

NEWBERY MEDAL-WINNING AUTHOR OF *THE CROSSOVER*

**KWAME ALEXANDER**

'At once vivid and simple, lyrical  
and surgical, expressive and exacting'

**LUPITA NYONG'O**

**THE  
DOOR  
OF  
NO  
RETURN**





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**KWAME ALEXANDER**



ANDERSEN PRESS

This edition first published in 2023 by  
Andersen Press Limited  
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK  
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland  
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in the UK in 2022 by Andersen Press Limited  
First published in the United States of America in 2022  
by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 83913 324 4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

FOR MY MAAME,  
BARBARA ELAINE JOHNSON ALEXANDER,  
WHO TOLD THE BEST STORIES

MY CHILDREN GLIDED ON THE GREAT RIVER

OVER THE DEPTHS OF DEATH...

THEN, ONE DAY, SILENCE . . .

—DAVID DIOP

A S A N T E



BONWIRE

KUMASI

UPPER KWANTA

LOWER KWANTA

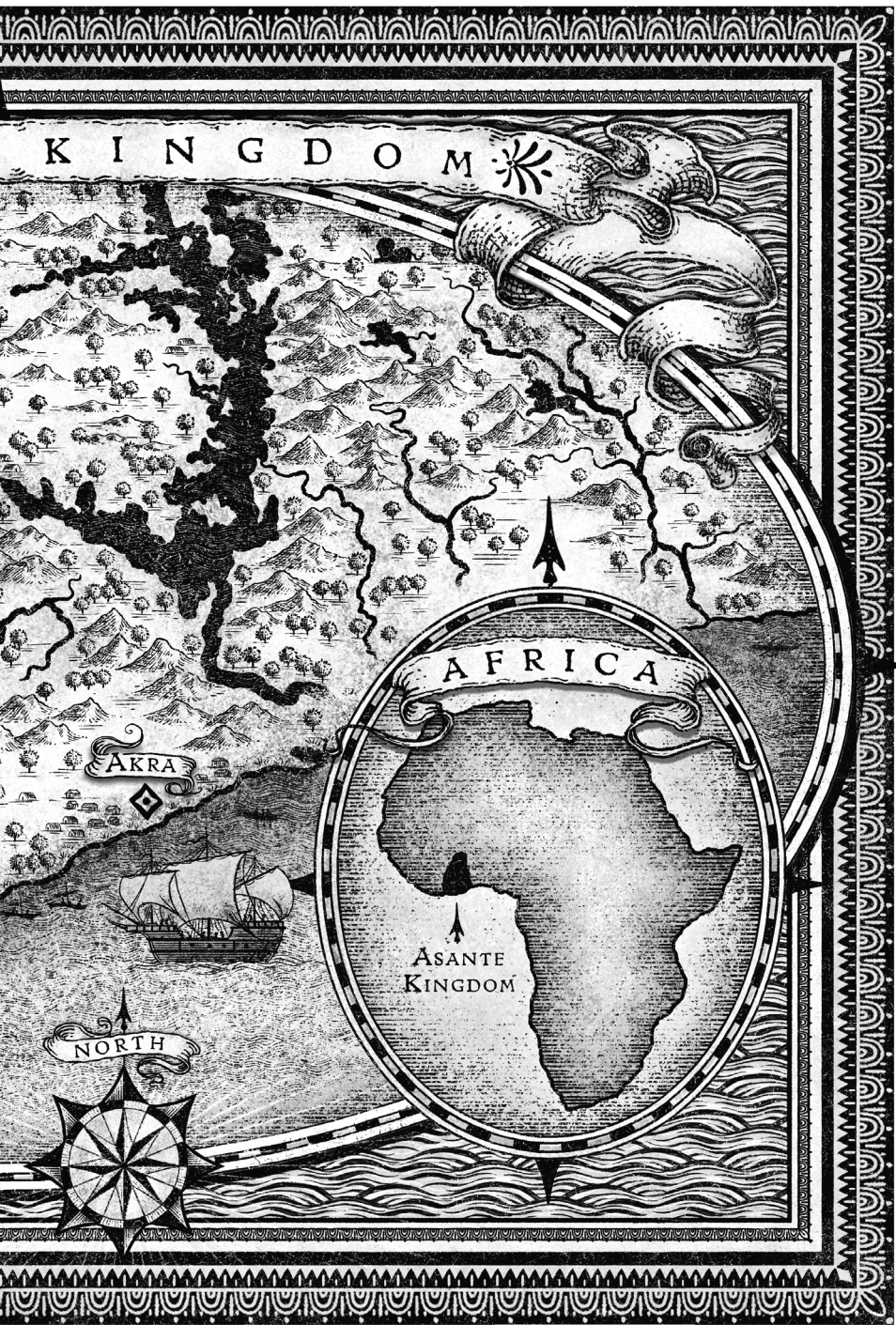
OHIN RIVER

PRA RIVER

CAPE COAST CASTLE

CAPE COAST





K I N G D O M

A F R I C A

A K R A

A S A N T E  
K I N G D O M

N O R T H

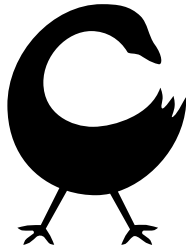
## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is historical fiction. It is a novel inspired by history, based on the real lives of the Asante (*Ashanti*) people, who are native to a region of West Africa now known as Ghana. It was a hard story to write, but it was one that needed to be told. I wrote it for the me nobody knows. For the you who is still becoming. For the possibility that is in *us*. The great poet, philosopher, and abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson said, *Be an opener of doors*. I've tried to be that here. Now you must walk through. With your eyes unshut. With your heart unlocked. And your mind as free as the mighty sea . . . *Akwaaba!*



# **ASANTE KINGDOM**

**SEPTEMBER 1860**



## CHAPTER ONE

# THE STORY OF OFFIN

*There was even a time...many seasons ago...when our people were the sole supplier of the purest and most valuable gold in the world...The river was bedded with enough gold to make a century of royal stools for the Asante kings...A thousand shiny bracelets for their wives...Then came the foreigners...Invaders disguised as friends...pretending to be students of our way...with only one lesson to learn...how to steal our fortunes...But we fought them off...protected our rich land, our river...the Offin River...It flows to the east, into the mighty Pra, which travels*

*over one hundred and fifty miles down to the Coast, where it drains into a vast blue unknown that we call the Big Sea ... On the rolling sides of Offin are deep forests and farmlands and villages and a boy of the same name ... You see, on the morning of your birth, eleven years ago, your maame squatted at the edge of the water, and ... Offin carried her fifth child on its shoulders at first breath ... It is true, I was there, that you stopped crying as you floated off like a ship inching toward the horizon ... The river Offin grabbed you with an invisible cord wrapped around each moment of your day ... held you like a mother cradles a baby ... pulled you like the moon does the earth ... Ever since, you and the water have been bound ... river and son, wave and flutter ... That is how you got your name, my grandson ...*

# THE STORYTELLER

*There was even a time*  
is how my papa's father,  
Nana Mosi, the village storyteller,  
begins most of his  
fireside tales

always starting  
in the middle  
of a thought  
like we were to know  
what *even* came before

always speaking  
in slow,  
deliberate spurts  
about the past  
like it lives  
in him,  
like it still matters

always repeating some things  
and pausing at other times,  
with a toothy smile

that raises one eyebrow,  
right before  
the thing he knows  
we cannot wait  
to hear.

Though he is nearly eighty now  
and seldom speaks,  
when he does,  
I hang on to all his words,  
the lulls in between,  
and I remember  
the stories  
like a pigeon remembers  
its way home.

# IN THE DREAM

I sprint across  
the clearing,  
past a leopard  
teaching her cubs  
how to count to ten.

After I grade them,  
I dart between the maze  
of forest trees  
and discover a pot  
of boiling plantains  
by the river.

Picture me running  
over rocks and grass  
swept up in the cool breeze  
rushing to the water  
diving off the back  
of a—



# SCHOOLED

*Offin, how old was  
beloved Queen Victoria  
when she became heir  
to the throne?* Mr. Goodluck Phillip, our teacher,  
asks,  
startling me  
out of my dream.

My cousin,  
who thinks he is better  
than me at everything,  
giggles, then shoots  
his hand up fast,  
but Mr. Phillip is talking  
to me, staring  
at me, daring  
me  
to answer incorrectly.  
*I will like Kofi Offin  
to answer the question, please,* he says.

Dunwõtwe, I proudly answer,  
standing among

my classmates, smiling  
like I just bit into  
the sweetest mango.

I do not see  
the lightning  
almost slice  
the skin  
from my palm,  
but I do feel the scorch  
of the rod  
across my hand  
and in my bones.  
I even taste its sting  
in my mouth.

*Queen's English, please*, Mr. Phillip says,  
as calm as rain, like  
he did not just attack me  
with his jagged cane.

Eighteen, I say quickly.  
*That is correct. The Queen was eighteen*, he adds,  
    looking at the whole class,  
*when her uncle died*

*of pneumonia,  
making her the rightful heir.*

*I am not teaching you  
to count in English for nothing.  
Sorry, Mr. Goodluck Phillip, I say,  
looking down at the purplish welt  
burning my sable skin,  
and trying not to cry  
in front of everyone,  
especially Ama,  
and my cousin,  
who now looks like  
he is happily eating  
my mango.*

# OUR TEACHER

Kwaku Ansah  
was sent  
many, many seasons ago  
to Akra  
to attend  
*The Queen's Missionary School  
at Osu for the Propagation  
of Better Education  
and Improved Language,*  
and when he returned  
he had “improved” his name to  
Goodluck Kwaku Phillip,  
and insisted  
to the Council of Elders  
that we needed  
to be propagated  
as well.

## ON A MISSION

Mr. Phillip seldom smiles,  
is lanky and tall,  
wears wire-rimmed glasses  
and big-collared shirts  
with strange bows  
around his neck,  
frowns when he speaks our Twi,  
insists that we call him  
by his new names,  
does not like  
riddles or bean stew  
or most things  
we are used to  
in our village,  
and swears  
that he has been anointed  
to rescue us  
from our old selves  
and help us discover  
our true ones.

# MY OLDER BROTHER

Kwasi once told me  
that Mr. Phillip informed  
his class that  
*English is regularly spoken  
in Akra and on the Coast,  
and if we want to become better,  
learned men and women,  
we must learn  
to speak  
this mother tongue,*  
and when a boy responded,

*I do not know about your mother, sir,  
but my maame speaks Twi*

the entire class erupted  
in laughter,  
including the boy,  
*until Mr. Phillip's cane  
slashed his buttocks  
so hard  
he was unable to sit  
for three days*

*and it left  
a long, thin gruesome bruise  
that swelled  
across his buttocks,  
making it look  
like he was smiling  
from behind.*

## LIGHT SENTENCE

The punishment  
for my crime,  
for answering  
in my own Twi  
instead of talking  
in the stale, foreign language  
that Mr. Goodluck Phillip  
makes us speak  
in school,  
is to stay  
after school  
so that he can teach me  
to read  
from *The Dramatic Works*  
*of William Shakespeare*,  
which I enjoy—though  
I cannot let him know—but  
which I can barely focus on  
because I want to be in the river  
and my forearm is throbbing  
and I cannot stop thinking  
about the end of the day  
when Ama came up to me



and whispered,  
*But you knew the correct answer, Kofi,*  
*so do not feel so bad,*  
and her breath smelled  
like honey  
and pine  
and possibility.

# AMA

I have known her  
since we were  
giggling babies  
swathed in cloth  
on our maames' backs  
while they sold yams  
and cassava  
at the market.

We played together,  
learned together,  
swam together,  
even dreamed together  
about our futures  
until hers was nearly ruined  
when her parents died,  
leaving her homeless  
and alone.

So, now I mainly get  
to see her in school,  
since she spends  
the rest of her time

cleaning  
and being the house girl  
for her uncle's family  
in exchange for food  
and a roof.

## AFTER SCHOOL

When we finish reading together,  
Mr. Phillip makes me repeat  
different English words,  
praises my efforts, then says  
that if I want to be  
a young man of intellect  
I should pay attention  
to where my tongue lies  
when I roll my *Rs*,  
and even though  
I hate the taste  
of his alien words  
on my tongue  
I just nod  
and say,  
Thank you for  
the instruction, sir.

# WAITING FOR ME

outside  
is Ebo,  
my best mate,  
leading a band  
of youngsters  
in search  
of the few  
gold specks  
still swimming  
in the streets  
and ditches  
after last night's  
heavy rainfall.

# TAKEN

Ama walks  
toward me,  
carrying a large water pot  
on her head,  
a bundle of timber  
in her arms,  
and her baby cousin  
draped across  
her back.

*It will not hurt long if you use this,* she says,  
placing the timber  
on the ground and  
taking my arm  
in her hand.

She rubs my bruise  
with a large, fuzzy, green leaf  
and a flash of warmth  
rushes through me  
like a wave.

I do not feel

my eyes closing, but  
I can feel every hair  
on my body  
jump at the sun.

*Is that better, Kofi?*

Yes. It. Is.

*Now, do not swallow this or you will cough until you  
die,* she says,  
handing me the leaf. I cannot tell whether she is  
serious or not.

...

*It is a joke. It is just a clove leaf, mainly used to  
make the pain of a bad tooth go away. You will  
be fine.*

It has the smell of something in my maame's stew...

Thank you, Ama.

*Are you and Ebo going to swim now?*

If the river is you, I will swim... is what I wish I  
could say. Instead, I answer, No swimming today.  
It is too dark.

# WHERE I GO

each day  
after school  
is both hideout  
and oasis.

It is where I am student  
and king.

A place that holds me  
and my destiny safely  
in its deep-blue arms.

The river

where I splash

and splish

and kick

into twilight

until the stars emerge

or Kwasi

comes growling

like a hippo.



*KOFI, OUT OF THE WATER, NOW!*  
*IT IS ALMOST DARK!*

Sometimes  
I pretend to not hear  
him telling me  
what to do  
just because  
he is older  
and bigger,  
but when it comes  
to swimming,  
I have to listen,  
because all the elders  
in my family  
and mostly all  
the old people  
in our village  
say that the river  
is cursed  
at nighttime.

## CONVERSATION WITH EBO

*CHALE!* Ebo hollers, handing me a palm full of red berries.

Just in time—I can use a sweet snack.

*Also, I collected these,* he says, showing me a bag of kola nuts.

What, you are preparing our dinner now, *chale*? I say, laughing.

*Oh, these are not for you to eat.*

What are they for, then?

*For you to present to Ama's uncle when you ask to marry her,* he adds, laughing.

You are a nut, yourself.

*Your obsession is so obvious, Kofi.*

I am not obsessed.

*You are. And you are afraid to tell her.*

I am not.

*Then do it, big man, tell her how you feel,* he says,  
peeling away the kola's white skin.  
How I feel? You sound like my sisters.

*Ei! Your sisters are smart. And beautiful,* he says,  
looking way too excited.  
My sisters are married and their husbands will skin  
you for thinking those thoughts.

*Only two are married. Esi is free, no? She is dark  
and comely. You think she will come to me?* he  
says with a smirk.  
Ebo, you are a fool.

*So, tell me, what was Goodluck's penalty?* he says,  
chewing away at the kola seeds. *Did he make  
you hold a stack of books over your head and say  
your numbers in English?*  
No, we just read.

*Torture.*  
In truth, it does not bother me. I actually enjoy it.

*A witch has cast a spell on you, chale.*  
To be, or not to be, I say in my best Mr. Phillip  
imitation.

*Ei! Speak Twi! We are not in class.*  
Ebo, how much gold did you find?

*I promise you, barely a crumb.*

At this rate, you will be an old man with a cane and  
no hair before you collect even a Benda of gold, I  
say, laughing, then turning to leave.

*Then I will die rich and happy with my one Benda,*  
he says, laughing too. *Ei! What about the river?*  
I cannot swim today. I must get home.

*I will walk with you, then. In case your cousin and  
his herd are waiting.*  
And what will you do if they are?

*I will run for assistance. HELP! HELP! I will  
scream,* he says, laughing.  
You are a true friend.

*Seriously, do you think I have a chance with your  
sister?*  
Daabi, I tell him, shaking my head. Not in a  
hundred seasons.

# TROUBLE

When I arrive  
at our compound  
Kwasi and Nana Mosi  
are seated  
on opposite sides  
of an ivory game board,  
playing Oware.

So focused  
on winning, which  
no one has ever done  
against Nana Mosi,  
Kwasi does not  
even look up  
when he tells me  
that everyone  
knows of my wrongdoing  
because my cousin  
came around earlier  
singing  
like a guinea fowl.

# **AFTER LOSING**

three straight times to our  
grandfather, Kwasi finds me  
counting in English.

# CONVERSATION WITH KWASI

*Mr. Goodluck Phillip is still miseducating his students, ei?*

He says he is on a mission to widen the sea of our intellect and understanding.

*He is on a mission to capsize our culture, I promise you.*

Nana Mosi beat you again?

*Our grandfather has been playing Oware for nearly one hundred years. He is unbeatable. This I know.*

He just needs better competition probably.

*You are the one with jokes, he says, laughing. It appears that I am not the only one with an adversary.*

Can you teach me to punch like you?

*Fighting is not the answer.*

That is easy to say for someone who fights as well as you do, Kwasi.

*You have a sharp mind, little brother. Try using that.  
Outsmart him.*

My thoughts are no match for his fast legs, or his  
powerful fists.

*But there are things you have that are powerful. Use  
these.*

What kind of things do you speak of?

*Am I to come up with every answer to your problems?  
Figure it out.*

...

*You must face this, head high.*

But what if I—

*Ei! The bird who dares to fall is the bird who learns  
to fly!*

What does that even mean?

*It means that Maame is looking for you, and she is  
not pleased, he says, laughing, then tapping me  
on the head and walking away. You will be fine.  
With our cousin, I mean. Not with Maame. He  
laughs again.*

...



# PUNISHMENT

I am banished  
to bed  
for the night  
without drink  
without dinner  
by my maame,  
who is only silent now  
because she plans to wait  
to unleash her wrath  
on me  
when my father,  
who is away  
mining,  
our business,  
returns.