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# Walking Between Worlds

**LETTERS TO THE NEXT  
GENERATION OF THE  
ETHIOPIAN DIASPORA**

**BY AYNALEM ADUGNA**



for my brother Amsalu

When home wasn't a refuge, you made your own—and refused anything that asked you to shrink. Your grit taught me what perseverance looks like.

“Between what breaks and what begins,  
walk steady—  
truth in your hands,  
dignity at your side.”

**Robert M. Drake**

**A note on titles and intent:** I did not come to this work as president of something, a board chair, or head of an academy. In fact, when an invitation addressed me as “Professor,” my first response was to correct it. I taught in American classrooms for seventeen years while I waited for permanent residency, but I have always been careful with titles. What I offer in these pages is not rank; it is witness. This book leans toward the second generation of the Ethiopian diaspora because I believe they are one of the engines of Ethiopia’s transformation. If the work contributes anything lasting, it will be because the next generation found something here that helped them build a wider bridge back to the country that named them.

A word about the quotations threaded through this memoir: many come from writers and thinkers whose works I admire, but I have not read every source in its entirety. Where I have only met a voice in excerpt, I say so by implication here—and I take it as an assignment. The unread books have moved to my short list, and—judging by the longevity in my family—I expect I still have roughly a third of the way left to read more deeply, to test and refine what I’ve borrowed, and to return thanks by learning these voices in full.

## **Preface**

This book begins with a walk. I was fourteen, moving alone along a road that felt older than any argument the adults could explain to me. Almost a decade prior, my father had been sent north to Eritrea, and that posting—dutiful, impersonal—took more than months from our family. It emptied a room, then a marriage, and then redistributed our chances the way drought redistributes a harvest: unevenly, without apology. In the space where my mother’s voice should have been, a stranger’s voice arrived—my father’s sudden choice of a partner he barely knew. We children learned quickly that love and proximity are not synonyms.

Almost six decades later, headlines rhyme with that season: mobilizations, border buildups, warnings that a war everyone remembers is a war that can begin again. The lesson, for me, is not historical irony; it is continuity. When a state tells you it is preparing for conflict, a family hears it as a weather report for the soul. There are people who will insist that everything changes. I have watched what refuses to. The border still hardens when politics need it to; letters still travel slower than worry; and children still measure adult choices in the currencies of hunger, school fees, and quiet.

What follows in these pages is not an indictment and not an alibi. It is an account—of how a posting altered a marriage, how a hasty remarriage altered a house, and how children adapted, improvised, and carried forward. If I return

often to that fourteen-year-old walk, it is because it was the first time I understood the distance between where a country sends a father and where it leaves his children.

If you trace the arc of this book, you'll find two steady lines. The first is the stubborn line of effort—years of study, teaching, volunteering, and building maps and methods that could stand up in a meeting where the clock is always five minutes fast. The second is the softer line of belonging—how a boy who once walked a dusty road alone learned, step by step, to make rooms where facts are clear, dignity is intact, and decisions are fair.

I wrote these pages for my children and for the wider family of the Ethiopian diaspora—for anyone who has ever felt suspended between places, languages, or expectations. The stories travel from a tin-roofed house to university classrooms, from a volunteer's desk to state government, from a personal website launched at midnight to a keynote stage back home. Along the way, there are hyenas in the hills, equations turned into English, and maps that quiet a room by telling the truth.

You'll also see how persistence and perseverance are not slogans here; they are the method. I spent seventeen years waiting for a single document, and I did not spend those years idling. I built, taught, learned, listened, and kept my promises—to data, to students, to communities, and to myself. If there's a thesis to this book, it's simple: fix the denominator; honor the people behind the numbers; and when the path is narrow, keep walking until it widens.

This book unfolds in thirteen chapters, each one ending with a Fireside Interlude. The interludes are the book's letters—brief pauses where the story steps aside to speak directly to the second-generation Ethiopian diaspora. They braid memory with method: what happened, what it taught, and how to use it. Where a chapter gives scene and texture, a Fireside Interlude distills portable tools—questions to ask, measures to trust, habits to practice (fix the denominator, map the gap, build the bridge), and the civics of everyday life (how to listen across languages, how to turn feeling into service).

Their usefulness is simple: to help you translate inheritance into action. If the chapters are the road, the interludes are waypoints—a compass check, a small ledger of what matters, a short list you can carry into classrooms, clinics, councils, and living rooms. That is why the subtitle reads *Letters to the Second Generation of the Ethiopian Diaspora*: the interludes keep the promise of the title. They are addressed to you, they are written for use, and they link each chapter's witness to the work you will do next.

## Prologue

Picture the road as it was: dust lifting in the afternoon, shoes that didn't fit quite right, a boy counting steps because numbers made more sense than promises. My father's assignment to Eritrea had already become a story other people narrated for us—"duty," "service," "temporary." What we lived was different: a long separation that turned permanent and, soon after, a new woman in our kitchen whose face we did not yet trust. The adults spoke the language of necessity; the children learned the vocabulary of consequence.

In the years that followed, the pattern repeated at different scales. Borders tightened and loosened; leaders changed; maps were redrawn and then argued over again. The public words—deployment, mobilization, normalization—wore out their meanings, but in the private sphere they always resolved to the same math: who eats, who studies, who leaves, who stays. We adapted the way young people do, by becoming useful—running errands, translating between worlds, learning to read any room before crossing its threshold.

This book traces that adaptation without romanticizing it. It moves from that first solitary walk to later crossings—airports and offices, classrooms and waiting rooms—where the old conflict's echo still shaped the next decision. It lingers on the moment my father chose a replacement for my mother after barely meeting her, not to humiliate the dead or the living, but to record how quickly a single adult decision can reroute a child's map. And it refuses the easy ending in which time heals all. Time does not heal borders. People do, when they can. Often they can't.

If the chapters feel like returns to the same theme, that is the point. The Ethiopia-Eritrea story keeps insisting on repetition; families like mine keep answering with endurance. I began as a boy walking alone. I write now as a man taking stock: what hardened and stayed hard, what bent and did not break, and what we carried anyway.

A line on a map moved first. My father's deployment to Eritrea sent him north and, in the quiet arithmetic of service, separated my parents long enough to alter the course of all their children. The adults involved would have called it duty. We learned it later as drift: letters delayed, visits shortened, a family practiced in waiting.

On a late afternoon long ago, a fourteen-year-old boy set out on foot toward Nekemt. The eucalyptus stood like sentries. Dust clung to his ankles. The road

was familiar by daylight and fear-shaped by dusk. He was not running to anywhere and not exactly running away. He was walking because the room he had been given could no longer hold him—because silence in one house and cruelty in another make a third thing inside you, a resolve that feels like breath after smoke.

Hyenas laughed somewhere beyond the gullies. The boy imagined their yellow eyes the way we later imagine deadlines or verdicts. He walked anyway—past the fear, past the hunger—until the town’s generator hummed in the night and its noise became a lullaby. That first long walk did not make him fearless. It made him faithful—to the plain work of enduring, to the stubborn habit of turning toward the next honest thing to do. Years later, when the work became translating calculus into policy, stitching maps from cold addresses, or standing in front of an audience back home, it was the same muscle: keep going, keep telling the truth, keep the dignity of people intact.

This book begins with that walk because it is the seed of everything that followed: the teacher’s voice, the researcher’s patience, the public servant’s clarity, the parent’s promise. If you have ever stood at the edge of a road and chosen forward, you already know this story.