

## The Ebrié of Abidjan

### 1. The Martyrs

It wasn't enough to take a deep breath, then expel it slowly in relief, as I rounded the slip road to the arterial *Boulevard Latrille*, where the cars were triple-stacked. Exhaust fumes corrugated the air. I had to climb closer to the breeze chugging from the air conditioning and remember when ice, snow and sleet wiped my conscience clear. When I arrived, all was tidy in the villa, the beds made, the floor swept, the kitchen disinfected. The darkness, always attentive, had slyly invaded the room, blackened the corners, drained colour from the curtains, dulling the once vivid carpet. Even three wall lights could not make it bright. Tan and sepia to grey, a fantail of unfulfilled wants in a random night.

Mosquitos frilled the curtains, while I went through motions of arrival, remembering the brown airport lounge, clutching dusty entry documents. Is this, waiting for bags, the past reflection of my requited custom? The proof denies its own heritage, forgets its name, leaves sharp without precise excuses. I search the spotted mirror for my friends, newly wise to brute upheaval, rupture, loss and the bobbing sun, a sobbing burst of anguish, cast down by a broken gate in elegant but suburban *Bingerville*, where once the French colonials preened as peacocks, and only the mighty *Fromager* trunk, splayed in iron roots, avoiding the spring, demurred from their solid foundation floors. Now the bamboo cathedral avenue even welcomes chauffeured four by fours.

I fly through the storm, checking my webbed hands for the spidery lifelines. Twisting in the tumbling sheets, comforted by the soft rush of rain sweeping in waves across the city, while others shored the gaps, put bricks and stones on their shaking rooves and readied themselves for salvage. Bats, deep delved in the forest, sated in rotting mangoes, murmured and rustled damp in digestion. The morning's light sharpened my eyes, half closed, I woke to the bulbous sky, falling like bustled curtain folds. I am hid from afar, named after the planets, immortal, recognized but unfathomable, ineffable. I clambered for balance on the outreaches like a young hawk, then swooped on the startled prey, darting in the inebriate haze of the tired lagoon as parting clouds ushered the way.

## 2. Along the shore line

A ram-rod beach to wander in between sea and lagoon, drawing pointed lines around the sprawling clouds and the splaying spume. Along the dead-straight southern coast the kingfishers stickle by the slow shallows of the *Iles Ehotile*. These slick-talking poachers stalk the tourist boats as they furrow and furnish their way around the islands with panache and presumption. They pose for photos, but neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns. Over in ancient *Jacquerville* the crosses are pink, a greeting to the marauding sea that ever pushes back to the savannah, while traders gather with their groundnuts, melons, and beachwear, lining the ochre paths between the coconut trees. Each winding season destroys another line of fading façades. Colonial ghosts walk on the waves with studied poise.

*Assinie's* monuments were arrested in motion, stripped clean of cover, clothes and skin. Their skeletons stalk the dark refectories. The holiday club is scraped out, struck inanimate by profusions of war and growth, blind to the fire hollows, deaf to the crash and roar of the waves, scarred by old bullets, new litter and vandals. I walk between the fishing boats to atrophied cellars, through unwallied basements to the white-boned attics wide to the winds. In *Bassam*, blind killers sprayed blood across the beach, ended hopes and loves. At dusk the hawks gathered noisily while the waves rolled on past the cliff edge of night. The red sand fell through the timer; ran out with the rites, leaving the survivors with their incantations, dancing in the air like kites.

In *Port Bouét*, the flag-strewn fishing boats bounce across the grainy trails of tankers tramping to *Tema*. Swimmers pull into the lurch and swell of the waves. A light rain throws darting silverfish, skeins gleaming and slipping from the lowering sky, feeding the undertow, glistening like fairy steps while the storm took half the local restaurant away after the dining room was ripped from its binding. Now waiters at *le petit bateau* welcome guests with gusto, take orders for lobster, prawns, *capitaine*, and crab. Even the toilet perches on the edge, a cabin with a view, clinging in peril to a cliff suddenly cleft, like a ridgeback above the litter and louche flotsam of the scudding shore. And we customers eat, stolid in contemplation of the remaining floor.

### 3. The Plateau

*Rue Chardy* squawks and snorts from roosting sites on the city's grid, unrestful in its shop-front urgency, hustling with currency, phones and shoe polish. Between the scarified buildings and the stymied cars winks the leering lagoon. The traffic slows and grumbles, letting wafer-thin walkers thread their way through. Amongst the oil changes, radiator leaks and suspension springs, the cars are thrown from many moving parts. The scurrying *gbakas* and *woro-woros* avoid the windmill arms that signal parking spots. They snipe and chatter like yellow woodcock - timber doddle, short-legged, strong-beaked, a rapid, staccato chit. The sentry towers, grim, concrete-stacked, daily throw millions of straw fruit bats down the arterial sky-lanes. They swing and swirl crazily through the angled arches of the dumb and dusky cranes.

And on they skiffle, those dogface-dancers, to forests damp and dark, where mangoes luxuriate and rot, and sordid secrets unfold and spread like wings into gauzy new forests, microcosmic and discrete, whispers at the feast. For the total of life's knowledge is a single fern unfolding, stretching her arms behind her shoulders. A line of beauty caresses between her breasts and hips. And by the gamers' race track, the exposed earth is russet red and golden brown. The diggers tense, take up their cudgels, but here every seed, when dropped into dust, grows lush into cornucopia. And so the copper gauntlet is thrown. The first fused ferns of forest start their race for time and space against the builders' cement. The winner stakes the plot, once secured and fenced.

In the cool detachment of the hotel terrace bars, beer and peanuts abound, low chatter and air-conditioning post the background noise, and the sky dives slow motion into dusky traces of gossip and emotion recalled in tranquility. I search tirelessly for the spontaneous overflow. Sometimes, in the small evenings or long weekends, alone, I glimpse it and breathe easier. I see it also in night storms, riveted to the growling sky while the rain crashes down on corrugated rooves and gushes in rivulets and flowing streams. When lightning shocks the room aghast, there are new shadows on the walls, and time is passing fast. I try to pull up the cage, stay the winding wheel, and loop the cable around my feet until the dawn breaks the deal.

#### 4. In the Rue des Jardins

Mounds of sand and hardcore, mute as Egypt's pyramids, parading with pride on the scanty lawns and driveways. White paint and thumb-like figurines protrude from near the swing garages where shiny cars sniff and nose the early morning, shocked rigid by fuming exhausts. Hardening cement strangles the young cocoa tree, while the grand carriage assembly smokes in unison. The *Clubhouse de Vallon*, centrally cast, streams people from a big screen of crowds and footballers. A score ripples the gouache of shadows, tints and glasses, erupts "*Allez les bleus!*". Outside, children splash in the turquoise pool, and beyond, the old masks and statues climb in the crevices with meticulous care. Their dilettante ghosts hesitate: they are cloud-caught, snagged fast in the still air.

Everything is shaping up, turning spruce, ice cream parlours link to funeral chains, Sushi and Thai, Chinese and Indian, from dental clinics to hamburger bars, where smart dressers show themselves, flicking handkerchiefs while shepherding squabbling crocodiles of kids with crooks and sabres, holding polished mirrors aloft. In *Jardyland*, the young doe, dosed calm, sleeps, then picks its prim way across the jungle floor, finding lovers entwined beneath the leaves. Hearing the clack of *petanque*, I tiptoe from the sleeping guardians where a hut of antiques once stood, along the night alley and past the dark bungalows of curtained music, reaching the crowds by the café, the carwash and *Pam's*. I follow the dance, mixed with water and soap, plantains, papaye and yams.

In *Abidjan's* mannered gardens, *les champs de Mars*, the universe revolves, spooling out days of rest for the faithful, none for the wicked, tempting continuity, tracking ritual, the feasts move in mysterious relays, triangulated from the planetarium above my head. On earth the paths are laid to grids: measuring orderliness against the chaos of bifurcation. The park attendant urinates on the concrete sculpture, and asks if I want a tour of the garden. He eyes the women by the entrance selling hair extensions. The gate yawns, thuds shut like a power chord that reverberates down the road, alerting the guardians, who look up briefly, then go back to the study of their phones. A dog barks while the gathering clouds roll and toss, and the gaunt sky groans.

## 5. The Hospital

In each room illness waits in various stages of impatience. Along each corridor wanders the knowledge of dying. Saints and soap stars bless and curse these spaces, surrounded by taken chairs and illustrious faces, staring unconnected at stains on walls and video screens. Moistened thumbs and fingers flick through last year's journals, the newsprint rubbed away, the stories drained, interest faded to irrelevance. A cluster of desperation stretches by the entrance, but only payment permits access. The blind, the deaf, the lame, lost minds wait inanimate, abandoned, wrapped in a tight knot of hurt. The ill wind picks itself up, rustles leaves in the car park, prepares its welcome for the day's arrivals, who come at last to make their mark.

Doctors pass by, lost in smart conversations with their phones. Patients wait in the waiting room, clutching scrip, scraps and straws. *Nollywood* climaxes just as a name is called but no one stirs. The doctor calls again. Looks closely at those seated, then at one whose head is bent in submission, meditation or prayer. He calls the guards, who stretch the body away. The dull collusion of pink, lime and grey abstracts the sightless, informs the ignorant, sings along to the deaf. This is a one-way life, plagued by fatigue and slowed by drudgery. A morning drags along a car-cluttered avenue, dodging the buzzing mosquito *woro-woros* on verges, then for small change showing cars the parking places, turntable arms and somersaults, keeping all eyes level on their happy faces.

Behind the closed door, the doctor sighs, writes a prescription, tears it from the pad – pep pills, potions, prayers. Outside, a sparse crowd lingers around the buildings, lies on the grass, rests against walls, orders food from the banging saucepans. It's sent to the wards in plastic containers- some *attieke*, some *sauce de graines*. The angels choose their times, sign in and out, ascend to heavenly duties. White coats hang on the walls while the washing dries to cardboard on the grass. The heat presses hard and people rest in the stubborn but sheltering trees. Their talk circles through the air, mixes with the sirens and exhausts of cars and trucks, which bustle and burrow their way through *Treichville's* arteries, as the plough to the furrow.

## 6. The Ebrié of Abidjan

*Marseilles* and *Canal* are partly lit and partly dressed, adorned and anxious but ready for the city's theatre through the dapple-dark obscurities. They are *Tigris* and *Euphrates*, settled uneasily in show-time, flouncing and plunging like a bell-dress at a ball. But self-conscious, dimpled, a *marché de nuit* unfolds in ebony panoply, laying its sword as if a clanking regatta of flapping sails were in the offing of the hyacinth-trailed *Ebrié*. I heard the indistinct barking of orders around the glittering fleet at bay. Some wait at the riggish wharf for ferries to the floating islands of plastic bottles and *bidons* where with silken tackle a lovesick mermaid steers, or for slick speedboats across *Acheron* to the gilded groves of my peers.

Those apartment towers line up along *Mercedes* like armoured warriors, surveying the sky from thousands of lidded eyes, weapons aloft in salute: the veil of leisure before them, the lagoon to the hind. It laps the shoreline lazily. Once I stumbled lost, and staying unfound, walked the length of the *Marseilles*, which starts in other-world wealth and expires in squalor, green turning slowly to brown and grey, like an exhausted planet, no longer able to turn, let alone rise up. Meanwhile expatriates buy expensive goods cheaply and cheerfully with their rightful duty-free passes. They don't give up the fight. The duppy grins and dreams, grimaces at my pinch of salt, waits at the roadside for her head to spin. I tell her straight: it's not my fault.

Only the *Ebrié* people know the Lagoon's histories, whispered at the *Fatchue* in *Blokosso* where new generations scale the family trees. The god *Obosom* lives on the dirty streets, dozes on the littered grass, remembers when the *Tchaman* were warriors and seers, now they are fishermen and farm-hands. He knows their time will come again, but like all gods in temporary disarray, he is quick to smite but slow to save. A stooped old man carries branches to repair the roof of his house, destroyed by the storm that swept in from the hurtling sea. His eyes meet a round ghost face white as goat's milk, that talks in spirit-words from the *Oshira*, the whirlwind *Oya*. The old man drops the branches in terror; runs away shouting "*min-chan m'bidjan*".

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January 2019