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# Broken Horn Bull / A Collection of Essays

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**BROKEN HORN BULL**

**A Collection of Essays**

by

MARTIN ANBEGWON ATUIRE

B.A., University of Colorado, Denver, 1998

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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This thesis entitled:

Broken Horn Bull

A Collection of Essays

written by Martin Anbegwon Atuire

has been approved for the Department of English

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Associate Professor Marcia Douglas

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Associate Professor John-Michael Rivera

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Assistant Professor Noah Eli Gordon

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

## **Abstract**

Atuire, Martin Anbegwon (M.F.A. English, Creative Writing)

Broken Horn Bull

A Collection of Essays

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Marcia Douglas

I am a native Buli speaker and belong to the second generation of Balsa who had the chance to obtain formal education in English. None of my grandparents, and hardly anyone from their generation had the opportunity to go to school. The first schools were established by the British beginning with my father's generation. My mother never had the opportunity to go to school. She was therefore non-literate in English and Buli. During the colonial era, schools were mostly in the southern part of Ghana while the north, where I come from, was mostly left alone to its native ways and native forms of education.

With such background I find myself as a writer working at a very interesting and exciting time in the history of our language and narrative forms. A few of us Balsa are writing for the first time in Buli alongside writing in English. We make an attempt to work carefully in ways that honor, celebrate, and allow for the continued growth of the oral tradition, while at the same time taking advantage of the written text and of the ability to write in English. As primary school pupils, we did not read story books for story hour on our weekly schedule. It could have been because we had only a limited number of books, but story time for us was a memorable occasion when we took turns telling stories in the oral tradition to the class. We learned

first to listen to stories, and then to tell stories in our native Buli before we learned to read and write our own stories in English.

Using a lifelong experience of the narrative, beginning with the oral tradition of my Buli language, and later exposure to the written texts, especially of African writers in English, my thesis brings together works that fall into three main categories. The first part embodies narrative pieces of experiences growing up in northern Ghana as a child, going away to high school and college, and eventually returning to work in the same community. The second part contains snippets along the narrative of the experience of the Black Diaspora in North America, and the last section deals with the complexity of returning to Africa as a dual citizen of the USA and Ghana. Even though the narrative line is established along the three components named above, this is not an attempt at writing a memoir. The pieces attempt through the perspective of the narrator, to render a collective experience of how everyday people struggle, survive and at times fail or triumph over challenges placed in their way.

Special emphasis on the oral tradition is evident throughout the pieces, especially in the title essay. I use the collective narrative voice of “we” a lot in this piece as a way of incorporating unique components of the oral tradition such as, the fact that a story is often a thing of collective as well as personal ownership. A person who creates a story may own it at the time of telling it to others. Once told, the story becomes a collective property, and other people have the right not only to retell it, but to add their own flavor to it. My use of the “we” narrative voice in recounting collective experiences is reflective of yet another aspect of the oral tradition. This aspect calls for the narrator to make room for others who may come along and say, “this was not how I remembered it”, thereby keeping a story open and accountable to the collective.

The story tellers of my childhood, and African writers in English such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Ngugi wa Thiongo, and Ayi Kwei Armah influence the narrative style and some of

the writerly decisions in my thesis. When and where it works successfully, I give credit to all those who came before me, but when and where I fail to make a tight or successful weave of the story telling tradition I take full responsibility for my clumsy weave.

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# Part One

Tilli pa yue te gbong

*The ladder gave the roof its name*

A Buli proverb

## Skin Deep

Baby Akpam is shiny ebony black. We call her Joe Blackie. Joe Blackie is not the name of a person. It is the name of a baboon, a very black baboon. Joe is a white man's name for his African male servant, also known as his ape. Add the two together and we know where Joe Blackie comes from, but we don't care. We call Baby Akpam Joe Blackie before school, and after school. She tries to hold it. Her face stiff, back straight as we walk in past the water engine room, past the church toward the main road that leads into town. She walks alone. The rest of us walk behind her.

"Hey Joe Blackie- you want a banana?"

She cries. We all laugh.

She looks at me when she says, "Why are you so mean? What have I done to you? Have I done you any wrong? My skin is my skin, I cannot jump out if it, leave me alone, leave me alone."

Something skips a beat inside my chest. I pretend I am not sad. I pretend that I don't want to go and hold her and tell her sorry because I know that would be my end. The other boys would ridicule me to death. So I pull my heart taut like a bow and continue to shoot poisoned arrows of hurt at Baby Akpam.

"Joe Blackie, Joe Blackie," only now, I say it with diminished vigor.

"Leave me alone."

I look at her teeth while she is speaking. Her teeth are milk white like a baby's teeth. Her large eyes, white and round like the stars with a dot of brown. Baby has refined features, like Mama says of

beautiful people. God took his time with the chisel, just so finished, just so fine, look at her lips, just the way they are cut, so perfect.

No one tells us to make the change, but it just happens in middle school. We drop the Joe and just call her Blackie. Blackie could mean Black Beauty. I want her to know I think of her as black and beautiful, but she doesn't like Blackie either. She becomes very quiet in middle school. Most times she just does not respond. She has a determined and faraway look in her eyes. Baby Akpam. Some of us leave to go to boarding school for high school. I still see Baby when I come home on break, but she does not speak to me, and I learn to not speak to her.

In high school I join the *Anyob Gbansa* students. *Anyob Gbansa* means "eater of books". We devour especially books by African writers. But books are scarce and expensive so one book circulates among twenty readers. Sometimes one person has just a day to finish a book before passing it on to the next reader. Like other readers, I cut class to groove with the works of Achebe, Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and other writers. I dig and carry bucketfuls of gravel on my head as punishment for cutting class, but I continue to read. Some of the books say "Black is beautiful." I read about sistas and brothas in the Diaspora who chant and swing, "say it loud, I'm Black and proud."

In boarding school the young women don't *use*. Educated women, or most of the educated women like our teachers, don't *use*. But some of the women of the Zongo (ghetto) like my mother, they *use*. The Government bans *using* cream and soaps, but it is only in theory. People go across the border to Burkina Faso and Togo and smuggle in tablets of Robert's Medicated Soap, and other skin bleaching soaps and creams to sell on the black market. The women who *use* lighten their skins with the soaps. It takes a lot of soap and cream over weeks of use to lighten the entire skin. Most cannot afford that much soap and cream so they just lighten their faces. For the best results, the *user* has to smear powerful skin bleaching

soap all over her skin each night before bed for at least two weeks. Each morning she washes off the soap and some black skin, and applies skin bleaching cream such as *Ambi*, and in two weeks she is completely transformed into a light skinned woman. To stay that way, the *user* has to stay out of the scorching sun, but the sun is everywhere in northern Ghana, so users get burned now and then and apply even more bleaching agents to get rid of the burns. Some of the long time *users* have scars on their faces, huge black spots where the bleaching has burnt their skins. I join students who put up posters and offer unwelcome messages to inform *users* - *using* will give you skin cancer. *Using* is hating yourself, *using* is hating your beautiful black skin.

College in Accra is a whirlwind of pan-African black identity, at least for some of us at the Ghana Institute of Journalism. I have never felt my blood boil so much as it does these days. After school, a few of us go to the W.E. B. Du Bois Memorial Center for Pan African Culture. We watch documentaries of the Soweto Massacre. The image of a little boy sitting in an open field surrounded by the dead bodies of black South Africans, who had been shot by the South African apartheid police, sticks in my mind, haunts my dreams. The little boy sits up and tries desperately to wake his mother. He does not understand she is dead, but he is frustrated that his mama would not respond to him and he screams into the camera. I feel hatred along the color line like I have never felt before. At the Du Bois Center we watch documentaries about the lynching of black people in America. I take part in discussions, talks, symposia. I join the student movement to end apartheid in South Africa. At our meetings, exiled students from South Africa break down and cry when they tell us how their relatives and comrades have been – “braaied” - barbecued by the racist police force. Tuli is one of the students from South Africa. He cannot stop drinking. He walks stooped over, and clutches his heart all the time. I have more books to read than ever: Alice Walker, Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and James Baldwin become a regular diet. I realize that getting lost in reading good books have a way of postponing hunger when you have nothing to eat. Ngugi wa Thiongo shows up one breezy

evening at the Du Bois Center. We sit outside the Du Bois Center and listen to him talk about decolonizing the mind. He says Africans need to believe in our ability to find our own solutions to our problems. When he says, “the intellectual is an engine with mental weapons,” I want to stand up and cheer, but I remain riveted in my front row seat. I let my mind wonder to Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela, each using the platform of their unfair trial to make a most provocative indictment, and to totally demolish the apartheid system of South Africa in words.

At school some of my professors are exiled freedom fighters from apartheid South Africa, Sierra Leone, and other African countries. Professor Cook is a black man from Cuba who wears only Afro-centric clothing, and his theory of using mass communication for national self-determination inspires me beyond measure. Uncle Theo, our political economy professor, is from Sierra Leone. He is a walking encyclopedia of radical black thought. A few of us chip in change on Fridays to take him to the shack behind the campus to buy him local gin, and sit with open notebooks and pencils in hand. Lately, he seems to have more money, and buys us drinks instead. We hear he is working for an African president who supports armed struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. Then Paa Roger, a fellow student comes to say Uncle Theo is recruiting freedom fighters to go and train in the desert for attacks on the racist apartheid regime in South Africa. Applicants must be ready to engage in suicide bombing if need be. Jerome, Paa Roger and I sign up the same day. We prepare to leave for training right after graduation.

Before graduation my father appears one night from the village. They had heard the news and he boarded the only truck leaving the village that day. It was a truck carrying cattle to the city. He arrives at my door at midnight. He smells of cattle piss, suffering, and sheer tiredness. He tells me if I choose a more peaceful way of fighting I could live to see Mandela come out of jail, even see the end of apartheid. He tells me to think of my poor mother. I feel deep shame for making him suffer so. Uncle Theo understands. He

says, “never do anything that would make your ancestors curse you. You are first in your family to go to college. Stay and fight from here.”

After graduation, I choose to work in the villages around my hometown as a rural journalist. I ask my boss to let me cover village women and write stories about how they are contributing to the development of our country, and about their daily trials and tribulations. He says it is strange that a young man would leave the city to come and work here, so I could do as I wish. I get a few bylines on the national news. My mother is proud, and in my village people like to turn on the radio and listen to my stories. I am proud too, and my head feels swollen like I have triple malaria. One hot afternoon I am retuning from the village of Tusiga. I have a story that has the potential of being picked for national headlines. Village women on their own formed an environmental group to roll back the encroaching Sahara desert by planting fast-growing trees. They have no formal education; they cannot even read the word *environment*. I am thinking this story would shame all the big talking NGO executives who sit in their air conditioned offices in the city and drive around in their air conditioned cross-country vehicles talking about environmental revolution. I am filled with self-righteousness. I feel important because I convince myself I am not only doing much needed work for the African revolution, I am writing stories from the point of view of the forgotten- *the African woman*. I board the last bus out of Tusiga. It is one of those buses with a separate driver’s cabin in front joined to a back container that is made into a passenger coach. The coach has the very front row of seats facing backwards, so everyone in the rest of the bus faces the people in the front row seats and vice versa. Needless to say, the front row seats are usually the last to be filled. I get on board early and sit in the very back row.

At first I pay no heed to the light skinned woman looking like a ghost who boards the bus just before takeoff and sits in the front row. Her *using* is painful to watch so I avoid staring. As we journey along I cannot help but look more closely because she just stands out. She has sore looking redness

around her neck, and on her pale arms. She has blotches of skin that were beginning to turn into scars on her cheekbones. Suddenly recognize her, and a flicker of movement in her eyelid shows she recognizes me – she is Baby Akpam.

“I am so sorry,” out of breath, and with tears in my eyes I say as I catch up with her.

She stops and looks at me without saying anything for what feels like a very long time.

“Sorry for what?”

“I am sorry for taunting you, making fun of your, your, beautiful black skin when we were in primary school.”

She looks at me without saying anything.

“Please, I am not asking that you forgive me. That will be too much to ask. What we did, what I did was wrong.”

“Wrong? wrong, eh?” she now has wetness in her eyes.

“No, go on and forgive yourself.” She says, while looking at me straight in the eyes.

She turns and walks away, fast.

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## My Cousin Remembers Two Events in my Childhood

### I

#### Thirst

It was during one of those times of serious water shortage in the village. We had muddy water from the dam, but there was no drinking water. The water pumping engine was not working, and the public stand pipes were completely dry. We used to get so thirsty we would unbutton our white calico school shirts and each use a stretch of his shirt to cover a cup of muddy water and suck the water through it. One day, Adebagela, the water pump man finally got the machine working, but it could not pump water into the pipelines. The machine just spewed water from the engine room located at the edge of the village. On that day, we all got our buckets and Mama lined us up and marched us down to the engine room. We joined other families in filling our buckets with clean drinking water. I still remember it was the first time you carried a size thirty-four bucket on your head. Before that, you carried the size twenty-eight bucket. Well, we started back home each carrying a bucket of water on the head. About half way past the church and the *Agbongyeri* sacred baobab grove, you started screaming and walking rather fast because your neck hurt really bad. "*Waa-soiy! Waa-soiy!*" you cried all the way 'till you reached the front of the house with the bucket of water on your head. Then you started screaming for someone to help bring down the bucket of water from your head. "*Tui li mu! Tui li mu! Tui li mu!*" Well, you had run ahead so you reached home first, and the rest of us were still behind so there was no one home to help you get the bucket down from your head. Then I don't know what came over you. You just let go and dropped the entire bucket of clean drinking water on the ground. I thought Mama was going to kill you that day. Her brand new bucket was no longer round. It was smashed and all banged around, and you had lost the water. Remember, when

she said she would not have been so mad if you had dropped it on the way, but the fact that you almost made it and then dropped it was not a good sign in life? Remember how she actually wept when she told Akunka's wife about it because she was just convinced that you were going to amount to no good in life because of that one act? Mama was always reading big signs, wasn't she?

## II

### **Turning Wine to Water**

Remember when we were altar boys and used to steal swigs of Holy wine before Mass? Remember how one day you took such big swigs we all knew we were going to get caught by Fr. Manef? Then, you went and poured water into the wine to try to hide the fact that we had drunk so much from the bottle. When we said it would not work, you prayed and said Jesus turned water to wine in the Bible so if we all prayed hard during mass it would work. Remember, how Father Manef lined us up in the sacristy after mass and smelled our breath and then made us go to confession? When we told him you not only took the biggest swigs, but that you poured water into the wine to be like Jesus he got so mad his nostrils were dancing like a frog anticipating a mighty leap, his hair stood up, and there was blazing fire coming out of his shiny blue eyes. You were so angry at us because we told on you, and you ended up with one hundred rosary penance on your knees.

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## Broken Horn Bull

For us children who live near the market area of Sandem, Aguri is not just the village bicycle mechanic, he is our story man. We gather at sundown under the nim tree where Aguri repairs bicycles. We wait. We watch him finish repairing his last bike for the day. Aguri tells us stories after he is done working.

Unlike other adults who go with their buddies after work, Aguri does not have any tight adult friends. He stays by himself. The majority of his friends are the children. Aguri shares a familiar with each child. A nickname shared between Aguri and the particular child, and no one else. His familiar with me is *broken horn bull*. I call him *broken horn bull* and he calls me *broken horn bull*. I feel special to have a name with Aguri. A group of us walk up to his workshop when he does not have a customer. Time to salute in familiar. We take turns. *Don't cut a piece of sky! The one who cherishes birth! The one whose tongue covers the earth!* Aguri bounces back the familiars. We each are a single familiar, but Aguri is a hundred familiars at a time.

Three little children shout familiars. Aguri responds to then one at a time. They look shyly at each other in excitement, not knowing what to do next. They have not planned for what may come after responds. The first child giggles and takes off running. The other two follow suit laughing louder. Aguri smiles, goes back to work. He hits and he tightens. Aguri has an old lorry engine block with many holes in it. It is so heavy it sits in a permanent spot under the nim tree. Against this solid metal block he bangs bicycle parts loose, and into shape. Some adults say Aguri does too much banging on a bicycle and won't give him business. Aguri sometimes bangs metal to think through stuff.

Aguri never wears shoes or sandals. He goes everywhere barefoot on his big, strong feet. He walks, and rides his bicycles with the direct power of his immense feet. Aguri is a man of medium height with large eyes. He keeps his goatee and hair neatly combed. He wears the same pair of black shorts and

matching black shirt every day. While other people take buckets of water to go and wash in bathrooms, Aguri walks across town to the dam and takes a good bath and swim on those afternoons when work is slow.

We wait as Aguri packs his tools into his rectangular black metal toolbox. His toolbox has a million dents all over it. He sits on his toolbox under moonlight and tells us new stories. He also tells stories we have heard before from grandmothers, uncles, or older siblings, but Aguri's version of each story is always different. He spices each story, takes an unexpected bend here, inserts a fork there, adds a song and gives us the chorus. He stands up, stoops low, makes gestures, whispers and mimics the movement of a ghost sneaking into a compound. Next, he is a hunter hiding behind the trunk of a kapok tree to escape an evil spirit flying through the forest.

Each night Aguri selects a sayer from the group of us listeners. A good sayer is like an echo. But not just a hollow echo. A sayer is an echo with nuance and skill, someone who knows how to repeat with amplification, humor and wit, sentence by sentence as Aguri weaves the story along. Most important, a good sayer knows how to hold a story. To hold a story well means to hold the tension and not attempt to make even the slightest hole in the tension of a story. Aguri says a good sayer holds the suspense in a story just like a well-sealed flat in the inner tube of a bicycle tire. "You don't let out even the slightest bit of air." Aguri says. A good sayer plays with language, metaphor and even hyperbole, always on the edge but never giving it away or moving the story any further along than the main teller, Aguri. A good sayer adds humor, borrows from village idiom and jargon, but respects the calibrated stop in each sequence of the story as Aguri narrates along.

It is an honor for anyone of us to be selected sayer by Aguri. It not only means sitting next to him on the ground next to his toolbox and facing the audience, it is also a public recognition as assistant story

teller by the man of story. But there are risks with being selected to be a sayer. It is being on the spot, and each sentence is a trial of restraint and freedom that needs to be handled with care and precision. Freedom to embellish, expand or contrive, but restraint in not moving the story any further than the narrator, even if you know the story and have heard it a million times before. Aguri gives a standard warning to any sayer who attempts to propel the story.

*“How come you are already serving the food when I am still cooking?”* Aguri asks the sayer who tries to move the story forward. A sayer who attempts more than once to move the story is removed and replaced by a new sayer from the crowd of children. Aguri says to such a sayer, *“you are spoiling my story, let’s get someone else who knows how to hold”*. At Aguri’s story telling sessions, holding is important. As a sayer, and as a listener you have to know how to hold.

The night Aguri names my familiar we are listening to him tell the story about the young trainer and the stubborn bull with the broken horn. Aguri is telling the story and Abu is saying. Abu is master of gestures and physical dramatization. Even when he is not saying story Abu dramatizes his speech. When Abu is speaking, we give him space because he is given to turning unexpectedly, and making all kinds of pointing gestures. If you don’t want to get poked in the eye, you give Abu space when he is speaking. In the story Abu is saying for Aguri, they come to the point where the bull with the broken horn reaches the end of its patience with a very mean young trainer. The trainer wants to break the bull in one session to pull the plough. The bull does not want to pull the plough. Aguri goes on, *“broken horn bull refuses to move and just stands there with his head pointing to the earth as if in deep contemplation. The trainer is inexperienced. He keeps jumping around the bull, hitting it on the sides, kicking it to move, but broken horn bull won’t budge. He thinks the bull is not watching him with its head pointed to the ground but the bull is following his every step from listening to the vibration of his movement on the ground. Then the trainer walks all the way and stands in front of the bull. ‘You dumb bull,’ he says as he reaches and grabs the one*

full horn and the other broken horn of the bull in each hand and pushes down hard. The bull goes slightly low on its hind legs and swings its head with full force. The young trainer goes flying into some *bagasa* shrubs. Then broken horn bull takes a few steps back and then and charges forward, the trainer tries to get up on his feet when he sees the bull tearing towards him at top speed.” As Aguri says “top speed,” mean Lahla, a boy a few years older who happens to be sitting directly behind me in the dark reaches out with his fingers all spread out and pushes me just at the lower part of my neck. I scream in fright and leap forward bumping into Aguri and hitting my shin against his toolbox. I cry and cup my hand over my shin in pain. Aguri pauses to make sure I am OK. Lahla and the other children are laughing hard. Aguri tells Lahla if he is too big to let younger children listen in peace to story he should get up and go home. Lahla sits head bowed low. The laughter stops. Aguri says as he holds me standing next to him. “This one here, are you listening children? I say this one here knows how to get into story, I can tell one day he is going to be telling stories with full force like the bull with the broken horn.” Turning to me he says, “your familiar from here on is *broken horn bull*.” Even those children who were laughing a minute ago now look at me with envy. I move from fearful child to living-in-the-story child.

I continue sitting by Aguri after he finishes the story about the bull with the broken horn. We all listen to the night. It is a humid night. The ground is not completely dry from the rain and there is the smell of ripened nim fruit all around us. It smells like too much malaria medicine poured on a cloth. The batteries in the radio belonging to Baba Alhassan, the night watchman for the GNTC store a few yards from Aguri’s workshop must be dead. We do not hear voices and songs from Baba Alhassan’s far away Moshe lands playing full blast on his radio which he often keeps on all night.

People wonder how Baba Alhassan would hear a thief breaking into the store with his radio so loud. But even the thieves know Baba Alhassan’s skills as a watchman lie in his medicine. He has eaten medicine that allows him to know when someone is approaching even if he is sleeping at his night

watchman job. Without the sound of his radio tonight we hear the far away pounding of a pestle in a mortar. The pestle has a slight inner rhythm in its pounding. This must be one of the long cylindrical mortars small enough for a person to grab between the thighs and give a good pounding. From the sound we can tell the person is just not pounding up and down. She is bouncing the pestle off the side of the mortar as she pulls out each time. It makes a sound that a few of us find hard to resist clicking to while we wait for Aguri to begin the next story. *Klo ki klo, klo ki klo, klo ki ki klo, klo ki klo, klo kiki klo.*

When he is about to begin the next story Aguri asks if I want to be his sayer. “Yes, yes”. We begin story.

“Long ago, long ago, in a time of hunger, when there was no crop to harvest and all the domestic animals had died of hunger and starvation,” Aguri begins, and I echo- “he says way way back in a time when the farmers had just planted the remaining grain they had, and there was no food anywhere, not even a single grain in the ant granary.” I hold and wait for Aguri to give the next sentence for the story to continue. And we go on like that for the remainder of the story as Aguri continues,

“Like my sayer said, when there was not even a grain of millet to be found in the ant granary all the bush animals had a meeting and decided to go to God in the sky for food which they will bring down to earth to eat. So Hyena and Hare went up and held a meeting with God and He gave a cow to Hyena and a ram to Hare.

On their way back home Hyena suggested that they should eat their animals. Hare did not mind him so after a little more time passed Hyena said, ‘ummmmm, Hare just look at how juicy the leg of my animal is.’ Before Hare could say anything, Hyena went ahead and tore off the cow’s leg and greedily swallowed it. After a little while Hyena said, ‘look how juicy the other leg is,’ and he tore off another leg of

the cow and swallowed it. Hyena continued in this manner until he tore off all the parts of the cow and ate them.

Hare, however, planned to take his animal home. Then Hyena said, 'Hare, when you are ready to kill your animal, will you tell me, so that I may come and help you cut up the meat?' Hare asked Hyena, 'when you were eating did you give me some of your meat?' Hyena agreed that he had done wrong so Hare said, 'all right, I will call you when I kill my ram.'

'When do you intend to kill it?' Hyena asked.

'Before day break.'

'At exactly what time?'

'When the cock crows, you come over.'

Hyena went home but the waiting was just unbearable. The longer he waited the more ways he came up with to eat most of Hare's ram in pretending to help him cut up the meat. Finally Hyena could wait no longer so he went and seized cock and beat him over the head and cock crowed. Hyena then ran over to Hare's house only to find out Hare had not yet killed the animal. Hare said, 'Oh, oh, go and come back a little later.'

Hyena went home and tried to wait but as he only continued to salivate over the thought of eating Hare's ram he went again and seized cock and pinched him till he crowed again. He ran over to Hare's house but when he arrived Hare asked him to go and come back a little later. When Hyena left, Hare killed his ram, skinned, and divided up the meat and hid it. He then took the tail of the ram and stuck it in a rubbish heap.

Hyena went and pinched cock till he crowed and crowed endlessly. This time as Hyena approached Hare's house, Hare ran outside and cried, 'the ram is entering the land of the dead!' Hyena stopped in his tracks and looked at the spot Hare was pointing at and noticed the tail of the ram. Hyena ran as fast as he could and grabbed onto the tail and pulled with all his strength. The tail came out of the rubbish heap and Hyena fell on his back really hard. When he got up he cried in disappointment, because the ram had managed to escape to the land of the dead leaving only its tail in Hyena's paws. In his anger Hyena swallowed the tail of the ram, and went back home."

"My story ends here," Aguri concludes.

"Are your ears listening?" I ask all present.

"Yes, they are listening," the crowd of children answer together.

"He says his story ends here, *kpata kpata*, with not one step forward, and not one foot print forward", I echo Aguri in conclusion.

"May sky God allow this night to open to morning," Aguri says.

"May sky God allow this night to open to morning," we echo before going separate ways home to find our mats for the night.

In addition to our familiars Aguri has call and response, and proverbs that he engages us with. During the day as he is busy working on a bicycle, a child running by on an errand might pause and shout once he gets close enough to Aguri's shop,

*teng dan yalima!* (If you say a particular town is the farthest place on earth),

*ka choa bo ning!* (There is another town even further) Aguri will yell back.

Another time the child may shout,

*wulim won!* (in the hot season)

*de nyandi tuila!* (eat hot food) Aguri would respond.

*Nyota won* (in the cold season)

*De nyandi yogsa* (eat cold food) Aguri would respond with a smile.

It does not matter whether Aguri is in the middle of conversation or a heated bargaining with a customer. He always pauses, responds to the child, and returns to his communication with the adult from where he left off.

Other times Aguri takes a break from storytelling and engages us in riddles, or ask us why do we think such and such a proverb exists?

*How come our people say an old person does not run in the day time for common reason?*

*How come walls do not think it funny when rooms are crumbling from the flood?*

Other times he simply asks us to sing over and over different songs from several of the stories he tells us.

At times we just watch Aguri repair bicycles. He stops and explains what he is doing. To cook a flat tire, Aguri brings out an old beer bottle with a little bit of kerosene. Next he brings out his cook stove made out of an old piston of a car. He scraps over the flat, applies special glue to the area around the flat, presses on the binder, usually a piece of well scrapped old tube over the glue. Next he covers the patch with thin aluminum paper found in cigarette packets. Then he sets the patch under the piston and lights up the kerosene. It burns for about fifteen minutes and after it cools down he gently peels back the aluminum

paper. Next he pumps up the tube and submerges the part with the patch into a bowl of water. No bubbles mean the patch is a perfect patch. Some children like Kwabena bring stalk and bamboo and build miniature bicycles. Others use old tins cans to build lorries. At times we need to borrow a tool from Aguri. He does not want to be interrupted. Plus, you don't want to make the mistake of always asking to use a specific tool because that might be seen as disrespectful, as if you are suggesting that the tool is for child play. We improvise tools also. We pound tin and metal flat, and cut it with knives. We bend the flattened tins and shape them to look just like miniatures of the market trucks that park not too far from Aguri's workshop. Anytime anyone finds an old flip flop sandal you bring it home and store it. Sooner or later you need to make the wheels of a toy truck or motorcycle and old slippers are perfect. You just cut rounds in the old slipper and you have nice rubber tires. You attach the tires with a spinning axis that make your toy truck roll and bounce over rocks and potholes in the road. Aguri looks on as we build successful and not so successful toys. He makes suggestions, but for the most part he leaves it up to us.

Story just weaves itself around Aguri. He not only tells us stories, we also have stories about him. Some of the older children tell stories of how in his in his youth, Aguri walked barefoot all the way to Mali where he learned how to speak French and repaired all kinds of bicycles for the Bambara people. Mali is hundreds of miles away but I cannot imagine Aguri traveling by any other means aside from walking or riding a bicycle, and of course doing so bare foot. A lorry or bus just seems too confining for a person like Aguri. His huge feet, and strong legs have to be moving if he is moving.

Aguri drops a phrase of French now and then. C'est finit. Is when he is done cooking a flat except he says it like the West African French- Sa fini. We eagerly repeat after him.

Another story we have about Aguri is the bicycle race story. Even though there are many versions of this story I have my own version too because it all happened before my very eyes. It goes this way.

There is a bicycle race in town. It is organized by Teacher Bob. Of course Aguri signs up and all of us children knew he would beat everyone. We can't imagine another better bicycle rider than Aguri. We have seen with our own eyes all the fancy moves he makes on bicycles when he takes test rides. After completing the repairs on a bicycle, Aguri always goes for a test drive. When he is in the mood he rides all the way to the dam on the way to Wiaga. At that point he turns around and takes off from the hill of the bank of the dam at full speed and flies into town. He rings the bell of the bicycle continually to alert people to get out of the way. He pedals fast right to his workshop under the nim tree. By this time we children are gathered waiting for his return. Each time he lands differently. At times he goes so we are certain he can't stop but then upon reaching his workshop, he cuts that curve so bad and bends the bicycle so low in negotiating the curve those of us watching simply can't help but in retelling the story have to say his shoulder actually grazed the earth in the middle of the curve.

Aguri does not have a bicycle of his own. Sometimes he has an old bicycle he builds from scraps but soon sells it. When the bicycle race is announced Aguri does not own a bicycle so he borrows a heavy duty Raleigh from one of his favorite customers. Aguri is one of seven people signed up for the race.

On the day of the race all the participants arrive at the center of town. Participants check out their bicycles, and are each given numbers. Aguri is number 03. Teacher Bob asks the participants to line up on the main road. The riders face the village of Siniensi seven miles away where they would each have their time clocked and then turn around and ride back. They take off. People cheer. Goats, sheep, and chickens get out of the way. Aguri is in the lead. Before he takes the curve and disappears toward the hills of Siniensi, he stands up on his pedals and gives his fans a few pedals of Aguri monkey pedaling all in rhythm. We cheer and scream his million familiars. We wait impatiently. We play games, kick rags tied together to make soccer balls, but never venture away from the finish line where the racers are supposed to return. After what seems a long time someone yells *Ba- chiena!* Here they come! We each jostle for a spot along

the finish line. Teacher Bob yells for the road to be cleared. Lo and behold the first person arrives, in full speed and comes barreling through the finish line. It is not Aguri. It is Amoak, another bicycle repairer who only works on market days. Other days he buys and sells cattle riding all over the land of Balsa on his bicycle to make his purchases. He has thighs the size of three big Dagomba big yam tubers. Along with the other children I am worried about Aguri. What must have happened on the way? We do not understand. Something must have happened to Aguri's bicycle I suggest to Kwabena. "But it is a Raleigh," Kwabena argues back. Raleigh is the most heavy duty bicycle. "Yeah, but the owner is a cheap man, perhaps he did not maintain the bicycle well and that is why it failed." Soon the second, third, and fourth persons arrived. Still no Aguri. Other people cheered but us children are beside ourselves. I wonder if Aguri had an accident.

The fifth person arrives and right after a child screams- *wa chiena yooo*. At this all the children scurry to the fish line, we wait eagerly. There has to be an explanation. I am sure it will emerge. I am still happy to see Aguri arrive. He comes in full speed, and this time even much faster than when he is on a test ride. I hold my breath and wait with the other children. Aguri comes blowing through the finish line with enough speed to go all the way to the other end of the land but he still kept pedaling. There is no way he is going to be able to turn. Even I am worried about his ability to cut the curve and make a full u-turn back to the finish line. He stops peddling for a minute and bends the bicycle; the bicycle responds and stays in balance with his body. He is approaching Ima Atugba the porridge seller's hut. Customers scatter and make room. Just when he is about to crash into the pot of porridge he pulls the curve so clean it is almost as if he grazes the pot. We forget that he is sixth in the race and cheer. "You just got to feeeeeel that," Kwabena volunteers. We agree. Aguri and his bike are both up straight and in balance and approaching the finish line but Aguri bends over and starts pedaling hard racing back. How is he going to be able to stop? He is going too fast to stop when he reaches the finish line. He proceeds to make another three-sixty turn

but the angle is too tight. Bicycle tires skip on gravel road. He lets go of the bike which flies off to a distance. He is on the ground surrounded by a mighty cloud of dust. No. When the dust clears a bit Aguri's just laying on the bare earth of the dusty road. Stiff. He does not move. I hold my breath, tears welling up. Teacher Bob rushes to his side calls out his name "Aguri. Aguri." No movement, no response. I want to call him by our familiar and I am sure most of the children want to do the same but the adults are in charge and this looks too serious. No, I do not like it at all. Teacher Bob stands back. "Where is Emperor Kabaka?" He shouts. Emperor Kabaka is the nickname of the village nurse. Emperor Kabaka is nowhere to be found. "He is supposed to be present in case there is an accident!" Teacher Bob is beside himself. People start asking, and calling "Kabaka, Kabaka where are you? Anyone seen Emperor Kabaka?" Teacher Bob is yelling, but no one has seen where he went. At this moment Aguri moves. He places both hands on the ground, pushes up, then springs up and dusts his clothes. He has a bruise on right knee but seems unconcerned about it. All the children and some adults cheer. We each shout our different familiars with Aguri. He does not respond but has a huge amused smile on his face. It is almost as if we are recognizing him by all his names. Even the adults are impressed.

*Man pass Man! The man whose beard spread over an entire river! Mover of the roads! Lover of all who love me! Broken horn bull! Frog leaps from frying pan to fire. Fire Extinguisher! Always Always! Breaker of Rocks! The man who smiles in the face of death!* And so on as Aguri lifts up the bicycle and inspects it. The back wheel is badly bent and locked in place. It would not even spin when he tries to roll the bicycle. He lifts the entire bicycle on to his shoulder with one hand and walks to his workshop a few yards from the finish line. When he gets there he takes out his tools and proceeds to repair the bike. Slowly, attention turns back to the race, as Teacher Bob announces the winner.

We have different stories about different aspect of the race and Aguri's performance but we have the same reason why Aguri lost. In some versions, Aguri makes such a big hole in the road when he

crashed the highway department had to come and fill it up right away. Others say the bicycle was so messed up Aguri had to rebuild it from scratch. Some say he uses magical powers to prevent him from getting hurt in a crash that could have possibly killed another person. I tell the version that says when he made that first u-turn near the pot of porridge the force and wind of his movement is so immense it makes the pot spin. We all have the same conclusion - the wicked and jealous repairer Amoak, used magical powers to cripple Aguri's bicycle making it as heavy as a boulder and only someone with Aguri's skill could still manage to ride the bicycle and come in sixth place.

A few days after the race we are back to normal story time with Aguri. One evening I find myself among a group of boys walking in single file on a footpath leading out of town with Aguri in the lead. The sun is going down and I am worried that I am breaking the curfew rules at home. Unless I have my father's permission, I am expected to be home from wherever I am before it gets dark. I know I should not have set out with Aguri and the other boys but the experience that lies ahead is too tempting to resist. On finding out a few of us boys had never had roasted dawadawa fruit Aguri set up an expedition to go harvest dawadawa from the juiciest fruit tree he knows. Most of us have had ripened dawadawa fruit, and the powder made from dawadawa fruit before, but never the almost ripe dawadawa fruit that is roasted right off the branch. After passing a few farms we arrive at the tree just as it is getting dark. Aguri climbs, and strips loads of dawadawa fruit and drops them. We gather the fruit and set a pile of sticks and dry stalks for a camp fire. Aguri lights the fire and holds fruit over the fire, then he drops the fruit over the fire, quickly turning it over and over. The thin green leaves quickly sizzle and fizzle away. A few fruit pods pop out in rapid succession. "The fruit is firing shots!" Seven year old Anang exclaims excitedly. We wait.

Aguri shows us how to unpeel the roasted dawadawa pod on the side and leave the roasted fruit sitting in one half of the pot. The fruit is delicious, warm, sugary, and buttery. "Don't eat the seeds, do you

hear me? They won't kill you but they will give you indigestion." Aguri warns. The seeds feel soft, warm and bouncy on my tongue. I bite into one but do not swallow. It is not as bitter as I expect.

As we sit around the fire eating dawadawa Aguri proceeds to tell us a story unlike any other story he has told us before. This story does not have to do with animals or magical world. Instead he tells us the story of a young woman who used to live in our village.

"I am going to tell you the story of Akalieni. If she were alive today I would call by the familiar- *She who Dances in the Baobab Tree*. Are you listening?"

"Anang, will you say for me?"

"Yes, Yes."

"Long ago in the time of our grandfathers' grandfathers, when there was no a main road for lorries to come to our village, and when the biggest market in our area was not in Sandem but in Bachonsa, there lived a young woman by the name of Akaleini." We inch in closer around the fire.

The Aguri started with Anan saying along.

"When Akalieni danced you saw rolls of laughter falling from her hips. She responded to the village drum like no other woman. The village drummers went wild when Akalieni stepped into the dance circle to float, twist, and grace the surface of this earth with her bare feet, bringing up particles of dust that formed a mirage around her.

It was during one of Akalieni's dances that Akukeri the master drummer in all fourteen villages of the Bursa beat that skin on calabash to such a powerful and compelling tempo young people from the next village came running miles under the moonlight. They had to see who was behind a drum so powerful.

They had to see whose dancing feet so inspired a drummer to carry on like an invitation to the dead to rise up and dance.

Akalieni thought she heard the distant sounds of drums as she gathered the clay dishes that her cousins had left around the firewood stove in the kitchen that evening. The thin layer of okra soup lining the black clay dishes glistened slightly from the glow of dying embers in the firewood stove. Each dish was licked clean of *saab* prepared from last year's millet harvest that went so well with Akalieni's okra soup. *They enjoyed the supper after all*, she smiled to herself. It was a bit challenging for Akalieni to prepare supper that night as the family had run out of salt. She tried to borrow salt from the compound next door but they had run out as well. Akalieni managed with what was left of the salt adding a little bit of water filtered through the ashes of millet stalk to the soup. This was not the first time she had substituted *kaam* for salt but she was not sure how it would turn out. It must have worked tonight because everyone cleaned their bowls, including her grandmother who had not had a great appetite lately.

Akalieni's thoughts were interrupted again by the sounds of drums. She hurriedly finished tidying up the kitchen and found her straw mat.

"Sleep well grandmother," Akalieni said as she paused to touch the feet of the old woman already snoring in the courtyard. She continued past her and climbed up the ladder to the mud roof top where her cousins were sleeping. She spread out her mat, laid down, and listened attentively. Without a doubt it was Akukeri behind the female drum. She did not need to listen more than a minute to tell when Akukeri was behind the female drum. *Why wouldn't grandma let me marry Akukeri? He is the man I love. I don't care if he is not a good farmer or a good hunter.* Akalieni turned and tossed on her straw mat.

Akalieni had been raised by her paternal grandmother. She had very little memory of her own mother who died while Akalieni was still an infant. For as long as she could remember it was grandmother

who took care of her. Her grandmother was old now but determined to make certain Akalieni did not marry a loafer like Akukeri.

“If that is the last thing I have to do before I depart to join the ancestors then I will make sure I do just that,” she told Akukeri the last time he came to visit. Grandmother always found indirect ways to let Akukeri know he was not a good suitor for Akalieni but when Akukeri had enough courage to actually come and make a formal request to be considered as an official suitor for Akalieni’s hand in marriage, grandmother thought it was time to be direct. She called Akukeri a lazy man, and an effeminate fool.

“Look at his hands,” she said to the elders who had gathered to receive Akukeri and his delegation.

“Soft hands of a man who does not know how to hold a hoe or a spear. My granddaughter deserves a strong man, who can farm, stand among other men. Yes, a man who can defend his family,” Grandmother concluded the meeting that day.

The next morning Akukeri’s uncle showed up by himself to plead on behalf of his nephew.

“Our mother, I have come here to plead with you to give our son a chance. The two are in love, and that is a rarity these days.”

Grandmother was impatient. “Listen here, you the son of Amakaning, I knew your parents when they were alive, and your mother was my friend. We sold our vegetables under the same tree in the market. I respect your family. That is why I held my tongue yesterday. I did not want to hurt the young man’s feelings but today he is not here and you have come on his behalf after I have made it clear that he is not a good suitor for my granddaughter.” Grandmother huffed.

Akukeri’s uncle remained silent.

“Why is it so difficult for you to understand my position? I will tell you this to your ears only- Akukeri needs for himself a husband, not a wife, what don’t you understand?” Akukeri’s uncle got up and left without saying goodbye as custom required.

As Akalieni listened to the sounds of the drums she could distinctively identify Akukeri's drum. Tonight he was playing the female drum which only came in now and then to lace the male drum and the flutes, to ground and balance out the male drums giving melody and direction. She could picture the dancers all stomping with renewed energy each time the female drum came in. She knew Akukeri would continue to look for her amongst the dancers but she also knew her grandmother would not approve of her going to a dance at night by herself, and even more so when Akukeri was drumming. Even though Akalieni loved her grandmother she could not help imagining how much freedom she would have once the old woman died. *Am I thinking evil thoughts? I will sure be punished for having such thoughts.*

Akalieni rolled on her mat and pushed her cousin lightly to have more room. As she laid face up looking at the half moon she tried to get the sound of the drumming out of her mind, and to think kind thoughts about her grandmother. Her mind went back to what other women had told her about her name, and how her father had been publicly humiliated by her grandmother during the naming ceremony.

Akalieni was born in the moon of the harvest when people stayed up late on warm nights plucking peanuts from the harvest while story tellers massaged their ears and imagination with the best stories of Balsa folklore.

*Afeoklie* meaning ‘she who came with the bountiful harvest’ was the name her father chose for her. But her grandmother knew full well that grandmothers have the veto on naming grandchildren. She decided to name her *Akalieni* meaning ‘umbrella’.

The story told in the village is that the old woman waited until all the noise had died down at the naming ceremony. She then picked up the infant and lifted her up to the stars and said, "Your name is Akalieni. We are a people living in a dry and sunny climate. You will bring shade to your people. You will hold the tribe together." She then brought the newborn back down and held her close to her bosom and called out her new name four times as is done for all Balsa women. And that was that. She became Akalieni from then on. Everyone present thought the old woman had named her granddaughter well. Still, people still felt for the new father. He was so proud to name his first child, but he had been publicly displaced by his own mother.

This year's harvest would mark Akalieni's eighteenth birthday. Some of her age mates had already married and a few had given birth. Akalieni reflected on her situation as she continued to listen to the music of the drums coming from the distance. When the wind carried the chorus of the crowd at the dance to her ears Akalieni could no longer stand the separation. She had done this before. She would find her way to the dance, afterwards Akukeri will walk her home but not before they made love in the cave in the stem of the baobab tree on the way. She sat up and looked around. All her cousins were still fast asleep. She leaned over the tiny wall bordering the roof top and noticed her grandmother was still in the same place in the courtyard fast asleep.

Akalieni tied her cloth firmly around her body and under her armpits. She grabbed the wall and lowered her body quietly till she was stretched with her feet touching the sides of the wall. There was nowhere for her to place her feet. She held her breath, let go of the wall and jumped down. She landed on her toes and her waist beads made a loud jiggling sound. She looked around and listened intently. No one stirred, the only sound she could hear were the drums and a few crickets in the valley nearby. She made a mental note to adjust her waist beads the next day. As a dancer her waist beads needed more attention

than normal. They provided a good jiggling rhythm when she danced and she loved the music they made when she walked.

Quietly, Akalieni went round to the front of the compound and reached in the darkness under the logs for her axe. She placed it over her shoulder and took to the foot path. The path meandered between other compounds but she did not want to walk around other houses as the dogs made it difficult to walk without notice. She cut across dry farmland and continued in the direction of the drumming. She scurried along. *I will feel better once I pass the Baobab grove. It is the only place that is somewhat isolated along this route.*

Akalieni stopped for a brief moment to remove a tiny thorn that had lodged itself between her toes. She heard a strange movement in the distance. Akalieni moved slowly from her bent over position and squatted with her body resting on her toes. She brought the axe down from her shoulder and gently pushed it onto the ground to hold her balance. Akalieni listened attentively as she surveyed her surroundings. In the distance she saw the figures of two men. She could tell the men had noticed her as well because they stopped for a minute and then started advancing slowly toward her. In a flash Akalieni was up on her feet and sprinting toward the baobab grove. *At least I could hide there.* When she got to the grove she went round to the cave in the stem of the baobab but quickly changed her mind. If her pursuers were slave raiders they would know to look in the cave of the tree. Quickly she decided to climb the tree and was up in the middle by the time the two men reached the grove. They looked everywhere slashing the growth with their machetes. Akalieni remained quiet as she heard the men muttering curses in the Zambarima language. Even though Akalieni could not fully understand what they were saying she comprehended enough to confirm her fears that they were Zambarima slave kidnapers from lands to the north of Balsa.

Akalieni felt her axe slipping and slowly grabbed it. She felt for a safe place where a branch came out of the trunk of the tree and gently hooked the axe in the joint. She felt with her hands to make sure it was secure. She must have made a slight movement because one of the men stopped and grabbed the other by the shoulder and they waited in silence. Akalieni held her breath and hugged the baobab limb tightly, not making the slightest movement. Then she heard a bursting, breaking sound and something gave way round her waist. The string of her waist beads broke. Beads scattered all over, dropping between the leaves and branches to the ground making what she imagined to be a deafening sound. A few beads hit one of the men on the head and he jumped and let out a short scream.

“Master Zuberi they are throwing rocks at us from atop the tree! I swear there are evil spirits up that tree. You know what they say about baobab trees. In the name of Allah, let’s go!”

The man addressed as Master Zuberi hesitated for a moment as if to weigh the validity of his companion's fear. Just then a few beads which had stuck in the leaves fell and hit him in the face. He jumped up in fear. In a minute the two men fled muttering incantations in Zambarima.

It took Akalieni a few minutes to settle down from the fast and loud thumping of her heart. She could not believe her luck. In one minute she was certain the men were going to climb up the tree and capture her, and in another they were gone. *Oh thank you. Thank you! Spirits of my Ancestors, Spirit of my Mother!. Goddess of Womanhood and waist beads! You have saved me!*

Akalieni let her body rest on the branch of the baobab she straddled and many thoughts went through her mind. Slave raiders had not attacked any Balsa village in the last three years. Not since the brutal defeat of the notorious raider, Babatu and his army. The Balsa felt relatively safe for a while but now they were back. *How would I tell Grandma about this encounter?* Akalieni thought of a few stories she could make up but none sounded convincing enough. Her grandmother would know that she had snuck out

to meet Akukeri. Perhaps the gravity of the issue would let her grandmother forgive her if she just told the truth but she knew that would not work. Finally she settled on a dream. *I would tell Grandma I saw them in a dream. After all, Grandma is very superstitious and would not take a dream of the slave raiders coming back lightly.* She would alert the elders even if it was based on her granddaughter's dream and the people would get ready and send out scouts and put up a defense. She felt a bit relieved with this realization but at that same moment she felt a very strong need to urinate. Then it hit her. She could not come down the baobab tree, at least not until day light because the men might still be in the vicinity. She could not take such a chance. She knew the safest thing to do was to stay in the tree. This realization brought further complications about how she would sneak back into the house after day break.

It was at this point that Akalieni's ear picked up the drumming again and what she heard bothered her. The crowd was singing a slow chorus and stomping in unison. It is the final dance. It was clear someone was ending the dance rather soon. It was Akukeri. She had a strong feeling he was ending the dance because she had not showed up. She knew his routine. He would walk back their usual path by the baobab all the way to her compound before going home. He had to make sure they did not miss each other if she was on her way to be with him at the dance. For one fleeting moment she was flattered and the next moment fear ripped through her heart like a sharp knife. *Oh no, Akukeri is going to walk right into the slave raiders. Oh God, no! I have to come down this tree. I have to meet him even if it means my death.* With tears streaming down her face Akalieni made a resolution right there on the baobab tree. She would not be captured alive. She would fight the raiders. If she had to take her own life to prevent them from capturing her then so be it. She was not going to sit there and let Akukeri walk into the hands of slave raiders.

With this resolve Akalieni picked up her axe and started climbing down the baobab. Even though she shook with fear she continued to climb down. When she got to the last branch which was about eight

feet from the ground, she lowered her body and let her feet hug the trunk of the tree while she held onto the branch with her left hand. In her right hand she wielded her axe. Then she let go and landed on her toes. This time she noticed the absence of her waist beads and felt naked. She stood silently for a minute but did not hear a sound except the distant chorus of the last dance. Akalieni crouched low and made her way gingerly out of the grove surrounding the baobab tree and looked around. She did not notice anything unusual. She picked a handful of earth and let it slowly fall back into the earth in libation.

“Spirits of my Ancestors! I put this walk that I am about to take in your hands. If it is your wish that I walk in safety, I know not even the meanest slave raider will touch me. But if it is your wish that I should die tonight, then I humbly submit myself.” She let the last drop of earth fall off her hand and took to the path toward the dance grounds.

When she had walked a few yards the chorus finally died down. She knew the dance had ended. Overcome with fear Akalieni looked around one more time and broke into a sprint. Soon she began to whimper like a wounded animal while she ran with her axe fully angled and ready to strike the first thing that came in her way. She ran for about fifty yards and stopped to tighten her cloth under her armpits and wipe her tears. She looked around and started running again until she was blinded by her own tears and fear. Akalieni did not notice the figure that stepped to the side of the path as she came flying by. Just as she passed the man she noticed something and turned. The sudden turn made her miss her step and one leg crossed the other and she fell. She quickly rose up on one hand and saw him approaching her. She could tell it was the man called Zuberi. “Nooooooo!” Akalieni shouted as she raised her axe and jumped up to strike. Then she heard him yell, “Kheeei!” as he reached out and grabbed her hand with the axe. She recognized the voice and dropped her axe. Her knees wobbled and gave in. With tears and mucus streaming down her face she fell right into his outstretched arms. “Ka fi, n la? Are you OK? What is the matter? Did you see a ghost? You almost killed me.” Still holding her with both arms Akukeri let himself

fall gently into sitting position on the ground and cradled her while she wept and continued to shiver in his arms. He wiped her tears and rocked her for what seemed like an eternity. Finally she muttered, "We have to leave."

Aguri ended the story of Akalieni right there. This time we are not shy or afraid of not being able to hold. "More, more, what happened next? Were they able to get home safely? Did they marry?" we ask tons of questions.

"My children, it is late. I should get you all back home before your parents kill themselves worrying. Akalieni's story is a long story. In many ways it is the story of our people. I will continue to tell it to you in bits, but only on special occasions".

Aguri leads us back into town. As we reach each child's home Aguri makes us wait while he explains to the child's parents why the child is coming home so late. I am grateful when we get to my house and Aguri speaks with my father. I don't get in trouble for staying out so late. For the first time I see my father shake Aguri's hand and thank him for guiding the children. Aguri looks down and does not say anything, except "Broken horn bull, I will see you tomorrow."

"Broken horn bull, may the night open to a new tomorrow." I respond.

## Teacher Odamu

Marcus did not take the main road to school that morning. Instead, he rode his bicycle along the bush path that meandered through the fields, in front of compounds, and across the little stream. It was a Wednesday morning and his school uniform was the cleanest it could be. Actually, it was just his white shirt that he had washed the previous night. His brown khaki shorts could survive the week without appearing dirty. It was market day which meant there would be many trucks on the main road that he usually took to school. Marcus did not want his clean white shirt to get dirty from the clouds of red dust that trucks created as they raced to the market with goats, salt, kola nuts, the last of farmers' grain, chickens, and firewood. The rains had failed to come again this year, but the scorching sun was a constant. The earth was baked dry and the slightest wind blew up storms of dust everywhere. Marcus was fed up with the drought, dry winds, red dust, dust in his hair, dust in his eyes, dust on the living room furniture that Marcus cleaned each morning as part of his chores, dry dust caked up in his nostrils, around the entrance to his throat, especially after sweeping the bare earth yard in front of his house each morning.

Marcus could not bear the thought of his white shirt getting dirty before Friday. He had been fortunate to land a piece of bar soap the previous night to wash his shirt, and not only that, he had also applied just the right dab of blue dye to the water as he rinsed his shirt for the last time, giving it a brilliant white. He ironed it that morning and thought it looked very clean and smooth, just like his teacher, Mr. Odamu's white shirts. Marcus adored this shirt that his mother had purchased from the market after sorting through a pile of imported second-hand clothes popularly called *obruni wawoo* (dead white people's clothing). The only thing Marcus did not like about *obruni wawoo* was the unpleasant balmy smell that came with each piece of clothing. When Marcus was little he believed the *wawoo* smelled that way because they took them off the backs of dead white people in Europe and shipped them to Africa. He thought that was the way dead white people smelled. Even though he no longer believed this, Marcus still

hated the smell. Once he brought the white shirt home, Marcus boiled it in hot water and sprinkled cheap lavender on it to get rid of the *wawoo* smell. The smell lingered for a while and only went away after a few more washes.

Riding through the fields on this Wednesday morning Marcus noticed an increased amount of wilted millet, greens, and legumes. Crops that were sturdy only a few weeks ago now just lay on the sides as if their core was made of cheap plastic that could not hold up. Even this early in the morning the air was already dry and hot. The stream that Marcus crossed was dried up. The little evergreen thorn bush on the other side of the stream now bore only branches as every single leaf had been nibbled off by hungry animals. This was the second drought in consecutive years.

The drought hit the community hard. Food was scarce and the little that was available in the market was very expensive. The majority of people who were subsistence farmers were particularly left without any cushion. There were rumors that some of the villagers were boiling baobab seeds to feed their children. There were other rumors too about the food aid that was sent to help the poorest of the poor. There were rumors that the chief executive, a man appointed by the government to serve as lead administrator, was diverting the food aid to his friends to sell on the black market. Trucks brought in hundred of bags of food aid but only few bags were distributed to the public. No one had a clear idea where the rest of the food aid went. For Marcus, school was a sanctuary from the surrounding misery. The government still sent grain, and the students were fed three meals a day. Marcus felt relieved to be in school where the focus was not on the drought or the famine, but on learning. His first class this Wednesday was woodwork with Mr. Odamu.

“ I doesn’t know how many times I have to tell you children not to cut across the wood with the rib saw,” Mr. Odamu barked at his Wednesday morning woodwork class.

Of the twelve teachers at the middle school, the only teachers allowed to use bad grammar, or 'shoot bullets', or massacre the English language were the technical trades teachers, Mr. Odamu the woodwork teacher, and Mr. Amale, the school farm teacher. Unlike the college trained teachers of the arts and sciences, Mr. Odamu and Mr. Amale were technical school trained. Their focus was on hands-on training in the trades. They were not expected to be proficient in grammar and no one needed to tell students not to emulate their English. Mr. Amale simply did not try to use formal English. He gave instruction in the local dialect, and at times used West African English. The students adored him for using West African English which was hip and nuanced, but which students were forbidden to use in the classroom. Mr. Amale never had to write on the chalk board since he taught right there on the school farm, instructing students on how to work the bullock plough, make compost, clean the pig sty, and weed the groundnut fields. Mr. Odamu faced greater challenges. He lectured in class, used the chalkboard, and sometimes read from woodwork manuals, or his Bible, to the class. This particular Wednesday morning he was having an unusually hard time.

"Before putting the plane back in the tool box always make sure that you have release the blade". Mr. Odamu picked up the plane and demonstrated how to release the blade and pull it back.

"Yes, safety and precaution first, and always. Seeing the danger before it hurts you". He concluded, as he put the plane down on its side.

A few students winced, bit their lips, did everything they could to keep a straight face, no one dared laugh. Nonetheless, Mr. Odamu knew something was not going right. He started reading more from the book, and avoided eye contact with his students. Skinny twelve- year old Marcus felt pain. He hurt for Mr. Odamu. He was Mr. Odamu's favorite student, and knew students were going to make fun, dramatize, and embellish Mr. Odamu's bullets for the next few weeks. Marcus did not take part in the out-of-class, behind

the back mocking of Mr. Odamu, if he could help it. He may have joined in once or twice when he was afraid bigger students would pick on him for being a teacher's pet. He always felt hypocritical afterwards, for laughing or not speaking up when others made fun of Mr. Odamu. To Marcus, Mr. Odamu was a really good teacher, bullets or no bullets, he made sure each student understood the lesson by the end of the day. He returned to the woodwork shop after school to offer extra classes. He would stand behind timid students, wrap his hands around theirs as they tried to handle a particular tool, and showed them how to work safely, how to plane just right. Sometimes Mr. Odamu would pause during woodwork class, and read to students from the Bible. He gave advice to students, helped those in need, was an elder in the Presbyterian Church, and to Marcus, led an exemplary life.

Mr. Odamu was not a native of the area. He did not speak the local dialect. He addressed any feelings of homesickness he may have felt by cooking tasty dishes from his part of the country. He had no qualms holding a stirring stick and going into his pot of steaming *banku* and stirring up a storm. This amused most of the students because the local superstition was that even though men may cook, it was going too far for a man to hold a wooden stirrer and prepare any meal that involved actually holding a stirrer with both hands and stirring up any type of starch. Some believed men who persisted in doing this were most certainly on their way to losing their manhood. If he knew of these superstitions, Mr. Odamu did not care. After all he was of a different culture, and therefore the local superstitions did not apply to him. In addition, Mr. Odamu had no reason to be insecure of his manhood. He was extremely muscular. He had the biggest biceps of anyone, teachers, students, and staff in the school. He kept his hair short, had muscular legs, walked with confidence, and always kept his clothes cleaned and neatly ironed. He was not married but everyone knew of his secret girlfriend Monica, in the upper forms. She was a final year student and it was believed they were just waiting for her to graduate for them to get married. Even though teachers were not allowed to have sexual relationships with students, there were rumors of riotous noises

coming out of teacher bungalow four on those nights she snuck from the girls' dormitory to Mr. Odamu's house. For the most part, they kept their relationship respectable, not allowing themselves to be seen together in public, yet everyone knew he paid her school fees, bought things for her, and that now and then she would come on a weekend afternoon to make a pot of soup in teacher bungalow four.

When Mr. Odamu dismissed the class before the period was over on this particular Wednesday, Marcus thought it was because of the stream of bullets. As usual, Marcus stayed behind to help pack up the tools. Marcus relished cleaning the shiny tools and putting them back into the huge tool box where each tool had just the right crevice to fit in. The tool box and the shiny tools made Marcus feel like he was in a school with a lot of resources, not some far away rural village school in the most impoverished region of Ghana. Marcus liked feeling this sense of a wealth of resources. He liked the colorful books that came with the carpentry tools. For the first time, Marcus' love of carpentry nurtured in his early childhood years by the village carpenter, Assibi Carpenter, seemed to be coming to full circle. As a little boy Marcus spent countless hours at Assibi Carpenter's workbench watching him work, and playing in the sawdust with his friends, but at Assibi Carpenter's bench, children were not allowed to touch any tools. Assibi Carpenter talked to his tools, told stories about each tool, recounted stories about how a specific tool saved his job in some far away town. Assibi Carpenter's tools were sacred, mystified, and had a spiritual essence. Here in Mr. Odamu's workshop, Marcus was learning the theory behind tools, getting to hold newer versions of Assibi Carpenter's old tools, and beginning to gain a theoretical understanding of carpentry under the gentle guardianship of Mr. Odamu. Assibi Carpenter made dove tail joints by eyeballing and drawing pencil marks right on the wood, sometimes crossing out lines until he had marked out what would be a perfect fit.

In Mr. Odamu's class Marcus learned how to calculate and measure a perfect dovetail joint on paper, and to have it perfectly calibrated on paper before even touching the wood. Marcus respected both men. He had even deeper respect for Assibi Carpenter who seemed to intuit his work. He recalled Assibi

Carpenter's work had a finer finish, and was always polished. Mr. Odamu's work however, even when he was making furniture for customers, and not for teaching purposes, was always robust, and rustic, but made to last for generations. Mr. Odamu loved working in *odum*, the hardest, sturdiest wood on the market. When he worked *odum*, his biceps rose and fell as he cut through long boards like cutting through cake. Assibi Carpenter preferred *wawa* and plywood, which were easier to mold, and never finished anything that he did not sand into fine curves. To Marcus, Assibi Carpenter's furniture was like the clay pots his mother bought from the village women. Clay pots perfectly cylindrical yet made without any measuring tools. Clay pots perfectly baked to glistening red and black like the earth in a most polished state. Clay pots that held the family's drinking water. Mr. Odamu's furniture on the other hand was like the metal basins his mother bought from the Hausa men in the village market. Pretty in their robustness, and round with machine precision. Basins that held extra water for washing and doing the dishes. Nonetheless, basins that could withstand all the banging around and abuses that a clay pot could not put up with. Basins that even after the paint had been scratched and the body dented, and holes appeared, could be taken to the village welder to have the holes filled, and to the village painter for new paint, basins that lasted forever and were passed down from mother to daughter.

Marcus was awakened from his thoughts by the voice of Mr. Odamu.

"Did you ride your bicycle to school today?"

"Yes, sir."

Marcus thought Mr. Odamu was going to send him on an errand. It made him feel special to go on errands for Mr. Odamu. Like those times Mr. Odamu would realize in the middle of class that he had left a T-square, or a book at home and would give Marcus his bungalow keys to run and fetch the item. Marcus always took a minute to linger in Mr. Odamu's house, to look at his shoes, his neatly ironed shirts hanging

on the rope tied across the top of the poles on his bed. Marcus particularly liked looking at the African batik shirts that Mr. Odamu wore to church but never to school. Even though he was only in his mid-thirties, Mr. Odamu was a respected elder of the town's Presbyterian Church. He read the Bible often, and would sometimes give advice to students in hardship, telling them to accept the Lord. It was during one of those errands that Marcus discovered Monica's red hat lying next to the Bible on Mr. Odamu's bed.

"I have job to complete in Wiaga. I want you to come and help me finish it."

"Should I go and tell Mr. Amobtima that I will not be in class?" Mr. Amobtima was Marcus' form teacher.

"Don't worry. I already talked to him. Go and get your bicycle and meet me at my house after you finish cleaning the blackboard."

"Yes sir." Marcus smiled. He felt special again.

It was only when he was pedaling to Mr. Odamu's bungalow that it occurred to Marcus Mr. Odamu may have invited him to come on the job at Wiaga because he needed a bicycle. Marcus was the only kid in school with a bicycle. A few teachers had their own bicycles, but they were in the minority. The teachers who did not have bicycles resisted borrowing Marcus' bicycle except for emergencies, and they always had the bicycle back before school was out. At times Marcus felt uncomfortable owning a piece of property some of his teachers could not afford to own. The bicycle was given to Marcus for his three-mile trip to school each morning after his uncle who owned it died and his property was brought back from the city. Marcus concluded he was still lucky to have a field experience and one-on-one time with Mr. Odamu, even if it was because he owned a bicycle.

For the second time that Wednesday, Marcus found himself avoiding the main road. Mr. Odamu did not take the main road to Wiaga for the same reasons that Marcus avoided the main road on his way to school that morning - too much dust from market trucks on the red gravel road. Marcus sat on the cross bar with his legs hanging on to the left as Mr. Odamu pedaled along the back route of foot paths that went by compounds of villagers, and through the fields of crop. They rode in silence.

Mr. Odamu looked at the cloudless skies, and sucked air through his front teeth in frustration.

“Eh! When are the rains going to come?”

“My uncle told my mother that some of the villagers with no food are boiling baobab seeds for their children to eat, so they don’t go to bed on empty stomachs.”

Mr. Odamu shook his head, and said, “The number one cause of all this famine is that you people in the north have only one rainy season.”

Marcus did not understand but remained quiet.

“You see, in the south where I am from, we get two rainy seasons in one year. That means we can grow and harvest crops two times in a year. That is why we always have food.”

Suddenly, it made sense to Marcus. People from the north were always leaving and going to the south to live and work in the city or on cocoa farms. Usually people from the south with government jobs resisted transfers to the north. He realized this was another reasons for liking Mr. Odamu. He left his homeland with two rainy seasons in a year to come to the dry north. He even had a girlfriend from the north, and did not spend his time trying to get back to the south.

“Is that because the south is closer to the sea that you get all the precipitation?” Marcus was impressed with own his recollection of geography lessons from Mr. Amobtima.

“Exactly, and also because you people are closer to the Sahara desert and have those dry, dry Harmattan winds.”

“Even people from the north are lean and dry looking compared to people from the south.” Marcus was quick to add.

This made Mr. Odamu laugh. They continued to ride in silence.

In Wiaga, Mr. Odamu finished the last bit of work making a center table for a teacher friend. The teacher’s wife made Mr. Odamu and Marcus a hot dish of *saab* and vegetable soup. She served the food inside their two room apartment. Marcus understood that he would only eat after Mr. Odamu was done eating so he waited outside. The teacher’s wife came and told him Mr. Odamu wanted him to come inside the house.

“Marcus, go and wash your hands and come and *chop*.” Marcus smiled. This was a special day indeed. He was eating from the same bowl with Mr. Odamu. If only his classmates could see him now, Marcus smiled to himself. Mr. Odamu cut huge morsels of starchy *saab* and dipped in the soup making a sucking noise as he brought it to his mouth. Marcus tried to eat quietly. There were two pieces of goat meat in the soup. Mr. Odamu took one and cut it in half, and gave Marcus the other half. They each ate their halves and left the second piece of meat in the soup. Without even thinking about it, they both knew the leftovers from a visitor’s meal often served as the only meal for member of the host’s family, and especially more so in this time of famine.

The ride back to school was shorter than the journey out. The market trucks had all passed and so they rode back on the main road. School was not yet over when they got back to Mr. Odamu’s bungalow. Marcus was glad because he would be back home at his usual time. He would not have to explain to his parents that he went to Wiaga with Mr. Odamu. He did not think they would mind but was just not sure. He

did not want his parents to think Mr. Odamu was taking advantage of him and his bicycle. He did not want his parents to think anything wrong of Mr. Odamu.

Mr. Odamu pedaled right into his yard and got off the bicycle. Marcus jumped down and held the handle bars. He slowly pushed the bicycle and leaned it against the kapok tree in Mr. Odamu's yard, and stretched his legs to get rid of the numbness from sitting cross-legged the entire journey back. Mr. Odamu walked to his veranda and fetched himself a large cup of water. Marcus watched him drink in huge gulps. When he was done, he passed the cup to Marcus. Marcus opened the lip of the pot and bent down to fill the cup.

It was then he appeared. He must have been hiding on the other side of the kapok tree. He held on to the stem of the tree with one hand and leaned out with the upper portion of his body and looked around to see if anyone else was around. Mr. Odamu noticed him and made a sound of annoyance sucking air through his teeth. He motioned the man over. He looked like a peasant, with lean but strong looking limbs. He was not wearing a shirt. The only piece of clothing on him was a dark brown pair of trousers which were folded into knots at the waist indicating that they were several sizes too big for his narrow waist. He was bare footed. He looked like he had been working outdoors for few years straight. He did not look washed. He had a scraggly looking beard, and moved with a certain intense fear. It was his eyes that got Marcus. They had an extremely desperate look in them like the eyes of someone about to do something dangerous, bad, and something highly secretive. Marcus shot a quick glance at Mr. Odamu. Mr. Odamu seemed relaxed, but had a look of annoyance on his face. The man came onto the veranda. He emptied one of his pockets and brought out a few dirty cedis and some coins. Hunching, he started counting the money. Mr. Odamu motioned him to stop and to step inside his living room. They left door open. Marcus heard Mr. Odamu whispered forcefully.

‘Why you come now? I say nighttime only.’

The man whimpered, but said nothing else and continued to count his bills. He handed the money to Mr. Odamu pleading “sah, all I get, all I get.”

Mr. Odamu took the money, counted it and made to hand it back to the man. The man took a step back but would not take the money. Mr. Odamu said in a stern voice, “listen man, e no catch.” The man emptied his other pocket. “Finis, finis, No get more.” He whimpered again. Mr. Odamu stuck the man’s money into his hands. Some of the change fell onto the floor. The man went down on his knees and collected the money. Still on his knees, he held onto Mr. Odamu’s right leg at the ankle, “my pickins, my pickins, they suffer, no food, no food for one moon, my woman e sick. Master, I take God beg you.”

Mr. Odamu made the same noise again, sucking the air through his front teeth, and motioned the man to get up. He took the money. “Next time all the money, OK?”

“Yes sah, massa, yes sah masah.” The man said with extreme relief. Mr. Odamu bent over and looked under the guest bed in his living room. He moved his neatly polished Sunday shoes and a few pairs of sandals out of the way, and motioned the man to grab something. The man went back on his knees, reached under the bed and pulled out half a bag of sorghum still in the plastic food aid bag. “Thank you, massa, thank you-ooo,” he said as he rose still grabbing onto the bag of sorghum. He dragged the bag to the veranda, and removed a dirty lappa from his back pocket, and proceeded to tie it around the bag. The lappa had a tear in the middle and could not conceal the bag. Mr. Odamu was impatient. “It is OK. Make you go, go now,” he said, and pointed to the back gate behind the kapok tree. The man hoisted the bag onto his head. Marcus noticed his trousers were folded at the bottoms with the fold on one leg higher than the other. He walked fast, almost running. As he passed, Marcus noticed the man’s back had scratches on it; his skin looked dry and coarse. The lappa fell off the bag and the man grabbed it with one hand and

rolled it into a bunch and held it tight as he grabbed the half bag of sorghum on his head. The inscriptions of the bag of sorghum were laid bare, and Marcus read the words and the logo.

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The logo showed two hands clasped in a firm handshake of friendship. The man continued to run, and disappeared behind the kapok tree, taking the bush path out of the campus. Mr. Odamu watched until the man disappeared. Then he muttered with disdain, "Illiterates!"

It was then he seemed to realize Marcus had been on the veranda and by the drinking pot the entire time. He seemed a little disconcerted. He reached into his pocket feeling the change. At first Marcus was worried Mr. Odamu was going to offer him some of the money and this terrified him because he knew it would be rude to refuse. Instead Mr. Odamu looked at his watch.

"It is last period, isn't it?" He asked Marcus.

"Yes sir".

"Why don't you take free time 'til the bell rings, eh? There is no need to go back to class at this time. I excused you for the day."

"Thank you, sir."

Marcus walked to his bicycle and proceeded to roll it out of the yard. Mr. Odamu came back out of his room and stood on the veranda watching Marcus.

"Marcus!"

"Sir."

"You are a very good boy."

"Thank you, sir." Marcus kept his head down.

"Marcus, look at me," Marcus lifted his head and looked at Mr. Odamu.

Mr. Odamu's expression was very serious, more serious that Marcus had ever seen him. He had both of his hands in his pockets.

"I will write you a very good testimonial for your secondary school application."

"Thank you, sir. You are very kind."

"No problem. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes sir". Marcus did not understand. He did not *overstand* either. He could not stand Mr. Odamu's eyes on him, so he quickly rolled his bicycle out of the yard.

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## Meeting Ama Ata Aidoo

The first time I saw her was on a cloudless afternoon twenty-five years ago in front of the administration offices of Tamale Secondary School. She had flown into our school unannounced in a military helicopter. We had read her books but never seen her in person. We'd seen her on TV. She was one of few Ghanaian writers listed in our English Literature curriculum. Most of the other writers were big names from England. Ama Ata Aidoo was our own. She was a very outspoken professor in one of the public Universities. She was pro-African woman to the core, always wore native clothing, hung out with market women, and peasant women. In short, she made women like our mothers look important when everyone else ignored them. Committed to the oral tradition, she made the term *wahala* part of the learned vocabulary. She used *wahala* to describe the condition of the African woman: marginalized multiple times for being black, African, and from the Third World, and then marginalized again for being a woman. But don't get me wrong. She was saying the women were just victims or *wahala* people who just accepted their lot. In her own life and in her books, the women we read about were smart, resourceful, and fought back. *Wahala* is a Hausa term. In Ghana, Hausa is spoken mostly in the Zongo, and in the centers of commerce in northern Ghana and in some parts of the big cities. Ama Ata Aidoo brought *wahala* from the Zongo to speak to power in world literature. She was very outspoken about education, called all the schoolchildren in Ghana 'my children'. It was no surprise that when the revolution took over she was named Secretary of Education.

On that afternoon, she stood on our campus flanked on either side by two fully armed military men in combat attire. One of the men was a young man from the north. He looked tired yet driven. His eyes were bloodshot, and when he pulled off his beret his hair was unkempt. The other soldier had both hands

on his AK-47. Ama Ata Aidoo in her bight lappa with matching head scarf did not look out of place standing between the two soldiers. She had a confident look on her face, and with calm assurance she casually handed her walking stick to the one soldier without even turning to look at him. He eagerly let go of his grip on his big gun and accepted the stick. If she looked anything different from the soldiers, she looked more like a mother bored with her little sons playing soldier. She kept her gaze on the students.

The reason for their unannounced visit was because the students of Tamale Secondary School, the biggest and most reputable public high school in the northern half of Ghana - known for producing well-educated, well-mannered youth, had gone on strike, gone completely out of control like when prisoners take over a prison.

Tamale Secondary School was known as a school where they quickly expelled bad kids, the kind that were most likely going to cause a strike. But things had gone bad. Really bad. We had a new headmaster and things were not working out. Everything about our new headmaster was incompetent. He addressed the Monday morning assembly in a whisper, he commanded no respect, he showed no emotion, and spent way too much time partying with the accountant, and the bursar. All of that would not have caused us to go on strike, but it was the food. We were fed food with insects in the rice. The soup was thin and watery. It looked, tasted, and smelled like soup prepared for one hundred students and stretched by dumping in gallons of water and tons of salt to serve the over eight hundred students. While students starved and others got sick on the food, the headmaster all of sudden purchased a brand new Mercedes. The bursar bought a shiny new motorbike, and we were told the accountant started building a mansion in his hometown. Monsieur Taka, our French teacher who had always been a bully was now completely out of hand. The headmaster made it worse by appointing Monsieur Taka Senior House Master in charge of discipline. Monsieur Taka now got to slapping students in class for giving the wrong answer. He lurked

around after curfew and if he caught a student even walking to the use the bathroom, he physically beat the student.

We boycotted supper, the headmaster sent Monsieur Taka to tell us we either eat what we are served or there will be no food prepared for us anymore. Whaaaaat? We went on strike, yes, big strike; like no classes, mass action, and mass destruction. We broke windows, smashed the headmaster's new car, placed beds on roof tops, drummed on pots and pans, and banned the headmaster from stepping foot on campus. We chanted Bob Marley lyrics "*Get Up! Stand up! Stand for up your Rights! You can fool some of the people some of the time but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.*" A few students built and took shifts manning a road block to the headmaster's in case he tried to sneak in. Phyllis Atigiri led a group of girls to storm Monsieur Taka's house. He saw the group coming and took off in his car. He did not even take his family with him. Coward! Phyllis and the girls got to his house and dumped out all of the family's groceries outside and stomped the food into the sand, tore up curtains and sheets. Mrs. Taka was beside herself. She came outside the house and sat on a stool on the veranda clutching her little children, and calling the girls all kinds of names. As the students were about to leave, Phyllis Atigiri grabbed a tin cup and slammed it on Mrs. Taka's head. We all thought that was too much. Mrs. Taka was herself a victim of Monsieur Taka's terror. We were used to hearing her crying and wailing several times per week at the mercy of Monsieur Taka.

We had been on the rampage for two days. Our strike had made national news. We were not surprised when the helicopter flew in. We had been warned the government was going to send soldiers to come and shoot us, or chase us off campus, and that we will forever be expelled and the school shut down. We sobered up when we realized who the government had sent. Mama, Professor Ama Ata Aidoo. We made a circle around her. She came forward, and the military men waited for her to speak. She said she

was heart-broken to hear that students of Tamale Secondary School had gone on the rampage; destroying school property, boycotting classes, and just being lawless.

“What has come upon you, my children?”

“Madam, it is not anything, just our food is very, very bad.”

“Food?”

“Yes, what they serve in the dining hall, it is like they are chopping the money and just buying rotten *nyama nyama* food for us.”

“Yeah?”

“The headmaster bought a new Mercedes, and he comes at night to take some of the girls from the girl's dorm in his car”.

“What?”

“Yes, and the Bursar too; they are all stealing our money.”

“OK, hold it, so your grievance is about the quality of food, and? ”

“Yes, Madam, and Monsieur Taka, too.”

“Who is Monsieur Taka? “

“Our French Master. He is always beating up students”.

“Now, can you prove any of this?”

“ Yes, yes.”

“OK , I have heard you.”

And then she stood there just silent for what seemed like a long time, until the crowd became very silent with her. She said. “You are about to eat lunch, correct?”

“Yes Madam.”

“Let’s go and see for ourselves what kind of food you are talking of.” There was renewed energy among the students. She actually heard our grievances, did not chide us, and took immediate steps to find out exactly we were complaining about. The two soldiers by her side and rest of the student body trailed behind. It was short walk just across the main street to the dining hall and kitchen. When she arrived, she asked for one of the pans of lunch to be brought out.

Someone produced a cup of water. She washed her hands, and reached into the pan and cut a morsel of TZ. She dipped it in the soup, just like a school girl. Then she brought it to her mouth. Wow, she was eating the food were being fed. She instantly spat it out, and screamed, “whaat!” This food is not even good enough for pigs! I can’t believe they are feeding this to our children.”

Our food got better beginning the next meal. Things got much better. There was an investigation. Monsieur Taka faced disciplinary action, and was eventually given a desk job. The headmaster was removed. Before Ama Ata Aidoo left, she held a class with us right in the shade of nim trees. We came to understand our school, the buildings, books, and school property were there because our families toiled and paid taxes. It did not make sense for us to destroy our own property, meant for our education and those to come after us. We each had a responsibility to make the best of our education and to give back.

The first time I saw Mama, Professor Ama Ata Aidoo, was on a cloudless afternoon in front of the Administration Block of Tamale Secondary School. I was seventeen years old. I wanted to tell her about her books, but that was not a good day to talk books. Years later, she left her post of Minister of Education when the government turned out to be not what it said it was. Unlike the others, she went to another African country to teach. She did not go to seek political asylum in Europe or America.

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## Things are Cheap in Tamale

Things are cheap in Tamale. Send money, fast. I saw with my own eyes shirts, blankets, building materials, everything being sold by force at control price. Even if we don't need everything now, we can keep for tomorrow. I write in the letter to my parents. It is Saturday morning. I am a fifteen year old Tamale Secondary School student in town on a one of the few Saturdays we are allowed to go off campus. I walk to the Sakasaka lorry station where buses are leaving to my home town. I find a willing traveler who agrees to deliver the letter to my parents.

I walk back to the market. People gather by radios. Others gather in random groups. There are soldiers everywhere. All of them fully armed, some on foot, others in speeding jeeps, and military trucks. People are being arrested left and right. I spot a crowd of people moving from shop to shop. I move in for a closer look. In the middle of the crowd, stand a soldier and a teenage boy. The boy is clutching a shopping list. I recognize him. He is one of my school mates, Akansuanisa. He looks scared, but soon I realize he is not scared of the soldier who is carrying his AK-47 on his shoulder. I think Akansuanisa is nervous because of the attention; of everyone in the crowd looking at him. In school he is quiet, studious and avoids drama. His hands shake as he clutches his shopping list.

There are other students in the crowd. I am not sure if Akansuanisa sees us or not. We watch him. He is focused on the list. The soldier is shouting all the time. Between barks at a shopkeeper, he turns and shouts at Akansuanisa, "I say what else you get for the list."

"Oh, Uncle, it is blanket." Akansuanisa does not lift his gaze from the printed list in his hand. It is a sunny afternoon, yet under the canopy made of different pieces of plastic and straw mats that cover this part of Tamale market, we all seem to be standing on a semi-dark stage.

The shopkeeper stands behind his table in a pose that looks more tired than defiant, yet a pose that gives him some dignity in his helplessness. His eyes seem to be saying, "If you are going to shoot me, just do it, and if you are going to let me go then just let me be, it makes no difference." He is a short man in brown khaki shorts, and a white cotton singlet. His facial hair and head is completely shaved, but tiny sprouts of graying hair stick out on his chin. He stares dejectedly at his table of goods.

"I say you get blanket?" Akansuaninsa's uncle thunders... AK-47 bouncing on his shoulder.

"Yes, sah."

The shopkeeper offers a black and brown woolen blanket, fresh and solid like it has been starched and ironed.

"How much?"

"One cedi fifty-two pesewas."

"What?"

"One cedi fifty-two pesewas. It is the control price."

The soldier turns to Akansuanisa, "Is that correct, son?"

"Yes, Uncle, that is the control price."

"Pay 'im." Akansuanisa offers the shopkeeper two cedis. The man gives Akansuanisa back forty-eight pesewas in coins.

I follow Akansuanisa and his uncle to several other shops. Some people in the crowd borrow money from each other to buy whatever is being forced sold at the control prices. I don't have any money except my *trotro* fair back to school. I buy nothing. I worry that the shops will be empty by the time my

parents send me money. The soldiers are forcing everyone to sell their goods at control price, at several times less than they paid for the goods. Shopkeepers are not replenishing their stock. In some places shopkeepers sit in front of empty market stalls. They have sold out everything, but are required to keep their shops open.

At the bus stop I watch people in the outdoor Mosque in afternoon prayer while I wait for the *trotro* back to school. Men bow and genuflect in perfect unison, women do the same in their section a few paces behind the men. A man arriving late, grabs a plastic kettle of water and disappears behind a short wall to wash for prayer.

Suddenly a woman's scream cuts through the air and the heavy market hum of people bicycles bells, and running bus engines. Then, another scream.

"Shut your fuckin' mouth." A man's voice yells.

Then I see the crowd running behind a push truck. A teenage boy is pulling the push truck, and two other teenage boys are pushing from behind. On the push truck, usually used to carry goods, is a middle-aged woman looking extremely roughed up. She has no head tie, her hair is black like it has been freshly dyed except now she has some dust and a few leaves in it, and it looks disorderly. Her lappa is pushed up her above her knee on one leg. She grips at the sides of the flat wooden surface of the push truck to prevent herself from rolling off. She is wailing something. On the side of the push truck trot two soldiers each wielding a gun on the shoulder. One of them is smoking a cigarette. One soldier wields a leather belt with metal buckles in his right hand while his left hand holds the gun on his shoulder. The cigarette-smoking soldier orders the boys to stop the push truck when they come to the shade by the Mosque.

The woman stiffens her body. She whimpers and sits up looking into the eyes of the soldier with the cigarette. Her blouse is dirty, parts of her body are covered with dust like someone who has been rolling on the bare earth. She looks completely beside herself like a mother who just found out her beloved child is dead. But this woman was not defiant and suicidal, rolling on the earth like some of our mothers look when they lose a child. She is completely consumed by fear in a way that makes my insides quiver. This must be the way people look when they are sure that they are completely conquered and are about to be tortured to death, I think to myself. She jumps at every slight movement of any one of the soldiers. She cowers, wails, and begs for mercy even before the belt lands on her. I close my eyes. I hear her wail, then the sound of the belt, and then her wailing, sobs, again, and again. I open my eyes. She is now flat on her back on the push truck, she twists and wiggles her body. She begs loudly for mercy.

“I would never do *kalabule* again,” she pleads.

“Shut your fuckin mouth!”

Red and black welts appear on her skin where the belt lands on her. The soldier continues to shout at her to stop screaming. Each time the belt comes down she just lets out a long deep howl like some who is being gutted from the insides with a blunt machete. Her lappa comes lose. Blood runs from her head down the side of her face, a wet mush of red and black hair stick to the side of her face. The soldier raises the belt. The crowd is silent, watching. I cannot look any longer.

I make my way slowly to the kapok tree by the Mosque and sit on one of the exposed roots, my head in my palms. I had heard stories about public torture and humiliation of people by soldiers for anything from major crime to petty annoyances, but not witnessed anything close to what I had just seen. Boarding school was a sort of protection from the harsh realities of the military uprising that was only a few weeks old. We were told soldiers took people into the forest and they disappeared. We were told there

were gun shots heard in the forest between the school and town proper. Men were arrested, women were raped by soldiers, we were told.

I cannot get the picture of the woman off my mind as I ride the *trotro* back to school. The look of terror in her eyes. I do not know her. I did not wait to hear what the people in the crowd said she was guilty of, but I had heard her say she would not do *kalabule* again. *Kalabule* could mean many things but the base of it was profiteering, making illegal profit such as selling any item above the controlled price, hoarding goods and selling only to known customers. It could mean she gave bribes and got illegal loans, or else she was living a lifestyle much more expensive than her place in life afforded her.

There are other students walking to school from the bus stop. I do not walk with them. I walk by myself head down clutching to feelings of fear, rage, and terror. I am no longer sure I want my parents to send me money to buy cheap goods. I am not sure I want the spoils of this uprising. I do not go to my dorm when I arrive on campus. I cut across the parade grounds to the senior boys section. At Tamakloe House, a group of students are gathered around a radio listening to the news. The announcer reads off names of people placed under arrest, house arrests, people whose assets have been confiscated, and frozen. He reads a list of corrupt officials of the previous government tried and any found guilty in *absentia*. The reporter reads off the slogans waved by some supporters of the uprising in the capital. "Let the blood flow." "Down with corruption." "No more *kalabule*." As the news concludes and martial music takes over, Waxman, a sixth form student and leader of the school cadet corps jumps up and takes salute.

"I say somebody just give me a gun!"

"Eeeh Wax," someone shouts his preferred appellation.

For a minute I envision Waxman in his neatly ironed military uniform among the junior army officers who have taken over the country. Our Waxman, a kid from a small village, often made fun of for his

poverty, his lack of city smarts, his big appetite for cheap food. In my brief trance, he is eloquent as he gives instructions in the revolution, just as he does with the school cadet each week. But this time, I imagine him not wielding a fake wooden gun like a cadet, he is carrying a real AK. I am brought back to the present, when Waxman starts stomping and marching up and down the dormitory. He turns, and takes a salute. He marks time. He has a wild look in his eye. All the boys watch. When he starts talking with his hands cupped like he is speaking into a microphone, he sounds like the new leader of the military uprising.

“Down with Kalabule. The violence of poverty, misery and humiliation that has gripped the poor for far too many years has simply torn over and now dramatically clutches the rich. You are either part of the solution or you are the problem.”

“Eeehhh, eehh Wax!” Some of the boys shout in admiration. I like Waxman as a person. He had on many occasions helped me with school work, and showed kindness to me, but I can no longer get excited about what the uprising was doing to people. I do not tell anyone what I saw in town a few hours ago.

“Do you hear me? I say somebody Give me a gun.”

Waxman is still asking for his gun as we all disperse.

As I walk towards my dormitory in the junior boys section of the campus, I see my classmate Michael. I do not know what to say to him. His father is one of the top officials of the past government that has been arrested. There are rumors Michael's father and other top officials are being tortured to reveal secret dealings of the past government. I do not know what it would feel like if my father was in such a situation, especially given all the graphic rumors of their horrible torture being circulated. For a second Michael's and my eyes meet, but we keep walking, each in the opposite direction. We are not close friends, but we are friendly to each other. We come from the same part of Ghana, and often see each other during breaks from school as our hometowns are only eighteen miles apart. At least once during vacation from

school, he invited me and others to his house and his grandmother gave us soda and snacks. I remember finding out during that visit that his father was the only child his grandmother ever had. It was clear his grandmother doted on Michael, but during the visit she also took her time with each one of us. She asked us about school and who our parents were. When I told her my mother's name, she lit up and said her late husband and my mother's father were friends, and asked many caring questions about my family. As I walk past Michael, I realize how he is like his kind grandmother. He is not snobbish like students who are from rich homes and get to travel to Europe for holidays. He always shares. It is almost as if he knows what it is like to be poor, and now that he is rich he never forgets to be kind to those who do not have. He is one of those students who have extra of everything, yet you never want to ask him for things too many times because he is the one that would always come through for you. So you save that 'til when you really have your back to the wall. That is just who he is - a teenage boy with slightly reddish lips, slim, and always wearing a neatly ironed school uniform.

Now I walk past Michael and we avert our eyes. I take a few more steps after we pass each other and turn to see Michael standing at the bus stop with a few other children of top officials of the recently dethroned government. All the children he is with are led by a man dressed in black shirt and pants. The man hurries them onto one of the big busses going into town.

It is the last time I see Michael before the photo of his father and five other men make the front page of the national daily newspaper a few weeks later. All of these former government officials were blindfolded, and shot at the Teshie execution range for alleged crimes they had not been tried for. In the photo, Michael's father's limp body hangs on the cross he was tied to before being shot. Later news came from the village, that Michael's grandmother had a heart attack and died when she heard the news of her son's execution.

# Part Two

*The fly that refuses to listen to advice will follow a corpse to the grave*  
Buli Proverb

### **Fish Out of Boiling Water**

Rosulo and his two daughters come from a war torn country in east Africa to become refugees in Denver, Colorado. They find it hard to grapple with new everything - culture, language, way of dressing, and new cold weather. They feel like fish out of water. "Yes, but fish out of boiling water," Rosulo reminds everyone.

### **Just Close your Eyes and Pick One**

Fifty- two different toilet seat covers to choose from. My default of letting my budget decide is not working this time. There are too many in the same price range. I try to focus, concentrate hard, but the store loudspeaker cuts right into my thought stream with an advertisement of portable storage systems to help people store much needed junk. I have an instant headache. I am sweating. It is 4 p.m. on a Sunday. I have to finish fixing the toilet. I mask my helplessness by getting upset at the vastly ridiculous choice range of our capitalistic consumer market. The capitalistic consumer market does not seem to care or even notice me or my pitiful cash in the least. Two cigarettes outside Home Depot, I decide it is futile to be upset. I go in and do what my friend from Gambia, Jallow, does when overwhelmed by the multiplicity of choices in American stores. Close your eyes and just pick one. As you walk to go and pay convince yourself that you not only made the best choice, you also got a steal of a deal, and the item you are about to pay for would instantly improve your quality of life beyond measure. Smile in self congratulation.

### **American Cheese, Please**

I watch the waiter's lips and choose the one option that I am sure I understand and can repeat, even if I do not know what it is. "Yes, American cheese, please". I was not about to make the same mistake again.

Last time I said, "yes, sheda cheese" with confidence like I knew all the options by heart. As soon as I said it I could tell from looking at the waiter's facial expression something was not right. *Sheda* means expensive lace outfit in Nigeria. In Ghana when you say you did something *sheda*, it means you did it intentionally. I am sure there is no intentional cheese in America. It was clear not only was I clueless as to what I was ordering, I was also too insecure to ask for clarification, so for the longest time I only ordered American cheese.

## **Daddy, are you a Bad Person?**

### **I.**

Westminster, Colorado, 2000

Strapped in her car seat in the back my four-year old daughter witnessed me being pulled over so often and yelled at by mad police officers that she finally asked me one day, "daddy, are you a bad person?" "Baby, why would you say that?" "Because the police are always pulling you over and the police are only mad at the bad guys." I remember holding my daughter's hand when she said this and thinking how do you explain racial profiling to a four-year old who believes in a world where Santa Claus is real?

### **II**

Denver, Colorado, 2003

Driving to my daughter's school right after getting off work, I was pulled over as I turned onto Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Standing at my window he peered down at me with a look of disdain.

"How much have you had to drink today?"

"I beg your pardon, officer. Do you mean coffee or water?"

He called for backup.

### III

Frankfurt, Germany, 2007

I stayed in Ghana for too long that summer because I forgot. In Ghana, I had spent the summer with other Balsa speaking people in my community and we brought home the peanut harvest with hoe, song and drum. At night we plucked the crop while listening to stories passed down from generations. I walked the land, and drove the roads without fear or any heightened consciousness of my race. On the way back to the US I got off the airplane in Frankfurt to connect to my US flight. As we walked into the airport there was the usual line of people awaiting friends who had just deplaned. A man in jeans and a red shirt looked at me, pointed and motioned me over. He was standing with a similarly dressed but shorter man. I paused and walked over, sure of myself, and just like I would have done in Ghana, I say to him, "yes, can I help you?" I was certain that he needed my help. Two hours later, and after I had missed my connecting flight, and had been sitting by myself in a room that looked like an airport jail with my passport gone, and no explanation offered, I realized what had just happened. I stayed in Ghana for too long that summer because I forgot, because it took me a while to realize I had just gone through the process of *racing*. I had moved from being a Balsa who enjoys a song, and sense of self to a black man in the wider world of the Black Diaspora. In the Diaspora we come from all corners of this earth, and in various ways, but we all black, and we all suspect. Welcome to the Black Atlantic.

## IV

Denver, Colorado, February, 2011

This very short train ride puts me in a good mood. Just a short ride from Thirtieth Avenue and Downing Street in Five points to Downtown Denver. Perhaps it is the electric glide of the train as we pass sights that evoke a certain feeling of being at home in this community that makes me feel so. We ride past the offices of the Urban Spectrum where Bee runs the monthly newspaper with a mission of “spreading the news about people of color” with a smile and an astute business savvy; pass the Welton Street Kitchen where the Sisters know how to make the baddest Caribbean patties; glide past Ethel’s Soul Food of wicked collard greens. The light is on in Blackberries Coffee shop where the owner personally welcomes each single person that walks in. I imagine good coffee, good Blues in the background, and wall posters of Steel Pulse album cover photos. I pray the rent is not jacked up again so the coffee shop can stay in business. We glide past the Blair Caldwell African American Research Library. I think of Brother Danny, Senior Research Librarian, and Sister Terry, Community Resource Director, who both worked so hard for this library to be established in this community, and who both have been running the place since it was opened a few years ago.

We glide past Twenty-Third Avenue and we are in downtown Denver where tall buildings dwarf the train and everyone and everything underneath. At the Sixteenth Street Mall stop, I get off and walk to take the free Mall Ride to catch the bus to Boulder where I will teach my midday Intro to Creative Writing class. After that, I will sit and read for three hours straight before going to my graduate seminar on W.E.B. Du Bois with one of the most talented and most inspirational professors I have ever had, Dr. R. Rabaka. It promises to be a good day as I walk to the corner to wait for the mall ride.

Between two buildings I see middle aged woman arranging her belongings on a shopping cart. She seems to be wearing all of her clothing on her, and her shopping cart is filled with tons of items bundled in old plastic grocery bags. She looks up as I am about to pass by her. I smile and say, "Good morning".

She stops arranging her belongings and stares for a minute.

"Nigger."

What? I cannot believe what I just heard.

"Nigger, you raped that girl." She is shouting. People stop and stare.

"Listen, Lady, I don't know what you are talking about, and please don't call me that name."

She is now yelling. "Nigger, nigger, that is who you are, you raped the girl, yes, you did!"

It is clear she is not only homeless, she's mentally ill.

I want to be empathetic, but her insults sting so sharply, and so deeply I am paralyzed by shock and mounting outrage.

I breathe long and hard and try to ignore her, hoping she will stop. And she does for a minute and goes back to arranging her goods.

Some of the people who had stopped to stare start moving away. I look up and the Mall Ride is still a block away.

Then she rolls her shopping cart onto the side walk and starts all over again. Please, God of my Ancestors make the ride come now!

“No, no woman, I don’t care if you are insane, you have no right...”

“Nigger, nigger, you raped her, you raped the girl.”

People stop again, and stare. No one says anything.

“*Oh, n’dek mawa, mi tin nye nipoak wa de kase*”- spirit of my departed mother what have I done to this woman that she attacks me so? Invoking my mother’s spirit in my unconscious default to my native Buli does not help.

The woman has now taken a position a few yards away from me on the sidewalk. She is directly facing me and just carrying on...

I want to forget the ride and just walk away, but anger boils all over my being, and I don’t want to seem like I am running away, to give the slightest impression her accusations have any grounds. I clench my teeth, hold firm onto my bag. The Mall Ride is here. I hop on. She is besides the ride, yelling. People make a lot more way than usual for me on the ride. “I don’t know why she is doing this. I don’t know this woman. She is just an insane homeless woman,” I say out loud to myself and to the silent crowd on the ride as I reach to grab the bar. No one says anything. I want to yell more in my own defense, but I think it even more humiliating to have to fight to exonerate myself this way so I remain quiet, breathing hard. The driver shuts the doors, but I can still hear her. The light is red so the Mall Ride does not move. I stand braced, breathing hard. No one says a thing. Her voice follows as we finally drive off. Her voice rings in my ears, and in my palpitating heart as we go down Sixteenth Street. I am drenched in sweat.

An hour later, I sit in front of my class. It is time to begin class, but I cannot bring myself to teach today, or simply begin class in my usual cheerful way. It has nothing to do with the students. My heart is just too

heavy to move. The students are respectful, humorous, young people that I have come to treasure being with over the past six weeks. Students are beginning to move uncomfortably in their seats wondering what's up. Finally, I decide to share with them what happened that morning. The five young men in the class just stare with sad expressions on their faces. They don't look me in the eye. One young woman has tears in her eyes. Another young woman expresses outrage, not at the woman, but at the fact that no one on the Mall Ride said anything. I thank the students for allowing me to get that out of my chest, and we begin class.

We conclude class with a discussion of Lucille Clifton's poem, titled "what did she know, when did she know it". The discussion moves to center on the painful betrayal felt by the persona in the poem. A victim of rape and possibly incest, the persona, a little girl, declares in the poem that mothers are supposed "to know everything", and if that be the case, did her mother know, and when did she know that her little girl was being raped by the unnamed family member? The students talk about betrayal as a trope in their own writing. They talk about writing from the perspective of characters who have betrayed others, and characters that have been betrayed by others. We ask the question, what is betrayal? Is it when one actively sells out another, fails to protect someone in their care, or secretly victimizes someone in their care? Could betrayal also occur when one fails to acknowledge, speak up, and be an active witness, to another's victimization? We are out of time and the students are on the edges of their seats. Before I dismiss the class, the one young woman who was outraged that the people on the Mall Ride did not say anything to me that morning quickly slips in what she thinks is another example of betrayal- "it is like those people on the Mall Ride who did not say anything to you when that woman kept calling you names and making outrageous accusations." I am glad class is over and I don't have to say anything. Perhaps I shared too much? I am not sure. My mentor once told me- "teach from your points of strength, but also don't forget to teach with your vulnerability."

# Part Three

Your life may be as insubstantial  
as a shadow cast by moonlight.

Mevlana Rumi *Mathnawi*, III, 1721.

## And Then One Day it Changes for You

On a veranda adjoining an open courtyard where fermented guinea corn is spread out to dry, I sit next to my auntie as we sort good groundnut seed from bad for sowing the next day. It is the beginning of the rainy season in Kalbiisa in northern Ghana. Bird song, intermixed with chicken chatter, and the far away cry of guinea fowl drifts into the veranda with a wind almost still. The sweet smell of flowering baobab from the tree behind the compound, coupled with the distant promise of budding shea nut fruit tricks the nostrils into smelling rain on this hot and cloudless afternoon.

Auntie Akubla sits crossed legged on the floor, a calabash filled with raw groundnuts balances on her lap. She speaks with an easy laugh, punctuated by silent moments where the only sound in the veranda is the thud of good seed landing in the calabash on the floor, and the hollow sound of bad seed hitting the bottom and sides of the old metal basin. The good seed will be in the earth before midday tomorrow. The bad seed will be stored to serve as snack for the children in the lean season between sowing and harvest. Now and then a handful will be pinched, gently crushed, and added to the vegetable soup to give it a delicate and rewarding crunch.

Sitting with Auntie Akubla and working groundnuts in this way reminds me of my mother. The two women bear no resemblance, nor was my mother a farmer. Auntie Akubla is the wife of my father's brother, Akanuro, who is the head of our family compound in Kalbiisa. Perhaps it is because I spent countless hours shelling and crushing groundnuts with my mother that this sitting with Auntie Akubla brings back such strong memories. Perhaps it is the closeness, and the ability to share intimate conversation while working together at a leisurely pace that conjures up those memories. These memories of special times with my mother that I have grown to treasure did not happen by choice. Mother worked full time in her drinking bar. A non-literate, she kept her books and balanced accounts mentally without any written

records. She took inventory, and calculated her investments while she washed drinking glasses and kept each customer's tab, all in her head. She was exhausted by the time evening came around and needed help in the kitchen. My mother did not have a daughter. She picked me the oldest of her three boys to be her helper in the kitchen. I did not mind the work, and certainly enjoyed being close to my mother, but I hated the teasing from other boys in the neighborhood who made it clear the kitchen was only for girls and the kind of boys that were destined to grow up to become what they called, *women men*. So I worked groundnuts, picked vegetables, crushed tomatoes, pinched spices, fanned the charcoal pot, and held the cooking pot in place while my mother stirred our dinner.

Auntie Akubla, a kind and perceptive woman, is reading my thoughts. "We weeded and planted millet around the graves." She did not need to say this. I always go to the family burial ground not too far from the compound in Kalbiisa when I first arrive. Indeed, I had just returned from visiting the graves to sit with her. Auntie Akubla's statement makes me think of something that I always wondered about as a child. Why do we Balsa people bury our dead around our compounds on land that is used for crop cultivation? As a child I often wondered what it meant eating crop that has grown from where people have been buried. I never asked any of the elders about this because I was afraid they would confirm my thoughts - graves need to be near the house so the ghosts of the dead can return easily at night, to eat dinner, or sit by the fire in the kitchen on a cold night. Of course, the millet stalk around the graves provided the needed cover for ghosts of family members to come and go without being discovered by others who may raise an alarm. As an adult, I am not sure I believe in this form of physical representation of ghosts, and I have learned one or two things about composting and gardening. I guess I have come to appreciate how this form of utilitarian cemetery allows us to be connected to relatives who have passed.

Kalbiisa is one of several settlements of the town of Sandem in the north of Ghana. People in outlying settlements such as Kalbiisa live in traditional style compounds in farming communities. They bring their produce, poultry, and animals to sell in the market in the central part of town for cash. As a child

growing up in Sandem, I did not live in Kalbiisa. My parents lived in the central part of town called Yabatuik or Baobab market, about one and a half miles from Kalbiisa. Yabatuik is the commercial and bureaucratic part of Sandem where there are official buildings such as the district administration, the health center, the police station, post office, shops, drinking bars, and the main bus stop. The people who lived in Yabatuik work in government offices or engage in business. My father worked at the health center and my mother operated a drinking bar. The houses in Yabatuik were not of the traditional mud-built rounded architecture like in Kalbiisa. In Yabatuik the houses were built with cement or mud blocks and shaped in squares or rectangular fashion like the ghettos in the big cities of Ghana. People rented rooms or owned their own houses and let out rooms to renters. The living arrangement was often tight and noisy, but Yabatuik dwellers had the privilege of being at the center of things, and on the main road which led to the city.

As a child growing up in the central part of Sandem, Kalbiisa was where I went to escape the pressures of the close living arrangement of Yabatuik. As an adult, Kalbiisa is where my mother and father are buried- the place I visit first upon arriving in Sandem. When I was younger and lived in the city in Ghana, I visited Kalbiisa less frequently. Now that I live even much further away in Colorado, I seem to return to Kalbiisa even more frequently with four visits in the past four years. As I continue to age, the yearly visit to Kalbiisa has become an expensive pilgrimage of returning to that place where I may be caressed by the spirits of the ancestors.

I sort some more groundnuts with Auntie Akubla. The good seed quadruples the bad seed. There will be more than enough to sow tomorrow morning. I thank Auntie Akubla and my uncle, and beg their leave to visit Yabatuik before returning to Kalbiisa for the night.

As I arrive in Yabatuik, it occurs to me that I have returned to Yabatuik many times in my adult years and would often visit the house that my parents built, but I don't recall ever going back to Uncle JK's

house - the first house that I remember my family living in. We lived in two rooms of this house that belonged to my uncle, JK. It was from Uncle JK's house that my parents bought bags of cement and we made blocks on weekends, 'til we had enough to build the first few rooms of our own house. When I was twelve years old, we moved into our own house. I pause briefly and wonder if Uncle JK's house is still standing and what it looks like now. I decide to go there to see what memories I may recall after all these years.

To get to Uncle JK's house, I pass by a little red government house. When I was a child this house was the residence of the head of the local government, known as the Clerk of Council. The man who was forever Clerk of Council when I was growing up was Mr. Inusa, a short man from the Northern region. He was often accused of arriving in Sandem with only one shabby suitcase, but over the course of many years of being the head of local government, he managed to acquire much wealth under questionable dealings. Mr. Inusa spoke Hausa, and was one of very few Muslims known to openly consume alcohol. He ruled over the local government with a heavy hand and much arrogance. He bought a car and took expensive trips to the city. After several years, the local council was replaced by a bigger district council and several officials of much higher stature were brought to head the district. Mr. Inusa lost his post of Clerk of Council and was relegated to a pen pushing job and a smaller office. He became broke, sold his car, and most of the property he acquired. In those later years, he became humble and walked through town using the back paths, avoiding confrontations. He also became a consistent customer of my mother's drinking bar in Yabatuik where he would buy drinks on credit or beg others to buy him a drink. He would come to the bar in the morning, afternoon, and at night to drink gin in shots.

My brother Norbert was a toddler during those later years of Mr. Inusa, and became attached to him as he was consistently at my mother's drinking bar where Norbert ran about holding onto our mother's lappa as she attended her customers. Mr. Inusa had this habit of dipping his finger into his drink and

offering it to Norbert to lick each time he took his shots of gin. Soon enough Mr. Inusa and Norbert became tight and even had a nickname for each other- *tot man*. No one paid much attention to this relationship between Norbert and Mr. Inusa, but soon it was clear that Norbert looked forward to Mr. Inusa's daily visits. My mother used to say that people who operated drinking bars for a living always run a risk of alcohol consuming themselves, their spouse, or their children. This has turned out to be the case with Norbert. After months and years of rehab, he has become a thirty-three year old man who cannot stop drinking, cannot hold a job, or live a functional life. As I pass by Mr. Inusa's former home, I remember when he finally left Sandem. He was transferred to go back and work in his home region as he was getting close to retirement. He left in his black suit, which never seemed to be washed, carrying his one suitcase.

I stay in the shade of the great mahogany trees as I walk from Mr. Inusa's former house to my family's first home in Sandem. As children, we played soccer under these trees. People travelling to the villages south of Sandem stopped to rest under the shade of the mahogany trees. Across the street from where I am standing used to be the spot where Assibi Carpenter set up his workbench. Balding, with a smooth spot on the center of his head that was somewhat reddish, Assibi Carpenter made wood obey him. He was the best carpenter in town. He would saw, stop and whistle a tune, turn the wood this way and that way, take a step back, knock on the wood, and get back to work. He worked hard. He would start on one piece in the morning and by noon he would have sculptured it into several little pieces. By end of day he would start putting pieces together, and pretty soon he had a bed, a wardrobe, a center table. He would step back look at the completed piece of furniture, and say, "yes." He would whistle another tune, and go back to polishing the completed piece till it became too dark to work. Assibi Carpenter knew his trade, his art. After work, he would drink hard, walk with a swagger, and pound his chest. "It is me, Assibi Carpenter telling you the truth", he would repeat to his drinking buddies. He would brag about where he had worked and with whom, rattling off the names of important foreign contractors he had worked for, *Kassadjan, Taylor*

*Woodrow*. He would talk about work crews, and work discipline, faraway places where he had worked, and how he had worked on tall buildings and perched atop some of these buildings in impossible positions while putting on a roof or a window.

Assibi Carpenter was one of the consistent customers of my mother's drinking bar. When my parents were building our house, they gave him the contract to roof the house. Assibi Carpenter did a good job of it and took his payment in installments as the work progressed. When my mother realized he was drinking his entire pay away, she decided to take action. Without seeking his permission, my mother went to the major store in Sandem, GNTC, and purchased a brand new shiny blue bicycle with a chunk of Assibi Carpenter's pay. When Assibi Carpenter completed the job and showed up for the remainder of his pay, my mother paid him in a brand new bicycle, and whatever cash was left over. At first Assibi Carpenter was outraged, and made a big deal. He paced up and down, cut some serious *bambaara walkings* (then the latest stylistic gait from neighboring Francophone countries) in front of my mother's drinking bar. He pounded his chest, said a lot of "whaaat, me Assibi Carpenter, would not be treated in this manner." Said how he would never accept this method of payment. "I want my money, red hot cash, now, now!" He yelled in front of the bar for all to hear.

Finally my mother stood up, adjusted her lappa around her waist and her tied head scarf tight with the tip pointing into the sky, and went outside to meet Assibi Carpenter face to face.

"You, Assibi Carpenter, if you don't like what I did, I challenge you to take the bicycle and go and sell it. Yes, go and sell it and get the cash that you need. I will sit in my bar and wait for you to bring the money back and buy my drink, so I can make lots of profit."

Assibi Carpenter was quiet, but still wore a furious face. "Yes, you want cash. I will pay you cash, and wait for you to bring it all back to me. I will give you drink and make plenty profit". And when she said "profit," my mother snapped her right thumb against the forefinger, and looked Assibi Carpenter in the eye.

"You walk around town begging for other people's bicycles to go to your jobs, or carrying you tools on your head like a little boy, what do you think I stand to gain from you owning a bicycle?"

Assibi Carpenter made to speak, but could not find speech so he pointed his finger at my mother, "You, you, Sister, ah, ah" was all he uttered. He grabbed his bicycle by the right hand, lacing his fingers around the center of the handle bars, and gave the kick stand one nifty kick with the heel of his left foot. He did not mount the bicycle. He simply rolled it and walked away fast. Later he came to love his bicycle and thanked my mother endlessly for his new transportation. He took pride in polishing his bicycle just like he polished his wood, and cut a sharp figure riding it across town to different jobs. If anyone reminded him how he came to acquire his new ride he would say, "As for my sister, she is a very smart woman." He would say of my mother. Later I found out Assibi Carpenter's father and my mother's father were friends, and the children from both families grew up together, and that was the reason Assibi Carpenter never called my mother by her name. He always called her 'my sister'.

Finally I am approaching the back of Uncle JK's house, the house my family lived in before we built our own house. It is still painted the same color for as long as I can remember, pink with green windows. This house was built by my uncle JK, a man who was an example of success and craziness. Uncle JK was married to my mother's sister. He lived and worked as an accountant in a faraway town. I always associated him with town hall style furniture, for this was the chair he occupied in the one photo my mother kept of him. He was reputed to drink a bit, but was not a miserable drunk who could not meet his responsibilities. He was a successful man who commanded and people obeyed. He died a sudden death

that made many people sad. I remember my parents held some kind of reception after he died, under the shade of the nim tree behind the house. It was at the reception that I found out Uncle JK had made a pledge upon my birth that at any time that my parents were ready, he would take over responsibility for my education. He offered me my first educational scholarship, so to speak. My parents had planned for him to take over once I attained thirteen years of age and was ready to go to secondary school. I heard stories of him getting drunk and driving his big motorbike like crazy, making pop-a- wheelies, and going at crazy speeds.

I am standing in the front yard of Uncle JK's house. The yard now has a cement floor, and a little pig sty on the border with the next compound. A woman peeks out the window and then comes out of the door. I recognize her.

Sister Anankum, I remember you in primary school. You were one of the big girls, a few years older. You belong to that house of beautiful Sahara looking girls. Big- boned, long- limbed women. Elegant stature with delicate features. You still have that little gap between your two front teeth that is a mark of beauty among our people. After you graduated from high school, you married Mr. Naaba. Later you attacked and beat up a woman in Kwame's house for having something, or trying to have something to do with your husband. I still remember there was something different about that fight. You attacked the woman, but unlike other married women who attacked their husbands' lovers, you did not seem interested in beating the hell out of the woman. You could have, you dwarfed her with your strong- boned Amazon build, but you didn't. It was a short fight I remember, you made your point, took public action.

That could have been thirty years ago you attacked that woman. Today you stand in the front door of the two rooms I remember our family living in. You have the screen door pushed half way open, the green nylon screen matches your green dress and reddish headscarf. A popular highlife tune follows you

as you open the door; more music comes out through the window of the bedroom. It is a melodious tune. The kind my mother used to listen to. A good melody of floating acoustic guitar grounded by a solid bass. A wailing piano, fleeing from a steady drum beat, accompanied by the enchanting lyrics of a powerful vocalist, repeating proverbs, teachings, admonishing the enemies, and exalting the innocent.

You are telling me about my mother in the last weeks of her life. I want to hear how my mother lived her last days, but it hurts me to hear about how turbulent her relationship with my father became in those last days. How alcohol descended on them and consumed their lives just like mother prophesied. You still call my mother, 'Mama', like most children in Yabatuik of our generation.

"Mama ran here one night and said she was leaving your father. She asked my husband to go and get her some Guinness. After they drank the Guinness she took off saying that she was going to walk twenty miles to her people in Fumbisi, and then your father came and took her back home. A few nights later she was back. She told us how you all used to live in this house before they built their own house. She had the legal papers of their house with her. She spent the night here but never went back to your father. The next day she left. Later we found out she secretly took the bus out of town and went to her mother's people in Walewale. Then we found out she died there a few days after arriving".

I am silent. I know that my mother died in Walewale seventeen years ago but I had no knowledge this was where she spent her last night in Sandem. These same rooms where we lived before we built our own house. I am looking at the woman that gave my mother refuge. I have no words.

"That is how it is on earth. You will be here and there, and then one day it changes for you". Sister Anakum concludes.

I walk back under the shade of the mahogany trees. The side of the road is covered with mahogany pods. A few of the pods are unopened. They remain rounded hard-shelled balls. One pod is

opened. Inside of the opened pod lay fifty little sachets of mahogany seed set in delicate scales. It is time to return to Kalbiisa again.

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## **Hamdia's Smile**

From a distance his face looks peaceful. Closer, he is a tiny elder with disappearing eye lashes resting in the body of a child. One year-old Hamdia weighs only six and a half pounds. He has two strips of bandages on either side of his face, about one inch apart. The bandages hold the feeding tube inserted into his tiny nostrils. His mouth is slightly open. His head is tilted to one side. He is not skin and bones like some of the other babies but when Dr. M gently held and depressed the skin on his thigh the indentation made by his finger just stayed. Fifty mats line the sides of this rectangular hall. The place is lit by lanterns and a few flashlights. Shadows dance on the walls as mothers and nurses rush about.

On the next mattress Sefidi's brown pupils are filled with life. Her glance is still and riveting at the same time. She sits leaning her back against her father, Jamal's hand. She has difficulty lifting up her head so she rolls her eyes upward with the pupils all the way into upper eye lids and holds the gaze. She does not make much voluntary movement. Her stillness has both a lightness and a certain deep weight that makes it look like she is sitting right on that spot that is the navel of the earth. Her brown dress hangs over thin legs and even thinner arms. Her condition has improved so she can at least hold her torso up. It is still a challenge to hold her head up for long periods so she continues to lean on her father to stay upright.

Each morning Sister T, the lead nurse, briefs the staff and volunteers of the therapeutic feeding center in Amharic, English and Gurage.

### **For Children in Phase One**

Feed every three hours. And continue till the night shift returns.

Refer to each child's chart and give prescribed treatment for infections.

Simulate appetite for children with severe and unstable malnutrition.

Focus on weight gain. Any questions?

### **For children in Phase Two**

They should not have any more symptoms of edema.

Appetite needs to be stable.

Remember the quantity of food needs to increase as the child gains weight. Refer to the chart for ratio.

Feed each child at least five times daily.

Add a feeding of porridge if the child is over eight pounds in weight.

Don't forget to always record the percentage of food the child takes at each feeding. I mean how much food the child actually eats. Munai, are you listening?

Good.

All babies that are nursing need to be breastfed before you give them formula.

Never force feed a child.

After the 3 P.M. feeding, there is a slow time in the feeding center. Some of the babies nap. Mothers steal the brief time to do laundry at the standpipe outside. Other women take their babies outside and visit under the shade as they braid each other's hair. In the center, a gentle hum rises from a corner, a lullaby emerges from another corner floating over sleeping babies to the center, and pretty soon the whole center joins in. For a moment, it all seems peaceful as babies rest in sleep, and from fatigue of feeding while parents wait the long wait for them to recover.

Jamal sits with his hands in his lap, head pointed down. He nods, and doses off. Gently, I pull the cloth from his hands. I swat the flies away from Sefidi. She is on antibiotics. She eats only a little of anything, but seems to like porridge loaded with vitamins the best. "It is good for her," Sister T says.

The flies keep coming. They seem to stay stuck to her eyes until the piece of cloth almost touches them before they fly off. But they don't fly far. They just hover or sit on the window and wait, only to come right back on Sefidi's face. They sit in the corner of her eyes and dare you. You can't swat them without swatting her in the face. Some are so fat they look like vultures on Sefidi's little face.

I think flies deserve a mean sounding name other than just flies or a fly. Fly is an innocent sounding name; they need a name more like mosquitoes; a name that would warn you of something unique and questionable behind the name.

Sefidi's energy is in such short supply she cannot lift her hand to drive away the flies. The flies are lethargic from over feeding and from being overweight.

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I don't know what it means if anything to be the only African in the group of volunteers from America working at this therapeutic feeding center in the middle of Ethiopia. What I know is that when I look at Jamal, I see in him some of my cousins in the rural subsistence farming community where I was raised in northern Ghana. Jamal is a well built man, with lean but strong limbs. He stands over six feet tall and walks with long strides. Everything about him speaks of the subsistence farmer that works hard on his fields. He carries a self-assured air about him that is incongruous with this place where he waits day and night on a mattress on the floor with his daughter, waiting for her to recover.

African or not, I am more like the Americans I came with. I will leave when the time comes. Every afternoon as I sit with Jamal and Sefidi I have my return plane ticket in my back pocket. A plane ticket and a passport documents the critical fact that I have a way out that the people we came to be with do not have.

Jamal is not a conquered man, but over the days he tells me over and over there is so much, "I cannot even begin to tell you." Perhaps it is not the amount or quantity of what he has to share, but more like what is the use? It is clear I am here only temporarily. So why even start to share all that weight?

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In June of 2003, famine hits parts of Ethiopia including the Butajera area in the central highlands. Specialist say the famine was caused by a secession of droughts in three years climaxing into an emergency situation for the subsistence farming communities in many parts of Ethiopia. But famine in this African context is mostly poverty.

Famine is poverty. Famine is what happens when subsistence communities that are already close to the ground finally get leveled. Famine is what happens when the assistance that is needed takes so long that when it arrives, it meets only the survivors. Famine is what makes some people rich at the expense of communities in need. Famine is what takes place outside certain bubbles of sufficiency in affected regions.

Famine is what happens to subsistence farming communities while governments and aid agencies argue over whether the situation should officially be declared famine or not. Famine is what happens when

companies like Cargill lobby for food aid shipping contracts, which when successful, as is often the case, results in a minimum of six months to get food to the affected regions when bringing food from one part of Africa to the affected region takes at most three months.

Famine is not just poverty. It is impoverishment. Impoverishment is defined as - *to exhaust the strength or richness of anything*. Famine in Africa is a global economic system that continues to exhaust the strength and richness of Africa. Famine is a short-sighted African leadership that continues to exhaust the strength and richness of Africa by betraying the trust of the people for short term gain. A little child dying of starvation anywhere on this earth is what happens when you and I allow it to happen.

In this type of famine there are always bubbles of *no famine* zones. In those bubbles you will find those who fly in to help. I am a volunteer in a famine stricken area in Africa. I live in this village for now, but I live in the bubble of *no famine*. My ability to be here is due to my condition of *no famine-ness*.

And then there is famine fatigue. Famine fatigue is not about the people facing the famine getting tired from their struggle to survive. It is about the donor communities and governments in Europe and North America who get tired of the same famine on the news. The same malnourished faces on their television screens. It is about the frustration that a kind-hearted person living in Europe or North America feels after they have written one or two checks to stop the famine, and yet the famine still persists in the same area. Famine fatigue is when famine refuses to become old news, making room for another disaster, or when the news of the famine still tries to exist alongside the next disaster. Famine fatigue says to the victims of famine - I have done my part, please be respectful and go away somewhere and roll over and die quietly.

The urgent poignancy in the pointed struggle of a little baby to survive hunger and severe malnutrition is a vivid testimony of a world grappling with a famine of ethics and morality.

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At the triage center, the driver pulls up under a beautiful tree in what looks like an outdoor village market spot. There are no chickens to scatter, no goats or sheep in sight. As if they have been waiting in the wings, people start to emerge from many paths leading to the shaded area - men and women carrying babies, toddlers, some with siblings in tow. They sit around the shade and pretty soon it looks like they have been here the whole time. People engage in conversation, others sit quietly, little children with some energy run about and play.

Dr M goes into the UNICEF tent and stays there for a long time. The tent is larger than the feeding center we come from. In it are more children suffering from acute malnutrition and related illness. When he comes out, Dr. M looks exhausted. His face is blank. He looks too tired to even carry any emotion on his face. With a receding hair line, he is tall, and talks patiently to everyone. In the mornings at the beginning of his work day, he smiles a lot. I wonder what he thinks of us volunteers who don't even have the strength to work a full shift without going behind the building to weep now and then. He is here now, and may go back to his home and regular job in Addis whenever this shadow hanging over the lives of children in this community passes.

Nurse Munia wheels out a portable exam table. She hangs a weighing scale on one of the branches of the tree. It hangs next to the table. As if by silent signal, the people crowded under the tree begin to move toward the exam table as soon as Dr. M sets down his medical bag on the lower shelf. Nurse Munai stands next to him with a clipboard and examination forms. One by one the children are weighed. Some of the babies scream when the nurse places them in the weighing scale. Some are too weak to cry.

The parents ask no questions. Dr M notes his diagnosis. Nurse Munai tells each parent whether their child's case is critical enough to be admitted to the feeding center. Parents don't argue or try to talk their way in. Those not admitted to the feeding center get notes for food rations.

In non-famine time, Dr M works at the teaching hospital in the capital. He and his wife, a nurse, have a three month old baby. Dr. M has seen the baby only once since birth. He cannot take a break from working the frontline. He is the only doctor for over seventy thousand people in a famine stricken community. Dr. M volunteered to come and work the frontline because he completed his housemanship in this community. Without a car, he set to come and work when the call came. Finally a rotary club in the US, donated a jeep for him to do his rounds. We are on one of these rounds now where he is triaging child victims of famine.

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The same organization that runs the feeding center also has an orphanage and a school. The orphanage is always filled to capacity. Last night two infant twins were abandoned in the nearby town. The message came in the middle of the night. Where were the twins while the person walked miles to come seek help? Perhaps in a Tukul? It was stormy and rainy last night. Did their mother wait outside? Did she lurk in the darkness outside the Tukul until the husband and wife couple that ran the organization arrived with the pediatric nurse to take the infants? How many times may she have started to abandon her infants in the past week, but could not go through with it?

As an adjective, the state of being an orphan is also defined as not being part of a system, isolated, abandoned. When the establishment of orphanages in different communities in Africa became the response to a crisis of too many children with no one to take care of them, people made note of the fact that African societies typically absorbed orphans through the extended family system. What happens to children who are brought to an orphanage because their primary connection to the system, their parents, abandoned them?

Ayesha, a pregnant mother here at the feeding center with her malnourished child, gives birth on one of the beds. There is minor celebration as other mothers, and the nurse gather around Ayesha. She occupies a corner of the dispensary with her newborn. When allowed to visit, other mothers stop everything to come and greet the mother and baby.

Even Sefidi is doing better now. She can move her arms and will hold a cup and drink from it if you place it snug in her hands. Her eyes, always alert, now dart around with much energy. Her head is still disproportionately bigger than the rest of her very thin body. Jamal smiles a bit more now. We communicate more, and manage to even share jokes, but I feel sadness in our interactions, and I think we both know why. He does not ask when I will leave. I look into his eyes for the slightest opportunity to tell him I will soon have to leave. Our group leaders tell us we have to let everyone know we are leaving soon. It is not fair, they tell us, to just show up one morning and try to wiggle in a quick “bye” and leave. Many things are not fair, I reflect, such as coming here, and being a part of people’s lives, and their pain. Coming here and getting to know Jamal and Sefidi, and having all the control on when I leave, and the fact that we most likely will never meet again. I make myself look Jamal in the eye when I tell him I soon have to leave. He tries to smile and says, “Nshah Allah”. I respond ‘Nshah Allah”.

Sefidi is strong enough to walk between Jamal and I back to the bus after I come to say my final goodbye. Some of the women come out of the feeding center to watch the bus leave. They stand facing east as the sun rises. There is much sadness, but there is also lots of waving, and laughter. Some of the mothers have their babies in their arms. I know that I have to leave and keep a cheerful face as I wave to Jamal and Sefidi. At the same, I feel a part of me truly belongs back here on this land with people that look and live like the community that I left to go to America years ago. I am leaving Africa again, except this time I am not filled with eager desire and dreams of where I am going like the first time I left my native northern Ghana to go to the USA.

As the bus pulls out of the compound, the rays of the rising sun lands on the face of a little child in his mother's arms. He is wearing a pink woolen hat that comes down on the sides to meet the greenish lappa his mother wrapped him in. The sun illuminates his face and I realize that he is Hamdia. He has no more bandages on his face. He holds just the slightest articulation of his face toward the sun, and then his face breaks out in the most beautiful smile.

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