

lekso baite

By Leah Daniel

i wanted to begin *this*, whatever this is, with a definition

but, like many things to do with my culture,

the only definition i know is the one my mom has told me:

a house in mourning.

my mom has always been my eyes and ears in my family,

interpreting and withholding,

i have never had full access to my family's secrets, like many children

but i have also never had full access to my family's common inside jokes and laugh,

somewhat of an outsider, displaced by the choice my family members made in where to

bring me up

there's a certain air however, that needs no interpretation:

a quiet tenseness

an empty and short laugh

hushed whispers from the kitchen

a forced smile when the kids walk in

an eye seemed permanently swollen from unshared tears

leksew baite

my house has already been a leksew baite before

we had probably every habesha person within a hundred km radius

come to pay their respects to

my dad's sister,

my aunt, my lookalike, my biggest supporter.

their respects felt like comfort and acceptance,

their visit felt like old friends trying to cheer you up.

soon enough our house felt like there was so much life,

how could we ever remember my aunt's final days over her beautiful other ones?

her big laugh, her charm with people

days spent with family, with friends

people who felt so strongly for her they fell to their knees at her funeral

calling out for her

ihite geni

sister geni

here, no one was calling out for her

here, we were all holding each other

admiring her smile from the frame on our dining room table

seeing her surrounded by all the flowers she deserved

leke sewe bait

i knew my grandparents weren't visiting under the best pretenses

i can never pretend to feel what my grandpa feels

the loss of his first child, his first daughter

auntie geni

i was excited to see them regardless

despite the language barrier we would laugh

communicate creatively

and sometimes communicate nothing at all,

but through the air travelled

love

leksow bayte

there was something so heart-shattering to walk into the living room

and see my grandpa's eyes.

he tried to be silly like always,

but they were a giveaway

my grandma, so full of warmth

said hello so reservedly.

the all-black dress which never left my home

became more pronounced than ever.

that night i sobbed again,

and just like that, my house became the leksow bayte again

how will i ever know what they feel if i can't even figure out this one phrase?