

PERSONAL ESSAY

My grandma was illiterate. I’m an English major.

// BY HANA TILKSEW

Tafesu, my mother’s mother, never read a book.

Imperial Ethiopian custom in the mid-20th century dictated that young women were married off as teenagers, not educated. In some ways, I’ve been less privileged than Tafesu. She was the affluent daughter of landowners — wealth that I never saw because Ethiopia’s communist regime took it away. She was surrounded by family her whole life; an ocean lies between me and many of my relatives. But I’ve been given a gift she never had: the written word.

Since I was 5 or 6 years old, I’ve known I wanted to be a writer. For many years, my practical parents tried persuading me otherwise. But despite their best attempts to push me toward the hard sciences, I showed little inclination toward those subjects. I taught myself to write cursive at 7, my only aid a printout with letter templates that I traced onto paper repeatedly, enraptured with the swoops and swirls of my pen. By 11, I was breaking into the teen section of the local library, sauntering into the YA room and hoping no one would comment on my small stature. At 14, I attempted a novel; two years later, I was published in a magazine for the first time. In high school, I started a classic literature club and tripped over myself to take AP English Lit.

Why the hunger for anything and everything literary? I was a guarded youth, hardened by living in six dif-

ferent states by the time I was 14. I learned early on in life that I could not rely on people or places to be constant. My favorite stories, however, never changed. Your comfort character does not forget you after you’ve been at a different school for a year. They are there to welcome you back as soon as you turn the page, no matter how long it has been. I learned almost everything about the world around me through stories — things my immigrant family, knowing little themselves of how to navigate life in this country, could not teach me.

Now, as an English major at Yale, I’m set apart from the rest of my family: parents in nursing and a fi-

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nance major twin brother. It would be easy for me to assume everything I’ve accomplished through my literacy occurred in a vacuum — that I’m a passionate reader and writer thanks to my own efforts. But when I think of Tafesu, I won-



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Hers was a dynamic life spent in the front seat of history. When she was born, Ethiopia was renowned worldwide as the only African country never colonized. When she died, the nation was limping on foreign aid and charity from the diaspora. She dined with war heroes in her youth and saw America as an old woman. If she’d been taught to write, perhaps she would have spun these stories into epic tales, printed and distributed for all the world to read. They may not have been stories I could read myself — I never learned fidel, the alphabet of the Amharic language — but I sometimes imagine sitting at her feet as she read her own writing aloud, transcribing her words in English so her ideas could be received globally.

When my mother’s older brother — Tafesu’s eldest son — left home in the early ’70s to attend university abroad, she pushed back against the idea that it was unbecoming for an Ethiopian to leave their native soil. As far as she was concerned, education was an opportunity no one should disregard.

Tafesu died when I was a small child, but I wonder what she would say if she could see me at Yale. As I sit in my early English poetry class this semester and stumble my way through archaic diction and iambic pentameter, Tafesu’s memory reminds me that each required reading and long-winded essay is a privilege.

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WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:
CALLING YOUR GRANDPARENTS