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"Self-Portrait as a Young Man," by Ficre Ghebreyesus.

The story begins on a beautiful April morning when a man wakes exhausted and returns to sleep in his thirteen-year-old son's trundle bed, declaring, "This is the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in!" Or it begins when the wife says goodbye to the man a few hours later, walking in front of his car switching her hips a bit, a kiss blown as she heads to her office and he continues on to his painting studio.

Or it begins as he packs a tote bag with the usual slim thermos of strong coffee made in an Italian stovetop moka pot, a larger thermos of cold water, two tangerines, a package of Nat Sherman MCD cigarettes, and a plastic sack of raw almonds. The tote is astral blue and printed with Giotto angels. Off to his studio for a day of painting. Then the two children will walk down Edgehill Road from the bus stop like burros under their knapsacks, and his wife will prepare dinner while listening to Thelonious Monk and sipping from a glass of white wine that he's poured for her. The thirteen-year-old does his homework and the twelve-year-old practices his drumming.

I am the wife. I am the wife of fifteen years. I am the plumpish wife, the pretty wife, the loving wife, the smart wife, the American wife. I am eternally his wife.

Perhaps the story begins with the fistful of lottery tickets he bought two days before he died, which I discovered weeks later, when they fluttered out of the pages of one of the many books he was reading.

Or it begins when I meet him, sixteen years before. That was always a good story: an actual *coup de foudre*, a bolt of lightning, love at first sight. I felt a visceral torque, I would tell people, a literal churn of my organs: not butterflies, not arousal; rather, a not unpleasant rotation of my innards, as never before. Lightning struck and did not curdle the cream but instead turned it to sweet, silken butter. Lightning turned sand into glass.

Maybe, though, the story began in the winter of 1961, when two women were pregnant, one in Asmara, Eritrea, and the other in Harlem, U.S.A.; one with her sixth child, one with her first. The East African son would arrive on March 21, 1962, on the most hallowed day of the zodiac. It is the beginning and the end of the astrological calendar, and so it is said that children born on March 21st are ancient souls who possess the wonder and innocence of newborns. The American child, a girl, would come on May 30th, into the chatter and buzz of Gemini, in Gotham.

When I met Ficre Ghebreyesus, in New Haven, in the late spring of 1996, the first thing he wanted to do was show me his art. He was living in an unfinished loft where he slept and painted when he was not cooking at the Eritrean restaurant that he owned and ran with two of his brothers. The restaurant was named Caffè Adulis, in homage to the ancient port city on the Red Sea that is now an archeological site, one of Africa's great "lost cities." Pliny the Elder wrote of Adulis, which he said was founded by "Egyptian slaves fleeing their masters." Ficre always said it meant "city of free men."

As Ficre showed me his work, he talked about his family. His late father, Gebreyesus Tessema, was a judge who was exiled hundreds of miles away from home when he refused to tamper with his judicial decisions to suit the wishes of the dictator. His mother, Zememesh Berhe, came from a family of many sisters and two brothers, tough Coptic Christian highlanders. Together, they had seven children: one, the eldest son, lost to the long independence war with Ethiopia, Ficre at the No. 6 position. Their language was Tigrinya, an Afro-Asiatic tongue closely related to the ancient South Semitic Ge'ez and spoken in Eritrea and its diaspora, as well as in northern Ethiopia. His full name, Ficremariam Ghebreyesus, means "lover of Mary" and "servant of Jesus." The abbreviated Ficre means "love."

On a Thursday night at the end of March, 2011, I bring an unexpected guest home to stay with us, my artist friend Lorna, who's spoken at Yale, where I teach, that afternoon. When Lorna and I arrive home, the house is lighted and glowing, and tea is brewing in the black Japanese cast-iron pot. Ficre has put raw almonds in a small celadon bowl. It is late; our sons, Solomon and Simon, are sleeping. We are so pleased to live like this, organized and open and welcoming when friends pass through Hamden, the hamlet where we recently moved to live in a tan stucco Arts and Crafts house surrounded by a garden. Ficre fell in love with the property, which reminded him of the African "compound" where he grew up amid flowers, inside walls his mother painted apricot, spring-sky blue, rose violet, and butter yellow.

The next morning, I organize the children for school and send them off and Ficre makes coffee when Lorna rises shortly after. We three drink our cappuccinos under the gazebo. Hanging inside is a mobile that Ficre fashioned from some slender, twisty branches that blew down in the yard after a storm. The mobile turns gently in the breeze. The morning is gray, and the yard smells of the fresh, damp earth of early spring.

As we walk toward the house, something makes us look back into the yard over our shoulders. There is a giant hawk sitting on the branch of our hundred-year-old oak tree, eviscerating and devouring a squirrel.

We freeze to watch. The raptor is utterly focussed on its task. I watch Ficre and Lorna scrutinizing, their artist's eyes recording what they see. The hawk attends to its business undisturbed. It is rapacious; it takes what it wants. The bloody ribbons of the squirrel's entrails hang off the branch as the hawk eats the entire remains of the hapless rodent in about five minutes.

Ficre tells us he has seen the bird the day before, with the children, and shows us a short video he took on his phone of the creature on the same branch, eating another squirrel. I have seen a hawk a

few times but never one so intent on its survival, never seen predation up close and in action. It is pure and elemental, necessarily violent, riveting, nature itself. We watch for as long as we can before we have to go off to the duties of our days.

Some weeks later, on his bureau, I find an acrostic that Ficre made, which exhausted variations on the word "hawk." He'd assigned numbers to the letters and then assigned those numbers to lottery tickets, which he had bought by the dozens and secreted in the pages of the books he was reading.

Saturday: the surprise fiftieth-birthday party that Solomon and Simon have planned for their father is upon us. We try to go about our business as usual while surreptitious e-mails and calls come in with last-minute details and snafus. My brother stopped at the bakery in Bridgeport to pick up the cake and found the bakery closed. A friend from New York is waiting at a café downtown until the coast is clear. It is supposed to storm, and a friend from Boston is not sure that she can make it on the road. Finally, Ficre and the boys leave the house and he takes them to see "The Hunger Games."

I scurry around tidying up. In a few hours, friends begin to arrive, decked out and giddy. Solo and Simon and I have secured a New Haven party treat, the Big Green Truck: a truck with a wood-burning oven for making pizzas with a cavalcade of toppings, plus salad, and gelato, and espresso. The pizza makers are in on the secret and park the truck out of sight by the side of the house.

Solo texts from the road: *We are leaving downtown. We pulled out of the parking lot. We're on Whitney Avenue.* Everyone gathers in the library, rustling and giggling, until we hear Ficre's key in the door. Surprise! His face wide open with joy as he goes to each one of us, *You*, and *You*, and *You!* We laugh, we talk, we eat, and we dance.

That night, he goes to sleep literally with a smile on his face. I gently poke him, thinking he is awake and playing sleep to entertain me, or still falling asleep, reviewing the evening in his mind. But he is in what the poet Léopold Sédar Senghor called "a deep Negro sleep."

The next evening, something urgent and sharp comes over Ficre: he has to leave the house, right away, he tells me. He has to buy a lottery ticket; he has a number, and a feeling. He is agitated, so certain is he that his number is going to win, and win big. I tell him gently he is being a little silly and let's just have dinner, but he jumps in the car, drives off, and comes back with what I later find out is a hundred lottery tickets. "I have to win it for you," he says. "I have to win the lottery for you."

On Tuesday, I come home late from the university. The boys are asleep and Ficre is on the couch watching television, waiting for me, drowsy. He has promised Solo a sleepover. He goes to Solo's trundle bed and I go to our bed, and we call out good night to each other down the hall. How beautiful, the way that children sleep so peacefully that their parents' voices do not wake them.

The next morning Ficre wakes exhausted, but happy. “This is the most comfortable bed I have ever slept in!” he says.

Then sleep some more, I whisper, and delay leaving home, puttering, so we can be together.

He feels better when he wakes again. We drink our coffee and chat, as on a million mornings. He drives me to work. I’ve just heard about a poetry reading on campus from a book of new translations of the sacred poetry of the Kabbalah, but it is scheduled at the same time I’m supposed to pick up the children from school to take them to the orthodontist.

“You have to hear the sacred poetry of the Kabbalah!” Ficre says to me. “You are an artist, and you need it—*I* will take the children to the orthodontist!”

The room where the reading is held is packed. The words resonate and sound to me oracular and true, though their meaning is mysterious:

Windows of worship

Windows of beckoning

Windows of weeping

Windows of joy...

Windows of bearing

Windows of birth

and he saw—

windows without number and end.

The program runs long, so I tiptoe out to get home as promised.

From his bedroom-window lookout spot, Simon sees me approach and comes running downstairs to the door. News from the family in diaspora: an older cousin in Montpellier, France, will not join us for the holiday as planned, because his three-year-old daughter is contagious. I go inside and call to my husband: “Fiiii-kiii!”

“I’ll get him!” Simon sings.

And then Simon is screaming. I run downstairs and see Ficre slumped on the floor, the treadmill still running. There is a raw slash where skin has come off his head. I think, *The treadmill was set too fast; he fell and hit his head*. Which he had. I think, *He will have a horrible concussion*. There is a small amount of yellow fluid pooled next to him. Strangely, I see no blood. Some months later, Solo comes home from school and says, *I know what the yellow liquid was. It was plasma. Blood separates into red and yellow, plasma and protein.*

I tell Simon, *Leave, get the phone, get your brother, call 911, bring me the phone*, and I am alone with Ficre. His eyes face mine directly. He is so warm; he is the right temperature. Half of his face seems slack to me, so I then think, *He has had a stroke and that is worse than a concussion, but he will recover*.

I tell the children, *Go upstairs, wait for the ambulance, bring them down quickly when they come*.

I am alone again with Ficre. It is just the two of us. I speak to him, low and urgent and gentle. I hold him carefully and try to wake him with my words and touch. I breathe into his warm mouth. I don't try to lift him, lest his spine be injured. I am certain he can hear me.

At the hospital, the medics rush him into the emergency room, and the doctors usher me into the roomette where they work. I keep my hand on his calf the whole time. He is still warm. They cut off his clothes. As his body is exposed, a doctor in a turban closes the curtains.

They pump him and jump him. They keep doing it. "Anyone have any other ideas?" the doctor shouts, after they have tried and tried. And then he looks straight and deep into my eyes and says the words they say in the movies that are nonetheless the only words: *We did everything we could do for him*. Which I saw. Later on, I will learn it was 6:54 P.M., Wednesday, April 4, 2012.

The penis, which is mine alone, lies sleeping on his thigh, nestled in its hair, and that is what I remember of his body, after the emergency-room doctor met my eyes and made his pronouncement. Him, still him, still Ficre, still a him, the last trace of him. The penis with which he made the human beings who are our children is sign and symbol and substance of what I have lost.

I lie atop him and cover his body with my body. After a time that cannot be measured, someone I do not know comes and puts her arms around my shoulders and gently, gently leads me off and away from Ficre.

And then the children arrive, and I am waiting for them at the entrance, and I tell them that Daddy is dead.

Where is Daddy? We go to a room to see his body—not to see him, to see his body, for when we go in it is his body but not him, in a hospital gown, under covers. We touch and hug and weep over the body that no longer houses him. It is somehow not frightening to see this body. In these moments it still belongs to us. The body is no longer warm. Our wails are one wail. We know when we want to leave the room.

When he was sixteen years old, he walked across his country through killing fields to escape. He walked into the dust of Khartoum. He was a refugee in Sudan, in Italy, in Germany, and in the United States, where he ended up living in New Haven for far longer than he had ever lived anywhere else. He became an African-American man, but he was not the descendant of slaves. He washed dishes in Italy, attended school before he knew a word of the language in a Germany so racially hostile it almost broke him. He went years without seeing his parents. His parents and his community built him to survive. But it was not without price.

His big heart burst. The autopsy later tells us his arteries were blocked nearly completely, despite the fact that he was slim and energetic and ate yogurt and blueberries and flaxseed, despite the fact that he passed stress tests with flying colors. I learn that severe heart disease is first discovered in many sufferers only when they drop dead. He could never quit smoking, though he tried and tried, over and over and over. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.

He was probably dead before he hit the ground, the emergency-room doctor and the coroner and a cardiologist I later speak with tell me. That may be why there was no blood on the floor, despite his head wound and the scalp's vascularity. He might have felt strange, the doctors told me, before what they call "the cardiac event," but not for more than a flash. One tells me he is certain Ficre saw my face as he died. We are meant to take comfort in this knowledge, if knowledge it is.

I breathed into his mouth. He was supple. The 911 operator asked if my husband was breathing and I could not say. The air around him was warm and vaporous. How many times that day and in the days and weeks and months that followed did I say "my husband." My husband died unexpectedly. I just lost my husband. "Lost" implies we are looking, he might be found.

I lost my husband. Where is he? I often wonder. As I set out on some small adventure, heading for some new place, somewhere he does not know, I think, I must call him, think, I must tell him,

think, *What would he think*? Think what he thinks. Know what he thinks.

When I held him in the basement, he was himself, Ficre.

When I held him in the hospital as they worked and cut off his clothes, he was himself.

When they cleaned his body and brought his body for us to say goodbye, he had left his body, though it still belonged to us.

His body was colder than it had been, though not ice-cold, or stiff and hard. His spirit had clearly left as it had not left when we found him on the basement floor and I knew that he could hear us.

Now I know for sure that the soul is an evanescent thing and the body is its temporary container, because I saw it. I saw the body with the soul in it, I saw the body with the soul leaving, and I saw the body with the soul gone.

When we first became lovers, we entered a three-day, three-night vortex. Night One I slept Senghor's "deep Negro sleep" for what seemed like the first time ever, lifelong insomniac no more. Night Two I burned with high fever and dreamed of my grandmother and a cherry tree, the only fruit she ever ate to excess. The next morning, Ficre gave me small sips of cold blackcurrant juice and rosehip tea to make me well. Night Three my fever broke and so did my menses, more blood than I had ever let in my life, all over the bed, a trail across the room, the bathroom floor, and in the tub. He cleaned it up; I did not feel abashed. Then he had to go to Washington, where there was to be an exhibition of photographs of Eritrea that he had taken during the war and just after independence. The last thing he put in his bag was my first book of poems.

He returned to New Haven five days later with a present for me: a honey-drenched honeycomb, from a visit to Luray Caverns. Its structure was ancient and iconic. *Did you know that honey was found in King Tutankhamen's tomb and is still edible*? he said. *And that honey was found in sealed jars in Pompeii*? We marvelled at the honeycomb's simple construction and deceptive strength, and held it up to behold its incomparable gold. We looked all around us through the honey's gold light. Then we ate it.

Why did he buy the lottery ticket with my name on it? Why was he so angry when he lost?

The day he died, the four of us were exactly the same height, just over five feet nine. We'd measured the boys in the pantry doorway the week before. It seemed a perfect symmetry, a whole family the same size but in different shapes. Now the children grow past me and past their father. They seem to grow by the day; they sprout like beanstalks toward the sky. Simon's anklebones appear shiny at his

pants' hems. He complains his feet hurt, and indeed his toes have grown and are pushing against the tips of his shoes. His growing seems avid, fevered. It feels like the insistent force of life itself.

Ficre and I used to walk together in Grove Street Cemetery, where he is now buried, where I will one day join him. The Yale art historian Sylvia Boone is buried there, too. Her great work is about Mende art, and is called "Radiance from the Waters." Her gravestone is a West African wonder in rosy marble etched with a seashell and a Sowei mask she'd written about. In her earlier book about visiting West Africa, she wrote that travellers should always commit the "charming, hopeful, irrational" act of buying a lottery ticket in a new country. She called it buying "a chance." It will make you feel lucky, as if anything could happen, even when "you *know* you will not be there for the drawing."

You were six and your brother was four, my mother said. *The whole day passed, a lovely day, and at the end I knew something was different, but I wasn't quite sure what. Ah, that's it! I said to myself. Nobody cried today! For the first time in six years, nobody cried!*

We used to laugh at that story when my boys were young and the cries would come and go, dried up by the vanished sunlight like summer storms, fast-finished but ever-present.

I thought of that phrase tonight. "Nobody cried today." It is ten months, almost one year. I did not cry today. I cried yesterday. I may well cry tomorrow. But I did not cry today, and neither did either of my sons, though mostly I am the one who still cries. It is not an accomplishment, just an observation, but one that marks the passage of time.

The next day, Simon weeps, remembering the day his father died, remembering being the first to find him, wondering if dying hurt him, remembering that the last thing his father said to him before he went downstairs to the treadmill was a cheerful "Check on me."

You did check, I tell him. And then I came, and then Brother. And we were there with him when his soul left the room. He was in his own home, and he was with us.

The tears subside, and melt into a few strong shudders. When I look at the video Ficre made of the children watching the rapacious hawk, I hear the light tinkling bells in Simon's voice and think, He was so young that April.

A bit later, in the shower, Simon calls out to me, *I was a ten in sadness when I was crying, Mommy, but now I am a six*.

Whoops, he says, *it just went down to five*.

He comes out of the shower and puts on his pajamas.

Now it's just a three.

He brushes his teeth.

Now it's all gone, he says. *We were with Daddy when he died*.

A year later, it is time to make decisions in the studio. It has been photographed exactly as he left it, each table surface a still-life, each palette a painting unto itself. The paintings have been sorted according to size, dusted, and labelled, all eight hundred and eighty-two of them, plus the sketches, and the photographs, and the small metal sculptures.

The idea of throwing away his paintbrushes makes me queasy. They are somehow biological, his DNA in the brush fibres. I find a box of the very best paintbrushes, which are made of sable. I have long been fascinated with the story of the frozen woolly mammoth, how scientists used a blow dryer to thaw it and extract DNA from its flesh and fur. Now I read they have found liquid blood inside a ten-thousand-year-old woolly mammoth. They will extract the DNA and eventually fertilize and plant an egg inside an elephant. Ficre's DNA is everywhere in the studio, and in the paintbrushes he held for so many hours.

After the studio, I clean deeper in the never-ending house, facing it bit by bit. I clean my pantry cabinets and find Ficre's baking supplies: two brands of yeast and powdered-milk solids, wheat and white and rye and spelt bread flours, rice flour to experiment with gluten-free bread. I throw away all the expired flours. They smell ever so slightly rancid, but not unpleasantly so. They smell biological. I am reminded that grain is alive, a host for bacteria. Things grow and live in it.

Soon after that, we walk forward into a new story, each of us carrying the old ones across our shoulders in bandanas tied to sticks. My sons and I move to New York City. Today, we look out our window at the Hudson River and wait for another hurricane as the sky turns lavender and orange, Ficre colors. When the rain is most dramatic, we feel him close. The boys grow taller than everyone around them and become young men.

Something is fading: not the memory of him but the press of memory, the closeness of him. He is somewhere in the atmosphere, but also not. He is fifty and I am fifty-one. He is a photograph in the living room; he is, for the moment, still.

On the streets of New York, I see people who remind me of him in glances: Ficre elderly, in a favorite overcoat and a gentleman's hat. Ficre an African man walking the city. I see a lovely bald

brown head, or a slightly springing stride. He moved lightly and valued light-footedness, as he valued sotto voce. How he despised needlessly loud voices. There are flashes of him in this complex metropolis, but he is not here.

Death sits in the comfortable chair in the corner of my new bedroom, smoking a cigarette. It is a he, sinuous and sleek, wearing a felt-brimmed hat. He is there when I wake in the middle of the night, sitting quietly, his smoke a visible curl in the New York lights that come in between the venetian-blind slats.

At first, I am startled to see him. He sits so near, is so at home. But he doesn't move toward me, he simply cohabits. And so, eventually, I return to sleep. He isn't going anywhere, but he isn't going to take me, either. In the morning, the chair is empty.

I dream we are moving, my family of four: Lizzy, Ficre, Solomon, and Simon. It is light and easy. We laugh with the boys as we sort through and throw things away. Ficre carries and moves large bags and objects—"your African ox," as he used to call himself, sturdy and purposeful. The boys move like oxen as well. We are glad to be going wherever we are going.

Now it is just the two of us walking a long, gently curved road, holding hands. At a fork in the road, Ficre lets my hand go and waves me on. *You have to keep walking, Lizzy*, he says. I know it is the only truth, so I walk.

I look back. I look back. I can still see him, smiling and waving me on.

It was the two of us walking the road and now he has let my hand go.

I walk. I can always see him. His size does not change as I move forward: he is five feet nine and a half, exactly right. I can still feel the feel of my hand in his hand as I walk.

I wake and the room is flooded with pale-yellow light.

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