

turn is all that remains in the wake of slavery. If you close your eyes, you can imagine yourself once again safe in her arms. With a rifle pointed at your chest, you can travel home.

Every generation confronts the task of choosing its past. Inheritances are chosen as much as they are passed on. The past depends less on "what happened then" than on the desires and discontents of the present. Strivings and failures shape the stories we tell. What we recall has as much to do with the terrible things we hope to avoid as with the good life for which we yearn. But when does one decide to stop looking to the past and instead conceive of a new order? When is it time to dream of another country or to embrace other strangers as allies or to make an opening, an overture, where there is none? When is it clear that the old life is over, a new one has begun, and there is no looking back? From the holding cell, was it possible to see beyond the end of the world and to imagine living and breathing again?

The rebels, the come, go back, child, and I are all returnees, circling back to times past, revisiting the routes that might have led to alternative presents, salvaging the dreams unrealized and defeated, crossing over to parallel lives. The hope is that *return* could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order. And the disappointment is that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss re-makes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home.

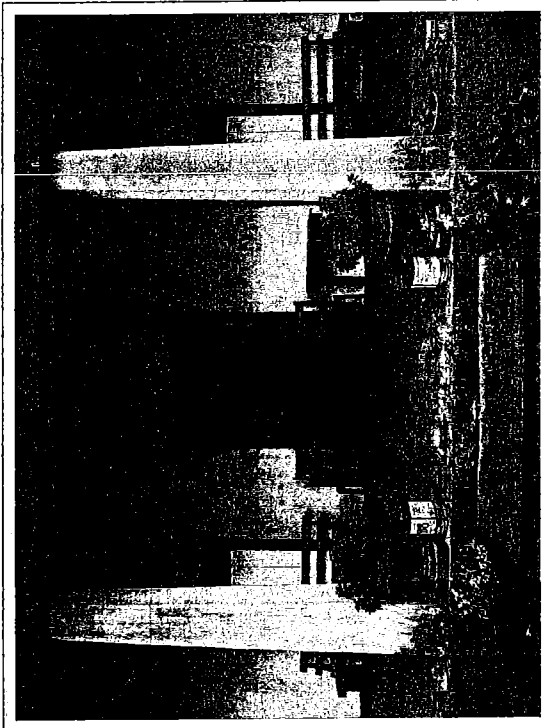
*I shall return to my native land.* Those disbelieving in the promise and refusing to make the pledge have no choice but to avow the loss that inaugurates one's existence. It is to be bound to other promises. It is to lose your mother, always.

## The Tribe of the Middle Passage

*The rich ones have come too late.* A glance at the luxurious homes towering on the seacoast, which were dwarfed only by Elmina Castle, provided all the proof needed. The stately white residences of the descendants of slaves fueled envy as well as the suspicion that slavery might not have been so bad given the wealth African Americans clearly possessed. Everyone in town agreed they had come too late to change anything and relished seeing the longings of the affluent defeated. Some wondered if the *burorya* had come to Ghana earlier, what might have been possible. Others mocked them, saying the nouveaux riches paraded every stitch of their wealth because they were desperate to show they were big men.

The ones who had come too late couldn't rid themselves of the label, so they accepted it grudgingly. Kobain and the others didn't flaunt their wealth, nor were they rich, but the disparity between the way they lived and the way most of the residents of Elmina lived was impossible to miss. The thatch and mud dwellings of the surrounding villages and the shanties, one-room cinder-block houses, and dilapidated colonial buildings of town made the spacious homes occupying the coast appear like mansions.

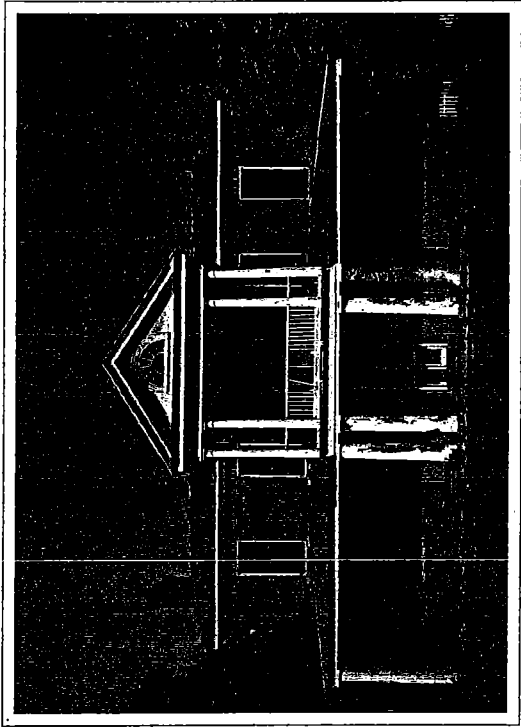
But the villas, cottages, and bungalows had little to do with wealth.



Debt was what they represented—a history of things owed, stolen, and destroyed. The elegant dwellings lined up along the seacoast reminded me of the mansions built in Liberia by ex-slaves from North and South Carolina and Mississippi, which replicated the world from which they had migrated, except now they were the new masters.

The homes of the rich ones were also the bittersweet reminder of the freedom they would never enjoy in America. The homes announced to the rest of Elmina that the rich ones had disembarked and that they were black *white men*. Every brick and pillar testified to the impossibility of returning and to the imprudence of believing in origins and trying to recover them. Built in the shadow of the castle, as if issuing a provocation—we will now thrive where we once were branded and sold—the homesteads were the product of the struggle still being waged between creditor and debtor races, predators and prey, merchants and slaves. What else could be the point of staking a future in the shadow of a slave fort? It was plain to see: prosperity was the face of dispossession.

*The tribe of the Middle Passage* was how Kohain and his neighbors, Imakhus and Nana Robinson, identified themselves. As Imakhus often re-



peated, “We are the descendants of Middle Passage survivors.” It was the tribe created by the rapacity of African elites, the territorial expansion of strong states, and the greed, cruelty, and arrogance of white men possessing the world. It was the tribe of those stolen from their natal land, stripped of their “country marks,” and severed from their kin.

Slavery made your mother into a myth, banished your father’s name, and exiled your siblings to the far corners of the earth. The slave was as an orphan, according to Frederick Douglass, even when he knew his kin. “We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but *slavery* had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sisters, and knew they must mean something; but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning.” The only sure inheritance passed from one generation to the next was this loss, and it defined the tribe. A philosopher had once described it as an identity produced by negation.

The Middle Passage was the birth canal that spawned the tribe. The Middle Passage was the death canal in which “the African died to what was and to what could have been.” Revisiting “what could have been” ex-

plained the presence of this tiny community of African Americans sandwiched between two slave forts. Had they come earlier, who knows what they might have done.

The tribe of the Middle Passage had returned to Africa, but they possessed no kin, clan, or a village home, all of the essential elements that defined belonging in the eyes of Ghanaians. The arrival of African Americans in Elmina could hardly be called a homecoming. Rather it was a continuation of a long local tradition of renting land to foreigners, which had started as early as the fifteenth century when the Portuguese first arrived. No one envisioned Kohain, a black rabbi and activist from Mount Vernon, New York, or Nana Robinson, a retired fireman, and his wife, Imahkus, from the Bronx, as errant children who had returned or as chickens come home to roost. No one rejoiced that they were back. They had been allowed to lease the beachfront property for ninety-nine years, since no foreigner could own land in Ghana. African Americans were tenants rather than sons and daughters. No one knew this better than the returnees.

One Africa Productions, which Kohain had founded along with Nana and Imahkus, organized The Door of No Return Ceremony, a reenactment of the slave trade intended to mend the psychic wounds of the descendants of slaves. At present they were embroiled in a trademark dispute with a Ghanaian tour operator about who owned the ritual. One Africa Productions also assisted African Americans who wanted to settle in Ghana and lobbied for a measure to grant them dual citizenship. Ghanaians opposed the measure, fearing that waves of African American riffraff would flood the country and dominate with their U.S. dollars.

It was ironic that the kind of African Americans who would fit best in Ghana were the ones least attracted to Africa. The straightened-hair, prim, Bible thumping, flag-waving black Christian conservatives would be much more at home in Ghana than the frayed band of dreadlocked and nappy-headed radicals who inundated the place. Evangelicals were welcome; protesters need not apply. Most Ghanaians were Christian, respectful of hierarchy and authority to a fault, straitlaced, and wary of foreigners in need of love. The country that most of us had come running from was the one of which they dreamed. They would have traded places with us in the blink of an eye.

I PREFERRED Kohain's house to the hotels in town. Renting a room from him was cheaper than lodging at Oyster Bay or Coconut Grove Hotel. Besides, after a day of wandering around in a slave fort, the last thing I wanted to do was explain myself to an inquisitive desk clerk or own up to the fact that I could not. The sprawling six-bedroom home, which was nestled along the ten-mile stretch of coast between Elmina and Cape Coast castles, provided a reprieve from curious glances and unanswerable questions. All the rooms in the villa had private baths, running water as circumstances permitted, electricity when there wasn't a power cut, and clean sheets and towels always.

Kohain was a pensive man with a broad, handsome smile and *pyees*, which he tucked behind his ears. I liked him because he never pontificated about the problems with Africa, which distinguished him from the majority of expatriates. Exhaustion had driven him to Ghana. Thirty years of participating in the struggle for black equality in the United States with seemingly little to show for it had worn him out, so he decided to jump ship. "It doesn't really matter where you live," he said. "Everywhere in the world African people are in struggle. This place is as good as any other."

From the back porch of his house, I could see Elmina Castle jutting into the ocean. I had always intended but never asked him or the Robinsons why they had chosen to build their homes within clear sight of the slave fort. Did the sight of the castle make them rejoice because they had been able to find their way back? Or was their proximity evidence of the fact that this was as near to home as they could get?

A passage from Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* described the folly of ex-slaves, who, blinded by filial duty, tried to return home. Although their villages had been destroyed by the slave trade, they continued to long for the world in which they once had lived. "The sickness of nostalgia," writes Armah, fixed the gaze of the wistful solely on the past. They were like children "hankering after situations forever lost" and "craving the love of blood relatives" who were better in memory "than they could have ever been in their own flesh."

Did the rich ones suffer from the sickness of nostalgia? Did I? Was longing or melancholy what defined the tribe of the Middle Passage? I had never thought of my life as being driven by filial duty. I had been a bad daughter, not a good one. My offenses were many: I became an atheist in the eighth grade and never failed to remind Father Cavanaugh of this during confession. I joined the Young Socialist Party at fourteen, primarily because my best friend at the time was high school organizer. I hung out with privileged, disaffected white kids. My mother feared they would lead me astray, and they did. I refused to accept a college scholarship for minority students partly funded by J. P. Stevens. At the time, I was participating in a national boycott campaign because of the company's treatment of its textile workers. I called my mother a handkerchief-head Negro when she tried to force me to attend the scholarship dinner, and she, in retaliation, called me an Oreo. I refused to wear my cap and gown for my high school and college graduations. There had been pressing political reasons for not doing so and the dissenter's armband was red for both occasions. I changed my name and shamed my parents. I lived with a college boyfriend in Lincoln Houses, a Harlem project in which he had been raised. I don't know which my mother was more embarrassed by, the fact that I was cohabiting out of wedlock or that I was living in public housing. Not much besides self-identification divided the lower middle class from the working poor, so my perilous spiral down the class ladder terrified my parents. I went to graduate school to study literature and not to medical school as my mother had hoped. My mother had wanted to become a doctor, following in the footsteps of her uncle, grandaunt, and great-grandmother. I replicated her failure.

I had spent most of my adulthood bucking parental designs, so it was hard to believe that I was now on the path of sacrificial daughters and dutiful sons. Yet I found myself, like the other members of *the tribe*, expecting to discover my legacy in a pile of stones that had been carried across the Atlantic in the fifteenth century. Looking at the castle from Kohnain's back porch, I wondered what besides dispossession had been transmitted from one generation to the next? In his *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*, Henry Highland Garnet had warned that not even death brought an end to the wretchedness of slavery, because the

children of the enslaved assumed the condition of their predecessors. Was this as true now as it had been in 1843? Could a negative inheritance be passed from one century to the next, as if, as George Jackson wrote, "time had faded nothing"?

I knew I wasn't in Ghana solely to reckon with slavery; if so, I could have traveled just as easily to Portugal or the Vatican, the localities that had inaugurated the Atlantic slave trade. The unrealized dreams of Nkrumah and King and the unfinished struggle of commoners, slaves, fugitives, and socialists had as much to do with it. I shared Mary Ellen's pessimism about the future, but I wanted to be proved wrong. I wanted to imagine a present not tethered to a long history of defeat, but this was difficult to do with Elmina Castle dominating the shoreline. It entailed a great effort to remind myself that the destruction of the holding cell hadn't been absolute and that I was part of what had lived on. Ghana was as good a place as any other to think about the afterlife of slavery and the future of the ex-slave. Secretly I hoped that it wasn't too late to believe in freedom dreams.

WITH MY EYES SHUT, the ocean sounded louder and even more threatening. It pushed the voices of Kohnain and his wife, Chessy, talking at the dining room table and isolated the veranda from the rest of the house as though it were a separate world of its own. The roar and clap of the Atlantic reverberated in my head. I was determined to listen until I couldn't bear it any longer.

The back door screeched across the porch floor and I opened my eyes. A handsome twenty-something-year-old man joined me on the porch. He took the seat next to me.

"It's so beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

"The castle?" I asked.

"No. The ocean."

"Yes. Somehow the Atlantic seems larger here than on the other side."

"Maybe it's just that it feels more tragic," he replied.

"At night it's so loud I can hardly sleep," I said, instantly regretting it. It seemed suggestive.

"Here you can't forget," he said.

I wished that were true, but I didn't contradict him.

Khalid was an aspiring filmmaker from Atlanta. It was his first visit to Ghana. He explained that he had come to Elmina because he felt an ancestral call. "All the folks taken across the waters are returning home through me," he said with absolute earnestness.

"Really," I murmured.

"It's like when I visit my grandmother's grave," he continued. "It feels like the entire family is out there with me. My father, my cousins, I mean everyone."

"I have never felt so alone in my life," I told him, revealing more than I had intended.

He was surprised. "Why?"

"I'm not sure if I can explain it." I heard my voice wavering like it does when I'm about to cry.

"It's okay," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"No reason to be."

"It feels like the crash to me, not the grave," I went on in an unsteady voice. "It's the place where the car hit the tree and your mother and brother died. And your father survived but he becomes an alcoholic, so it's like he's dead too or worse. But it's just a regular street for everyone else." I bit my lower lip but the tears streamed down my face, anyway. Khalid didn't say anything, which I appreciated. The silence allowed me to pull myself together. I laughed nervously and apologized again.

He squeezed my hand. "Sis. It's all right. Don't forget we're survivors." I wondered if a gesture of tenderness defined a tribe. Or if it was a fantasy of who you once were or who you never were. Was a tribe as fleeting and as treacherous as a promise of love? How was it that a stranger uttered "sis" in exactly the same tone as your brother or that one syllable could make you realize how very far away from home you had come? "I'm okay," I said, too quickly to be convincing.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Five months."

"Tell me what you like about Ghana."

"That's hard. There are lots of things," I replied.

"Just tell me the first thing that comes to mind."

"Okay. I like to watch the boys in my neighborhood play soccer. Some of them own sneakers and some don't. So the boys who have sneakers lend a shoe to the ones who don't. During the game, there are all these boys racing down the field with one sneaker and hoping that foot is going to be the lucky one."

"In Atlanta, kids are killing one another over shoes," he said. We both fell silent.

"They're poor here but less defeated," I said. "Maybe I'm just being romantic." Ghana wasn't Liberia or Sierra Leone or Congo. All reasons for hope hadn't disappeared.

"They didn't lose everything. We did," he responded.

"And all for so little," I said. "The worse thing is that it doesn't hurt any less now. It should, but it doesn't."

"Have you ever thought about staying for the long term?" he asked.

"In Ghana? No, I'm nonreturnable goods," I answered. "What about you?"

"No. I mean it's great here. I totally respect Kohain and the rest of them, but to me it would be like trying to live in a cemetery. I like visiting my grandmother, but I don't plan on taking up residence there."

We laughed and listened to the ocean long after our words had faded away.