



ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR
 NPR, *San Francisco Chronicle*,
Buzzfeed, *Time*, *Harper's Bazaar*,
Mother Jones, *Esquire*, *E!e*, *Paste*,
Entertainment Weekly, *Oprah.com*,
the Skimm, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

A NEW YORK TIMES AND
 WASHINGTON POST NOTABLE BOOK

"Brims with compassion...
 Yaa Gyasi has given
 fate and heroic voice
 to the missing
 and suppressed."
 —NPR

"Tremendous...
 Spectacular...
 Essential reading."
 —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Dazzling...
 Devastating...
 Truly captivating."
 —*The Washington Post*

Eight families, eight generations, two halves, systems the
 dominant and the oppressed, each unaware of the
 other. One will marry an Englishman and lead a
 life of comfort in the palatial rooms of the Cape
 Coast Castle. The other will be captured in a raid
 on her village, imprisoned in the very same castle,
 and sold into slavery.

Homegoing follows the parallel paths of these
 sisters and their descendants through eight gen-
 erations, from the Gold Coast to the plantations
 of Mississippi, from the American Civil War
 to Jazz Age Harlem. Yaa Gyasi's extraordinary
 novel illuminates slavery's troubled legacy both
 for those who were taken and those who stayed—
 and shows how the memory of captivity has been
 inscribed on the soul of our nation.

Cover design and illustration by Joan Wong
 Author photograph © Michael Elson for

www.homegoingbooks.com

Reading Group Guide available
 at www.ReadingGroupCenter.com

U.S. \$16.00

ISBN 978-1-101-97106-2

Fiction

5 1 6 0 0



9 781101 971062

HOME GOING
 YAA GYASI

HOME GOING

"HOME GOING IS
 AN INSPIRATION."

—FA NEHISI COATES.

author of

Lemon, the Bird and Me

a novel

YAA GYASI

Maame

Cobbe Otcher

+

m. Big Man Asare

Effia Otcher m.
James Collins

Esi Asare + ?

Quey Collins m.
Nana Yaa Yeboah

Ness Stockham
m. Sam

James Richard Collins m.
Akosua Mensah

Kojo Freeman m.
Anna Foster

Abena Collins +
Ohene Nyarko

Agnes Beulah Cato Daly Eurias Felicity Grace H Black m.
Ethel Jackson

Akua Collins m.
Asamoah Agyekum

Willie Black Hazel
Eli Dalton + m. Robert Clifton

Abena Anna Yaw Agyekum m.
"Abee" Serwah Esther Amoah

Josephine
Carson "Sonny"
Clifton + Anani
Zulema

Marjorie
Agyekum

Marcus
Clifton

He went to her, took her body in his arms, let himself feel the full weight of her. It was not the same weight as coal, that mountain of black rock that he'd spent nearly a third of his life lifting. Ethe did not submit so easily. She did not lean back into him until the pot had been scraped clean.

Akua

EVERY TIME AKUA DROPPED a quartered yam into sizzling palm oil, the sound made her jump. It was a hungry sound, the sound of oil swallowing whatever it was given.

Akua's ear was growing. She had learned to distinguish sounds she had never before heard. She had grown up in the missionary school, where they were taught to go to God with all their worries and problems and fears, but when she came to Edweso and saw and heard a white man being swallowed alive by fire, she dusted off her knees, knelt down, and gave this image and sound to God, but God had refused to keep them. He returned her fear to her every night in horrible nightmares where fire consumed everything, where it ran from the coast of Fanteland all the way into Asante. In her dreams the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart. The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Inland and then the babies would vanish, and the firewoman's sadness would send orange and red and hints of blue swarming every tree and every bush in sight.

Akua couldn't remember the first time she'd seen fire, but she could remember the first time she'd dreamed of it. It was in 1895, sixteen years after her mother, Abena, had carried her Akua-swollen belly to the missionaries in Kumasi, fifteen years after Abena had died. Then the fire in Akua's dream had been nothing more than a quick flash of ochre. Now the firewoman raged.

Akua's ear was growing, so at night she now slept flat on her back or stomach, never on her side, afraid of crushing the new weight. She was certain that the dreams entered through her growing ear, that they latched onto the sizzling sounds of fried things in the daytime and lodged themselves in her mind at night, and so she slept flat-backed to let them through. Because even though she feared the new sounds, she knew she needed to hear them too.

Akua knew she'd had the dream again that night when she woke up screaming. The sound escaped her mouth like breath, like pipe smoke. Her husband, Asamoah, woke up next to her and swiftly reached for the machete he kept beside him, looking at the ground to check for the children, then at the door to check for an intruder, and ending by looking at his wife.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

Akua shivered, suddenly cold. "It was the dream," she said. She didn't realize she was crying until Asamoah pulled her into his arms. "You and the rest of the leaders should not have burned that white man," she said into her husband's chest, and he pushed her away.

"You speak for the white man?" he asked.

She shook her head quickly. She'd known since she picked him for marriage that her husband feared her time among the white missionaries had made her weaker, less of an Asante somehow. "It's not that," she said. "It's the fire. I keep dreaming about fire."

Asamoah clicked his tongue. He had lived in Edweso his whole life. On his cheek he bore the mark of the Asante, and the nation was his pride. "What do I care of fire when they have exiled the Asantehene?"

Akua could not respond. For years, King Prempeh I had been refusing to allow the British to take over the Kingdom of Asante, insisting that the Asante people would remain sovereign. For this, he was arrested and exiled, and the anger that had been brewing all over the Asante nation grew sharper. Akua knew her dreams would not stop this anger from brewing in her husband's heart. And so she decided to keep them to herself, to sleep on her stomach or back, to never again let Asamoah hear her scream.

Akua spent her days in the compound with her mother-in-law, Nana Serwah, and her children, Abee and Ama Serwah. She started each morning by sweeping, a task she had always enjoyed for its repetitiveness, its calm. It had been her job in the missionary school too, but there, the Missionary used to laugh as he watched her, marveling at the fact that the school floor was made of clay. "Who ever heard of sweeping dust from dust?" he would say, and Akua would wonder what the floors looked like where he came from.

After she swept, Akua would help the other women cook. Abee was only four years old, but she liked to hold the giant pestle and pretend that she was helping. "Mama, look!" she would say, hugging the tall stick to her tiny body. It towered above her, and the weight of it threatened to throw her off-balance. Akua's toddler, Ama Serwah, had big, bright eyes that would glance from the top of the *fufu* stick to the trembling sister before sending her gaze to her mother.

"You are so strong!" Akua would say and Nana Serwah would cluck her tongue.

"She'll fall and hurt herself," her mother-in-law would say, snatching the *fufu* stick from Abee's hands and shaking her head. Akua knew that Nana Serwah did not approve of her, often saying that a woman whose mother had left her to be taught by white men would never know how to raise children herself. It was usually around this time that Nana Serwah would send Akua out to the market to pick up more ingredients for the food they would make later for Asamoah and the other men who spent their days outside, meeting, planning.

Akua liked walking to the market. She could finally think, without the scrutinizing gaze of the women and elderly men, who stayed around the compound, making fun of her for all the time she spent staring at the same spot on a hut's wall. "She's not correct," they would say aloud, no doubt wondering why Asamoah would choose to marry her. But she wasn't just staring into space; she was listening to all the sounds the world had to offer, to all the people who inhabited those spaces the others could not see. She was wandering.

On her walk to the market, she would often stop at the spot where the townsmen had burned the white man. A nameless man, a wanderer himself, who had found himself in the wrong town at the wrong time.

At first he was safe, lying under a tree, shielding his face from the sun with a book, but then Kofi Poku, a child of only three, stumbled in front of Akua, who had been very close to asking the man if he was lost or needed help, pointed with his tiny index finger and shouted, "*Obroni!*"

Akua's ears prickled at the word. She had been in Kumasi the first time she heard it. A child who didn't go to the missionary school had called the Missionary "*obroni*," and the man turned as red as a burning sun and walked away. Akua was only six years old then. To her, the word had only ever meant "white man." She hadn't understood why the Missionary had gotten upset, and in times like those she wished she could remember her mother. Maybe she would have had the answers. Instead, Akua stole out that evening to the hut of a fetish priest on the edge of town who was said to have been around since the white man first came to the Gold Coast.

"Think about it," the man said, after she told him what happened. In the missionary school they called white people Teacher or Reverend or Miss. When Abena died, Akua had been left to be raised by the Missionary. He was the only one who would take her. "It did not begin as *obroni*. It began as two words. *Abro ni*."

"Wicked man?" Akua said.

The fetish man nodded. "Among the Akan he is wicked man, the one who harms. Among the Ewe of the Southeast his name is Cunning Dog, the one who feigns niceness and then bites you."

"The Missionary is not wicked," Akua said.

The fetish man kept nuts in his pocket. This was how Akua had first met him. After her mother died, she had been waiting for her in the street. She hadn't yet understood loss. Crying was what she did every time her mother left her, to go to market, to go to sea. Waiting for the loss of her was commonplace, but this time it had lasted the entire morning, and her mother had not reappeared to shush her, hold her, kiss her face. The fetish man saw her crying that day and had given her a kola nut. Chewing it had pacified her, for a time.

Now he gave one to her again and said, "Why is the Missionary not wicked?"

"He is God's man."

"And God's men are not wicked?" he asked.

Akua nodded.

"Am I wicked?" the fetish man asked, and Akua didn't know how to answer. That first day she had met him, when he had given her the kola nut, the Missionary had come out and seen her with him. He had snatched her hand and pulled her away and told her not to talk to fetish men. They called him a fetish man because he was, because he had not given up praying to the ancestors or dancing or collecting plants and rocks and bones and blood with which to make his fetish offerings. He had not been baptized. She knew he was supposed to be wicked, that she would be in a sea of trouble if the missionaries knew that she still went to see him, and yet she recognized that his kindness, his love, was different from the people's at the school. Warmer and truer somehow.

"No, you're not wicked," she said.

"You can only decide a wicked man by what he does, Akua. The white man has earned his name here. Remember that."

She did remember. She remembered it even as Kofi Poku pointed at the white man sleeping under the tree and shouted "*Obroni!*" She remembered as the crowd formed and as the rage that had been building in the village for months came to a head. The men awoke the white man by tying him to the tree. They built a fire, and then they burned him. All the while he was screaming in English, "Please, if anyone here can understand me, let me go! I am only a traveler. I am not from the government! I am not from the government!"

Akua was not the only person in the crowd who understood English. She was not the only person in the crowd who did nothing to help.

When Akua returned to the compound, everyone was in an uproar. She could sense the chaos in the air that seemed to get thicker, heavier, with noise and fear: the smoke from sizzling food and the buzzing of flies. Nana Serwa was covered in a film of sweat, her wrinkled hands rolling *yifu* by the second to plate up for the large crowd of men who had come. The woman looked up and spotted Akua.

"Akua, what's wrong with you? Why are you just standing there? Come and help. These men need to be fed before the next meeting."

Akua shook herself out of the daze she had been in and sat beside

her mother-in-law, rolling the mashed cassava into neat little circles and passing them along to the next woman, who filled the bowls with soup.

The men were shouting loudly, so loudly that it was nearly impossible to distinguish what one was saying from what the others were saying. The sound of it was all the same. Outrage. Rage. Akua could see her husband, but she did not dare look at him. She knew her place was with her mother-in-law, the other women, the old men, not begging questions of him with her eyes.

"What is going on?" Akua whispered to Nana Serwah. The woman was rinsing her hands in the calabash of water that sat beside her, then drying them on her wrapper.

She spoke in a hushed tone, her lips barely moving. "The British governor, Frederick Hodgson, was in Kumasi today. He says they will not return King Prempeh I from exile."

Akua sucked her teeth. This was what they had all been fearing.

"It's worse than that," her mother-in-law continued. "He said we must give him the Golden Stool so that he can sit on it or give it as a gift to his queen."

Akua's hands started to tremble in the pot, making a low rattling noise and marring the shape of the *fufu*. So it was worse than what they had all been fearing, worse than another war, worse than a few hundred more dead. They were a warrior people, and war was what they knew. But if a white man took the Golden Stool, the spirit of the Asante would surely die, and that they could not bear.

Nana Serwah reached out and touched her hand. It was one of the few gestures of kindness Asamoah's mother had shown her since the days of Asamoah and her courtship, then marriage. They both knew what was coming and what it meant.

By the next week there had already been a meeting among the Asante leaders in Kumasi. The stories that followed told of the men of the meeting being too timid, disagreeing about what to say to the British, what to do. It was Yaa Asantewaa, Edweso's own Queen Mother, who stood up and demanded that they fight, saying that if the men would not do it, the women would.

Most of the men were gone by morning. Asamoah kissed his daughters, and then he kissed her too, held her for just a moment. Akua watched him as he dressed. She watched as he left. Twenty other townsmen went with him. A few men stayed, sat in the compound waiting to be fed.

Nana Serwah's husband, Akua's father-in-law, had kept a machete with a golden handle beside him every night of his life, and after he died Nana Serwah had kept it in the place where he used to sleep. A machete in exchange for a body. After the Queen Mother's call to arms reached Edweso, she had pulled that machete out from the bed and taken it with her into the compound. And all the men who had not already gone to fight for the Asante took one look at the old woman holding the large weapon and left. And so began the war.

The Missionary kept a long, thin switch on his desk.

"You will no longer go to class with the other children," he told her. Only a few days had passed since a child had called the Missionary *obroni*, but Akua hardly remembered that. She had just learned to write her English name, Deborah, that very morning. It was the longest name of any of the children in the class, and Akua had worked very hard to write it. "From now on," the Missionary said, "you will take lessons from me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she answered. Word must have gotten to him that she had mastered her name. She was getting special treatment.

"Sit down," the Missionary said.

She sat.

The Missionary took the switch from his desk and pointed it at her. The tip of it was just inches from her nose. When she crossed her eyes she could see it clearly, and it wasn't until then that the fear hit her.

"You are a sinner and a heathen," he said. Akua nodded. The teachers had told them this before. "Your mother had no husband when she came here to me, pregnant, begging for help. I helped her because that is what God would have wanted me to do. But she was a sinner and a heathen, like you."

Again Akua nodded. The fear was starting to settle somewhere in her stomach, making her feel nauseated.

"All people on the black continent must give up their heathenism and turn to God. Be thankful that the British are here to show you how to live a good and moral life."

This time, Akua did not nod. She looked at the Missionary, but she didn't know how to describe the look he returned to her. After he told her to stand up and bend over, after he lashed her five times and commanded her to repent her sins and repeat "God bless the queen," after she was permitted to leave, after she finally threw the fear up, the only word that popped into her head was "hungry." The Missionary looked hungry, like if he could, he would devour her.

Every day Akua woke her daughters up while the sun was still sleeping. She wrapped her wrapper, and then walked with her girls out into the dirt roads where Nana Serwah, Akos, Marnbee, and all of the other women of Edweso had already begun to assemble. Akua's voice was the strongest, and so she led them in song:

*Awurade Nyame kum dom
Oboo adee Nyame kum dom
Ennee yerokokum dom afa adee
Oboo adee Nyame kum dom
Soso be humu, megyede be humu.*

Up and down the streets they sang. Akua's toddler, Ama Serwah, sang the loudest and most off-key, her words a slew of gibberish until the song reached her favorite part, at which point she screamed more than sang, "CREATOR GOD, DEFEAT THE TROOPS!" Sometimes the women put her in the very front, and her little legs would stomp about valiantly until Akua picked her up to carry her the rest of the way.

After the singing, Akua went back to wash herself and the children, put white clay on her body as a symbol of her support for the war efforts, eat, then sing again. They cooked for the men in shifts so that

there was always something to send away. At night, Akua would sleep alone, dreaming of the fire still. Screaming again, now that Asamoah was gone.

Akua and Asamoah had been married for five years. He was a tradesman, and he had business in Kumasi. He had seen her one day at the missionary school and had stopped to talk to her. And from then on he stopped to talk to her every single day. Two weeks later he was back to ask if she would marry him and come to live in Edweso, for he knew she was an orphan with no other place to live.

Akua found nothing particularly remarkable about Asamoah. He was not handsome like the man called Akwasi who came to church every Sunday, standing timidly in the back and pretending not to notice as the mothers threw their daughters at him. Asamoah also seemed to possess little mental intelligence, for his whole life had been about the intelligence of the body: what he could catch or build or lift to take with him to market. She had once seen him sell two kente for the price of one because he could not count the money correctly. Asamoah was not the best choice, but he was the sure one, and Akua was happy to accept his proposal. Up until then, she had thought she would have to stay with the Missionary forever, playing his strange game of student/teacher, heathen/savior, but with Asamoah she saw that maybe her life could be something different from what she had always imagined it would be.

"I forbid it," the Missionary said when she told him.

"You can't forbid it," Akua said. Now that she had a plan, a hope for a way out, she felt emboldened.

"You . . . you are a sinner," the Missionary whispered, his head in his hands. "You are a heathen," he said, louder now. "You must ask God to forgive your sins."

Akua didn't respond. For nearly ten years, she had filled the Missionary's hunger. Now she wanted to attend to her own.

"Ask God to forgive your sins!" the Missionary yelled, throwing his switch at her.

The switch hit Akua on the left shoulder. She watched it drop to the floor, and then, calmly, she walked out. Behind her she could hear the Missionary saying, "He's not a man of God. He's not a man of God." But Akua cared nothing for God. She was sixteen, and the fetish priest had died only a year before. She used to go to him whenever she could get away from the Missionary. She used to tell him that the more she learned about God from the Missionary, the more questions she had. Big questions like, if God was so big, so powerful, why did he need the white man to bring him to them? Why could he not tell them himself, make his presence known as he had in the days written about in the Book, with bush fires and dead men walking? Why had her mother run to these missionaries, these white people, out of all people? Why did she have no family? No friends? Whenever she asked the Missionary these questions, he refused to answer her. The fetish man told her that maybe the Christian God was a question, a great and swirling circle of whys. This answer never satisfied Akua, and by the time the fetish man died, God no longer satisfied her either. Asamoah was real. Tangible. His arms were as thick as yarns, and his skin as brown. If God was why, then Asamoah was yes and yes again.

Now that war had come for them, Akua noticed that Nana Serwah was nicer to her than she had ever before been. Word of this man and that man dying came in every day, and they were both holding their breath, certain that it was only a matter of time before the name out of the messenger's mouth was Asamoah.

Edweso was empty. The absence of the men felt like its own presence. Sometimes Akua would think that not much at all had changed, but then she would see the empty fields, the rotting yarns, the wailing women. Akua's dreams were getting worse too. In them, the firewoman raged against the loss of her children. Sometimes she spoke to Akua, calling her, it seemed. She looked familiar, and Akua wanted to ask her questions. She wanted to know if the firewoman knew the white man who had been burned. If everyone touched by fire was a part of the same world. If she was being called. Instead, she didn't speak. She woke up screaming. In the midst of all this turmoil, Akua was

pregnant. At least six months now, she figured by the shape and firm weight of her belly.

One day, more than halfway through the war, Akua was boiling yams to send to the soldiers, and she could not lift her eyes from the fire.

"This again?" Nana Serwah said. "I thought we had finished with your idleness. Are our people out fighting so that you can stare into the fire and scream at night for your children to hear?"

"No, Ma," Akua said, shaking herself out of her stupor. But the next day she did it again. And again her mother-in-law scolded her. The same thing happened the day after that, and then the one after that, until Nana Serwah decided that Akua was sick and that she must stay in her hut until the sickness had left her body. Her daughters would stay with Nana Serwah until Akua had fully healed.

The first day of her hut exile, Akua was thankful for the break. She had not had rest since the men left for war, always marching through a town singing the war songs or standing on her feet sweating into a large pot. Her plan was to not sleep until night had fallen. To lie on the side of the hut where Asamoah usually lay, trying to conjure up the smell of him to keep her company until night fell over the hut, casting its awful darkness into the room. But within hours Akua was asleep, and the firewoman had reappeared.

She was growing, her hair a wild bush of ochre and blue. She was growing bolder. No longer simply burning the things that were around her, but now acknowledging Akua. Seeing her.

"Where are your children?" she asked. Akua was too afraid to answer her. She could feel that her body was in the cot. She could feel that she was dreaming, and yet she could not exert control over that feeling. She could not tell that feeling to grow hands, nudge her body into waking. She could not tell that feeling to throw water on the firewoman, put her out of her dreams.

"You must always know where your children are," the firewoman continued, and Akua shuddered.

The next day she tried to leave the hut, but Nana Serwah had the Fat Man sit at her door. His body, too fat to fight in the war that his peers were in, was just the right size for locking Akua in.

"please!" Akua shouted. "Just let me see my children!"

But the Fat Man would not budge. Nana Serwah, standing next to him, shouted back, "You can see them once you are no longer sick!"

Akua fought for the rest of the day. She pushed but the Fat Man did not move. She screamed but he did not speak. She banged on the door but his ears would not hear.

Periodically, Akua could hear Nana Serwah coming to him, bringing him food to eat and water to drink. He said thank you, but nothing else. It was as though he felt like he had found his way to serve. The war had come to Akua's door.

By nightfall, Akua was afraid to speak. She crouched in the corner of the hut, praying to every god she had ever known. The Christian God whom the missionaries had always described in terms both angry and loving. Nyame, the Akan God, all-knowing and all-seeing. She prayed to too to Asase Yaa and her children Bia and Tano. She even prayed to Anansi, though he was nothing more than the trickster people put in their stories to amuse themselves. She prayed aloud and feverishly so that she would not sleep, and by morning she was too weak to fight the Fat Man, too weak to know if he was even still there.

For a week she stayed like this. She had never understood the missionaries when they said they could sometimes spend a whole day in prayer, but now she did. Prayer was not a sacred or holy thing. It was not spoken plainly, in Twi or English. It need not be performed on the knees or with folded palms. For Akua, prayer was a frenzied chant, a language for those desires of the heart that even the mind did not recognize were there. It was the scraping up of the clay floor into her dark palms. It was the crouching in the shadow of the room. It was the one-syllable word that escaped her lips over and over and over again.

Fire. Fire. Fire.

The Missionary would not let Akua leave the orphanage to marry Asamoah. Since the day she told him of Asamoah's proposal, he had stopped his lessons, stopped telling her that she was a heathen or asking her to repent her sins, to repeat "God bless the queen." He only watched her.

"You can't keep me here," Akua said. She was gathering the last of her things out of her quarters. Asamoah would be back before nightfall to get her. Edweso was waiting.

The Missionary stood in the doorway, his switch in his hand.

"What? Will you beat me until I stay?" she asked. "You'd have to kill me to keep me here."

"I'll tell you about your mother," the Missionary finally said. He dropped the switch to the floor and walked toward Akua until he was standing so close she could smell the faint stench of fish on his breath. For ten years, he had come no closer to her than the length of that switch. For ten years he had refused to answer her questions about her family. "I'll tell you about your mother. Anything you want to know."

Akua took a step back from him, and he did the same. He looked down.

"Your mother, Abena, she wouldn't repent," the Missionary said. "She came to us pregnant—you, her sin—but still she wouldn't repent. She spit at the British. She was argumentative and angry. I believe she was glad of her sins. I believe she did not regret you or your father, even though he did not care for her as a man should."

The Missionary was speaking softly, so softly that Akua couldn't be certain that she was hearing him at all.

"After you were born, I took her to the water to be baptized. She didn't want to go, but I—I forced her. She thrashed as I carried her through the forest, to the river. She thrashed as I lowered her down into the water. She thrashed and thrashed and thrashed, and then she was still." The Missionary lifted his head and looked at her finally. "I only wanted her to repent. I—I only wanted her to repent..."

The Missionary started crying. It was not the sight of tears that caught Akua's attention so much as the sound. The terrible sound, the heaving sound, like something wrenched from the throat.

"Where is her body?" Akua asked. "What did you do with her body?" The sound stopped. The Missionary spoke. "I burned it in the forest. I burned it with all of her things. God forgive me! God forgive me!" The sound returned. This time, shuddering came with it, a shaking so violent that soon the Missionary fell down to the ground. Akua had to walk over his body to leave.

Asamoah returned at the end of the week. Akua could hear him with her growing ear, though she could not yet see him. She felt weighed to the ground, her limbs heavy logs on the floor of some dark forest.

At the door, Nana Serwah was sobbing and screaming, "My son-o! My son! My son-o! My son!" Then Akua's growing ear heard a new sound. Loud step. Space. Loud step. Space.

"What is the Fat Man doing here?" Asamoah asked. His voice was loud enough that Akua considered moving, but it was as though she were in the dream space again, unable to make her body do what her mind wanted it to.

Nana Serwah could not answer her son, so busy was she in her wailing. The Fat Man moved, his enormous girth a boulder rolling to reveal the door. Asamoah entered the room, but still Akua could not get up.

"What is the meaning of this?" Asamoah roared, and Nana Serwah was shaken from her wailing.

"She was sick. She was sick, so we . . ."

Her voice trailed. Akua could hear the sound again. Loud step. Space. Loud step. Space. Loud step. Space. Then Asamoah was standing in front of her, but instead of two legs, she only saw one.

He crouched down carefully so that their eyes could better meet, balancing so well that Akua wondered how long it had been since he'd last seen the missing leg. He seemed so well acquainted with the space.

He noticed her swollen belly and shuddered. He reached out his hand. Akua looked at it. She had not slept in a week. Ants had begun to pass over her fingers and she wanted to shake them off, or give them to Asamoah, lace her small fingers between his large ones.

Asamoah stood and turned to his mother. "Where are the girls?" he asked, and Nana Serwah, who had started crying anew, this time at the sight of Akua trapped on the ground, ran to fetch them.

Ama Serwah and Abee came in. To Akua they looked unchanged. Both girls still sucked their thumbs, despite the fact that Nana Serwah

put hot pepper on the tips of them every morning, noon, and night to warn them away. The girls were developing a taste for heat. They looked from Asamoah to Akua, holding hands with their grandmother, thumbs in mouths. Then, wordlessly, Abee wrapped her entire little body around her father's leg as though it were a trunk, as though it were the *fufu* stick she was so fond of holding, stronger than she was, sturdier. The toddler, Ama Serwah, moved closer to Akua, and she could see that she had been crying; a thick line of snot trailed from her nose to lick her upper lip, her mouth gaping wide open. It looked like a slug exiting a cave in order to enter a cavern. She touched her father's knee, but kept moving to rest where Akua was. Then she lay down beside her. Akua could feel her little heart beating in time with her own broken one. She reached out to touch her daughter, to pull her into her arms, and then she stood and surveyed the room.

*

The war ended in September, and the earth around them began to register the Asante loss. Long fissures in the red clay formed about Akua's compound, so dry was the season. Crops died, and food was limited, for they had given all they had to the men who were fighting. They had given all they had, assured that it would come back to them in the abundance of freedom. Yaa Asantewaa, Edweso's warrior Queen Mother, was exiled to the Seychelles, never to be seen again by those who lived in the village. Sometimes Akua would walk by her palace in her wanderings and wonder: What if?

The day she had gotten up from the ground, she had not wanted to speak, nor would she let her children or Asamoah leave her sight. And so the broken family nestled into one another, each hoping the others' presences would fill the wound their personal war had left behind.

In the beginning, Asamoah did not want to touch her and she did not want to be touched. The space where his leg had been taunted her. She could not figure out how to situate her body next to his while they lay in bed at night. In the past, she would curl into him, one of her legs intertwined between his two, but now she could not get comfortable,

and her restlessness fed his restlessness. Akua no longer slept through the night, but Asamoah hated to see her awake and tortured and so she pretended to sleep, allowing the waves of her breasts to rise and fall to the current of breaths. Sometimes Asamoah would turn and stare at her. She could feel him considering her while she pretended to sleep, and if she slipped, opened her eyes or lost her breathing rhythm, his big booming voice would command her to sleep. If she convinced him, she would wait for his real breathing to match her contrived one, and then she would lie there, wishing the firewoman away. If she slept, she would do so only lightly, dipping the ladle of sleep into the shallow pool of dreamland, hoping she would not see the firewoman there before she beckoned herself awake.

Then, one day, Asamoah no longer wanted to sleep. He nuzzled Akua's neck.

"I know you're awake," he said. "I know you do not sleep these days, Akua."

And still she tried to pretend, ignoring his hot breath against her skin, breathing still and the same.

"Akua," he said. He had turned his body so that his mouth now met her ear, and the sound of her name was a strong stick hitting a hollow drum.

She did not answer as he continued to speak her name. The first day she'd left the house after her week of exile, the townspeople had looked away as she passed, embarrassed and ashamed of how they had let Nana Serwah treat her. Her mother-in-law too could not see her without bursting into tears, her pleas for forgiveness muffled by the sound. It was only Kofi Poku, the child who had pointed out the white man, the evil one, and so consigned him to burn, who saw the silent Akua and whispered "Crazy Woman." Crazy Woman. Wife of Crippled Man.

That night, Crippled Man turned Crazy Woman onto her back and entered her, forcefully at first, and then more timidly. She opened her eyes to see him working more slowly than he used to, using his arms to push off, push in, his sweat dripping slowly off the bridge of his nose to land on her forehead and trickle down to meet the floor.

When he finished, Asamoah turned away from her and wept. Their daughters were asleep across from them, thumbs in mouths. Akua turned too. Exhausted, she slept. And in the morning, when she realized that she had not dreamed of fire, she felt that she would be all right. And weeks later, when Nana Serwah snatched baby Yaw from between Akua's legs with one hand and sliced the cord with the other, when Akua heard his loud and mewling cry, she knew that her son would be all right too.

Slowly Akua began to speak more. She slept rarely, but when she did, she would wander. Some days she woke up at the door, other days curled up between her daughters. The sleep time was short, quick, so that as soon as she had moved she was awake again. She would return to her place beside Asamoah, stare at the straw and mud of the roof above them until the sun began to peek through the cracks. Rarely, Asamoah would catch her in her night wanderings while he himself was in midsleep. He'd reach for his machete, then remember his missing leg and give up. Defeated, Akua thought, by his wife and his own misery.

Akua was wary of the villagers, and the only people who brought her any joy were her children. Ama Serwah was speaking real words now, leaving behind the fast and frantic nonsense speech of her early twos. Now no one questioned Akua when she wanted to take long walks with her children. They didn't question her when she thought a stick was a snake or when she left the food in the fire to burn. When they whispered "Crazy Woman," they had to do it behind Nana Serwah's back, because if the woman heard them, she would give them a tongue-lashing that would sting almost as much as the real thing.

Akua would start each walk by asking her daughters where they wanted to go. She would sling baby Yaw in a wrapper around her back and wait for the girls to direct her. Often, they would say the same things. They wanted to walk by Yaa Asantewa's palace. The place had been preserved in her honor, and the girls liked to stand outside the gate, singing the postwar songs. Their favorite one was:

Koo koo hin koo
 Yaa Asantewaa eei
 Obaa basia
 Ogyina apremo ano eei
 Waye be egypte
 Na Wabo Mmofen

Sometimes Akua would sing along softly, rocking Yaw back and forth in time with the music as she praised the woman who fought before cannons.

The girls would need to rest often, and their favorite spot to do it was underneath trees. Akua would spend long afternoons with them, napping in the small slices of shade provided by impossibly large trees.

"I want to be like Yaa Asantewaa when I am an Old Lady!" Ama Serwah declared on one such day. The girls had grown too tired to keep walking, and the only tree nearby was the one where the white man had burned. The blackness of the charred bark seemed to crawl up from the roots and toward the lowest branches. Akua resisted stopping there at first, but the baby's weight made her feel like she was carrying ten handfuls of yam. Finally she stopped, lying flat on her back, the small mountain of her not-yet-deflated belly hiding her girls from sight as they lay at her feet, Yaw at her side.

"Will they sing songs about you, my dear?" Akua asked, and Ama Serwah burst into giggles.

"Yes!" she said. "They'll say, Look at the Old Lady, Ama Serwah. Isn't she strong, and pretty too?"

"And what about you, Abee?" Akua asked, shielding her eyes from the mighty midday sun.

"Yaa Asantewaa was Queen Mother, daughter of a Big Man," Abee said. "That is why she gets a song. Ama Serwah and I are only the daughters of a Crazy Woman raised by white men."

Akua could not move as readily as she once used to. She didn't know if this was because of the baby that had grown in her stomach, demanding her food and energy, or if it was a result of her week spent in exile on the floor of her hut. She wanted to spring to her feet, to look

her daughter in the eye, but all she could manage was a gentle torque of her lower back, first to the left and then to the right, until she had gathered enough force to sit up, and see Abee, who was playing with the peeling bark.

"Who told you I am crazy?" she asked, and the child, who could not yet tell if she was on the verge of getting in trouble, shrugged. Akua wanted to be angrier, but she couldn't find the energy anywhere in her body. She needed to sleep. Really sleep. Two days before, she had gotten the yams she dropped into the oil, forgotten them as her eyes slept. By the time Nana Serwah shook her awake, the yams had burned to black. Her mother-in-law had said nothing.

"Everyone says you are crazy," she said. "Sometimes Nana yells at them when they say it, but they still do."

Akua rested her head against a rock, and did not speak until she heard the girls' soft and sleepy breaths floating about her like tiny butterflies.

That night Akua took the children home. Asamoah was eating in the middle of the compound when they walked in.

"How are my girls?" he asked as his daughters rushed toward him to receive their hugs. Akua hung back, her eyes following her daughters as they made their way into the hut. It had been a hot day, and Ama Serwah was already peeling off her wrapper as she ran inside. It waved behind her like a flag.

"And how is my son?" Asamoah asked Akua's back, where Yaw hung cradled in fabric. Akua walked toward her husband so that he could touch the baby.

"Nyame willing, he is good," she said, and Asamoah grunted his assent.

"Come get food to eat," he said. He called for his mother and she appeared within seconds. Her old age had not diminished her swiftness, nor had it diminished her ear's ability to distinguish the needy cry of her oldest son. She came out and nodded at Akua. She had stopped weeping at the sight of her only days before.

"You must eat so that your milk is rich," she said, dipping her hands into the washing bowl so that she could begin the *fugu*.

Akua ate until her stomach grew. It looked like it could be punctured, like sweet milk would flow from her belly button, and that was all that she could picture as she cleaned her hands. Milk flowing below her feet like a river. She thanked Nana Serwah, and twisted herself up off the stool that she had been sitting on. She reached out her hands to Asamoah so that he too could hop up, grabbed the baby, and then went into their hut.

The girls were already sleeping. Akua envied them. The ease with which they entered the dream world. They sucked their thumbs still, unfazed by the pepper their grandmother applied every morning.

Beside her, Asamoah rolled once, twice. He too had been sleeping better than he had in the early days of his return. Sometimes he would reach for the ghost of his leg in the middle of the night, and then, finding his hands empty, he would cry softly. Akua never mentioned this to him when he awoke.

Now, flat-backed in their hut, Akua allowed herself to close her eyes. She imagined that she was lying on the sand of the beaches of Cape Coast. Sleep came for her like waves. First licking her curling toes, her swollen feet, her aching ankles. By the time it hit her mouth, nose, eyes, she was no longer afraid of it.

When she entered the dreamland she was on the same beach. She had been there only once, with the missionaries from the school. They had wanted to start a new school in a nearby village but found the townspeople unwelcoming. Akua had been mesmerized by the color of the water. It was a color she had never had a word for because nothing like it appeared in her world. No tree green, no sky blue, no stone or yarn or clay could capture it. In dreamland, Akua walked to the edge of the rolling ocean. She dipped her toe into water so cool she felt she could taste it, like a breeze hitting the back of the throat. Then the breeze turned hot as the ocean caught fire. The breeze from the back of Akua's throat began to swirl, round and round, gathering speed until it could no longer be contained within Akua's mouth, and so she

shot it out. And the spit-out breeze began to move the fiery ocean, dipping down into the depths to collect itself until spiraling wind and fiery ocean became the woman that Akua now felt she knew so well.

This time, the firewoman was not angry. She beckoned Akua out onto the ocean, and, though afraid, Akua took her first step. Her feet burned. When she lifted one up she could smell her own flesh wafting from the bottom. Still, she moved, following the firewoman until she led her to a place that looked like Akua's own hut. Now in the firewoman's arms were the two fire children that she had held the first time Akua dreamed of her. They were locked into either arm, head resting on either breast. Their cries were soundless, but Akua could see the sound, floating out of their mouths like puffs of smoke from the fetish man's favored pipe. Akua had the urge to hold them, and she reached out her hands to them. Her hands caught fire, but she touched them still. Soon she cradled them with her own burning hands, playing with the braided ropes of fire that made up their hair, their coal-black lips. She felt calm, happy even, that the firewoman had found her children again at last. And as she held them, the firewoman did not protest. She did not try to snatch them away. Instead, she watched, crying from joy. And her tears were the color of the ocean water in Fanteland, that not-green, not-blue color that Akua remembered from her youth. The color began to gather. Blue and more blue. Green and more green. Until the torrent of tears began to put out the fire in Akua's hands. Until the children began to disappear.

"Akua, the Crazy Woman! Akua, the Crazy Woman!"

She felt the sound of her name in the growing pit of her stomach, the weight like worry. Her eyes began to open, and she saw Edweso around her. She was being carried. Ten men at least, lifting her above their heads. She registered all of this before she registered the pain she was in, looked down to see her burned hands and feet.

The wailing women were behind the men. "Evil woman!" some of them cried. "Wicked one," said others.

Asamoah was behind the wailing women, hopping with his stick, trying to keep up.

Then they were tying her to the burning tree. Akua found her voice. "Please, brothers. Tell me what is going on!"

Antwi Agyei, an elder, began to bellow. "She wants to know what is going on?" he cried to the men who had gathered.

They wrapped the rope around Akua's wrists. Her burns screamed and then she.

Antwi Agyei continued. "What kind of evil does not know itself?" he asked, and the crowd stomped its many feet against the hard earth. They slung the rope around Akua's waist.

"We have known her as the Crazy Woman, and now she has shown herself to us. Wicked woman. Evil woman. Raised by white men, she can die like one too."

Asamoah pushed his way to the front of the crowd. "Please," he said.

"You're on her side? The woman who killed your children?" Antwi Agyei screamed. His anger was echoed in the yells of the crowd, in the stomping feet and beating hands, the undulating tongues.

Akua could not think. The woman who killed her children? The woman who killed her children? She was asleep. She must still be asleep.

Asamoah began to weep. He looked Akua in the eyes, and with her own she begged him questions.

"Yaw is still alive. I grabbed him before he died, but I could only carry one," he said, looking at Akua still, but speaking to the crowd. "My son will need her. You cannot take her from me."

He looked at Antwi Agyei and then to the people of Edweso. The ones who had been sleeping were now awake, had filtered in to join the others waiting to see the evil woman burn.

"Have I not lost enough flesh?" Asamoah asked them.

Before long, they cut Akua down. They left her and Asamoah to get themselves back to the hut. Nana Serwah and the doctor were tending to Yaw's wounds. The baby was screaming, the sound seeming to come from somewhere outside of himself. They would not tell her where they had put Abee and Ama Serwah. They would not say anything at all.

Yaw

THE HARMATAN WAS COMING IN. Yaw could see dust sweeping up from the hard clay and being carried all the way to his classroom window on the second floor of the school in Takoradi where he had been teaching for the last ten years. He wondered how bad the winds would be this year. When he was five, still living in Edweso, the winds were so strong that they snapped tree trunks. The dust was so thick that when he held out his fingers, they disappeared before him.

Yaw shuffled his papers. He had come to his classroom on the weekend before the start of the second term to think, perhaps write. He stared at the title of his book, *Let the Africans Own Africa*. He had written two hundred pages and thrown out nearly as many. Now even the title offended him. He put it away, knowing that if he didn't he would do something rash. Open his window, maybe, let the winds carry the pages away.

"What you need is a wife, Mr. Agyekum. Not that silly book."

Yaw was eating dinner at Edward Boahen's house for the sixth night that week. On Sunday, he would eat there for the seventh. Edward's wife liked to complain that she was married to two men, but Yaw complimented her cooking so often that he knew she would continue to welcome him.

"Why do I need a wife when I have you?" Yaw asked.

"Eh, careful now," Edward said, pausing his steady food-shoveling for the first time since his wife put his bowl in front of him.

Edward was the maths teacher at the same Roman Catholic school in Takoradi where Yaw taught history. The two had met at Achimota School in Accra, and Yaw cherished their friendship more than he cherished most things.

"Independence is coming," Yaw said, and Mrs. Boahen sighed one of her deep-chested sighs.

"If it's coming, let it come. I am tired of hearing you talk about it," she said. "What good is independence to you if you don't have someone to cook your dinner!" She rushed off into the small stone house to collect more water for them, and Yaw laughed. He could picture the caption they would put under her name in the revolutionist papers: "Typical Gold Coast woman, more concerned with dinner than with freedom."

"What you should be doing is saving your money to go to England or America for more schooling. You can't lead a revolution from behind your teacher's desk," Edward said.

"I'm too old to go to America now. Too old for revolution, too. Besides, if we go to the white man for school, we will just learn the way the white man wants us to learn. We will come back and build the country the white man wants us to build. One that continues to serve them. We will never be free."

Edward shook his head. "You are too rigid, Yaw. We have to start somewhere."

"So let us start with ourselves." This was what his book was about, but he didn't say anything more, for he already knew the argument that would come from it. Both men had been born around the time the Asante were absorbed into the British Colony. Both had fathers who had fought in the various wars for freedom. They wanted the same things, but had different ideas of how to get them. The truth was, Yaw didn't think he could lead a revolution from anywhere. No one would read his book, even if he did finish it.

Mrs. Boahen came back with a large bowl of water, and the two men began to rinse their hands in it.

"Mr. Agyekum, I know a nice girl. She is still in her childbearing years so there is no need to worry—"

"I should be going," Yaw said, cutting her off. He knew it was rude.

After all, Mrs. Boahen was not wrong. It was not her place to cook for him, but he didn't feel that it was her place to lecture him either. He shook hands with Edward, and with Mrs. Boahen too, then made his way back to his own small house on the school grounds.

As he walked the mile length of the school grounds, he saw the young boys playing football. They were agile boys, in full control of their bodies. They had a boldness to their movements that Yaw had never possessed when he was their age. He stood and watched them for a moment, and soon the ball came flying toward him. He caught it, and was grateful for that small bit of athleticism.

They waved at him, and sent a new student over to fetch the ball. The boy walked up, smiling at first, but as he got closer, the smile fell from his face and a look of fear replaced it. He stood in front of Yaw, saying nothing.

"Do you want your ball?" Yaw asked, and the boy nodded quickly, staring still.

Yaw threw the ball at him, more forcefully than he meant to, and the young boy caught it and ran.

"What's wrong with his face?" Yaw heard him ask as he approached the others, but before they could answer, Yaw was already walking away.

It was Yaw's tenth year of teaching at the school. Every year was the same. The new crop of schoolboys would begin to flower the school grounds, their hair freshly cut, their school uniforms freshly pressed. They would bring with them their timetables, their books, what little money their parents or villages had been able to collect for them. They would ask each other whom they had for this or that subject, and when one said Mr. Agyekum, another would tell the story that his elder brother or cousin had heard about the history teacher.

On the first day of the second term, Yaw watched the new students amble in. They were always well-behaved children, these boys, having been handpicked for their brightness or their wealth in order to attend school, learn the white man's book. In the walkways, on the way to his classroom, they would be so boisterous that it was possible to imagine

them as they must have been in their villages, wrestling and singing and dancing before they knew what a book was, before their families knew that a book was a thing a child could want—need, even. Then, once they reached the classroom, once the textbooks were placed on their small wooden desks, they would grow quiet, spellbound. They were so quiet on that first day that Yaw could hear the baby birds on his window ledge, begging to be fed.

"What does the board say?" Yaw asked. He taught Form I students, fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds mostly, who had already learned to read and write in English in their lower-level classes. When Yaw had first gotten the post, he had argued with the headmaster that he should be able to teach in the boys' regional tongues, but the headmaster had laughed at him. Yaw knew it was a foolish hope. There were too many languages to even try.

Yaw watched them. He could always tell which boy would raise his hand first by the way he pushed forward in his seat and moved his eyes from left to right to see if anyone else would challenge his desire to speak first. This time, a very small boy named Peter raised his hand. "It says, 'History is Storytelling,'" Peter answered. He smiled, the pent-up excitement releasing.

"History is Storytelling," Yaw repeated. He walked down the aisles between the rows of seats, making sure to look each boy in the eye. Once he finished walking and stood in the back of the room, where the boys would have to crane their necks in order to see him, he asked, "Who would like to tell the story of how I got my scar?"

The students began to squirm, their limbs growing limp and wobbly. They looked at each other, coughed, looked away.

"Don't be shy," Yaw said, smiling now, nodding encouragingly. "Peter?" he asked. The boy, who only seconds before had been so happy to speak, began to plead with his eyes. The first day with a new class was always Yaw's favorite.

"Mr. Agyekum, sah?" Peter said.

"What story have you heard? About my scar?" Yaw asked, smiling still, hoping, now, to ease some of the child's growing fear. Peter cleared his throat and looked at the ground. "They say you

were born of fire," he started. "That this is why you are so smart. Because you were lit by fire."

"Anyone else?"

Timidly, a boy named Edem raised his hand. "They say your mother was fighting evil spirits from Asamando."

Then William: "I heard your father was so sad by the Asante loss that he cursed the gods, and the gods took vengeance."

Another, named Thomas: "I heard you did it to yourself, so that you would have something to talk about on the first day of class."

All of the boys laughed, and Yaw had to stifle his own amusement. Word of his lesson had gotten around, he knew. The older boys told some of the younger ones what to expect from him.

Still he continued, making his way back to the front of the room to look at his students, the bright boys of the uncertain Gold Coast, learning the white book from a scared man.

"Whose story is correct?" Yaw asked them. They looked around at the boys who had spoken, as though trying to establish their allegiance by holding a gaze, casting a vote by sending a glance.

Finally, once the murmuring subsided, Peter raised his hand. "Mr. Agyekum, we cannot know which story is correct." He looked at the rest of the class, slowly understanding. "We cannot know which story is correct because we were not there."

Yaw nodded. He sat in his chair at the front of the room and looked at all the young men. "This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days, they told stories to the children so that the children would know, so that the children could tell stories to their children. And so on, and so on. But now we come upon the problem of conflicting stories. Kojo Nyarko says that when the warriors came to his village their coats were red, but Kwame Adu says that they were blue. Whose story do we believe, then?"

The boys were silent. They stared at him, waiting.

"We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that

this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture."

The room was still. The birds on the ledge were still waiting for their food to come, still crying for their mother. Yaw gave the boys some time to think about what he had said, to respond, but when no one did, he continued. "Let us open our textbooks to page—"

One of the students was coughing. Yaw looked up to see William with his hand raised. He nodded at the boy to speak.

"But, Mr. Agyekum, sah, you still have not told us the story of how you got your scar."

Yaw could feel all the boys directing their gazes toward him, but kept his head down. He resisted the urge to put his hand up to the left side of his face, feel the raised and leathery skin there with its many ripples and lines that, when he was still just a child, reminded Yaw of a map. He had wanted that map to lead him out of Edweso, and in some ways it had. His village could hardly look at him and had collected money to send him to school so he could learn, but also, Yaw suspected, so they would not have to be reminded of their shame. In other ways, the map of Yaw's scarred skin had led him nowhere. He had not married. He would not lead. Edweso had come with him.

Yaw did not touch his scar. Instead, he set his book down carefully and reminded himself to smile. He said, "I was only a baby. All I know is what I've heard."

What he'd heard: That the Crazy Woman of Edweso, the wanderer, his mother, Akua, had set the hut on fire while he, still a baby, and his sisters slept. That his father, Asamoah, the Crippled Man, had only been able to save one, the son. That Crippled Man had kept Crazy Woman from burning. That Crazy Woman and Crippled Man had been exiled to the outskirts of town. That the town had collected money to send the scarred son to school, when he was still so young he had yet to forget the taste of his mother's breast. That Crippled Man had died while the scarred son was still in school. That Crazy Woman lived on.

Yaw had not been to Edweso since the day he left for school. For

many years, his mother sent letters, each written in the hand of whom ever she'd convinced to write for her that day. The letters begged Yaw to come see her, but he never responded, and so, eventually, she stopped. When he was still in school, Yaw spent his leaves with Edward's family in Oseim. They took him in as though he were one of their own, and Yaw loved them as though he belonged to them. An unapologetic, unquestioning love like that of the stray dog that follows the man home from work every evening, happy, simply, to be allowed to walk nearby. It was in Oseim that Yaw had met the first girl he would ever be interested in. In school, he had loved the Romantic poets best, and he had spent nights in Oseim copying Wordsworth and Blake onto tree leaves that he scattered around the spot near the river where she went to fetch water.

He spent a whole week doing this, knowing that the words of white Englishmen would mean nothing to her, that she could not read them. Knowing that she would have to come to him to find out what the leaves said. He would think about it every night. The girl bringing her bundle of leaves to him so that he might recite "A Dream" or "A Night Thought" to her.

Instead, she went to Edward. It was Edward who read the lines to her, and afterward, it was Edward who told her that the leaves were Yaw's doing.

"He likes you, you know," Edward said. "Maybe he will one day ask you to marry him."

But the girl shook her head, clucked her tongue in distaste. "If I marry him, my children will be ugly," she declared.

That night, lying next to Edward in his room, Yaw listened as his best friend told him that he had explained to the girl that you could not inherit a scar.

Now, nearing his fiftieth birthday, Yaw no longer knew if he believed this was true.

The semester passed. In June, Kwame Nkrumah, a political leader from Nkroful, started the Convention People's Party and Edward joined soon thereafter. "Independence is coming, my brother," he was fond of say-

ing to Yaw on the nights when Yaw still joined him and his wife for dinner. This happened less and less. Mrs. Boahen was expecting her fifth child and the pregnancy was difficult. So difficult that the Boahens stopped entertaining. First just the other teachers and town friends that they had acquired, but then Yaw, too, noticed that even his welcome began to wear.

And so, Yaw got a house girl. He had been resistant to having other people in his house for as long as he could remember. He could cook a few dishes for himself competently enough. He could fetch his own water and wash his own clothes. He did not keep his house as neat as he had been forced to keep his room in school, but none of this bothered him. He preferred the clutter and the plain meals if it meant he would not have to have another person in his house, looking at him.

"That's ridiculous!" Edward said. "You're a teacher. People stare at you all day."

But for Yaw that was different. At the front of the classroom he was not himself. He was a performer in the tradition of village dancers and storytellers. At home, he was who he really was. Shy and lonely, angry and embarrassed. He did not want anyone to see him there.

Edward examined all of the candidates himself, and in the end Yaw ended up with Esther, an Ahanta from right there in Takoradi.

Esther was a plain girl. Maybe even ugly. Her eyes were too large for her head and her head too large for her body. On the first day of work, Yaw showed her to her room at the back of the house and told her that he spent most of his time writing. He asked her not to disturb him and then went back out to sit at his desk.

The book was getting unruly. The Gold Coast independence movement's political leaders, the Big Six, had all come back from school in America and England, and as far as Yaw could tell they were all like Edward, patient but forceful, confident that independence would indeed come. Yaw had been reading more and more about the black people of America's movement toward freedom, and he was attracted to the rage that lit each sentence of their books on fire. He wanted that from his book. An academic rage. All he could seem to muster was a long-winded whine.

"Ess-cuse me, sah."

Yaw looked up from his book. Esther was standing in front of him with the long handmade broom she had insisted on bringing with her, even though Yaw told her that his house had many brooms.

"You don't have to speak in English," Yaw said.

"Yes, sah, but my sis-tah say you ah teach-ah, so I must speak English."

She looked terrified, her shoulders hunched and her hands gripping the broom so tightly that Yaw could see the area around her knuckles begin to stretch and redden. He wished he could cover his face, put the young woman at ease.

"You understand Twi?" Yaw said in his mother tongue, and Esther nodded. "Then speak freely. We hear enough English as it is."

It was like he had opened a gate. Her body began to slip into an easy stance, and Yaw realized that it was not his scar that had terrified her, but rather the problem of language, a marker of her education, her class, compared with his. She had been terrified that for the teacher of the white book, she would have to speak the white tongue. Now, released from English, Esther smiled more brightly than Yaw had seen anyone smile in ages. He could see the large, proud gap that stood like a doorway between her two front teeth, and he found himself training his gaze through that door as though he could see all the way down into her throat, her gut, the home of her very soul.

"Sir, I have finished cleaning the bedroom. You have a lot of books in there. Did you know? Do you read all of those books? Can you read English? Sir, where do you keep the palm oil? I could not find it in the kitchen. It is a nice kitchen. What will you have for dinner? Should I go to market? What are you writing?"

Did she breathe? If she had, Yaw didn't hear it. He shuffled the pages of his book and set it aside as he thought about what to say next.

"Make whatever you want for dinner. I don't care what."

She nodded, not dissatisfied, it seemed, with the fact that he had answered only one of her questions. "I'll make goat pepper soup," she said, her eyes cast downward, moving this way and that, as though searching the floor for any thoughts she might have dropped there. "I will go to market today." She looked up at him. "Would you like to go to market with me?"

Suddenly Yaw was angry or nervous. He couldn't quite tell which, and so he chose to respond with anger. "Why should I go to market with you? Don't you work for me?" he shouted.

Her mouth closed, the portal to her soul hidden. She cocked her head to the side and stared at him as though it was just then occurring to her that he had a face, that his face had a scar. She studied it for one second more, and then smiled again. "I thought you might want a break from your writing. My sister said teachers are very serious because they do all their work in their minds and so sometimes they have to be reminded that they must use their bodies. Will you not use your body if you walk to the market?"

Now it was Yaw's turn to smile. Esther laughed, her whole wide mouth open, and suddenly Yaw had the strange urge to reach in and pull something of that happiness out for himself so that he might keep it with him always.

They went to the market. Fat women with babies at their breasts sold soup, corn, yams, meat. Men and young boys stood bartering with each other. Some sold food, others sold carvings and wooden drums. Yaw stopped by the stand of a boy who looked to be about thirteen who was using a slim knife to carve symbols into a drum. The boy's father stood careful watch beside him. Yaw recognized the man from last year's Kundum. He was one of the best drummers Yaw had ever seen, and as the man stared at his son, Yaw could see that he wanted the boy to be even better.

"You like to drum?" Esther asked.

Yaw didn't realize she had been watching him. It was so rare that he had to be concerned with other people. He hadn't been angry after all. Just nervous.

"Me? No, no. I never learned how."

She nodded. She led the freshly purchased, roped goat behind her, and at times while they walked, the animal grew obstinate, digging its hooves into the ground and nudging its head against the air, its horns reflecting light. She tugged it forcefully, and it bleated, perhaps at her, though perhaps it would have done so anyway.

Yaw realized that he should say something. He cleared his throat and looked at her, but his words stuck. She smiled at him.

"I make a very good goat pepper soup," she said.

"Is that right?"

"Yes, so good you would think your mother made it. Where is your mother?" she asked in her breathless way.

The goat stood still, screamed. Esther wrapped the rope once more around her wrist and tugged. It occurred to Yaw that he should offer to walk the goat for her, but he didn't.

"My mother lives in Edweso. I haven't seen her since the day I turned six." He paused. "She did this to me." He pointed to the scar, angled his body so that she could see it more clearly.

Esther stopped walking and so Yaw stopped too. She looked at him, and for a second he worried that she would reach out and try to touch him, but she didn't.

Instead she said, "You're very angry."

"Yes," he said. It was something he rarely admitted to himself, let alone to anyone else. The longer he looked at himself in a mirror, the longer he lived alone, the longer the country he loved stayed under colonial rule, the angrier he became. And the nebulous, mysterious object of his anger was his mother, a woman whose face he could barely remember, but a face reflected in his own scar.

"Anger doesn't suit you," Esther said. She gave the goat one more good tug, and Yaw listened to it bleat as the two of them walked ahead of him.

He was in love with her. Five years passed before he realized it, though perhaps he knew on that first day. It was summer, and the insistent fog of heat was upon them, so ever-present it felt like a low hum, a heat you could hear. Yaw didn't have to teach summer term, and so he had hours, whole days, to sit and read and write. Instead, he watched Esther clean from his spot at the desk. He pretended to be annoyed when she rolled off her list of endless questions, but since that first day, he always answered them all, each and every one. When it was not raining, he would sit outside under the shade of a big, bushy mango tree while she drew water from the well. She carried it back to the house in

two buckets, and the swollen muscles of her arms would flex, and the sheen of sweat would appear on them, and when she passed him she would smile, the gap so lovely it made him want to cry.

Everything made him want to cry. He could see the differences between them as long ravines, impossible to cross. He was old; she was young. He was educated; she was not. He was scarred; she was whole. Each difference split the ravine wider and wider still. There was no way.

And so, he didn't speak. In the evenings, she would ask him what he wanted for dinner, what he was working on, whether he had heard any updates about the independence movement, whether he was still considering traveling for more education.

He said what needed to be said, nothing more.

"The *banku* is too sticky today," she said while they ate one night. In the beginning, she had insisted on taking her meals separately from him, saying that it wouldn't be proper for them to eat together, which was true enough. But the thought of her alone in her room with nowhere for all of her questions to go seemed to him to be the worse option. So now, this and every night, she ate across from him at his small wooden table.

"It's good," he said. He smiled. He wished he were a beautiful man, with skin as smooth as clay. But he was not the kind of man who could win a woman just with his presence. He would have to do something.

"No, I've made much better in the past. It's okay. You don't have to eat it if you don't like it. I'll make something else for you. Would you like soup?"

She was starting to pick up his plate, so he held it down.

"This is good," he said again, more forcefully. He wondered what he should do to win her. For the past five years she had been drawing him more and more out of himself. Asking him questions about his schooling, about Edward, about the past.

"Would you like to go to Edweso with me?" Yaw asked. "To visit my mother?" As soon as he said it, he regretted it. For years, Esther had been nudging him to go, but he either deflected or ignored her. Now, his love had made him desperate. He didn't even know if the Crazy Woman of Edweso was still alive.

Esther looked uncertain. "You want me to go?"

"In case I need someone to cook for me as I travel," he said hurriedly, trying to cover his tracks.

She considered this for a moment, and then she nodded. For the first time since he had met her, she had no further questions.

*

There were 206 kilometers between Takoradi and Edweso. Yaw knew because he could feel each kilometer as though it were a stone lodged in his throat. Two hundred and six stones collected in his mouth, so that he could not speak. Even when Esther asked him a question, like how much longer were they to travel, how would he explain her presence to the townspeople, what would he say to his mother when he saw her, the stones blocked his words from passing. Eventually, Esther too grew silent.

He remembered so little of Edweso, so he could not say if things had changed. When they reached the town, they were greeted first by a sweltering heat, the sun's rays stretched out like a cat after a nap. There were only a few people standing about the square that day, but the ones who were there stared freely, shocked at the sight either of the car or of the strangers.

"What are they looking at?" Esther whispered miserably. She was worried about herself, that people would think it improper for them to be traveling together, unmarried. She had not said this to him yet, but he could see it in the way she lowered her eyes and walked behind him.

Before long, a little boy, no older than four, holding the long train of his mother's wrapper, pointed at Yaw with his tiny index finger. "Look, Mama, his face! His face!"

The boy's father, who stood on the other side of him, snatched his hand away. "Stop that nonsense!" he said, but then he looked more closely along the line the boy's finger had drawn.

He approached Yaw and Esther where they stood, uncertain, holding one bag each. "Yaw?" he asked.

Yaw dropped his bag to the ground and walked closer to the man.

"Yes?" he said. "I'm afraid I don't remember you." He held his hand above his brows to shield his eyes from the sun, but was soon extending it again to shake the man's hand.

"They call me Kofi Poku," the man said, shaking back. "I was about ten when you left. This is my wife, Gifty, and my son Henry."

Yaw shook hands all around and then turned toward Esther. "This is my . . . This is Esther," he said. And Esther too shook hands all around.

"You must be here to see Crazy Woman," Kofi Poku said before realizing his mistake. He covered his mouth. "I'm so sorry I mean Ma Akua."

Yaw could tell from the way his eyes searched and his mouth slowed that Kofi Poku had not had to call his mother by her name in years. Perhaps ever. As far as Yaw knew, the Crazy Woman of Edweso could have earned her title well before his birth. "Please, don't worry," Yaw said. "We are here to see my mother, yes."

Just then, Kofi Poku's wife leaned in to his ear to whisper something, and the man's eyebrows lifted, face brightening. When he spoke, it was as though the idea had been his all along.

"You and your wife must be very tired from your journey. Please, my wife and I would like you to stay with us. We will make you dinner."

Yaw started to shake his head, but Kofi Poku waved his hand, as though trying to counteract Yaw's shake with his own. "I insist. Besides, your mother keeps odd hours. It would not be good for you to go to her today. Wait until tomorrow evening. We will send someone to tell her you are coming."

How could they refuse? Yaw and Esther had planned on going straight to Akua's house to stay, but instead they walked the short mile's distance from the town square to the Poku house. When they got there, Kofi Poku's other children, three daughters and one son, were beginning dinner. One of the girls, the tallest and most slender, sat before a great big mortar. The boy held the pestle, which was nearly twice his height. He held it straight up and then would send it crashing down just as the girl's hand finished turning the *fufu* in the mortar, barely escaping the impact.

"Hello, my children," Kofi Poku called, and all of the children

stopped what they were doing and stood, so that they could greet their parents, but when they saw Yaw their voices hushed and their eyes widened.

The one who looked like the youngest girl, with two puffs of hair on either side of her head, pulled on her brother's pants leg. "Crazy Woman's son," she whispered. Yet still, all could hear, and Yaw knew for certain now that his story had become legend in his hometown.

Everyone stood there, embarrassed for a minute, and then Esther with her large and muscular arms snatched the pestle from the older boy and quickly struck the *fifu* in the mortar before anyone had time to think or react. The ball of *fifu* flattened, and the *fifu* stick fell with a thud against the clay earth.

"Enough!" Esther shouted once they had all turned to stare at her. "Has this man not suffered enough that he should come home to this?" she asked.

"Please excuse my child," Mrs. Poku said, using her voice to speak instead of her husband's for the first time since they'd met her. "It's just that they have heard the stories. They will not make the mistake again." She turned, allowed her gaze to rest on each of the five children, even the toddler at her feet, and quickly, without any need for further explanation, they understood.

Kofi Poku cleared his throat, and motioned for the two of them to follow him to their seats. As they did, Yaw whispered, "Thank you," and Esther shrugged. "Let them think that I am the crazy one," Esther said. They sat down to their meal. The kids served them, frightened but kind. Kofi Poku and his wife told them what to expect from Yaw's mother.

"She lives with only a house girl in that place your father built for her on the edge of town. She rarely goes out anymore, though sometimes you can see her outside, tending to her garden. She has a lovely garden. My wife often goes there to admire the flowers that grow there."

"Does she speak when you see her?" Yaw asked Mrs. Poku.

The woman shook her head. "No, but she has always been kind to me. She even gives me some flowers to take home. I put them in the girls' hair before we go to church, and I think it will bring them good marriages."

"Don't worry," Kofi Poku said. "I'm sure she will know you. Her heart will know you." His wife and Esther both nodded, and Yaw looked away.

It was dark in the courtyard, but the heat had not lessened, only transformed, buzzing with mosquitoes and humming with gnats.

Yaw and Esther finished their food. They said thank you. They were taken to their room, where Esther insisted on the floor while Yaw got the mattress, a tough, springy thing that fought his back. Like that, and there, they slept.

They spent the morning preparing, walking around Edweso, and eating many times. They had been told that Yaw's mother rarely slept and seemed to prefer evenings to mornings. And so they bided their time. Esther had left Takoradi only once in her life, and Yaw loved seeing the wonder in her eyes as they took in the strangeness of this new town.

Everyone thought they were married. Yaw did not correct them, and, to his delight, Esther did not correct them either, though Yaw wondered if this was more a factor of her politeness than her desire. He was too afraid to ask.

Soon, the sky began to darken and with each new shade, Yaw's stomach began to tighten. Esther kept glancing at him carefully, taking in his face as though it held instructions for how she herself should feel.

"Don't be afraid," she said.

Since they'd met five years before, Esther had been the one to encourage his homecoming. She said it had something to do with forgiveness, but Yaw wasn't certain that he believed in forgiveness. He heard the word most on the few days he went to the white man's church with Edward and Mrs. Boehen and sometimes with Esther, and so it had begun to seem to him like a word the white men brought with them when they first came to Africa. A trick their Christians had learned and spoke loudly and freely about to the people of the Gold Coast. Forgiveness, they shouted, all the while committing their wrongs. When he was younger, Yaw wondered why they did not preach that the people should avoid wrongdoing altogether. But the older he got, the better he

understood. Forgiveness was an act done after the fact, a piece of the bad deed's future. And if you point the people's eye to the future, they might not see what is being done to hurt them in the present.

When it was finally evening, Kofi Poku led Yaw and Esther to Yaw's mother's house on the outskirts of town. Yaw knew it immediately from the lush things that grew in her garden. Colors that Yaw had never seen before bloomed off of long green stalks that rustled from the wind or the small creatures that moved beneath them.

"This is where I leave you," Kofi Poku said. They had not even reached the door yet. For any other family, in this and many other towns, it would have been considered rude for a townspeople to be so close to a person's house and not greet the master of the house, but Yaw could see the discomfort in the man's face, and he waved to him and thanked him again while he made his way off.

The door to the house was open, but still Yaw knocked twice, Esther standing behind him.

"Hello?" a confused voice called. A woman who looked older than Yaw, carrying a clay bowl, rounded the corner. When she saw Yaw, saw his scar, she gasped, and the bowl fell to the ground, shattering, scattering pieces of red clay from the door all the way into the garden. Tiny pieces of clay that they would never find, that would be absorbed into that earth from which they came.

The woman was shouting. "We thank God for all of his mercies! We thank him that he is alive. Our God, he does not sleep-oh!" She danced around the room. "Old Lady, God has brought you your son! Old Lady, God has brought you your son so you do not have to go to Asamando without seeing him. Old Woman, come and see!" she yelled.

Behind him, Yaw could hear Esther clapping her hands together in her own mini praise. He didn't turn, but he knew she was smiling brightly, and the warmth of that thought emboldened him to step a bit further into the room.

"Does she not hear me?" the woman mumbled to herself, turning sharply toward the bedroom.

Yaw kept moving, at first following the woman, but then continuing straight until he reached the living room. His mother sat in the corner.

"So you have returned home at last," she said, smiling.

If he had not already known that the woman in this house was his mother, he would not have known by looking at her. Yaw was fifty-five, which meant she would be seventy-six, but she seemed younger. Her eyes had the unburdened look of the young, and her smile was generous, yet wise. When she stood up her back was straight, her bones not yet hunched from the weight of each year. When she walked toward him, her limbs were fluid, not stiff, the joints never halting. And when she touched him, when she took his hands in her own, her scarred and ruined hands, when she rubbed the backs of his hands with her crooked thumbs, he felt how soft her own burns were, how very, very soft.

"The son has come home at last. The dreams, they do not fail to come true. They do not fail."

She continued to hold his hands. In the entryway, the servant woman cleared her throat. Yaw turned to find her and Esther standing there, grinning at them.

"Old Woman, we will make dinner!" the woman shouted. Yaw wondered if her voice was always this loud or if the volume was for him.

"Please, don't go to any trouble," he begged.

"Eh? The son comes home after all these years, does the mother not kill a goat?" She sucked her teeth on the way out of the door.

"And you?" Yaw asked Esther.

"Who will boil the yam while the woman kills the goat?" she asked, her voice mischievous.

Yaw watched them go, and for the first time he grew nervous. Suddenly, he felt something he had not felt in a long, long time.

"What are you doing?" he shouted, for his mother had put her hand on his scar, running her fingers along the ruined skin that he alone had touched for nearly half a century.

She continued, undeterred by the anger in his voice. She took her own burned fingers from the lost eyebrow to the raised cheek to the scarred chin. She touched all of it, and only once she had finished did Yaw begin to weep.

She pulled him down to the ground with her, pulled his head to her bosom, and began to chant, softly, "My son-o! My son! My son-o! My son!"

The two stayed like this for a long while, and after Yaw had cried more tears than he had ever cried before, after his mother had finished calling his name out into the world, he peeled himself away so that he could look at her.

"Tell me the story of how I got my scar," he said.

She sighed. "How can I tell you the story of your scar without first telling you the story of my dreams? And how do I talk about my dreams without talking about my family? Our family?"

Yaw waited. His mother got off the ground and motioned for him to do the same. She pointed to a chair on one side of the room, and she took the chair on the other. She looked at the wall behind his head.

"Before you were born, I began to have bad dreams. The dreams started out the same—a woman made of fire would visit me. In her arms, she carried her two fire children, but then the children would disappear and the woman would turn her anger toward me.

"Even before the dreams began, I was not well. My mother died at the hands of the Missionary at the school in Kumasi. Do you know it?"

Yaw shook his head. He had never heard this before, and even if he had, he would have been too young to remember it.

"The Missionary raised me. My only friend was a fetish priest. I was always a sad girl because I did not know that there was any other way to be. When I married your father, I thought I could be happy, and when I had your sisters . . ."

Here, her voice caught, but she lifted her shoulders, began again.

"When I had your sisters, I thought I was happy, but then I saw a white man burn in the square in Edweso and the dreams began. Then the war began and the dreams grew worse. Your father came back without a leg, and the dreams grew worse. I had you, and the sadness did not stop. I tried to fight sleep, but I am human and sleep is not. We were not equally matched. In my sleep one night, I set the hut on fire. They say your father could only save one, you. But that is not entirely true. He also saved me from the townspeople. For many years I wished that he had not.

"They only let me see you so that I could feed you. Then they sent you away, and would not tell me where. I have lived here in this house with Kukua since that day."

As if summoned, Kukua, the old servant, came in with wine. She served Yaw first and then his mother, but the woman refused. Kukua left as quietly as she had entered.

Yaw drank from the wine as though it were water. When the cup lay empty at his feet, he turned his attention back to his mother. She took a deep breath and began again.

"The dreams didn't stop. Not after the fire, not even to this day. I started to get to know the firewoman. Sometimes, as on the night of the fire, she would take me to the ocean in Cape Coast. Sometimes she would take me to a cocoa farm. Sometimes to Kumasi. I didn't know why. I wanted answers, so I went back to the missionary school to ask about my mother's family. The Missionary told me that he had burned all of my mother's belongings, but he lied. He had kept one thing for himself."

His mother pulled Effia's necklace from her neck then and held it out to Yaw. It glowed black in her hand. He touched it, felt the smoothness of it.

"I took the necklace to the fetish man's son so that I could make offerings to our ancestors so that they might stop punishing me. Kukua was maybe fourteen at this time. When we did the ritual, the fetish man's son stopped. He dropped the necklace very suddenly and said, 'Do you know there is evil in your lineage?' I thought he was talking about me, the things I had done, and so I nodded. But then he said, 'This thing you are carrying, it does not belong to you.' When I told him about my dreams, he said that the firewoman was an ancestor come back to visit me. He said that the black stone had belonged to her and that was why it grew hot in his hand. He said that if I listened to her, she would tell me where I came from. He said I should be glad that I was chosen."

Yaw grew angry again. Why should she be glad she was chosen if she was now a ruined woman and he a ruined man? How could she be content with this life?

His mother must have sensed his anger. Old woman that she was, she went to him and knelt before him. Yaw knew she was crying by the wetness of his feet.

She looked up at him and said, "I can't forgive myself for what I've

done. I won't. But when I listened to the firewoman's stories I began to see that the fetish priest was right. There is evil in our lineage. There are people who have done wrong because they could not see the result of the wrong. They did not have these burned hands as warning."

She held her hands out to him, and he looked at them carefully. He recognized her skin in his own.

"What I know now, my son: Evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home. I'm sorry you have suffered. I'm sorry for the way your suffering casts a shadow over your life, over the woman you have yet to marry, the children you have yet to have."

Yaw looked at her surprised, but she simply smiled. "When someone does wrong, whether it is you or me, whether it is mother or father, whether it is the Gold Coast man or the white man, it is like a fisherman casting a net into the water. He keeps only the one or two fish that he needs to feed himself and puts the rest in the water, thinking that their lives will go back to normal. No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free. But still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free."

Yaw took his mother up from the ground and into his arms while she kept chanting, "Be free, Yaw. Be free." He hugged her, surprised by how light she was.

Soon Esther and Kukua came in carrying pot after pot of food. They served Yaw and his mother well into the night. They ate until the sun came up.