

## “Of Beetles & Angels”

by Mawi Asgedom

### Text

¶1 I may or may not remember seeing my mother look at our house in Adi Wahla, Ethiopia, just before we left. Gazing at it as though it were a person whom she loved and cherished. Trance-walking to the house’s white exterior, laying her hands on it for a few moments, feeling its heartbeat—feeling her own heartbeat—then kissing it, knowing that she might never see it again.

¶2 From our very first days in America, my mother and father hammered into our minds the importance of excelling in school.

¶3 RIGHT NOW, WE ARE AMONG THE POOREST IN THE LAND. NEITHER YOUR MOTHER NOR I WILL FIND GOOD WORK BECAUSE WE LACK SCHOOLING. WE WILL HAVE TO WORK BACK-BREAKING JOBS, WE WILL NEVER FULLY UNDERSTAND OUR RIGHTS, AND OTHERS WILL TAKE ADVANTAGE OF US.

¶4 BUT IF YOU, OUR CHILDREN, WORK HARD AT SCHOOL AND FINISH THE UNIVERSITY, MAYBE SOMEDAY YOU CAN HELP YOURSELVES AND HELP YOUR FAMILY, TOO.

¶5 What’s both beautiful and scary about young children is that they will believe most anything that their parents tell them. If our parents had told us that black refugees growing up on welfare in an affluent white community couldn’t excel, we probably would have taken them at their word.

¶6 But they told us that we could do anything if we worked hard and treated others with respect. And we believed them.

### Definitions

*walking while you are thinking about something else so much that you do not notice what is happening around you*

*a person who has been forced to leave his or her country*

*money that is paid by the government to people who are very poor or unemployed*

*having plenty of money*

¶7 It hurt my brother and me to see our parents struggle, and we wanted, more than anything, to be able to help them someday. So we worked hard at school, and after several years, we graduated from the ESL (English as Second Language) program at Longfellow Elementary and entered regular classes full-time.

¶8 Sometimes I wonder what my father would have done at my graduation from Harvard. He probably would have leaped from his seat and interrupted my commencement speech in front of 30,000 spectators. Standing with his back straight, chest out, and right hand pointing forward, he would have shouted, loud enough for everyone to hear:

¶9 THIS IS MY SON, SELAMAWI. A LONG TIME AGO, WHEN HE WAS JUST A LITTLE ONE, I TAUGHT HIM TO WORK HARD AND TO RESPECT OTHERS. NOW LOOK WHERE THAT HAS TAKEN HIM.

¶10 But like my brother, my father missed my graduation. Ironic, isn't it, that father and son survived disease, war, and famine in Africa, but could not survive something as preventable as drinking and driving in America?

¶11 My father departed before it came to full fruition, but the dream that he and my mother shared has already begun to come true. His children have graduated from college—first me, then Mehret, and one day, Hntsa. Mulu lives in Atlanta and raises two more children with that same dream.

¶12 I delivered the commencement address at my graduation from Harvard in 1999. This is the text of my speech.

*graduation ceremony*

*the point at which a plan is successfully completed*

¶13 When I was a child, my mother told me that I should always sleep with the covers over my head. At the time, my family was living in a Sudanese refugee camp, in Africa, and we owned nothing that we did not carry with us. On many a night, we slept out in the open, and my mother warned that if we let the covers down, snakes could slip in and slither into our mouths. We had no trouble following her advice.

¶14 Years later, in the comfort of the United States, my mother gave me another piece of advice, this one less obvious. “Always remember where you came from,” she told me just before I left for Harvard. I was puzzled. The first piece of advice had been easy. Who wants a mouth full of snake! But why was it important to remember where I came from?

¶15 When I moved on to Harvard and saw new worlds open before me, I quickly forgot about trying to understand my mother. Before I knew it, I was signed up for the Tae Kwon Do Club, the Harvard African Students’ Association, a Phillips Brooks House Program, the Freshman Crew Team (where I totaled a \$15,000 boat against the dock), and a Freshman Bible Study (I figured I needed all the prayer that I could get). And, of course, I was taking four classes and trying to meet as many of my 1,600 classmates as wanted to meet me. As I focused my energies on myself and my immediate surroundings, remembering where I had come from seemed far less important than knowing where I was supposed to be every half hour.

¶16 During my sophomore year, however, something happened to remind me of my mother’s advice. I was working as a delivery man for the Harvard Student Agency. One day as I was waiting for my packages in the office, an elderly black woman tottered in and wearily leaned on her cane. She hoped to find someone who would type a short letter for her. Such a simple, easy thing to do. But HSA has no typing service, and the receptionist had to tell her that she had come to the wrong place. As the old woman turned to leave, frustrated and confused, one of my coworkers called

*easy to notice or understand*

*a style of fighting from Korea*

*a group of people who compete in rowing races in boats designed for many people who row together*

*tiredly*

*someone whose job is to welcome and help people arriving in an office*

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her over, gently sat her down, and typed the letter. It was such a simple act. Yet never has a Harvard student seemed so great to me as in that moment of reaching out.

¶17 I began to reflect on what my mother might have meant. In the Sudan, we had carried with us all that we owned, but that included our devotion to one another. In that sense we carried a home, a community, a sense of mutual responsibility wherever we went. On that day in the Harvard Student Agency, my coworker carried a community with her as well: the simple community of human connection and duty.

¶18 So what have I learned from my four years at Harvard? Many facts and formulas, many new ways of thinking, a fresh understanding of the world. But what’s most important to me is that after four years at Harvard I’m finally beginning to understand my mother’s advice.

¶19 Remembering where you come from means holding on to the vision that you are a part of a human community that you can carry with you every day. That community has given us much. Are we not obligated to give it something back?

¶20 My mother’s advice in childhood was to pull the covers over my head—that had been the easy part. But her later advice meant, I now realize, that I should know when to pull the covers down and stick my neck out. That’s the hard part. Too many of us go through life with the covers over our heads. We want to reach out, but we fear to make ourselves vulnerable. And we are also busy. We have appointments to keep; we have things to do. We race through a world of demands. And then we ask ourselves almost helplessly, “What can we do as individuals?”

¶21 Some people say that a butterfly flapping its wings in Japan can cause a hurricane in Louisiana. Anyone of us, however small and helpless we may feel, can spark unimagined changes. Today’s small act of kindness can become tomorrow’s whirlwind of human progress.

*to think carefully about something  
a strong love and commitment  
shared by two or more people*

*feeling that you must do something  
because it is right*

*easily harmed*

*a situation in which a lot of different  
things happen quickly; a rapidly  
rotating column of air, like a tornado*

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¶22 But as you all know, progress is not easy, and it will not come unsolicited. I hope that many of us will inspire positive change. There is still so much to be done both in distant lands such as the Sudan, and closer to home in our own communities. The big, sweeping, revolutionary actions are always most noticeable. But quite often, it will be the small things that all of us can do that will have the most impact. Yes, we will be busy in our lives. But we can all take a little time to do a little deed of kindness. We can help write a letter; we can inscribe a little goodness on the hard surface of this world.

¶23 In a few minutes we shall be welcomed to the ranks of educated men and women. As we start the journey to wherever our dreams may lead, we must remember where we have come from. We must recall our membership in the human community that has nourished us; we must accept the responsibility to keep that community alive. Improving the quality of life for the entire human community is the single greatest task that faces our generation and generations to come. Of course, no worthy endeavor is without risks and pitfalls—without snakes, if you will—but I know that you, my classmates, are ready to peek out, to see beyond yourselves, and cast off the covers. You are ready to face the snakes and drive them away. You are ready to change the world. Thank you! Good luck! And congratulations! **END**

*not asked for*

*completely new and different; sometimes brought about by change from the collective actions of the masses, or the grassroots of a movement or revolution*

*people who belong to a particular group*

*given the food and other substances necessary to live*

*people of about the same age living at the same time*

*an attempt to do something difficult*

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**“Of Beetles & Angels”****Choice A: Informational Paragraph**

What was life like for Mawi Asgedom in America? Write an informational paragraph explaining his experiences.

Begin your paragraph with a controlling idea that makes your point about the topic. Include three relevant facts, examples, or data from the article to support your controlling idea.

End your paragraph with a concluding sentence that follows logically from the details and explains why the topic is important.

**Choice B: Argument Paragraph**

Based on evidence in the text, do you think that Asgedom’s parents were a strong influence on him? Write an argument paragraph telling whether you think they were or were not.

Start your paragraph by making a claim about the issue. Support your claim with three convincing reasons or relevant data from the article. Point out a weakness in an opposing argument.

Conclude your paragraph by restating your claim and making a recommendation to readers.