiff suit jacket and scratched cuff links. *There's no art in this*, she added, disgust evident in the smile she let settle

on his camera equipment and unopened portfolio. She was a woman shaped out of angles, her bones delicate. She'd kept a notebook with her during the interview but had written nothing while he talked, had chosen instead to pin her unflinching gaze on him. She'd looked tired, her eyes sunken, as if they would bend light if they could and bask only in shadows. *You must know who I am*, he'd wanted to remind her. *I was the last face so many saw before they disappeared. Who better than me to photograph what remains?*

The others might ask you about a relative who'd been jailed at the Navy Mechanics School when you were there, she'd said at the end as they stood at the door of her lab, interview over, his hand extended but ignored. *It's better to discuss those things after this job is done, don't mix the two*. She'd nodded and walked back to her desk.

Alfonso opened his lens wide to take in the dry, cracked earth. He saw two Ethiopian men watching him intently from a short distance. Each of them held a photograph to their chest, the image facing his direction. Alfonso felt his stomach tighten. He knew this ritual, recognized the hopes they were trying to place in his hands. He'd seen this same gesture in Argentina. Strangers would stop him in the streets and ask, *Aren't you the one the newspapers talked about? The photographer jailed at the Navy School who took those pictures?* Then, out of nowhere, a photo. *This is my mother, my sister, my father, my aunt, my grandson.* So many. A procession of faces and bodies both candid and posed, staring at him, waiting to be found, to be taken out of the land of the disappeared and reclaimed.

Alfonso lowered the camera and held up both hands to the approaching Ethiopians. He walked backward, shaking his head. *Yekerta*, he repeated again and again, silently thanking the guide for teaching the scientists and him what would

be the most important word on this trip, in this country full of people still waiting to properly mourn their dead. *Sorry. I'm sorry.*

It was Lara's idea to go to the dusty *tej bet* near the hotel that night before the first dig. The rest of the team, tired from a day of meetings and briefings, had excused themselves to sleep, and only Alfonso remained.

"I drink one beer the night before we start working at a new place," she said to him on the way there. "Everything will taste like dirt by tomorrow."

The bar was a tiny, dim building made of what looked like adobe. It was painted blue with a pale-green door that swung limply on rusted hinges. A scratched-up slab of wood made up the counter and, behind it, a strikingly pretty waitress with clothes that clung to her soft body smiled and pushed two beers toward them as they sat down.

They drank in silence, Alfonso trying to feign disinterest in the envelope Lara had taken out of her purse and held gingerly at the edges.

It was then that Gideon walked in. Lara shifted her attention to the door and watched the old man with interest as he stopped and stared at them, momentarily startled, before taking a seat at the end of the counter.

She stared as if she were scrutinizing a document. When she spoke, it seemed directed to no one. "He's lost someone," she said. Her black wavy hair fell over her face and she pushed it back and took a drink of beer.

He stole another look at Lara. Despite what she'd told him at the interview, the other scientists had plied him with questions about those they knew who'd also been jailed at the Navy School. She was the only one who'd never asked.

They set their beers on the counter and watched Gideon as the waitress started talking to him, animated and tender-voiced. Gideon sat straight, alert and expressionless. He seemed to refuse to look their way; he simply pressed himself deeper into his seat and wrapped his fingers around his beer, nodding to the waitress's chatter. It was the way he stared at his hands that made Alfonso look at his own. What was he doing in Addis Ababa?

It was hard to tell his age. Gideon looked sixty; he carried a weariness twice those years. In the soft light that outlined his straight nose and papery skin, Gideon resembled a worn prophet, a man who should have been illuminated by nothing but dying candles.

Tenastilign. Alfonso tried to repeat the greeting again. He'd never learn the hard consonants of Amharic, the lilt of the language. He dipped his head for a quick bow and waited for Gideon to return the greeting. He smiled, understanding after only four days in Addis Ababa the reserve of Ethiopians.

Gideon took a long, deep drink of his beer and turned away.

After another failed attempt at conversation the pretty waitress with dewy eyes told Alfonso that Gideon didn't talk. "He sings," she said in her thick English. "Famous. A long time ago. Now . . ." She wrapped a hand around her throat and squeezed. Her bright-red nail polish clashed with the soft glow of the light hanging over her head.

"He can't talk?" Lara asked, leaning into the counter, suddenly interested. "How come?"

The girl shook her head. "He just stopped. He drinks one beer every night." There was an awkward pause as if there was more she wanted to say but didn't know how.

Alfonso caught her staring at him, curious about their

presence in this bar that was far off the tourist maps. He smiled at her and she turned quickly to drop a cassette tape into the dilapidated stereo. A mournful voice held a note above a jazz trumpet climbing down the scale in slow steps.

The change in Gideon was immediate, but maybe only he could see it. Maybe only a man who'd witnessed so many moments of terror would have been able to recognize it. Gideon folded into himself and became just another man caving into his chest until his back could bend no more, became just another body in a long line of bodies that Alfonso was ordered to photograph, became just another face filled with fear staring starkly into his lens, pleading without words for a salvation both subject and photographer knew would not come.

"*Dónde?*" Alfonso asked the commander, knowing where the brightest patch of sunlight streamed into the window of the small room in the Navy School of Mechanics. "*Aquí?*" He swallowed hard and pointed, disgusted by his impulse to photograph in the best light. "Here is good."

The prisoner shuffled against the blank white wall and stood in the gentle sunbeam. He was a young man with a long face and wild curly hair now matted to his head. He shook in his chains, his thin arms cut and bruised, his eyes nearly swollen shut.

"*Señor.*" Alfonso spoke softly to prevent the sudden jerk that raising his camera usually elicited. *Lo siento*, he said with his eyes. "Raise your chin and look at the camera," he said with his mouth. The young man stared at him instead, as they always did, and curved his chest as if to dodge a blow to the heart. Alfonso heard a soft whimper, saw the trembling lips, then forced himself to meet the young man's gaze. He saw that moment when disbelief gave way to naked terror. *I'm sorry*, he

wanted to say, but the commander was standing just behind him with his thick breaths and sweat, mumbling, "*Bueno. Bueno,* the *generalissimo* will like this one for his collection. You'll take one of me next week for a new passport." The commander winked. "You'll make me look like a new man, *sí?*"

He was on the fourth floor of the Navy School. He'd been picked up in San Isidro just outside of Buenos Aires three months ago. He'd been stopped at gunpoint in his car. He'd had his camera on the seat next to him, the windows down, enjoying the bit of wind that cut through the moist evening heat. There had been three soldiers and they gave no reason for dragging him out of his car. It was Argentina in 1978, General Jorge Videla was in charge, thousands were being disappeared. Maybe those were reasons enough. But what he thought of, in the dark backseat of an unmarked car speeding down Avenida del Libertador, were all those years he'd turned away from his mother, a woman so hungry for affection that Alfonso was sure it was her heart that killed her, not her asthma.

The music was dying. The waitress hummed, her voice wavering over the last notes before fading in a soft breath. Her expression was earnest, her eyes tender. He could have watched her for another hour, could have held her under the steady gaze of his lens until her body swayed just so, until she was simply a figure dissected by a thick band of shadow and a wilting strip of light.

She lifted her eyes to him. "'Tizita.' A famous song," she said, turning the stereo off with a careful press of a button then tilting toward him so her arms rested next to his on the counter. "It means memory. A good song to hear in Ethiopia." She stole a shy glance at him through her lashes, avoiding

Lara, who had removed a carefully folded newspaper article from the envelope.

Alfonso cleared his throat and smiled uncertainly. "*Birra*." He pointed at himself and Lara and then to Gideon. "What's that?" he finally asked Laura, gesturing to the article.

"No more, thank you." Lara waved the new beer aside. She slid the news clipping toward him. "So you understand what we'll be doing tomorrow."

Alfonso looked at the article. There had been a massacre of an entire village of men, women, and children in a place called El Mozote in the mountains of Morazán in El Salvador. Hundreds of corpses had been found, ranging from newborn to elderly. Villagers in the surrounding area reported a ghost had begun to roam above the mountains after the *matanza* by the Salvadoran army. Naked and wild-haired, she could be seen crouched near the river under the moonlight, wailing for her dead children with a dying fish flopping in her hand. Argentine scientists had arrived to exhume the site of the massacre and had been cautioned by villagers and the military about the ghost.

He closely examined the image of Lara and four colleagues standing next to a roped-off area, pointing at three tiny crushed skulls.

"How long ago?" he asked. "You look much younger."

"It doesn't matter," she said. She took the clipping from him and folded it precisely and slipped it back into the envelope. "The ghost the people claimed they saw," she said, turning to face him. "There was no ghost. There's no such thing." She had leaned close to him, her back to the waitress and Gideon.

Alfonso nodded, confused. "People make up these stories."

Lara shook her head. She spoke urgently. "There was no ghost because even though the army killed infants and children and weak women, even though they burned men alive, even though they retraced their steps to make sure they'd gotten everyone—there was one survivor. More than a thousand killed but one lived. She hid in bushes then ran into the mountains. I met her while we were there digging. She came down from the mountain when she saw us with the bones. She wanted to find her children." Lara paused, her eyes on the envelope. "She lived. She's still living."

The waitress held the new beer toward Alfonso, who shook his head. He waited, uncertain what to say to Lara. This was the most she had said about anything not relating to their work in Ethiopia.

"Just because someone is missing," she continued, her gaze direct, "it doesn't mean we'll find them. You don't know anything unless you have proof." She was focused on his camera. "If you can't see something, you have nothing."

Alfonso expected her to get up and walk out after that, the silence drawing thick between them. But she didn't. Instead, she stared at his camera for so long, Alfonso raised it to his eyes. And when she didn't do anything, he took off the lens cap and adjusted the meter. He suddenly felt he could see her better this way, framed in the small box that shut out everything except those deep-set eyes and hollow cheeks, the rapid blinking and slow shake of the head. The slender, frail fingers reaching up to wipe an eye and dropping to reveal once again the stern flatness of her gaze. He aimed.

"No," she said firmly. He flinched at the way Lara frowned and her hands flew up to cover her face.

"No, no—no photo," the waitress said, reaching out as if to take the camera from Alfonso. "No."

It was then that Alfonso noticed that Gideon had stood up and covered his head with one arm. The waitress had also moved to stand in front of Gideon, her body becoming rigid and stiff, straight-backed and strong. All pleasantness had gone from her face.

Gideon turned his back to them and walked out quickly. The door creaked on its hinge before coming to a rest. Lara slid out of her seat.

"We'll be starting early," she said. Then, with a thank you to the waitress, she too left the bar.

The waitress relaxed once they were alone. "He's a nice man, he's my friend," she said, pointing to Gideon's empty seat. "But in Qey Shibir . . ." She snapped her fingers looking for the right word. "Red Terror. The revolution in 1974. He was not good. He was famous, many photographs of him in Addis Zemen."

Alfonso nodded. He was familiar with the Red Terror, the intense period of violence heaped on the people of Ethiopia by an iron-fisted dictator.

She pointed to Gideon's empty seat again. "He was a singer."

"For a band?" Alfonso asked, remembering a small brochure at the Ghion Hotel that recounted the history of the popular hotel band. "Which one?"

The waitress's face clouded and she brought that second beer back over to Alfonso. "For funerals."

"The families liked him, then?" Alfonso asked. "Like Alberto Cortez in my country."

The waitress scrubbed the inside of a glass dry and held it up to the weak light for inspection. She set it down softly. "He was a Derg singer." She continued when Alfonso shook his head as if he didn't understand. "He sang to celebrate deaths

of the Derg enemies. The families hate him. Even now, some people never forget." She peered over his shoulder at the door, a faraway look in her eyes. "How could you forget? His voice was beautiful." She fluttered the fingers of one hand gracefully.

The beers were giving the room soft edges; he'd been drinking on an empty stomach. The flimsy wooden door, which couldn't prevent Addis Ababa's smells from seeping into the bar, began to pulse in slow rhythm to a new song spinning out of the old, worn stereo. Exhaust fumes, manure, smoke, *berbere*, and, beneath it all, the sweet pungency of myrrh mingled with the sharp smells that were coming from either the waitress or the plastic jug of *tej* that he hadn't been brave enough to sample, choosing bottled Ethiopian beer over the homemade honey wine.

"You are visiting Addis Ababa?" the waitress asked, her hard smile and knowing eyes forcing his gaze from her hips to her face.

He didn't know when the horror had ebbed and he'd begun to pose his subjects, straighten their clothes, and use shadow to hide bruises. The impulse had grown slowly, between f-stops and focal points. The slight shift to include the whole face in the frame turned into attention to composition and expression. He'd never ask anyone to smile, he'd tell himself, but for the prettiest prisoners, the ones whose cuts started below the necklines of their gowns, he found himself unable to resist. *A small curve in your mouth, señorita, to soften your face,* he'd whisper. *Just for me, ignore the soldiers*. The look they gave tipped into helplessness.

At some point, after hundreds of photos of hundreds of prisoners who had walked out of frame and into an interro-

gation room or the line of fire, Alfonso began to hide a few damning rolls of film from the commander. He'd dreamed about his mother and her distaste for his photography, for his bourgeois skills in a working-class family. *It will turn you into something else,* she'd once said to him, *and you won't be my son anymore*. In his dream, she'd become the bird that tapped ceaselessly on the window of the fourth floor of the Navy School; she'd tapped a hole into the room, flying onto his camera and perching on the flash. Her wide-eyed stare, first at the sheet he'd pinned to the wall, then back at him, had forced him awake with a hand swinging at empty air.

"I'll keep these for you, Commander," Alfonso had said the next day to the heavy-breathing man who sweated profusely, a damp handkerchief constantly in his grip. "You don't need to hold these, they're a bother." He put a used roll of film in the pocket of the same filthy trousers he'd worn since his arrest. He tucked the exposed rolls into his front pockets, then his back pockets, and then into the pocket of his shirt—and when there was no more room, he smiled widely, innocently, and slid a few into his socks.

Whenever he could, he would hide a few rolls inside his cell, a square cold box of a room that held a rotating group of twenty prisoners. Raul, a baby-faced university student with an unflagging spirit, dug a small hole into one wall for the film, then stood or slept in front of it until one day he too was called to pose for Alfonso. Alfonso scratched an *R* into the film canister of the roll that held Raul's forgiving smile. Four years later, when the junta fell and he was released from prison, it was the first one he took out and slipped into his shirt pocket.

If there was such a thing as redemption, he reasoned, he would give the families of these prisoners proof that, once

upon a time, there had been a man who looked into the face of their loved one and saw a life worth remembering. That he did nothing to save them the indignity of a photograph just before death, he hoped no one would ever point out.

"You're a tourist, visiting?" the waitress asked again.

"I'm working," he told her, patting his camera.

"Journalist?" she asked, her face suddenly curious and interested. "For the trial of the Derg officers?" She spat out the words, her features contorting into a scowl. "Let them die for what they did to us. They kill us, they leave the bodies on the streets. My sister . . ." She stopped and took a deep breath. "It's good you are here," she said simply, then turned away as if embarrassed.

After a revolution dethroned Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, the Derg regime had reigned until just three years ago, 1991. The Red Terror had been declared by Mengistu Haile Mariam to eliminate all opposition, meaning a population that Alfonso was all too familiar with: young, educated, idealistic, innocent except for the crime of hope. The Red Terror had nearly stripped Ethiopia of an entire generation, kept her in the firm clutches of violent and bloody chaos from 1977 to 1978. But the violence had started earlier, and it had never completely stopped until Mengistu fled. Many had not been allowed to properly mourn for their dead. Others had never found the bodies of the disappeared. When a new government came to power, the first steps toward bringing Derg officials to trial began. But courts needed evidence, proof.

The team of forensic scientists had come from Argentina with skills honed in their own land, among the bones of their own people. They had come to excavate mass graves in Addis Ababa and prove what former Derg officials tried to deny. The

team had been to other places—Kurdistan, the Balkans, El Mozote, and Croatia—before Ethiopia, they understood the power that the dead still hold. They worked under the belief that witnesses, documents, even photographs could deceive, but a restored skull, a bone fragment, a skeleton dug up from a hole filled with the remains of dozens of others, spoke a kind of truth for which there was no defense.

And Alfonso, he'd come to Ethiopia because he wanted to stand in front of these remains and pretend the bones could substitute for the Argentine prisoners who understood what they were really looking at when they turned to face his camera. "I know how to photograph the dead," he'd said to Lara during the interview. "We know each other." She had finally relented.

"What is the singer's name?" he asked the waitress now, blinking rapidly to keep the tears back. It still surprised him how easily he cried since his release from prison. He pointed to the door behind him as if the man were standing there.

"Gideon," the waitress said. "Once, he had a son." She shook her head sadly.

II

Walking back to his home near the crowded Mercato, Gideon didn't know what to make of the *ferenjoch* sitting in his favorite bar talking to Konjit. Seeing these foreigners had startled him so much he'd drunk his beer in three gulps. Maybe Konjit had put on the music for the tourists' benefit. Maybe it was her way of asking why he hadn't come to visit her in a week. Maybe it was her way of punishing him. So many people in Addis Ababa found small ways to make him pay for what he'd done in the past. Jabbing him with a sharp elbow in a crowd. Kicking him in the leg. Shrinking away from him as if he were

a leper. He understood the language spoken in these moments. Expected it. Some days, when he thought of his son, wished for it. But the song, "Tizita," had come like a sharp, bitter slap; the unexpectedness of Tilahun Gessesse's soaring voice in the dark *tej bet* had been like a fist to his chest. It had been his own closing song whenever he had performed at the palace in the days before the Derg.

Samson, he would have called out if he'd had a voice—the shock of hearing that song had been that strong. He would have called out his son's name, and in the country where he still had his voice, he would have still had his son and his son would have come running. *Samson, my son.*

Abbaba.

A muezzin's voice rose from Anwar Mosque in the wind, light and vibrant. As he did every day when he heard the call to prayer, though he'd abandoned any religion long ago, Gideon touched his throat and cursed his gift, willed it to stay trapped where he'd shut it long ago. He walked by a small café near one of the overcrowded shops in the area and saw a group of men hunched over newspapers, frowning. A young newspaper vendor ran to him in dusty sandals and waved a paper in his face.

"Digging has started at the military compound," the boy said, the corners of his dried lips stained from chewing the numbing khat leaves. There was a glazed look in his eyes, an out-of-focus stare that Gideon had once envied and even thought he'd needed.

He tried to wave the boy aside to let him pass when the boy reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bundle of khat. "And this?" he asked.

Gideon had tried the leaf for the first time soon after Samson disappeared, had wanted something to ease the lone-

liness that felt like a knife in his side. He'd chewed alone, in a dark corner of his modest home where Samson's bed still lay unmade, just as he'd left it weeks ago. It was 1978. He was no longer a singer with a popular band loved by Emperor Haile Selassie. The emperor was dead. Hundreds had fled the country. Soviets and Cubans seemed to have appeared from nowhere. Soldiers were everywhere.

Two policemen had come at five a.m. to take his son for questioning. They'd promised to bring him back. Gideon knew of this familiar lie meant to quiet parents into submission. He'd grabbed his son with both arms around the waist and dropped to his knees. One of the policemen had taken his rifle and hit the back of his head again and again until he finally let go of his son. He'd gone immediately to the jail and was told to come back the next day. He'd spent the night on the jail steps, and when he'd gone back to the counter with his son's picture, the weary officer had pointed him toward the hospital morgue. *Try there*, he said. *They were all taken there last night.*

When he hadn't found Samson and two weeks had passed, Gideon went to a small kiosk in Mercato and asked the owner for khat.

"Gideon," the owner said, "this isn't like you. Wait instead, go to church, your son will come back." But the owner hadn't been able to look him in the eye and in the end he'd slid the tiny bundle of leaves toward him and refused Gideon's money.

All the leaf did to him was make his sorrow take shape and come alive. It settled inside his chest, grew fur and teeth, and gnawed against his rib cage. His chest had felt as tight as a drum. The voice calling out for his son sounded like his wife's, but when he turned, he found nothing but his own hand groping clumsily in the air for the woman who'd taught him how to

love, then died in childbirth.

"Digging has begun," the newspaper boy repeated, shoving the paper in his face. "Read about it. They're working over there." He pointed toward rolling hills where a military base sat. "If you lost someone in Qey Shibir, you should read this."

Gideon paid for the paper and examined the front page. Standing at the end of a row of serious men and one woman was the tourist from Konjit's bar.

He pointed to the photo and gave the newspaper boy a quizzical look.

"You don't know?" the boy said. "There are graves in the military base. These people," he pointed to the picture in the newspaper, "they came to dig up the bodies. They know how to do it."

Gideon's hand shook. His son had been taken to that jail; he'd followed the truck for as long as he could on foot then hailed a taxi to the gate. He'd memorized the license plate and seen the same truck, empty, in the jail parking lot. Gideon clutched the paper to his chest and leaned so hard on his good leg he almost tipped into the boy, the memory of the days searching for his only son pressing down like a heavy hand.

The soldiers had stared at him at the counter, his son's photo pushed toward them with shaking fingers. They refused to respond to his questions. They tried to ignore him. They turned their backs and let him run his voice hoarse asking them where they took his son. They let him stand at the counter and weep for Samson. Then they began to tire of his never-ending sorrow. One of them threatened him. Another pleaded with him to go home. When he stayed, with that tilted stance that forced him to lean one elbow on the counter, they beat him back with fists and kicks. They swung their rifles into his short

leg and watched him fall. They insulted his father's name, his band, his dead wife. Still, Gideon woke the next morning and walked back to the jail, Samson's photo in hand.

It was on the fourth visit that one of the soldiers had pulled out a small sheet of paper, then pointed to Gideon and said, "Maybe he's the one the general's looking for."

He didn't protest when they took him to another building next to the jail, because they knew where his son was and that was all that mattered. The soldiers shoved him in front of a large wooden desk where a man as thin as a dried stick coughed in his seat as he gripped his stomach. The man inspected him, beginning at his feet, his mouth curling as he glanced from one leg to the other, then broke into a wide smile when he got to Gideon's face.

"The Great Voice of Ethiopia, with talent only worthy of an emperor, is here in my office volunteering to sing for our cause?" the man had asked. "How did we get so lucky?"

On his way home, Gideon remembered a story he learned in school. Once upon a time, there was a goat who believed he was king. He was caught by a peasant who mistook the king for a goat. *Just sing,* he told himself. *Nothing changes just because it is called something else. A song is only a song, but a son,* he reminded himself again and again, *a son . . .* And he stopped and sighed at all a son could be.

His first funeral was for the only son of a couple who could not stop shaking their heads at the sight of their child's grave. "Is this real, is this him, is this my son?" the mother moaned into the chest of the grieving father. Gideon cursed his voice, his throat, the air he breathed. He kept his mouth clamped shut until he felt the soldier's rifle in his side. He started softly, a mournful song of longing and loss, but the soldiers raised their guns and pronounced the corpse an enemy and made

him sing of Chairman Mengistu's valor. Then the soldiers pointed their weapons at the mother and said, "Dance, Emama, we do not weep for those we hate."

Every day for a week, Gideon went to Konjit's bar and waited for the two *ferenjoch*. He'd put on his only suit from his days in the band. It was pin-striped with broad lapels and a blue handkerchief sewn into the jacket pocket. In his shirt pocket was Samson's photo. He ordered one beer and sipped it slowly, sparingly. Then he waited, ignoring Konjit's questioning look and her attempts to talk to him.

During the second week, one night near closing time, the man came in alone just as Konjit was trying to make Gideon go home. Gideon felt his mouth go dry, even though he'd just taken a drink of beer. He spun around, his mouth open, and for the first time in years, he regretted swallowing his voice and making it disappear.

The man had dark circles under his eyes. There was a fine sheen of dust covering him, and the weight of the camera slung over his shoulder seemed to tip him to one side. He didn't look at Gideon or Konjit, lost instead in the Amharic letters on a beer bottle sitting on the bar. He breathed with his mouth open in soft gusts. Gideon couldn't tell if he was near tears or simply at the point of exhaustion.

"*Birra?*" Konjit asked, holding out a fresh bottle to him. "You are tired?" She smiled, then let the smile fade when the man didn't return her gaze. She set the beer in front of him and turned to stack clean glasses on a shelf.

Gideon felt for Samson's photo. Its edges pressed against his shirt and burned into his bare skin. His heart hammered against the photo, beating his son's name into his chest then up to his throat. His mouth opened and closed over silent

words.

The man waved aside the beer and began to breathe normally. He laid his hands flat on the countertop and stared at them intensely. He began to unload his camera and his lips quivered as he took the roll of film and slid it into his shirt pocket. Then he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Gideon slid Samson's photo out of his pocket and laid it gently on the counter in front of the man. He tapped the man on the shoulder, keeping his hand there to comfort him, then he led the man's gaze to the photo, then back to himself. He did it again: Samson, then him. Samson's face, then his face.

Konjit shook her head with mournful eyes. The man turned away. He put both hands over his face as if to shield himself from a bright light.

"Please," he said, one of the few English words Gideon could understand. "Please. No more." He shook his head back and forth and said something quietly to Konjit, his eyes glued to the counter, focused on his hands gripping his beer as if the bottle were the only thing keeping him in place.

"Leave him alone," Konjit said to Gideon, her concentration on the man's mouth. "He is saying that too many families came today."

Gideon shook his head and pushed the photo closer to the man. He tapped his shoulder and pointed to the picture again. *Samson*, he mouthed desperately. *Samson*. He faced the man and waited.

The man spoke in English to Konjit then nodded in his direction.

Konjit took a deep breath and spoke gently: "There are nothing but bones now, Gideon. There is no way to identify by a photo."

But isn't every bone different? Gideon wanted to ask. *Isn't*

the shape of my son's face unlike any other? Look at his jaw, its strength and strong lines. Who else but my Samson has that? Look at him! Gideon wanted to shout. *There is no other like him, even after all flesh has gone the way of dust, even after all has turned to ash. There is him.*

III

Gideon has come every day for a week to watch us dig. He crouches beneath a tree and sits quietly, holding a photograph in front of his heart. He's dressed in an old suit that's neatly ironed. His shoes are polished to military standards and I notice even from this distance that one has a thicker heel than the other. Alfonso sits with him when the sun goes down and we've turned on our lights to continue to dig. They do not talk, but I see them sitting so close, one could be leaning on the other. He doesn't leave until we pack our equipment and drive away. Alfonso stays until Gideon gets up to go home, helping him to his feet and saying words I can't hear from where I crouch, documenting pieces of what were once whole men.

I'd refused Alfonso's request to travel with us to Ethiopia. *Added weight and cost*, I'd said, trying to make my denial sound professional. Diego pulled me aside and whispered, *Lara, don't you remember him in the news? They kept him for years. The things they did to him. Let him come. Besides, he gave my family the last photo of my brother.*

I don't want to ask if he remembers my sister. I have no courage. Alicia ran away from the police the night they tried to arrest her. She was always the fastest in her school, she could outrun the boys. She ran out of Buenos Aires toward the sea then floated away to a new place. She'll come back when we have finished with all these bones.

We are nearing the end. The bones have been dug up and laid on metal tables into the semblance of a human frame. We've packaged and labeled the clothes, jewelry, ID cards. All the bodies have been identified. Now the mourning can truly begin. Our job is done. Soon we leave for Argentina, until we are called back or called to another place full of unclaimed sorrow.

I have separated my information about Ethiopia between what we know and what we do not. Between fact and assumption. There is no room for the disappeared. There is no section in my report that will include the hopes of all who have heard of Lazarus and believed. All that we have is what we can dig out of the earth, hold up to the light, then return back to dirt.

This is what we know from this latest dig: forty adult male prisoners were taken to a wooded corner of the military base and strangled with a nylon rope. Some also suffered blunt force to the skull, nasal fractures, broken bones in their hands and feet. Each piece of rope was cut exactly 159 centimeters and the ends were heated to fuse frayed strands. The executioners (could just one have the strength to kill forty who want to live?) tied simple knots at each end to allow for a better grip. The killers then looped the cords around the necks of the prisoners.

This is what we can assume: some of the prisoners struggled, but not all. It was a futile fight. They all died from ligature strangulation. I wonder which of the prisoners lived the longest, and if every breath of life was worth the struggle.

They were buried under meters of heavy stones and lime. We found them under those stones, and ash. They were clothed. All but one had a blanket around him; the night was cold. All but that same one had the cinched nylon rope tied

around his neck. That prisoner who died without a blanket, with his rope flung far from his body, what new story could he tell us about that night that his bones choose to hold secret? I ask myself this question as I copy data onto paper, record it so that the next time we must dig for bones, we have the stories of these to guide us forward.

I am writing the last of my notes, leaning against a tree just beyond the site, when Alfonso and Gideon walk over to me. They seem to hesitate as I look up.

"*Sí?* Can I help you?" I ask Alfonso, not wanting to be rude, trying to respect what he must have seen and endured in the Navy School. I realize that the tormented look I first noticed when he came to us has not changed. It is permanent, like a scar.

"Gideon. He has something to show you." He points to Gideon, who takes a picture from his suit pocket and holds it out to me, cupping it like an injured bird. "This is his son, Samson," Alfonso says. "He disappeared years ago, he was jailed here."

I shake my head, already knowing the question. "We've found everyone. There's no one else here. Tell him I'm sorry." And I have to wonder at a man who wants the bones of his son, who chooses not to believe in escape and flight.

"Please look," Alfonso says. He pauses. "For his sake, just look at the picture. Then tell him."

I see a young man, a boy really, with eager eyes and a wide smile. I see his father's strong jaw and high cheekbones, a chipped front tooth and sloping forehead. He is flesh and blood, this boy, so alive. We dig only the dead.

"No," I say. "He isn't here."