Elinam Agbo

Schools of Longing

We begin with a crash, a hoot, and a forgotten shoe. Like the people in their beds, the fowl and the rabbits are asleep, safe from foxes and other night thieves. The owl is a still watcher atop the balustrade, blending with the night except for those eyes your mother misses because she has broken the vase on her way to slamming the door. The tulips your father picked for her yesterday lose their petals and begin their dying. She pauses, feels the prick of a hard gaze, shakes it off, stomps her way down the veranda, down the steps and into the compound, where she leaves for good, the gate wide open. She's a brave one, your mother, not scared of the night or those who walk in it.

The owl takes off after a mouse scurrying home. The wing-sliced wind sings us awake. We rise. From the ashes your mother smears on her way out. Ashes from last night's meal, the fire she built to heat water on the clay hearth because your father's mother had commandeered the kitchen stove and your father admitted patients late again and couldn't break the fight between the two women of his heart.

We rise, breathless and bodiless, smelling a familiar life, a key to our past. We are so hungry for memory. We rise without knowing our number, our want driving us forward.

You are a surprise, failing to tiptoe behind us. You hear the crash and jump out of a dream, scramble after the hem of your mother's gingham skirt. You stumble over the shoes by the door and slip your feet into a pair of too-big sandals. Before the wide-open gate, you lose one in the mud and hold the other, for you cannot return for the first. You run barefoot through twigs and stones and grass. This means you leave home without defense. Some will call you foolish for this. But you are six, so we won't hold it against you. Come, sweet child, we mean you no harm. We'll keep the single sandal safe.

What a delight you are, traipsing in the dew-soaked loam with your dainty toes, your little fingers cradling dewdrops that

fall off tall leaves. Suddenly we forget the woman in front of us, so much do we want to hoist you into our laps, comfort you with milk we do not have. How do we get milk in these bones?

When we reach for you, our airy hands congeal. Solid flesh, borrowed flesh from the newly dead. We are delighted to be whole again, if only for a short while. We can't wear this skin for long. Flies bring attention and attention means death, not in any way final but lonely. So lonely a sleep. So cold.

Look, we now have eyes for you. How do we get yours to us? Your gaze is ahead, your arms outstretched for your mother, who has become the night. Unknowable, going, gone. You trail her steps to the graveyard. You call her name, and when the tombs echo, you cover your mouth. She does not answer. The bats answer. Another owl peers down from a high branch. What is that thing up the mango tree with red eyes? Aren't you afraid?

Of course you are. You have never been outside this late, not alone. You thought you weren't alone—that's why you left your bed, your house. A shiver snakes through you. Sorrow rakes your chest. Bends your back. You stumble on a rock, scrape your knee bloody, your polka-dotted pajama top and shorts soaked in mud. The night swells with your crying. Look up. There is a fire ahead, under the silk cotton tree. Forget the rumors of the evil lurking under its shadow. There is no devil here, not now anyway. Come, we mean you no harm. Let us warm your heart. Let us feed you. Do you like cocoyam?

You shake your head. You are saying something.

What is it, dear? Speak louder.

"Ma said not to take food from strangers."

"Un-strange us," we say.

"What?"

"Give us a name."

"I don't know," you chew inside a cheek, "How do you feel about Maggie?"

We roll the name between us, so many inside one body. Do we have a Maggie in here? We do not remember. We cannot remember. Instead, we see a story we have heard.

"Magdalene or Margaret?" we ask. The ex-prostitute or the pearl? The almost-stoned or the hard woman with a face of stone? We can't choose. We are a bit of both.

"I don't care," you say. "I am thirsty."

"There is a well not far from here."

You shake your head, so pampered you are.

"Tea," you say. "I want tea."

We look around for tea leaves. Lemongrass should do. We can ask the wind to bring one of the banku pots your neighbors leave soaking outside. We'll clean it and boil water for your lemongrass tea. No one will complain when they wake up at dawn to cleaned banku pots. They'll think one of their better children did it. They may treat the children to ice cream, or at least a smile, less yelling.

"Milo," you clarify. "I want Milo."

No one leaves Milo outside in the yard. Milo requires breaking into houses, for the cocoa fields and the chocolate factories are too far away. Besides, Milo has grains, but we won't tell you that. We find you endearing. That doesn't mean we have to trust you. Try the roasted cocoyam. Let us know if you do not like the taste.

Do you want to hear a story? We want to share the little we know of our past, how we wandered across many lands, feet bare to thorns and unburied bones. Through the cane fields of Guyana, St. Lucia, Montserrat. How we snuck in the pages of the book your mother carried on her way back to Ghana, where we thought we could find some comfort. All we want, have ever wanted, is some comfort. But you are eating, and what a hard introduction. We should ease you into it, if we tell you at all. You are so young—we only wish to hold you.

When you finish eating, you reach out for another cut of cocoyam, and we borrow breath from the wind to cool it for you. You sob as you eat. Each tear that falls, a memory of your mother goes with it. The little things: her lavender soap smell, her singing in the kitchen, her jingle laugh—a special sound, you don't think you'll find one like it again.

"Hush, child," we coo, in place of your mother. She is gone now, wherever she meant to go, too far to hear you. A quiet taxi came for her. Or maybe the earth consumed her. We don't care about her anymore. Can't you see? You have stolen our attention. We are no longer interested in her story, what pieces she would have added to ours to make us feel more whole, more real, affirmed in our existence.

"Your mother does not want you to cry," we say.

You turn in the dark and cock your head at us. This is how

we catch you.

"You know my mother?"

"Of course, dear," we say. "We know everyone." It's a lie, the way the women in your family say, "Grow up and we will answer your questions," then do not keep their promise. We like to think we know everyone because we wish we knew everyone, especially someone to give us permanent bodies to wear gowns and attend balls in. Did you know we went to Kwame Nkrumah's ball with the queen, and no one saw us?

"Do you want more food?" we ask. We like hearing the quiet sound of this singular voice, not shouting in the many-voiced wind.

You shake your head. Your stomach complains.

"Come here. Sit. Eat." We pat your bantu-knotted head. We shuffle you into our solid laps. The fire lights your face. Your tears glisten. We wonder how you see us. Are we as beautiful as your mother?

But you don't care about beauty now, only the fire and the cold breeze that makes gooseflesh of your skin. We weave a coat out of dry leaves and cover you with it.

"Thank you," you say. What a polite child you are.

We don't know how long you stay with us. We are not familiar with how the living track the moon and the sun. Soon you start to speak of leaving.

"Can you help me go home?" you ask. "Maybe Ma found her way back."

An ache grows where our hearts should be. How long has it been since we felt pain in the heart, something besides hunger and cold? Please stay, we don't say. Please stay forever.

"Of course," we say. "Where is your house?"

You glance around at the tree and the moss, the ferns and the tombs. No visible road.

"Are you fairies?" you ask. Poor thing. So lost. Your mother told you stories of sprites and goblins and sweet Tinker Bell types, and never us. Perhaps she loved you after all, in that dangerous, protective way.

"What are fairies?" we ask. We want to play with you.

"Depends," you say.

"On what?"

"In some stories, they are tiny. In others, they are big and pale."

"Are we tiny, big, or pale?"

You glance up, eyes large and deep. We want to ask what you see when you look at us. Are we mothers?

"No," you say, finally. "You're not tiny, big, or pale."

"Then we are not fairies."

"I didn't finish," you mutter. You pick at the bark of the tree. "Some fairies are green," you add. "Some live in trees. And rivers."

"That sounds like everything," we say. "Are fairies everything?"

"I don't know," you cry. "They're stories, Madge. Can I still call you Madge?"

"What happened to Maggie?"

"I thought you didn't like Maggie. Don't worry, Madge is better."

"What does Madge mean?"

"I don't know. You can pick your own name if you don't like it."

"Is it your mother's name?"

You stare at your hands, at the white crumbs that remain of the cocoyam.

"I don't remember," you say to your hands.

You look about to cry again.

"We love it!" we say. "Madge sounds nice. Thank you."

Madge is still Maggie and not Maggie. Madge is still human and neutral, not dark like the other names we have held before. Obeah woman. Soucouyant. Hag. Witch. You are playing with our borrowed face, picking at pimples on the nose, scratching our cornrows when the pimples don't give. This is human behavior, right? You have not grown afraid of us, and this gives us hope.

"Tell us more." We want to coax your mother's memories out until you are all ours.

You shrug, so unknowing. "There are dark fairies and light fairies. You don't look too scary. You must be related to the light."

You should know, you are loved. A search party comes looking for you. They bring torches and clubs. The clever ones bring leftover shoes and salt. You have to go now. Don't be stubborn. We are a call away. Look for us in the trees and the birds and the twinkling lights when the sky becomes a black blanket. We will watch over

you. There is no reason to cry. We are not your mother. We will be better. We will stay forever, if you know how to ask.

"What is that?" you ask. We follow your pointer finger away from the torches to the electric pole. Something is burning there. Someone. A ball that sometimes shimmers into the shape of a person. An old woman we know, not because we lived next to her or shared a landlord and a clothesline and a well. No, we know her because she is what we used to be, before we stole into your mother's purse to cross an ocean, before she discovered and buried us in front of your father's house. A woman of the night, they called us. Soucouyant. Ol Higue.

"A witch," we tell you.

"What about a broom?" you ask. "If she is a witch, shouldn't she have a broom and a pointy hat and a long draping cloak?"

Smart girl you are, but no, wrong story. Your mind is in another part of the world.

Everything misunderstood is a witch, it seems. Nothing has changed.

There is shouting between the gravestones. The torch carriers argue. The wise tell the young to return home. The foolish and the brave and the persistent, those who have something to prove and something to lose, say absolutely not. They stay. Old wise men know what to do with their energy, so they give one final warning and walk home by moonlight. Not all who stay know the stories. Some do. Your father knows. They did not bring bags of rice. Find sand, he shouts, anything with grains. The flying woman does not hear. She is on her way to feed, to disguise her bites with those of the mosquito. She is not listening to the voices of the earth. The sky makes her free in this way but also vulnerable. Your father and the others hold sand in their fists and throw. She screams. Not a human scream. Sparrows scatter. Crows scatter. We cover your ears. We would cover your eyes too, keep your mind clear of the blood and the raw striated muscles under the blaze, but we don't have enough hands.

Suddenly one borrowed body is not enough.

"Help her," you mutter, another surprise.

"What?"

"Don't you know her? She's the old woman from the market. The one who sells smoked herrings. She smells like you. Like earthworms."

We are not offended. You are a child, laying the truth bare. We should cherish this, not discourage it. We miss this kind of honesty. Where did our children go?

"You know her?" we ask from far away, inside the wind, where we are birds with long beaks, pecking at a memory tree. Memory with holes. Memory like smooth gari. Nothing to hold in the sieve. Impossible to count.

"Yes," you nod. "Ma never buys from her. Says if she doesn't like you or your mother or your grandmother, she licks a herring before putting it back in your pile."

"You're saying she's bad?"

"Ma did. I'm saying help her."

We didn't think about helping. No one helped us. The old woman dodging the grains does not know us. Not yet. We are looking to increase our number. If she falls, we might get her too. More memory. Wicked market lady or not.

"Okay, okay," we lie. "Go to sleep. Everything will be okay in the morning."

Dawn arrives, and your father finds you sleeping under the silk cotton tree. He did not sleep, did not stop looking after the flying woman fell far away, disappearing into the bush. He did not leave when the others left, when they returned to their homes to wake their children up for school. Your father's eyes bulge when he sees where you lie. He is afraid. That doesn't stop him from reaching for you. We are glad you are loved still, sad to lose you. But this is no time to fight. Our time is up. The dead flesh must return to the earth. We are wind and sky again.

We did not watch your father before, not like we watched your mother. In the memories we tuck under sturdy roots, the ones we believe are ours, there are shadows and locked doors where fathers should be. We thought him the same until now.

He carries you on his back. Your single shoe falls between the roots, forgotten. The next time we get hands, we will keep it safe for you. Before the devil returns to his room under the tree and uses the shoe for who-knows-what. Until you return for it.

"What did you throw, Papa?" you ask from your place on his back, between yawns.

"Throw where?" he asks.

"At the old woman in the sky."

"You saw?"

"Hmm."

He pauses at a stream. You think he will not answer, but he is saving his breath to jump from rock to rock. When he is back on dry land, he finds his tongue.

"Sand and salt," he says.

"Okay," you yawn. "Are they gone?"

He frowns, not sure who *they* are. He thinks you mean the torch carriers, or maybe you saw more than one flying woman. He withholds a shudder, pushes the frown away, and shakes his head. "Don't worry about them. You're safe now."

By the time he opens the house gate with one hand and holds you with the other, you are snoring, drooling on his shoulder.

Before the sun breaks through the curtain and your father's mother wakes you, you dream. But not of your mother, and not of us. Why not of us?

In the morning, after the roosters have done their crowing and the kenkey seller has passed your house and your father has left for work, your grandmother puts a toothbrush in your hand. After you clean and wash your face, she roasts a cocoyam, blows on it, and shoves that into your hand too. You need to learn to eat by yourself, she says. Your mother fed you Milo and Cerelac and bread and jam for breakfast. We were the first to give you cocoyam. But you do not remember us when you taste your grandmother's. You do not tell her how we taught you to appreciate the tastes of starch and earth. It's better this way. We will wait, perched on the edge of your consciousness like the dreams that do not see morning. We will protect you as best we can, warn you of thorns and snakes when you run around the empty yard chasing chicks and ducklings. When you scurry through the neighbors' sweet potato farms, playing spy with the wind and collecting dandelions with basil and acheampong leaves in a basket. When you dub yourself a doctor's helper, like your father.

He comes home from work at the stroke of six, and you run to the gate to greet him.

"Papa, I dreamt you died."

"Oh?"

"Yes, and you haunted me and I was afraid."

He laughs. Not jingly like your mother's, but close.

"Don't worry," he says. "I won't haunt you. Besides, didn't I ever tell you? If you dream that I died, it means I will live a long life."

This makes you happy, and you laugh, and the sound makes our hearts leap. We forgive you for forgetting us.

Your father was the first in his village to finish school, to work with the white men in their colonial hospital, as equal as he could get. So everyone in the village calls him "chief," and yes, that means he has respect, and land for his family to farm, but it also means responsibility. Distant relatives and friends of relatives wait in line with open palms and palm wine. They bring their daughters and nieces. Your father's mother and father insist he can't say no. Can't turn people away. "No" means disgrace.

This is why your mother leaves, why no one speaks of her after she disappears. She is not number one, but he did choose her. They met in a market in Accra, and she showed him the proper way to wear a tie. He brought her home soon after, to his mother's rage. Your mother learned of the others through the dreams we gave her. She would have learned the truth soon enough. This is why she does not give anyone a reason. This is not enough for you, and we understand. We try to console you. Try to prepare you for the stepmothers who will come and go. One sitting on the warm seat the previous one has vacated. You will stop keeping track after the sixth. The previous wives, before your mother, will arrive with suitcases and children older than you, children they will leave in your father's care.

In the stories, life turns sour for the girl when her mother leaves (or dies) and her father follows in some way. For you, the bad days begin long before your father's death. You think they begin when you nearly tear your cousin's ear off, and your grandmother curses you by accident. The boy is ten and foolish. You are nine and tired. He calls you ugly, your mother a good-for-nothing whore. You've grown used to insults thrown at your body, but something about hearing your mother's name turns off all the alarms your father's mother installed in your head. You lunge at the boy, see his eyes bulge with fear, and you don't think. You pound and tear. He

screams, even as his clipped nails press into your arms. He is an only child. Pampered, with the skin of a young prince. You are the third of seven children, and counting. Your skin loses its softness early, adorned with calluses and scars from wayward knives and hot coals, unkempt nails and sharpened stones.

He wears a bright red pinafore over a white dress shirt. The blood-mixed dust will come out of the pinafore but not the tattered cotton top. That is done for.

Your mistake is not paying attention. His mother is chatting on the porch with your grandmother. They hear the cousin screaming and scramble down the steps. The aunts pounding fufu drop their pestles and join. Large hands push you into the sand. Someone slaps you. More voices close in. Neighbors. Your siblings. The dust stings your eyes. Your mind returns to your grounded body, and you pray your father won't hear of this. A futile prayer.

"You troublesome child," your grandmother spits. In her frustration, your grandmother wishes you away, out of existence. She doesn't mean it, but curses do not care about intent. They are resilient leeches, not unlike viruses.

Later, when the cousin and his mother return to their rightful place in Ho, your grandmother summons you to her room. You knock on her door, bracing yourself for her lashes. But she is not holding a cane. You survey the room, and you can't find the smooth rod. She pulls you to her, albeit roughly, and wipes your face and hands with a washcloth.

"No one wants a violent girl, Efua," your grandmother says as she cleans you. "You can't go on like this." You nod. You didn't think, you say. You are sorry. You promise to think next time, to shackle your fists and bite your tongue before you respond.

Your grandmother explains that the cousin was probably just repeating something he'd heard from your elder siblings. That you should forgive him. You nod. You don't forgive him. Your siblings, in mourning their own missing mothers, turned that mourning into acid, raining down on the younger members of the household. We understand, more than you can know. But you are nine, and all you catalogue is the hurt.

Soon, you are one of many, fighting for the love of one father, who is overwhelmed with responsibility such that every month, the time he spends with each of you is less than half the lifespan of a fly. In the race for his love, no one can maintain a winning streak.

The longest for you is three days, when your father praises your intellect and brags about you to his friends.

"My Efua will go to University," he says, even though when the time comes, he will not send you to secondary school because by then he'll have retired, with another new wife and fifteen children to his name. But at the moment of praise, his words are all you need to assure yourself that you still occupy a room in his mind.

It doesn't change the fact that you feel alone. So when it is your turn to boil water for everyone's morning baths and you are left in the dark until dawn, we offer to distract you from the shadows hovering behind the chicken coops, under the orange trees, and beyond the sugarcane fields. We know you hear us. You have heard us since the beginning.

You hesitate at first. We don't blame you. Your grandmother has warned you of witches and spirits, and how they can possess you, lead you to your death. Still, we appear harmless, and besides, you owe us from that time we fed you. So you open yourself to us.

"Find me more fairy tales," you say.

We love fairy tales. We can hide our own stories in them. Probably not stories we should share, not with a girl of nine, but we like having your ears.

We recite them to you from memory since we don't have hands this time to hold the physical books. And you can't recognize the boundaries between our realities and the tales other children find on shelves. You frown when we say the witch who captured Hansel and Gretel rises from the ashes as the village beauty, when Thumbelina's mother accidentally throws her out with a broken teapot (she napped inside it), and especially when you hear of the woman whose lover turns her into a dog.

"Was he a werewolf?" you ask. You have not heard any version of that story before.

"Sure," we lie. That story has changed so much we cannot recall which of us lived the beginning of it.

You start to share what we say with your friends at school. We should have warned you. We should have stopped you. Your friends, your well-meaning friends, tell their mothers, who tell their grandmothers, who tell your grandmother during a Revival Ser-

vice at her Pentecostal Church.

She blames us for your violent behavior, and while she is not wrong—sometimes our anger becomes entangled with yours—she does not see the big picture. She does not see how we protect you, how we mother you. Instead she consults her minister, who insists you get baptized and anointed. When your grandmother speaks of your time under the silk cotton tree, something clicks in his mind, every tale he has heard of the devil's abode, and he insists on purging said devil out of you.

The day of the purging, we tell you stories of warrior-women, brave women. We try to fill you with courage we do not have ourselves. It doesn't work. When the minister slaps your head with his oiled hand, and hard, foreign words from the congregations' tongues pierce you, when your grandmother pushes you into the circle every time you try to run, we wish we had hands to hold you. To carry you away like a mother would. We hope the prayers will end soon, that God will appear and declare all this a misunderstanding or perhaps sap them of their stamina, but nothing makes humans endure longer like a fear they need to chase away.

We contemplate appearing to them. Showing our translucent bones and empty eye sockets. The snakes in our hair. The maggots in the snakes. But if we do that, they will never leave you alone. They will make a pariah of you. We don't want that kind of future for you. So instead, we freeze, useless.

Still, we refuse to leave without your permission. You grow afraid after hours on your knees, the blood of Jesus invoked so many times you wonder how endlessly his blood must flow. The image of his suffering frightens you, and you banish us.

"Sorry," you say. "It's better this way."

We retreat into the shadows, becoming spectators again. We watch your life unravel, our voices echoing off the invisible walls between us.

When you are sixteen, your newest mother calls you a woman and asks you to leave like your elder sisters before you.

"Go, find work. Come back when you can be useful."

Your father is sick. He dies in his sleep while you are away. You do not get to ask him to forgive your leaving. There is no will that you know of, no investment to pay for your schooling. The

libraries supplement your education.

You leave to find a life for yourself, to carve a story that does not copy the one you were born into. You imagine a life in the city. Accra is good. Takoradi or Tema or Kumasi will also do. A husband with two children. A large house. Just like the happy families in the stories. You take the parts you like and throw out the parts we think can teach you something about the life in front of you.

You hustle your way to teachers' training college. Your father may not have had enough money to see you to University, but he did the next best thing. He taught you how to fend for yourself. You have a small room to yourself, the first you call your own, if only temporarily. Your next-door neighbor is a lovely girl called May, who asks your birthday the first time you meet, then shimmies into your life, hanging unfamiliar Nollywood posters on your wall, making you holiday sweets you forget to eat. One day, during your second job as a dishwasher at the local chop-bar, you meet a young man with bright eyes and uneven dimples, the left deeper than the right. His hair is curly and full, gleaming with shea butter. You have seen him before. He is taller than he looks from far away. He attends University at Cape Coast and tutors the girls in your class during the weekends.

"I've been watching you," he says. The left dimple caves, revealing a big smile. Everything is a joke to him. You don't mind this. You like the attention. You haven't felt like the center of anything for a long time now.

He walks you to class, between his own classes. Buys you lunch, then dinner. You start sleeping over. When he holds you, you don't dream of the dead. You dream of long fields, of rabbits hopping around a garden, guinea fowl pecking at corn, white goats crunching on cassava leaves. You feel light when you wake up. Some would say you are under a sweet spell or a drug, but you don't listen. They are unhappy, lonely cynics.

He paints for you a portrait of a girl on her mother's lap. Around the edges, he scrawls your favorite poem. "Movement Song" by Audre Lorde. Between sleep and waking, it is the first thing you see and you can almost hear a voice from behind the door, reading to you the way you were never read to after her leaving.

You know the words like August knows The Beatles.

"I don't understand it," he says, with that perpetual half-grin.

"I don't understand you," you say. He grins, and you poke his dimples until laughter bursts out of him like music. A peaceful, familiar sound. Not identical, but you no longer need it to be identical. A tear falls and you do not hide it fast enough.

"Tell me," he says. And you do. You tell him everything. We feel a little betrayed, but we welcome the warmth that floods your heart.

"Where is home for you?" you ask, when you finish your story.

"Nowhere," he says. For once, his face doesn't sing. A shadow looms over him for the rest of the night. When you finally fall asleep, you dream of a boy standing in a deep hole, his brothers above shoveling sand to bury him alive.

"Let's run away," he says in the morning.

"Run away where?"

"I don't know. Anywhere."

The government doesn't let you. His empty pockets don't let you.

August never marries you. He says he never wants to disappoint you and that sounds like a sure way for him to disappoint. If you had aunts near you, they would scream their disapproval. But your father is dead and your mother is in the wind. You make excuses. Weddings are too expensive. May, your friend from teacher's training, suggests the courthouse. You say you are considering it. Maybe because you are afraid of becoming your mother. Maybe because August never insists. He follows you. Visits every new place you find yourself. When the government sends you from Ho to Koforidua to Aboso, where May is stationed, he comes, dipping his foot into each place, leaving a mark.

The next time you hear our voices, you are about to become a mother. You have settled in Aboso, where you teach primary school. You and August agree he can find work wherever he can earn more and save for the home of your dreams. So long as he visits at least once every other week. The only single room you can

afford is one of four in a small compound house that resembles an oversized chicken coop. So that's what you call it. You have learned, over the years, to make yourself laugh. Your baby kicks in response, and you tell yourself she is laughing along.

You decorate your chicken coop room with stools, a 25-year-old carpet, and a new couch you pay for in monthly installments. You need at least one item to be new, to show yourself you've accomplished something of value, no matter how little. The carpenter who sells you the couch offers you a used shelf he was thinking about breaking apart, and this gives you the idea for your book business, which doesn't take, leaving you with a scattered collection of used romance novels and old legends hiding under your shelf, between the couch cushions, in the space between your headrest and the wall. From your landlady, you rent a plot of land to grow vegetables, which you sell on weekends to provide for yourself, your baby, and August too, when he manages to take a break from his many lectureships.

Between schoolwork and farm work, you talk to your baby. When the contractions peak in frequency, you are crouched over a potato mound. Your salary won't come for weeks, and the weight of responsibilities and debts echoes so loud in your head that you lose track of your days. You have a calendar for the baby's coming, but even that does not ground you in time, in space. First you crumble and murmur a prayer into the earth. Then you rise onto your elbows and knees, carefully avoiding the hoe's blades, the sharp twigs and thorns. You crawl to the street, where one of the boys selling coconuts helps you into a taxi. You ask someone to call May. From her convenience store by the roadside, your landlady cranes her inquisitive head, and you cannot hide yourself. You leave a message with her, in case August comes home.

"Why is he not here now?" she demands as the boys flag down a car. As if she cares. You know better.

"He just went to Winneba," you groan. "He should be back soon."

That seems enough for her. She has a son who is attending college in Winneba. The boy comes home every other day.

The nurses take their time. Snails! you want to shout at them. Time becomes a wave, slapping you, disorienting. Someone wheels you

into a room. They are telling you things. Some version of you is answering. Inside, another you howls.

Sometime between nurses, your eyes roll into the back of your head. The last thing you hear is a call for a doctor. *Now!* The snails' sudden urgency should have jolted you.

By then, you are almost gone. Closer to us, which means far from the world above. You find yourself in a cold, dark room. You think the floor is just wet at first, but then the water starts rising. Above you, the machines from your first world continue their beeping like impatient drivers in Kumasi traffic. You hear them but cannot see. You sit in the water and drape your arms around your knees.

Voices bump into one another, as if you are under the water. A baby cries. That sound is clear, like the baby is right beside you. That makes you move. Is it excitement? Are you suddenly overjoyed to see her face to face? All the stories you want to share!

You unwrap your arms. Your palms sweep the water, but they can't reach the bottom. What if your baby is drowning?

"Someone, help," you cry.

The nurses and doctors cannot hear you.

We hear you. We always hear you, dear child.

You hear our stomping and banging. We cannot appear to you. This is not like the meadow outside the cemetery. This is a room inside your head. The door is closed to us, but you are so near!

You hear our whispers and groans. Then you surprise us. You clamp your ears shut with wet hands. The baby's crying slowly fades.

When you wake in the first world, nurses and doctors gather around you, so many foreheads creased with worry.

How attentive, you think. You do not remember the room or the baby or us.

There is someone else. Your eldest sister, Faith, sits in a chair beside you. She holds your hand. Outside the door, you glimpse outlines of your brothers. Three of them. May, who is sleeping in an armchair, sits upright, asks how you feel.

"Am I dreaming?" you ask a nurse.

She frowns. "No, you're just waking up."

An artery ruptured in your head.

You have been thinking too much, they say. Not in those words, but that is how you translate the cause: high blood pressure, untreated.

They skirt around the dead elephant. You know they want you to ask or remember on your own, and you think them cruel. In time, you cave. You ask.

"We're sorry," they say. "She didn't make it. We're so sorry."

You don't want the body. You don't want the evidence, but even a stillborn deserves a proper burial. Faith says she will take care of the funeral.

Your siblings drive you home. May hugs you, says she will come over later.

"I heard only one baby-mother pair survived today," one brother whispers to another. They think your eyes shut means you are sleeping.

When you get home, the chicken-coop house is quiet, as if the other tenants have already heard and are practicing how to mourn. Your sister is trying to talk to you.

You stare at the daffodils on her dress. You think you see them dancing.

Who lived who lived who lived?

When August returns and hears the news, he sinks into the holed couch and buries his head in his palms. He is still in his teaching clothes—khaki pants, a button-up shirt, black leather boots. He stays for three weeks. He doesn't shout for two. Then he starts shouting in his sleep, muttering during the day. You can't make out the words. When he wakes up, sweating a river, you ask him what he needs.

"Space," he whispers.

He promises to come back soon. You ask for a date. You insist. He says a month. In the empty space he leaves behind, you start pacing in the chicken-coop room when you get home from work. You keep striking your toes against the hard legs of old furniture. To relieve your foot bones, you take yourself on walks. You walk from Aboso to Swedru, past the hair-braiders and the tailors and the businesswomen who lend you rice and beans when your salary is late. Sometimes these women stop you, point at your

bare feet, and offer a pair of sandals. Sometimes you end up on a farmer's hill, and they give you water and ask if you need directions getting home.

One day, you rest on a boulder in a neighborhood you don't know. It is late afternoon, between the end of school and sunset. You watch the children, some playing ampe, some throwing mud and sticks at each other. No one is crying. When a splash smears your sleeve, you expect them to stop and apologize, but they do not.

"Witch," one calls in your direction.

"Ghost," another squeals. There is a muffled sound, faraway voices, unburdened running. You think the wind is laughing. You glance around to see if the children are talking at someone behind you. There are no people, only trees and unfinished buildings, cement-block skeletons. Not even a pool to reflect your uncombed hair, the stains on your shirt. You turn back to the children, your mouth open to clarify, to tell them a story. But your audience is gone. They have moved away from you. Their mothers have called them home.