

Of the Poet and the Café

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| Ethiopia |

translated by Hewon Semon

“የባህሪው ስራ ስራ”

There wasn't a single day Woubshet didn't wake up at dawn grumpy. His neighbors to the left and right of his rented room were like law-appointed alarm clocks for him. The loud prayers of the woman who just recently converted from Orthodox Christianity to 'Pente' to the left, and the roof-piercing music blasted by the banker to his right who sings along in hopes of escaping the sounds from the woman's prayers, wake Woubshet up abruptly from his sleep each morning. On top of everything, the landlord's cow also contributed to this by making loud sounds for reasons unclear; either it was protesting being milked or declaring its longing for its calf.

But today, he woke up to the sounds of the fire truck, the 'I am coming for you' declaration passing through the area. He sat up on the edge of his bed, trying to forcefully open his eyes. He sent his legs to the floor in search for his slippers. He couldn't find them. He couldn't remember where he threw them the previous night.

He knew he had slept in. How could he have slept this much on this day? On this special day! A bit angry with himself, undressed from the waist up, he made his way to his shelf in search of his watch. It read nine-thirty. As he had feared, he was late. He dressed quickly,

and made his way up Africa Avenue towards Abyot Square hurriedly. His rush made it seem as if an ostrich angrily looking for its scattered chicks was chasing him.

His long legs, feeling the strains of fatigue, couldn't satisfy his heart's desire to travel faster, but their long strides sufficed in swallowing up the road quickly enough. After passing Flamingo restaurant, he paused briefly, looking at churchgoers dressed in white, walking up and down the stairs of St. Estifanos's church.

He bent his head in the direction of the church, crossed himself, said, "Help me spend a good day, hold back my enemies, my Father," to St. Estifanos, and then went on his way. He walked by Addis Abeba Stadium, left it to his left, and walked towards Churchill Avenue.

He slowed his pace. He realized that he was sweating on his forehead when he got to Ras Hotel from Churchill Avenue. From the left pocket of his wide coat, he took out a blue handkerchief and smiled to himself as he dabbed the sweat from his face. He could feel it was a good day. Roha Café would be filled with excitement today. He couldn't clearly remember the last time a poetry night was held at Roha Café. It must have been over 10 years ago. Renown and esteemed poets, home-grown critics, journalists scouting for gossip, theatre actors whom he saw daily enjoying the morning sun at Biherawi Theatre would all come. "All will come and either present poetry or mock those who read their poems," he said to himself.

When he got to Ras Hotel, he started walking at an even slower pace. He sent his hands to his shirt to check that his collar was placed properly under the sweater he was wearing. It was properly placed. He looked down at his shoes. His shoes weren't clean. He called out to the listero boys sitting in the sun across the main road. A listero in his mid-teens came sprinting towards him. Without removing his eyes from Woubshet's shoes, the listero dropped his box on the ground, kneeled, and started wiping his shoes. Woubshet, with his shoe on the listero's box, drifted away in thought, thinking of the evening ahead and the short speech he'd make.

It all started all over again last Tuesday. A young, skinny, dark-skinned and messy-haired boy came to Roha Café and stood by the entrance. Woubshet was preparing a cup of macchiato with hot coffee.

“What’s keeping you there? Either get in or go to your left or right,” he yelled, pointing to the lively neighboring Sheger and Arada Cafés.

The young boy ignored Woubshet. He stood a while longer at the entrance then called out, “Woubshet the poet!”

Woubshet stopped preparing his macchiato and stared intently at the boy. No one had ever called him a ‘poet’ until today.

“You’re cursed. Restart the poetry evenings. You think it’s enough to simply write one book and spend your life burning that book?” the boy said. Then he left without waiting for a response.

Woubshet didn’t know who the boy was or who might have sent him. He closed his café and went to Tele Bar to have a drink, and he spent the evening walking aimlessly, thinking about the good old Roha Café days. What a blessed time that had been.

What has he done in the past 10 years? Nothing! What has he done besides burn every copy of the one book he wrote, making a bonfire like the Meskel demera? He would have liked to bang his head against a brick wall.

Woubshet Mesfin published a poetry book titled, “The Early Bird’s Decree”, and became the laughing stock of critics, and professional and amateur poets alike. He wrote about a bird. There was one bird. A bird, which, unlike the Meskel bird, did not come just once a year following the scent of the adey abeba. It was about a bird that, when the sky became the color of the belly of a donkey, would disturb the peace of Addis Abeba by declaring, Allehu,

allehu, I exist. One day, all the other birds copied her voice and began to say, Allehu, allehu, and stole her melody. That bird was never seen again. She never came back to Addis Abeba. He wrote, "Where did the bird go?" When the book made it to the public, it became an item of mockery. He was accused of disrespecting literature, and it had been ten years last Tuesday that, like Aryos, he was excommunicated from the arts.

He wrote his poems at a time when Roha Café was seen as the hottest spot for literature. It was a wonderful time for both Roha and the arts. At least twice a week, Roha would witness poetry accompanied with music from the krar and washint, and, once every 15 days, a famous artist would be invited to lead heated conversations.

The week his book was published, critics drew their weapons and fired shots at him. When he went to open Roha Café early in the morning five days after the book came out, he found his book thrown on the café's veranda. He didn't expect to receive such negativity. Poets, critics, journalists who once jam-packed Roha Café disappeared entirely.

He closed Roha Café and disappeared from the area for two weeks. The news of Woubshet's retreat was heard across the town. He went to Dire Dawa. Upon his return, despising poetry, he stopped all sorts of art programs from taking place at the café. He removed the poems from the walls. He then stopped his contact with all poets and critics and started purchasing copies of his book from publishers and distributors to burn them, hoping that the coming generation would know nothing of it.

Roha soon became a cold café where only coffee and macchiato were sold. The glamour of Roha further deteriorated once the neighboring Sheger and Arada Cafés were opened.

Woubshet wanted to manage Roha Café only until all of the publications of his book had been burnt. He had published nine hundred and fifty copies. One month and twenty days after returning from Dire Dawa, he had bought nine hundred and thirty copies. But finding those last twenty books took him over ten years. Since he didn't know who bought the copies, he kept visiting old bookstores. He would even wait until after-work hours in various places to ask, 'Does anyone have a book called The Early Bird's Decree?' But even so, up

until last week Tuesday, he had only bought and burned sixteen of the remaining books; he now had four books left.

However, on Tuesday, he had decided to drop his ten-year long effort and organize a great poetry event. He distributed advertisements in public gathering spaces. He has also sent descriptions of the event to newspapers. The only concern he had was regarding the number of people attending; he didn't want a large group.

He gave the listero one birr and headed calmly to the Café without waiting for his change. By looking at the number of people outside Biherawi Theatre, drinking tea, coffee and macchiato, it might seem that Addis Abeba had been asked to come out for battle. A sense of jealousy crept up on him when he realized that his café was not open, and that all of these people were being served at Arada and Sheger alone.

But he immediately scolded himself, "Listen Woubshet Mesfin! You are a poet, not a merchant! Let it be gold they're paying with."

He sent his hand to his pocket in search of the key to the café. First to his left pocket. He found a blue handkerchief. Then he emptied his other pockets. He must have forgotten his keys at home. He forgot his keys. He approached the other cafés, angry at his forgetfulness. It seemed like the city's coffee admirers had been called here through a proclamation. The noises of the cups and spoons, the restlessness of the coffee drinkers, the back and forth of the waiters made the cafés resemble a wild market space.

Woubshet approached the cafés. He could see Arada Café. He could also see Sheger Café. But he can't see Roha Café. As he approached, his confusion grew. He got to the veranda, unwilling to accept what he was seeing. Seats were taken; some were drinking while standing. All the chairs on the veranda were all occupied.

Roha Café was here.

But Roha Café was not here now.

He struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. He tried to convince himself that what he was seeing was not true and that he must not be awake.

The café was not there.

Roha Café, until eleven o'clock last night, was between Arada and Sheger Cafés. Unable to digest what he was seeing, he stood for about twenty minutes leaning on one of the posts of Biherawi Theatre, moving his eyes, watching the coffee drinkers on the veranda absent-mindedly. He registered the features of each customer.

He read the names of the cafés, posted on the external wall of their entrances. One read, Arada Café. Without removing his eyes from the wall, he carefully and slowly glanced to the door of the next café. Sheger Café, it read.

“Ende! Is this real?” he said to himself. And then again, “Are you stupid? This can't be,” he scolded himself. He turned his face away from the cafés and looked at the buildings across from him. He saw Addis Café from afar. He was correct. He hadn't confused the neighborhood. He has been coming and going from this place for the past 15 years.

Returning from his thoughts, he asked himself, “Where did Roha Café go?” while tapping his forehead because he couldn't see or read its sign. “My eyes have stopped reading then,” he said, walking from where he stood by Biherawi Theater, and making his way towards the direction of Ras Hotel. When he got to the entrance of Ras Hotel, he stopped. He rubbed his eyes and told himself repeatedly that what he was seeing: people walking past him, creatures calmly making their way up and down the road, was not in his dreams but in reality. He stretched. He slapped his forehead gently with his palm.

He slowly walked back the forty meters from Ras Hotel to Biherawi Theater. “What is wrong

with me?" he asked himself. "Hoooy! My eyes can't even see properly? It means that old age is here. What if it isn't my eyes?" He grew concerned. "Have I started losing my mind? Am I forgetting things? No! I haven't gone mad." He looked at what he was wearing. He looked fine. Though I don't look well dressed, I haven't let myself go, he thought and comforted himself. If I mention that the café disappeared, they'll think I lost my mind, he thought, walking slowly again. He wished the short road would take him forever to complete. He returned to the cafés, talking to himself. He looked. Yet again, Roha Café was not in its location. "How can a single person not ask how a café that was there yesterday not exist today?" he asked and glanced around at the mass of worriless people drinking coffee.

He started thinking of what he should do. Should he yell, "They stole my café"? If he did, they'd take him to Amanuel Hospital, convinced that he was crazy. How was he going to convince himself of that, and what would he do for a living now? As he was stressing over this, two accountants from Medhin Company walked into Sheger Café without greeting him. They saw him. They had all even stared at one another. They pretended to not know him. He was a little annoyed. Looking from Sheger Café to Arada and then back again, he hoped for a miracle to bring back Roha Café. A little while later, two young women walked into Arada Café without greeting him. "What's so wrong with me that they refuse me God's greetings?" he said, thinking to confront them. But, one can't really accuse others of not saying hello. He returned his eyes back to where Roha Café was until last night.

He swallowed and looked in disbelief at Arada then Sheger Café while leaning on Biherawi Theatre's post. Angry and confused, sweat was starting to roll down his forehead. He took out his blue handkerchief to dry his face and put it back in his pocket, only to bring it back up to his forehead again.

The short waiter from Arada café came towards him. She had tied her short hair at the back. The blue uniform she wore fit perfectly around her hips, tripping the eyes of all passersby. Woubshet liked her smile; a beautiful bright smile that was enough breakfast, lunch and dinner on its own. She was a good friend. He tried to write a poem about her smile once, but not a single verse was willing to come to mind.

She showed him a reserved smile and said respectfully, "I'm sorry, you've been standing

here since earlier. What can I bring you?" That smile of hers, the one he had tried to write a poem about was not there.

Woubshet lowered his voice and approached her. "Don't you know me?"

The short waitress tried to look at him humbly and shook her head.

"Look at me".

She did.

"You don't know me?" he repeated.

"I'm not sure. Perhaps I forgot. Sorry. Our job forces us to meet quite a lot of people, we can't remember everyone," she said.

"But you knew me well?"

She looked at him again, shook her head and said, "What should I bring you?"

"I don't want anything."

"You can't stand here. Either order or go across the street and stand. Customers might want the place. It's house policy."

Woubshet got angry. "How? Who dares prevent me from standing on the veranda of my own café?" He spoke with a raised voice. This was what he was afraid of. "Eshy, tell me, where did Roha Café go?"

"What Roha Café?" She looked confused.

"My café! Roha Café! It was here last night."

Customers sitting on the veranda now angled their ears and started listening to Woubshet Mesfin's raised voice. All eyes were aimed at him, like a porcupine's thorns. He wasn't sure why they were staring at him like that. The café he worked at for so many years... when it disappears all of a sudden, can he not ask why? Can he not ask about his right, ende?

"Aren't you ashamed when you deny the existence of a café I walked in and out of for ten years? Let us ask the people of Addis Abeba from Mexico Square to Ambassador, from Legehar to Piassa where Roha Café was. There is no reason to lie!"

The short waiter left Woubshet to take a new customer's orders. Woubshet mumbled alone, "How bizarre! Just how bizarre."

People's eyes were still fixed on him.

"My people, why do you look at me? Do you think I'm crazy or do you think I am lying? He's my witness, I am telling the truth," he said, pointing his hands at the sky.

"What café is this, my friend?" It was tall young man not far from Woubshet who asked, stirring his lemon tea with a spoon.

"My café, Roha Café. It was here until 11:00 last night," he said. "I can't find it now. Who could say where it could have gone?" he added in a voice for all to hear.

"Maybe you confused the location? I've been coming here for two years, I've never seen a Roha Café here," said the man politely, hitting the tip of his tea cup with his spoon.

Woubshet got angry. "What's he saying?! I'm telling you I was working until late last night. What kind of thing is this? I've lived off of it for years. How many coffee addicts did I serve? How can you say you've never seen it? How can I, the owner, not be trusted? Name a single poet who doesn't know Woubshet Mesfin's Roha Café. How many playwrights sat in Roha and came up with their ideas. 'Dawn in Gonder', where do you think that play was written? Was it not at Roha Café? Was he not sitting and drinking Roha Café's hot coffee? Why do

you deny it? There is no reason to lie.”

The young man silently listened to Woubshet and without responding, put a bill in the cup holder and rushed out. The noise surrounding the two cafés had now disappeared and was replaced with silence and whispered words. Some started laughing.

The headwaiter of Arada Café approached Woubshet in his white attire. He was tall and dark-skinned. He had a scar on his forehead, either a horse had stepped on him or he was a victim of a knife attack. The manager had on a short work coat over his white shirt. He held his hands politely at his back and got closer to him.

Woubshet relaxed when he saw Moges. “Moges, ajerew. Ere get me out of this puzzle; where can a café go?” he said, lowering his voice.

Moges was surprised that a man he had never seen called him ‘ajerew’, a term of endearment among friends, and said, “How can we help you, sir? You are disturbing customers.”

“Moges!” exclaimed Woubshet. He clapped his hands, “Moges! You too! Moges...”.

“Do you know me?”

“Woubshet Mesfin of Harar! He asks if I know him?!”

Moges was confused and tried to remember where he might have known Woubshet. He couldn’t remember anything.

“You’re also acting as if you do not know me?”

“I’ve never seen you before today.”

“Stop joking and tell me where my café went.”

“Which café?”

“Roha café?”

“What Roha Café? I know all the cafés from Mexico Square to Piassa, there is not a single one called Roha.”

“Why do you have to go far? Won’t God himself judge you for denying that Roha was between Arada and Sheger Café for many years?”

“If the café was here where would it go? It isn’t wind, you know?”

“Aren’t you Moges?”

“You are correct.”

“Two months and twenty days ago, did I not bring a doll for your new born baby girl?”

“Yes, I do have a daughter now, but where do you know me that you would come to my house with a doll as a present for my newborn?”

Woubshet was furious. “Where do I know you? Where do I know you? You ask me? How many times did you come begging for money because payday wouldn’t come soon enough? How many times did I give you all I had?”

Moges said calmly, “Sir, where did you say the café was?”

Woubshet looked up at the two cafes. The coffee-drinking customers were listening to their conversation intently. “Here of course” he said and pointed to the two cafés serving their

customers next to one another. "In between the two. Next to Roha was Sheger Café, wasn't it?"

As Moges tried to contain his laughter, the owner of Sheger café noticed the commotion and approached the two. "Getaw, you are disturbing the area."

"Where should I go from my own café?" Woubshet yelled angrily.

Million took off his glasses and scrutinized Woubshet.

"Ato Million, don't tell me even you don't know me?" Woubshet said.

"Obviously not!"

"How could you forget me, the man who managed Roha Café for many years?"

"What café?"

"He asks me what café! You've been running this pretentious place; don't I know that you sold khat? Why do you pretend to not know me?"

There was confusion on the faces of his interrogators. Though they've never seen Woubshet before, they could tell he has information about them. Million was involved in selling khat years ago, but not anymore. Now, he only owned a house in Haya Hulet Mazoria, where artists chewed khat. "Where did you say Roha café was?"

"How many times should I tell you? It was here between the two cafes. You've also forgotten me over night, but what can you do when He commands it!".

"When?"

“Until last night 11 o’clock in the evening”

“And where has it gone?”

“What do I know?”

“Well, it couldn’t have got up and disappeared.” Moges said.

Woubshet was angry.

“If it were here, where else would it be? The café couldn’t have flown away,” Million said, turning to re-enter his café. They all left Woubshet where he was standing and returned to their jobs.

Coffee drinkers rested their eyes on him. He sent his eyes back to the café. How all of them could forget him in a day, and how Roha Café disappeared, he couldn’t understand. “Am I dreaming?” he said to himself. Impossible, he wasn’t dreaming. Roha Café was gone. When he looked up, people’s eyes were forced on him. Some were pitying him.

“What are you staring at? Why are you acting like you don’t know me?” he said loudly. No one responded. “You, you,” he said, pointing at a short, big-bellied man who was complaining that his macchiato had too much milk. “Don’t you know me? Weren’t you Roha Café’s macchiato customer?”

“Who me?” the man asked.

“Yes, you forgot?”

“Don’t start any trouble, my friend. What Roha are you talking about? They start treating you and release you too early at that crazy people’s hospital. Then you come here and trouble us.”

“Who are you calling crazy?” Woubshet raised his voice. “Don’t I know that you’ve been using largatin?” he added.

The man was shocked. “I think you are a spy. You seem to carry our secrets around with you. Now, stop troubling me.” He grew quiet thinking of how a stranger could know of his mental health condition. He silently went on stirring his macchiato.

Moges heard the noise on the veranda and went outside. He saw Woubshet quarrelling with a customer. “You’re disturbing our business. I’ll call the police. Don’t assume that the station is far. ...”

“Let a thousand policemen come. I asked about my café,” he said. “You think its someone’s café, my café, my sweat, Woubshet Mesfin of Harar, a poet afraid of none, a poet. Don’t think I want a piece of anyone’s fortunes.” He approached Moges.

Moges attempted to retreat. “Don’t make me call the police,” he repeated.

“Call a thousand policemen, I from the land of Harar. Who fears death? You say police, ki ki ki ... gassy policemen, who fears them?”

Out of those who had been watching Woubshet, some remained interested in his persistence, others tired of the repetition and started paying their bills and leaving. As they did, new coffee drinkers assumed their places.

Woubshet quickly made his way past Moges and into Arada Café’s restroom. People inside hadn’t noticed what was going on outside, so they ignored Woubshet’s hurried entrance. Their attention was drawn to him only when Moges followed him yelling, “Get out!”

“Let me urinate in peace,” he said and locked the toilet from the inside. He could hear Moges and the others whispering outside the door.

Woubshet closed his eyes as he stood across the sink. He feared looking at himself in the mirror but approached it, nonetheless. Who would he go to for help if he saw someone else in the mirror? He opened the tap with his eyes still closed. He felt the running water on his hands.

He cleansed his sweaty face with his wet hands.

He slowly opened his eyes.

It was him.

Was it really the actual Woubshet Mesfin that all of this was happening to? Or was his soul resting in the body of someone he didn't know? Or has he not woken from his sleep? He remembered the story of the Ethiopian Abemelek, friend of the prophet Ermias, who slept for sixty-six years after praying to avoid watching the destruction of Jerusalem, and he thought that perhaps he had also slept, though not for as many years, but much fewer. Fearing that he might have aged, he looked again at the mirror. He was the same Woubshet Mesfin. He squeezed his face between his hands.

It was the Woubshet Mesfin of yesterday. His head was covered with grey hair. The skin on his forehead had formed lines. His eyes rested on his left eyebrow. They had more grey hair than the right one. He sent his left-hand fingers to his eyebrows and felt them. Today wasn't the day to worry about his eyebrows. The café he worked at for the past fifteen years had disappeared. Even worse, he watched as people who knew him walked by pretending not to know him, and being unwilling to talk to him.

He heard Moges from outside, "You, man. Get out. I'll call the police. You'll regret it later and ask why you were taken to prison."

"Roha café, where did Roha Café go?" he asked the man in the mirror.

Woubshet remembered when he left his birthplace Harar and came to Addis Abeba to work as an accountant at the post office, and then the bright days of Roha Café. He had no other dream. Poetry, day and night: he dreamt of being a poet. He wished to be remembered beyond his grave as a great poet and not as a man carrying flesh that would rot upon death. "... to be or not to be, that is the question ...", he wanted to write just one verse like this, and travel on her forever. He dreamt all day of when his name would be known world over, when his books would be teaching material in schools, when his verses would be repeated by people of all kinds. He dreamt of being present, forever. But he couldn't remember a single time when he'd written a verse satisfying enough for himself or for his friends.

He had sent poems to every poetry competition he heard of. But he never heard back from any of them, not even a confirmation that they had received his poems made it back to him. But he never gave up. He spent his days thinking of poems, at the expense of his work and his social life.

He left his job at the post office and headed to his brother in Dire Dawa, thinking of getting more time for his poetry. His brother was a contraband merchant. If he earned some today, he would lose some tomorrow. That was how he lived.

"And your job?" he asked Woubshet the moment he saw him.

"I quit."

"You'll trade with me. Glad you came."

"Contraband?"

"We'll go to Artishek in the morning. Be ready," he said.

Woubshet appeared dubious. "Abo! don't piss me off. I came to live here so I can write my

poems.”

“You’re not a mashela tebaqi, singing to chase birds from the sorghum harvest. What does poetry do for you?”

But Woubshet had made up his mind. He lived with his brother for two years and finished the first draft of his poems. While he stayed in Dire Dawa, his brother opened a café called Roha in Addis Abeba. Woubshet went to Addis Abeba to manage his brother’s café and publish his book himself. After his brother died in a train accident, he took full ownership of the café. Roha became famous soon after.

Woubshet opened the door of the restroom and walked out. “Ayie Moges, you keep acting like you don’t know me,” Woubshet said, looking pitifully at Moges.

“In the name of St Mary, I swear, Mariamin! I do not know you.”

Woubshet walked out of the café and stood on the veranda. But Roha Café wasn’t there. Where had the café hidden? It was beyond comprehension.

The owner of Sheger Café, Million, standing further away said mockingly, “Did you find your café?”

Woubshet walked past him, defiant and unresponsive. As he walked away from the two cafés, his heart was filled with sadness and his spirit was burdened with inexplicable confusion.

He decided to look for people who knew him and to explain his situation. In the past ten years, he’d cut contact with most people in the arts. But some still remembered him. Since people talked about his attempt to burn all his books, people knew of him. He might find a few sympathetic to his circumstance.

He made his way to the booksellers behind Biherawi Theater. He had an especially strong relationship with the owner of Shawl, the old books bookstore. Over fifty of his poetry books that he burned had been bought at Shawl. He found the owner, Bekalu, re-shelving his books.

Woubshet gave Bekalu a warm greeting. "Bekalu the great, you're all grown."

Bekalu looked at Woubshet with wonder. "Good morning," he said in a collected and respectful tone, the tone used to speak to the elderly.

"Bekalu," Woubshet said.

"Yes," Bekalu said, confused.

"Ere, listen to what happened to me," Woubshet continued, in a spirit of camaraderie, without noticing Bekalu's confusion.

"What was it?" Bekalu said.

"Ende!" said Woubshet. "Don't tell me you don't know me?"

Bekalu smiled and said, "I'm sorry, perhaps I have forgotten you?" He was embarrassed that he forgot a customer.

Woubshet tried to stay calm. He approached the counter. "Do you, maybe, have the book of Woubshet Mesfin, The Early Bird's Decree?"

Bekalu tried to remember, but he couldn't. "I'm sorry. I've never heard of this author or book" he said.

"Are you sure?" Woubshet said.

“In the name of the angel Gebreil, I swear, Gebrielen!” he swore.

“You do not know me?” Woubshet said.

Bekalu stared at the man that stood across from him. “Did you come from the states?” he said, doubting himself.

“You’ve never seen me?” said Woubshet. The young bookseller shook his head. “You used to know me Bekalu. Eshi. Do you also not know Roha Café?”

“Where is it?”

“By Biherawi Theater, where you had had coffee many days.”

Bekalu shook his head.

Woubshet walked to three other booksellers that he was convinced would know him, murmuring to himself. The same thing happened. They didn’t know him. He couldn’t find anyone who knew him or his Roha Café. He was certain that he was a man who, just yesterday, lived in Addis Abeba managing Roha and while trying to form poetic verses on white paper. It was as if his existence had been erased through a proclamation. Overnight, all who knew him had forgotten him. He dug into his pocket and searched for his ID. He looked at it. He had pulled out an identification that had a picture of Woubshet Mesfin, from Harar, the fearless. It was him.

He headed to Tele Bar located behind the College of Commerce and took a chair by the veranda. This was where he was before he headed home last night. He has been a customer there for several years now. The waiter he knew approached him. He’d completely forgotten him as well. He ordered coffee. As the waiter returned with his coffee, Woubshet cleared his throat and said, “Excuse me, brother, do you know where Roha Café is?” The waiter shook his head and walked away. He couldn’t remember where all the other waiters had gone off to.

He left Tele Bar and went to Tewodros Square in a rush, looking for the critic and lawyer Maru's office. He hoped Maru would remember him. He walked up Churchill Avenue, staring at the area, buried in deep thought. He couldn't think of any possible reasons this would happen to him. He hadn't changed a bit from yesterday. The only thing that happened was that he had been erased from memory, both in the memory of others and in what he had dedicated his life to. But how can material, a café, disappear? Where would one even say it could go? He collected and burned his poem collection to be forgotten as a poet, but not entirely as a human being.

He got to the critic Maru's office. He had been a customer of Roha since the day it was first opened. The heartbreaking review he wrote about Woubshet's book forced a wedge in their relationship. But while plenty abandoned Roha, Maru still, from time to time, came and drank coffee in silence. He reached the office, which was a little walk from Lycée Gebre Mariam School.

He knocked on the door and walked in. The secretary asked him to wait. He was soon invited to go into Maru's office. Maru got up from his seat and greeted him. Not as if he'd greet a dear friend, though, only as though he would greet a customer.

"Maru," Woubshet said.

"Abet," Maru said in his rough voice while smiling.

"Please, tell me in honesty," he said.

"What should I tell you?"

"Do you not know me?"

Maru stared at Woubshet's face. He thought. He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I think I might have forgotten you," the critic said. "Were you a writer?"

"Roha Café. The café by Biherawi Theatre where you used to go to for years - do you

remember it?" Woubshet said.

"By Biherawi Theatre? No .. No! I do not remember a café called that."

Woubshet couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You don't know me, either? Don't you know a poetry collection titled, 'The Early Bird's Decree'?"

Maru shook his head. He pointed at the books on the shelf behind Woubshet. "All the books I ever reviewed are there. Take a look. I don't know your work. I'm sorry."

Woubshet got up. He walked out of Maru's office and went back to Biherawi Theatre.

Roha café was not there.

He hadn't eaten all day, no breakfast, no lunch.

What was the point of eating.

The poetry night event had about three hours before it started. He stood in front of Biherawi Theater and started waiting for the people who would have come to Roha Café for his event. The time was flying by.

One hour left.

Thirty minutes.

He looked across the road to see where Roha Café used to be until last night. Customers of Sheger and Arada came and went. No one remembered Roha. He was also forgotten, as if he hadn't lived on earth.

It was time.

Not a single person had come to Roha. And Roha Café was not at her place either.

He walked towards the stadium in despair, leaving the café he worked at for the past fifteen years. He kept looking for people he knew. Though he recognized some, none of them recognized him. The chants of football fans in the stadium engulfed the neighborhood. He started walking to Abyot square.

A young book vendor carrying a stack of books ran up to him. “Almost sold out, almost sold out,” he cried, attempting to sell his books.

“Listen there, do you have a copy of ‘The Early Bird’s Decree’?”

The bookseller started laughing at Woubshet. “Hahahhahahahahaha!”

Woubshet couldn’t understand why he was laughing. “Do you have the book of the great poet?” he asked. “The book of the poet Woubshet Mesfin ...”

The laughter didn’t stop. “Hahahahahahahahaha!”

“The book of the poet Woubshet Mesfin,” he said again.

Woubshet covered his ears with his hands and hurried down the road to St. Urael’s Church. He wasn’t sure where he was headed, but he went past the church and down the slope, and only stopped when he got to the bridge.

He fixed his eyes on the river flowing under the bridge, tired from the summer sun’s heat. Dusk was approaching. It was making its way slowly through the rocks.

Darkness covered the narrow stream.

