

# Introduction

AT SOME POINT in 2018, I realized, with no small amount of horror, that J. Kenji López-Alt and I are the only nonwhite authors whose work has been accepted into the canon of general cookbooks. *The Joy of Cooking*, *How to Cook Everything*, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and every other general cookbook that comes to mind were written by white authors. A question I've long had inside me but was never quite able to articulate finally formed in my head: If good cooking is universal, then why is only a tiny sliver of the population granted the opportunity to write about it authoritatively?

A year and a half after my book, *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, was published, after it had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for eight weeks, after I'd been presented with the James Beard Award for best general cookbook, after the book was in its tenth printing and a global documentary series based on it was announced, I received an invitation to sit on a panel about general cookbook writing. The other two proposed panelists were (perfectly wonderful) white female colleagues of mine, the authors of books I love and value deeply.

While the invitation was full of flattery and many kind words, it didn't include an honorarium or an offer to pay for my travel or accommodations. Since I already planned to be in the area for another event, and since I welcomed the chance to sit on the panel with my beloved colleagues, I wrote back to the organizers to thank them for the invitation and say that I'd be happy to participate as long as they invited another writer of color to join as a panelist or a moderator. To relieve them of the burden of having to seek out potential panelists and moderators of color, I included lists of both for their consideration.

Two days later I received an email suggesting that I sit on an entirely different panel—a much more diverse one!—all about ethnic cooking. Maybe that was more appealing to me?

At first glance it seemed like an entirely reasonable offer, so I was confused by the fireball of anger I felt in my stomach. I got up from my desk and took a walk around the block before responding. I wrote that as someone who has experienced coded and noncoded misogyny and racism throughout my career, and indeed life, I'm making it a point to use my platform to effect change. I asked them to consider diversifying multiple panels instead of putting all the people of color on a single panel, thereby turning our races and ethnicities, rather than our work, into a topic of conversation.

In truth I'm not interested in discussing race for the sake of race. On the other hand, I am interested in combating the prevailing notion that only white people can write successful general books about cooking while people of color have the authority to write only about our ancestral cuisines. And I've learned that one way I can do that is to make inclusion and equity a condition for my participation in projects and events.

I was still burning when, days after that exchange, I received the invitation to edit this collection. I've grown too wary to expect more from a system that has no incentive to change its ways—I'd rather build a new one. So I answered quickly, with an enthusiastic yes, thrilled by the opportunity to build upon the progressive foundation laid last year by this series' inaugural editor, the legendary Ruth Reichl.

Months later, when I sat down to read through series editor Silvia Killingsworth's thoughtful selections, I considered using this opportunity to make a bold statement by exclusively choosing works by people whom the food world has historically undervalued and marginalized: people of color, queer folks, and women. The thought of letting conviction guide my choices was initially thrilling. Then it dawned on me that following such logic, I couldn't include Mark Arax's "A Kingdom from Dust," which was the single most powerful story I read in 2018 and the only one I knew I had to include from the moment I took the assignment. If this reasoning meant excluding one worthy piece, then surely it would lead to other blind spots too.

I thought about how, if the tables were turned, I'd want my own work to be considered for its merit and not my identity. I owed it to others to do the same for them. So I deprioritized ideology and instead decided to read everything blind. I printed out all the stories and asked a friend to redact the names of authors and publications with a marker. Then I spent two months reading and rereading until I'd narrowed the original group of one hundred pieces to about forty. At that point I knew I'd have to start breaking my own heart, because I loved all forty dearly.

I wasn't sure how to go on winnowing down my selections, so I thought I'd put names to each of the pieces to check how inclusive I was being. To my surprise and delight, the list I'd chosen blindly skewed toward women, people of color, and queer people. Credit for this goes to Ms. Killingsworth, who demonstrated impeccable taste with her initial selections. By handing me a truly diverse list, she carried a huge part of the load and relieved me of the burden of having to make identity a criterion for inclusion in the collection. Not only did she send works by writers from all backgrounds, but she also scanned the broader writing landscape, including stories from publications far beyond the scope of traditional food media. Ms. Killingsworth granted me the luxury of choosing pieces for no other reason than that I felt they were truly distinctive and distinguished.

Together with Ms. Killingsworth, I've come up with a collection I believe represents the best of food writing in America in 2018. But what does that mean, exactly? As I read and considered pieces for selection, I welcomed the opportunity to reexamine the terms *best*, *American*, and *food writing*.

At this point in my career, I've grown pretty cynical about "best of" lists in general and ones concerned with food in particular—it's all so subjective, so personal. Neither of my two industries—culinary and media—boasts an exemplary record of rewarding people who stray from an all-too-narrow definition of excellence. Without much trouble I can recall several egregious instances of narrow-sightedness and exclusion that have perpetuated the idea that whiteness, maleness, and a focus on Western-derived technique are somehow critical to success in these industries. Three come immediately to mind: *Time* magazine's unforgettable 2013 "Gods of Food" feature, which skewed

overwhelmingly white and male; San Pellegrino's "World's Best Female Chef" award, which is handed out alongside "World's Best Chef" and whose mere existence suggests that female chefs are somehow disqualified from consideration in the latter category; and *Chef's Table*, one of the most influential food television series in the Western world, choosing to feature female and nonwhite chefs in fewer than a quarter of its episodes. And the list goes on.

How can we declare that a work is the best in its field if entire swaths of contenders aren't even considered? And also, what does *best* even mean? For what is the best part of a landscape? Is it the most dramatic peak to which the eye is immediately drawn? Is it the way the sunlight reflects off the calm surface of the glassy sea? The parting of the clouds? Is it the tiny bird or the soft gray moss? I'd argue that what makes a landscape breathtaking, sublime, is all its parts—even, or perhaps especially, the parts we might not always notice immediately. The awesome must be balanced by the subtle. The bright needs the contrast of the dark. Only a broad perspective can capture the entirety of a landscape, and so with this collection, I've aimed to present a panoramic survey of the year's best work.

I've always believed that good food writing is simply good writing: compelling, intelligent, at times lyrical, and driven by narrative and voice. Good food writing evokes the senses. It makes us consider divergent viewpoints. It makes us hungry and motivates us to go out into the world in search of new experiences. It charms and anger us, breaks our hearts, and gives us hope. And perhaps most importantly, it creates empathy within us.

Across the collection, pieces do all of this and more. Helen Rosner stunned me with her ability to process Anthony Bourdain's death quickly enough to reflect with both criticism and sensitivity on his journey as a human, a celebrity, and a feminist in her piece, "Anthony Bourdain and the Power of Telling the Truth." I never knew the history of veganism, which Khushbu Shah wrote about in "The Vegan Race Wars: How the Mainstream Ignores Vegans of Color," but in the year and a half since I first read the piece, I've referred to it countless times in conversation. By broadening my understanding, it earned its place here. Sam Anderson's meditation on language, flavor, and metaphor in "Flavors of Space-Time" perfectly describes the challenge anyone who writes about food must face—how to use words to describe a wordless sense: taste.

And of course there is Mr. Arax's "A Kingdom from Dust," the obvious result of many, many years of steadfast reporting on a famously media-shy subject, Stewart Resnick. I first heard of the billionaire "farmers" Mr. Resnick and his wife, Lynda, about ten years ago, when I learned that they, as private citizens, control and use—by various rights and contracts—more water than any other person in my drought-ridden home state of California. I've been anxiously waiting for a report on the Resnicks since then. Mr. Arax delivered a story with a grander scope and more damning detail than I could've dared to wish for. As with Ms. Shah's piece, I've referred to it repeatedly since it was first published, beseeching everyone I know to take the time to read it. And now I beseech you, dear reader, by including it here.

All the pieces in this collection have moved me in one way or another. They shifted, and continue to shift, my perspective, and I believe that they will do the same for you. My hope is that you'll walk away from the collection with an expanded idea of what the "best" can look like.

And in an era when the very definition of *American* is under constant debate, I think it's worth examining that part of this honorific a little more closely too. In a country where everyone but Native Americans and the descendants of enslaved peoples is an immigrant, anti-immigrant rhetoric certainly feels more pointed than ever. And since the vitriolic words and actions tend to be directed at people who are not of European descent, it feels like every day the definition of *American* contracts, becoming more and more a synonym for *white*.

With this collection I made it a priority to counteract that contraction by choosing stories that broaden our cultural understanding. Tim Carman's story, "In the Twin Cities, Asian Chefs Feel the Sting of Andrew Zimmern's Insults. They Say His Apology Isn't Enough.," is a phenomenal example of careful, balanced reporting about a complicated subject. By spending time with both Mr. Zimmern and a handful of chefs left offended in the wake of his comments denigrating Chinese American food and proclaiming that he's "saving the souls" of everyone from "having to dine at these horse— — restaurants," Mr. Carman was able to convey an Asian American story rife with emotion by letting everyone speak for themselves.

In her paean to peanuts, “Hot Wet Goobers,” Shane Mitchell gives us a transcontinental history of the legume while showing us how it’s dug its way into various identities of the American South. With pieces like this one, Ms. Mitchell has firmly established herself as one of the great food writers in this country for her ability to sensitively roam the rich yet tricky culinary terrain of the South without avoiding or whitewashing the shameful parts of its history.

Michael Twitty gives us another look at the African roots of southern cooking in his essay “I Had Never Eaten in Ghana Before. But My Ancestors Had.” “In Ghana,” Mr. Twitty writes, “it’s clear I have inherited a remarkably rich culinary tradition . . . Yet everywhere we look are reminders of home . . . There is barbecued meat on every corner, roasted ears of corn and sweet potatoes, bits of fried chicken cooked fresh on the spot, and black-eyed-pea fritters. Deep-fried smelt and *akple* look like fish and grits.”

In “The Gay Man Who Brought Tapas to America,” Mayukh Sen shines light on Felipe Rojas-Lombardi. The all-but-forgotten Peruvian immigrant was the founding chef of Dean & DeLuca before going on to open a tapas bar in Chelsea in 1982, arguably blazing the trail for every small plate of food we now see on restaurant menus across the country.

Many more of the selections, including those by Melissa Chadburn, Soleil Ho, Charlee Dyroff, Priya Fielding-Singh, and Marilyn Noble, lend depth and dimension to the ways that food is integral to the stories we tell about ourselves as Americans, in all the myriad ways that they may manifest.

People often assume that *food writing* is just another term for restaurant criticism. But as a food writer myself, I couldn’t be less interested in writing about restaurants. And while I don’t often find myself compelled to read reviews of them either, I’ve loved reading Hannah Goldfield’s work in *The New Yorker*, where she brings a refreshing sense of humor, duty, and joy to her post as the magazine’s restaurant critic. As the sole piece of criticism in the collection, “Black History at Harlem Hops” is tightly written yet full of context and charm, as Ms. Goldfield’s work tends to be. The lack of other critical works perhaps reflects my general disinclination toward the form (I never said these choices weren’t totally subjective!), though I look forward to reading the critical contributions of Ms. Ho, Tejal Rao, and Patricia Escárega, three women of color named to critic posts at major newspapers in 2018.

Of course food writing can take any number of other forms. In “The Life of a Restaurant Inspector: Rising Grades, Fainting Owners,” Priya Krishna makes her job as a journalist look easy. But as someone who has both worked in restaurant kitchens and reported for the *New York Times*, I know precisely how difficult it can be to get proximate enough to a subject as guarded as a municipal inspector to coax from him the narrative detail needed to satisfy an editor. That is to say, Ms. Krishna accomplished something nearly impossible and certainly very frustrating, and yet her story reads as effortless and even playful, despite being about the generally unglamorous topic of restaurant inspection. If this isn’t proof of a skillful writer, then I don’t know what is!

This collection comprises a full panoply of formats and styles, proving just how omnipresent food is in our lives, and that a great writer can use it to tell any sort of story. Yemisi Aribisala’s essay-cum-meditation on eggs, “The Girls Who Fainted at the Sight of an Egg,” weaves together food and sex and bodies into a luminous tapestry of flavor, shame, and memory. And then there is the brilliantly, tirelessly reported “Sliced and Diced: Here’s How Cornell Scientist Brian Wansink Turned Shoddy Data into Viral Studies About How We Eat,” which answered many questions I didn’t even know I had. After Stephanie M. Lee’s landmark investigation was published, Cornell University found Dr. Wansink guilty of academic misconduct, and he resigned—an incredible result for an incredible work of journalism.

The final lens through which I surveyed these works was time. Last year was filled with myriad challenges, disappointments, and successes. I wanted to make sure that both up close and from a distance, this collection accurately represented our year in food, in America, and on this precious planet.

In 2018 the food world, and indeed the world at large, suffered the loss of two of our greats. It was agonizing enough to lose Anthony Bourdain, our most beloved guide and teacher. But when our pioneering, poetical critic Jonathan Gold passed away a few short months later, it felt like a cruel joke. Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft’s reflection on the profound influence of Mr. Gold’s writing on his life as an Angeleno, and as a human, felt like an appropriate way to honor the critic.

The year also brought devastation in the form of wildfires—the most destructive in California history. The fires ravaged the largest and most profitable wine and agriculture industries in the country and certainly foreshadow worse blazes to come. Along with the autumn fires and other natural disasters came the publication of another alarming, unsparing report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, imploring policymakers and citizens alike to heed its calls to limit global climate change to 1.5° C. In “Food Fight,” Kathryn Schulz skillfully examines the intersection of cooking, politics, and the precariousness of our natural world.

At long last, 2018 saw the election of Native Americans to Congress. Historically underrepresented in politics, Native Americans have also long been victims of underrepresentation and appropriation in the culinary world. Ms. Noble’s piece examines a particularly shameful instance of such appropriation—the Epic Provisions bison bar. And by contrast, Ms. Dyroff’s “In Kotzebue, Alaska, Hunters Are Bringing Traditional Foods—and a Sense of Comfort—to Their Local Elders” allows us to hope that Native customs are indeed living on in the forms of food traditions, caribou, and seal oil.

With so many stories that reflect the bitter circumstances of our world, the collection would have been incomplete without a little something sweet. In addition to infusing “Big in Japan” with her signature curiosity, intelligence, and wit, Ms. Rao, my *New York Times Magazine* colleague, impressed me by managing to sneak the words *chocolatory* and *premiumization* by our hard-lining copyeditors. And with his attempt to correlate the Finnish love of *salmiakki*, or salty licorice, and the country’s leading position on the 2018 World Happiness Report, Mark Binelli made me laugh out loud a dozen times. His piece was so convincing that I even felt moved enough to try some salty licorice myself—well, almost.

My hope is that the pieces that make up this collection will bring you joy and challenge your preconceived notions. They’ll make you think, feel, and, inevitably, want to eat. As the twentieth-century poet and activist Muriel Ruckeyser said, the universe is made of stories, not atoms. In order to know our universe better, then, we need to hear as many different sorts of stories, from as many varied voices, as possible. In that spirit, I present to you twenty-five powerful, compelling, beautiful, charming, heartbreaking bits of that universe. Happy reading!

(For the record, the event organizers did diversify the general cooking panel, and I did join it.)

FEATURES

# I Had Never Eaten in Ghana Before. But My Ancestors Had.

With oral histories and a DNA test as his guides, a food historian travels to Ghana for a taste of the home he's never known.

BY MICHAEL W TWITTY

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL W. TWITTY

The six of us have given our undivided attention to Auntie Mabel, owner of the eponymous Mabel's Chop Bar in Ho, Ghana. Here the kitchen is an outdoor building, a complex of covered shelters where peeling, washing,

and butchering happen. Large cast-iron pots sit atop fires built on three stones. The chop bar is a place where you eat whatever is made from day to day, and today Mabel's table is laden with ginger, garlic, suya spices (a West African version of garam masala), crushed Maggi cubes, tomatoes, and shitor, a hot pepper sauce made from bird's eye chiles and powdered crayfish, tenderly simmered and stirred until it achieves the consistency of gravy-meets-preserves.

As she prepares stock for the meat (more on that in a moment), Auntie Mabel looks every bit the African American or Afro-Caribbean grandma we know from home, right down to tasting the resultant sauce off the back of her left hand. We are in the country of the Ewe people in eastern Ghana, and Mabel's courtyard is very still with the end-of-season dry heat, nearly 100 degrees. The covered space we sit in is a welcome shelter, and the whole scene, right down to the corrugated iron, reminds me of my first trips to the Deep South.



From left, chefs Kenyatta Ashford, Josmine Evans, Kezia Curtis, and Harold Caldwell outside of Mabel's Chop Bar. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL W. TWITTY

Auntie Mabel does not have time for our smartphone photos. She works with absolute disregard for our purpose, worrying instead about getting us fed before the afternoon rush. We are African American chefs who

have come to Ghana to learn about the cooking of our ancestors. Our leader is fellow culinarian Ada Anagho Brown, the president of Roots to Glory Tours, a group specifically charged with bringing African Americans linked by DNA to their ancestral homelands. Four of us have never set foot in Africa, and I have never been to Ghana. Of those who have tested to get a sense of our genetic roots, all of us trace back to this country. For me, it's a staggering 32 percent of my DNA.

I am an African American, gay, Jewish culinary historian whose life has been shaped by a search for my roots and an exploration of the ways food shapes identity. Food has played a deep and active role in empowering my people to overcome oppression, and how we do so is our greatest form of cultural capital. For most African Americans, slavery forcibly cut our immediate ties to the motherland. Needing to know more about our roots has become one of the central issues in our identity. That's why we're here in Ghana. We need to know that this is really home.



Author Michael Twitty takes photos at Cece Chop Bar in Kumasi, Ghana. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL W. TWITTY

Back at the chop bar, a bucket emerges from the refrigerated storage area. Power is precious in West Africa,

and refrigeration in the countryside is a luxury, but Mabel is known for her dedication to cleanliness and order. She pulls off the top of the bucket and reveals the cut-up carcass of *Thryonomys gregorianus*, the lesser cane rat, known across English-speaking West Africa by its descriptive nickname, grasscutter. Pizza Rat has nothing on this 15-to-20-pound bad boy. Low in fat, high in protein, it is vegetarian and tender and said to be the number-one bushmeat, followed by antelope, porcupine, and certain types of snakes and lizards.

Kenyatta Ashford and Josmine Evans—fellow chefs on this journey—take turns picking up the grasscutters by the tail, snapping pictures, and admiring their heft. Both chefs have roots in Louisiana, where muskrats and nutria can be dinner. Perhaps that’s the source of their fearlessness. I wince and laugh with Kezia Curtis, a caterer from Detroit, as earthy and open-minded as they come. Ada keeps saying “grah-hhs-kottah” the way the Ghanaians do, smiling and mimicking the animal’s sharp front teeth. As a Jewish guy who loves his roast chicken and brisket, I am feeling mighty not in my roots at the moment. This rat is the *treif*-est thing I have ever been asked to eat.



Preparing herring and sardines for smoking near Accra. PHOTO BY KENYATTA ASHFORD

My good friend Harold Caldwell, a historical interpreter at Colonial Williamsburg and a trained chef in the 18th-century tradition, is ready to engage with old *Thryonomys gregorianus*. Not far from the courtyard, we walk through a back alley to the butchering yard, where a young man in his Sunday best is sweating over a fire. He places each grasscutter on the grate and quickly scrapes away the singed hair. Within seconds the carcass is white as snow. Harold, also in long sleeves and used to working in the searing heat, joins in and makes the young brother smile but stops after three scrapes, noting the singed hair on his own arms and hands. The grasscutters are gutted immediately and cut into pieces. While we watch this gruesome display, goats, cats, and chickens skulk around as if there is nothing to see, and a man arrives with freshly shot duiker, a dainty little antelope from the rainforest.



Twitty (third from right) poses with his fellow travelers and local Ghanaians in Central Ghana. PHOTO BY ADA ANAGHO BROWN

We retire to the back of the chop bar and take turns pounding fufu, a soft, gluey loaf of boiled yam. Immediately Harold and I think of possum cooked with yams, a treat mentioned often in collected oral histories from folks who were enslaved in the American South. Three women dipping pestles into water knock away at the yam in an ancient beat, making it look easier than it actually is. We stumble at the process, trying not to knock ourselves out and to keep the yam off the ground.

Harold and I start singing an old song passed down by our enslaved ancestors in America, changing the words “I’m gonna beat this corn” to “I’m gonna beat this yam, unh-huh!/I’m gonna beat it good/unh-huh/gonna beat this yam/gonna beat this yam and eat it ’til my belly full!” Within seconds the women whose muscles power the chop bar are clapping and call-and-response singing with us, absolutely delighted. When the fufu is ready, we retire to the courtyard. I eat chicken and stew while everybody else chows down on the grasscutter, admiring the perfect flavor of the stock and the juicy tenderness of the meat. Harold offers me a bite, but I shake my head no. As dedicated as I am to learning about the culinary heritage of a third of my ancestors, I’m not crossing this river today.



Cooking okra soup in Ewe country PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL W. TWITTY

In the early 1770s, my sixth great grandfather was captured at war and exiled from his homeland in the Asante Kingdom, now the central heart of present-day Ghana. Within six months of his capture he found himself enslaved in the developing James River port of Richmond. By the time it was the new capital of Virginia in 1780, he was under the lash of George Todd, a Scottish merchant whose surname would carry down through the centuries as our name while my African ancestors’ name was lost. But what mattered most remains: our Asante origins, revealed to me some 240 years later by an elderly relative and later confirmed by DNA.

When oral history, genetic tests, historical context, and my informed imagination combined in a moment of

revelation, my whole life danced before me. I was a teenager when I drifted into the Ghana embassy in Washington, D.C., as carelessly as you walk into a gas station. I interviewed everybody in that place, including a gentleman who became my Ghanaian cultural mentor. “The ancestors have sent me to make sure you become a proper Ghanaian man,” he said.

In my mind I had been preparing for this trip for decades, nibbling at facts and words and recipes. Ghana, it seems, was calling me.





Kezia Curtis stirs kenkey, a fermented corn dough. PHOTO BY KENYATTA ASHFORD

In Ghana, it's clear I have inherited a remarkably rich culinary tradition, largely expressed through the chop bar. Yet everywhere we look are reminders of home. The white clay that people still eat as a sort of folk medicine in the American South is sold in the market in Kumasi. There is barbecued meat on every corner, roasted ears of corn and sweet potatoes, bits of fried chicken cooked fresh on the spot, and black-eyed-pea fritters. Deep-fried smelt and akple look like fish and grits.

Here are the gourds we used to scoop water out of wells, the profusion of fruit both wild and cultivated. Street vendors sell fried everything— river shrimp, cocoyam (taro) chips, plantains, mangrove oysters, and bananas. Hospitality is in every gesture. Our cousins love cooking with us; we help clean freshly caught anchovies and stir thick pots of molten corn mush destined to be kenkey, a popular fermented starch in southern Ghana. There is silver herring, orange-red palm oil, bright pink little rock lobsters, speckled guinea fowl, deep green kontomire (cocoyam leaves that look like collard greens), and basil grown by the front door just like our grandmothers did in the Deep South.



Bowls of African red rice and black-eyed peas at the Kumasi Central Market. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL W. TWITTY

But this is not a food story that comes without cost. Hours after our arrival we visit the Nkrumah monument, a powerful symbol of African independence and the fight against colonialism. We learn about the welcome that Kwame Nkrumah, the man who spearheaded the movement that led to Ghana becoming the first independent nation in sub-Saharan Africa in 1957, extended to Africans in the diaspora. He wanted us here, because this place is in part where we come from. To be here, though, is to recognize a painful truth: We left as enslaved people.

Coming back is reparative. We make our pilgrimage to Elmina, Anomabu, and Cape Coast Castle. “You are fulfilling your ancestors’ dream to come back home,” Ada tells us plainly. “They never thought they would come back. You are giving them peace.” We step five feet into the pitch darkness of the men’s dungeon at Cape Coast Castle, conspicuously placed under the chapel where the same men who violated women and children and subjugated formerly proud warriors prayed for their own souls’ salvation. The sea roils and roars, but I hear nothing except silence down there. And then a weeping.

I turn around and my dear brother Harold, who had been bursting with joy at every new and familiar taste, is sobbing. Then we are all sobbing. This is a horrific space, where nail marks still mar the walls. Yet we are facing an inescapable gratitude. Every second endured in this hell, followed by the hell of the bottom of a boat in the Middle Passage, followed by the hell of slavery and sharecropping and Jim Crow and 40 years of liberty(-ish) have led us back here, now finally with the freedom to return our genes and souls to the place where it all began, even humanity itself.

I cannot take my eyes off Josmine and Kezia. Their eyes are not their own but instead the lenses of defiant grandmothers, once young women themselves, from centuries past. The women’s dungeon has a slot in one of the doors through which those who resisted violation were fed. These are the ones who kept the roots of soul going, from the village to the market to the memories in their own minds, from here to the Middle Passage to the plantation. This place, in all its horror, is indispensable.

We leave the dungeon sober and angry but still grateful. We tumble out the door of no return exhausted, watching the Fante fishermen and their children dutifully tending their nets as twilight sets in; drums and gongs signal the pulling in of the catch.

The door of no return has become the door of return. We reenter the fort. A sign welcomes African Americans like ourselves—welcomes us home. We have the eyes of reclaimed orphans. Broken again, we are reset to heal in new ways. We pass around plates of jollof rice and red-red (plantains and beans cooked with red palm oil). Deep sighs turn to deep smiles and we offer up prayers of gratitude and hope, addressing one another in our new Ghanaian names—Dzifa and Sedzugi, Elikim, Yayra, Mawuli. Every step has increased knowledge of our past and set a path for the future. Aware the ancestors’ souls are inside us, we are hungrier than ever before. *Akpe na Mawu*, as they say in the Ewe language. Thanks be to the Creator.

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