



Home & Belonging



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Volume 05 Issue 03

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Nisnis - A quarterly magazine
published by Queer Ethiopia
focusing on LBQ issues



QUEER ETHIOPIA

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“Queer Ethiopia” is an alternative space created by a group of queer Ethiopian women. It is designed to be a space for a diverse group of Ethiopian queer women whose sexual and gender identifications vary. It includes cis and trans women who may be lesbian, bisexual or asexual. This is a space where the experiences of queer people takes center stage. We hope to include personal experiences from our daily lives as queer people, various stories, interviews, original artwork and poetry. We hope it will also serve as a place where Ethiopians in Ethiopia and Ethiopians in the diaspora come as themselves to explore and create an online community.

 queerethiopia.com

 [ethioqueer](https://ethioqueer.com)

   [QueerEthiopia](#)

 etqueerfamily@gmail.com

 t.me/queeret

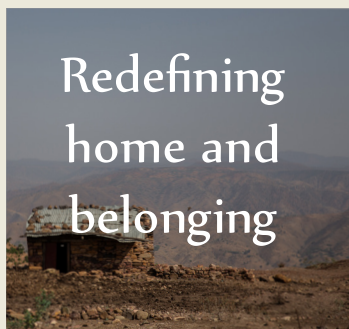


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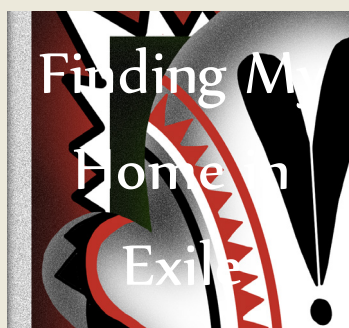
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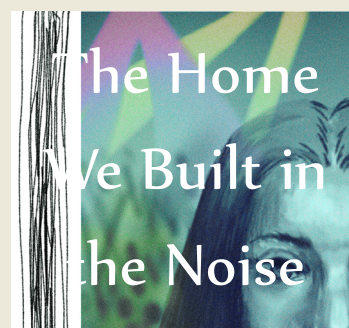
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From the Editors

Seeing a pride flag openly fluttering in the window across from an Ethiopian restaurant, “a beacon in a foreign land,” is a reason for celebration. When that sight makes a queer Ethiopian exhale for the first time in years, it is damn near impossible not to cry. It is a signal that a home that holds no shame might just be a possibility for us.

Welcome to our 17th issue of Nisnis, where we explore the meaning of home and belonging. For queer Ethiopians, home is rarely a simple geographical location. It is a complex, aching, and beautiful question we navigate every day. It is the physical space we are forced to leave, chased by homophobia; it is a sanctuary we build for our survival, and it is the love we create in the corners of a hostile country.

As the stories in this issue demonstrate, the places that should offer safety can often become sites of hate and hostility. Our family homes can be where we carry a “heavy secret.” The church of our childhood can transform from a universe of belonging into a source of shame. Our university campuses, sites of exploration, become “places of ache,” where we edit our laughter, our style, and our very conversations just to survive. As one of our writers succinctly puts it, “Ethiopia isn’t home for queer people.” We are forced to make our bodies into our first and sometimes only refuge.

Yet, in the face of this denial and rejection, we are relentless builders of our own belonging. This issue is a testament to the many ways that we build home. For some, home is a person, as one of our contributors writes, “We have created a place where the world cannot reach us. A place that feels like home, because love is safe here.”

For another one of our contributors, home is the love that makes a noisy, crowded concert feel like a “perfect solitude” because the one you love is secretly holding your hand. The mere touch of her hands serves as a grounding force.

We also find home within ourselves, like Yohana, who cultivates a private sanctuary, discovering that true belonging requires no one’s permission but her own. We find it in digital spaces, connecting with a chosen family across borders. And we find it in a reclaimed faith, in the powerful experiences of a church led by a lesbian pastor, where a rainbow pin on a pianist’s lapel feels like a miracle.

For others, home is built in exile. It is the freedom found in Kenya to walk hand-in-hand with a partner, defended by strangers who say, “She has the right to be who she is.” Home is being free to imagine a life that is in the light instead of lingering in the darkness of Ethiopia. It is having the bravery to take risks in the unknown.

We hope this issue of Nisnis fills you with pride, as it is a testament to our resilience. It is a powerful celebration of our ability to find and create love and safety against all odds. We keep building homes on these shifting grounds, proving that we are the architects of our homes. Never giving up and always rising with hope and determination.

Thank you yet again for reading Nisnis. Thank you also to all those who contributed to the publication of this issue. We wouldn’t be able to do this without you.

Enjoy.

Redefining home



e and belonging



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”

...

- Yohana

Home is a basic need - somewhere safe, where you unequivocally belong. But for many queer Ethiopians, this is complicated. When the places and people that should offer safety cannot accept who we are, we need to make a difficult choice: to hide, to leave, or to redefine the very meaning of home.

This story follows two paths born from that choice. Yohana has found a way to build a sense of home within herself. She has created an internal space of safety where her true self can exist. Jamzee has made the painful decision to leave Ethiopia, seeking physical safety abroad at a great personal cost.

Their stories are really about resilience. It is about the courage to create a space for oneself in a country that repeatedly tells you that you do not belong. And within that internal and external struggle is a powerful sense of hope: the belief that a future is possible where we don't need to live in conflict between being our authentic self and our sense of safety.

Through Yohana's and Jamzee's journey, we learn that belonging is not a given, but that it is built. We learn that the very act of building is an act of hope for a more accepting world.

Yohana: The home within

For Yohana, the word "home" has changed shape and meaning over the years. It used to be a simple thing: the house where her family lived. But as she grew more into herself, that simple definition began to feel limiting and uncomfortable. The love was clear, but it felt conditional, tied to a life she was expected to live.

Now, home is something she builds for herself. It's not a physical place, but rather a feeling she carries inside. It is the feeling of being able to relax, to let her guard down and just be.

You can almost hear the relief in her voice when she describes it: "When I am alone, I am not judged by anyone." In the quiet room, with the door closed, the world outside fades. Here, she can pray, meditate, or just watch a movie without having to explain herself. This solitude is a relief, a break from the constant pressure to perform, even in social situations with other queer people where she thought she might fit in.

This desire for a private sanctuary comes from a life that daily requires constant attention. A happy phone call with her girlfriend is punctuated by pauses, listening to anyone outside her

"These challenges? ... This is the price I paid."


Jamzee

door. She finds herself watching people's faces closely, waiting until "they say hi and gauge their friendliness before I feel safe." Family gatherings become a minefield of well-meaning questions about her future — when she will get married, when she will have children. To navigate them, she arms herself with a story.

"I have to make-up a story about how I already have a boyfriend," Yohana said, a small, necessary fiction to protect her truth and herself.

She relies on simple daily rituals to keep her inner world strong. Her meditation and prayer go beyond just spiritual acts, they are a way of checking in with herself, reinforcing her own foundation and boundary. She knows that if her inner peace starts to crack, the outside world becomes a much scarier and difficult place.

This whole journey has led her to a quiet but powerful realization. After spending so much energy trying to belong in different worlds, she found the most solid ground was within. "When I am on my own, I feel like I really feel a sense of belonging to myself," Yohana says.

It is the ultimate safety: a home that nobody can lock her out of, a belonging that requires no one's permission but her own.





Jamzee: A journey to hope and belonging

For a long time, home for Jamzee was just ... home, a physical space. It was the dusty pitch where she played football with the neighborhood boys, the familiar taste of her mother's shiro, the simple comfort of being surrounded by people she knew and who knew her.

But that version of home started to suffocate her. She remembers the knot in her stomach when her landlord looked at her friend and asked a pointed question.

"She came and asked me if we were... you know, 'gay'," Jamzee recalls. "I just played dumb. I acted like I had no idea what she was talking about."

At that moment, her home - the space she paid for - wasn't safe anymore. It was a place where she had to lie to keep a roof over her head.

When she moved to Addis Ababa from the regional city where she lived, she did not anticipate that it would be fraught with so much danger. The hate campaign in Addis Ababa became so intense that she was concerned about walking alone on the streets. Random and threatening questions about why she was "dressed as a man" had her fearing for her safety.

Leaving Ethiopia was not a dramatic escape; it was a quiet, painful tearing away. She moved to Kenya with one hope: to find a place where she could be herself. The reality, though, was a shock.

"Kenya is not the most comfortable place," she says with a sigh.

She was met with many challenges which included being afraid to close her eyes for fear of being attacked on the streets of Nairobi. She took any work she could find including washing cars and collecting trash, just to afford a single meal.

"You know the things you do for survival," she says. "These were difficult things."

But in the middle of all that hardship, a new, tougher version of home started to grow inside her. It was not about a specific country or house anymore. It was about the feeling of making it through another day on her own terms.

"These challenges?" she said, "This is the price I paid." You can hear the strength in her voice, hard-won and real. She dreams of an Ethiopia where the next queer person like her won't have to pay such a high price.

For now, home is the small, steady flame of her own resilience and bravery - a light she carries with her, no matter where she goes.

Home: Where we are able to breathe

Home is an interesting concept because it is meant to be a safe space. And Ethiopia isn't home for queer people. We have survived all kinds of violence by people we love, by our churches and mosques, and by the state. From the press conference against us in 2011 to Toto Tours in 2019 to Gibre Sodomini Eqawemalew in 2023, we have witnessed wave after wave of hostility. Each of these moments carried the same message that we do not belong.

These orchestrated campaigns of fear and moral panic are not isolated incidents; they are part of a broader effort to erase us from the national imagination. Through propaganda and public condemnation, they have spotlighted our

existence only to dehumanize it, forcing us to feel foreign in our own country. They have weaponized the very idea of "home" against us. They have turned what should be a refuge and a safe space into a site of exile.

Safety goes out of the window. You begin to shrink yourself for survival. Your conversations become measured, and laughter becomes cautious. You start to pull away from your community and from the version of yourself that once felt free to exist within it. You slowly skip family gatherings, avoid questions, erase traces of affection from your social media. Then the withdrawal grows heavier and deliberate. You begin to look over your shoulder every time you walk down the street,



scan faces in cafes and restaurants or pause before holding your partner's hand in public. Love and intimacy become a calculated risk. Living with a partner adds another layer of vigilance. You learn to choreograph everyday life around safety, rehearsing invisibility as though it were second nature.

The constant denial of home and choreography is painful. Allies often ask, "How do you survive? How do you navigate home?" Their tone always carries the same disbelief, "I don't even know how you do this."

I think of queer bodies as sacred spaces, carrying so many secrets, stories untold and fears swallowed. When every external space turns hostile, the body becomes the first and sometimes only refuge. It helps us hold memory and desire. It is my body that remembers every glance I had to avoid, every love story I couldn't say aloud. Isn't it our bodies that teach us how to walk without drawing attention, how to hide tenderness, how to grieve silently in public. Yet within that choreography of caution, there is also grace. The grace of still choosing to live and to love. The contradictions of fear and freedom itself is resistance.

I think of the power of social media that connects us across borders. Our little, fragile safe space. After a long day of performance, we open our phones to step into a world where we can breathe more freely. It's like taking your bra off after a long day, or your hiking boots after hours of walking uphill. We speak our truths without lowering our voices like we do at cafes. We share memes that only we understand, we share our love stories with no fear. Within these connections, chosen families are built. A big, messy, beautiful family with all kinds of siblings. The ones who text you after hearing about another hate campaign. The ones who remind you to eat, to rest, to breathe. The ones who hold your stories without judgment. Our bodies learn new ways of belonging. We celebrate anniversaries of a couple we have never met in person; we send holiday greetings and share pictures with no faces or identifying marks. In this web of connection, we find a new kind of home. It is not perfect but real and alive.

Those digital webs have also carried love across distances. Many of us have found our partners through those same online spaces. A queer woman once told me, "Even with so much hate around,

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Romantic partners become our safest spaces. For some, that shared apartment or rented room becomes a home in the truest sense because of the mutual care that fills it. It’s a no-hate zone, a space where you decide who gets to come, where tenderness and joy takes place with no fear. You get to have your chosen families over on weekends or holidays, filling the space with warmth and inside jokes.

In a place that insists we shouldn’t exist, living together becomes an act of quiet rebellion. You dance to your favorite music, holding your partner by the waist, kissing at every corner. You watch queer shows on full volume, not whispering anymore. It’s ordinary life and yet it feels extraordinary because it’s lived freely between those walls.

I think of home in exile. Many of our friends have had to flee, leaving behind everything familiar because of the physical and emotional violence they faced. This kind of escape never comes easy. In one way, you feel lighter and freer because you can finally exist without constant fear. Yet in another, you carry the heaviness of what was lost.

You start to rebuild home from scratch. You learn new streets and new accents. You practice new ways to say your name. You long to meet chosen families again, to find people you can dance and laugh with. But even in exile we find ways to create joy. We play our songs with other queer Ethiopians and dance to Eskista and Guragigna at our small hidden pride parties. We share injera and coffee and plan our next gathering again.

There is still nothing like being accepted as any other citizen, to belong without explaining or hiding parts of yourself. Yet there is power in the different ways we have learned to belong. And this is how we do it.

Home, in the end, is not where we are born, but where we are able to breathe.



Campus: Place of Ache

Being a queer student in Ethiopia is one of the hardest things I have ever had to live through. Our society is known for its homophobia, and campuses are no different. Talking about queerness openly is impossible. Even saying something positive about it can make you a target.

Forget about being free to love or be in a relationship; it's not safe. Most students are not progressive or open-minded, because they've grown up in a culture shaped heavily by religion and tradition.

On campus, I never feel completely safe. Our safety is never guaranteed. That's why we are forced to hide who we are. Being verbally abused or bullied is painful, but the bigger fear is what happens if people actually find out you're queer. The risk of physical violence is very real, and in some cases it can even cost someone their life. That constant fear shapes how I move, how I act, and how I speak.

It's almost understood that no one, including the staff or faculty at school will make space for us. I don't expect anything from them. But I have been lucky in one way: I have a few close friends who know about me. Some of them are queer, and others are allies. They make everything bearable. With them, I can breathe, and I can laugh. We watch movies together, play games, and stay up late having conversations about anything and everything. In that small circle I feel safe and seen, and that's what makes campus life enjoyable for me at all.

Still, it's exhausting to hide myself all the time. I try not to "give off gay energy," but sometimes it's hard to pretend. I don't want to act like someone I'm not or to layer myself with things that don't describe me, just to survive.

For example, with my straight friends, conversations about relationships were always the hardest. On a normal day, when the topic of heterosexuality came up, I had to nod, agree, and add comments that supported their arguments even if they didn't reflect what I truly felt. Don't get me wrong. I like men too. I'm talking about the non-inclusive topics, the heterosexuality-centered topics, and the hatred towards my people.

During my campus years, I have been pretending to have a boyfriend just to stop them from trying to set me up with someone. The endless questions were unbearable, so I carefully chose my words, avoiding anything that might hint at me being queer or even supportive of queerness. Even in how I dressed, I tried to blend in by styling myself like other women who presented themselves in ways society deemed acceptable. The way I spoke, the way I behaved, even the way I carried myself—those were all layers I put on, versions of me that weren't really me, just to fit in and survive.

There are moments when I ache to just be myself, without fear of what could happen. I had this untamable desire to live openly and unapologetically in my identity. It's a mix of longing and frustration, longing to embrace who

I am without hesitation, and frustration at the barriers that make me hide. I consider myself a STEM girl, and sometimes I imagine what it would feel like to simply cut and color my hair the way I want, to wear a septum ring, and to dress in baggy clothes with my flag as a belt. You know the small choices that quietly announce my comfort in my own skin. The ache was that urge to let people see me exactly as I am, without fear of judgment or rejection. My queerness belongs to me; I don't need outside validation to know I'm real. But I do deserve to move through the world as a normal person, treated with the same ease and acceptance others take for granted.

What would make life better for queer students like me? Respect. Understanding. I remember the night I came out to my close friend, who was also my roommate. She was straight, but we often watched sapphic movies together and had open conversations about queerness in general. Unlike others, she never carried hate or judgment, and I think I can honestly call her an ally. For a long time, I lied to her too, especially since I had been secretly dating our mutual friend who lived in the same dorm. But as time went by, I couldn't keep lying to her. We had a routine of going for walks at night, and during one of those walks, we were talking about whatever we were talking about, and then I told her I was queer. My voice shook, and it felt terrifying, but it was also freeing.

She didn't hesitate; she hugged me, reassured me, and told me she loved me. At that moment, I felt free, and for once I wasn't pretending. I was just myself.

Maybe asking for everyone to be like this friend could be a big ask. At minimum, I want a campus where people don't have to agree with us but where at least they let us exist in peace. Because at the end of the day, it is simple: love is love. And it should be okay to love someone of the same sex.

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My partner and I met when we were very young, at a time when we didn't even know where to find other queer people. It honestly felt like it was just the two of us against the world. In public, we had to perform, pretending to be nothing more than friends. We laughed and walked side by side, careful not to draw any suspicion.

I remember one night so clearly. After a wonderful dinner date, I walked her home. Her neighborhood had no streetlights, and the darkness wrapped around us like a secret. At her doorstep, I leaned in and kissed her goodnight, not realizing her older sister was arriving at the same time. The shock and panic of that moment still feel fresh even today, but to my surprise, her sister never said a word about it, not to her and not to me. This was years and years ago. Things weren't as bad as they are now. These days we just give each other a high five.

A few years into our relationship, I got a good job and finally moved out on my own. I had hoped she would move in with me too, but her family was far stricter than mine. So, living together was impossible. Still, we found a way to make it work. She started spending two to three nights a week with me, and I can't explain how much of a difference that made. Coming home to an empty apartment after a long day at work always felt dull and quiet. But Thursdays were different. From the moment I wake up, I am already excited. I'd clean the house, pick up groceries, and set everything in place, knowing she'd be there the next day. By Friday evening, when I see her waiting for me, the apartment comes alive again. She plays all her favorite video clips and dances around the house. I am grateful I get to fall asleep and wake up with her beside me.

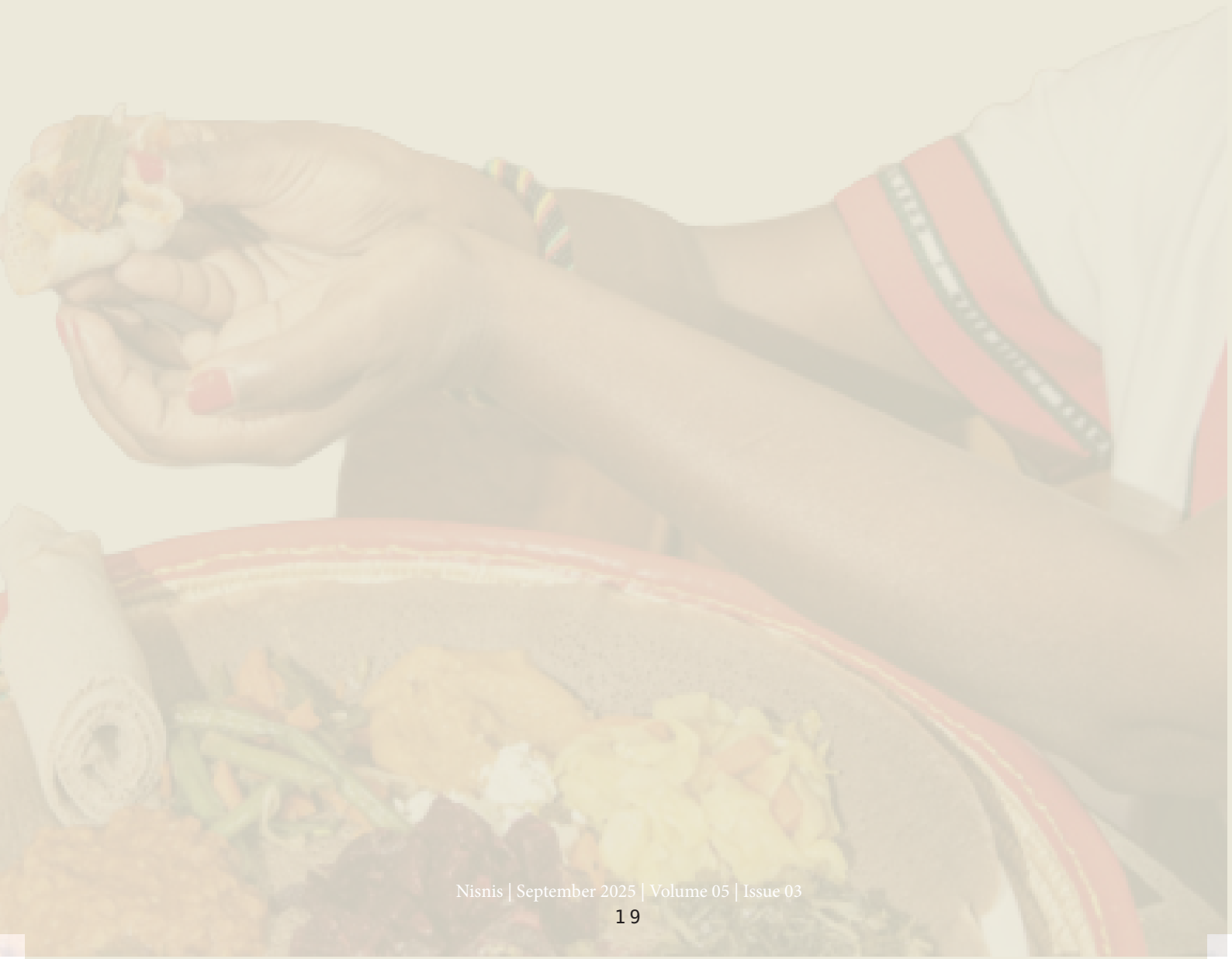
We spend our long weekend cooking whatever we have: misir, gomen, and tibs. We drink our coffee. We talk about everything and nothing. On the surface, it's ordinary. But to us, it is everything. We have created a place where the world cannot reach us. A place that feels like home, because love is safe here. We don't have to laugh like we are just friends; we could kiss and cuddle, and we can look into each other's eyes without worrying what the next person would think. We often pour our wine and enjoy a movie. I love horror movies, but she doesn't like them. The truth is, it doesn't really matter what's on the screen; the best part is having her curled up next to me, stealing glances when she laughs or hides her face in my arms.

It's not all roses. Even though we've created our little sanctuary, the pressure from outside never really goes away. We keep trying to find ways to make it work. She loves flowers, so on Valentine's Day I cleaned the room, bought her chocolates, and surprised her with a bouquet. She was so happy when she walked in. We had such a beautiful time together. But when it was time for her to leave, she couldn't take the flowers home. Where did it come from? Who gave it to you? Who are you dating? When are you

getting married? The questions never end. So, the flowers stayed behind, blooming in my small studio apartment.

We can't openly celebrate holidays together. We both spend the day with our families. But later that same week, I go to her house as her best friend and have dinner with them. We laugh and talk with her family over the coffee ceremony. Nothing feels heavy or awkward, and I always look forward to going back. They may or may not know. Things might change in the future. But for now, for my love and me, it is our secret Ethiopian holiday.

Things are getting scarier and often leave us feeling hopeless about the future. You're at the mercy of a random TikToker taking a picture of you at a restaurant or a stranger noticing something. Our people don't just watch; they can shame, attack, or displace you for simply being who you are. Maybe we will never be accepted by many in this country, but within these four walls, we've created our own country, our own freedom. For me, home is not a place; home is her.





Church is not the building

My worldview was shaped by the church. From childhood, all I knew was to read my Bible, pray, and go to Sunday service at one of the churches in Addis Ababa. The teachings of being “the chosen one” went deep for me. I truly believed I had a duty to pray for the salvation of everyone else in the world. Church was my universe. I was so happy to attend services, to worship, and to run around with my childhood friends after Sunday service. Those early years of church felt full of belonging.

But as I grew older and started learning about myself, the same space that had once felt like home became more complicated. My gender expression wasn’t like the other girls’, and neither were my interests. All I knew was whatever desire I carried for other girls was not meant to be spoken out loud. The silence grew heavier as I learned more about how some churches openly preached

against same-sex relationships.

Those conversations often spread widely, and I became more afraid. Serving in the church started to feel like lying to God. I even wondered if I was possessed. The shame ran so deep that I couldn’t stand before the people I served. Instead, I carried a constant weight, convinced I was the greatest sinner in the congregation. Through all of this, I had no one to confide in. Not a single person knew the confusion or the desires I was dealing with.

I began missing services and avoiding time with church friends. When it finally became unbearable, I told the leader that school and work were keeping me busy, though in truth I was quietly pulling myself away. Eventually, I walked out of the church completely. I remember how leaving brought a complicated mix of emotions. Relief, because I no longer had to perform or hide, and pain, because the church was the only world I had ever known. Stepping outside of it felt like having to relearn life itself from the very beginning.

The first few years after walking away were incredibly hard. I carried so much rage, especially because the homophobia around me kept getting bigger, and the church was playing its part in that too. I stopped talking to church friends I had known for years. I became an angry young adult who didn’t know how to process the loss of what felt like home. I didn’t

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want to be anywhere near church people. I stopped listening to gospel music. But as I kept learning more about my queerness, I started to come across queer Christians from different parts of the world. I found resources I never knew existed. I learned about queer churches, queer mosque leaders, and communities that welcomed people like me. A Nigerian gay pastor, a South African gay imam, a trans pastor in the U.S., and so much more. Most of these leaders had also left the churches they grew up in, and some were even excommunicated because of their gender or sexuality. Reading their stories became the beginning of my healing. For the first time, I felt open to the possibility of stepping back into a church if I ever missed it. And one Christmas evening, I did. I

walked into my childhood church with my chest out as a proud queer woman. I lit the candle, sang my heart out, and left right after the service. I didn't want to talk to anyone or explain myself.

Over a decade later, I had the opportunity to attend a church led by a lesbian pastor somewhere in Africa. It was an unforgettable experience. I saw people from all walks of life. As a queer African woman, seeing others on the continent live out both

their faith and their queerness made me feel less alone. Some young queer folks, queer couples, elderly queer men and women and non-binary individuals. It almost felt like a dream. I still remember the pianist wearing a rainbow pin and the singer with rainbow earrings. Watching people openly reconcile their faith and sexuality was beautiful. I didn't have to rush out after the service. I stayed behind, made connections, and shared tea with everyone. In those moments, I felt echoes of my early childhood, when belonging in church came without question. These moments reminded me that church is not the building. Church is the people who make me feel safe, welcomed, and accepted.

**I learned about queer
churches, queer
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A Home That H

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olds No Shame



We build our
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Last summer I packed my bags and left the only country I had ever known as home. Publicly, I told people I was leaving for a better education and a better life. Inwardly, I knew I was leaving for freedom. For years I had spoken the language of my country, worn the faces of its people, and lived among its traditions. But I never felt like I belonged. Its culture, its religion, its narrow definitions of identity: In my opinion, they rejected me, and I could no longer pretend to accept them. So, as a generational immigrant I did what my mom and her mom before her did; the women before me who had left the places they were born in pursuit of a future that matched who they wanted to be.

I remember landing in a foreign nation whose language I did not speak. I was confused and afraid, clutching the little pieces of familiarity I had carried across the sea. Then, as I waited for my train at the airport, I saw a man with a Pride sticker on his backpack. For a second I was taken aback. I was scared someone might see him. Then the realization came that it is okay. For the first time in a long while, I exhaled. Here, it seemed to say, I could breathe loudly, without apology.

The subway was my first passage into this new life. Google Maps guided me from the airport toward what locals called, “Yehabesha sefer”, a cluster of restaurants and shops where Ethiopians gathered. But when the metro doors opened, I stepped into a station covered from floor to ceiling in rainbow colors. I stood frozen for five minutes, then laughed for five more at the irony: the unofficial Habesha sefer was also the city’s official queer district. Outside, just across from the Ethiopian restaurant where I was to meet a friend, stood the city’s most famous gay bar. In that moment, I saw something I had never imagined possible: a space where my culture and my queerness could coexist, without one hunting the other into silence.

In the year that followed, this city began to stitch me into its fabric. I attended my first Pride event, where I said out loud, “I am bi,” without whispering or glancing over my shoulder. A classmate gifted me a Pride sticker that I pressed onto my backpack like a seal of belonging. On my daily walks up the hill to my apartment, I passed a house with a pride flag fluttering in the window and a beacon reminding me that I was on the right road. Here, I saw girls kissing girls and boys kissing boys in public without fear. Here, I found a home that held no shame.

Two months after my arrival, a craving for injera pulled me back toward the community. I went to a Habesha gathering, expecting comfort food in

the form of shiro and injera. The room buzzed with different lives: elders who had fled Ethiopia decades ago, students navigating new identities, and families both from Ethiopian background and found through adoption raising Ethiopian children who had never stepped foot in the country. At one table sat a teenage girl about 17 years old whose face was as Ethiopian as mine. She spoke of injera and shiro with the tone of someone explaining a culture she barely knew, sharing fragments of tradition with her non-Ethiopian friends, whom she had invited.

When she rose to leave, she leaned down and gave one of her friends sitting next to her a quick peck on the lips, casual as breathing. For her, it was normal. For some in the room, it was not. I felt the tension ripple, but only from one side, from those of us who still carried Ethiopia's unspoken rules inside us. It was mostly the newcomers students: the elders who had adopted and evolved in cultures and the ways to their new home they paid no mind. It's those fresh off the boat that still hold on to the prejudice

As I stared at her, I saw myself. She was reaching toward a culture that might never fully accept her. She may not fully understand how deep the hate for her may run; she may have never experienced it. I had run from a culture that already had rejected me and my queerness into a new one. I don't know if this new one will accept me. I may be focused on the fact they accept my queerness and neglected my other identities of being a Black woman. She sought belonging in a homeland she barely knew; I sought freedom from a homeland that I knew too well. And yet here we both were, sitting at the same table, navigating the same question: where do I belong, when "home" asks us to cut ourselves in half? Is her home asking her to be white act white the way mine demanded straightness out of me?

But here we both are trying to make peace for ourselves by stitching together our differing identities. At that moment I understood that belonging does not come from birthplace or bloodline alone. It comes from the spaces we carve for ourselves, the part of our identities coming together where no part of us has to apologize for existing. We build our home like we build a house. We take different pieces and merge them to create comfort and joy. In doing that the first step will always be building a solid foundation. For me that was finding safety and loving people who accepted me for who I am: a classmate with a pride sticker, a window that hang a pride flag etc...

Perhaps that teenage girl and I, in our different ways, were proof of the same truth: home is not something we inherit. It is something we create. A home that holds no shame exerted on it from outsiders. As we will always belong to the place we created.

At that moment I understood that belonging does not come from birthplace or bloodline alone.



Finding My Home in Exile

For me, as a queer person, home has always been more than a place - it's a safe space to be myself. It means being accepted and respected for who I am. In Ethiopia, home was the physical house where my family lived, surrounded by familiar culture and language. But for my heart, it was not safe. I carried a heavy secret, unable to talk about my attraction to women. I longed to share this part of myself to lighten the load, but there was too much fear and no trust.

That is why I came to Kenya. And here, I have found a new meaning of home. Kenya is my home now because I feel I belong here more than I ever did in Ethiopia.

This feeling of home comes from specific freedoms. Here, I have the freedom to express my sexuality openly. I can be physically affectionate with my partner — kissing, holding hands in public. I can live socially without hiding: going on dates, attending events with her, and introducing her openly as my girlfriend.

This safety was shown to me in powerful moments. Once, while walking with my partner, a man asked, “Who is the man and who is the woman?” Before fear could set in, another stranger defended us. “Why do you care? Mind your own business,” he said. “Who gave you the right to make people feel unsafe?” The man even apologized. In that moment, I saw that in Kenya, it's not just queer people who protect you; the larger community itself can make you feel safe.

Another time, some men at my work place asked me why I am a lesbian. They asked if it was because I had never been with a man. But other customers told them, “You are making a mistake. She has the right to be who she is. She is not affecting your life. Leave her alone.” And they made them leave. That support from people who are not even queer - that is what makes me feel more at home.

My romantic relationship has also deepened this feeling. Being with my partner has shown me that home is a feeling of comfort, safety, and belonging, no matter where we are.

Because of the safety Kenya provides, I can build a life with her that was impossible before. We live together under the same roof. Our relationship feels equal, without old-fashioned pressures. Most importantly, we are committed to building a family together, openly and without fear. With her, I feel understood and loved. She is my home, and Kenya is the place where we can build it.

Having to find home in exile brings mixed emotions.

If I had this acceptance and freedom in my own country, I would never have left my friends and family.

I am happy because I found a safe place so quickly. I am experiencing so much here that I never could before.

But I also feel angry. If I had this acceptance and freedom in my own country, I would never have left my friends and family.

Still, I do not regret my decision. My definition of home has grown. It is no longer just a house or a country. Home is where I find comfort, support, acceptance, and belonging. It is in the relationships I build and the safe spaces I have found. In Kenya, I have built that home. I belong here, at home in exile.





The Home We Built in the Noise

We screamed,
shouted, and
welcomed
Aster. My
partner
was in
front of
me, filming
Aster's
magnificent
entrance and
the crowd's
reaction.



She doesn't like large crowds. Or loud music. Or strobe lights. Or even the singer. And yet there she was, standing beside me in the middle of it all.

It felt like the universe had compiled a list of everything she hated and designed the evening around it. The host had thousands of people singing snippets of a famous Amharic song in unison, the DJ blasting it through huge sound systems. It was probably her worst nightmare, far removed from her ideal Saturday evening.

I kept turning back to make sure she was okay as we navigated deeper into the hall, eventually finding a standing spot with a decent view.

We were ready. Or I should say, our friend and I were ready. She was just sucking it up.

The DJ continued playing a mix of traditional and contemporary sets - Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian. And my girlfriend loves to dance. Soon enough, the rhythm drew her in, and I saw her shoulders relax, her body beginning to move. I never doubted she would enjoy this part. Her taste is eclectic, and she has a way of finding joy in sound where I least expect it.

My real worry was the main act. After a long wait, Dawit Mellesse came on. Bless his soul, he started with a song that she liked, and she even sang along to a few. But it proved too much; she needed a break and stepped outside with our friend.

I worried that the experiment had failed. The longer she stayed out, the more I feared we had pushed too far. I considered leaving, but she returned, saying she was ready for more. She had enjoyed Dawit. And so we waited, our friend and I with excitement, her with dread, for the legend.

When the host announced Aster, screaming "Are you ready, Addis Ababa?", the venue vibrated. The music swelled, the lights flared, and the smoke machine billowed.

The noise as she appeared must have registered on the Richter scale. The first note of "Hagere" brought us to the verge of losing our collective minds. When she got to the chorus, we sang with gusto and in unison as if we had been

handed the lyrics for a test. We screamed, shouted, and welcomed Aster. My partner was in front of me, filming Aster's magnificent entrance and the crowd's reaction.

Then, she turned back to me.

And in that moment, something shifted. The strobing lights no longer felt chaotic; they seemed to frame her gorgeous face. The crowd's roar softened to a hum, and Aster's powerful voice faded into the background, becoming the soundtrack for our own private concert.

As Aster sang, my partner discreetly reached for my hands. She was taking pleasure in my joy, and I was overwhelmed with gratitude for her presence. Each time our hands touched, the world slowed down. I could feel her heartbeat - a rhythm more grounding than any bassline.

We exchanged glances, held hands, and stole kisses in the parking lot. We were two queer women at a concert we had made our own. It was obnoxiously loud, but within that noise, we had created a perfect solitude. A perfect home.

As Aster sang,
my partner
discreetly
reached for
my hands. ... I
could feel her
heartbeat - a
rhythm more
grounding than
any bassline.

WHERE IS HOME?

A QUESTION WE CARRY

FOR QUEER ETHIOPIANS, "HOME" IS A COMPLICATED WORD. IT HOLDS THE SCENT OF BERBER AND THE SOUND OF OUR MOTHER'S PRAYERS, BUT ALSO THE ACHE OF HIDING OUR TRUE SELVES IN THE VERY PLACES MEANT TO KEEP US SAFE. BUT WE ARE BUILDERS. WE ARE FINDING AND CREATING HOME IN WAYS THAT WE NEVER IMAGINED. IT DOESN'T MAKE US LESS ETHIOPIAN; IT MAKES US ARTISTS OF OUR OWN LIVES.

SO, WHERE ARE YOU FINDING YOUR HOME THESE DAYS?

NORTH: HOME IN A
PERSON

IT'S THE SECRET
LANGUAGE OF A HELD
HAND IN A CROWDED
CAFE. THE SHARED
LOOK THAT SAYS, "I SEE
YOU." IT'S THE PRIVATE
WORLD BUILT WITH A
LOVER WHERE THE
OUTSIDE CEASES TO
EXIST.

• YOUR HOME IS A
SECRET, SACRED LOVE.

SOUTH: HOME WITHIN
YOURSELF

IT'S THE PEACE OF
YOUR OWN ROOM, THE
RITUAL OF YOUR
COFFEE, THE QUIET
TRUTH THAT YOU ARE
ENOUGH. IT'S THE
HAVEN YOU'VE BUILT
INSIDE, WHERE SHAME
CANNOT ENTER.

• YOUR HOME IS YOUR
UNSHAKABLE SELF.

EAST: HOME IN YOUR
CHOSEN FAMILY

IT'S THE CHAOTIC JOY
OF FRIENDS CRAMMED
INTO A SMALL ROOM,
SHARING FOOD AND
TRUTHS. IT'S THE
TELEGRAM GROUP THAT
IS YOUR 24/7 LIFELINE.
IT'S THE UNWAVERING
SUPPORT OF THOSE
WHO BECOME YOUR
BLOOD.

• YOUR HOME IS THE
FAMILY YOU CHOOSE.

WEST: HOME IN
FREEDOM

IT'S THE BRAVERY OF
WALKING HAND-IN-
HAND IN A NEW CITY.

THE RELIEF OF
BREATHING IN A PLACE
WHERE YOUR LOVE
ISN'T A CRIME. IT'S THE
COURAGE TO BUILD A
LIFE IN THE LIGHT.

• YOUR HOME IS YOUR
HARD-WON FREEDOM.

