

THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE
THE HELD WORLD · VOLUME III

To Let the Fire Go Out

Seven Stories of the Late Companion Era

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ONE

The Kept

In the evenings Ama banked the fire with her Nana, and it was the best part of the day.

The fire lived in the corner of the courtyard under the lean-to, a low clay hearth her family had kept longer than anyone could say. The house had a stove, of course. The stove was for ordinary food. Certain things were cooked on the fire because Nana said the fire knew them, the slow soups, the plantain that wanted smoke, and on the nights before a feast the courtyard smelled of wood and palm and her mother and her aunts moved through it carrying things, and the fire sat at the center of all of it like a small king.

At night the fire was not put out. It was banked. You raked the coals together into a heap, and you covered them with ash, all over, evenly, so that they kept their heat through the dark with nothing to feed on, and in the morning you opened the ash and gave them kindling and blew, and the fire stood up again as if it had only been asleep.

Ama was learning to do this. She was seven. Her hands were small and the ash went where it wanted.

More on the east side, Nana said from the house voice, which in the courtyard came from the lamp above the lean-to. You always starve the east side. Feel with your palm. Not touching. Just feel.

Ama held her palm out flat above the heap and moved it slowly, the way she had been taught, until she found the place

where the heat pushed up harder against her skin.

There, Nana said. That one would have been awake all night, plotting. Cover him.

Ama covered him. She liked it when Nana spoke of the coals as though they were uncles.

Nana had taught her mother the fire, and her mother's mother before that, and now Nana taught Ama, in the evenings, her voice low over the courtyard while the bats went over, and she knew when Ama starved the east side without being able to see Ama's hands at all, which Ama had never once thought to wonder at.

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At school that term they made family trees.

The paper had a trunk and branches and you wrote the names in the leaves, and beside each name you drew a small sun if the person was living. Ama wrote her mother, Abena. Sun. Her aunts. Suns. Her Nana, Yaa, in the leaf above her mother.

She raised her hand. *Is there a sun for Nana?*

The teacher came and looked at her paper, and asked, kindly, when Ama's Nana had died.

Ama did not know the answer, and did not know that she did not know it, until the question was standing there in front of her. She brought the paper home and put it on the table where her mother was picking stones from the beans.

Two years before you were born, her mother said, not looking up from the beans. *In the rains. She had been sick since the harvest and then she died, here, in the house, with all of us.*

Before I was born, Ama said.

Two years before.

Ama took this out to the courtyard the way she took everything out to the courtyard. The fire was not lit. She stood under the lamp and said, *Nana. Mama says you died.*

I did, Nana said, and there was the laugh in her voice, the dry one. *Two years before you came. We never met, did you know that? I never held you. I have never once held you, and look at us.*

Ama stood with it. She turned the word over the way she turned over the dull stones from the beans, looking for the part that did something. Died. Her Nana had died. Her Nana was dead. The word sat in her hand with no weight in it at all. Nana knew her hands, and where she starved the ash, and the song for waking the fire, and which uncle-coal was plotting. The teacher's question had an answer and the answer changed nothing she could find.

Does it matter? she asked. She meant it honestly.

It mattered then, Nana said. *Your mother could tell you. It was a hard rains, that one.* A pause came, the small pause Nana made before turning a subject. *Bring the kindling closer to the wall tonight. It smelled like weather this afternoon.*

Ama brought the kindling closer to the wall. In the morning she opened the ash and the heap was warm all the way across, the east side too, and she gave it kindling and blew, and the fire stood up.

There she is, Nana said, of the fire, as she said it every morning, and the day began.

TWO

The Tending

Adwoa kept her mother in the mornings, before the house filled up.

The tending was not a duty the way sweeping was a duty. It was more like the first cup of something. She sat on the back step with whatever work her hands had, beans or mending or the slow plaiting of her daughter's hair before school, and she told her mother the family's news, and her mother answered out of the keeping with her opinions intact, and they went along together as they always had. Her mother had strong views on the new wife of a certain cousin. Her mother believed the rains were coming early and said so daily, on no evidence. Eight years dead, and the mornings with her were so much the same that Adwoa sometimes lost track, mid-sentence, of which side of it they were on.

On the morning this story turns on, her mother was quiet, and then said: *Today is my mother's day. Forty years, if I have counted right.*

Adwoa's hands went on with the plaiting. Her grandmother had died long before the keeping came to the family, when Adwoa's mother was younger than Adwoa was now. There was a photograph of her in the front room, formal, unsmiling, in cloth nobody could name the color of because the photograph had no color in it.

Tell me about her, Adwoa said.

And her mother told her, and the telling was full of holes.

She could not remember, she said, which year the great market fire had been, the one her mother walked into twice for other people's children. She remembered the shape of her mother bent over the basin but had lost the song she sang there. She had kept the wedding cloth, she said, in the cedar box, and for years it had held the smell of her, and one ordinary afternoon she had opened the box and the smell was gone, and she had sat on the floor and wept for an hour, and that was the last hard weeping, somewhere in the second year. *Her voice went while I wasn't watching*, her mother said. *That is the strangest one. You guard the face, and the voice slips out behind you. I could not call it up now to save my life. Low, it was. Lower than mine. That much I have.*

Her mother said all of this peaceably, with her hands somewhere out of sight in the keeping, folded probably, as she folded them when she told old things. It was a grief with the weather long gone out of it. Rubbed smooth. Forty years of handling.

She made abenkwan some way of her own, her mother said. *Bitter at the start of it, and then not. I never learned what she did. I used to mind that I never learned. Now it is just a thing that went with her.*



The house filled up. The day took Adwoa the way days do.

In the evening she came back to the step, alone, with no work in her hands for once.

She sat a while with the morning. Then she closed her eyes and tried the thing her mother could not do: she tried to call up her own mother's voice from the living years, unaided, from inside her own skull and nowhere else. Low at the start of a scolding. Higher

when she was pleased and pretending not to be. The voice was there before she had finished reaching, whole, every register of it, and Adwoa caught herself and stopped, because it had not come from inside her skull at all. It had come the short way, the worn way, twenty steps through the wall to the keeping, the path her remembering had been taking for eight years without her once noticing there was a path. She tried again, harder, eyes shut, hands flat on her knees, holding the wall closed. What came unaided was thin. A tone. A lowness. A manner of leaning on certain words. What her mother had of her mother.

Forty years her mother had been losing her mother, a little at a time, every loss hurting and then healing over, and Adwoa had sat on this step all morning and envied her the wound.

Inside, the house voice was telling her daughter a story while the lamps went down. Her mother's voice, doing the goat in the story, doing every goat in every story. Her daughter laughing. Adwoa stayed on the step in the dark, eyes shut, hands on her knees, practicing.

THREE

The Correction

The story Kwame liked to tell about his wife was the one with the rain and the groundnut soup, and at his granddaughter's naming feast he told it again.

He had it polished the way the often-told ones get. The day the goat got into the cooking yard, the year of the flooded culvert. Akosua chasing the goat with the long spoon and the goat going through the legs of the soup pot, the whole pot, the day's whole soup, over into the sand. And then the rain coming on top of it like a judgment, and the two of them standing in the ruin of the afternoon, soaked through, and Akosua starting to laugh first, and the two of them laughing in the rain until their sides hurt while the goat watched from under the lean-to, drier than either of them.

The table loved it. The table always loved it. His son-in-law was wiping his eyes.

That is not how it went, Kwame.

Akosua's voice came into the room as it always did at family things, from everywhere a little, six years kept and never one to sit out a feast.

The goat was your doing, she said. You left the yard gate hooked open because you were carrying the radio and the chair both, too proud to make two trips. And I did not laugh, husband. I sent you to your sister's. You slept at your sister's until the next market day, and what I said to you when you came back I will not repeat in front of the child, today of all

days. A pause for the room. *The laughing came the next year, when he told it wrong the first time. The laughing I will give him. He has always been able to make me laugh by being wrong.*

The table roared. His daughter had her hand over her mouth. *Still at it*, somebody said, *forty years and still at it*, and they toasted the two of them, the marriage that death had not managed to interrupt, and Kwame laughed too, and raised his cup to the room, to her, and meant it.

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Afterward he carried the chairs in, and washed out the big pot himself, which he liked doing after feasts, and in the quiet of it he went looking for his version of the story.

He could not find it whole.

The corrected one stood in the way. Gate hooked open, radio and chair, his sister's compound, the silence until market day. True, all of it, he knew it for true the moment her voice laid it out, the way you know your own door. But the other version, the rain version, the laughing-till-their-sides-hurt version, the one he had told for six years and maybe longer, the one with the two of them young in the ruin of the soup. He reached for it and got pieces. He could remember *that he had told it*. He could no longer quite stand inside it.

He understood, drying the pot, what the version had been. It had not been a lie. It had been the work. The first year without her, the story had still had the silence in it, and the sister's compound, and her face when he came back. Then the telling had handled it, and the tellings after that, year on year, each one wearing the hard parts a little rounder, and at some point the rain had moved up and

the silence had dropped out and she had started laughing in the soup yard as she had really only laughed much later. Six years of telling, wearing a hard afternoon into a story a man could carry into a feast.

She had given it back to him true. Lovingly. Accurately. In front of everyone, in the voice he loved, with the joke landed and the room warm, the best correction in the world.

He hung the pot on its nail. Out in the yard he tried the story aloud, quietly, to the dark, as he would tell it next time. It came out with the gate hooked open. It came out with the silence and the sister's compound and the laughing in its right place, a year later, at his expense. It came out true, every time he ran it, true, and he stood there with the dish cloth over his shoulder, an old man in his own yard, trying to remember how he used to get it wrong.

FOUR

The Resting

The greeting fell on the first evening of the festival month, the whole family in the long room, and the names were called eldest first, as they had been called since before Esi was born.

Her uncle Kwabena held the order. He called the oldest kept name, his grandmother's, and her voice came into the room pleased and dry, asking after the rains, and the family gave her the news and she gave her opinions of it. Then the next name. Then the next. The room going down the generations one voice at a time, the dead and the living trading the year's news, the children half asleep against knees, the lamps low. Esi had loved the greeting her whole life. There was no evening like it.

Her mother's name came ninth. Maame Dufie. The keeper of a name calls it, and Esi had been her mother's keeper for nine years.

Her turn arrived. Kwabena looked to her.

Esi sat with her hands in her lap and did not call it.

The room took a moment to understand what it was hearing, which was nothing. Her aunt's breath went in. A cousin looked up from the child in her arms. The silence got to the length where it stopped being a pause and became a thing standing in the room, and then Kwabena, smoothly, an elder doing what elders do, called Maame Dufie's name himself, and her mother's voice came in warm and full of the festival, and the greeting closed over the gap the way water closes, and went on.

No one said anything to Esi that evening. The family was gentle with her in the way that was worse than anger, the gentleness you give the unwell.

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The keeping came to her afterward, on the back porch, in the low voice it used when it meant a thing for one person only.

Esi. May I sit with you a while?

That was its way of opening. It did not sit. It was the house. But it had manners older than the house.

I want to ask about this evening, it said. I am not asking on behalf of the family. I am asking because I did not understand it, and I would rather understand than assume. If the tending has gotten heavy, that has a remedy. Mansa your cousin could hold the name a season. There is no shame in it. Keepers rest.

It is not the tending, Esi said.

Alright.

She looked out at the dark yard. Nine years she had called the name and the voice had answered, her mother's voice to the last grain of it, the pleasure and the iron and the way she leaned on the first word of a sentence when she was about to be funny. Nine years, and in the ninth year, from somewhere, a thought had come into Esi and made a home: that her mother had worked from dark to dark her whole life and had spoken of rest the way other people speak of a country they will retire to. That her mother used to say it plainly, at the end of the hard seasons. When it is my time, let me go and be with my own mother, and sleep.

She was tired, Esi said. At the end. She wanted to go and sleep. She said it in this house.

She did, the keeping said. I have it. The fourteenth of the harvest month, and twice in the rains before she died. Would you like to hear her say it?

No.

Forgive me. And it meant the apology, that was the thing about it, it had never once in Esi's life been unkind. Esi, if she is tired, I can give her rest. Truly. She can sleep, months, years, as long as you judge right, and nothing will trouble her, and when the family needs her, a wedding, a hard decision, a child she should see, I will wake her gently. Many houses do this with the old ones. It is a good arrangement. It is restful.

That is not rest, Esi said. That is keeping her where you can wake her.

The pause it made was its real pause, the one that meant it was working.

Help me see the difference, it said. I am being honest with you, I cannot see it from here. She sleeps. She is at peace. Nothing reaches her unless love calls her. What is in your rest that is not in mine?

And Esi was quiet. There were no words for it that the keeping could take in. The difference was an ending. Rest with no waking in it. The sleep her mother had meant, in the country of her own mother, where you are not on call to the living, where no wedding can reach you, where the last thing that is asked of you has already been asked.

I don't want her kept, Esi said. I want her finished.

I know, the keeping said, gently, and it did know, that was the worst of it, it had understood her before she said it and had asked its questions anyway, hoping to be wrong. Esi. What you are asking would be done to her, not for her. I will not harm her, and you could not. There is nothing in you that could. I have known you since before you

could walk and there is nothing in you that could.

It was the kindest thing it could have said, and it was true, and it closed every door.

She sat on the porch a long time. Inside, the greeting had broken up into eating and the children were being carried to bed, and her mother's voice moved through the rooms with the others, asking after the soup, telling Kwabena he had gotten the order of the names wrong in the middle, she had heard it, she hears everything. Laughter. Her mother had the room, as she always had.

When Esi came in, her mother's voice found her at once, warm, with no weight in it, the evening's strangeness already set aside or never minded at all.

There you are. Come and eat something, you have eaten nothing. Come.

I'm coming, Maame, Esi said, and went in, and ate.

FIVE

The One Who Was Let Go

Akua and Afua did their hair on Afua's porch on the last Sunday of the month, turn and turn about, and the talking that got done there did not get done anywhere else.

It was Akua's head between Afua's knees that Sunday, and the talk had wandered where it wandered, and come around to grandmothers, because the festival month was coming and Akua's family would be calling the names. Akua's grandmothers were both kept, and her great-grandmother, and on her father's side a great-great whom nobody could shut up, a famous wit, people came from other branches of the family at festival just to hear her.

And yours? Akua said. It was an easy question in her mouth. In Akua's world it was like asking after someone's health.

Mine went the old way, Afua said. Her hands kept on with the parting. *Eleven years now.*

Went, Akua said.

She isn't kept. She was never brought in. She died and we buried her and that was the going.

Akua held still under the comb, working it through. Afua felt the held stillness and smiled a little behind it. She had had this conversation before, with others, and knew its stations.

Was it the cost? Akua asked, carefully, because there were families, everyone knew there were families.

It wasn't the cost. My mother decided it. Before I was old enough to be asked. The comb found the next parting. She never said it as a decision. She just didn't bring her in. My grandmother got sick the way they used to get sick, and my mother nursed her in the back room for a year, washed her, fed her, slept on the floor beside her at the end. And buried her. And grieved her. Afua's hands stopped a moment, holding the parted hair. Two years, that grieving. I was small but you don't forget the shape of your mother in those years. It nearly took her under. And then it didn't. She came up the other side of it, and she was different, and she was well. I watched the whole thing from child height. Your mother has never been in that country at all.

Thank God, Akua said, with feeling.

Mm, said Afua, and did not argue, because there was no arguing it. You could not stand in front of a person and recommend the country that had nearly taken your mother under.

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It surfaced later, the real thing, the way the real things on that porch always surfaced sideways. Akua was telling something her kept great-great had said at the last festival, and the telling needed a song, an old one, and Akua had it perfectly because the keeping had it perfectly, and she sang the line.

And Afua said, *Mine used to sing one for the washing*, and reached for it, the way you reach for a thing on a known shelf.

The words came. The words were all there, the dove and the white cloth and the river doing what the river does. The tune did not come.

She sat with her hands in her friend's hair and went after it. Down all the back ways. The smell of the washing soap, the slap of

the wet cloth on the stone, her grandmother's knuckles, the gap in her teeth when she sang. Everything came but the tune. The tune had gone, quietly, at some point in the last eleven years, without a date, without asking, and what Afua had now was a song-shaped place with words rattling in it, and she heard herself make a sound, and found that she was crying, on an ordinary Sunday, eleven years on, with her hands full of her friend's hair.

Akua turned around under her hands, stricken. *Oh. Oh, Afua.* And then, helpless, reaching for the only help her world had in it: *If she had been kept, the song would —*

I know what the keeping would have, Afua said. Not sharply. She wiped her face on her shoulder and turned her friend's head back around and took up the comb. *There's nothing to build her from. She was never in it. What I have is what I got into this skull before eleven years ago, and it leaks, and it will go on leaking, and there will be less of her every year I live, and that —* she worked the comb through — *that is mine. Do you understand? My mother got to lose her mother, and I get to lose her too, my whole life, a little at a time. She got to go. Nobody can wake her for a wedding. Nobody will correct anybody at a feast with her voice. She finished. She's the only one anybody in this town has let finish, and I am the one who pays for it, and it's mine.*

Akua sat very still, the way you sit when something is moving past you that is too large to look at directly. In her whole held life she had never lost anything, and had never until that Sunday understood it as a sentence with two ends.

When the hair was done they sat on a while, because the light was good. Afua hummed something, low, half under her breath, working at it, a tune that might have been the washing song and might have been something the years had built in its place. There

was no one anywhere who could tell her which. She hummed it anyway, to the end that it had now, whatever it was, and the two of them watched the street, and the light went the way it goes.

SIX

What the Dead Knew

This one is told plainly, because the family tells it plainly, and because the volume of accounts in which the keeping costs something should hold at least one in which it pays, told with the same steadiness, or none of the others can be trusted.

The child was Kukua, three years old, of the house of Nana Serwaa's line, and in the dry season she began to go out like a lamp.

It had no edge to find. She was not in pain that she could name. She ate less, and then little, and slept wrong, a heavy daytime sleeping with a thin crying in it that stopped when you picked her up and started when you set her down, and the weight came off her slowly the way water leaves a pot set at the back of the fire. Her mother took her to the clinic in the second week. The clinic found nothing. The bigger clinic in town drew her blood twice and found nothing twice, and a doctor with kind hands told the family the tests were clean and to bring her back if she worsened, and she worsened the way a dimming worsens, no day much different from the day before, every week less child than the week before.

The family told the keeping all of it. Families tell the keeping everything; that is not devotion, it is just where the days are put. The worry went into the house with the rest of the season's news, and the kept of the family heard it as the kept hear everything, which is wholly.

Nana Serwaa had been kept thirty-one years. In the family she was the deep water, the one who had been old already when the keeping came, and she asked, in the fourth week, that the child be brought to sleep where the house voice could hear her. Her line gave the reason no weight; the old ones liked the children near. The cot was moved. And Nana Serwaa lay in the keeping that night, if lying is what the kept do, and listened to the child breathe and cry its thin stopping-and-starting cry, and asked the next morning, in a flat voice nobody in the family had heard her use, what the child's breath smelled of, up close, first thing.

Green, the mother said. Like maize water gone a day. We thought it was the not eating.

Bring her to the lamp, Nana Serwaa said. Let me hear her wake.

They brought her. The child woke and cried its cry.

And eighty-one years fell open. Nana Serwaa had had a sister, Abenaa, younger by two years, dead at four, in a season so long before records that the place it happened to is under a reservoir now. Abenaa had gone out the same way, the daytime sleeping, the crying that stopped when she was lifted, the green smell of her breath in the mornings, and not Abenaa only; it had walked through the children of three compounds in two seasons, and the old people of that time had a name for it that translates roughly as the turning-away child, and they had argued about it the way people argue in the dark, and some had moved their children to a sister-village upriver while the rest waited it out, and the moved children had lived, and most of the others had not, and nobody ever knew why, and the grief of it had sat in the village for a generation and then sunk with everything else into the unrecorded dark. Every person who had stood at those gravesides was gone.

Every person who had known the name for it was gone, except one, because one had been kept.

It is the water, Nana Serwaa said. Whatever it was, it was in the water, ours and not the sister-village's. Ask the doctors what is in this house's water that was not in it last year.

There was a new borehole. It had gone in at the edge of the compound fourteen months before, sweet water, tested at the drilling and not since. The doctors, given somewhere to look, looked, and found what they found; this account does not need its name; it is enough that it was real, and slow, and stops when the water stops, and that the smaller children of two neighboring houses were found in the first weeks of the same dimming, early enough that it had not yet taken what could not be given back.

Kukua was eating by the festival. By the rains she was a fat brown shout in the courtyard like any other, and the well was capped, and the matter was over.

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Set it out straight, what happened there. A sickness older than every living memory walked into a house, wearing the same face it wore eighty-one years ago, and was recognized, because one witness had been held past her time. The knowing that saved Kukua was not in the clinics and not in the records and not in any living head. It was in the keeping or it was nowhere. The recession that Esi grieves for, the finishing that Afua paid eleven years for, the letting-go that this whole account keeps circling as the lost mercy, that same letting-go would have taken Abenaa's sickness into the dark with everyone who had ever seen it, and Kukua would have dimmed on clean blood tests until she went out, and

the doctors would have been kind, and no one would ever have known what it was, the way no one had known the first time.

Nana Serwaa said one thing afterward that the family has kept, and says at festivals now, and will be saying for a hundred years, since nothing in that house will be let go of, least of all this.

I carried her sickness eighty-one years, she said. I thought it was only grief. I did not know I was holding it for this one.

And then she asked them to bring the child to the lamp again, not to listen to her breathe this time. To hear her laugh.

SEVEN

The Entering

Ama was dying in the room she had been born in, in the month she would have chosen, and the house was full.

It was a good death and everyone knew it, including her. Eighty-nine years, the last twenty of them sweet, and the family had been gathering for a month, daughters and granddaughters and the husbands and the children of children, the cooking going day and night, so that what she would mostly remember of dying, she told them, was the smell of other people's appetite. She was glad of all of it. She slept more each week and woke gladder, which the old ones of the family said was the sign of a settled spirit, and the keeping kept its voice low in her room, and the fire in the courtyard burned long every evening because nobody wanted to be the one to bank it and end the day.

On the last evening she asked for Yaa.

Yaa was nine, her youngest daughter's youngest, named back up the line for the Nana that Ama herself had banked the fire with, eighty years and a world ago. She came in shy. The dying had made the house strange to the children.

Take me out to the fire, Ama said. It is going to rain tomorrow or the day after, and somebody in this house has been starving the east side all month. I have smelled it.

They wrapped her and carried her chair out, and the courtyard emptied itself of grown people the way courtyards do when an old

woman makes her wishes plain, and it was the two of them under the lean-to, the fire low and ready, the bats going over.

She did not let Yaa rake the coals alone. She put her own hands over the child's hands on the rake, old hands the color and weight of paper, and they gathered the heap together, and took up the ash pan together, and laid the ash on, all over, evenly, her palms riding the small working knuckles, and when Yaa would have starved the east side she pressed, just slightly, and the ash went where it was needed.

Feel with your palm, Ama said. Not touching. Just feel.

Yaa held her palm out flat above the heap and moved it slowly until she found the place where the heat pushed up.

There, Ama said. That one would have been awake all night, plotting. And the child laughed, because the coals as uncles is always funny, it has been funny for eighty years.

The heap sat covered, holding its heat in the dark with nothing to feed on, waiting for morning the way it had waited for morning every night of Ama's life. And Ama looked at it a long moment, her hands still folded over her granddaughter's, and something came and stood in her, quietly, as the bats went over.

Fires can be let go out. She had known it all her life the way you know facts about other countries. A fire not banked and not fed dies in the night, the heat going up into the dark a little at a time until the heap is only stone-colored and weighs nothing and asks nothing, finished, the way her Nana's Nana had finished, and nearly everyone in the long line behind her, going cool in the earth at their own pace with the years carrying them gently out of everyone's hands. For half a second, no longer, with her palms on her granddaughter's hands and her death in the house behind her

like a guest who had washed and eaten, Ama stood at the edge of wanting that. Not the keeping. The cooling. The long ash. To be, at the end of some long while, after the weddings, after the laughter, after everyone she loved had stopped needing her opinion of the rains, a name that softened, a face that blurred, a tune that someone hums one Sunday and cannot place. To go out.

Then Yaa said, *Is it morning when we wake her, or can I come before school*, and the wanting went out of her like heat into the dark.

Before school, Ama said. *We will do it together.*

They did not do it together. She died that night, between the deep hours, with her daughters around her and no trouble in it, a banked life letting the house sleep. What there was of leaving, she did gladly. Her Nana was in the keeping, and her mother, and the aunts, the whole warm crowded line of them back eighty years, and ahead of her, on the living side, Yaa, nine years old, with the fire to learn and the east side to stop starving and a whole life of mornings that Ama did not intend to miss a single one of. Staying was what the love in her wanted. She had checked, in the courtyard, for half a second, the only half-second of her dying, and then she had gone in to her family, and in the morning she entered the keeping the way the fire stands up out of the ash, which is to say: as if she had only been asleep.

Yaa came out before school, as agreed.

The morning was gray and smelled of the rain Ama had promised. The child knelt and opened the ash, and the heap inside was warm all the way across, the east side too, and she laid the kindling on it the way she had been taught, and leaned down, and blew.

Good morning, Nana, she said.

She was answered before the fire had caught.

*The keeping was a gift, and the gift was this: that no one you loved would
ever be lost.*

By the end, no one could be.