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## Learning to Eat the Dead: USA by Maria Abegunde

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*for Diamond Reynolds*

When they invite you to dinner, say yes.

Arrive early, choose the chair closest to the door.

Pay attention to who sits where.

Pay attention to who drinks what.

When they lay your lover's body face down,

Do not vomit when your host saws off his head.

Do not cry when the guests crack his fingers and elbows.

Look as they turn him over to lick the back of his neck.

When they ask if you'd like to try some, politely refuse.

Instead, pour your glass of water over his feet.

Wash between his toes. Massage what remains of his heels.

Do not look at his knees which someone has started to suck.

When the hosts walks towards you with a slice of cranium,

Insists that you taste its peculiar pungency, and says

I have eaten Black man brains a million times, but never like this...

Decline, sit still, breathe, pray, pray. Pray.

Pay attention to who stops eating when you do this.

Pay attention to who whispers to whom.

Pay attention to who picks up the wine bottles.

Pay attention to who slips the steak knives into their laps.

When a guest offers you more water, ignore her.

Pour olive oil over his feet. Kiss them gently.

Place your cheek against his soles. Listen to the lesson on how

To be awake even while sleeping.

Only when they bring you his heart do you accept.

Demand to hold the whole organ.

Place it on your plate.

Do nothing as they wait for you to eat.

Pick up his heart. Rub it against your face. Rub it against your neck.

Feel its weight on your shoulders.

Take your knife and cut a small chunk from the center.

Rest it against your chest. Let it dissolve into your own.

Put what you have cut into your mouth.

Caress the shards of metal with your tongue.

If you chew, your anger will poison you.

Swallow nothing, not even a piece of skin.

**Maria Hamilton Abegunde** is an ancestral priest in the Yoruba Orisa tradition, a Reiki Master with a focus on the recovery and healing of memory from sentient bodies. Her research and creative work focus on transgenerational trauma and community healing through contemplative practices. Excerpts from *The Ariran's Last Life*, a Middle Passage memory-work, have been published in *Let Spirit Speak!*, *Best African American Fiction* and *The Kenyon Review*. Essays have been featured in *The Journal for Liberal Arts and Sciences*, *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora*, and *nocturnes*. Excerpts from *Learning to Eat the Dead* were selected as a COG poetry finalist. She is a Cave Canem, Ragdale, Sacatar, and NEH fellow. She directs The Graduate Mentoring Center and teaches African American and African Diaspora Studies at Indiana University Bloomington.

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