

Winter 2011

NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU: "He who does not know can know from learning"

Kayleen Schepper
Grand Valley State University

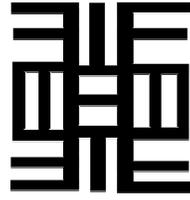
Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects>

Recommended Citation

Schepper, Kayleen, "NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU: "He who does not know can know from learning"" (2011). *Honors Projects*. 87.
<http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/honorsprojects/87>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU



"He who does not know can know from learning."

Symbol of the quest for knowledge.

It was the colors she noticed first. Red dirt. Black people. It was as if her eyes inverted the color scheme she had known her whole life: the red hue in her family's skin, the black of Michigan soil. It surprised Elizabeth how great the distinction was; how for a while she couldn't see anything else. Just colors.

The second thing she noticed was the air, thick and heavy. Standing in her new dorm, Elizabeth couldn't distinguish between the humidity and the fatigue on her body. She thought about her arrival to Ghana and how everyone stared at her, their eyes adding to the weight. She had not left the confines of her room since. Twenty-four hours, hidden and alone. It was safe there. No pressure to perform. No fear of appearing foolish. It was freeing, like untying sandbags from her ankles.

Elizabeth gazed out her window at the scene outside. The concrete hallway overlooked a courtyard, separated only by a railing and open air. The courtyard was teeming with clotheslines where laundry hung and colors danced with each other. The grass below saturated the scene, vibrant green contrasting with the concrete.

On the other side of the courtyard were rows of balconies, each one belonging to a dorm. They looked like cubbyholes from a distance; five stories of boxes containing beds and luggage and people. Dull, white walls framed each room, gray along the edges as if someone took a pencil to them. Many students stood out on their balcony doing dishes or cooking lunch or washing clothes.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, her ears captured by the chatter and the music and the laughter emerging from outside her window. There was so much activity out there, so much life being lived. Elizabeth began to feel trapped within her dorm's four walls, going stale as the rest of the world drank in the breeze.

Not that her room wasn't nice. It was simply furnished with a bunk bed, a table and chair, and a small refrigerator. Brown shelves and cupboards already held Elizabeth's belongings. The cement floor was laminated with a bright, blue tile pattern. But how long was she going to stare down at the blue floor and ignore the blue sky?

Elizabeth flung herself off her bed. *I can't hide in here forever*, she thought. She grabbed the doorknob.

Froze.

But one look at me and everyone will know that I don't belong here...

Elizabeth shook her head at herself. She was not going to waste the next five months locked up inside herself.

She opened the door and stepped outside, feeling like a baby bird leaving the nest for the first time. Time to fly.

She only stood awkwardly for a brief moment before a group of guys waved her over. There were four of them, also students at the university. She smiled as she strolled towards them, ignoring the sandbags of self-consciousness as they dragged behind her feet. Eagerness replaced her nerves as she became aware of her craving for interaction. Conversation was like food to her. She feasted her eyes on the opportunity to exchange words and ideas and perspectives with her African peers. Her smile grew wider. She wondered if the whole Hall could see it.

The four Ghanaian students greeted Elizabeth with excited grins. They shook hands and exchanged names, devoting a great deal of time to mastering the correct pronunciation. She had difficulty understanding them because of their thick accents and low voices.

"Where are you from?"

"Uh, Michigan. United States."

"Ah, U.S.A.!" Their enthusiasm sent relief through Elizabeth. *They like my country. Oh thank God.*

"Why did you come to Ghana?"

"Well..." Elizabeth searched for a response. Why did she decide to go to Ghana, of all countries? The question was simple enough, but it sent a current of confusion and embarrassment through her. What exactly propelled her across the Atlantic? Was it a romanticized idea of an African adventure? A curiosity of the unknown? An appetite for challenge? She suddenly felt silly for being there. After all, Europe was in her blood; her only connection to Africa was an ugly history of exploitation. So what was she doing there?

Elizabeth had always been attracted to people and places that were different than her. As a little girl in ballet class, she would have rather played football with the boys. As a high school athlete, she chose to hang out with the band geeks and the art freaks. Now a college student—who had never known anything except her white little world—she opted to live temporarily off the West African coast. Did she need more of a reason to be there than that she wanted exposure to something outside of the bubble she had lived in her entire life?

That was the appeal of Ghana to Elizabeth. It was the chance to branch out and open up to another dimension of the human experience. To stay within her bubble, to live her whole life ignorantly within the constructions of her own culture, was to limit herself. The world was bigger than her home. There was so much to learn. It was overwhelming sometimes, this incessant list of things to discover.

Elizabeth's thoughts fumbled out of her mouth in reply. She was not entirely aware of what she was saying but hoped it was coherent. Whatever she said, they kept smiling. Elizabeth loved smiles. They were one of the first things she noticed about a person, and they could completely alter any demeanor. She had a particularly big smile herself, which she considered her best asset. When she smiled, her whole face was involved. She loved how her gums showed and how her cheeks grew big and how her eyes sparkled. Her mother always told her that she came out of the womb smiling. It was as natural as breathing to Elizabeth.

“Do you know the Twi?” they asked.

“Twi? No, I actually just got here yesterday.”

“Oh, but you have to learn the Twi!”

And with that they rushed her into a room and sat her in a chair. A notepad was placed on the table in front of her. The four boys crowded around to teach her their native tongue. She was struck by their animation and realized that her efforts to learn the language meant a lot to them. Not only that, but they were also delighted to have an opportunity to teach her, to help her, and to tell her about Ghana.

The tallest of them wrote out the Twi alphabet, insisting that Elizabeth repeat each letter to practice the phonetics. Another taught her greetings and phrases used in everyday small talk. Each attempt Elizabeth made to pronounce the words made them laugh. They laughed a lot and she liked that. She found herself laughing with them.

The session was interrupted by a great growl and Elizabeth realized she was hungry. The more reserved of the four asked her if she had eaten.

“No, I haven't eaten all day.”

“Wow. Then you really, really need to eat. Do you have a hotplate?”

“No...”

“Wow. What will you cook with?”

Elizabeth couldn't believe it. She didn't even know how she was going to eat. She did not know where to buy food, how much it should cost, or what she should get. She didn't even really know how to cook! College had always been fast food and microwave meals and sandwiches and snacks. Her eyes grew wide in panic. The hunger was more noticeable now, a sharp pain in her gut.

“I... I don't know... I am not even sure what a hotplate is...” she finally stuttered.

“Wow. Ok, then you need to get a hotplate. You can get one in town. I can take you. It really is no problem, no problem at all.”

And just like that they were in a taxi to town, munching on the bread he had bought for them on the way to the taxi station. The bread was warm and sweet. She tried to pay for it, but he insisted. Elizabeth was astonished by how much he went out of his way to help her. He could have just explained where to go and what to buy. Instead he fed her and accompanied her to where she needed to go. And at this moment, she was grateful.

“I really appreciate this,” she said to him through a mouthful of bread.

“No two ways about it!” he replied, using one of many aphorisms that would quickly become familiar to Elizabeth. He smiled warmly. It was the kind of smile that starts in the heart and stretches up to the face, an embodiment of true genuineness and good character. It spoke directly to Elizabeth's soul. “Relax,” it told her. “Everything is going to be okay.”

The air even felt lighter.

The ocean came into view as their taxi approached town. The palm trees lining the road made Elizabeth feel like she was on vacation. It was the first time she had seen the ocean since her arrival. Though travelling to Ghana made the world feel smaller, staring at the ocean reminded her how big it was.

“So what is your name again?”

“Kwabena.”

“Kwabena...”

“It means Tuesday born.”

“Oh!”

“In Ghana, we are given a day name on the day we are born. I was born on Tuesday, so my name is Kwabena. A female child would be Abena. Then a week later the child is given a Christian or a Muslim name.”

“Ah, I wonder what my name would be...”

The driver slammed on the brakes and her body jolted forward, diverting her attention from Kwabena to the road. Their taxi was practically touching the back bumper of the car ahead of them. Elizabeth had never seen so many taxis. They were small, beat up cars with mismatched colored bodies. Red and gray. Black and yellow. They each had something written across their back windshield, like a bumper sticker. The taxi in front of her said “Matthew 6:34.” Another to her right said, “Jesus is Lord.” She looked at the back of her own taxi. “Glory to God.”

As traffic resumed, Elizabeth watched in alarm as vehicles raced by, squeezing between each other, whipping side to side to dodge potholes. Elizabeth gasped involuntarily as imaginary car collisions flashed before her eyes. They stopped at a stoplight next to a billboard that listed the country’s most recent car accident statistics. *If I die here, it will be in a car accident. I don’t know why everyone makes so much fuss about malaria; this is what I should be worrying about. Where are all the lane markers? Where is the traffic enforcement? There aren’t even seatbelts in this taxi!*

Only hours ago she was sitting in the safety and the boredom of her room. Now her life was in the hands of the taxi driver. The thought was terrifying and exciting. *But I guess I would rather be here—figuring things out and seeing the city—than spending the next five months of my life watching dust collect.*

She closed her eyes and let the wind calm her. It lifted her blond hair and spun it around her face. She squinted through strands of yellow at Kwabena, who was talking to the driver in Twi. Kwabena was shorter than her and very fit. He wore a plaid, button-up shirt with black pants. His smooth face and his close-shaven hair gave him a very clean look, and his eyes and teeth shined brightly against his dark complexion. When he wasn’t smiling, his default expression was one of concern. It was a quiet, caring look.

The taxi dropped them off at the market and Kwabena paid for the fare. Elizabeth was stunned by the sudden exposure to sunlight, sharp and bright, digging into her eyes and pulling sweat from her pores. She strained to see everything around her, eyes widening to absorb the scene, so rich in color and activity. The paved concrete was unlike any image she had seen of Africa on television. She was expecting dirt roads and half-naked people and straw huts. But the people were smartly dressed and the buildings stood strong in their cement brick structure.

The market lined the street, busy with people working, shopping, eating, and napping. Goats and chickens and dogs freely roamed among the people, their odor merging with town’s

many smells of garbage, urine, sweat, and food. *A petting zoo is probably a ridiculous concept to these people*, Elizabeth mused.

Elizabeth was surrounded by food and jewelry and people and art without ever veering from the road or entering a building. They passed by pyramids of bold, red tomatoes and baskets of plantains, tables of designer knock-off purses and racks of boldly patterned fabrics. Elizabeth thought about shopping in the U.S. and how efficient and private it was. The market in Ghana was open and interactive. *Very open*, Elizabeth thought as one of the market vendors brought her breast out of her shirt to feed her baby.

She was enthralled by the women in the market, the scene of long skirts and broad smiles, stew boiling over fire, loud voices bartering, singing, and laughing. Women greeting the passerby with their cheerful eyes as they stood proudly behind their display of goods. Women half-asleep and slumped in their chairs, waiting for the hot noon to pass, dull faces etched with boredom and exhaustion. Women carrying babies on their backs and balancing baskets on their heads, their strong gait and graceful stride flavoring the streets as they effortlessly dodged the small animals and half naked children that dashed in front of their feet.

As she walked down the street, she felt like she was on display. “Dropping, dropping!” taxi drivers would yell, their way of asking her if she needed a taxi. “Beautiful queen! Come, come!” hollered Rastafarian men selling jewelry and souvenirs. It felt like everyone wanted her money. Even children approached her, trying to sell her plantain chips and oranges. *Do they do this to everyone? Elizabeth wondered. Or am I being sought because they think I have money... because I am white...*

“Obruni!” everyone would shout at her. The children especially would shout, waving eagerly. “Obruni! Obruni!”

Elizabeth looked over at Kwabena, perplexed. “Obruni means white person,” he explained. “The children get really excited to see a white.”

At that moment, a group of three little girls began repeatedly chanting, “Obruni! How are you? I’m fine! Thank you!” Their eyes and smiles were both wide with anticipation for Elizabeth’s response. She felt her insides freeze, as if she was on stage and forgot her lines. She wished to run backstage, out of sight, safe again from everyone’s curious eyes. Elizabeth was afraid a response would only encourage the chanting, but she didn’t want to act coldly either. She reluctantly turned toward the little girls and waved hello. They shrieked with excitement and ran off.

Kwabena went on as if nothing happened, but Elizabeth was embarrassed. Embarrassed that she was publicized while Kwabena ignored. Embarrassed that her reaction emulated the behavior of Miss America in a parade, or the popular girl in high school. The embarrassment

became guilt and the guilt birthed confusion. *Isn't attention like that generally welcome? Doesn't it usually make you feel good? Why doesn't it feel good?*

She wondered what Kwabena was thinking, but he was already bartering with one of the market women. The woman selling the hotplate wore a long dress that hung off the shoulders in an orange and brown pattern that brought out the richness of her complexion. Her hair was wrapped in a separate fabric, this one green and brown. She had black lips and tired eyes, yet she was cheerful and animate. Her motherly figure made Elizabeth feel flat and shapeless, and she saw herself as a little girl standing next to a woman.

Elizabeth was relieved to have Kwabena barter. She didn't know Twi and she didn't know the pricing for hotplates. All she knew was that she would get overcharged because she was foreign. Kwabena was already having a rough time getting a good price because the woman knew the hotplate wasn't really for him. Once their negotiation was complete, Elizabeth gave Kwabena money to pay for the hotplate.

"Oh," muttered Elizabeth.

"Are you fine?"

"I just realized I need pots... and dishes."

The day went on, an afternoon hopping from one stall to another in the heat of the sun. With every purchase Elizabeth recognized another need and Kwabena accompanied her faithfully through each one. It was difficult to be so stripped of independence. She struggled to be patient as she filled her head with various Twi phrases and appropriate prices. *Eh te sen?* meant "how are you?" *Me to* meant "I am buying." Oranges cost ten pesewas, but apples were almost one cedi. There were so many details to take in, it made her head pound. And her head pounded all the way home. Pound. Pound. Through her meager dinner of noodles. Pound. Pound. The product of stress and sun and information overload. Pound. Pound. She lay down to sleep. Her head and her heart beat together. Pound. Pound.

Her body's pounding complimented the sounds outside her window. *This is so college*, thought Elizabeth as she listened to the loud music and the voices of her peers. The hallways and balconies and courtyard were buzzing with students. She wished she knew what they were saying to each other. However, she could feel their energy; the familiar beginning-of-the-semester air of freedom and anticipation. And hormones.

Pound. Pound. The day's events began to replay in her head. She had been exposed to so much in such a short amount of time and her brain struggled to contain every new sight and sound and smell. But in every scene that played, Elizabeth saw the people, the Africans. In every memory she heard, "Obruni." Of all her new experiences, the most prominent was the newfound intensity of white consciousness. She thought about the children, grabbing her shirt and waving

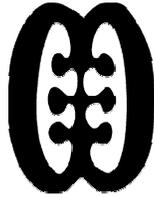
excitedly, treating her as if she had celebrity status. She thought about the men, the bold and obnoxious ones expressing their attraction to her.

She wasn't even sure if her appeal was on the basis of her race; maybe it was rooted in the thrill of seeing someone different, unusual, and new. If that were the case, she could evade the guilt she felt in association with her whiteness. She wouldn't have to worry about unintentionally perpetuating any white supremacy ideology.

Elizabeth buried her face in the pillow. The noise outside mocked the noise inside her head. *How am I supposed to fall asleep to this? It's like my bed is in the middle of a frat party...*

Exhaustion became her lullaby. The noise merged with her thoughts, fading into the background until they were quieter than her breathing. Her body sunk into her mattress, her self-consciousness sunk into unconsciousness. Sleep welcomed her. The pounding ceased.

ESE NE TEKREMA



"The teeth and the tongue."

*Symbol of friendship and interdependence;
The teeth and the tongue may come into conflict, but they need to work together.*

Elizabeth was awakened at dawn by the campus life. *Do these people ever sleep?* She squinted out her window. Students were out on their balconies, shouting in Twi to each other across the courtyard. Christian worship music played through the loudspeakers, some students singing along while others shouted their own praises.

Elizabeth began to establish a morning routine. She bought a water bottle from the store downstairs and poked a hole in the plastic, using the small stream to brush her teeth. She missed the luxury of safe drinking water. For now she stuck with bottled water, which was imported. She decided she would switch to the more economical sachet bags the other students used once her body was more adjusted.

Ready for a shower, Elizabeth took her things to the bathroom. She stripped off her clothes and turned the faucet. Nothing. She turned the faucet in the other direction. Still nothing. She stood naked and sweaty under the empty faucet, pleading with it, hoping at any moment cool water would flow out. Exasperated, she threw her dirty clothes back on and headed out into the hall. A female student walked by carrying a bucket of water, and it dawned on Elizabeth that she was going to have to take a bath out of a bucket. "Excuse me!" Elizabeth approached the girl. "I'm sorry, where did you go to get the water?"

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Well sweetie, just take those stairs out to those doors and then take a left, and you will see the polytanks."

"Ok. Thank you!" Elizabeth turned to go, anxious to be clean, when the girl spoke again.

"My name is Abena. Everyone calls me Bee," she said, extending her hand. Elizabeth took it, relieved to be making a female friend. Bee was short and busty and absolutely beautiful. Her chin-length hair was sticking out, evidence of a good night's sleep.

“I’m Elizabeth.”

“EE-liss-uh-bet.”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. Well, I will see you later, Sweetie.”

They smiled at each other. Elizabeth needed that smile. Bee picked up her bucket and continued to the washroom, walking with the poise of a runway model. She had a presence that commanded attention and a charm that conveyed love. Elizabeth hoped to see her again soon.

She took her own bucket to the polytanks, three great black tubs of water sitting outside the Hall. She turned the valve to fill her bucket and carried it back up the stairs. The handle of her pail left indentations in her palm and the weight of the water pulled on her arms and obliques so that her muscles ached by the time she reached the washroom. *I hope I don’t have to do this every day*, she thought to herself.

She was fixing her breakfast when she heard that another girl from the U.S. would be arriving. The news sent a surge of anticipation through Elizabeth. Another American! She had thought she was going to be the only international student on campus. Now there was going to be someone else! Someone whom she could struggle and learn and process with. Someone who would understand her. A fellow traveler. A roommate. She wondered about her, what her name was, where she was from, what her hobbies were. She imagined the nights they would spend staying up late, getting to know each other, talking until sleep stole their words. She imagined the jokes they would share and the stories they would tell.

Hours passed, and Elizabeth spent them reading and writing and watching from her window. She wanted to be in the room when her new roommate arrived, but she was getting restless again. She thought of leaving briefly to find Kwabena, or maybe even Bee, and see if they would want to have dinner with her.

She was heading towards the door when it suddenly burst open and the entryway of the room erupted with luggage. There were so many bags that at first Elizabeth didn’t see the tall, thin woman among them. If she wasn’t expecting an American—and if she didn’t have so much luggage—Elizabeth would have thought the woman was Ghanaian. Dragging her bags into the room, she sighed and spun around to Elizabeth, eyes widening. *Was she expecting me here?* Elizabeth wondered. *Was she expecting a white girl to be here?*

“Hey!” She stretched out the word, revealing a southern twang. “My name is Lauryn.” She said her name like it was her favorite word in the world. Lauryn.

Lauryn had a stunning face with big eyes and lips, framed by several, short twists of hair. Her wide smile rivaled Elizabeth’s. There was a gap between her front teeth.

As Elizabeth introduced herself, she realized she had spent the morning imagining a white girl. She had looked forward to no longer being the only white girl at the university. And now, shaking hands with this beautiful, black woman, absurd thoughts crossed through Elizabeth's mind. *Will she like me as much as the Ghanaians? Is she disappointed that I am white? Does she think it's weird that a white girl, like me, decided to go to Africa?*

"There is no elevator," Lauryn mused, staring at her bags, still breathing from the three flight trip. "No elevator. Wow..." She sat down on the bed, torn between unpacking and taking a nap. Her tired mind could barely process the drive to campus, hours of passing through villages and driving by vendors on the street. The images blurred together in her memory like a bad film. Lauryn knew her mind and her body; she knew she needed to rest so that she would have the energy to experience and enjoy everything to capacity. Sitting on the bed was already pulling her away from consciousness.

Napping was the best thing she could have done for herself. Kwabena came by that evening and invited them to hang out at a club near campus. The sun set and Elizabeth and Lauryn changed into more stylish wear. Lauryn could have worn something ludicrous and worked it. She was dressed rather chic in a sleek, long black dress and a thick red belt around her waist. Elizabeth couldn't help but compare herself to Lauryn, who was not only trendy, but carried herself with high esteem, her confidence unearthing itself with every movement and word.

Elizabeth hoped they would become good friends. She missed the security of being known and loved. It was something she could rest in; it allowed her to discard worry she carried with her about not being enough, or even of being too much. Elizabeth realized how conditional her confidence was, how much she relied on the acceptance of others for it. And in this foreign country—its citizens still strangers at this point—she felt the need to prove herself. She walked and breathed and lived under pressure to prove herself worthy as a traveler, as a visitor, as a foreigner, and as a representative of the American nation and white race.

She wanted to be recognized as who she was underneath all those things. But who was she underneath them? Her whole life she viewed her self as personality, thoughts, and memories. Maybe the self is composed of those things, but are they untouched by her status as a white American? For the first time, Elizabeth contemplated her identity in terms of her race and nationality. How much have they shaped her experience as a human being? How much have they impacted her perspective? She wanted to be known by the Ghanaians beyond those things, but she wasn't even exactly sure what lie beneath them.

She looked at Lauryn, who was changing her shoes for the fifth time. She wondered how Lauryn defined herself. Did she see herself as black first, every other demographic following after? Was she always conscious of her race as a minority in the U.S.? Was she conscious of her race around Elizabeth?

Lauryn put on a funky pair of red heels and admired her feet. Ready for a night out, she and Elizabeth made their way to the taxi station to meet Kwabena. “You ladies are looking very, very nice!” he exclaimed when he saw them. They thanked him and climbed into a taxi.

The club was located in a lot outside a gas station. A live band played music on one end of the lot and loudspeakers, round tables and plastic chairs were dispersed throughout the rest of the area. Near the band a space was cleared for dancing. They sat down at a table and Kwabena ordered a round of beer.

And they chatted, learning about each other as new friends do. They shared interests, discussed school, told each other stories and made each other laugh. Elizabeth and Lauryn became extra attentive as Kwabena spoke about his upbringing. “Your parents never hugged you?” they exclaimed in surprise. He explained the role of the parents in the Ghanaian family, the importance of establishing respect and authority. There was an excitement in learning the differences and discovering the similarities with a Ghanaian peer.

Elizabeth and Lauryn traded stories about their parents’ reactions to their trip overseas. Nervous grandparents. Hesitant parents. Upset families. And so many frantic questions. “Why would you want to go there?” “Where will you sleep?” “Is there electricity?” “Is there war?” “Is it safe?”

Lauryn was studying theatre, and it was evident in the elaborate way she told stories. She flailed her arms and widened her eyes as she jumped from one tale to the next. Her voice echoed through the lot, loud and articulate and rich in southern twang. As she mentioned certain people she would pause and grin, savoring the memory of them like her favorite chocolate bar. Elizabeth found herself struggling to visualize many of the people Lauryn talked about. White was always the assumption. Earlier that day, she thought Lauryn would be white. And now, as Lauryn spoke, her default image of each person was white. But how could she assume that of the people in Lauryn’s life?

So as Lauryn mentioned her friends and acquaintances, Elizabeth wanted to ask whether or not they were also black. An odd question, when she thought more about it. Did she ever ask about hair color? Height? What made skin color so much more significant than other descriptive features? It had the power to change the whole imagery of the person, a power granted by a long history of superiority complexes and odious ideologies. It was a power she had never noticed so strongly before taking herself out of the U.S. where she lived among the majority, oblivious to many of these realities. There, her skin color was no big deal to her. In Ghana it was of great significance. Elizabeth thought about Lauryn. Her skin color has probably never been “no big deal.”

Kwabena asked if they wanted to dance. He didn’t even have to ask Lauryn, who leaped up as Lionel Richie’s *All Night Long* began to play. Lauryn loved music more than most things. Music was an energy-giver, a stress-reliever, a self-expresser. She tossed her hips, feeling the

music flow through her body, letting the beat navigate her arms and legs. She sang out each lyric she knew, loud and strong, revealing some vocal talent. Her enthusiasm was invigorating. Kwabena laughed and clapped and danced along. Elizabeth joined them too. Lauryn made her smile and laugh, and she focused on that more than her dancing. She was better at laughing, anyway.

The thing about dancing is that it is supposed to be felt. Lauryn was good at it, but Elizabeth thought too much. She thought about the music and she thought about how she should move her body. Lauryn's movements were naturally fluid and she didn't have a care in the world as she engrossed herself in the song. Elizabeth on the other hand was conscious of her surroundings, the eyes of drunken men making her and all the other women into sexual objects. She wanted to feel the music, but all she felt was watched. She always felt watched. It was a case of the minority's paranoia.

After a few more songs, Elizabeth headed back to the table, soon joined by Lauryn. They watched Kwabena as he continued to have a good time on the dance floor. It wasn't long before a group of guys strolled over to their table. One of them pulled a chair up next to Elizabeth.

"Don't you remember me?" he asked.

Elizabeth searched her memory from the past few days, but the black faces blurred together. Before coming to Ghana, black people had looked so similar to her. She feared this would happen; that she would have trouble distinguishing faces here.

He introduced himself by his Christian name, James. James. James was one of the four guys she had met the day before. He had been the tallest one, who wrote out the Twi alphabet for her. She remembered now.

"I want to take you as my friend," he smiled at her. This smile was different than Kwabena's. It was a surface smile, rooted no deeper than his throat.

"Are you married?" he asked her.

"No..."

"Oh! Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No..."

"Why not?"

Why do you need to know? she thought.

"I just haven't met him yet."

He was silent for a moment. He reeked of body odor, alcohol, and cologne. The smell stung Elizabeth's nostrils.

"I want white children. How do you think I can have white children?"

Elizabeth was taken aback by this question. *Is this really appropriate? Do I only find it rude because of my culture's sensitivity of race? Or is it just plain, across-the-board offensive?*

"Um... adopt?" she answered him.

He laughed. "I want to go to the U.S. It is my dream to go to the U.S. one day. It is my dream to marry a white woman."

Now Elizabeth was truly offended. *Why? Why white women? Why the U.S.?* She wondered where James got the impression that white women were preferable to Ghanaian women, that life in the U.S. was advantageous to his home. Her mind flashed back to her day in town the day before. The guilt and discomfort brought by the attention was becoming a familiar sensation. She wanted to stand up for the African women, reverse the notion that they were somehow inferior. Elizabeth deeply admired the African women; they were the most beautiful women she had ever seen. What wasn't James seeing? She wanted so badly for him to love his country, to love his country's women.

Elizabeth looked over at Lauryn, who was also dealing with men. Maybe James' pursuit of Elizabeth, the "white lady," wasn't such an accurate representative of Ghanaian men. Of course, their advances could still be based on the thrill of being with an American woman. This was the foreigner's paranoia. *What do they want from me? Money? Sex? A visa? Are they only interested in me because I am American, or do they genuinely want to get to know me?* Both Elizabeth and Lauryn would battle this foreigner's paranoia throughout their semester.

The guy Lauryn was talking to kept trying to buy her drinks and invite her over to his place. Elizabeth watched how Lauryn handled the situation. She was stern and blunt, but she was also laughing. "You funny," she would say, chuckling to herself and shaking her head. "I'm not going home with you! You are just wasting your time!" Lauryn would make eye contact with Elizabeth and widen her eyes at her. "Can you believe this?" her eyes said. And Elizabeth realized at that moment, sitting at the table with Lauryn, that they were in the same situation: young, American women at a club among drunken Ghanaian men.

James began his third Star beer. He stood up and danced, shaking his hips provocatively at Elizabeth who laughed nervously, uncertain of how else to respond. He grabbed her hand and kissed it. She let him and regretted it. She had never gotten this much attention from a man before, but none of it made her feel beautiful. If anything it made her feel violated. He tried to kiss her hand again and this time she pulled it back. He smiled and took another swig of beer.

Lauryn was also ready to get away from these drunken men. One had just bought her a beer, though she told him multiple times that she didn't drink. When she wouldn't drink it, he began shouting. "But I paid for it! I bought it for you!"

"That was your choice," Lauryn responded calmly. She wore an annoyed expression on her face and spoke to him like she was scolding a child. "I told you I don't drink! You buyin' me beer don't change that! Go on along now, you just wasting your time over here."

He stood up and stumbled off to another table. Lauryn shook her head and laughed. "Oh Lord," she muttered to herself. "Lord have mercy."

Before she could ask Elizabeth if she was ready to head back to campus, another guy sat next to her. He was much older than the last, probably old enough to be her father. He introduced himself to Lauryn, surprised by her accent as she answered back.

"Where from?" he asked, eyes widening.

"I'm from the United States."

"Ah! You are American!"

"Yes."

He sat eagerly, mouth opened in astonishment. He had clearly not anticipated this.

"You know," he slurred, "Your roots are African because you are black. You may be an American, but your roots are here. Your roots are in Africa."

Lauryn nodded and opened her mouth to speak, but James cut her off.

"You are a black American. You are not African American, you are black American. You can never be African like us."

"Hey now, I'm not comin' in here tryin' to be African. I'm American, don't get it twisted, now."

Elizabeth listened intently, surprised at Lauryn's alliance to her American identity. She expected her to fight the last claim, to align with the African people. It wasn't a denial of her African ancestry, but rather an embracing of her nationality.

"You are Obruni," James told her. "You are not African American, you are black American. Because you are American, you are Obruni."

"Hey, I know I'm American," she kept saying. "I'm not trying to be African."

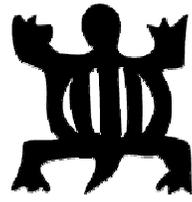
Elizabeth was stunned by the conversation. All the talking and thinking about race was becoming exhausting. Elizabeth wasn't used to it. It was a topic she generally avoided in conversation and something she was rarely so conscious of. Now she was overwhelmed by her own awareness, as if she was noticing the sun for the first time and she couldn't stop staring at it. Her head began to pound again. Or was that the music?

Kwabena returned to the table, sweaty and smiley. Seeing him reminded Elizabeth that not every man was a sleazy drunk, and not every Ghanaian was interested in hooking up with her to get a green card to the U.S. and have white babies. Kwabena saw that both girls were beginning to look tired and accompanied them to a taxi. Elizabeth and Lauryn sat side by side as they rode through town. Silence fell on them for the first time, comfortable like a blanket. They breathed in the warm, night air, breathed in each other's company, breathed in the beginning of their adventure together.

"Well, that was some first night out," Elizabeth mused as they arrived to campus.

"It surely was," said Lauryn. "It surely was."

DENKYEM



“Crocodile.”

Symbol of adaptability.

Lauryn sprang out of bed at four in the morning. She leaped down from the top bunk and ran for the showers. She had discovered earlier that week that the water would often run for a little bit before dawn. Sure enough, cold water fell from the faucet. Shivering violently, she washed herself in the dark, singing to distract herself from the chill. An early morning and temporary discomfort were small prices to pay for a real shower.

The sun was just rising. It was the dawn of a new week. Lauryn shook her head. It had been one of the longest, most exhausting weeks of her life. Yet it had been wonderful. She couldn't believe it sometimes: she was in Africa, the motherland! And it wasn't all jungle. It wasn't all starving children, skeletons sticking out of their flesh. There were cars and buildings and gardens and healthy, happy people. *Where are these images of Africa?* she wondered.

Sometimes when she was out walking she would pause and watch the people. She looked like them. There was something oddly special about it, about being in this brown sea of faces and gapped smiles. She felt a belonging in the way she could blend, in the way no one suspected she was foreign until she opened her mouth to speak. Sure, they looked like her cousins, but she was quickly realizing how different they were from each other. The most obvious difference was their speech. She spoke with such volume, they spoke so low. She had her southern twang, they had their own distinct accent. And they rarely spoke English. She loved it. She loved laying on her bed, listening to them outside her window. She loved the way they sounded, she loved how animated they were, and she loved the mystery of what they were saying.

But she missed home. Living in Ghana was way out of her element. The sun was unbearable. Nasty animals roamed everywhere. Her feet never felt clean. The clothes she packed were too thick. And the food! She missed her Granny's sweet potato pie, her mama's chicken and dumplings, her auntie's fresh-baked cornbread. She missed grits in the morning and sweet tea in the afternoon. Oh, what she would give for a cheeseburger! A slice of pizza!

Her diet over the last week consisted of chicken, rice, noodles, and okra. It was nice to have chicken. She knew chicken. She wasn't ambitious enough to try any of the local food, nor did she know anything about cooking it. And she was nervous about buying anything from the vendors on the streets near campus.

Elizabeth was a little more ambitious. Her latest trial was fufu, a beloved dish of many Ghanaian people. Fufu was a pasty substance made from a starchy vegetable called cassava. The cassava would be peeled, boiled, and pounded in a mortar with a giant stick. The Ghanaians put their blood, sweat, and tears into preparing this treasured dish, the work of their muscles bringing the cassava to a pulp and then to a dough. And that was what it looked like: a lump of dough. It did not look appetizing to Lauryn at all. Elizabeth had bought some from the Canteen to try. It sat wet and cold and tasteless in a plastic bag. The plastic bag next to it was filled with a lukewarm, spicy soup and a chunk of chicken. Elizabeth scooped some fufu with her fingers, dipped it into the bag of soup, and stuck it in her mouth. She grimaced as she chewed and swallowed.

Kwabena had come by that day, laughing at the expression on Elizabeth's face and Lauryn's adamant refusal. "No, no, no, no," he had said to them. "You want the fufu to sit in the soup. And you are not to chew it."

"What? You don't chew?"

"Yes."

"How can you *not* chew?"

"I don't so much like to masticate."

Lauryn could not get past the idea of not chewing. In fact, she was always chomping on bubble gum. It was rare to catch Lauryn without a slab of gum between her teeth, her jaw rapidly moving up and down. She could have probably bought a house with all the money she spent on bubblegum throughout her life.

Lauryn leaned over the railing and stared blankly into the courtyard, dwelling on everything else she missed about her home. Driving through the city. Sleeping in her big, soft bed. Singing in the church choir. Hanging with her family. She missed her mama and her aunts and her sisters, especially the twins, just four years old. Lauryn loved children, and she was blessed to have a family full of them. They made her want to be a better person, reminding her that there was something more to life than herself, and that something was other people, young and impressionable people who needed hope and love and a good role model.

The air around Lauryn filled with song and she blinked to see a choir in the courtyard. *This early?* Their voices formed a harmony of familiar hymns with an African twist. It was soothing. It was beautiful. Lauryn closed her eyes.

She was startled by the leader of the choir. “Wake up, wake up!” he shouted as the first song came to a close. “Today is the day the Lord has made it! Rejoice and be glad in it! Wake up!” She wondered if the abrupt shouting had woken Elizabeth. She watched as members of choir ran through the halls, pounding on the windows of each dorm and shouting, “Wake up! Wake up!”

When the songs ended and the preaching started, Lauryn went back into her room and climbed up into her bed, still feeling the pangs of homesickness. *If I can do this—if I can do Africa—I can do anything.* She pulled out her bible and turned to the Psalms, reading by the light of the dawn. Psalm 16. “You are my LORD. Apart from you I have no good thing,” she read. “My heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure...” She let the words wash over her, let them whisper in her ear, drawing her into an early morning nap.

Elizabeth woke to a bright and noisy day. She looked at the time. Seven thirty in the morning. She shoved her head under her pillow. Why could she never sleep in past eight? She stumbled out of bed and looked up, surprised to see Lauryn still there, asleep. Lauryn had been absent from the room the last few mornings. Sometimes they wouldn’t see each other until lunch. But that was Lauryn, coming and going as she pleased. Elizabeth wished she wouldn’t. She wanted a partner. She never invited herself to go along, afraid of invading Lauryn’s space. So instead she would go to Bee’s room and hang out with her and her roommates.

Bee’s room was smaller than Elizabeth’s, yet three bunk beds were crammed inside it, six girls to a room. At first her roommates didn’t pay much attention to her; they would give her a greeting and then go about their business. They were young and giggly, often whispering about boys or poking fun at each other. Elizabeth was content sitting in the stuffy room, mashed between two of the girls on their flat mattress, watching them entertain each other. Elizabeth found herself laughing often with them, not because she understood their humor, but because of the enthusiasm and energy they brought to the hot and crowded room.

Elizabeth clung to company. Lauryn, on the other hand, walked the halls of campus as if she didn’t need anybody. She would pop in and out, leaving for hours at a time, coming back stressed out and tired. She napped often and spent many minutes on the phone. Even so, Elizabeth admired her independence. She missed being independent like she felt at home, back where she knew how everything worked and where everything was. She hated asking for help; even though the Ghanaian people were so eager to. She hated the need she had for it, hated being so dependent on everyone around her, hated not being able to do everything on her own.

The last week had passed by slowly. After doing their daily chores, most students spent their days watching movies on their laptops or napping. It was a slow pace of living, and Elizabeth often found herself relaxed and bored. She laughed as she realized how typically “American” she was being, wanting to be busy, wanting every hour filled with activity. She

thought back to all the times throughout her college career when she was so stressed and busy that she hardly slept. She yearned for timelessness then.

Classes would start next week. Scheduling classes had been nothing short of a nuisance. It was a process of very little communication and a lot of waiting. Elizabeth was thankful she at least didn't have to stand in line—or the queue—for hours and hours like the other Ghanaian students did. Bee had spent entire days in queues just to register for classes. She dealt with many other difficulties Elizabeth and Lauryn were able to avoid due to their status as foreign exchange students. Unlike them, Bee had little freedom in choosing her subject of study or her class schedule. But she didn't mind so much, for she saw education as a privilege, and she knew that attending university warranted respect in her community.

The first day of class arrived, accompanied by stress and apprehension. It didn't help that the students at the university still seemed to be unaccustomed to Elizabeth's presence. Boys leaned out of their balconies, shouting down to Elizabeth as she passed by below them. "Obruni!" they shouted.

"I like the way you walk!"

"White lady! White lady!"

Elizabeth ignored their calls, staring straight ahead like a zombie as the sandbags on her ankles threatened to pull her back to her room. "Ebefaa," she said to herself, a Twi phrase Kwabena had taught her. *It's going to be all right.* She tried to focus her attention on getting to class, dragging the sandbags of self-consciousness with every step. Her body moistened with sweat though the tall trees along the sidewalk hid the sun.

She approached a tall, white building of lecture theatres. Room locations were posted on a paper stapled to the wall. Room 10, third floor, right. Elizabeth sifted through the mass of students who were making their way to and from class. Third floor, out of breath, quad muscles bursting, she found the classroom. Hundreds of students were struggling to cram into a room made to fit fifty. Wooden desks and metal folding chairs jammed together, sometimes with three students to a single desk. The room buzzed with conversation, Twi words Elizabeth had yet to learn. She squeezed into the door and stood against the back wall, looking for a seat.

But there were no more desks. There were no more chairs.

Elizabeth noticed people bringing chairs into the room from outside. She followed one girl to an empty classroom and watched as she grabbed a chair and carried it with her. *Oh.* And so Elizabeth did too. By the time she reached her classroom again, students were bursting out the door, the way clothes spilled out of her mother's closet. She stuck herself as close as she could to the open door. "This is Ghana for you!" exclaimed another student as he made a place behind her.

They waited. Ten minutes passed. Twenty minutes passed. Everyone seemed to know each other. Elizabeth sat, twiddling her thumbs, wishing someone would talk to her. Someone nice.

The professor never showed up. Elizabeth stood, annoyed, and went on to find her next class. She wondered how Lauryn was doing. She felt like a lost puppy as she went on her way to another classroom, another swarm of students, another hour of listening to conversations she didn't understand, all the while feeling everyone's eyes on her back.

Another professor that didn't show up.

This is ridiculous, Elizabeth thought to herself. She sat, this time on a stiff-backed bench, and wished her course-mates didn't all know each other so well, wished they would talk to her instead of just looking at her. She wondered what they thought of her, what judgments they were making, what assumptions they had.

Then she felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Hello. What is your name?"

Oh my gosh. Thank you! She was delighted to have someone talk to her and relieved that the someone was a woman, rather than a creepy young boy asking for her phone number. This was the first female to have ever approached Elizabeth. She usually felt ignored by the girls on campus.

The girl introduced herself as Kafui. Another beautiful Ghanaian girl with a beautiful smile and a lovable demeanor. She asked the usual questions of where was she from and why was she here. It was nice not to be asked whether she was married for a change.

"I saw you and I wanted to talk to you, but I was nervous," Kafui said. "And then I thought, why not? What's the risk?"

"Really?" said Elizabeth. "I was wondering why no one would talk to me..."

"They are shy," Kafui explained. "They want to talk to you but they are feeling shy. They will probably ask me later about you."

Elizabeth hadn't considered that.

"Well, I am glad you decided to talk to me."

"Sure," Kafui said. "Maybe we can be friends."

Elizabeth smiled. "I would really like that."

"Cool."

Elizabeth left that class no longer annoyed or stressed. It was a simple conversation, but it made the day lighter. She walked to her next class practically skipping and smiling at every passerby. *They were shy*, she thought to herself. *That's all*.

One more class. One more class then she can walk back to her room and seek refuge in something she had grown to know over the last two weeks.

This time the professor showed up. He was professional and articulate and intimidating, pacing the front of the class as if he owned the room. And yet he was witty, cracking jokes Elizabeth didn't get, leaving her grinning awkwardly as the rest of the class erupted with laughter. He decided that he didn't like having class on Mondays; it didn't work for him, so from now on class would be on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Elizabeth held her breath as he made the announcement, hoping the newly scheduled hours would not conflict with her other classes. They didn't. She breathed.

Elizabeth left class feeling victorious. She had survived an entire school day in an entirely different school system. She had found her classes, sat among her classmates, and even made a friend. She was anxious to get back to the Hall and hear about Lauryn's first day.

SANKOFA



“Return and get it.”

Symbol of the importance of learning from the past.

Lauryn’s professors did not show up her first day. Or her second. Or her third. The first week of classes passed and Lauryn had yet to attend a single lecture. It made her anxious, like being stuck in traffic. She wanted to move forward. She was getting bored.

She was entertained by the tales Elizabeth shared about her lectures. Elizabeth told her about the vigorous note-taking and consequent hand-cramping, the emphasis on memorizing verbatim and the hours spent sitting on hard benches with stiff backs. She told her how the students erupted in laughter every time she spoke, amused by her accent. She shared how important it was to network, to trade phone numbers, and to ask for help. Lauryn was glad that she could prepare herself with Elizabeth’s stories, but she was ready to experience class on her own.

They decided to visit Cape Coast Castle that weekend. It was one among many forts built along the West African coast by European powers to protect their trade of gold and ivory and timber from other Europeans and Africans. Cape Coast Castle was originally built by the Portuguese in 1555 and came into British possession in 1664. By the 18th century, it had become a port for the trading of African slaves. Over a four hundred year period, about seven million African slaves had been shipped across the Atlantic Ocean from these ports.

After the end of the slave trade, Cape Coast Castle sat in poor condition until the 1990’s, disregarded by the local people who were mostly unaware of its significance and history. When plans were made to turn the castle into a hotel, it was the African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans who fought against it. The castle was instead restored and preserved to educate the world and generate revenue for the city.

The taxi dropped them off on the side of the road, and they walked towards the ocean, the sun beating down on them. Lauryn had insisted that Bee join them. “This is your history too,” she told Bee. “It is important for you to know your history.”

It was a strong claim, but Lauryn always spoke the things she strongly felt and she strongly felt that she shared this history with Bee. The castle was where their histories collided, where they united as a single, shared story. She saw history as the key to a deeper understanding of the present, a deeper understanding of herself. She came from a history, everyone did. But not everyone took the time to explore it or learn it or see how they fit within it.

The longer Lauryn was in Ghana, the greater her thirst was for this knowledge. The castle was much more than a tourist attraction; it was symbolic of her connection to the great continent, the link between the American and the African in her identity. Her roots were tied to the castle, wrapped around its bricks, tangled in its story. Her identity as a black woman held a history, and this was it.

They walked inside, pausing near the entrance where a plaque read:

IN EVERLASTING MEMORY
OF THE ANGUISH OF OUR ANCESTORS.
MAY THOSE WHO DIED REST IN PEACE.
MAY THOSE WHO RETURN FIND THEIR ROOTS.
MAY HUMANITY NEVER AGAIN PERPETRATE
SUCH INJUSTICE AGAINST HUMANITY
WE, THE LIVING, VOW TO UPHOLD THIS.

May those who return find their roots, Lauryn read to herself. Her chest felt full, as if it was suddenly aware of the blood pumping through her heart. *May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity.*

They joined a tour group and were lead by a guide through the courtyard to various empty rooms. Their guide told the story of the slaves with conviction and drama and heart. He wasn't regurgitating history like a text book, dull and indifferent; rather, the story seemed to be alive in him, feeding off of every ear that heard it, attempting to awake each listener from a slumber of ignorance. Lauryn made sure she stood at the front of the group; she did not want to miss a word. This was the story of her ancestors, a story that for most of her life was so distant from her, so vague and abstract. In the castle, the past had never been so real.

They entered the dungeons first, male then female. She heard the story from the guide, but she felt the story from the room. Her palm on the cold walls. Her feet on the hard ground. Her goose bumps rising into the musty air. The tour guide and the dungeon worked together to spin numbers and facts into a historical picture. Lauryn saw her ancestral mothers fighting the oppression of the white man, kicking and screaming as they were separated from their families and crammed like cargo into the castle cells. She saw the white man force himself into these women and walk into church afterwards with a clean conscience. She saw identities ripped from African families as they were shipped away without a name, their value deduced to a price tag.

And the story dug into her soul like nails, ghosts of the past breathing down her neck. She shuddered. Pierced her lips. Listened. Saw.

She saw passed the oppression of her people into their resistance, their fight for freedom and survival. European accounts of the slave trade were tainted with the denial of African resistance, focusing instead on the cooperation of various African kings and chiefs. She had learned over and over again about the capture and selling of her people, but rarely about the hundreds of reported incidences of organized rebellion in the forts and ships. She heard stories of success even less often, such as the 1752 account of African captives joining together to kill all but two of the ship's crew, using them to turn the ship back towards the Gold Coast

My people were fighters, she told herself. They may have been slaves, but they didn't go down easy...

Lauryn could feel her shame eroding, the shame that came with descending from slavery, a stigma that had poisoned her ethnic identity. Her history was not just of oppression, but struggle and strength. She was a descendent of survivors, survivors who eventually made a life for themselves in the New World, who spent centuries fighting hate, fear and injustice. Lauryn was inspired by their might, proud to claim these women as her ancestral mothers, thankful that their efforts to make it eventually lead to her birth and life in the United States.

Near the female dungeons was The Door of No Return. Their tour group exited the door to the beach outside, the door that had carried each slave from the hell of the castle to the hell of the ship and eventually to their destiny of another hell. The guide's voice lowered as he described the immense fear each captive must have felt upon exiting these doors, narrating how, even after months in dark and crowded dungeons, the sight of the ocean and the breath of the salty air served as no means of relief. The ship was merely another dungeon, and its only relief was death by starvation, disease, or a suicidal plunge into the sea. Death was the African slave's only exercise of agency.

"But today," the guide exclaimed dramatically, "we shall return!"

The door had been renamed the Door of Return in 1998, symbolic of the ability for Africans from the Diaspora to return to their roots on the African shore. The guide welcomed back any African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans present on the tour. Lauryn walked through the door, back into the castle, beaming in the pinnacle of her homecoming.

Return. Lauryn thought about what an incredible concept it was, the ability to go back to somewhere you once were. Framing the tour as a return insinuated that she had been there before. As an individual, this was her first venture to the African coast; a visit to another country, another culture, another people. Yet as part of a great family, a family of African lineage, a family united under European tyranny, this was indeed a return. She was the first in her family to

do this, and that was who she represented as she visited the homeland, completing the circle. America would always be her home, but Africa would always be her roots.

She had been given the opportunity to go back, a right taken from her ancestors after they were forced out of their homes and shipped across the ocean. She had voluntarily left her own home with the plan to return there, but her ancestors were robbed of that choice.

From there they made their way up to what used to be the Governor's Quarters. Large, open windows allowed the room to fill with soft daylight and a cool breeze. It was a relief compared to the rest of the castle. The implications of this were sad but expected—the best space reserved for the elite. From there they entered the Governor's Store Room, where female slaves were brought to the Governor for sex. The church ironically stood in sight of the Governor's Quarters in the middle of the courtyard, its very foundations the dungeon walls.

Their tour ended in the gift shop. The commercialism of the castle was a mockery of what it had always been: a marketplace. Its first trade was gold, then human beings. Now it sold clothing and bags and jewelry and key chains. It sold education and history, sold the experience of a homecoming for Diasporan Africans. It was not merely a historical landmark, but a tourist attraction, a tool to build up the economy through foreign visitors.

“Come, come!” the shop owners urged, hoping to make money off the tourists.

Lauryn didn't like the title of the tourist. She felt like she was more than a tourist. She was a student. She was a resident. She was no tourist.

But she loved shopping. It was the break she needed from the last hour she spent mentally living out the gory details of the slave trade. To take her mind's focus from slavery to hand-crafted jewelry was like coming up for air after a deep sea dive. She had spent the afternoon digging through the murky sea bottom, chest pressed by the weight of the water, limbs twisted in its weeds. It was important to spend time down in the grimy depths of the past, exploring the historical muck and intimately learning the cold and slimy foundation of European oppression. But Lauryn wasn't going to spend her life in it. She believed in moving forward, in looking ahead, in breathing in the clean air of life and hope and opportunity. She saw too many people stuck in their own oppression, obsessively wallowing in their circumstances, paralyzed by their own attitudes, their heads so deep in the muck that they forgot about the air above them.

Instead, Lauryn would stand on the muck. She would feel the grime between her toes and never forget the past she came from. She would walk on the muck, head above water, moving forward and living out her life as best as she could. That was the call she received from her ancestral mothers. Remember. Accept. Move forward. Live this life full of gratitude and passion and love.

They exited the castle then, hurrying past a line of male vendors standing outside, who shouted at them to come over and look at the jewelry, look at the paintings, come and look. But they kept going, heading towards the beach, leaving behind echoes of “Beautiful lady! Come! Come!”

They stood on the beach for a while, Bee stepping into the ocean tide, laughing as she ran from the waves. Elizabeth laughed along, jumping into the water and taking pictures. Bee posed for the camera, sticking her hands on her hips and tossing her eyes fiercely at the camera lens. Little boys and little girls swarmed Elizabeth, wanting their pictures taken, wanting money, wanting to talk to the white lady. Lauryn watched as Elizabeth wrestled within herself, wanting to give attention to the children but also wanting to simply be a young girl hanging out on the beach with her friends.

Lauryn laid her jean jacket onto the sand and sat down. The shore was littered with trash, and the familiar stench of garbage and urine stirred her stomach. The drumming from town and the fishermen shouting on the shore came together into a single song. Bee danced, Elizabeth laughed, and Lauryn rested, her thoughts drifting with the waves.

Slavery had existed long before the Atlantic Slave Trade, but it was the 16th century Europeans who industrialized it, turning people into commodities, clearly defining a black and white dichotomy of property versus ownership, slave versus master, dehumanized versus privileged. This new form of chattel slavery perpetuated an ideology of racial inferiority that plagues American history and continues to thrive as the underbelly of racism. She lived in a nation that claimed to be colorblind, that denied the presence of racism in its system. If the U.S. was so colorblind, why were its prisons and its most impoverished schools so full of color? Why was media telling women that beauty was lighter skin and straighter hair, smaller noses and thinner thighs? Racism never died, it had only evolved, from the whipped backs of her ancestors to the Jim Crow laws of her grandmother’s generation to the current reality of prejudice and white advantage.

Many claim not to be racist because they define racism by hate, by blatant and insulting comments, by a denial of rights. Racism often exists in people without their awareness. It is a system of advantage, the benefiting of one race over another. It is white privilege, even when its participants are oblivious to it. It is the weaving of poverty and race so tightly that one issue cannot be talked about without the other. It is the minority in the general population becoming a majority in prisons.

Many claim not to be prejudice too, not realizing that prejudice is not limited to hate, though it serves as a fuel for it. Prejudice is a preconceived notion, a false judgment, a projection of negative stereotypes. It manifests itself in jokes and language. It is the “I’m not racist, but-” disclaimer. It is the lack of surprise when a black man gets arrested, or a Latino girl gets

pregnant. It is the expectation that most African Americans are thugs, and black neighborhoods are full of gangs and guns.

From the shoreline the castle looked like nothing more than a large, old building. Lauryn could not shake the impact of the events that happened within its walls centuries ago, its significance not only to her identity as an African American, but to her current experience as a racial minority in the United States. She could see history's hand in building the boxes her society put her in, labels that determined who she was and how she should be treated. She often hated the boxes, how often they represented points of segregation, using differences to justify discrimination or fuel fear. She knew her boxes well. Woman. Christian. Student. Black.

Black.

A single word. A category.

A simplification of ethnicity. A disregard of family history.

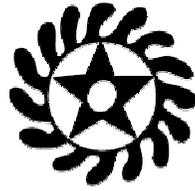
A depiction of the Other throughout the world.

A color.

Her skin wasn't even black. Dark brown. But who wants to be called "dark brown?" Who wants to be referred to by the tone of their skin? As if there was nothing more to her than that?

Identity had so many facets, but Black encompassed all the others. In the U.S. it was her primary label, written in big block letters with her other identifiers in fine print.

SESA WO SUBAN



“Change your character.”

Symbol of life transformation.

September passed, and then October. As the air in the United States grew chillier, the sun in Ghana shone brighter. Elizabeth reminisced over cinnamon donuts and apple cider as she licked pineapple juice off her sticky fingers. She had missed autumn this year. But as she bit off another mouthful of fresh pineapple she realized that there were worse things.

Elizabeth had finally nailed down the routine she craved. Running at sunrise. Coffee and reading in the morning. Class in the early afternoon. Laundry on Mondays. Market on Wednesdays. She was learning how to cook, often preparing meals for Lauryn and herself, proudly inviting her Ghanaian friends over for dinner. Sometimes she and Lauryn would venture off to town together to shop or go to the beach or watch the dance rehearsals from the street.

Elizabeth’s favorite thing to do was visit the market. Being among the women in the market never failed to relieve her stress or turn around a bad day. Their excitement towards her was exhilarating. “Hey!” they would shout when they saw her coming, broad smiles on their faces. “Eh te sen?” How are you?

“Boko!” Elizabeth had learned to respond. I’m cool.

The woman who sold her fruit was trying to teach her Twi. She told her the names of each fruit she sold and taught her a new phrase every time Elizabeth visited. Elizabeth could see the appreciation in the faces of the Ghanaians when she spoke in Twi. “Hey!” their voices rang each time Elizabeth surprised them with a new phrase. “You’ve done very well!” they would tell her. It was a great compliment, almost as great as their smiles.

Yet over two months had passed and she had rarely traveled outside the city. All the time she spent within the ten mile radius was making her feel claustrophobic. *I am in Africa for goodness sake.* How many times had she thought that before? She wished she could just hop into a taxi, explore another city, swim in the ocean, and be back by nightfall safe and sound and

rejuvenated. But she was trapped. She was trapped by her lack of knowledge of correct routes and dangerous areas. She was trapped by her inability to speak fluent Twi and her obvious status of a foreigner. But mostly, she was trapped in what had become familiar, restricted by the comfort of knowing.

A week ago she felt like she reached her breaking point. Arriving home sweaty and tired after class, she collapsed onto the bed and began to cry. She didn't even know why she was crying. Was she just tired? Was she annoyed?

"You ok?" Lauryn asked her sincerely.

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. "I don't know."

A few minutes passed without words, only Elizabeth's sniffing.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Elizabeth had flipped over onto her back. She took a great breathe, exhaling slowly.

"Well..." she looked over at Lauryn, saw the concern on her face, and realized that she had been given an invitation to really talk, to speak her mind unfiltered. So she did. She talked about how trapped she felt, how bored she was of being in the room but how often she was driven there to escape the attention she attracted. She talked about how she cringed every time she heard boys shouting at her from their balconies, how she would imagine that she had no ears. She talked about how homesick it made her, how she missed the option of blending in.

"I thought... I thought by this point of the trip I would be used to this," Elizabeth said. "I thought I would be used to being white here. I have adjusted to so much—I have fallen in love with so much—but I wonder if I am ever going to adjust to this whole white minority thing. I just keep waiting for the day, the day that it finally feels normal, the day that I am comfortable standing out, the day that I can laugh off the assumptions people make about me instead of getting so damn offended."

She sat up, throwing her arms into the air as she spoke.

"And like, I can't even go to the beach and relax! I can't even read a book by the ocean without being bombarded by children asking me for money. I can't take a walk along the shore without being approached by strange men, asking for my number, asking me if I am married... Sometimes I just want everyone to leave me alone, and I feel so guilty about it when I do..."

"I just... I want to go places, and I want to know what I am doing and where I am going! I want to go to the beach and not be bothered! I want to go out and dance without worrying about creepy men! I want to walk places without feeling everyone's eyes on me! I want to sing at church and know the words!"

Elizabeth sighed.

“I don’t know, maybe I am being stupid...”

“Nah, Liz, you’re not stupid,” Lauryn said, shifting herself so that she could look directly at Elizabeth. “Those are real feelings. You just got to be patient with yourself.

“The thing of it is, Liz, every time we step out of our comfort zone, it’s gonna be stressful. But, we just gotta go ahead and do it. Otherwise we ain’t gonna move forward at all. Sometimes you just got to take a deep breath and take the jump, take the risk. Sometimes you gotta do things before you’re ready. Experience is the best teacher. Isn’t that why you are here? You can read all you want about Ghana, you can read all you want about the culture of the village and the experience of town. But to actually live it? Mmmhmmm. That’s what you are doing. Be proud of yourself! Celebrate each accomplishment, as small as it may be. Celebrate every Twi word you learn, every conversation you have, every person you meet. Celebrate your progress in every little adjustment. But be patient with yourself, Liz. It’s ok. It’s ok to not know it all.”

Just then, Bee came into their room and invited them on a trip with her program to Kumasi. The trip would be Saturday, a day trip to the palace where the Ashanti kings have lived. Elizabeth smiled. A group trip! A palace tour! A different city! She looked at Lauryn.

“Let’s do it.”

So Elizabeth and Lauryn each purchased a ticket from Bee’s class representative who had helped put the trip together. Elizabeth looked forward to the trip with great anticipation. Now she just had to get through one more week of class, one more week of restlessness, one more week of routine until she was on that bus to Kumasi.

Elizabeth’s alarm went off at five in the morning. Eyelids like lead, she stumbled out of bed and began to boil water for coffee. She bathed and dressed in the cold, morning air, the shock of the cool water waking her up as the dark silence threatened to lure her back to sleep.

The bus was arriving at 5:30. “Pronto,” the trip leader had said. Elizabeth stepped over Lauryn, who had moved her mattress from the top bunk to the floor weeks earlier. Lauryn hadn’t woken up yet; she was like a sleeping bear with a Do Not Disturb sign posted next to her. Elizabeth procrastinated as long as she could, willing Lauryn to wake on her own.

5:15. Still asleep.

She tapped Lauryn’s shoulder and waited. Elizabeth felt mute in the morning, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth, the energy responsible for her voice box absent. She was going to avoid speaking if she could.

Lauryn didn't respond to Elizabeth's taps. She sighed and forced her vocal cords to wake up along with the rest of her. "Lauryn," her voice cracked. "Lauryn, the bus will be here in fifteen minutes..."

Half-asleep, Lauryn sat up, an angry glare fixed on her face. Elizabeth smiled apologetically, sat down in the chair with coffee in hand and waited for Lauryn to get ready to go.

They made their way to Bee's room where Bee and her five roommates were just waking up. Elizabeth glanced at her watch and panicked. *What do you mean you aren't ready? The bus is going to be here any minute!*

At 5:40, eight girls sprinted down the steps of their Hall and ran over to the parking lot where the bus was supposed to pick them up. Five people stood there, huddled together, but no bus.

Elizabeth sat on the curb, dwelling on the precious minutes of sleep she missed. Her tongue welded back to the roof of her mouth as she listened to Bee and the girls chatting away. Lauryn was sitting next to her, silent as well. The angry glare was beginning to fade off her face, but the frustration of waiting held it there.

The sky pinkened and the crowd of students grew and grew. It was 6:10 when the first bus arrived. Students swarmed at its door, filling the bus instantly. Elizabeth continued to sit on the curb, waiting for the next bus.

At 6:30 the second bus arrived. Elizabeth realized there was not going to be enough room for the rest of the group. Lauryn must have realized it too because she grabbed Elizabeth by the arm. "Come on."

Lauryn lead them into a single file line at the door of the second bus. The other students began to crowd at the door. Lauryn's eyes flared. "Get to the back of the line!" Someone shoved their body between her and Bee. "Excuse me?" Her outbursts were only interrupted by more and more bodies as a large mob of students swallowed up their line. "Y'all are acting like children!" Lauryn shouted as she tried fervently to re-establish her place near the door.

Elizabeth had allowed herself to be weeded out of line to the outside of the group. She stared incredulously at the unstructured behavior, the shoving back and forth, the zealous attempts to stand at the bus' door. She wasn't sure how to respond except to stand back, get out, and watch in a paralyzed silence. To assert herself in the situation would send a message that she thought she was better, that she thought she deserved more. She found Bee and grabbed onto her hand, keeping her eyes on Lauryn.

"That's it!" Lauryn shouted, exasperated. She turned her back to the bus and began to

make her way out of the crowd. “It’s not worth it,” she muttered to herself as she pushed through the masses. “Y’all acting like you in preschool or something!” she shouted again once she reached the outside.

No longer sandwiched between bodies, Lauryn paced back and forth, shaking her head and muttering to herself. Elizabeth watched her, a ticking bomb. Her impulse was to comfort Lauryn somehow, put her arm around her shoulders, stick a band-aid on her frustration. But Elizabeth knew better; she had learned over months of sharing a room with Lauryn that she just needed to process the situation and she would calm down on her own. She had spent many hours, silent and patient, listening to Lauryn animatedly narrate her aggravation. Elizabeth played the role of the sympathetic ear, feeling helpless as she searched her mind for the advice and consolation Lauryn always gave her when she was upset.

One of the trip leaders approached Lauryn then, and Elizabeth could hear him apologizing to her. He asked how many were in her group. “Eight.”

He nodded. “Come with me.”

“Come on,” Lauryn said, grabbing Bee’s arm, leading a chain of eight girls through the crowd. Another trip leader stood at the doorway, using his body as a barricade. He allowed Lauryn onto the bus, fighting off the other students who tried to force their way in behind her. One by one, arms stretched and hands clasped, Lauryn pulled the remaining girls onto the bus.

Inside, Elizabeth breathed in the composure of this new crowd, sitting silently in their seats. She sat between two of Bee’s roommates, secure but tired, and looked out the window at the students yelling angrily outside. Her eyes fell on a particular boy, fists clenched at his side, mouth open in fury, eyebrows deeply furrowed.

Then Elizabeth heard it.

“White!”

Her ears picked the word out of the mass of noise and she tuned into the voice that carried it, singling it out above the rest.

“Is it because she’s white?!”

The words hit her, a blow to her chest, the impact of a truck hitting a wall, the shock of a glass plate hitting the floor. Her heart began beating furiously, threatening to break through her chest. Elizabeth sat there, eyes wide and body stiff, overwhelmed by the commotion outside the bus, stung by a single word.

White.

“Don’t listen to them.” Grace, one of the girls, was stunned by the tears spilling down

Elizabeth's face. "Don't mind them," she whispered urgently. But how could she ignore the tsunami of voices washing over her, roaring in her ears? Even with Grace's pleading, Elizabeth couldn't stop the tears, hot and wet, soaking into her shirt collar.

White.

Elizabeth felt targeted by the word, defined by its historical baggage. It was a heavy but familiar load. It was a load she felt every time she interacted with someone of another race, a load she carried shamefully on her back as if she represented every awful thing any white person had ever done. It was the same load she felt when they toured Cape Coast Castle. All she could think throughout the tour was how her European ancestors built those castles, colonized and enslaved those people, and benefitted from their suffering. Her connection to the castle filled her with shame, discomfort and anger.

She wished the past wasn't so permanent. She wished people weren't so cruel.

Elizabeth wondered about her family centuries ago, who they were and what role they played in the whole mess. Were they directly involved with the trade? Did they put chains on African arms and cage them up like cattle? Were they slave owners? Did they whip their backs and take away their names? Were they among the few who fought for African freedom, who recognized the inhumanity of the trade? Or did they sit back in apathy, enjoying the fruits of forced labor?

Elizabeth had never given much thought to ancestral family before. She knew she had British heritage, as well as French, Irish, German, and Scottish. A European mutt with no intimate connection to any European country or any of their histories.

Likewise, she didn't give much thought to her ethnicity. She knew to check the Caucasian and Non-Hispanic boxes, but she never felt defined by them. It was just another box to check. She knew that she was an American of mixed European descent, but she never saw this as very significant. Sure, it was part of who she was, but it was also part of everyone else in her community. She had grown up seeing the world as white; white was normative and ethnic was everyone else.

Elizabeth looked at her hands as if seeing them for the first time. Her slender fingers, her milky skin. The blond hairs on her arms, the freckle by her thumb. She thought of the stories she had heard of the first time people saw white men, how they thought they were living dead, ghosts, cannibalistic monsters. She stared at her whiteness, the symbol of innocence and purity, tainted with its association of arrogance, hate and judgment.

And sitting on the bus as many Ghanaian students stood angrily outside, Elizabeth felt like a living representation of white privilege. It was as if she was the only one on the bus now, the only one they were looking at, the only one painted as the enemy in that moment. She wanted

to explain herself, defend the image of her that her Ghanaian peers were receiving. But instead, she wept. She wept about the past she never saw, the history she never chose. She wept over the ugliness of hatred and judgment that seemed innate in people, the injustice and unfairness that seemed to reign in the world. She wept over the burden of being different and the pressure to prove herself as a white person.

What was she trying to prove? That she didn't think she was better than everyone because she was white? That she didn't think she was from a superior race? It was the reason she cringed every time she heard Ghanaians say they loved the whites. "Why?" she wanted to challenge them. She didn't understand how, with a history of exploitation and white supremacist ideology, they could still "love the whites." "Love your people!" she wanted to plead, in fear that the Ghanaians' love of her represented a degradation of themselves. She fought against this esteem of white women, even subconsciously romanticizing African women, painting them to be exotic, breathtaking, a new breed of women that left Elizabeth feeling like less of a woman in comparison. Her own self-degradation numbed the guilt.

It was also the reason she reacted with such hostility to every man who asked for her phone number or her hand in marriage. She found herself defensive of African women every time a Ghanaian man told her he dreamed of marrying a white lady. *Is it because he sees white women as more beautiful? Is it because he sees white women as rich? Is it because he thinks marrying a foreign woman will get him to the U.S. or Europe?*

She recalled her first marriage proposal, three weeks ago, a blind man sitting outside her class. A security guard had beckoned her over, introduced her to the man and walked away chuckling to himself.

So Charles the Blind Man asked Elizabeth to marry him without knowing anything about her except that she was a white, American woman. *This is ridiculous*, Elizabeth thought to herself. *I could be a total bitch and he doesn't even care!*

"Why does it matter to you that I am white when you can't even see me?" Elizabeth had asked him after she refused his proposal.

"Because," he told her, "White women are more humane."

Elizabeth was stunned by his response. White women are more humane? "What does that mean?" she asked, feeling her defenses rise on behalf of African women.

"White women," he explained to her, "do not cheat on their husbands. And they have more sympathy for the handicapped."

Quite an assumption to make about me based on my skin color. Does it have any merit? Is it a cultural difference between the U.S. and Ghana? But the assumption wasn't based on my home culture, it was based on my racial status...

Elizabeth leaned toward him and whispered sternly. “Look. This is not how you find a wife. And just because I am white it does not mean I am those things.”

Elizabeth had become very sensitive to the assumptions made about her. She didn’t want people to see her as “white lady” or “American woman.” *There is more to me than that. I am Elizabeth!* Even if she was liked, she wanted to be liked because of who she was—because she was Elizabeth—not because of her skin color or her nationality. *Is anyone here ever going to see past my whiteness?*

Then she wondered, *how many times have I looked at someone and only seen that they are black, defining them by that, failing to look beyond it?* She wondered how often Lauryn became frustrated with the very thing that was crushing her.

So you are the minority for once in your life, Elizabeth began coaching herself. *Yeah, it’s hard. Sometimes you are going to get laughed at by a stranger or shouted at by a man or stared at by a crowd. So what? Live it out. Deal with it. Some people in this world have to deal with it all the time and they don’t have a choice. You can do it for a couple months out of your life.*

Elizabeth started to calm down, her tears ceasing, her face drying. Bee came up from behind her, wrapped her arms around her neck in a hug. “You are the sugar in my tea!” she exclaimed. “The only cockroach in my cupboard!” Elizabeth let out a giggle, encouraging Bee further. “You are the only gecko on my wall! The only monkey in my zoo! You are finer than my mother, lovelier than my father!” Elizabeth’s smile grew. Bee knew those were her favorite.

The third and final bus, a tro-tro this time, arrived at 7:30. Tro-tros were large, fifteen-passenger vans usually filled high above capacity and were commonly used to travel long distances for a low price. Apparently they had sold too many tickets without planning for the appropriate amount of transportation. The third tro-tro filled with the remainder of the group and they set off for Kumasi.

Four hours. Four hours pressed between two of her Ghanaian friends, their sweaty arms sticking to each other, her butt fused to her seat. It was a familiar cramming, akin to what Elizabeth endured in her classes and what her hall mates endured in their dorm rooms. Her eyes hurt and her muscles cramped and she yearned for sleep to relieve her, to accelerate the passing of time, to help her forget the pain in her tailbone and the strain on her back. Her head bobbed up and down with nowhere to rest it, her body whipped back and forth as the bus dodged potholes, and her butt slammed down into the seat with every speed bump. The engine’s rumble and rushing wind drowned out her thoughts and kept her in uncomfortable consciousness.

Three more hours. She gazed out the window at a scene of bold colors, the green grass and red dirt she noticed so strongly the day she arrived. The sky was blue and bright, and the sunlight made everything look so much more alive. Once in a while they would pass through small villages. The bus would slow down, even stop, and vendors would swarm, baskets of

FanIce and groundnuts on their heads. Lauryn bought some FanIce, sucking the sweet, cold vanilla out of the corner she bit off the plastic wrapper. Elizabeth bought some bread, smiling as she thought of the first time she ate it, remembering Kwabena's kindness.

Two more hours. The bus stopped at a rest stop so the passengers could use the bathroom. Elizabeth was relieved to unglue herself from her seat and stretch out her legs. She saw Lauryn on her way out of the bathroom and gave her a weak smile. Lauryn embraced her. She hugged her hard and strong, arms of love and compassion tightening around her back. She held Elizabeth there for a while, not even knowing what was wrong, just knowing that Elizabeth needed a hug in that moment. Elizabeth sunk into Lauryn's embrace and rested in her companionship.

Lauryn and Elizabeth headed back to the bus to rejoin Bee and the girls and continue on to Kumasi. But as they reached the door, they saw the bus was already full. Their seats had been taken. Lauryn turned to Elizabeth and shrugged, and they began heading for the tro-tro instead.

Suddenly one of the boys on the bus leaned his body out the window, and yelled down to Lauryn and Elizabeth.

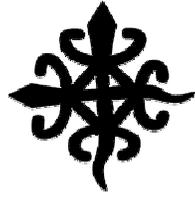
“No Obrunis on this bus!”

The girls stopped abruptly. *Did I hear that correctly?* One look at Lauryn's face told her she did. Lauryn spun around, eyes wide in fury, and began shouting back at the boy, telling him he had low self-esteem, letting him know how ignorant he was. Elizabeth watched the scene as if she was in a dream, everything fast and blurred as she stood cemented in place.

They climbed into the back of the tro-tro, separated from their Ghanaian friends for the rest of the drive. Elizabeth could see the anger coursing through Lauryn's veins. She wasn't sure if Lauryn was insulted by the nature of the act alone or the possibility that she had been included in the Obruni category.

They rode the rest of the way in silence, except for Lauryn's occasional utterance of “Ignorant!” She stared at her knees as Elizabeth stared out the window, forgetting about the last few hours as she watched Africa float by.

FUNTUNFUNEFU-DENKYEMFUNEFU



“Siamese Crocodiles.”

*Symbol of democracy and unity;
These crocodiles share one stomach, yet they fight over food.*

Once in Kumasi, Elizabeth and Lauryn reunited with Bee and the rest of their friends as they set out with the group towards the palace. Half the group was told to wait for the next tour due to their size and the trip leader urged the students to exercise patience. The eight girls sat on the cement, tired and stressed, engrossed in the negative air.

After a few minutes, Lauryn’s face softened. “I have settled it in my heart,” she said, turning towards the girls, “that I am going to enjoy this day with y’all. Whatever we do or whatever we don’t do, I am going to enjoy being together.”

They went for a short walk as they waited for the next tour. The girls strolled through the town, sometimes stopping to look at jewelry or buy snacks from the vendors. Lauryn was looking at pineapple when a woman selling fruit began to speak feverishly in Twi. Lauryn responded with a blank stare. Bee began laughing. “She is speaking Twi. She thinks you are Ghanaian.” Lauryn was struck by the ability she had, in that moment, to pass as Ghanaian, to be seen as one of them.

Kumasi was a breath of fresh air. Elizabeth was surprised by how comfortable and secure she felt there. There was something calm about the city, something about the people that conveyed friendliness. The shops were more congested but not as rough or intimidating. People were even waiting in lines!

Lauryn leaned over to Elizabeth and whispered, “We should come back here again sometime.”

The street was lined with beggars, but not a single beggar approached Elizabeth. They sat silent and miserable, passed by hoards of people as if they were a tree planted by the sidewalk or a fence around a building. Elizabeth walked by too, appreciating the ability to walk without being bothered. And yet, she was bothered by their presence, bothered by how aware she was of how little she acknowledged them, as if they weren't people at all. Her conscience fired alarms, sirens telling her she had so much to give as she gave nothing. She thought about all the efforts she had seen throughout her life to help Africa, to fight AIDS, to donate money, to send old clothes and shoes through charity organizations. And there she was, face to face with the Ghanaian homeless, turning away from those who were too proud to ask for the help they needed, breathing in the freedom of walking down the street without harassment rather than honoring it.

They made their way back to the palace just in time for their tour. Manhyia Palace was the home of the past three Ashanti kings, but the current king turned it into a museum and settled in another palace behind it. Manhyai Palace was actually a gift to Prempeh I, but he refused to move there until it was paid for. He would accept no favors from the British.

The tour began with a documentary and then they were lead through the palace by a trained guide. Each room was filled with artifacts, furniture, pictures, and live-like sculptures of the past kings and the Queen Mothers. Lauryn jumped every time she walked into a new room, never expecting the painted eyes of a past Asantehene to stare back at her.

The Ashanti kingdom began in the 18th century by King Osei Tutu. The Ashanti dominion began in the forested region of southern Ghana where Okomfo Anokye, the king's priest, had planted two trees. He had predicted that one tree would live and another would die, and the living tree would be the capital of the Ashanti. That is where Kumasi, which means "the tree lived," derives its name.

The Ashanti people quickly became the largest ethnic group in modern day Ghana. At the center of their empire is the Golden Stool, which was believed to have descended from heaven. Though there are many replicas of the Golden Stool, but the real stool is kept at the Manhyia Palace, though only its photograph is displayed. The Stool is brought out only on special occasions and continues to be recognized with reverence. Not even the king is allowed to sit on it and it is never allowed to touch the ground.

The conflict between the Ashanti people and the British stretches back to 1760 when the Ashanti people became very wealthy in gold. Their invasion in 1874 marked the first defeat of the Ashanti empire, causing disunity among their people. The Berlin Conference was held a decade later, a one year period from 1884-1885 in which Europeans met together and partitioned the continent, dividing the map of Africa among them as if it was pie. Britain took the wealthiest areas, including the Gold Coast.

Prempeh I was instilled during this time as the Asantehene, or Ashanti king. He was a pacifist, seeking diplomacy rather than war. He even tried to meet with the Queen of England, who refused to see him. The British troops arrested Prempeh I and his family, making them kneel down and kiss the boots of the white general. They were sent into exile to the Seychelles Islands.

The Queen Mother, Yaa Asantewa, refused to kiss the General's boots. In the year 1900 she took charge of the resistance movement after the British governor, Sir Frederick Hodgson, demanded they surrender the Golden Stool. It took 2,000 British soldiers to eventually capture and exile her to the Seychelles Islands, where she died in 1921. Meanwhile, the British had been given a fake stool, and had gone decades without realizing so.

Lauryn looked into the face of the photograph of Yaa Asantewa displayed in the palace. She had envisioned a large, plump woman, an embodiment strength and power, but a tiny woman in the photo stared back. Though seemingly frail, her stern face exhibited the might of a hundred kings, the power of her stare possessing her gift of authority and passion for her people.

As Lauryn learned the history of the Ashanti people, she wished had an African history she could claim, a country and tribe of origin. Sure, her roots were African, but Africa was such a vast continent of many diverse countries and groups, each with their own culture, their own story, their own legacy. The Ghanaian people confidently declared their African heritage. They knew the history of their people, the life of the tree they budded from.

Where do I come from?

Their tribes survived colonialism, though its impact was ever present. It created the borders that continue to define Ghana, forced economic dependence on Europe, implemented a capitalist system, and began the westernization of their culture. It also brought about nationalism, and pride in one's tribe evolving into pride in one's nation. Lauryn could see that they loved their country. They were proud to be Ghanaian. They were proud to be African.

As they exited the palace at the end of their tour, one of the students came up next to Lauryn. "Good afternoon," he said to her as they walked through the palace courtyard, littered with peacocks.

"Good afternoon," she responded.

"What part of Nigeria are you from?"

Lauryn smiled, amused by the inquiry.

"Oh, I'm not from Nigeria. I'm from the United States."

"Oh!" he exclaimed.

She mused over the way some of the local people mistook her to be African, their surprised faces when they learned she was from the U.S.

Where do I come from?

The question came more urgently than it had before, ringing in her head. *Where do I come from? Ghana? Nigeria? Cameroon?* She couldn't escape the question; even when it wasn't in her head, it came from those around her.

She didn't come to Ghana to discover her heritage or retrace her lineage, but being there was pulling the desire out of her, as if it lived within her all her life, hibernating, awakened now by a closer contact with the past. There was something about being in Africa where her family's story originally began. There was something about being among Ghanaians who knew where they came from.

Where do I come from?

And there was something else. There was the way some Ghanaians treated her, making it clear that she wasn't African enough. "You are not African American," James had told her the first week she was there. "You are Black American." African American. Black American. She knew both of those labels well. But in Ghana they meant two different things; two separate categories distinguished by the level of connection deemed appropriate to the African people.

This perception of her, shared by many Ghanaians, stirred in her a desire to assert her African roots. She wanted to be able to tell them, yes, she is African, and this is the tribe she is from, and this is their history. Her history. But until she could give specifics, she had no authentic claim to African ancestry, except for how she looked.

In the U.S. she was labeled as too African. In Ghana she wasn't African enough. Was there any place in this world that would claim her, take her with pride? Did a land exist that would look upon her like a proud father and a loving mother, that would open its arms to her, reassure that she belonged there?

Where do I come from?

She was stuck in a state of between, wedged between her heritage and her home. Her identity lie in the Middle Passage, wandering between America and Africa, homeless just as her ancestors were after they were ripped from her villages.

Even the Africans didn't know what to do with her. Some saw her as a sister, welcoming her home. Some saw her as a privileged American, an Obruni. Sometimes they called her African American, and sometimes she was Black American. The inconsistency was confusing, and it contributed to the betweenness she felt. It was a strange position to be, the majority and minority at the same time, to hear "hey, Black sister!" within the same hour as "Obruni!"

Hey Black Sister. A vision of unity, bringing all the African people together as branches of the same tree, its thick trunk solid and established, its strong roots digging deep into the earth.

Obruni. An expression of division, “foreigner” as the saw severing each branch, “stranger” the hand tossing them to the ground, where they lie staring up at the scarred, naked trunk, eyes on their detachment.

This tug of war between unity and division permeated African history. Even before colonization, tribes throughout the continent played the game, creating rivalries and waging wars. When European powers invaded, Africans were unified in a shared struggle yet divided by the colonizing efforts. The creation of borders during the Berlin Conference sliced through entire ethnic groups without any regard to its affect on the African people. These borders were enforced by military action. The colonizers even pitted tribes against each other, knowing that a people divided against itself could not stand.

The slave trade was arguably the greatest point of division among the African people as millions over centuries were literally kidnapped from their homes and shipped to other parts of the world. The arrival of Lauryn’s ancestors in the U.S. was where her history diverged from the Ghanaians. As 19th and 20th century Ghanaians battled the colonization of their people, Lauryn’s ancestors battled another aspect of European oppression on another land.

The New World received its first African slaves in 1619 who worked as indentured servants with the ability to purchase their freedom and have slaves themselves. It was in 1705 when slavery became institutionalized. Slaves could no longer purchase their freedom and free African Americans lost many of their rights. Heavy importation of slaves continued, and by 1775 Africans were one of the largest ethnic groups on the land, second only to the English. Enslavement continued after the abolition of the trade in the U.S. in 1808. The African American population continued to grow as the women were forced to give birth to children to serve as future generations of slaves.

And so slavery in the United States reconstructed the ethnic identity of millions of Africans. A new community of people born of struggle. A new division of Africa formed as a result of European dominion.

By the late 19th century, African Americans were freed from institutionalized slavery, but continued to be slaves to discrimination and violence, chained by prejudice and hatred. When Ghana became the first African country to gain independence from colonial rule in 1957, the Civil Rights Movement was taking off in the U.S. The news of Ghana’s independence it gave African Americans hope in their own battle against racial oppression.

Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president, invited all Africans from the Diaspora to join Ghanaians in rebuilding their country. Hoards of African Americans made the journey, viewing it as an opportunity to escape the animosity in the states and claim Ghana as their real home. It

was their chance to fight for freedom on an international level and to be involved in the movement of Africans worldwide.

“There is a new African in the world,” Nkrumah had proclaimed from the Old Polo Grounds in Accra. “A free, independent people.”

And so Nkrumah continued to emphasize that Ghana’s independence was not just about their country, but a celebration, an inspiration, a revival of Africans all over the world.

But efforts to establish a unified African people were met with opposition by media, politics, and the misconceptions Ghanaians and African Americans had of each other. African Americans romanticized Ghana as a land of black power and pride and their high expectations of a warm welcome and a moving reunion were often met with disappointment. Their idealism was replaced with a misconception that Ghanaians thought they were better than them. The U.S. press advertised hostility between Ghanaians and African Americans, infusing the media with propaganda that African Americans were not welcome there.

Ghanaians held their own misconceptions of African Americans. They idealized the U.S. as a place of wealth, viewing African Americans as privileged, coming into Ghana with superiority complexes of their own. They also viewed their suffering as minimal compared to the current economic suffering of the Ghanaian people. Julian Mayfield, an African American activist exiled to Ghana, fought against this idea of America by publishing criticisms and graphic images of racist incidences in the U.S.

Ghanaian and African American relations were especially strained when the first of multiple assassination attempts on Nkrumah occurred August of 1962. His main suspicion was that the assassination attempt was executed by the U.S. CIA. Ghanaian perception of African Americans was then tainted with suspicion. Further assassination attempts and acts of violence only worsened the situation.

History’s contribution was never small. Africans in America. African Americans in Africa. Centuries of racism and misconceptions, media and politics. She wore it like a stamp on her skin that told the people who she was and what she was like before she could ever open her mouth.

A sister yet a stranger.

Together yet apart.

Different branches of the same tree.

NKONSONKONSON



"Chain link."

Symbol of unity.

The trip included a dinner of kenke and fish, neither of which looked appetizing to Elizabeth and Lauryn. They separated from the group and found a Canteen where they split a meal of chicken, yam, and palaver sauce.

“So, are you ok now?” Lauryn asked, referring to Elizabeth’s episode that morning.

“I think so,” said Elizabeth as she stared at the plate, circling the sauce with her yam. “I’ve had a hard time shaking off what that one guy said.”

“What guy?”

“You know. That guy. The one who shouted, ‘Is it because she’s white?’ right after we got onto the bus.”

“Oh! Nah, Liz, I totally missed that.”

“Oh. Yeah, well, when he said that, I don’t know, in that moment I felt this heavy burden, It was like *I* was the one who colonized Africa, like *I* was the one who enslaved their people.

“But I never did any of those things, and I am so sick of carrying around the guilt as if I did. I am so sick of feeling like I have to show everyone here that I am not that person. I am stuck in this label, this label of wealth and privilege and arrogance and hatred—”

“Liz...” Lauryn paused for a moment. “Liz, you don’t have to prove anything to them. You don’t have to prove anything. You just, you gotta do you.

“Yes I do! Unless I do, how is anyone going to know that not all white people are like that?”

“Look. It is what it is. Colonialism happened. Slavery happened. And it was sad. But you got to accept it and move on, Liz. The faster you can accept it, the faster you can move forward from it, and when you move forward you can help prevent it from happening again. Changing the world begins with changing yourself. Don’t worry so much about what they think. Just do you.”

As Lauryn spoke, her words released Elizabeth somehow, freeing her from the chains of her own guilt. The heaviness that had surrounded her since that morning lifted, the sandbags she had worn around her ankles since August fell off. She stepped out of shame and into light—not light as in the opponent of dark, but light as in the friend of weightlessness and relief. Here she began her first steps forward, to see herself as a white woman and be ok with it.

They ate in silence for a while, contemplating each other’s words, chewing on the thoughts they shared as they chewed their chicken, feeding their minds as they filled their stomachs.

“You know,” Lauryn said, almost thinking aloud to herself. “I don’t think many of us realize how y’all must feel. We get so focused on our part of the story, the shame of, ‘Oh I am a descendant of a slave...’ We don’t take the time to think of the shame y’all must feel on the other side of it.”

“That’s because no one ever talks about it!” Elizabeth erupted. “I mean, this is the first time I have *ever* talked to an African American about this stuff. And how many times have you ever discussed this kind of thing with a white person? It’s become taboo to talk about in the U.S., and so we avoid the issue, brush it under the rug. No one talks about it openly. We ignore it, meanwhile coexisting side by side behind our own walls.

“And you know, I have spent so much of my life trying to hide from it. Like, whenever this aspect of history was brought up in class, I would listen on the surface and just wait until it was over so I could move on with my life without thinking about it. It always made me so uncomfortable...”

“I want unity and peace and equality, but instead I chose ignorance and called it ‘colorblindness.’ I tried to tell myself that I didn’t see race at all, that race was no longer even an issue in our country, so there was no point in thinking about it.”

“And the thing of it is,” Lauryn interjected. “Prejudice ain’t the same thing as racism. Yeah, there are some prejudice folk still around, but honey, racism is everywhere. Racism is engrained in the system. Hard work will only get you so far when you are fighting the system.

“Girl, my mama is a teacher, and it’s mostly black kids at the school she teaches at, and you know, they struggle to get funding, so a lot of the students there are failing. The truth of it is, these poor, black kids aren’t being given the same opportunities as the white kids in the city.

“I mean, I guess I understand the original motive of the colorblind mentality, to lead us towards this ideal of racial equality,” Lauryn continued. “But somewhere down the line, it turned into a denial of the issues and an attack on corrective efforts. You are right: it’s ignorance. And ignorance only worsens the issue.”

Elizabeth sighed.

“I guess...” she started. “I guess I didn’t realize how *not* colorblind I really was until I came here.”

She paused for a moment, took the last bite of her chicken and chewed slowly, thoughtfully staring into space.

“I’ve never experienced anything like this before,” she said. “I have never been so aware of how white I am...”

They paid for their meal and headed back towards the group. As they walked, Elizabeth reflected on the past few months and the impact her experiences in Ghana had on her. Over the last few months she had grown in confidence and independence as she made friends and faced challenges in another country. At the same time she was learning humility in receiving help, in listening, in considering the idea that maybe she wasn’t always right, maybe she didn’t know everything, maybe she didn’t have it all together. She was gathering deeper insight into how much her culture shaped the way she behaved and the way she thought.

She had been exposed to so much that she would have never been exposed to if she stayed home. Especially....

I have never been so aware of how white I am.

It was obvious yet profound, infuriating yet remarkable, and had quickly become mind-numbingly irritating, like listening to the same song over and over, except this song was associated with discomfort and confusion. Sometimes she wished she could unscrew her skull and lift her brain out of her head, give herself a break from these incessant thoughts of race.

Elizabeth slowed her stride, staring at her feet, wondering.

“Hey, Lauryn? When you are home... do you... are you always aware? Like, are you always conscious that you’re... black?”

“Yeah!” came Lauryn’s immediate response, eyebrows raised as if it was the most obvious question she had ever been asked. But Elizabeth kept looking at Lauryn inquisitively, waiting for her to share her experience more thoroughly.

“I remember when I reached high school, my mama had me switched schools in the 9th grade. I went from a school that was mostly black to a school that was mostly white. And honey,

it was a culture shock. And for some reason, I didn't join the clubs or activities that I would have thrived in. I cared so much about fitting in, I didn't pursue the things I was really good at." She shook her head. "I shrunk from my own potential."

"So..." Elizabeth began. "Did you have any white friends?"

"You know... I had acquaintances... but I never really had a white friend who I hung out with outside of school or anything. The first time I really hung around white people was my freshman year of college. My roommate was white. She was cool. We didn't become best friends or anything. But that was the first time I really realized how different we really are."

Elizabeth listened intently, trying to see white American culture through the eyes of someone from outside of it, imagining what it would be like to live with white people for the first time. It was another attack on the colorblind mentality that she had clutched to for so long, that said there were no differences except for appearances. But they were different. They came from different backgrounds, different histories, different cultures and different styles. And for the first time, Elizabeth saw African Americans as more than a race, but as a cultural group.

"But something I realized, being here in Africa," Lauryn continued, "is that, even though I may look like them, I actually have more in common with you."

They saw each other in that moment, white and black, but together. Connected. And they weren't connected by ignoring their racial differences, but by embracing them and learning from them. They united together in their commonalities, in the converging aspects of their identity as young, American women. They bonded in the friendship that had budded between them over the last few months.

"You know what else I've realized?" Elizabeth said, smiling. "This is the first time I have ever truly experienced being colorblind. I have always seen people through the eyes of the majority, the color conscious glasses of the U.S. But sometimes, here, when I am hanging out with you or Bee or Kwabena, it hits me that I am not seeing your color at all! It's not denial or ignorance, it's simply seeing *you*. And when I am with you guys, I am also less self-conscious of being white. I feel seen too. It is so liberating!

"And all it took," she continued, "was a friendship to develop, to go deeper than skin, deeper than the labels society places on us."

They had reached the group, who were standing around the busses, chatting with each other, enjoying their last few moments in the fresh air of Kumasi before they climbed back into the stifling busses.

"That's so cool, Liz," Lauryn said as they joined Bee and the girls. "That is so cool."

They chatted together for a few minutes before they got back onto the busses, ready to endure another four hours back to campus. Lauryn and Elizabeth continued to talk together in the back of the tro-tro, a light conversation about everyday things like movies and music.

But something was still bugging Elizabeth. Her eyebrows had furrowed together, and Lauryn could almost see her brain turning, spinning out thoughts and questions like the girl in the fairytale who spun straw into gold.

“What you thinking about, Liz?”

Elizabeth took a deep breath, almost feeling guilty for dragging the conversation back in this direction. Brows still furrowed, she expressed her concern to Lauryn.

“Why are we all so segregated still? Why it is that even though I went to a fairly diverse school that I mostly have white friends. And why even though you went to a predominantly white school, did you have mostly black friends? Is it our cultural differences that pull us apart, or some sort of need for familiarity? Or is the segregation just embedded in our country, engrained in us from history?”

“I mean, why does it take coming all the way to Ghana to bring us together?”

“Yeah,” Lauryn agreed. “Yeah it’s crazy...”

She fell asleep soon after, her head on Elizabeth’s shoulder. Elizabeth didn’t sleep. She sat by the window, cracked open, wind in her face, smelling the African air. She gazed into the villages, lit by lanterns and candlelight, and wondered about the people there, what they were doing and what they were talking about. She wondered about their nightlife. Do some of them go to bed early to prepare for the long day coming at dawn? Are there people in these villages like me, who want adventure but want to be good, who love the nighttime and how alive it makes them feel? And as she stared up at the stars, she wondered whether or not they loved their lives, whether or not they dreaded each morning or took it on with a smile and a song.

Elizabeth yearned for unity. She yearned to unite with the Ghanaians. She wanted to be one with them because she loved who they were; she loved them as a people, as a visitor loves their host, as a friend loves another friend. She loved them as people love one another in spite of their differences, and sometimes, because of them. She yearned to unite with all the people of her country, regardless of where they came from and what they looked like. The socially constructed boundaries of race and history frustrated her; she wanted these things not to matter, but to unite in simple humanity.

But the boundaries did matter. It only took three syllables to remind her.

Oh-bru-ni.

Yet, Elizabeth saw so much beauty in the differences. The months she spent living in Ghana left her with a newfound gratitude for the diversity of the world, an appreciation for every divergence of race and culture, opinion and thought. They all had so much to learn from each other, so much to see in each other, so much to admire in one another. Each group added beauty to the human race.

I am beautiful too, Elizabeth thought to herself. I was born white and blonde and tall, and I am as beautiful as my black sisters. I am as beautiful as my Indian and Asian and Latino sisters. Look at us all. She rested her head on Lauryn's and closed her eyes. Wonderfully made. Together, a masterpiece.

And somewhere between the stars and the coast, Elizabeth fell asleep.