
the DEEP BLUE Between
Ayesha Harruna Attah

Pushkin Press
71–75 Shelton Street
London WC2H 9JQ

The Deep Blue Between © Ayesha Harruna Attah, 2020

By agreement with Pontas Literary & Film Agency

The Deep Blue Between was first published by Pushkin Press in 2020

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

ISBN 13: 978-1-78269-266-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Pushkin Press

Designed and typeset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

www.pushkinpress.com

For Tumi and Tami

We are at the waterhole, a gaggle of girls. She sits on the banks and dips her toes into the water. I duck into the water and come out, waving out to her at the shore. Come, I beckon. She shakes her shoulders up and down. Come, I insist. She refuses. We dance that way, until I wade to her and pull her into the water. At first her feet touch the pond's bed, then I drag her in deeper. She falls and flails about, struggling to breathe. She is sucked into the water and disappears.

Heavy shapes hovering over me shook me awake. I had been dreaming about Husseina, as often happened, but it wasn't her dream. Experiencing her dreams took something I hadn't yet put my finger on. I pulled myself out of my sleepy state and realized the face closest to mine was Dogo's. I almost screamed. He covered my mouth, dragged me outside the hut.

"Why did you do that?" he said to me.

I looked around and tried to catch the eye of my friend. He was staring at Dogo. What had Dogo told them? Why had I given in to sleep? That was very stupid of me.

"You can't run away just like that. You belong to me," Dogo whispered.

Maybe if I accused him of some crime, of Dogo treating me the way Wofa Sarpong had my sister, sneaking into her room, these people would understand. I opened my eyes widely at Dogo. Then again, Wofa Sarpong had tried to say we were his family and not his slaves. There must be something wrong with being someone's slave.

"No," I began. "No, no, no." I lifted my hands and covered my eyes, peeked through slits between my fingers.

"Let me take my daughter and go," said Dogo.

"I am his slave," I shouted in Wofa Sarpong's language.

To my surprise, my colourless friend—not a thin man—darted across and grabbed Dogo by the throat, lifting him up in the process. Dogo tried to say something, his voice strangled in his throat. The colourless man was also shorter than Dogo and yet the tall man was being tossed about like the dolls Husseina and I used to play with. He let Dogo go.

"Pikin dey lie," Dogo finally managed. He said it so many times it is forever etched in my mind. "She my pikin." *The child is lying*, I would later understand. *She is my child*.

"Go!" the colourless man shouted, and rained other heavy words in his language on Dogo.

Dogo stared at me before turning and leaving. His face wasn't angry, but marked with disbelief and sadness at what I'd just done. My heart felt like someone had wrung it. The wrong man was paying for the crime. It shouldn't have been Dogo in the colourless man's clasp—it should have been Wofa Sarpong. It should have been the men who had burnt my village down and killed half my family. But, I told myself, for associating with Wofa Sarpong, Dogo deserved to lose me.

I learnt that the man who had become my protector was called Richard Burtt. He gave me my own cloth hut and refused to let me have my machete back, but I knew he would strangle a man to save my life. From that day, everywhere he went, I followed. We ate together from the same plate, which I insisted on, because I didn't want to be poisoned by the village people who looked at me suspiciously. Soon, I realized people in the village also needed Richard—his presence kept them safe—so they generally left me alone.

Every night, I went to sleep in my cloth hut—tent, Richard corrected me—I willed Husseina's dream to return. I wanted to close my eyes and get lost in the world of her dreams. I would shut my eyes tight, clench my jaw,

draw my knees into my chest and wait for sleep to come with its shrouding power. When it did eventually come, it would loosen my tight hug, and slow my breathing, lulling me into its warm embrace, but the dreams that came weren't her dreams—they were dreams that spoke of the past.

I would wake up, sometimes in the middle of the night, and go out of my tent. Every night, there was a different person guarding the village. Never one of Richard's people. Always people with the same skin as me. Richard told me that people with my skin were called "black people" and the people with colourless skin were called "white people". I didn't agree, since my skin was more red than black, and the people in this part of Kintampo were a deep brown. As for the ones we called white, I thought they were pink. When I told him, he laughed.

I was learning things from Richard that I was sure would make it easier to find Husseina. Richard had been in what he called "the Gold Coast" to study plants to find out what could be used to treat sicknesses. He was going to put everything he found in a book, and when I followed him around, I would hold a box with compartments in which he would throw samples of leaves. I learnt the names in Twi of plants and names Richard said were scientific. Names in English, in his language. He helped me plant my beans, which, in just a few days, sprouted into seedlings. I felt as if I had given birth to life. He'd left his wife and two daughters in a land called Great Britain to do service for his country. It was a noble thing he was doing, to willingly be separated

from his family. I hadn't gone away from Aminah in the same way—I just had to find Husseina.

During afternoon sleep, a time when the whole compound went silent, I often stayed up, looking at the line that formed from the coming together of the two pieces of cloth that made my tent, or I would go outside and look at my bean plants. Then, I would memorize everything I'd learnt, repeating words so they would roll off my tongue as if I'd been born with them.

"It's not right," a woman said to me, one such afternoon, as I was touching the first pod that had grown on my plant. She was called Ma'Adjoa and had fed me on my first day there.

"You are a girl; he's a man. You're leaving yourself exposed for bad things to happen. Come and stay with me."

The little ones often sang that Ma'Adjoa had eaten the children in her womb. I was scared that what they said was true, but I felt for her. It didn't feel right for one person to be condemned by the whole village, so to thank her, I ate lunch with her and dinner with Richard. But I still slept in my tent.

About three full moons since being adopted by Richard, I was sitting outside the tent. Richard had scribbled letters in the sand. He took the stick he used when he went into the forest to search for plants and pointed at the first letter, C.

"K," I sounded.

To the next, I said, "Ah", and finally, "T."

"Put it together," said Richard.

"Cat."

He wrote another word. I struggled with it, but I could read "dog" and "ant".

Richard dropped his cane and clapped loudly, grabbed me into the air and said, "Clever girl!"

I felt so proud of myself. And yet I didn't have any idea of what I'd read.

"We have to get you books from Accra," he said. "I'll tell the next chap who comes up."

I liked learning Richard's English. Porters brought over the books Richard had ordered for me. The books were made of a very fragile kind of cloth. The first time I touched one of them, I pulled too hard and it tore.

"Treat it like an egg," said Richard.

I listened to him and grew protective of the books, like a mother hen, to the point that when the other village children came and tried to touch the books, I hit their fingers with Richard's cane. If I was not delicate, how much more so would these illiterate children be? Richard called me "the prefect of books".

Kwasidas, Sundays, became my favourite days. There was another white man we called Osofopapa, and who Richard called a priest, who went around in the mornings ringing an upside-down metal cup to get the children and the adults to join in with them. The first time I attended, I went because Richard said I would learn about a God who is good.

"Who is your God?" I asked him.

"The creator of all life. He is the reason we have breath, why there are animals and plants and rivers and forests. He's here and there and everywhere."

His God and Otienu seemed similar. I wanted to ask Otienu a lot of questions about why he let such bad things happen to my family, but I was sure we left Otienu behind in Botu, and that's where he differed with Richard's God—he wasn't here and there and everywhere. I wanted to know if this good God could answer my questions.

That first day, Osofopapa brought out a thick book, thicker than any of the ones Richard had given me, and he spoke mostly Twi, so some parts of the story remained unclear. I learnt that before the world began, it had no colour, sound, taste, form or smell. It was all darkness until their God said, "Let there be light." Then from soil he made people. The message didn't speak to me and I almost didn't go back the second Kwasida, because we didn't even get to ask questions of Osofopapa. And I could just ask Richard, who wasn't as strict-looking as Osofopapa, with his white collar and white hair. But it was good I went—it was as if Osofopapa knew he needed to find a story to keep me interested. At first, he started talking about ntaafuo and I didn't know what he meant until he said a woman called Rebecca had two babies pushing for space in one belly. I wished then that my Twi were better, so I could understand the whole story. The two boys would become two lands. One came out red; the other was holding on to the heel of the other. Yakubu and Esau. My heart started racing. In Botu, we were the

only twins I knew of. I hadn't met any twins since. When he said that they would be separated, I wanted to get up and shout: "*That's what happened to Husseina and me.*" I wanted to ask: "*Did they come back together?*" I must have been making too-loud noises from my mouth because suddenly everyone was watching me. I darted my eyes left and right and stared straight at Osofopapa. They didn't know how important this was.

"The brothers would always fight," said Osofopapa. "Their lands would be at war with each other."

We fought sometimes, but that was not our relationship. I protected Husseina.

Our grandmother said I came out first, yelling so much that they had to cover my mouth. She said they were going to prepare the herbs to clean out Na, but just before they started the process of boiling hot water, another baby plopped out. She was so quiet they thought she wasn't alive. Only when my grandmother pinched her did she let out a small cry.

"Where is the place with the blue water?" I asked Richard, after the sermon with the twins.

"Water that is blue?" He shook his head.

"It has tall palm trees and water that looks as blue as the sky. There's maybe more water than land."

"Certainly not Accra. The water there is not one bit blue. You are a curious one. Where did you get such an image from? From one of your books?"

I shook my head. "My twin sister is there."

Richard's eyes widened. He regarded me as if I had turned into the madman who came here to get the white man's water.

"Like Yakubu and Esau," I said. "I have a ntaa."

"Ah," said Richard.

"I'm going to find her."

Richard laughed from his belly, which he held, then he said what he'd been thinking all along.

"You've gone mad. So many places have water and coconut trees."

"Like where?"

I remember not blinking. There was nothing he could say to change my mind. Either he helped me or I'd make my way to a place with coconut trees myself.

He asked me to tell him more about Husseina and how we were separated.

"Slavery was already illegal here in the Gold Coast. So she most likely went down the Volta and then to the coast," said Richard. "If what you say is not some crazy make-believe story, I am going down to the Basel Mission to do some work in the Volta—it might get you closer to the coast."

"Yes." I nodded.