MELISSA FISCHER

THE ADVOCACY

Foreword by

Daniel B. Oerther

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For Joann

FOREWORD

by Daniel B. Oerther

In their debut novel, Melissa Fischer opens a door into the mind and spirit of Louisa "Lou" Lehmann, a civil engineer and Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana's mining belt. As I walked through that door, I was compelled to read page after page of a story that does justice to the challenges, disappointments, and triumphs of engineers. Fischer's convicting prose elevated the read to something spiritual.

As engineers, we are too often pigeonholed as neurotic, socially inept, excelling only within a narrow range of mathematical gymnastics. Fischer doesn't pretend that this is myth. They embrace the engineer stereotype, giving Lou foibles that we can all recognize. But Fischer doesn't settle for caricature. While I was reading *The Advocacy*, the term that came to mind over and over was *cura personalis*, a Latin phrase taught with tenacity by every Jesuit-influenced institution. "Caring for the whole person"—body, mind, and spirit—comes screaming through the pages of every chapter.

Employing a Faulkner-like stream of consciousness, Fischer intertwines seemingly disparate threads—feminism, obsession-compulsion, *The Rifleman*—until the pattern, at first incomprehensible, yields whole cloth.

I've worked to bring clean water and adequate sanitation to villagers along the equator. I've spent time in Ghana. And yet, *The Advocacy* introduced me to vital nuance I was missing in my views. I can still remember my first meal of fufu and the patience

that was shown by my host in reteaching me how to eat. "If you like fufu, you like Ghana," my host explained with a grin, the memory of which I cherish.

Fischer has a gift for honoring such moments of connection, for taking us back to a time before cell phones and iPads, to the vital necessity of seeing and being seen. Lou is an engineer like me. Her career—as a woman succeeding in a "man's" profession—is inspirational. I'm excited that my students will come into their own with bold Lou blazing the way. *The Advocacy* is a must-read for every engineer; for everyone who knows, works with, or loves an engineer; for everyone who knows or has curiosity about Ghana; and for all concerned with environmental and social justice.

If you are a development professional, you'll find insight into the creativity of the engineer's mind. We aren't the same as the scientists that Lou knows, and we aren't the same as the businessmen and politicians of Lou's world. We're engineers. And as Fischer shows beautifully, that means we have the ability to build bridges and appear to be two things at once.

Daniel B. Oerther
July 2019

KRADIN

Akan children are often given several names, including a traditional Akan name, a religious or Western name, and a kradin or "soul name" correlating with their day of birth. Kradin follow this convention:

Day/English	Day/Twi	Soul Name	
		Female	**Male**
Sunday	Kwasiada	Akosua	Kwasi
Monday	Dwoada	Adwoa	Kwadwo
Tuesday	Benada	Abena	Kwabena
Wednesday	Wukuada	Akua	Kwaku
Thursday	Yawoada	Yaa	Yaw
Friday	Fiada	Afia	Kofi
Saturday	Memeneda	Ama	Kwame

The soul name is not just a nickname for children. It may be the preferred name in adulthood. The spellings of kradin may vary depending on the bearer's heritage or the dialect of Akan they speak.

LANGUAGE

There are at least seventy-nine indigenous languages spoken in Ghana. Together with their respective dialects, Ghana boasts of more than two hundred fifty tongues. Akan is the most spoken indigenous language, native to the Akan people, and used as a second language by a majority of the populace. Twi is one of the main dialects of the Akan language, with different subvarieties as Asante Twi and Akuapem Twi. Asante Twi prevails in the Ashanti Region, including in and around Obuasi. The migration to the mining area of people from other parts of Ghana, Africa, and the world contributes to a rich expression. Inconsistencies in spelling are deliberate reflections of the variability found within the local milieu.

Asante Twi, just like the English language, employs the Latin script in its orthography. Twi, however, has two vowels, "ɛ" and "ɔ," which are absent in the English alphabet. For readers who possess no familiarity with Twi, it is simplest to consider "ɛ" as the sound of the letter "e" in the word "pen," and "ɔ" as the sound of the letter "o" in the word "pot." Consonant clusters and digraphs may be simplified as follows: "gy" as "j," "ky" as "ch," "dw" as "djw," and "hy" as "sh." Some useful pronunciations:

Adwumadiem	A djoo' ma dee yem
Agyeman	A' je mai *(with the last /i/ pronounced as in "pit")*; /adʒɪmaɪ/

Akua	A koo' a
akye	a' chi *(with /i/ pronounced as in "pit")*; /atʃɪ/
akyire	a chee re *(with the last /e/ pronounced as in "eight")*
cedi	si' di
Ghanaian	Ga nay' un
Gyimi	Jimmy
Gyimiso	Jimmy soo
hyia	shee' a
Kakraba	Ka kra' ba
Kwadwo	kwa jo /kwædʒo/
kyɛw	cho
maadwo	ma' a djo /adʒʊ/
Takyi	Te' chee
Tekyiman	Te' chee mai *(with the last /i/ pronounced as in "pit")*

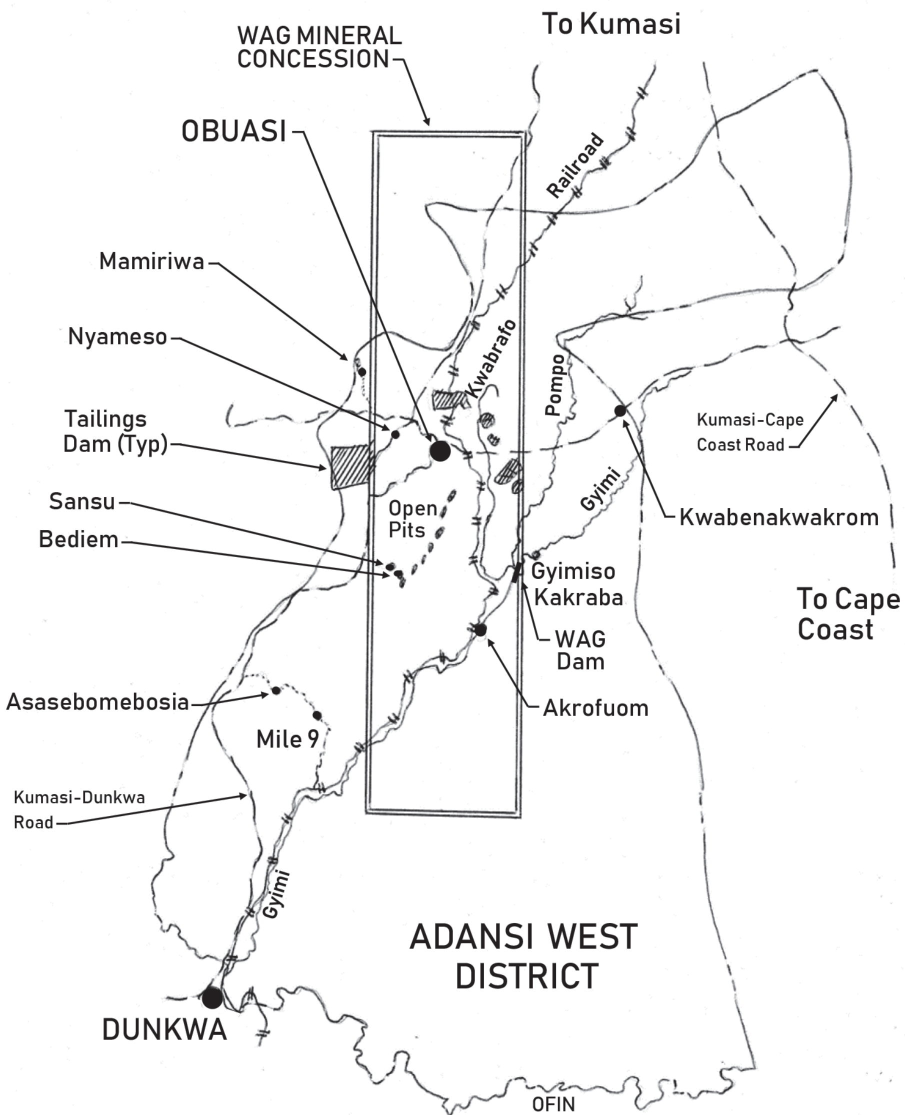
The spellings of places reflect spellings that were in use at the time of the story, which, in many instances, were anglicized. For example, "Ɔboase" is the Twi spelling of the anglicized "Obuasi." Residents of the town spelled the name as, "Obuasi"; similarly, formal documents retained the anglicized version. "Adanse" is Twi, while "Adansi" is anglicized. Both spellings are in use. The use of "Adansi" in the novel reflects the practice of the district administration, which spelled its name as "Adansi West."

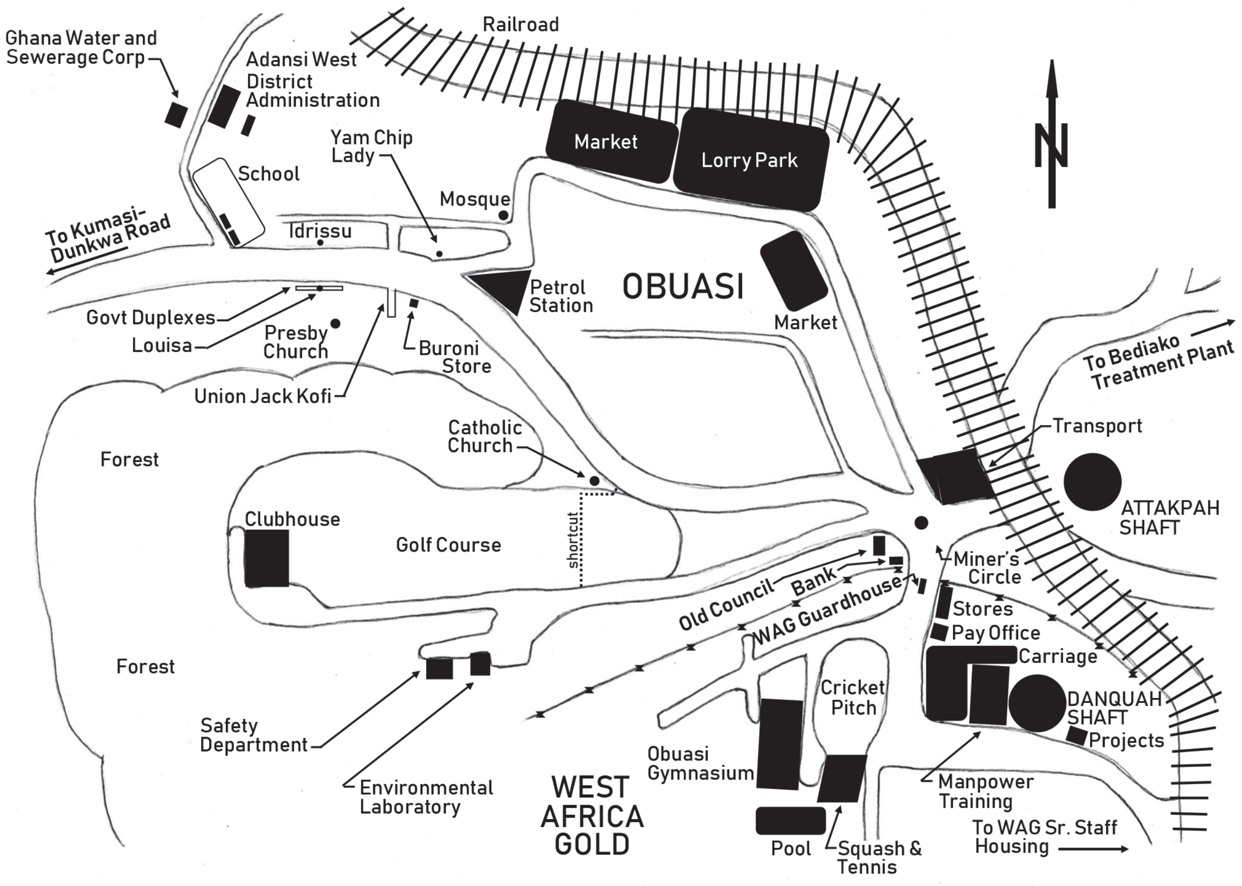
A glossary is provided at the back of the book.

ASHANTI REGION
KUMASI
ADANSI WEST
DISTRICT
Obuasi
Dunkwa

ACCRA
CAPE COAST
GHANA

AFRICA


To Kumasi
WAG MINERAL CONCESSION
OBUASI
Railroad
Mamiriwa
Nyameso
Kwabrafo
Pompo
Tailings Dam (Typ)
Kumasi-Cape Coast Road
Open Pits
Gyimi
Sansu
Kwabenakwakrom
Bediem
Gyimiso Kakraba
To Cape Coast
WAG Dam
Akrofuom
Asasebomebosia
Mile 9
Kumasi-Dunkwa Road
Gyimi
ADANSI WEST DISTRICT
DUNKWA
OFIN


Railroad
Ghana Water and Sewerage Corp
Adansi West District Administration
Yam Chip Lady
School
Mosque
Idrissu
To Kumasi-Dunkwa Road
Market
Lorry Park
N
OBUASI
Petrol Station
Market
Govt Duplexes
Louisa
Presby Church
Buroni Store
Union Jack Kofi
To Bediako Treatment Plant
Transport
Catholic Church
Forest
Clubhouse
Golf Course
shortcut
ATTAKPAH SHAFT
Miner's Circle
Old Council
Bank
WAG Guardhouse
Stores
Pay Office
Carriage
Cricket Pitch
DANQUAH SHAFT
Projects
Forest
Safety Department
Obuasi Gymnasium
Environmental Laboratory
WEST AFRICA GOLD
Manpower Training
Pool
Squash & Tennis
To WAG Sr. Staff Housing

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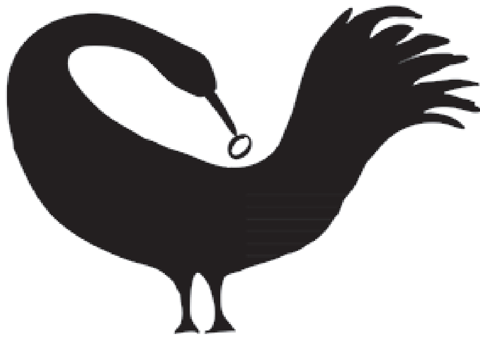
I

THE MINE CONCESSION



If one looks long enough at almost anything . . . something like revelation takes place. Something is "given."

—Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*

Always walk your site twice a day.

—The Old Man

CHAPTER ONE

No one is interested in an engineer's tale, but everyone needs a civil engineer. Humanity can live without airplanes and missiles, cars and computers. But a shelter within which to sleep and harbor one's children, a cistern or well for drinking water, a road to travel in the harshest weather, a bridge to cross a river, a sanitary means to dispose of waste—these necessities bestow upon the civil engineer a universal passport.

The small boy sits to my right. On my left, Takyi, one of four Ghanaians who compose our health team, alternately mops his brow and nods off in the heat. I stare at Ghana's red earth.

Earth is the source of all things. I taste the scent of damp iron, so strong that iron grains must pepper the air. The rich smell feels fertile. Iron—the scent of structural beams hoisted for erection, the aroma of the birthplace of humanity. Construction and procreation—the twin phenomena by which possibility is manifest, in the outer world and within.

The boy rests a light hand upon my thigh. I look down. He meets my gaze then looks away. I appreciate his ease. I could be his aunt, a familiar presence that is accepted and does not require words. The boy wears no shirt and is barefoot. Though his hair is growing in, his shaven head bears scars from the razor.

Takyi's head drops and he wakes with a start. Rarely do Takyi and I make the village rounds alone. Today, the other men had business in Obuasi town.

Before exhaling, I savor the eros that satisfies my intellect and my heart. This place that most would refer to as "nowhere," a village of subsistence farmers, feels to me the center of all things. Because I'm embarrassed by my writing, it's only to Carol that I attempt to express the depth of my sentiments. A tear springs at the recollection of my first letter.

> *Africa compels me to pay attention. Since my earliest years, I have known Africa as the place where two worlds come together. Unlike the place of my birth where one struggles to pierce the veil, in Africa the world behind the world animates every stone, every word, every act.*
>
> *In America, when a stranger nods as they pass, they are saying hello. In Africa, when a stranger speaks, they open the mouth of God.*

Carol has been my dearest friend since junior high school. Her response overwhelmed me. "So beautiful, Isa. Where have you been hiding your poet? I would love to hear more from her." Tears come and I turn away from Takyi. In one openhanded motion, I wipe the sweat from my brow along with the flow of emotion.

"Akua," Takyi utters my local name with warmth and respect. The men have never referred to me by my American name, Louisa. I turn to my colleague. Seeing that he has risen to acknowledge the arrival of a village elder, I stand for the introduction.

"Akua, this man is the CDR chairman." Takyi enunciates each word. "He says they are rousing the people now and he begs us to be patient." The gentleman has buttoned an old suit coat over a tee-shirt. In some villages, we are met by the chief. In others, the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, or CDR, acts as proxy. The title lands in my ear as an anachronism. I can't picture what it means that this is part of the present order.

From his pressed lapel, the man's hand trembles in a slow arc to meet mine. I extend my hand and offer a slight bow of my head. He says nothing and does not make eye contact. Tugging on the hem of his coat, the chairman takes a seat beside the boy. Though showing wear, his coat is neither frayed nor dirty.

Takyi and I resume our seats. We all stare at the bare red earth of the meeting ground. I think every movie I've ever seen about Africa is rooted in red earth. This ground and the pungent vapor of damp iron must bind this continent. I brush sweat from my eye. Pushing the rolled sleeves of my tee-shirt above my shoulders, I cast a glance at the chairman suffering within the cocoon of his respectability.

I am an engineer. I know the world that can be measured and predicted. I once flirted with the other world. Wondering if my profession was manifesting an arrogance of absolutism, I asked a colleague, "In the end it's all theory, isn't it? $F=ma$ is an approximation. It happens to align with all that we know. But one day, we will know much more and $F=ma$ will be inadequate. These things appear true because of what we don't know."

My colleague hid his scorn behind a polite response. "No, I think it's true. Force equals mass times acceleration . . . unless you're referring to the theory of relativity?"

I wasn't and that is why I'm not a physicist.

I was referring to simpler math. One plus one does not always equal two. For instance, a man and a woman conceive a child, one plus one equals one. Or, depending on how you view it, one plus one equals three. Or, if you believe in souls, one plus one plus one equals one (. . . or . . . three).

The boy leans toward the chairman. His long torso boasts the nicks and cuts of boyhood. The chairman speaks into the child's ear. I scuff my sandal across the top of the baked ground. Takyi mops his brow with his handkerchief.

If I were a poet, I could speak of souls. The truth is I am my father's daughter. He is a geologist and can tell you the truth of rocks. He lives in the empirical world and does not concede the existence of any other.

The truth is I have always wanted to be my mother's daughter. She is a psychologist and can tell you what you feel. When the empirical world is not to her liking, she denies its existence.

It is this heresy that makes me suspicious. I love the tangible world. It is the root of all things. One must always begin with what the senses perceive.

I wish Carol were here with me. She laughs at the way I inventory my surroundings. "Next time I'll remember to skip to the end of your letter. Only after every detail is recorded do you become human."

Her words sting, even though I know she understands. Better than anyone, Carol knows my embarrassment at living a split life. She knows my frustration at my own thought process, my inability to waver from thorough observation. I have to jump the track to find my emotions, set a deliberate intention to release myself from the obligation to be rational. That is what has led me back to Africa. I can remember a time when there was no split.

A slight pressure moves over my leg. I look down to find the boy's brown eyes upon me. He is not smiling and not afraid. More than anything, I feel calm in this boy. Unlike the children in Obuasi, he does not make me feel like a novelty for his amusement.

How would a poet speak of the monotony of waiting in this humidity? I let my mind jump the track—it's so much easier to do in Africa. A long, sanded bench of wawa wood. Upon which in damp silence wait Takyi, Akua, the boy, and the CDR chairman. Families summoned from their plots. Constellation of subsistence farmers, potency growing unseen. The durbar mound, red dust, vacant. My heart slows to an ancient rhythm.

If I were my mother, I could dismiss that last equation. Mom knows the mind and emotions, but has no concept of a soul. "One plus one plus one equals three." Mathematical logic requires the existence of a soul to balance the equation. This is the beauty. If followed to its logical ends, the quantifiable world demands what cannot be measured. But engineers do not speak of souls.

Sometimes I am my mother's daughter, in the best sense. I do feel things and love that civil engineering puts me in situations where I can touch life, where I feel life touches me. This is the richness of my profession. It saddens me that my voice does not sing in the telling—or so I am told.

There must be ground before one can stand. There must be a place and a situation before one can have feelings about it. It is the logical way to convey information. Why do people despise order?

It is my profession that grants me the privilege of sitting on this bench with this boy beside me. I take his presence as a gift. In the resonance of our shared tempo of waiting, slow, eternal, I feel I might know him just from looking, from the communication of our silence.

"Ei, Akua," Takyi cries. The high pitch of the Ghanaian "ei" confuses my ear. Even after nine months, I don't expect this falsetto from adults, especially not from men. How would Takyi survive on a construction site? "Did you ever imagine Ghana could be so hot?"

Without intention, heat had been my litmus test. I had questioned whether Ghana would be the same Africa where I had left my childhood. When our Peace Corps flight landed in Accra, the smothering, equatorial heat dissolved all doubts. At last I was home. This continent, where I have always felt most alive, finally I was free to experience through clear eyes, without parental filters, with nothing to protect my bare hands from touching the rawness of life. "Oh yes. You know I grew up in Libya, and I come from a very hot place in America."

Takyi's kind eyes widen. "Really, Akua? You come from a place as hot as Ghana?" Takyi has the weakest constitution of the men. He is not tall and his waist narrows to a stalk. Despite his frailty, Takyi knows the villagers and brings an unmistakable sincerity to our mission. "As hot as Africa! Really, Akua?" The damp air mutes his surprise.

"Well, not this hot. Southern California gets very hot in the summer, but we don't have your humidity." Takyi's gentleness feels a balm. His simplicity soothes the ravages of a past rife with a violence of the intellect.

It is part of why I came here, to walk away from the coercion to be smart and fast. I had grown to hate my own speech, every articulation delivered as a cut to the jugular or blocking the blow of the unforgiving, critical mind of my father, my teacher, my boss. I felt confused by the passion injected into my answering of technical questions. How could engineering stir so much emotion? Why was I willing to fight to the death to show I was right? I felt as if my survival hung in the balance.

I came here to lay down the sword of reason. To be clear, I have no quarrel with rational thought. I detest its perversion as a claim of supremacy or proof of self-worth. More than anything, I hate my inherent obedience to this savagery. That is the gift of Ghana. People are valued. There is that fundamental courtesy extended to every person, in every exchange, the imperative to acknowledge another's existence—regardless of performance. As a human being, one has value.

At home, my heart is not strong enough to counter the tide of a culture that worships intellect. I submit to the tyranny of cherishing a correct answer above all else. At what cost? What is sacrificed? In Ghana, I feel buoyed by a culture whose existence depends upon its appreciation of what cannot be seen. My breathing slows. My heart calms. I am no longer under attack, no longer fighting for my life.

"It is dry and hot in Southern California." Takyi turns this over in his mind. "Dry and hot. Like the Sahara?"

"Like the Sahara. Like the North of Ghana."

"Ah yes." Takyi chuckles and drags his handkerchief across the back of his neck.

The chairman rises and speaks in Twi to Takyi.

"Akua, the chairman apologizes for the slowness of the villagers. Many had gone to farm without realizing we would come today. As we bring important matters, the chairman feels it is necessary that we wait for all the people to gather. Akua, the chairman apologizes for the slowness, but the people have gone to farm."

"It is no problem," I reassure the chairman.

No longer reticent, the chairman stands before me and asks in English, "Do you like Ghana?"

"Yes, I like Ghana very much."

He studies me with a male eye. "How long have you been in Obuasi?"

"Seven months. I came in March."

"Are you married?" He leans his grizzled head close to mine to impress upon me the seriousness of his question.

"No."

"You are strong." The chairman raises his head, to express satisfaction with his appraisal. "How old are you?"

It's obvious where this is heading. "I'm twenty-nine," I say, turning to Takyi. My colleague intervenes in Twi, at which the chairman bows and returns to his seat.

Though glad to have preempted his marriage proposal, I concur with the chairman's observation. I am stronger than the typical Peace Corps volunteer. Before signing on, I worked in construction. My outlook is more pragmatic than most. Of the roughly seventy volunteers in our group, few have ever held a professional job or attempted the basics of maintaining a household and feeding

themselves. I stand on the shoulders of feminists who fought for my right to be here. My freedom is born of my profession.

Although our bench is sheltered by the fronds of a banana plant, the damp air presses the heat upon us. It may be my mother's Lebanese blood or my youth spent swimming in the Mediterranean—my skin loves this climate. Ghana is a fertile country. Food and export crops are grown here in the central belt of tropical forest. Thick, lush vegetation towers over the perimeter of the meeting ground. The habitations of Gyimiso Kakraba lie hidden beyond the vivid green of the forest. No sounds of the life of the village reach us through the thick air. Even mosquitoes and flies find it too much effort to lift a wing.

"Ah, these villagers are slow." Takyi shakes his head at the few young men and women who dot the open ground.

The men wear shorts and short-sleeved Western-style shirts, unbuttoned in the heat—or no shirt at all, revealing healthy torsos muscled from farming and mining. The young women are immaculate, their wraps ironed to a crisp, headcloths accenting their personal styles. One woman points at me. Leaning into her sister's ear, with a shrewd narrowing of her eye and jutting of her lip, she pronounces her verdict. I don't need to hear her words to know she thinks she's solved the riddle of my gender. One quality common to Ghanaians and Americans is the compulsion to categorize by gender.

I cut off all my hair just before entering the Peace Corps. Carol had honored my request under the oak that we had frequented in our adolescence. I remember the earth shuddering from the stallion's thunderous gallop down the half-mile length of pasture to assess our threat. Carol hesitated too many times. She tried to leave the front and one side long to preserve some vestige of attitude. She held up the mirror. I shook my head. Carol bit her lip

and trimmed away the last remnant of style. Accustomed to the bright dyes of our teen creations, the stallion raised an inquisitive muzzle. “Shorter?” Carol asked, thrusting the mirror at me. Holding my gaze on the contrast of white mane and slate coat, I ran my fingers over my temple and confirmed, “More.” Finally, Carol set down the scissors. When I stood, she placed a hand on my shoulder and I had brushed a tear from her cheek.

The defoliation, along with my thick black eyebrows, gives me a harsh appearance. I’ve tried asking expat wives to cut my hair, but they are reluctant to go so short. I’ve found I can accomplish the requisite shearing with the scissors on my Swiss Army knife. It feels a rite necessary to why I came.

Thin, scratched, dusty boy legs on the bench beside me. One scratch is a red, crusty sore, at which the boy picks till it bleeds. The surrounding nicks and scrapes come into focus—how did I not notice? His legs, arms, and belly are speckled with sores. I nudge Takyi, who looks at the boy, wipes his handkerchief across his eyes, and peers closer. Incredulity spreads over his face. I presume he, too, cannot believe he sat here this long without noticing.

Takyi turns to someone, drawing my attention to the large crowd that blocks the red earth from view. Their presence is a mystery to me, something from nothing, as I never saw anyone come. Perhaps fifty people press forward to hear Takyi. How was there no sound, movement, or feeling to intimate their arrival? This way of being, of moving in the world, makes me feel that we sit amongst gods.

The chairman stands as spokesman. Clasping both lapels, he elocutes, “It is the dam. Ever since they built the dam, the water in our stream is not good. Everyone has sores and itching.” His dignified bearing epitomizes the oratorical tradition of the Ashanti.

“Everyone? Who else? Show me,” I say.

No one moves. I'm certain it's an exaggeration. West Africa Gold, referred to by locals as "WAG," needs vast quantities of water for its refining operations. This year's goal to mine a million ounces necessitated infrastructure improvements, including a dam built on the Gyimi River.

A man steps forward and removes his shirt, revealing sores across his belly and chest. He extends a palm to the side to show the pink marks on the inside of his forearm. A woman steps forward and raises the hem of her cloth, exposing her legs. At home in Obuasi, I have a copy of *Where There Is No Doctor*, Peace Corps standard issue. It makes fascinating reading when the fever breaks a hundred and one, or when a new diarrhea regime appears, but I haven't ventured to the pages describing skin infections.

Child after child is presented to me, their sores darker, often crusted.

"The adults are able to keep from scratching," Takyi observes.

If Takyi and I report the epidemic to the Ministry of Health, we run the risk that no one will follow up and the villagers will perceive that we—the Adansi West Rural Water, Sanitation, and Health Advocacy—did nothing.

I look down at my young friend. There's something perfect about this small boy, gentle and poised, unconcerned about the epidemic. Cocoa-skinned, with soft features, the boy sits with a quiet attentiveness that reminds me of myself at ten. That was the year I flew out of Tripoli. I've wondered how different my life might have been if someone had been there for me. Perhaps my poet would not have absconded deep underground. 1973, the year I took refuge in the cold workings of my mind.

Takyi and I walk to the truck followed by a trail of villagers. The boy matches my stride. Of all days for the other men to be diverted. In particular, I miss Agyeman. He possesses an attuned political sensibility and usually serves as my sounding

board. Bringing people to Obuasi for examination could open our health team to the hostility of West Africa Gold. If we bring infected villagers to the mine, it might imply guilt by association. If, however, we bring villagers to the health clinic, WAG might take offense at not being given the first option to handle the matter.

If they were Kwasi's children, he would want to know what is wrong. Dr. Kwarteng-Badu, or "Kwasi," as he prefers to be called, is the senior environmental officer at the mine who administers WAG's funding of the Advocacy. Although environmental engineering is a specialty of civil engineering, Kwasi and I share no professional camaraderie.

His discomfort with his public relations role overshadows any possibility of a meaningful friendship. Within West Africa Gold there is no precedent for the types of decisions Kwasi is called upon to make. By virtue of our daily contact with the villages, the Advocacy acts as a conduit for grievances. In a backstabbing organization like WAG, any poor move on Kwasi's part comes at a high cost.

Resigned to the inevitable repercussions, I open the door to the back seat of the twin cab, catch my small boy's eyes, and nod toward the interior of the truck. He looks at the seat, which sits at an elevation as high as his chin, and back at me. Clutching his waist with both hands, I lift the boy onto the seat. Disbelief and excitement break over his face. Takyi ushers in a sore-speckled girl and the chairman from the other side of the cab.