Forgotten Newsmakers

Postcolonial chronicles of stringers and local journalists in Central Africa

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Contents

1. Introduction

This thesis is principally concerned with three books of reportage, *Stringer: A Reporter's Journey in the Congo* (2014)*, Bad News: Last Journalists in a Dictatorship* (2016), and the shorter e-book, *The Road Through War: Anarchy and Rebellion in the Central African Republic* (2016). The thesis also draws on several journalistic articles, magazine pieces, blog posts and essays. The books and articles were written between 2005 and 2015, a period during which I lived primarily in Central Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda.

Stringer is an account of my time, from 2005 to 2006, working as a stringer for The Associated Press in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Stringers are freelance journalists who are paid by the word or article and who receive few other benefits from the media organizations publishing their work. *Bad News* describes the demise of the free press and the rise of dictatorship in Rwanda, as told through the stories of Rwandan journalists I taught during my five years living there, from 2009 to 2013. *The Road Through War* is a piece of reportage relating a part of a journey I undertook as a freelance reporter, covering the war in the Central African Republic (CAR) just before genocidal killings began in 2013.

The three books are set in Central Africa, covering events of great significance that affect the lives of millions of people but that have received relatively scant attention in the news media. The books are both an investigation into the nature of those events and chronicles of the experiences of the journalists who report on them. I will consider the news contribution I have made in reporting and uncovering those events. However, my approach in this critical analysis also reflects my assertion that my three books make an important contribution to knowledge and literature about journalists.

The purpose of this thesis is to situate my books within a broader intellectual framework that provides the context to describe my contribution to knowledge. To this end, I first examine why

certain places and peoples are underreported by the global news production system, and the historical context for this exclusion. I then examine the informational voids that currently exist in news production and literature of journalism about these places and actors. Finally, I reflect on my books' contribution to filling this void and assess the insights that the books provide.

This thesis is structured in five parts. In Section 2, I explain why I felt there was a need to write the books and the challenges of publishing them. In Section 3, I propose postcolonial theory as an intellectual framework for my books, to understand the historical context for the exclusion of certain places and people in literature about journalism in Africa. In Section 4, I explore how these ideas from postcolonialism play out in global news production and literature about journalism in Africa, examining the persistence of colonial narratives on Africa and the exclusion of the perspectives of stringers and local journalists who work on the lowest rungs of the news production system. In Section 5, I reflect on my contribution in writing back to those exclusions, relative to my peers, by chronicling the lives of stringers and local journalists working in Africa. I also reflect on my limitations. In the appendix, I assess my contribution's effectiveness in light of the critical reception to my books from a diverse range of independent readers and institutions.

2. The origins of the three books and the challenges of telling ignored stories from Central Africa

My interest in the Democratic Republic of Congo was sparked by a news article I read as a student in my final year at Yale University in 2005. I remember the article being about killings in the Ituri region in the east of Congo. It was not the headline that I found particularly arresting, but rather a few lines near the bottom of the article – they summarised the conflict in Congo in terms very similar to this description in an Associated Press report about Ituri from that period, in January 2005, by the AP reporter Bryan Mealer:

> Since 1999, fighting in Ituri has killed more than 50,000 and forced 500,000 to flee their homes, U.N. officials and human rights groups say. The Ituri conflict was part of a larger, five-year, six-nation war in Congo that killed nearly 4 million people, mostly through starvation and disease. (2005)

This entire news article is a mere 288 words in length, though it described events so large – the killing of millions of people and displacement of hundreds of thousands more. This article is not unique. Other news reports about killings in Congo from that period did not even mention the millions of dead (Lacey, 2005), though some pieces, such as this *New York Times* editorial in February 2005, expressed indignation that in Congo "some 1,000 people die every day of preventable diseases like malaria and diarrhea" and writing, in response to criticism by the economist Jeffrey Sachs of the lack of media coverage of Congo, that "yesterday, more than 20,000 people perished of extreme poverty" (New York Times, 2005). Such commentary, however, did little to change the nature of news coverage. And I became intensely curious about this dissonance: how could such powerful events command so few words when events of seemingly lesser significance – a motor show in Geneva or shopping for "Important Meals" at

Washington, D.C. embassies – could warrant articles several times the length of Mealer's (2005) Congo report, in major newspapers such as *The Washington Post* or *The Daily Telegraph* (Nicholls, 2005; English & Don, 2005).

Shortly after this, as I describe in my first book, *Stringer* (Sundaram, 2014b), I was referred to an interview with the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński in *Granta* magazine that pointed to one historical contributor to the paucity of reports from places like Congo. In the interview, Kapuściński expressed a view that there has historically been a lack of writers bearing witness in Africa, relative to the scale of events occurring there:

> Twenty years ago, I was in Africa, and this is what I saw: I went from revolution to coup d'Ètat, from one war to another; I witnessed, in effect, history in the making, real history, contemporary history, our history. But I was also surprised: I never saw a writer. I never met a poet or a philosopher—even a sociologist. Where were they? Such important events, and not a single writer anywhere? Then I would return to Europe and I would find them. They would be at home, writing their little domestic stories: the boy, the girl, the laughing, the intimacy, the marriage, the divorce—in short, the same story we've been reading over and over again for a thousand years. (Kapuściński & Buford, 1987)

My conversations with American foreign correspondents who had worked more recently in Central Africa indicated that despite the many changes in the news industry, much of what Kapuściński had observed still held true – that there were significant events occurring in Africa that relatively few reporters and writers were chronicling. Nowhere did this seem more apparent than in Congo, whose war, according to an International Rescue Committee study in 2003, had already claimed the highest toll in any conflict since World War II (Coghlan et al., 2006). I felt that if important events were happening in Congo and there weren't sufficient reporters there, then that was where I should work. In the summer of 2005, I bought a one-way

ticket to Kinshasa, Congo's capital, with a conviction that what I would witness in Congo should be news.

That began nearly a decade of journalistic reporting and investigation in Central Africa, first in Congo and subsequently in Rwanda and the Central African Republic. The focus of my reporting was to uncover events and perspectives that were relatively underreported – even if important events were happening elsewhere, I tended to shy away from events if I knew other reporters would be at the scene. My books came afterwards, as exercises in reflecting on and processing my experiences in Central Africa.

I felt a need to write *Stringer* (Sundaram, 2014b) to convey the perspective of working as a stringer on the bottom rung of the global news production system (by "stringer" I refer to journalists paid by the word, working for Western news organisations). While reporting for The AP in Congo I observed how the self-assured tone that international news projects can be a facade. Stringers are central to the production of global news but work in precarious conditions, their perspectives often excluded, and their motivations poorly understood by the news industry. The perspective of stringers is important since they live and work on the terrain they report on, while staff correspondents in Africa generally live in news hubs at a distance from these places, parachuting in to cover breaking news (Sambrook, 2010; Vicente, 2016; Bunce, 2011). Near the end of my time reporting in Congo I was offered a staff position with The AP but I did not take the opportunity, in part because of my concerns at becoming a desk reporter disconnected from events on the ground.

My second book, *Bad News* (Sundaram, 2016a), developed more organically, focusing on the need to present the perspective of local journalists in Rwanda. In 2009, I went to Rwanda to teach a class of about a dozen Rwandan journalists. None of them are practicing today. A Rwandan colleague of mine was shot dead on the day he criticised the Rwandan President Paul Kagame, while others were arrested, imprisoned and forced to flee the country. It was when I realised, in the years after the Rwandan 2010 presidential election, that the government had almost entirely decimated the free press, that I decided to write this book, to put on the record the stories of brave Rwandan journalists who had stood up to the government and paid a high

price. The book presents the perspective, motivations and struggles of Rwandan journalists whose work has gone largely unheralded and unrecognised, including in cases where those journalists now live in exile in Western countries. The destruction of Rwanda's free press has received no sustained coverage by the international news media, even when it has reported on Rwanda, highlighting the ways in which the global news production system works, and providing a further motivation for me to write this book.

In writing *The Road Through War* (Sundaram, 2016b) I felt it necessary to describe the experience of being a freelance journalist reporting from the frontline about an unreported massacre. Despite humanitarian agencies warning of the build-up of genocidal killings, global news organisations committed few resources to the conflict in the Central African Republic. I describe some weaknesses of the global news media and how they exacerbated the conflict. It was a challenging piece of reporting to produce, as it was extremely dangerous to obtain access to the interiors of the Central African Republic during the war, and because I could not find a news outlet that would finance my journey. Editors cited the country's obscurity and the significant cost of the journey. One prominent American outlet asked me to report and write the story for free. I describe in the story my efforts to counter the information blackout in the Central African Republic, as the local press was almost non-existent outside the capital and major cities, allowing war crimes and large displacements of people to go unreported. I expand on some of these criticisms of the news production system in Africa in my essay "We're Missing the Story" (Sundaram, 2016d).

Reporting as an Indian in a profession and on territory claimed predominantly by the West presented several structural challenges. I worked for most of my time in Central Africa on an Indian passport. Western countries, for historical, colonial and trade reasons, had a far more extensive system of embassies in Central Africa than did India. When Indian embassies did exist, in cities such as Kinshasa, they provided little support to citizens beyond a symbolic registration and, in an Indian embassy official's words, to "confirm you as a missing person. Sometimes families need documents proving a death, which we can provide" (Sundaram, 2014b, p.127). This forced me to rely for support on Western embassies, which were under no obligation to

assist me. A further complication, particularly in times of danger, is that the Indian passport allows for visa-free or visa-on-arrival access to relatively few countries. Several African nations permit Indian citizens to obtain visas at their borders. But when conflict breaks out, evacuations are generally organised by Western embassies, and often involve transit or travel to countries that do require visas from Indian citizens. This makes it difficult for Indian passport holders, and many so-called "third world" citizens, to practice war correspondence in places like Central Africa.

I did, nevertheless, receive some of the benefits of my foreignness. In Rwanda, like most foreigners, I was held less accountable to the laws of the country and benefited from a certain sense of protection. For example, though several Rwandan critics of the government have been imprisoned and killed, only a handful of foreigners have been sanctioned. This made it possible – indeed, made it my responsibility, I felt – to support the work of my Rwandan journalist colleagues. I did so knowing that I would at most be thrown out of the country but that I would most likely not lose my life.

In what follows, therefore, I will explore why and how the circumstances that led to – even compelled – the writing of my books came about. Why is it that such momentous events can take place that profoundly affect the lives of millions of people and yet stir little interest among international news agencies? What is it that makes the lives of so many people count for so little that their loss and violation provokes little more than indifference? In the following section I introduce postcolonial theory as an intellectual framework for this critical analysis of my books, to understand the historical and political contexts for the exclusion of certain places and people.

3. Postcolonial theory and writing back to exclusion

The purpose of this section is not to provide a comprehensive review of postcolonial theory or criticism, but to present some concepts from postcolonialism that will be helpful in my critical analysis.

McLeod, in discussing the meaning of the word "postcolonialism", observes that "single-sentence definitions are impossible and unwise" (McLeod, 2000, p.49). He notes that colonial realities have persisted in many countries liberated from colonial rule – a condition termed "neo-colonialism" (2000, p.54) – and so "post-colonial" cannot simply be understood in a temporal sense. An important aspect of postcolonialism involves "the *challenge* to colonial ways of knowing, 'writing back' in opposition to" colonial views (2000, p.47), whose persistence is perhaps unsurprising given that by the 1930s European colonies and former colonies constituted nearly 85 percent of the world's land surface (Loomba, 1998, p.5). Loomba emphasises postcolonialism as a *process* characterised by "relations of domination that it seeks to uncover" (1998, p.39). Childs and Williams (1997, p.7) argue "for postcolonialism as an anticipatory discourse, recognizing that the condition it names does not yet exist, but working nevertheless to bring that about".[1] With these descriptions of postcolonialism and the post-colonial in mind, I will now identify and discuss some aspects that are relevant to this analysis.

[1] "Postcolonialism", which refers to a field of critical study and theory, is distinguished from the "post-colonial", which refers to specific forces and discourses that take us beyond colonial narratives, ideas and depictions of the world. "Post-colonial" also has a temporal connotation, referring to the historical period after decolonisation. Of course, the "postcolonial" can often also be "post-colonial". My books, for example, can be described as fitting into both categories, as they both offer a critique and manifest the very flows of power that they critique. I will highlight instances where the two terms intersect where it is particularly relevant to my analysis.

1. Ideas of humanness and portrayals of the colonised

Loomba cites Etienne Balibar's work on "neo-racism" to discuss how ideas of differences between people seemingly based on culture can be as destructive as racism based on genes (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991 cited in Loomba, 1998, p.123). She writes, "early modern European views of Muslims and Jews are also important in reminding us that 'culture' and 'biology' have in fact never been neatly separable categories" (Loomba, 1998, p.13). She continues her historical contextualization of culture-based racism by citing Mary Louise Pratt's discussion of the 1758 work *The Wild Man's Pedigree*, in which John Burke combines biological and social characteristics in categorizing Europeans as

> Fair, sanguine, brawny; hair yellow, brown, flowing; eyes blue; gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by laws

and Africans as

> Black, phlegmatic, relaxed. Hair black, frizzled; skin silky; nose flat, lips tumid; crafty, indolent, negligent. Annoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice. (Pratt, 1992, p.32 cited in Loomba, 1998, p.124)

Such "colonial discourses" served the purpose of "colonising the mind" of colonised people, according to McLeod, forming the "intersections where language and power meet" (2000, pp.32-33). McLeod points to the huge impact such colonial discourses had in shaping Western ideas about colonised places and people: "Discourses do not reflect a pre-given reality: they *constitute* and *produce* our sense of reality", adding that "the relationship between language and power is far-reaching and fundamental" (2000, pp.34, 53).

Postcolonial theorists emphasise the seminal contribution of Edward Said[2] in analysing "Orientalism" in colonial discourses, writing that Said showed how such discourses repeatedly denigrated colonised people as beneath Europeans and "barbaric, sensual, and lazy" (Loomba, 1998, p.63). The endeavour of "gathering and ordering of information about the lands and people visited by, and later subject to, the colonial powers" (1998, p.72) was itself compromised, and became a crucial component in creating an opposition between the West and the colonised. Images of the colonised "other" as irrationally violent, cannibals and rapists were continually brought home for consumption in West (1998, pp.72-73). And

> rarely did Western travellers in these regions ever try to learn much about, or from, the native peoples they encountered. Instead, they recorded their observations based upon commonly held *assumptions* about 'the Orient'...These observations (which were not really observations at all) were presented as scientific truths...colonial power was buttressed by the production of knowledge about colonised cultures which endlessly produced a degenerate image of the Orient for those in the West. (McLeod, 2000, p.35)

This was in stark contrast with contemporary Western humanist discourse, which French poet Aimé Césaire and other postcolonial intellectuals eloquently attacked for its "pretensions to enlightened universality" even as it maintained "covert racist exclusionary categories in its opposition of human and sub-human or non-human Others" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p.41).

[2] My analysis also addresses the major criticisms of Said. Some scholars dismiss *Orientalism* as "charlatanry" and defend the work of colonial scholars (Irwin, 2007). Others criticise Said's homogenous portrayal of colonisation, arguing that Said's deterministic analysis, relying heavily on Foucault, left no room for differences in how various colonies were administered (Mackenzie, 1995). A third "materialist" or Marxist criticism highlights Said's emphasis on discourse at the expense of material appropriation from the colonies, and his neglect of the differences in how colonialism was received by various classes of colonised peoples (Ahmad, 2007). My analysis responds to the material criticism by pointing out how discursive appropriations go hand in hand with material appropriations in international news systems. I also show how various classes of subaltern actors in the news industry receive and challenge colonial discourse. Variations in the administration of colonies are less relevant to my analysis, which primarily reflects Said's general point that discourse can and has been used to appropriate from subalterns. Clearly, therefore, I would refute Irwin's claims of "charlatanry", by arguing that Said's analysis remains relevant today. As I show, the appropriations that occur in international news systems today resemble the appropriations that Said identified.

Loomba highlights the wide scope of literature that may be analysed for such colonial discourse and hypocrisy, including "non-literary texts such as newspaper stories, government records and reports, memoirs, journals, historical tracts or political writings" as representing a "version of reality for specific readers" (Loomba, 1998, p.92) through their use of language. Said's *Orientalism* also extends its analysis to journalism and travel literature (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.39). It is perhaps worth noting that within the "literature of empire", Martin Green argues (1980) that the "novel of adventure" deserves special place for concerning itself with "questions of territorial expansion and exploration" and "force" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, pp.24-25). I show in the next section how colonial adventure narratives are present in portrayals of foreign correspondents.

Colonial discourse was created, consumed and utilised within certain political structures. I have already noted the place of colonial discourse at the intersection of power and language. The coloniser's political will was to control its domains, and discourse was put at this service (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.38), emanating largely from colonial "centres" or "metropoles", and structuring the centre's relationship with the colonial "peripheries" or "margins".

2. Centres and margins in empire and colonial appropriation

Loomba describes the centre and periphery in these terms: "The imperial country is the 'metropole' from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls" (1998, p.28).

A defining feature of imperialism is the appropriation by the "centre" of property, money and labour in the "peripheries". This appropriation was exercised in administrative, settler and plantation colonialism through the use of remote administrations, direct settlers and imported plantation labour (Loomba, 1998, p.24). The seizing "of sweat and dead bodies" created so much wealth in the centres of colonialism that Frantz Fanon went as far as to declare that

Europe was “literally the creation of the Third World” (Fanon, 1963, pp.76-81 cited in Loomba, 1998,p.63).

In many ways, the negative portrayals of colonised people I have described were an appropriation of culture, voice and identity that went hand in hand with the material appropriations of colonialism. Loomba writes that “Said’s project was to show how ‘knowledge’ about non-Europeans was part of the process of maintaining power over them” (1998, p.62). It was in the colonial centres that such portrayals of the peripheries were shaped and disseminated, encouraging colonial intervention in the peripheries (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.40; Ashcroft et al., 2002, p.6).

Aijaz Ahmad argues that similar modes of division of labour are still in operation today among postcolonial theorists, whereby “Third World cultural producers send ‘primary’ material to the metropolis” to be refined by elite intellectuals and sent back to the Third World as “theory” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.18). Nevertheless, Moore-Gilbert highlights the willingness of postcolonialists to reflexively examine their places in intellectual centres, citing Gayatri Spivak’s recognition that imperialist cultural structures have aided her *en route* to becoming a leading postcolonial theorist (1997, p.76). One might argue that the ambitions of postcolonialism necessitate such reflexive examination.

These dynamics between colonial centres and peripheries have been the subject of much debate in postcolonial theory. Critics have suggested that thinking in terms of centres and peripheries has stymied the ability of postcolonialism to interrogate the newer networks of global power that have accompanied “globalisation”. However, others have argued that globalisation has mainly reinforced the structural imbalances used and produced by modern colonialism, and that the material appropriation continues today, for example in debt servicing payments by former colonies and in the dominance of multinational companies over large portions of third world economies (Loomba, 1998, pp.11, 15).

This view of persistent structural imbalances is supported by Immanuel Wallerstein’s World-Systems Theory. For Wallerstein, colonial systems originated in a long-running cyclical process of capitalist globalisation that created “cores” and “peripheries” distinguished by their

economies (Wallerstein, 2012, p.28). Core countries and economies are characterised by a high degree of monopolization and profitability, while peripheral economies supply cores with low-cost raw materials and labour. Peripheral economies suffer in trade with core economies in a process of "unequal exchange", of which colonial appropriation or "plunder" is an extreme form. According to Wallerstein, "strong states" are most likely to protect monopolistic industries, leading to a correlation between a nation's strength and the "core-like" nature of its economy. Wallerstein argues that strong states pressure "weak states" to open their frontiers, which is profitable for firms in the strong states, while "resisting any demands for reciprocity in this regard" (2012, p.55). He also describes how colonizing powers sent out personnel to the colonies, which he describes as the "weakest states", to oversee administration, decision making and production (2012, p.55), thus institutionalizing the dynamics of inequality.

I have already discussed how colonial discourse was used by the centre in the process of economic and cultural appropriation from the peripheries. Discourse can also work in opposition to appropriation. In *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft et al. state that "directly and indirectly, in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the 'Empire writes back' to the imperial 'centre'… challenging the world-view that can polarise centre and periphery in the first place" (2002, p.32).

There has been extensive research on how such "writing back", particularly elite anti-colonial nationalist discourse, has been complicit in maintaining the underlying assumptions and structures of colonial projects. Elite nationalist discourses, for example, reasserted colonial ideas of "progress", "modernisation" and "backwardness", but now as the endeavours of a class of national elites, thus continuing to marginalise large sections of society (Chatterjee, 1986; Chatterjee, 1993; Guha, 1988; Mondal, 2003). The researchers who studied these doubly-, sometimes multiply-marginalised actors came to be known as the Subalternists, named after their term for the periphery's marginalised inhabitant, the "subaltern".

3. Recovering the subaltern's contributions and voice

Loomba characterises the postcolonial usage of the term "subaltern", developed by Antonio Gramsci, as "shorthand for any oppressed person" (1998, p.67). McLeod defines subalterns as "those who did not comprise the colonial elite – such as the lesser rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle-class peasants" (2000, p.196). The Subalternist Ranajit Guha referred to subalterns as "non-elite sectors" of society (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.79).

The Subalternists countered elite historiographies in which subaltern voices were diminished or absent. The Subalternists recast the subaltern as an historical agent who made profound contributions to societal transformations. They recast peasant resistances, classified by colonial administrations as "random and spontaneous disturbances", as organised insurrections that influenced more widespread agitations, making significant contributions towards the ending of colonial rule (Childs & Williams, 1997, p.161). The Subalternists thus challenged and rewrote histories that had emphasized the actions and roles of colonial and national elites and largely ignored subaltern activities (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.87). In doing so, they aimed to "restore histories of subaltern activity to the historical record" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p.37).

In her influential essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), Gayatri Spivak emphasises the difficulty of recovering the subaltern's voice and consciousness. She characterises those who argue otherwise, including Michel Foucault, as severely underestimating the destruction caused by colonialism (Loomba, 1998, p.229). Furthermore, she claims that any attempt by intellectuals to represent the voice of the subaltern is implicitly compromised by an assumption that their writing "can serve as a transparent medium through which the voices of the oppressed can be represented" (McLeod, 2000, p.197). Despite these difficulties, Spivak argues that postcolonial intellectuals should persist in their efforts and be driven by a "political commitment to making visible the position of the marginalised" (Loomba, 1998, p.230).

Loomba notes that Spivak's critics argue she is sometimes deaf to the agency of the subaltern in her reading of texts (1998, p.230), which has led to her exaggerated pessimism. Moore-Gilbert posits that Spivak emphasises the subaltern as a "'theoretical' fiction" and not as an actual individual, ignoring material realities (1997, p.103). Spivak, however, has clarified that her views on subaltern voice are characterised less by the subaltern's ability or inability to speak and more by how "others *did not know how to listen*" (McLeod, 2000, p.200).[3] Moreover, the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has argued that subalterns can indeed be listened to and their voices recovered, for example by understanding how they mimic and parody colonial authority (Ashcroft et al., 2002, pp.175-76).

This question of listening is a significant one. Ashcroft et al. describe the privileged position of the margins in postcolonial writing, but they reject notions that postcolonial literature can return us to a "'pure' and unsullied cultural condition" (2002, p.40), prior to colonialism. Part of the exercise of writing back to exclusion, then, lies in shifting the focus from recovering the past, and what was lost to colonialist domination, to a renewed focus on listening and observing the present, tuning into the subaltern experience. McLeod cites a wonderfully moving passage from Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that has a special resonance for me, as a journalist, in which Spivak describes her encounter with rural subaltern women in India. Spivak wonders how she might "touch their everyday" unencumbered by systems that "transcode" them into

[3] An analysis of the ability of journalism and memoir to transcode the subaltern experience lies outside the scope of this critical essay. This is because in order for the subaltern voice to be "transcoded" into a form intelligible to modern knowledge, the "face-to-face" encounters would produce journalism and memoirs that would still need to be embedded and implicated in the discursive and institutional formations and structures that exclude and silence the subaltern "voice" in the first place. Spivak calls this problem of representation an "aporia" – an irresolvable contradiction or paradox that needs to be worked with or through but which cannot be dismantled or resolved in any conventional sense (Spivak, 1985). The aporia would not be overcome by getting the "subaltern" to speak for themselves, either, because the problem is not one of "speaking" at all, but rather of listening – of "tuning in" to the other voice, rather than "tuning out" the otherness of that voice in order to make it understandable. It is possible that the current structure of the global news industry renders it largely incapable of listening to these subaltern voices.

categories of knowledge or learning (Spivak, 1999, p.242 cited in McLeod, 2000, p.201). In my view, in stressing "the importance of 'face to face' work with the subaltern" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.101), Spivak opens the door to contributions from journalistic practice, however limited those may be.

My analysis focuses on the subaltern as a marginalised figure living and working outside the circle of elites. I highlight the subaltern's contributions to our knowledge, and I add to our understanding of the subaltern's motivations, and living and working conditions. I show how subalterns in the international news media sometimes occupy dual roles, producing modern knowledge by mimicking Western discourse and thus acting as imperfect mediators between the periphery and centre. Such an analysis falls squarely within the tradition of subaltern studies.

In the following section I will detail how some of these concepts in postcolonialism find expression in current news coverage of Africa, and I examine the exclusion of the perspectives of stringers and local journalists, who work on the lowest rungs of the news production system, in literature and research about journalism in Africa.

4. The political economy of journalism in Africa

In this section I show how colonial discourse persists in news coverage on Africa today, and how it is evolving. I then turn to the structure of news production in Africa and discuss how colonial exclusions persist there. Finally, I show how the literary canon of journalism in Africa also exhibits similar colonial exclusions, thus establishing voids in current knowledge, both literary and academic. I refer to a variety of sources in this section, ranging from journalistic pieces to academic scholarship and works of literature. As such, the following discussion is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of the changing nature of media in Africa; rather, it focuses on those elements about African media coverage and news operations most relevant to my analysis, while also indicating, where relevant, additional related directions for inquiry.

1. Colonial discourse in current news coverage of Africa

In 2000 *The Economist* cover famously proclaimed Africa "The Hopeless Continent". Eleven years later *The Economist*'s cover would announce: "Africa Rising". The reversal was in part influenced by a 2010 report published by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company called "Lions on the Move" about a new era of African growth[4], which also led the Wall Street Journal to publish a series of features on African economic growth under the banner of "Africa Rising". But only five years later, in October 2016, the *New York Times* reported that Africa is not rising after all and that "Africa Reeling" may be a more fitting description (Gettleman, 2016). In an attempt to make sense of these polarised headlines, and perhaps approaching the truth, Lily

[4] Note the reference to "Lions", an allusion to African safaris, a long-standing theme of colonial writing about Africa.

Kuo writes in the online news magazine Quartz that “Africa wasn’t ‘rising’ before and it’s not ‘reeling’ now” (Kuo, 2016).

News coverage of Africa is particularly negligent when compared to the rest of the world. “Over the past 30 years there has been a steady decline in the attention given to reporting Africa,” writes Suzanne Franks in “The Neglect of Africa” (2005, p.59). She makes the startling observation that such neglect is despite improvements in communications and technology that should have made it easier to cover the world. For Franks, there has been a marked decrease in interest in Africa following the end of colonialism and the “end-of-Empire” narrative. And she has noted that little has changed since, that “many parts of Africa are less understood and less well reported in this period than they were several generations ago” (2010, p.72).

Hugely significant events like the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which began in the genocide’s aftermath, have been grossly ignored by the news media. Franks notes that though Congo’s war has killed millions of people, “for western purposes it has been largely invisible” and for this reason it has been branded “Africa’s hidden first world war”. Rwanda’s genocide, which killed nearly a million people in a hundred days, had the misfortune of occurring at the same time as Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as South Africa’s president, “a very rare good news story out of Africa”, which took precedence over the genocide because the “feeling in newsrooms was that one story at a time from Africa was enough” (2010, pp.73-74).

Besides this neglect, the dominant view in academic literature is that there are significant biases in the reporting on Africa that is produced. Reflecting on the findings of her landmark book *Africa’s Media Image* (1992), Beverly Hawk writes that “metaphors used to frame African stories were Western and often colonial, not African at all” (Hawk, 2016). The scholar Achille Mbembe has written about how such foreign frames reinforce neo-colonial, paternalist attitudes towards Africa and stereotypes about Africans, perpetuating inequalities and Western systems of dominance (Mbembe, 2001).

My work shows that such coverage of Africa can be linked not only to race and the legacy of colonialism that, as I discussed in the previous section, led to portrayals of Africans as less

human than Europeans, but also to structural inequalities in the international news system. Judith Butler writes about how some lives are still deemed more "grievable" than others, leading to a lack of media coverage of those considered less grievable and the implicit legitimization of violence against them (Butler, 2009). She also shows that media narratives reinforce ideas of "otherness" by expressing deeper grief for certain deaths on the basis of nationality and race (Butler, 2010). Butler's analysis is directly relevant to news coverage of Africa today. When African wars are covered inadequately in the press, relative to incidents in the West on a similar scale of violence, those African lives are immediately rendered less grievable. The media thus reinforces the notion that those African lives matter less and implicitly condones greater levels of violence against Africans. Franks cites the former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in support of this view: "if six thousand people in Europe died of malaria [as they do every day in Africa], the media would not just report the disaster: they would look for signs of negligence, for culpability, failures of science and technology and governmental corruption" (2005, p.60). Franks notes how CNN did not publish a story to which it later awarded a "CNN African Journalist of the Year" award, showing how high-quality stories from Africa are ignored (2005, p.63).

Evidence of the international news media's historic racism can be found in how African leaders have used it to their advantage. During a 1977/78 rebellion in Congo (then Zaire) that threatened the government, President Mobutu Sese Seko claimed that white miners were under siege, leading to exaggerated Western media coverage and the deployment of Belgian soldiers that ultimately protected Mobutu's government (Franks, 2010). Adding to this is extensive literature about how Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe has exploited postcolonial critiques of colonialism (Primorac, 2007; Tendi, 2014).

The recent positive discourses about Africa are a response to this historic neglect. Researchers and writers have expressed their belief that news coverage about Africa may be moving past negative and one-dimensional portrayals of the past (Bunce, 2016). "It is fashionable, these days, to be upbeat about Africa" writes Michela Wrong (Wrong, 2015). This new, positive image

of Africa, embodied by the "Africa Rising" narrative has been applauded by politicians, the African diaspora and the business community (Bunce et al., 2016b) as a post-colonial narrative.

But there have been several criticisms of this new narrative, including from Africans, hinting that the fundamental nature of reporting on Africa may not have changed very much. These criticisms are reminiscent of Bhabha's observation of contradictions in colonial discourse, whereby "the colonized subject can be simultaneously beyond comprehension (as in stereotypes about 'the inscrutable Oriental' or 'the mysterious East') and yet completely knowable as the object of the all-seeing colonial gaze" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.119).

In addition to Kuo (2016), Howard French, a well-known former *New York Times* Africa correspondent, has written that "Africa Rising has always been tedious + hollow, just as its journalistic opposite" (French, 2016). Grieve Chelwa, an economist at Harvard University has questioned the economic underpinnings of the "Africa Rising" argument, which he describes as a "myth" (Gettleman, 2016). For Chelwa, "Africa Rising" has been something akin to propaganda about the continent: "the rhetoric around 'Africa rising' is giving us a false sense of comfort and distracting us from the real work that needs to happen" (Chelwa, 2015). This flip-flopping between polarised narratives about Africa points to persistent problems in news production. It indicates that "Africa Rising" may have been more a reaction to criticisms of negative portrayals of Africa than a structural shift in how ground realities in Africa are covered by the news media, which I will now examine.

2. Politics and structures of news production in Africa

Franks notes that fifty years ago, just after the end of colonialism across much of Africa, European newspapers still invested significant resources in covering Africa:

> Even middle-market papers such as the *Daily Express* and *Mail* had Africa specialists, correspondents based in Africa who filed on

> a regular basis and offered informed comment on African affairs. The fact that newspapers and broadcasters had invested in correspondents meant that they were then inclined to take their material, and the story was reported in a steady, incremental way, informed by locally-based expertise. (2005, p.59)

The way Africa is covered has dramatically shifted. Many news organisations, facing cost pressures and leveraging improved digital technology, have shut down foreign news bureaus. Instead, they operate headquarters in a few hubs across Africa from where their foreign correspondents "parachute" into places to report on breaking news (Sambrook, 2010, p.18). These correspondents often report on places remotely in between their parachuting trips (Vicente, 2016). Such parachute journalism has been criticised for its lack of context and commitment to a country, for its propensity to manipulation from unreliable or one-sided sources, and for its inability to follow-up on gradually-unfolding stories (Musa & Yusha'u, 2013; Wrong, 2016). However, Sambrook cites his view and that of some other foreign reporters that improved technology and mobility make it easier for them to cover the world without necessarily having to live in those places[5], that parachute journalism is cost-effective, and that the parachuting in and out preserves a place's foreignness, making foreign reporters more alert (2010, p.19).

This new parachute model of journalism has come to rely heavily on local journalists and stringers, particularly in Africa, where "local journalists now provide substantive portions of day-to-day reporting" (Bunce, 2015, p.44). Many news agencies' bureaus now include local journalists and stringers (Sambrook, 2010). However, academic research on journalism in Africa is heavily focused on foreign correspondents. There has been research on how foreign correspondents perceive their audience in Africa and the West (Nothias, 2016), on foreign

[5] Note how this foreign correspondent view contrasts with the assessment of Franks (2010) that coverage of Africa by news organizations has not improved despite technological improvements. The self-belief of foreign correspondents in their own coverage of Africa and the narrative of African negligence in academia are possible future areas of investigation.

correspondents as anthropologist-like translators between cultures (Hannerz, 2004), and on foreign correspondents' demographics and evolving digital working tools (Vicente, 2016).

Despite the importance of stringers and local journalists in foreign news production, little research has been done on them or their motivations and working conditions (Bunce, 2011). Several major academic books about foreign correspondents, such as *Foreign News: Exploring the world of Foreign Correspondents* (Hannerz, 2004), *War Stories: The Culture of Foreign Correspondents* (Pedelty, 1995) and *Journalists at War: The Dynamics of News Reporting during the Falklands Conflict* (Tumber & Morrison, 1988), exclude local journalists, though Hannerz (2004) acknowledges the occasional journalistic contributions of local "fixers" (Seo, 2016).

Stephen Hess devotes a chapter to American freelancers in his book on foreign correspondents (Hess, 1996), categorizing them into archetypes such as "the spouse", "the expert" and "the adventurer". He discusses the stringer's generally low wages, patterns in their marital status, the social class to which they tend to belong in their home countries, and examples of freelancers who have transitioned to full-time correspondents.

Mel Bunce has researched whether portrayals of Africa have changed because of the integration of local journalists, whom she calls "local-national foreign correspondents", in international news bureaus (2015). She concludes that their contribution is important but is limited by hierarchical relationships with their mostly Western bosses and the need to produce stories sellable in Western markets, thus continuing the prevalence of colonial discursive structures, institutional hierarchies, and economies. In "This Place Used to be a White British Boys' Club" (2010), she describes how Western correspondents responded to election-related violence in Kenya with often incendiary reports, focusing on atrocities and tribal divisions, while Kenyan journalists emphasised unity and progress, as they would benefit from an end to the violence. In "The New Foreign Correspondent at Work" (2011), Bunce studies the news landscape in Sudan, examining the role of "local-national foreign correspondents", "Western foreign correspondents", and "hybrid foreign correspondents" (i.e., foreign stringers or Sudanese stringers who had absorbed Western news values) who shared characteristics with the prior two categories of journalists. Her main findings arose from analysing these three

groups for their news values: she found that Sudanese foreign correspondents were less likely to hold the government accountable, partly because they faced the risk of severe harassment and could not leave the country like their Western counterparts. She found that hybrid correspondents fell somewhere in between, still holding governments accountable while relating easily with local culture and with their foreign editors. In her book on international newsgathering (2015), Colleen Murrell looks at the role of another neglected group in news production, "fixers", who often translate and arrange logistics for foreign correspondents, but sometimes take on more roles that affect the content of news stories, almost always with minimal credit. Murrell's analysis of fixers centres on how they relate to and work with foreign correspondents (Brooten, 2016).

This is a good point at which to define journalist categories as they will be used in the rest of my analysis. My use of the term "foreign correspondent" refers to staff correspondents working for Western news organisations. By "stringer", as mentioned previously, I refer to journalists paid by the word, working for Western news organisations. It is important to note that by "stringer" I do not refer to "super stringers", who live and work in conditions close to those of foreign correspondents.[6] By "local journalists" I refer to local-national journalists covering events within their countries, subject to the national media regulatory environment and government pressures. In my book *Stringer* I describe a foreign stringer working in Congo, and in *Bad News* and *Stringer* I describe local journalists working in Congo and Rwanda.[7]

It is worth remarking that these terms can be used quite flexibly in the field. Journalists can make transitions between categories and can play multiple roles simultaneously. A local journalist reporting for national media may at the same time be working as a stringer for

[6] "Super stringers" are often deployed internationally and generally receive generous benefits packages, including Western-standard accommodation and paid-for transport and communication.

[7] My descriptions in *Stringer* would apply to local-national stringers in many respects. I will indicate where major deviations between the foreign stringer and local-national stringer might arise. My analysis of local journalists would apply in several other Sub-Saharan African countries. However, it would not apply to certain exceptions. In the particularly well-developed national media environment of South Africa, for example, many local journalists work for media outlets covering events across the continent.

Western media, for example. There are also several examples of journalists who make the transition from stringer to foreign correspondent. This is a possible area for future research, building for example on Hess's book (1996) describing some stringer transitions, and Bunce's work (2011) showing that local-nationals often absorb Western news values in transitioning upwards within Western media organisations.

In "Marginal Majority at The Postcolonial News Agency", Seo (2016) studies the oral history collection of interviews with AP staff to examine the increasing role of local journalists (whom she calls the "marginal majority") employed by the AP, as well as how foreign staff perceive the locals. She cites "a discriminatory framework in compensation and status—which can be traced back to the colonial days" (p.39), and "a caste system" in which expat journalists

> who are usually white, American, and male—constitute the top, supported by an underclass of local journalistic hires, many of whom are elites from English-speaking families with college degrees. Somewhere in the middle are the expatriates, which include Americans as well as British, Canadian, and Australian nationals with some expertise in the region, who may have started out as scholars or backpackers. (p.44)

She supports this description of a "caste system" by pointing out that news organizations value American lives more than local journalist lives, compensating families four times more in the case of an American journalist's death (p.47).

Seo concludes that the importance of non-Western journalists will only increase in news production, though there is little research about them, and she calls for future research on foreign news production, "away from the exclusive focus on American or Western correspondents, to include the stringers, fixers, and freelance videographers who have come to provide the bread and butter of foreign news" (p.52).

This paucity of research on stringers and local journalists is all the more surprising given the substantial documentation of the democratization of news media in Africa. For example,

Nyabola (2016) writes about the Kenyan #SomeonetellCNN Twitter campaign, and how social media led to the inclusion of African perspectives in news stories. In *Participatory Politics and Citizen Journalism in a Networked Africa*, Mutsvairo (2016a) and his co-authors focus on the growing participation in new forms of media by citizens in Nigeria (Kperogi, 2016), Ethiopia (Skjerdal, 2016), Central Africa (Briujn, 2016) and Kenya (Ogola & Owuor, 2016), describing the ability of previously excluded citizens to influence political processes and media discourse. This research has provided substantial insights on these new journalistic actors, who have arguably received greater attention than stringers and local journalists. Complementary research has described how online journalism in Africa is transforming how journalists communicate public-interest news and engage their audiences (Mabweazara et al., 2014).

However, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (2007), a collection of essays edited by Allan Thompson, does focus on local journalists in Africa. The book examines the production and impact of hate media in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. As such, the book is rather a criticism of Rwandan journalists than an assessment of their contribution to news. Essays in the book also describe the failure of international media to cover the genocide adequately, an addition to the literature of the neglect of Africa in the Rwandan context.

Current academic literature therefore tells us little about the lives, working conditions and contribution to international news of local journalists and stringers. The research that exists focuses on foreign correspondents, with some attention paid to the news values of Western stringers and local journalists working for international news agencies. There is little sense of how the hierarchies and exclusions in the day-to-day work affect local journalists and stringers. As I will now show, a similar exclusion of crucial perspectives is also present in literature about journalism in Africa.

3. Literature about journalism in Africa

Popular portrayals of foreign correspondents tend towards the hero or rogue figures, and have often cast correspondents as mythical or romantic figures (Saltzman & Ehrlich, 2015). In Africa, this has often translated to the western correspondent portrayed as a defender of human rights or as an agent of Western neo-colonial powers (Nothias, 2016). In many of these portrayals, local journalists and stringers are presented as minor, passing figures, or as sidekicks to foreign correspondents. Examining "The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture" database, I found that portrayals of African journalists are almost non-existent, and foreign correspondents in Africa are most often employed or dispatched by major Western media organizations, and are rarely stringers (Saltzman, 2016).

There is an established tradition of transforming journalistic experience into first-person reportage. My goal here is not to survey the breadth of this tradition, nor to conduct a postcolonial re-reading of these texts[8]. My purpose is to examine the perspective from which this literature is written, and to show the consistent exclusion of the perspectives of stringers and local journalists from this literature. It will be sufficient for my purposes to examine selected texts that demonstrate the historical context for this exclusion and show its continuation in contemporary literature.

Furthermore, I will not examine the full variety of texts written by journalists in Africa. There have been a number of accounts produced by journalists about their travels or sociological or historical expeditions in Africa. I will focus here on literature about journalists, local and foreign, reporting in Africa on events that are, or should be, considered international news.

[8] A possible future avenue of work would be to conduct a postcolonial reading of these texts, looking for discourse that emphasizes the place of Empire and the importance of foreign journalists while diminishing local perspectives.

Stringers and local journalists have contributed to international news for more than a century. In war correspondence alone, nearly a hundred stringers were engaged by the Reuters news agency to cover the Boer war of 1899-1902, the most comprehensively reported war in history until then. Dozens of American stringers were dispatched in 1914 to cover World War I. Reuters employed stringers in covering the Ethiopian War of 1935 and in the Spanish Civil War. Many Vietnamese reporters worked as stringers for foreign newspapers and agencies during the Vietnam War from 1954-75, and were often abusively managed, required to take severe risks to supply the world with news and photographs (Roth & Olson, 1997, pp.33, 306, 350).

However, these stringers and local journalists only minimally figure in literary accounts of most of those wars. This is particularly true in Africa[9]. The Boer War was covered by close to three hundred foreign correspondents. Among the most widely-read of them are Henry W. Nevinson of the *Daily Chronicle*, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Winston Churchill, George Warrington Steevens of the *Daily Mail*, and H.A. Gwynne and Edgar Wallace for Reuters. A good number of these correspondents produced books about the Boer War, but few among them examined the contribution or perspective of stringers and local journalists. Nevinson's trilogy of memoirs – *Changes and Chances* (1923), *More Changes, More Chances* (1925) and *Last Changes, Last Chances* (Nevinson, 1928) – recount in detail his Boer War experience, as well as other wars, but gives us little information on the many stringers and local journalists he probably saw and worked alongside. The same is true of his account of the Ladysmith siege (1900), published during the Boer War when those stringers and local colleagues would have been active in the field. Angela John, in her biography of Nevinson (2006), makes little mention of Nevinson's relationship with local journalists. John Simpson in his chapter on how the Boer war was reported (Simpson, 2010), writes about foreign correspondents, for example on Steevens' death in the Ladysmith siege, but does not dwell on stringers or local journalists. Churchill's memoir, also published during the Boer War (1900) focuses on his own experiences, as does Steevens' memoir (1900). Conan Doyle's book of reportage (1902) pays its debts to other foreign correspondents active in the Boer War, including Nevinson and Churchill, but hardly

[9] The system of employing stringers and local journalists also exists in Western countries, in non-postcolonial contexts. My analysis here is limited to the use and effects of such systems in postcolonial contexts in Africa.

dwells on the contribution of stringers and local journalists. Gwynne, in his book about the British army during the Boer War (1904), does not mention his cohort of Reuters stringers who probably provided him with information. Edgar Wallace's account briefly mentions local journalists[10]:

> the correspondence of the war was left in the hands of four London journalists (for one, and the best of us all, Howell Gwynne, of Reuter's Agency, had not left his post) and by hundreds of local correspondents scattered throughout South Africa—and these latter have rendered much excellent service to the London reader. But the local correspondent is a man who is making his home in the country. His existence in the Transvaal must necessarily depend on the terms he keeps with the military. He does not criticise military operations adversely; he studiously keeps as far as possible out of the range of polemics. He is practically under the thumb of the censor. I could quote many instances to demonstrate the fact that the Government has it all its own way as far as the local correspondents are concerned, that it is only from the London special, who is prepared to say what he thinks without the fear that his outspokenness will result in his ruin, that you can expect to receive an honest criticism. (1901, p.28)

Wallace does not elaborate on the contributions of these local journalists. Some of his views are echoed by Bunce's (2011) fieldwork in Sudan. In the next section I describe how *Bad News* (2016a) contributes to these portrayals of local journalists by documenting how Rwandan journalists challenged their government, taking significant personal risk, when many Western correspondents did not do so.

[10] It is possible that stringers and 'lineage' journalists (paid by the line, much like stringers), were better valued and paid historically than they are now. An analysis of the historical use and news contribution of stringers is a possible avenue for future research.

I observe a consistent exclusion in the authorship of works in the literary canon of 20th century journalism in Africa. The authors are almost exclusively Western foreign correspondents, and the pattern of omission of local reporters and stringers, despite their consistent use and contribution to news, is repeated.

Evelyn Waugh in his memoir of his time as a *London Daily Mail* correspondent in Ethiopia in the 1930s gives us little sense of stringers or Ethiopian journalists who may have assisted him (2000). The renowned Africa reporter from the 1960s, Chris Munnion, briefly mentions stringers. He notably mentions, for example, a "reliable stringer in Mozambique" (1993, p.352), whom he provides few further details about, and an instance when the well-regarded stringer Eric Marsden and the *New York Times* correspondent Homer Biggard broke an important story (1993, p.100). John Simpson's book on journalism in the last century *Unreliable Sources: How the 20th Century was reported* (2010) does not dwell on stringers, in Africa or elsewhere, though it does contain a short passage about a Reuters stringer in Sarajevo in 1914, "probably a local journalist...inexperienced and busy with the demands of his own newspaper", whose reporting led to confusion about the war (2010, p.143). *Newsweek* correspondent Edward Behr briefly mentions a Geneva stringer and a *New York Times* stringer in his memoir (Behr, 1978). The *Daily Telegraph* correspondent Richard Beeston in his memoir provides a paragraph about his "garrulous Cairo stringer...who had some connections with Egyptian intelligence" (2006, p.107). Legendary foreign correspondent James Cameron similarly devotes little space to stringers or local journalists in his memoir (2007). Australian journalist Philip Knightley focuses on British and American war correspondents in the Africa portions of his classic book about international journalism (2004), and the admired Africa hand Peter Younghusband largely limits himself to his experiences with other foreign correspondents in his memoir of Africa (2003).

There are a handful of recent books by reporters working for the wire services, broadcast media and magazine journalism. These authors and their books naturally differ in many respects,

including the depth of their reporting. Here I will limit myself to describing the exclusion of stringers and local journalists in their accounts.[11]

The *Washington Post's* Keith Richburg's book *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa* (2009), about his reporting from Africa in the 90s, offers a subversive perspective on African news, but on the subject of stringers and local journalists contributing to his reporting, Richburg is mostly silent. He mentions a few interactions with a Reuters Kenyan journalist and with his American stringer in Nairobi, and he dwells on the charismatic British-Kenyan stringer Dan Eldon, whose death at the hands of a mob in Mogadishu in 1993 has been recounted in several books. Other works from the 1990s and early 2000s, such as Michela Wrong's *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz* (2002), about her time witnessing Mobutu's last days as a foreign correspondent in Kinshasa, make little mention of the Congolese journalists and stringers who supported her. Wrong does mention "Radio Trottoir", informal street talk that was useful for news gathering. Philip Gourevitch's book on Rwanda (1999), sections of which he published contemporaneously in *New Yorker* magazine, similarly provides few details about Rwandan journalists or news and radio reports that might have helped him navigate Rwanda when he began visiting in May 1995. In Anderson Cooper's memoir (2006) of his reporting from Asia, Iraq, Niger and America, again stringers, local journalists and the extensive production crew who assisted him with his reporting are largely absent. AP correspondent Bryan Mealer's memoir of Congo (2009) features the AFP and Reuters foreign correspondents as prominent characters. His Congolese colleague Eddy Isango, who worked alongside Mealer in The AP bureau, is mentioned in a couple of anecdotes. Some of these anecdotes involve Mealer's generosity towards Isango, and

[11] Analysis of the reasons and responsibility for the exclusion of stringers and local journalists from these books is beyond the scope of this discussion and would be a avenue for future research. Such an analysis would ideally entail interviews with the concerned authors and the stringers who supported them, and possibly their editors as well as other agents in the publishing system. I note here that the ultimate responsibility for the contents of a book usually rests with the author, but make no judgment on where in the publishing chain the exclusion has occurred. Some relevant factors contributing to the exclusion, such as maintaining the myth of the "hero" foreign correspondent, and the influence of the political structure of news systems, are discussed in the next section.

Mealer provides us with little information about the Congolese journalist's life, motivations, or journalistic contributions.

Reading these accounts alone, it would be difficult to assess whether local journalists and stringers played an important role in the information gathering and reporting that led to world news.

Two authors who come closer to describing the experience of stringers are Aidan Hartley and Ryszard Kapuscinski. In *The Zanzibar Chest* (2004b), Hartley first works as a stringer for the *Financial Times*, then for *The Times*, *Time-Life,* and finally for Reuters news agency. Over the twenty-five pages (out of a 446 page book) that describe his life before the Reuters job, he reveals some details of the precarious life stringers lead. He describes his envy of well-funded correspondents at The Hilton in Khartoum and the need to file stories to earn a living and recover reporting costs. But the vast majority of the book is devoted to his time as a well-funded correspondent for Reuters, financed to fly across Africa from Kenya to Rwanda and Somalia to Congo, covering the continent's major news stories – as a "super stringer".

Ryszard Kapuściński also falls in between the foreign correspondent and stringer, at least in his own descriptions of his work in Africa for the cash-strapped Polish Press Agency. He describes needing to live in slums, lacking access to politicians, and working deals with better-funded foreign correspondents in order to reach important stories (1998). His mandate – to cover Africa for Poland – was very different to the very local work that most stringers and local journalists conduct, and Kapuściński was better funded than stringers and African reporters from the very beginning of his work in Africa, as is evident from the three months he spent in Luanda's Hotel Tivoli while covering the end of colonial rule in Angola (1976). Most stringers and local journalists in Africa would not be able to afford such accommodation. It should be noted that Kapuściński has been found to fabricate events and scenes (Domosławski, 2012), so it would perhaps be better to refer to the character "Ryszard Kapuściński" in his literature, one that has some basis in reality.

It is worth mentioning a few magazine pieces that have discussed stringers, mostly outside Africa. "The Stringers" is a 2500-word story describing the dangers Iraqi stringers face as they

gather news for U.S. newspapers, generally receiving little credit for their work (McLeary, 2006). Two older pieces describe New York stringers as "journalism's new underclass" (Lazare, 1987) and Washington, D.C. local correspondents as "diggers and toilers" (Bagdikian, 1963). "The 'Cheaper' Solution" discusses stringer pay rates and career transitions (Hess, 1994). Hess and McLeary do not describe the post-colonial context in which African journalists work, however, and their assessment of stringer and local journalist motivations is largely restricted to the economic and some career benefits of working for international news organisations. The New York and Washington, D.C. stringers, as one might expect, face far fewer dangers and are better compensated than their African peers. They also do not work in nations still struggling with imperialism after a history of colonisation.

A notable twenty-year-old book about the news contributions and working conditions of African journalists' is William Finnegan's *Dateline Soweto: Travels with Black South African Reporters* (1995). Finnegan documents the work of black South African journalists as they take significant risks to investigate stories that their white editors sometimes do not dare to publish. It is a fine portrait of an apartheid press and the important contribution of black journalists, and the daily stresses, hopes and fears of South African journalists working under the apartheid regime. Another notable book is Mike Nicol's *A Good-Looking Corpse* (1992), which describes the lives and investigative reporting of South Africans writing for the Johannesburg magazine "Drum" in the 1950s. The title derives from the South African writers' motto to "live fast, die young and have a good-looking corpse". *Bad News* extends the understanding of local journalists one obtains from these books. I describe local journalists who work under a near-totalitarian government in which the press, contrary to developments in South Africa, comes to be destroyed and silenced.

In summary, there is relatively little knowledge, in academia as well as in literature, about the lives, working conditions and motivations of stringers and local journalists in Africa, despite it generally being agreed upon that their contribution to international news is significant and growing. I will now examine how my books and work go some way towards filling these voids and extending knowledge about these crucial but ignored groups of journalists.

5. Chronicling the lives of stringers and local journalists

In this section I demonstrate that my books contribute to literature about journalism in Africa, by chronicling the lives and motivations of stringers and local journalists who work on the bottom rungs of the news production system. In my books I show how stringers and local journalists are systematically marginalised in news production systems. I argue that it is this inequality in the politics of news production that has contributed to their exclusion from literature about journalism in Africa, and in this way I extend current academic scholarship in this field. I also contribute to academic scholarship by adding to current knowledge of news production systems in Africa and linking these to postcolonial theory.

1. The contemporary neglect of Africa from a stringer's perspective

In *Stringer* I describe the difficulty of selling what seemed to me an important story about mass rape in Congo. I recount the following conversation with my AP editor, who was based several thousand kilometres away in Dakar, Senegal:

> "Four hundred rapes and the UN hasn't acted," I told the editor.
> "One woman says she was raped on the road by six policemen but no one was questioned." Hundreds of women had protested, I explained. There had been a spate of human-rights violations in Kananga.
> "Where?"
> "Kananga. It's near the middle of Congo."
> "Was there any shooting?"
> "No."

> “Any fighting, clashes?”
> “No.”
> “Any violence at all?”
> “Not that I know of.”
> “So no dead.”
> “Correct.”
> He paused.
> “Nah, not interesting.” (2014b, p.87)

After several such exchanges with my editor, I arrived at an insight about the nature of what qualified as international news:

> Death, as a rule, had the best chance of making the news. And in a country torn by war one might imagine such news would be abundant. But in Congo so many people died that, farcically, mere death was not enough: I needed many deaths at once, or an extraordinary death. A raid on a village—with a hundred people displaced—was only important if it involved the army or the UN. Rape was too frequent to be reported even six at a time. And the constant fear people lived in, if mentioned at all, was either in the penultimate paragraph of a news story or on the opinion page. (2014b, p.88)

To Franks’ (2010) descriptions of the neglect of Africa, I add the perspective of the stringer, showing why the Congolese war is not covered as extensively as it should be. I indicate that the issue is not a lack of reporters or budget, as news organisations often claim (Sambrook, 2010). If the stringer covered Congo as he or she might cover America or Britain, a mass rape would be news. Rather, I note that the world saw Congo as “not worth reporting on, unless the story was spectacular and gruesome” (2016d). Such interactions with editors naturally incentivise

stringers to produce news that privileges spectacularly violent and extreme notions of Africans discussed by Mbembe (2001), Said (1979), Loomba (1998) and Balibar and Wallerstein (1991).

In *The Road Through War* (2016b), I report on the current neglect of the conflict in the Central African Republic as a freelance journalist. I describe massacres that had gone unreported in the international media despite warnings of an impending genocide that should have drawn international attention to the war. This was just after the Westgate mall attack in Nairobi that had drained African media resources. I thus challenge claims by defenders of the technology-enabled parachute journalism model (Sambrook, 2010) that it satisfactorily covers Africa. The current neglect of Africa is in fact the result of a news production system that has foreign correspondents parachuting into the same places at about the same times "to tell us, more or less, the same stories" (2016d) while vast swathes of Africa are left uncovered, even when they experience turmoil affecting millions of people. I note that using stringers would lead to cheaper, more extensive and higher quality foreign correspondence than currently produced by parachuting in correspondents (2016d).

The use of parachute journalism is one manifestation of Butler's notion that some lives are portrayed as less "grievable" by the media (2009). Butler writes that news media depict wars in ways that make the loss of certain lives seem less worthy of grief – and outrage – than others (Butler, 2009). She writes that, in certain places, entire populations have been destroyed but "there is no great sense that a heinous act and egregious loss have taken place" (Butler, 2010). She also acknowledges, however, that it can be more challenging to grieve deaths that have occurred in faraway places (Stein, 2016). Parachute journalism is presented by some journalists, as I have previously noted, as a legitimate and cost-effective method of covering faraway wars. However, parachute journalism instead embodies the global inequalities cited by Butler, and it deepens the challenge of covering distant deaths. The hypocrisy of international news in Africa is evident when one observes that a parachute newsgathering model would be considered unacceptable by most organisations in the production of credible reporting on Western countries. Parachute journalism does not mitigate the neglect of Africa – rather, it exacerbates and institutionalises the neglect.

2. The life of the stringer as an entrepreneur-journalist

Stringers and foreign correspondents both hunt for news constantly, but their motivations differ. The stringer is driven by primary concerns like paying the rent, affording meals, and recovering the costs of reporting such transport and telephone expenses. These are rarely worries for foreign correspondents who enjoy stable salaries and travel for their reporting on their employers' tabs.[12]

My descriptions of the freelance journalist as an "entrepreneur" complements the classification by Hess (1996, p.69) of American freelancers as "adventurers" and "flingers" who "cobble together enough clients to earn a living". Stringers, to a greater extent than foreign correspondents, see news stories as a source of income for survival. In addition to producing an accurate story, they must pay attention, for example, to minimising the costs of reporting, where possible, so as to maximise their – generally meagre – profits. Hartley describes how, during his early days as a stringer, he stole out of a Hilton hotel where he was covering a story alongside foreign correspondents, to find a cheap local meal at a roadside shack (2004b, p.92). Driven to cover news stories not only for their news value or prestige but also for the money, the stringer thus works as an "entrepreneur-journalist".

After briefly describing his early days as a cash-strapped stringer, Hartley devotes most of his book to his well-funded travels across Africa as a super stringer. I contribute descriptions of the stringer as a national news entrepreneur, constantly gambling on stories in order to survive, and in the process also making errors. Bunce (2015) has shown how stringers are pressured by editorial superiors. My work adds to hers by showing how these pressures on stringers are exacerbated by their need to earn a living. Stringers, under pressure to supply the kinds of stories expected by news agencies, are thus forced to reinforce established discourses on Africa, and take on personal economic risk in order to overcome such narratives.

[12] Some of the following analysis of stringers as entrepreneur-journalists also applies to super stringers.

In *Stringer* I describe pursuing, in moments of desperation, a far-fetched bird flu story that apparently threatened to kill millions of people (2014b, p.52). I also describe investing significant time and money in another improbable story that did not bear fruit, travelling to Equateur with an Indian businessman to investigate valuable minerals on a piece of land he allegedly owned in the jungle. I write that while on that wild goose chase

> The AP informed me that I was missing a number of stories in Kinshasa. The government had begun to make election announcements… The editors called to ask where I was—though they had known about my expedition. The line was crackly. They were annoyed. They asked how long I intended to travel. I realised that I had also missed the earnings from those reports… And I felt a creeping doubt—if I had not erred by coming to the jungle. The pressure on me grew—the fear of coming out of this empty-handed. (2014b, p.143)

But functioning as an entrepreneur-journalist, in Equateur I stumbled upon a story about pygmies that would later win a prize, prompting The AP to provide limited funding for my future reporting (2014b, p.167). The risk had paid off. I used the opportunity to travel to the east and report on Congo's war.

In other cases, the stringer's desperation for money leads to unnecessary journalistic errors. I narrate how I rushed on a sensitive story about a massacre of protesters in southern Congo. My United Nations informant had told me that an Australian mining company funded by the World Bank had aided a militia responsible for the massacre, and that the U.N. report containing proof of this had been quashed by the World Bank. My U.N. informant broke ties with me when he saw that the story quoted him (2014b, p.116). It had not been clear to me that he had requested anonymity. A staff correspondent, not dependent on filing the story for money, would have had the incentives to double check such vital details before the story's publication.

So the variable quality of stringer reporting is not only due to inexperience, but also due to financial pressures.

3. The centrality of local journalists in international news production systems

Existing literature about journalism in Africa rarely mentions the contributions of local journalists, portraying foreign correspondent as the central figures in international news gathering.

In my books, I describe how in several instances newsworthy events that were not reported by the local press went unreported by the international media, and how biased information reported by the local press in Africa was repeated by the international media. I thus contribute to the argument that local journalism is central to the production of international news.

Throughout *Stringer* and *Bad News* I reference how local journalists introduced me to important stories. In *Stringer* I make clear the centrality of local journalism to my newsgathering for the AP, whether to obtain daily news (2014b, p.69), war correspondence (2014b, p.174), or election results (2014b, p.237). These descriptions indicate a mapping of the contemporary international news gathering process that begins with local journalism, which is filtered, verified, augmented and then transmitted by stringers or local journalists to international news bureaus, who broadcast it to the world. The contribution of local journalists and stringers in this process is generally excluded or mentioned only in passing. But the quality of international news is highly dependent on the quality of available local journalism.

The narrative arc of *Bad News* follows the destruction of Rwanda's free press. However, as the repression grew, I describe in the book how the international media emphasised not the killing, exile, imprisonment and abuse of Rwandan journalists, but a positive image of Rwanda that mirrored the propaganda published in Rwanda's government-controlled media (2016a, pp.74, 117, 119). Its link to an active local press cut off, the international press became an amplifier for

the press that remained: largely a mouthpiece for the government's message. My book's account of the press's destruction in Rwanda was then received by reviewers as important news, an unearthing of "secrets" from Rwanda (Rosen, 2016; Birrell, 2016).

A crucial scene in *Bad News* describes how Rwandan villagers destroyed their homes on government orders. Several thousands of people made themselves homeless in the rainy season. They grew sick and began to die from pneumonia and malaria. It was a shocking scene that should have made international news, but the local press, by then already silenced, did not report it. International reporters, mostly sitting in hubs hundreds or thousands of kilometres away and relying on the local press to alert them to major news, never reported it either (2016a, pp.126-37). Until the publication of *Bad News*, in which my reporting of this tragedy relied heavily on Rwandan journalists, this major incident went largely untold.

These depictions add to research and knowledge on the political economy of news in Africa. It also bolsters criticisms of "Africa Rising" by Chelwa (2015) and French (2016). I show that current media narratives of "Rwanda rising" from the ashes of the genocide – an important piece of the "Africa Rising" narrative (Gettleman, 2016) – are created by an international news system disconnected from the ground realities in Rwanda. The positive tone of new African coverage is not based on a model of journalism that provides a better understanding of the continent. "Africa Rising" may well be a superficial attempt to move away from past negative narratives of Africa, an easy way to deflect criticism. There may also be an element of overcorrection here in an attempt to atone for excessively negative portrayals of Africa in the past, and I have discussed how those negative portrayals were linked to colonial assumptions of Africa as savage and primitive.

Current academic scholarship about the media in Africa focuses primarily on reporters working for international news organizations. My contribution is to link the international media to local journalism narratives and structures. Further research might explore where and how global discourses on Africa – and the global south – intersect with narratives produced by journalists working locally. These local narratives and reports are rarely cited or acknowledged internationally, in media stories or in scholarship about the structure of international news.

Mapping how international news systems appropriate information from subaltern reporters would help to restore credit for subaltern reporters' labour. Scholars researching the media in repressed countries might study how government propaganda and repression influences narratives in the international media, thus further exploring the centrality of local journalism to international news. Journalism researchers in Africa might study whether online journalism, besides giving voice to marginalised populations, also reduces the appropriation of subaltern journalist labour by holding international news more accountable on the Internet.

This is a good place at which to introduce the notion that current news production systems in Africa bear several structural similarities to colonial Empires. Current news production systems are characterised by "centres" and "margins", as characterised by Loomba (1998) and Moore-Gilbert (1997). Centres of news production are headquartered in major world capitals such as London and New York, with "outposts" of the news Empire in foreign correspondent hubs like Nairobi (East Africa), Dakar (West Africa), Johannesburg (South Africa) and Cairo (North Africa). It is in these centres and outposts that discourse about the "margins" is largely decided and constructed, as described by McLeod (2000) and Said (1979), thus continuing the domination of the centres over the margins. The strong "core" sends out foreign correspondents to govern and administer news systems in the weak "peripheries", mirroring Wallerstein's (2012, p.55) descriptions of foreign officers sent to administer the colonies in world-systems theory. The discourses constructed by the centre and its emissaries glorify these emissaries, perpetuating the "heroic male adventure story" (McLeod, 2000, p.58), mirroring a tradition of heroic, mostly male, foreign correspondent memoirs that continues until today. I will further develop this application of postcolonial theory to the international news system over the rest of this section, drawing on my books as well as current literature and research on journalism in Africa.

4. Stringers and local journalists as subaltern reporters close to the street

Mapping the political economy of international news production therefore highlights how it is still structured by hierarchies, frameworks and assumptions that can be traced to the colonial discourse on Africa and the colonies more generally. It is within this context, then, that my work examines the positions of stringers, local journalists and foreign correspondents relative to the subjects and terrain they report on.

Stringers and local journalists, as I have defined them, can differ in many respects. The local journalist who is not also working as a stringer generally works in poorer conditions than the stringer. Such local journalists may regard the stringer as privileged in the same way that the stringer regards the foreign correspondent. I limit my analysis here to demonstrating that the stringer and local journalist are both subaltern relative to the foreign correspondent.[13]

I describe, for example, the physical setting of foreign correspondents in Kinshasa in stark contrast to my surroundings as a stringer:

> My colleagues lived well: one in a luxury hotel suite, another in an immense colonial home with servants and guards. I envied them… I found work as a stringer for The Associated Press, and rented a room from a family in a run-down home in one of Kinshasa's poorest but most lively areas. The house frequently lacked water and electricity, and neighborhood children would run through it after playing in sewage. It became The A.P.'s headquarters in Congo. (Sundaram, 2016d)

[13] Such hierarchies within subaltern groups have been noted in other contexts, for example in research on Korean students studying in U.S. universities who are described as subalterns, though they would be seen as privileged by subaltern Korean students in Korea (Kim, 2012).

Hartley only takes a line to describe the cheap hotel room in Khartoum that he could afford as a stringer (2004b, p.90). A significant portion of the first half of *Stringer* is spent describing the stringer's surroundings and workplace conditions. My house/office was located in Victoire, where popular riots often began, near the headquarters of vociferous opposition movements (2014b, p.11). The living conditions resembled those of many Kinshasa residents. To file stories I relied on internet cafes (2014b, p.75) with which I had to make special arrangements when news broke during closing hours (2014b, p.216). My neighbourhood was so poor that in some houses family members took turns not to eat (2014b, p.26). Anecdotes I relate include our house's toilet regurgitating sewage one day (2014b, p.116), and me finding a dead rat infested with worms in my room (2014b, p.130). The family I lived with often had no food or money, even for hospital bills, and came to rely on me as a provider (2014b, pp.132, 232).

This contrasts with well-established descriptions of the "indulgent" foreign correspondent expatriate lifestyle (Bunce, 2015), parodied by Waugh in *Scoop* (2012), where they flit from covering genocide to eating pastries made by their personal chefs (Wainaina, 2012). Seo (2016) notes that foreign correspondents have been known to conduct their reporting from hotel bars or swimming pools – dubbed "hotel journalism" by Robert Fisk (Simpson, 2010). Munnion (1993, p.39) refers to the "Hotel Imperial press corps". It is still common to lodge foreign correspondents in the most prestigious hotel in a city, though often citing security concerns. Hartley (2004b, p.93) describes foreign correspondents eating at the Hilton in Khartoum while on a reporting trip, preoccupied with fabricating receipts to claim false expenses – extra income that they said they spent on new electronics.

This enmeshing with life on "the street" forces the stringer to reflect on the nature of the news they file on a daily basis about Congo in relation to how the Congolese around them perceive their country. Here I reflect on the stringer's news notes, which often make substantial contributions to contemporary history:

> The narrative that formed in those notebooks was disconcerting—
> for though it was broadcast across the country it remained
> strangely silent inside homes: Congolese didn't vocally

> acknowledge it; they didn't transmit or hand it down. They listened, quietly assimilated it and returned to their rituals; and when Nana told Bébé Rhéma a tale— the baby would stare, wide-eyed— it would be about a heroic Congolese warrior or the defeat of an evil king, or about a princess who sought a kind husband; her stories were about valor, hope, love. The news seemed divorced from the world Nana created for her child, from the world the Congolese inhabited. (2014b, p.89)

The stringer's closeness to the Congolese helps hold the news accountable, in ways that complement the democratisation of news described by Bunce (2011), Mutsvairo (2015) and Nyabola (2016). This proximity of newsmakers to the street empowers citizens who can engage the newsmaker and force them to reflect on whether the news they file corresponds to the reality of people around them.

Given the position of local journalists as generally equal or below those of stringers in the news hierarchy, it is straightforward to deduce that the working and living conditions of local journalists would generally be even further removed from those of foreign correspondents. I support this in descriptions of Mossi's dilapidated dwelling in *Stringer* (2014b, p.124), and in *Bad* News, of Gibson's humble neighbourhood and apartment (2016a, pp.8-13).

I have discussed how in the "Empire" of international news production, stringers and local journalists are subalterns working on the margins or peripheries, excluded from the circle of elite foreign correspondents. This contributes a description of living and working conditions on the ground to the news "caste system" discerned by Seo (2016) in her analysis of the AP interview archive. Bunce (2011) has described how foreign correspondents tend to produce more "watchdog" journalism than their local journalist counterparts. I show how proximity to their subject matter makes stringers and local journalists accountable in ways that foreign correspondents generally are not, thus influencing the news values of stringers and local journalists. I also complement Bunce's (2015) observations about the limited ability of the subaltern reporter to challenge international news discourse by portraying the precariousness

of these reporters' personal situations and the personal risk required of the subaltern reporter in order to challenge Western discourse.

Bunce notes that as a result, local journalists often conformed to Western criteria for news stories, and that this led to conflict in their relationships with their foreign editors (2011). I corroborate this: even as I questioned the validity of the news I was filing, I fed The AP with the news it wanted. Developing the subaltern analogy further, this behaviour on the part of the stringer and local journalist bears resemblance to Bhabha's (1984) descriptions of "mimicry". My reporting was a form of what Bhabha called "camouflage" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.131). As a subaltern reporter, I was absorbed into the international news system, performing the role of a Western news agency reporter by mimicking their tone and perspective. I needed to adopt this camouflage in order to speak in a register recognized by the centre. However, Bhabha also suggests that such mimicry is a subaltern defence, allowing the subaltern to occupy positions of power within discriminatory power structures, and allowing the subaltern to speak back to the centre in language that the centre is able and indeed forced to recognize. The menace of mimicry, according to Bhabha, lies in the fact that the coloniser is never certain of whether the mimic is performing his loyalty to the empire, or, under the guise and protection of his mimicry, is working to subvert it. Here I show how I perform my complicity to the international news system. I will later discuss how *Stringer* in some ways subverts the news system.

5. Appropriation from stringers and local journalists in the peripheries

A defining feature of colonial rule was the appropriation of territory, property, labour and resources from subalterns in the peripheries, often with insufficient compensation to the subaltern (Loomba, 1998; Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Ashcroft et al., 2002). Appropriation from subaltern journalists is also a feature of international news systems.

I write in *Stringer* how after reporting for The AP from Congo for nearly a year, my bureau told me it was sending in a team of senior correspondents to cover the elections. I was expected to supply this team with insights, expertise and story ideas:

> The editor wanted me to team up with the correspondents. "As what?" I asked. He said I should continue working as I had planned to— I should know where to look for the news, I had been living in Congo. And the chief Africa correspondent wanted to chat before she arrived, "to pick your brain, share ideas." It sounded as if she wanted to steal my stories. The head of African reporting was in a sense my boss, but before that day I'd never heard of her. Now suddenly I was important. (2014b, p.189)

This is the classic scenario for how stringers support foreign correspondents who have parachuted in for a big news story. The stringer opens up their list of painstakingly-gathered contacts, uses their carefully cultivated relationships to set up meetings with these contacts for the correspondent who has just arrived, and advises the correspondent about the nuances of the unfolding story. These are essential contributions to news. In return, often it is up to the correspondent to decide how benevolently they want to credit the stringer. Sometimes the stringer receives a joint byline; more often they are credited with having "contributed reporting" in small print at the end of a story; most often the stringer goes entirely unmentioned. In this way the labour, contacts and knowledge of the stringer on the periphery is appropriated by the foreign correspondent who represents the core, mirroring the process of "unequal exchange" in world-systems theory (Wallerstein, 2012). Taken together with research about appropriation from fixers by Murrell (2015), one sees that the work of an entire underclass of journalism is exploited for the gain of foreign correspondents and international news.

Appropriation from local journalists operates in several ways. Local journalists who work as stringers find their work appropriated largely in the fashion I have described so far. However, there is another appropriation from local journalists that is more difficult to observe. Foreign correspondents in their memoirs often refer to local news reports guiding them (Mealer, 2009;

Richburg, 2009; Beeston, 2006). In *Stringer*, I perhaps go further than most when I write about my reports for The AP: “almost every element of news I first heard on the UN radio station” (2014b, p.80). Behind those news and radio reports are local journalists who first unearthed the story and reported it. However, in the news reports produced by “international journalists” (foreign correspondents and stringers), these local reports and local journalists are rarely credited. The information in those local reports is independently verified and appropriated by the international journalist. All credit for those reports henceforth goes solely to the international journalist and to the international news organisation.

In a recent post-US election news story, “Michelle Obama ‘ape in heels’ post causes outrage” (BBC, 2016), the BBC credited the American local news outlet WSAZ for first breaking the story: “the Facebook post was first spotted by local news channel WSAZ3”. This was despite the fact that the BBC could independently verify the Facebook post that was the origin of the news story. It is, however, standard procedure for the BBC and other international news agencies to take stories first reported by Congo’s *Radio Okapi* or Nigeria’s *The Nation*, verify them independently, and serve them to readers as their own without credit. In devaluing and appropriating the work of subaltern journalists in the peripheries, the colonial paradigm is here still operative. The division of labour and power is structured on geographical, economic and racial grounds.

The copying of news without credit also occurs in contexts that are not post-colonial. I would argue that the ability to copy without credit is a function of power relation inequalities between news outlets. My analysis here mainly pertains to the dynamics and effects of such appropriation in a post-colonial context.

Aijaz Ahmad criticises postcolonial intellectual structures for recreating colonial divisions of labour and hierarchies even as it attempts to redress historical inequalities. Ahmad characterizes Western intellectual elites as refining raw material from the “third world” that they then send back to the peripheries as “theory” that they have validated and approved (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.18). Some of Ahmad’s criticisms translate to the news industry, in that the international news media, even as it claims to be growing more inclusive, still serves as

gatekeepers for the work of local journalists. It appropriates, processes and disseminates the labour of subaltern journalists in the peripheries for profit, and the West still has to grant permission in order for the subaltern journalist to enter global discourse and to receive their due.

6. Representing the perspective, courage and labour of the subaltern journalist

Bad News contributes to literature about journalism in Africa by chronicling the lives of local journalists, a group about whom there is little existing writing. It also describes the bravery of Rwandan journalists, thus balancing literature that presents foreign correspondents as the principal heroic and courageous figures working within the international news system in Africa. These descriptions of bravery also contest a prevailing view in academic research (Bunce, 2011; Bunce, 2015), which tends to portray local journalists as less willing to hold their governments accountable, though for very understandable reasons. My portrayals corroborate Mudhai's academic research on the vulnerabilities of African journalists and his examples of Kenyan and Zambian journalists who challenged their governments' abuses of power (2004, p.213; 2007), as well as academic analyses of the extent to which South African journalists hold their government accountable (Wasserman, 2013).

The Rwandan journalists I describe in *Bad News* worked at risk of their lives and freedom, and those of their families, and therefore in far more dangerous positions than foreign correspondents, who generally risk, at worst, expulsion from the country. Despite this, I describe in *Bad News* how it was the Rwandan journalists who attempted to hold their government accountable while international news took far fewer risks in their largely positive portrayals of the government. For example, shortly after the Rwandan journalist Jean-Leonard was shot dead on the very day he criticised President Paul Kagame, I write about how the international press hardly reported his killing, preferring to focus on how "Ban Ki- moon, the United Nations secretary- general, had chosen Rwanda's president to lead a special high-profile

committee… Ban said the committee would be a collection of development 'superheroes.'" (2016a, p.74). This runs counter to most portrayals of the news values of foreign correspondents and local journalists.

I describe how Rwandan journalist Jean-Bosco continued to write critically about the Rwandan government despite having been beaten into a coma after criticising the regime (2016a, pp.3, 189). Agnès stridently continued to hold the government accountable though she had "endured psychological and physical abuse while in prison" where guards did not allow her to sleep though she was sick with HIV. I describe her subsequent imprisonment (2016a, pp.4, 58-59, 74-75, 145). Jean-Leonard was shot dead on the same day he criticised President Kagame (2016a, p.72). And through the book I narrate the story of Gibson, who despite fleeing the country fearing for his life, decided to return and begin reporting anew after he was moved by a farmer who told him how the government had ripped apart his field and destroyed his nearly-ripe crop because the farmer had not obeyed government rules. Gibson would again flee his country after being physically attacked (2016a, pp.52, 150-156). In *Bad News* I describe the personal cost incurred by local journalists in order to inform us, and their motivations for persisting.

It pales in comparison to narrate the personal exploits that foreign correspondents recount in their memoirs. They display heroism in stories about chartering a dhow and swimming to an archipelago (sometimes said to be in crocodile-infested waters) from where the correspondent dictated a story over a police station phone to a stringer (Hartley, 2004a; Beeston, 2006, p.88). Even stories of detainment in notorious prisons where locals were often executed (Munnion, 1993) or of witnessing the Rwandan genocide (Hartley, 2004b; Richburg, 2009) are tempered by the knowledge that foreign journalists could generally expect to walk free.

Bad News presents Rwandan journalists' perspective of their country at a time when their free press was being destroyed, thus providing a view of Rwandan society that escaped the foreign news and the experience of most expatriates in Rwanda. In *Bad News* I refer to how

> the dictatorship had made two worlds: one for visitors and another for the citizens. One in which the explosion was real, and another, in parallel, in which it was not. One in which there was

> memory, and another with new trauma. A world in which the streetlights seemed wonderful, signs of progress, and another in which they were frightening. (2016a, p.90)

The existence of these two worlds itself was revealed to me only by Rwandan journalists. I describe how these subaltern journalists helped me penetrate this second, hidden world, showing me how at genocide memorials, which foreigners saw as respectful ceremonies, Rwandans felt fear (2016a, p.22), and how well-lit, well-paved roads that foreigners saw as signs of economic development, Rwandans saw as places of government surveillance and risk (2016a, pp.49-50). I write about how the silence in the country, perceived by many foreigners as peace, is really a silence of fear (2016a, p.176). It is this perspective and experience of the Rwandan subaltern journalist, which many of them paid such a high price for reporting, that I present in *Bad News.*

Stringer is also a representation of a subaltern journalist's experience. I have written about how the stringer's news reporting resembled Bhabha's description of camouflage. *Stringer*, then, was a coming out, a representation of the subaltern experience that I was unable to explicitly reflect in my news reports. In this way it is a form of resistance to the centre that "arises from the subaltern's apparently deliberate attempt to elude the subject positions to which the dominant order seeks to confine the other", allowing me to occupy a "multiplicity of subjectpositions" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.132). As a stringer in Congo, I was part of the order of the international news system. As the author of *Stringer,* I stand outside that system, illuminating its inequalities, including my own appropriations of local journalists' work. I am at once complicit in the international news system and exposing its flaws and injustices, occupying multiple positions.

Bad News adds to Finnegan's (1995) book about black South African journalists who risked their lives to obtain stories that their white editors often did not print. I extend his work in the context of a Rwandan press that is shutting down, not opening up with the decline of apartheid, as in Finnegan's experience. I show how Rwandan journalists who take on the role of human rights activists grew increasingly vociferous in the face of the growing repression: "unable to

talk, the country's journalists had begun to scream" (2016a, p.59). I also write about how, once the Rwandan press had been destroyed, "there was silence in the country. Those voices that had resisted had been hushed, and the attainment of this peace in the country had needed the liberty and lives of several brave Rwandans" (2016a, p.176).

Bad News also contributes to academic research on media freedom and discourse in Africa, showing how Rwandan journalists defended their conceptions of media freedom in a post-genocidal authoritarian context, complementing Herman Wasserman's analysis of South African notions of media freedom after legislative challenges imposed by the South African state (Wasserman, 2013). My depictions of the effect of genocide videos and memorials on democracy and development add a Rwandan perspective to Wasserman's examination of the effect of popular media on democracy in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Ghana (Wasserman, 2011). And in describing how newspapers further state propaganda in Rwanda, I complement Mutsvairo's assessment of support for state propaganda by *The Herald* newspaper in Zimbabwe (Mutsvairo, 2016b).

7. Exclusions in literature as a result of political inequalities in news production

Having established the subaltern position of stringers and local journalists in the international news system, I argue that it is this political inequality that has led to the marginalisation of stringers and local journalists in literature and academic research about journalism in Africa.

Accurately representing the contributions of stringers and local journalists would diminish the myth of the foreign correspondent and reveal the degree to which their work is shaped and created by subaltern labour in the peripheries. It would diminish the "foreign assignment" trips that correspondents covet and see as a sign of prestige. Many foreign correspondents report with pride on their websites that they have reported from more than twenty countries (Kettmann, 2016; Roughneen, 2016). Recognising the subaltern's contribution would mean questioning such privileges of the foreign correspondent. This perhaps points to how Western

news feels a need to be authoritative, echoing Bhabha's descriptions of Western fragility in creating colonial discourse (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.117). According to Bhabha, colonial displays of authority masked their vulnerability, for a smoothly-running colonial project depended on the cooperation of the subaltern. Similarly, the international news system in its current form depends on the labour and informational contributions of the subaltern journalist. Since most literature about journalism in Africa is written by former foreign correspondents, and since many researchers are also former foreign correspondents, there is a strong bias in published material towards maintaining the status quo and preserving the "hero" narrative surrounding the foreign correspondent.

There is also a perceived lack of interest from publishers and audiences in the West for literature about subaltern journalists from other countries. Since most major publishers are still based in Western cultural capitals such as London and New York, this presents a further obstacle for the publication of subaltern journalist perspectives.

Given the current structure of the international news system, which allows foreign correspondents to use local journalism without crediting the local reporters, as I have described above, there are few incentives to give subaltern journalists in the peripheries their due. The news production system ensures that there is very little awareness of the importance of stringers and local journalists. The average reader is simply unaware that there is any injustice to redress at all. The precarious economic position of stringers and local journalists means that they are themselves in a weak bargaining position with respect to the centre, mirroring relations between strong core states and weak peripheral states (Wallerstein, 2012). The status quo is for the subaltern journalist to be content with monetary compensation for their work and to ask for little more, while the foreign correspondent and international news system take the credit and associated prestige.

8. Postcolonial narrative strategies

In crafting postcolonial chronicles[14] of stringers and local journalists I adopted a particular literary approach, with some artistic and narrative choices that I will briefly reflect upon here.

The first question is about the position from which to write. Childs and Williams (1997, p.22) note that "at a general level, adopting the position of the expert is immediately to adopt a position of power."

Many foreign correspondent memoirs emphasise such a position of authority and knowledge, and in their books they guide the reader through this superior knowledge about a place and their subjects. In contrast, in my books I shed such a posture of knowingness and emphasise my ignorance. At the start of *Stringer* I emphasise how my knowledge is dominated by representations of Congo in the international news media and popular portrayals, many of them emphasizing Congo's violence in "Africa's World War" (2014b, p.20). In my chronicle I gradually experience and uncover the subaltern experience and describe life in the peripheries. I reflect in progressively more meditative and incisive essays grounded in experience and observation that the reader has experienced together with me (2014b, pp.26, 108, 144, 242). I also emphasise in *Stringer* not the importance of my own job but the banality and tedium of daily life for the stringer. I describe my struggle for money, moments such as washing my clothes by hand (2014b, p.69), and the uncertainty of my position in the household of my host Congolese family (2014b, pp.58-59). In this way I also respond to Bunce's contention that "romantic descriptions" of the foreign correspondent "obscure the more diverse, complex – and at times, mundane – reality of contemporary international news-gathering" (2011).

My choice of protagonists – stringers and local journalists – was central to these postcolonial chronicles, allowing me to emphasise a view of the world from the perspective of actors

[14] Note that my chronicles could be considered both postcolonial and post-colonial, as these chronicles both offer a critique of colonial forces and at the same time they manifest the flows of power they critique.

traditionally excluded from narratives about journalism and also politically marginalised in international news systems. They offered natural vantage points from which to explore and narrate that which is not communicated in news reports, in the spirit of Kapuściński's observation that "the realities we face, especially in the Third World, are so much richer, more complicated, than a newspaper will ever allow us to report" (Kapuściński & Buford, 1987). I would add that the realities of news production are more complex than the media has an interest in revealing, as that would expose the news system's unjust appropriations.

A third decision I made was regarding my choice of subjects. Many foreign correspondents reporting from conflict zones emphasise adrenaline-charged (but generally brief) moments of open warfare (Hartley, 2004b; Kapuściński, 1976; Nevinson, 1923), describing the thrill, excitement and horror in such reporting. I tried to subvert such news headlines by describing, in *Stringer*, the paucity and quietness of a warzone (2014b, pp.171-74). And in *Bad News*, I chose to follow the story not of Jean-Leonard, who was shot dead after he criticised President Kagame, but the story of a less prominent journalist, Gibson, who was not shot dead but instead driven mad by betrayal and paranoia. I felt the choice of marginal subjects was more revealing of the government's repressive methods. This postcolonial approach shares something with Spivak's "reading against the grain" in which she "concentrates on minor characters, subplots or seemingly marginal motifs" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p.84). For Spivak, it is a postcolonial endeavour to focus on characters that colonial ideology deems marginal. In concentrating on marginal characters, I therefore take a similarly postcolonial approach.

9. The post-colonial dictator: the appropriation of postcolonial critiques by Rwanda's strongman

I cited Franks' (2010) description of how Congo's President Mobutu Sese Seko exploited the international news media's racism for his advantage in 1977/78. I also mentioned existing literature about how Mugabe has defended his repression – including justifying a ban on the BBC – using postcolonial arguments (MacGregor, 2002). I show in *Bad News* how Rwanda

President Paul Kagame appropriates postcolonial critiques of colonialism. These critiques are resonant in many parts of the world, and Kagame has positioned himself as one of Africa's new post-colonial leaders. I show in *Bad News* how Kagame continually emphasises concepts such as freedom, democracy and African self-determination even as his critics end up in exile, fearing for their lives, in prison or dead, within the country and abroad.

This is an example of how postcolonial critiques, often dealing with the politics of appropriation, can themselves become appropriated by an African president who is an example of continuing imperialist domination in Africa. I show how Kagame has no democratic mandate from his own people who vote in largely cosmetic elections (2016a, pp.108, 114), while Western countries legitimise his leadership, financing half of his government's budget and providing military support (Sundaram, 2014a; Sundaram, 2012). These same Western nations provide little meaningful support for Rwandan civil society activists and journalists who seek self-determination and criticise the Rwandan government's frequent abuses of their rights (Sundaram, 2016a, pp.169-70).

Early in *Bad News* I describe how in his public speeches Kagame "spoke about democracy in the country and the freedom that his people enjoyed, and how sad the coup d'états on the continent were, being the result of the absence of democracy" (2016a, p.6).

He also frequently cast himself in opposition to Western imperialism, citing the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when the world did not intervene despite evidence genocidal killings were underway. After his forces invaded and took over Rwanda, Kagame "cast himself as the hero of the genocide, as the man who had ended it while the world stood idle" (2016a, p.32). This appears as straightforward post-colonial discourse of defiant African leaders solving African problems, and plays into notions of the West not holding Africa's true interests at heart. There is some legitimacy in the assertion that the West does not have Africa's true interests at heart. However, *Bad News* points to the appropriation of postcolonial critiques by noting that Kagame's government has subsequently censured genocide survivors from remembering that Kagame had himself "opposed the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers one month into the hundred- day genocide. The president had worried that the peacekeepers would interfere with

his military campaign, and prevent him from taking power" (2016a, p.32). Kagame thus censors a portion of the truth to create a post-colonial narrative in which the West is solely to blame and of which he is an African hero.

After his government had destroyed Rwanda's free press, I write in *Bad News* about how Kagame "announced that there was a vibrant and free press in Rwanda, and the population, if asked, would repeat this…The president said that if people did not speak it was out of their own will" (2016a, p.175).

Kagame frequently uses such language in telling the West not to lecture him on freedom and democracy, thus continuing his post-colonial discourse of having enabled African freedom and self-determination.

Kagame's post-colonial narrative has resonated in a world desperate for African success stories. In the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Tristan McConnell writes about how support for Kagame is driven by "a genuinely felt desire to fight the image of a basket-case continent" (McConnell, 2011). Around the time Jean-Leonard was shot dead, on the very day he criticised Kagame, the U.N. chief Ban Ki-moon chose Kagame to lead a committee of "development 'superheroes'" (2016a, p.74). TIME magazine has called Kagame "the embodiment of a new Africa" and quotes former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Kagame's defence: "what I see in President Kagame [is] this impatience for a new Africa, not some throwback to an authoritarian past" (Perry, 2012). Yale University in 2016 invited Kagame to speak, citing his "leadership in…good governance, promotion of human rights" without any mention of his repressive methods (YaleNews, 2016).

The world's hunger for post-colonial narratives and leaders in Africa can be seen in the positive reception given to a man against whom there exists credible evidence of complicity in mass murder (French, 2009). This hunger, as I write in an article for *The Observer* (Sundaram, 2016c), stems partly from guilt in the west for the injustices of colonialism, and a need in the former colonies for leaders who truly represent their interests. It is rooted in the ways that colonialism and neo-colonialism continue to structure relations between former colonies and the former

colonial powers. This hunger for post-colonial leaders is clearly perceived and exploited by Kagame.

10. Limitations of my work

Said argued that "resistances typically have to work with forms which are inherited or infiltrated by the imperial powers... despite this handicap, however, significant victories over imperialism can be achieved" (Childs & Williams, 1997, p.110). In both *Stringer* and *Bad News* I adopt a form derived from the foreign correspondent memoir and thus place myself at the centre of the narratives, no matter how uncomfortable I am with that position as some reviews have noted (Krishna, 2013). In *Stringer*, this means I privilege my own experience (which happens to be that of the subaltern stringer) at the expense of the local journalists whose work contributed to my reporting and who worked alongside me. It means that however much I emphasise my vulnerability, I cannot escape the fact that I am in some ways the hero in my narrative.

Furthermore, as a stringer I appropriated from Radio Okapi local journalists in Congo, for example, without citing most of them by name. Like most foreign correspondents, I do not emphasise the lives of local journalists in *Stringer* or *The Road Through War* (though I extensively report on local journalists in *Bad News*). In a sense, all journalists appropriate the experiences of the subjects of their stories for professional and financial gain. It is clear that even the subaltern, when working for international news organisations, also appropriates. This opens up a wider discussion of appropriation in journalism, which is a possible avenue for future research. It also makes clear that I do not critique international news from a position of moral superiority, as I have been complicit in processes of appropriation and "unequal exchange".

My books have been published primarily in the West, and due to this I am also open to criticisms that Aijaz Ahmad makes of postcolonial intellectuals as an elite based in the West

who refine raw material obtained in the peripheries that they then export to the peripheries as valuable intellectual property that has received Western validation. I am criticising colonial and unequal relationships but I do so from within Western institutions that perpetuate some of those inequalities. I also benefit from my relationships with those Western institutions. I recognise that were my books to have been published only in Congo, Rwanda or even India, it is unlikely that they would have received wide reviews or readership.

6. Conclusion

The critical importance of stringers and local journalists to international news production establishes how much harder we need to work to understand the motivations and perspectives of these excluded groups of journalistic actors. The insights from my books and this essay can be applied in real-world journalistic structures. News bureaus should restructure to cater to the needs of these vital subaltern journalists to create higher-quality journalism, while according these journalists proper credit and compensation. Postcolonial theory finds several applications in current news structures, and it is my belief that the analogy that I introduce in some detail can be further developed to better understand how modern news production systems function and can diminish their appropriation from the margins and subalterns. Personal chronicles about stringers and local journalists serve to humanise and illuminate these journalists, particularly for readers generally unaware of the invisible actors behind their daily international news. With greater empathy and understanding, the gap between news producers and consumers narrows, and consumers, in seeing the inner workings of news production, come to understand just how much to trust what they read on the page or hear on television. This has broad implications beyond news production, touching important elements of foreign policy, peacekeeping and foreign aid in places on the margins of the world.

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8. Appendix 1: Critical responses to the three books

The contribution of my three books to literature about journalism in Africa has been recognised by leading institutions, publications and journalist peers. In addition, my books and journalism have been cited by academics such as Seo (2016), Bunce, Franks and Paterson (Bunce et al., 2016a) for their contribution to knowledge. I focus in this section on literary reviews, indicating where the reviewers are academics.

I begin by briefly listing some of the awards and recognition that the books have received. *Stringer* was chosen as a Royal African Society Book of the Year in 2014 (Royal African Society, 2016). *Bad News* was a finalist for PEN America's non-fiction prize (PEN America, 2017) and included in Amazon's best books of the year (Amazon, 2016). *The Road Through War* was awarded a Frontline Club award (Frontline Club, 2015), besides being shortlisted for the Prix Bayeux and the Kurt Schork awards.

Reviewing *Stringer* in *The Times*, Tristan McConnell notes the physical and societal context I choose to write from:

> Unlike those foreign reporters who cosset themselves in hotels, Sundaram stays with a family in a slum…it also affords him an unusual kinship with Kinshasa's people…A powerful evocation of the foreign correspondent's experience, that of the perennial outsider. (McConnell, 2014)

The former Africa editor of *Le Monde* and current professor in the African and American Studies Department at Duke University, Stephen Smith, notes in the *Guardian* the importance of my post-colonial "vantage point":

> Forsaking the "posture of knowingness" in his engagement with his Congolese "family" – and with neighbours, street children, a

> warlord, supposed witches or girls hunting for a foreign provider – Sundaram provides insights into a society usually kept at an exotic remove of unbridgable "otherness". (Smith, 2014)

Though other reviewers have compared my work to that of V.S. Naipaul and Kapuściński (Malsin, 2014; Penguin Random House, 2014), Smith says the voice in *Stringer* is close to that in Waugh's *Scoop*, writing that " Sundaram explores the other he might have been with great talent". The Royal African Society cited *Stringer*'s "meditation on the unknown and ignored" (Taylor, 2014), and the book's contribution to knowledge on the international news production system: "It seems incredible that this is how the news we consume and take for granted could really be made".

TIME magazine bureau chief Jared Malsin writes that in *Stringer* I

> draw back the curtain on the making of foreign news… For journalists who see war reporting glorified, it is refreshing to read a book that embraces and does justice to the fact that swashbuckling can be a grueling and underpaid business…The battle to convince editors to devote limited resources to foreign news is a struggle that stringers and freelancers everywhere will recognize. (Malsin, 2014)

The Telegraph states that "it is Sundaram's chronicling of ordinary life, rather than extraordinary death, that dignifies his journalistic endeavour" (Freeman, 2014). The *Columbia Journalism Review* remarks on how I diminish my persona

> Rather than focus on how he felt at the time, in his book he uses moments of his own confusion or ignorance to illuminate the people and places around him. Admitting the "I" into his storytelling freed Sundaram, not to talk about himself, but to talk, in rich detail, about the world around him. (Moore, 2014)

Contrary to narratives that project the protagonist, Moore adds that *Stringer* "has made gold out of the opposite approach—embracing the vulnerability one feels as a story unfolds". Other reviewers have noted the literary qualities of the book (Penguin Random House, 2014), with the BBC calling it "mesmerizing" (BBC, 2014) and *Guernica* noting *Stringer*'s focus on the peripheral place that "tends to live on the fringes of our imaginations" (Sriram, 2014).

Among critics of Western foreign policy and imperialism, Pankaj Mishra has deemed *Stringer* "one of those very rare books of journalism that transcend their genre—and destiny as ephemera—and become literature" while US television critic Jon Stewart called the book "remarkable" (Penguin Random House, 2014).

The *Guardian* prominently reviewed *Bad News* upon publication, praising it as "a superb exposé of a dictatorship" and "required reading" (Birrell, 2016) that offers "unusual insight into a police state that became an aid darling in the west". The *Sunday Times* called it a "powerful and shocking memoir" and a "damning indictment" of Rwanda's regime and Western governments that support it (Critchley, 2016). The *New Yorker*'s Jon Lee Anderson wrote that *Bad News* "a chilling chronicle of the creeping totalitarianism taking hold in Rwanda" (Penguin Random House, 2016). The *Washington Post* emphasised my focus on Rwandan journalists, noting that

> He begins his book by following the journalists in his classroom who are, in turn, following various stories in Rwanda: genocide memorials, presidential campaigns. About halfway through the book, the sequence eerily reverses; the stories are now following the journalists — and silencing them. (Sriram, 2016)

Sriram called *Bad News* "courageous and heartfelt" and noted the reclusive position I occupy as a strength of the narrative:

> readers may wonder if Sundaram himself fears for his life, as his students stop attending his class, go into hiding or are arrested. In writing this book Sundaram surely put himself at risk, and it is a

> testament to his bravery that he did so without drawing undue attention to its personal cost.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* also praised *Bad News* for its portrayals of Rwandan journalists, calling it "a searing illustration of the dangers associated with newsgathering in an authoritarian state, and a paean to those courageous enough to practice it in such dire circumstances" (Canfield, 2016). It compared *Bad News* to the documentary about American journalists *Spotlight*. The review added that a "variety of methods were being used to marginalise local reporters" and "reporters risked their lives to publish and broadcast the news, dreaming up clever ruses to connect with the readers and listeners".

A number of outlets connected with African reviewed my book. The Royal African Society wrote that *Bad News* had "the potential to alter our understanding of a place and its history" (African Arguments, 2016), and the book had "pulled back a weighty veil and exposed layers of manipulation that are – for most of us – almost impossible to see". It also noted my insights on Kagame's appropriation of postcolonial critiques: "Thanks in large part to an acquiescent media, Kagame has managed to cloak this erasing of democracy as the protection of it". On the *Washington Post*'s Monkey Cage site, Africa scholar Laura Seay writes that *Bad News* "details the ways in which Rwanda's regime uses a combination of propaganda, repression and drummed-up fear to force every person in the country to comply with its goals" (Seay, 2016). The website *Africa is a Country* published a detailed interview with me, saying *Bad News* "takes aim at the vaunted position Rwanda enjoys in the western imagination" (Busch, 2016). In a lengthy review, the *Nairobi Law Review* (Odhiambo, 2016) notes how *Bad News* "aptly captures" the challenges and dangers facing journalists across Africa:

> Anjan focuses on the lives and experiences of his students. He speaks about the difficulties of teaching prospective and working journalists the principles of good journalism. He writes about the joys of seeing some of the journalists practice what they have learned in the classroom. He talks of the tragedies of journalists working in an environment that is not only seriously restrictive

> because of government regulations but also in which the state can "control" news without appearing to do so.

The South African journalist Richard Poplak called *Bad News* "nothing less than the best book written about Rwanda by an outsider, a massively important contribution to understanding what is one of Africa's most important, inscrutable, regimes" (Poplak, 2016). The pan-African website Pambazuka emphasises how *Bad News* "exposes a terrifying dictatorship" in which Kagame has created, in partnership with the west, "a carefully choreographed false narrative" (Moloo, 2016).

Moving to the Commonwealth, *The Australian* praised *Bad News* as "one of the finest works of reportage in living memory" (Loewenstein, 2016), while one of India's leading critics, Nilanjana Roy, described the book as a "classic of journalism, an unforgettable account of the machinery that is necessary to sustain a republic of fear" (Roy, 2016). Former BBC reporter Frances Harrison writes in India's *Open* magazine that *Bad News* is "a portrait of a post-genocide society, a study of repression and mass denial. It should be mandatory reading for all diplomats" (Harrison, 2016). Among critics of western imperialism, Noam Chomsky had this to say about *Bad News*: "This searing, evocative account, focusing on young journalists struggling to gain the rights they so richly deserve, provides insights about the human condition that reach far beyond the tragic story of Rwanda" (Penguin Random House, 2016).

The Frontline Club of London, in awarding *The Road Through War* their annual prize for print journalism, emphasised its original contribution to journalism as a

> deeply unsettling portrayal of the Central African Republic's continuing sectarian war. Sundaram takes the reader to the very heart of the conflict, with glimpses of a physical and psychological front line that is as mysteriously ill-defined as it is deadly. This is an excellent, highly original piece of reportage and writing, reminiscent of Ryzard Kapuscinki and V.S. Naipaul at their best. (Frontline Club, 2015)

9. Appendix 2: Suggested extracts from the three books

STRINGER

ANJAN SUNDARAM

A REPORTER'S
JOURNEY IN THE
CONGO

Atlantic Books
London

1

I was already feeling perturbed. There was something perhaps about the bar's large parasol umbrellas, lit starkly by the hanging naked bulbs. Or it could have been the figures flitting behind them, beyond my view.

I had sensed his presence, his curt movements. But they did not seem malicious. Then he lunged for my table, and I found myself running in the night. I ran with all my force. And I would have said I was faster than him. But I might have imagined my own speed from the people who passed me by like pages in a flip-book: mamas with bananas on their heads, vendors carting cages of birds and monkeys, the crocodile-leather pointy-shoed bureaucrats. They turned to stare at me, the whites of their eyes stabbing the darkness and piercing my face, my side, my back. Who are you looking at? He's the thief, stop him!

I squinted to keep sight. His form was like an illusion—feet leaping off the earth, driving up plumes of dust. His hands pulled at his falling shorts; and when he looked back to see I was still running he screamed in surprise, showing dull teeth, and turned into a narrow passage.

We regressed from the city. The alleys amplified the darkness and my shallow breaths filled the spaces between the walls that rose on either side—gray walls high and long between which I ran blindly, without thinking—until we came to a field. And for a moment I lost sight of him.

I turned sharply, feeling a panic rise.

"You!" He appeared, empty-handed—and jeering at me, almost as if he wanted to play. A sickly chicken of a boy, with limbs extending like antennae from his belly. "You have my phone!" I yelled. "*Té!* I refuse!" The ground was wet and yielding, covered in waste, cans, wrappers. The smell was rotten. It was like nothing I had known. A landfill in the middle of the city. Of what was I afraid?

"I'll give you money."

"How much?" He wiped his shoulder over his mouth; his face was covered in sweat.

A group of children skipped toward us. I reached into my pocket for my notebook and wallet. The boy turned, and I saw a wound on a hairless part of his scalp.

"Keep the phone"—I pointed into my palm—"I only need the numbers inside." He smiled, as if smelling a trick. I felt frustrated at my carelessness. I didn't have money to hand out, and those numbers were precious. I was new in the country and had few friends. Most meetings had been gained by chance, in the street, at the odd conference, in a waiting room or at a bar; they had not been planned, necessary, or even particularly friendly. And yet they had taken on, in my mind, a great importance.

Kinshasa, when I first arrived, had felt giant, overwhelming. The scenes on the roads, the people moving from here to there, the languages, gestures, stares—the smallest rituals had seemed imbued with meaning and purpose, and the city appeared as a collusion of secrets only the locals shared. But these strangers I had met—journalists, businessmen, minor politicians—had become bearings from which I navigated the confusion. With

them I constructed a sense of place, and for moments felt part of the mystery. So the phone contained my personal map; and without it I felt lost, as though I had newly arrived for a second time and was again without connection. The bewilderment was now greater. And having exhausted the initial excitement of the new place, I now found the city distant, hostile.

My sigh came out heavy and sharp; it startled the boy. Already he was stepping away. I half tripped forward and yelled, "How do I find you? What's your name?"

"Guy."

And, making a cackling noise, he ran behind a mound. I felt suddenly strained.

I could not tell the way by which I had come—so I picked a nearby narrow street and followed it for a mile or two. The walk was not unpleasant. We were in the middle of a brief rainless period, in the summer; and there was a slight breeze. But even in this season the climate was humid and hot, and in such conditions everything grew quickly: the nails, the hair, the plants and insects. All attained giant or copious proportions. I stopped to inspect a falling banana tree. Its top was sappy, and crawling with red ants.

The city also grew daily. It was a center of migration for the region, like São Paulo or Calcutta, and already black Africa's largest capital—a collapsed metropolis, unable to assure even the survival of its nine million people. But still the dispossessed came in floods from the villages.

I passed some women sitting on their porches, washing down their children from canisters of soapy brown water. They looked up. *Bonjour,* I said. Slowly they repeated the word, as though they had not expected it.

The main road was unlit and cars streamed past. People stood in packs, frantically waving their hands and rushing to each slowing taxi. I made a circle with my forefinger pointing at the ground and twenty minutes later found space in a minibus going

north. My house was to the south, but it was the end of the working day and I was commuting like the masses. This was my way of finding a free seat.

I trembled incessantly—as did the bus's plywood floor. The metal chassis around me was covered in the dents of countless collisions. The driver took us to the city's commercial area, cruising along the street edge and gathering passengers. A man hanging on the back of the bus constantly yelled our route. People swelled toward us like a sea. We sat in an old Volkswagen whose twelve cushioned seats had been pulled out and replaced with wooden benches; soon we were more than thirty inside, cramped side by side, hands between our knees. We squeezed more for the woman who brought in her drooling infant. The windows were sealed shut, so there was no breeze, and inside it was suffocating. The human smells engulfed us. But I looked through the glass and saw the movement; and this perception of the wind gave some false relief. We came to the harbor, with its broken heavy machinery. And the two- and three-story buildings stained with long black stripes: algae, rising from within the cement and blooming in the open. One imagined the decomposition that lived hidden within. The city seemed to be falling apart, building by building—structures crumbled so slowly they seemed almost to melt. At a roundabout we circled a brick monument—black, as though burned. The statue of the Belgian king had long been toppled, leaving two pillars framing an empty space. Lining the roads were heaps of garbage, glowing like embers and giving off black smoke.

The collapse, the crisis. It is how the world knows Congo. Death is as widespread in few places. Children born here have the bleakest futures. It is the most diseased, the most corrupt, and the least habitable—the country heads nearly every conceivable blacklist. One survey has it that no nation has more citizens who want to leave.

And now we come to the mouth of the Boulevard, the city's

artery. The bus, shivering, accelerates in the wide lanes. On both sides old trees with majestic green crowns and high-rises pass quickly. They still inspire awe. Not far away is the Congo River, opening into a pool and curling around us. One is reminded that this place, even in Europe, was once called the Beautiful, *La Belle*.

The Boulevard is soothing in a way—this part of the city, one feels, has a certain vision, and was made with care. Buildings eighty and ninety years old are still intact, with porches and pillars and triangular eaves. Walls show traces of ocher. Old floors are of fine red and black oxide. The city is well planned, and traffic is congested only because wear has thinned the roads' drivable widths and because of modern neighborhoods, haphazardly constructed. The boulevards are enormous, like in few African cities. The lampposts are tall, solid, evenly spaced. And the railway station has a monument in Latin, declaring the colonial project for which this city was made: *"Aperire Terram Gentibus"*—"To Open the Land to the Nations."

Congo was then opened like a wound. And the world, continually seeking modernity, still consumes the country. A Belgian king committed genocide during the automobile revolution to pillage Congo for rubber—the world needed tires then. Midcentury, the Belgian state initiated a war over Congo's copper, to wire the world for electricity. Congo's recent conflicts were heightened by the world's growing demand for tin, to make the conductors used in almost every electronic circuit. We currently live in what some say is the Fourth Great Pillage—others call it the Fifth or Sixth. The world now needs cell phones, and Congo contains 60 percent of known reserves of an essential metal called tantalum. It is the curse: each progress in the world produces some new suffering. And a succession of Congolese leaders have tried, in their ways, to reclaim their land—first Lumumba by expelling the white man and gaining independence from Belgium; then Mobutu by reviving the old Congolese idea of king-

ship; and finally the father Kabila, with his half-Marxist ideas of liberation. But even now the country gives the impression of being possessed by outside powers. Kabila's son, the president, seems himself overwhelmed. Much of the country is without government. The wealth has brought out the worst in man: greed, corruption, great violence.

These four men had defined Congo's history. Patrice Lumumba, the fiery politician who united the Congolese and remains the country's only true hero. Then Lumumba's onetime secretary, Joseph Mobutu, ruled as dictator for more than thirty years, with Western help, after having Lumumba assassinated in 1961, just six months after Congo's independence. The rebel Laurent Kabila—the father Kabila—in 1997 toppled the cancer-afflicted Mobutu. And when the father Kabila was himself assassinated four years later, it was his son, the relatively unknown Joseph Kabila, who was installed, and still presided over this naturally rich but ravaged country.

A Congolese legend has it that God, tired after creating the world, stopped at this part of the earth and dropped all his sacks of riches. Gold, diamonds, oil, silver, uranium, zinc, cobalt and tungsten. Such is the wealth—they say you only have to dig and you are sure to find something, though you may not know its name. And it seems somehow significant that this wealth, which another culture might have interpreted as a divine reward, is described in Congolese legend as an accident. God only happened to be at this place.

The minibus turned in to the Avenue des Huileries, the Avenue of Oil Works—we were now only a few miles from the journey's end—where the bus had to share space with the pedestrians, and slow to their pace. As we shed the colonial structures, the past, buildings on the roads grew small and clustered, reflecting the country's anarchy. And against this backdrop the sluggish walkers appeared almost magical, like the survivors of a cataclysm. Men wore suits and fat-knotted ties, yellow and pink; women,

frilly fancy dresses. The shoes stepping in the mud were well polished, of fine leather. Rings of wetness showed under their arms on the satin. So laboriously beautiful—the people had an air of character, defiance.

The north and the west of the city were affluent, particularly along the river. As the bus plunged inland, on every side opened up slum-like neighborhoods, vast, featureless, without light. We moved through one of these murky areas, and entered a busy market, with roaming figures. The sides of our bus began to be thumped. We were gently rocked. Suddenly our bus was mobbed. Children's wide-eyed faces pressed against my window. I drew away. "Give me money," said the shapes of their lips, round as an O. *"Pesambongo."* But it was useless—our windows were fixed, and they could not even sell us their cool drinks, shoe shine or melting candy. Their desperate small hands stained the glass with wet palm prints. And they passed by like slow-motion pictures, glaring at us.

We at last arrived at the roar of Victoire, my neighborhood—and one could feel the chaos become acute. It was a place of raw cement. Few buildings were even whitewashed. Occasionally a low wall would be made of brick, adding a touch of color. But Victoire was legendary in Africa—revered, almost as a site of pilgrimage. Already, at this hour, from all parts of the city people would be coming; and beginning at 11:00 p.m., when Kinshasa's lights had mostly extinguished and the regular families had retired, here the vitality would resurge, creating an experience of almost pure pleasure and excitement. The music and meat grills would go all night. Saxophones would sound from terraces. Dancers would move like water: slow hips, tempting. The city would live a second life.

But now it seemed to oppress: the street of wooden stalls lit by kerosene lamps, where I alighted—the stalls crooked, winged insects gathering around their glows, the earth pushing against their walls in chimneyed piles. The feeling, I knew, had some-

thing to do with the house, around the corner. I tried to delay getting back by running some errands.

The shop I made for was just down the road, but people and cars flowed incessantly: I was forced to move, and often against my intention. To be still anywhere was to be in the way.

And at the center of this disorder, beside a pile of garbage being eaten by dogs and shrouded by flies, I arrived at a table of electrical goods. Shops in Kinshasa, especially in this part of town, had moved into the open to escape rents. The vendor was reading a stained small-format magazine, and looking disconsolate. I said I needed a fan. "I have a new ventilator," he declared. "High quality. I give you the best price." *Best price* meant there were other prices and I should negotiate. A large pedestaled machine with blue blades was produced.

"I don't want Made in China."

His salesman demeanor vanished. "Okay, I know the fan is no good, but *you* pay only thirty dollars. Made in Japan I have no stock. And why should I? The fans last too long and no one buys again." I relaxed. Now we could talk freely. Outbursts augured well in Congo—one only had to expose the initial theater, I found, and people were generally up-front.

We agreed on the terms of sale, including a one-week guarantee, which the vendor scribbled on the receipt and signed. He meticulously wrapped the fan in cardboard, while I observed the people, the street. Near me danced a stout man, alone, holding a portable radio to his ear; in front of him a butcher massaged a block of meat.

This area around Victoire was called the *cité* (pronounced with a spit, as opposed to the gentrified *ville*, spoken gently), and here for the most part one saw only Congolese: Victoire had a reputation for gangs and disorder, and expatriate and embassy workers (whose money made a substantial part of the consumer economy) were prohibited even from visits.

"Who wants those foreigners anyway?" said my supplier of

phone cards, Anderson, who operated one street from my house. "Their interest is only to rob this country, not to help us small people."

"All right, all right." I had heard this speech before. "I need a telephone," I said, knuckling his wooden kiosk. "Mine was stolen by one of those *schegués*."

When Anderson smiled his face became boyish. Otherwise, with his gapped teeth and balding head, he appeared very serious, and sometimes frightening. He always dressed simply—in a T-shirt, trousers and sandals—and he made a living selling cell phone credit. Two old telephones sat on his countertop, which was made of scrap wood. He sometimes talked about replacing the kiosk, but it seemed to have made its place: long use had formed depressions in the gravel, at the edge of the open gutter, where Anderson sat outstretched, surveying the street. This was his territory. He was a respected member of the Opposition Debout, an outspoken political movement headquartered in Victoire. He was also my antenna to Radio Trottoir, the underground news network.

"So you met the president," he said to me.

I put a finger to my lips. Not so loud around the opposition! "He wouldn't see me."

"But that's good, my friend! That's good!" Anderson raised his voice. "You are one of us. No use meeting those clowns."

"But the clowns have the power. And the news."

"You want news? Just wait a little. My friend, this country is going to blow up."

"If the country explodes you procure phone cards for me, eh? Ten dollars won't do anymore."

"When this country explodes *you* take care, my friend. We'll kill all the foreigners and burn this city." His phone beeped. "Let's talk later"—he winked and flashed me a thumbs-up—"Don't worry, you're one of us!" And I picked up my fan-in-a-box and made the short march home, feeling sick.

I entered a grid of obscure and ruined streets that stretched away from Victoire, and I followed a group of children playing soccer. The ragged ball, of plastic and string, rolled toward where I lived, on Avenue Bozene. I passed a boy doing his schoolwork, and men huddled over low tables crowded with one-liter beer bottles. Inside gated compounds women chattered, slapping their plastic slippers against their heels. Cracked walls rose from the ground, smelling of moss and crowned with glass shards. The ball fell into a gutter; a boy reached in with his hands and threw the ball in the air; sewage scattered from above. The game passed in front of my compound, which carried no name, just the number 32.

My house was a one-story structure with dirty white walls ringed by blue paint at the bottom. An iron gate led into the courtyard, and first I passed the landlord's identical dwelling before, at the back of the plot and near a set of toilets, coming to our metal-grill door.

I stepped in and tried to smile. Nothing had changed. The bulbs waned, the cistern hissed, Bébé Rhéma slept in her crib and Jose and Nana sat at the table, napkins tucked in. The living room was long and divided into two areas: close to the door was the dining table, near some low cupboards against a wall. At the far end was a television surrounded by khaki sofas. The plot was connected to water and electricity, and also had a septic tank. These were the important things, and they made our house nearly middle-class. (In Congo there was no middle class: there were the sprawling bungalows and the serviced apartments, with their maids and armed guards, and there was this.) I rented a room from Jose and Nana, themselves renters.

Jose's eyes were droopy, and he stooped over his plate. He was a mild man who worked in the city tax department and wore only designer shirts, mostly secondhand. He was over fifty but had married only two years earlier. Nana was a housewife, though she had a certificate as a nurse and was constantly saying she

would soon return to a clinic: it was one of her frustrations. She was tall and heavy boned, and her short-sleeved blouse amplified the thickness of her arms (she had swelled after marriage, as the wedding photographs on the mantelpiece showed). "You are late," she said, and then squealed: "What a beautiful fan!"

I had wanted to be alone that evening, but I did not expect it to happen—there was, it seemed, always someone around in the house; always some commotion.

"Look, it's a new one!" Nana chewed twice, then reached for the box. "Let him eat," Jose said. Nana retracted her hands and hurried off, her heavy steps resounding on the cement, to find me a fork and a plate. At the end of the corridor she shook the cistern handle. There was a gurgle, and the tiresome hissing stopped.

I had rarely dined with the family—our routines had seldom coincided—and I had still not learned their ways. The stew was in a large casserole, and a ceramic bowl contained white rice. The place mats had drawings of fruits on them. Nana passed me the bowl, indicating I was the guest. I served myself a spoon of rice. Then Jose heaped a ladle of rice on his plate, protecting the falling grains; his fingers tickled the air. He hummed contentedly. I tried to pass the bowl to Nana, but Jose's hand reached again. Grains tumbled from the bowl. Then Nana tipped the dish over her plate and shook it empty, banging with her spoon. Jose mumbled a prayer.

"Amen."

The family ate only one meal a day. Jose called it lunch; Nana called it dinner. And it was custom to serve oneself all at once, without expecting the food to pass around again. A small grilled fish was produced. Nana gave me a piece of tender meat, picking it off with her hands. We ate at a rapid pace—as though the meal were a stress and had to be consumed quickly, so that the house could return to its regular, foodless state. I finished my plate still hungry.

Jose said, "You met the president?"

"He was in meetings all day. An ambassador visited unexpectedly."

Jose took a moment to chew. "Where did you buy the fan?"

"Here at the market. Twenty-five dollars."

"Good price."

His few words lifted my spirits, and after dinner, in the living room, together we unpacked the box.

Soon the fan stood on a tall metal pedestal with its plastic blades housed in an enormous cage. It looked magnificent, and Jose circled it excitedly. Nana was outside, telling the neighbors. At this time in the evening the neighbors were usually out and about, drinking beer and chatting up the ladies, but as word of the fan spread, our living room filled. People took turns putting their faces against the wind and delighted at having their coiled hair stretch behind like stiff wires.

"The twenty-first century has come to Bozene," proclaimed Jose. And if the neighbors didn't seem jealous it was because Bozene shared all material possessions, especially items of technology. Except my computer, which, I had made clear to a perplexed Nana, was not for use by her nephews or friends. On that evening, however, everyone seemed to forget my foreign ways—and I was Mr. Popular during the half hour for which the fan spun and spun. I stood beside the fan, talking up my purchase. Until suddenly the house was plunged into darkness.

The neighbors moaned. The fan slowed until it hardly moved; it stopped completely. The neighbors squatted, as if it was as much their business as mine to wait for the power, to protect the fan and make sure Made in China survived the electric modulations. In the dark the appliance looked like a dead bird with caged wings; beside it Jose was sprawled on the sofa, half-asleep, his sweat-beaded head over his shoulder. From inside I heard Nana, *"Tapé tapé tapé,"* trying to distract Bébé Rhéma from the heat.

"Jose," I said, testing if he was awake.

"*Ouais,*" he drawled.

"You know they say the riots happen around here."

"Hmm."

"Where do these riots start?"

"Around Victoire."

"Where, exactly."

Jose rolled in his sofa, licking his dry lips. "You know where Anderson sits? . . . But now is not the moment for riots."

I turned the fan's cage from side to side, making it move as if it were working. "The current will come," he mumbled. "Don't worry." The evening passed like that, until the neighbors lost interest or tired of waiting.

My room was in the middle of the hallway that led from the living room. Across from my door was the master bedroom, next to the bathroom-cum-toilet. The kitchen was at the end of the hallway. My room was small—about ten feet by five—and it had been made, but the sheets were thrown, without tenderness, over the bed; the rug on the floor was askew; papers were stacked untidily in the corner; the curtains were tied up near the rod. The welcome had been brief; the warmth was now gone. I felt only accommodated.

Lying in bed I looked at the ceiling, at the disfigured panel of patchwork plywood. The grain on the sassy wood—ash black, insect resistant—had expanded in the cycles of rain and heat, twisting its surface and making the panel sag like the skin of some large animal. Above my face the wood had rotted and split. I wondered if it could crack open, and if the roof would then fall.

Two weeks before, I might have moved my bed. But I had realized the futility of worrying in such a place: the threats were too many. And I took my new indifference as a sign that I was settling in.

I lay awake, thinking. Guy and his place had seemed so strange; the feeling of loss returned.

But at midnight the church bells sounded and the sopranos began at Bozene's evangelist choir; and I could no longer think. Mosquitoes buzzed my ears like little biplanes from a World War I film. I tried to swat them but hit myself. The fan stood beside my face. I pushed its plug harder into the socket, hoping to see the blades rise into action. Nothing. My head dropped to the pillow, and I heard my lips flutter as I softly blew air between them.

Sometime at night I went to the kitchen. Rats banged through the metal pots when I turned on the bulb. The fridge was empty but for fungicide creams. I wet a towel and draped it over my pillow, to keep down the dust and provide temporary coolness. The sopranos sang all night, without rest, and by morning I knew their songs so well that I hummed them in the cold and brown-water shower I made by emptying a bucket over my head.

The night had made me restless. I wanted to get out.

2

I had left for Congo in a sort of rage, a searing emotion. The feeling was of being abandoned, of acute despair. The world had become too beautiful. The beauty was starting to cave in on itself—revealing a core of crisis. One had nothing to hold on to.

I was at the time at university in America.

The professor's eyes gleamed. His gaze penetrated, even frightened. Serge Lang, a legend of mathematical theory, sat behind his large desk, a black telephone to his one side and, on the other, a wall covered with yellow hardbound mathematics classics that he had written.

He was a fiery man, bursting with vitality. He screamed at his students, threw chalk at us in class. He shouted with his nose held to our faces. "Truth! Clarity!" He pressed his forefinger into our chests in the middle of arguments. But Lang and I got along. I liked his fury and candor. And he believed in my mathematical ability. When he saw me devour his classroom material he delightedly goaded me on. He wanted me to see more. Over three years he gave me more than two thousand dollars' worth of his textbooks. I cared for them as my small treasure. I

studied them in our stone department building, near his office, feeling pleasure and satisfaction—convinced that I was going to become a professor.

But on this day it was with those same yellow books, piled high in my arms, that I stumbled into his office. The professor's gaze set on me. I put the books on his desk. Lang frowned—he had understood.

"What happened?" he said. The anger was gone. He looked distraught. I felt as if I had betrayed him.

It was for the beauty that I had stayed. The beauty of the world in those symbols. The mathematics I loved was inspired by nature's exquisiteness: in crystals, corals, snowflakes; and by nature's grandeur in stars and oceans. It was the purity of the work that appealed. One was devoted to revealing the meaning of the symbol as well as the beauty of what was signified beneath. And my work at the best of times seemed an almost spiritual pursuit, for something elusive and universal—for a truth. Lang had shown me this.

In my field, algebra, we were devoted to generalization—a search for the universe's deeper rules. Our goal, indeed the ultimate triumph, was to reveal different things to be the same. And for this purpose we drew abstraction from abstraction, piled cleverness upon cleverness. Three dimensions became four, and five. One had to imagine in seven, seventy, impossibility. Objects grew too complex; new languages were invented. Conventional geometries became fully explored; other geometries, less imaginable, were brought about.

This was mathematics progressing. And Lang was now taking me to a place where nature's mysteries had extinguished, where man was surpassing nature. Fresh symmetries were being discovered, more complex, profound and elegant than in the world. This new mathematics was pristine, but it offered no stimulus to the senses. Its relations to the universe were numerous, but fortuitous. It was man's brilliance and vanity at play. I started to feel

lost. Our world seemed multiplied out into many worlds, like in some fantastical game. Sublime laws were substituting for life.

I shrugged at Lang.

I told him the textbooks would be better used by someone else.

I fidgeted, feeling a kind of anxiety wanting release. I was to leave university in two months. Lang had taken me far in a very short period: I should have been finishing my first degree, but in three years Lang had brought me to the point where I would begin a doctorate. I waited, not sure for what, and shuffled about.

"Where will you go?" Lang asked, staring at the wood of his wide table.

I was surprised by the preciseness of his question. "I've decided on Congo." I added, "I'm going to try to be a journalist."

"To play the fool." He said it at once.

His face was stern. But he was smiling with his eyes, brilliant. Always those eyes. I would never forget their lucidity.

I glanced for a last time at the tower of yellow books I had placed on his desk.

Some weeks later I was in a Togolese shop in New York, buying khaki pants to take with me to Africa. Lang called me from California. He always used a fixed line. The professor asked what I was doing. It was a strange call. I wondered if he was feeling lonely. But I found the shop's music too loud, and asked, "Can I call you back?"

I forgot to call him.

A month later I received a message that Lang was dead. I contacted the university, but the mathematics department would tell me nothing more. Rumors were circulating that the professor had killed himself. I suppose he had called me to say a goodbye of sorts. I was devastated, shocked. But there was little more that I could do; by then, I was already in Kinshasa.

I broke with America. Congo consumed me. After Lang's calm world of mathematics, I felt here only impermanence, fear. I had to constantly push, fend. Around me the crowd ground like a windmill—now loudly bellowing, now whirling in silence. A volatility seemed exposed against the black terrain. It felt impossible to belong to this place. The houses, the paint, even the brilliant goldwork of new villas appeared to announce the coming of a jaded future. But it did not shock. I felt somehow alert.

The war in Congo was the world's worst in half a century. Already more than five million people had died in it. The war was monstrous, filled with stories of rape and massacre, and so exaggerated in its proportions that it had become absurd. People struggled to find words to describe this conflict, and were now calling it—despite the contradiction in the term—"Africa's World War," to convey some sense of the number of armies it had drawn in and, more important, the scale of killing.

It was an unusual time in my life. The beauty in America and in mathematics had become cloying. I felt increasingly connected to a sense of being troubled, and I felt the need to grow into this, not escape. In America I was beginning to feel trapped and suffocated, and removed from the world.

Three strange things had happened in America to make me come to Congo. First, someone gave me, by chance, an interview with a Polish journalist, who spoke about the need to go to these wars in Africa, which he said few people took the trouble to witness, or to experience. Then I met a Congolese political refugee while paying my university bill; her husband's brother was Jose, and it was she who found me a room in Kinshasa. And finally, I was offered a job at Goldman Sachs that would have settled me for life.

The job only strengthened my desire to leave. My mother tried, naturally, to convince me to take it. She started to cry when I told her I was going to Congo. The interview with the Polish

journalist kept coming back to me. And listening to her weep, strangely, I felt I needed to go.

Journalism seemed a natural choice. I felt that the profession would immerse me in the world, and take me to the crisis. The world appeared to be uneasy about Congo, to turn away from it, and write its story from far away. I wanted to experience this place I read about in two-hundred-word news reports: those tiny stories seemed to describe events and emotions that were so large. I wanted to see how people responded to such crisis, what we could become. History was unfolding in Congo, in its war—our history. But such ideas became secondary as soon as I arrived. The apprehension was immediate, and assailing. I had come to Congo alone. I needed to survive. I needed money, a job. There was an urgency about this.

Congo was an unlikely place to launch a journalism career. Nothing about it was welcoming. And the world had largely rejected the country. Few cared for its news. Reporters were usually posted to Africa after several years in the business; and even among those who chose to start on the continent, the rule was to base oneself in Senegal or Kenya: safer, more ordered countries, with regular streams of tourists, and where the major newspapers stationed full-time staff.

But in my favor was the moment. Congo's elections, due in less than a year, would be historic, the country's first chance in four decades at democracy. It was a precarious time: old tensions had surfaced. Power could again be won or lost. I could feel the people's agitation. I could sense the threat—looming—of change.

The experience of Congo's last true elections was at the root of the apprehension. That had been in 1960, when the country had elected Patrice Lumumba as its first prime minister amid the violence of Congo breaking free from Belgium. Lumumba was subsequently betrayed by his handpicked protégé, Joseph Mobutu, among those he trusted the most. Mobutu had the

prime minister arrested and killed, and then installed a deeply repressive dictatorship.

There was now an additional risk. This vote was to be the final step of Joseph Kabila's peace process. Kabila had over the past three years managed to calm Congo's war, which had seen two major waves of violence. The war had begun in 1996, when Kabila's father was the front man of a Rwandan invasion that toppled Mobutu. But when the father then spurned his Rwandan backers, a power grab followed that saw another invasion by Rwanda, drew in armies from nine different countries, and engulfed Congo—as well as all of the heart of Africa.

Until three years earlier Congo in its entirety had been at war, divided between these armies. Kabila had brought together the warlords and made them his vice presidents. One of these, Jean-Pierre Bemba, would be Kabila's main opponent in this vote.

And the war still raged in the east of Congo. The main warlords had laid down their weapons, but particularly bloody militias spawned by the years of violence still killed, raped and pillaged. Adding to the five million victims, a thousand more were dying each day. And Kabila seemed more and more isolated—always seeming to fear that he would be assassinated like his father, and with few in his entourage whom he could trust. The elections would open him to attack. He was vulnerable. And there was a growing sense that the vote could cement the peace that had been gained, or again tear the country apart.

It gave me immediate purpose: I visited the election commission, a building on the Boulevard with an enormous orange voting box painted on its facade. The vision of Congo was different here: gleaming, organized, contemporary. I found the staff to be unexpectedly warm. I was given a front seat, as a foreigner, and a special-colored badge; my questions were answered graciously. Later local journalists came up to tell me the answers I had been given were wrong. They had their own explanations. They pro-

posed we collaborate. The atmosphere here, in the shiny halls, was more subdued than in the streets. I felt a sort of inclusion.

And then at home, with its anxieties and half acceptances, I was surprised by the hospitality. Nana had apparently decided to make me more quickly familiar with local culture. But she told me nothing. I found out only later that for more than a week she had been busy making arrangements.

The girl was an important figure in Congo. She cured moods, I had been told. She conveyed pleasure. She gave life to abundant families. She was coy, rebellious; tolerated, taught to be fickle and so cantankerous that it would seem nothing could possibly appease this girl until her man drew her closer, produced extravagant gifts and satisfied the restlessness. The acting was hyperbolic and overt. The girl knew to extract the maximum.

Anderson, who was thirty-five and still womanless, told me that at any given time the Congolese girl kept five men whom she referred to as "offices." (Traditionally only men kept offices. Women had usurped the model.) Anderson had repeatedly been on the short list. The office that went the full distance, he said, was either the wealthiest or the most cunning—for the poor man could also win. Months later Anderson took me to a wedding; he was a friend of the groom, who was wearing a tuxedo and smiling toothily though he had spent his every last franc on the girl and steeped himself in debt.

But not all men were as clever, or foolish. And in Kinshasa there was a dearth of suitable males. So the outsider had become desirable; for his money, job and passport. Nana later confessed to me that families with "values" derided foreigners: as outcasts to tradition, as bearers of grotesque sexual fantasies about the African woman, and—most damagingly—as the masters of paltry families. Every child was negotiated, planned. But so dire

was the situation, Nana said, that good women were sending their daughters even to such men.

When Fannie came home I didn't remember that I had met her two nights before at Anderson's kiosk. And I didn't know she was Jose's niece. It was morning, and I was shaving in the bathroom-cum-toilet when Nana clanged the metal door. I started. Some hair fell on the toilet seat and became embedded in the yellow grease. The door shook again. "Someone's here to see you."

"Who is it? Can you tell them to wait?"

I rinsed my face and with a towel wiped away the traces of foam from my neck. The mirror was cracked through the middle, in three diverging fissures, distorting my features. Carrying my shaving kit I returned to my room. Fannie was already there. She was looking at the fan with interest, touching its motor. I stepped out. Nana was holding a broom.

"I asked her to wait. But not in *my* room."

"She wanted to see the fan."

"Couldn't she wait a few minutes? I'm half-naked."

"You don't understand," Nana whispered and pulled me aside. "How do I say it?" She looked a little confused. "She *likes* you."

"What? You're joking."

"Shhh . . . Don't tell her I said." And Nana deposited her heavy frame on a chair at the dining table. "Go! Talk to her!"

"Fannie," I called out. "Nana wants you in the living room."

I crossed her in the corridor but couldn't look her in the eye. And I had hardly put on my shirt and tousled my hair and wondered what I should say when she was back. She was a tall girl, made to appear taller by pants that reached high up her wasp waist. Her full-sleeved white shirt was for men. Her features were fine, and she was of about marriageable age. She entered the room with confidence, sat down on my bed, and began to talk in a soft, melodic voice: she wanted a job, she said, but the employers were running her in circles.

I empathized, saying it wasn't easy in Kin.

"You're telling me," she said. "I have a university degree and all they say is come back again." She stressed the word *university*. There was a silence about the house, unusual for the morning, and I wondered if Nana was eavesdropping from the yard. Fannie pointed at my notebook. "What's that?"

"Some work."

"Nana mentioned. Why don't you write about me?" And she opened her eyes wide, as if she thought it were a grand idea. "You'll have to know me better, though," she said, laughing, "or you won't have the juicy details."

"Why don't you show me around Kin? I'm looking for stories."

"It's a date." She tapped her feet on the carpet and fingered her braids tenderly; she wouldn't leave my bed. Then she said, "Could you lend me a small thirty bucks?"

"What for?"

"Your girl needs to braid her hair." I must have looked skeptical. "Don't you want to write about a beautiful girl?" She waved her hair and the plaits swayed like playground swings. I shook my head. "That's too bad," she said. "Because I love you." She waited for the words to have effect. "Surely you have something to share."

"Nothing at all."

She stood up sharply and strode off like a cat, crossing her legs exaggeratedly. I followed through the corridor. She stopped and leaned against the living room doorway, not moving as I approached. I had to brush against her chest to pass, and I felt her press; she tried to trip me. Nana appeared not to notice any of it. She offered me a piece of bread and sat on the floor, breaking green beans.

Fannie moved to the dining table; she almost wafted.

I took the adjacent seat and picked at the bread. Some awkward moments passed. Then I looked at her. "I'd like your help."

She frowned.

I described the landfill to which I had followed Guy, when he had stolen my phone. "You know the place I'm talking about? It's close to the restaurant that sells whole goats."

She turned—I thought to look at me—but she only scratched the back of her head. And she spoke with skepticism. "Nana says you're important, but then how come you're so poor?"

While Fannie sat with a long face we had more unannounced visitors. They popped in and out with precise wants: a lemon slice, some tonic quinine, a cloth to wear to a funeral. The visits were regular, part of Bozene's sharing: it was Congolese custom to share both good luck and misfortune. Later I understood that I was a piece of luck that Nana had tried to share. And by asking Fannie to show me around I had given her license to make her own request; I had reneged. It set my reputation. But I was new to Bozene, and there were more experienced abusers. The street had a very definite structure; it operated like a tribe: an urban clan of village and city, of assorted languages, religions and cultures. All this had coalesced here into a Donut Society, with the family at the center, and the clan (the street) as the ring. Outside this ring the world was chaotic, without clear rules or enforcers. At the center it was much the same—family was excused no matter the gravity of the crime. But the clan was society's best-organized unit: here the rules were strict and the punishment was severe. Disobedient families had their credit extinguished—which meant they could starve—for errors that outside Bozene or within families would be considered minor. The severity showed in the wounds on their dwellings: gates falling from hinges, iron frames exposed on crumbling walls. Nana said they slept sixteen in a room, mat beside mat, arms and legs over one another. Theirs were always the darkest houses, voids among the lights; and in the morning they lay empty, quiet. I never knowingly saw the inhabitants. "Better keep away," said Nana. Bozene tried not to talk about the wretched. But lately there had been some chatter about the neighbors. And it was one of their boys

who now shook our door and peered through the grill. His face was small between the painted bars, his eyes dark and fearful. Nana heaved harshly, "What is it?"

"Sugar."

"Only sugar?"

The boy lowered his face. Nana stood and straightened her dress, spilling the blackened ends of the beans. She grumbled all the way to the kitchen. The boy waddled around the living room, the shame apparently forgotten. He skipped wantonly. He deposited himself at the TV. A musical skit was playing. Fannie, now ignored, played with the saltshaker. I heard Nana move pots and bags. The mood in the house was dull. I lay my face sideways on my arm and the plastic lace tablecloth made an imprint on my skin. A light breeze touched my feet.

I didn't mind the moment of quiet.

Before she left Fannie answered my question. She had not been to the landfill, but knew it as the 25th Quarter. It had an entrance from a main road, she said, avoiding the need to pass through the alleys. That's what I should tell the taximen. They all knew the 25th Quarter.

I asked around. Most people didn't seem to know the place; some had heard of it; others only "remembered" after I probed. The more I learned about the place the more I became intrigued. The 25th Quarter, I found out, had once been a cemetery.

But I did not go until the next day, until after a knock sounded on our door and the tall figure of Mossi, a journalist I had met at the election commission, strode in. "Why the hell are you not picking up the phone?" he said, throwing his cap to the table like a Frisbee.

Mossi Mwassi was a refugee from South Africa. He had a short crop of gray hair. Nana didn't like him—she said he had the bloodshot eyes of someone carrying hepatitis. But Mossi enjoyed being an irritation: he stretched his legs on the chair, though Nana had told him not to, and he put his arms behind his head

and dug at his back tooth with his tongue. His face screwed up when he saw Nana. But Mossi was undeniably helpful: he knew all the journalists and also which stories were hot—he recalled news expertly, without pause, as if reading from some mental ticker tape.

I told him how my phone was stolen.

"Oh, good," he said. "I thought you were avoiding me. The president is giving a meeting tomorrow, are you going?"

"I wasn't aware."

"His protocol must be trying to reach you."

"Can I call them?"

"No, they have to call you. It's a big meeting. He doesn't talk a lot, this president."

"What's he going to say?"

"They're changing the constitution. Rumor has it they want to reduce the minimum age for a head of state so Mr. Kabila can run in the elections. Can you believe it? He's too young! It's causing an uproar. The opposition is saying he's illegitimate, weak, this, that. Tomorrow will be a sight. You don't want to miss it. Get your phone, man, there's still a chance. The protocol will probably make another round of calls in the morning. Pay the boy off! Fifty dollars usually does the trick. Show him the cash. Yes, that's how it works in Congo, you pay twice, three times for your own things!"

I did not need more convincing. At another time I might have shown more prudence, I might have interviewed more people and thought through the plan another day. But Mossi gave me reason to go that night. And his nonchalant confidence ("only fifty dollars," he now repeated, waving a hand) revived a buried hope that I might retrieve my phone. So I hurried.

The timing was perfect. It was late afternoon and the children, known to sleep during the day, would now be waking. Nana tried to dissuade me. "Those boys are fetish." It meant they had connections to dark powers. "They become monsters at night.

And the girls, they seduce old men. Make fools of them." She put a banana on the table. "At least talk to the boy at the grocery store. He'll tell you what's what." The insects chirped outside the bathroom window as I washed my face.

I purchased a packet of milk biscuits at the Bozene corner store. They were crushed. The shop boy cracked open a new Britannia carton and asked casually, "Visiting someone?" I told him; he grimaced. "Don't buy biscuits." Gasoline or glue would be better, he said, but his kerosene stock was finished. He helped as best he could, and at the end my cargo pants were stuffed with sugar, a canister of Baygon insect repellent, a handful of *stems*—long cigarettes—and two samples of pastis, a strong liquor made from aniseed.

"I used to live on the street," the boy said. "You'll see. It's a place God doesn't visit."

Before I left Victoire I again tried calling Guy. But my phone had been switched off.

The twilight began to fade as the taxi progressed. The roadside gutters grew wider and greener, the heaps of rubbish higher; the air felt more laden with noise and the fires to our side grew more frequent. Our car seemed an absurd addition to the environment. I amused myself by imagining our form seen from high above, our dim headlights slowly turning among the ruins. Some children ran along the walls; a couple drank from a puddle in a place where the sidewalk had caved in.

The taxi deposited me at a stretch of sand and left at once. Two mounds of waste formed an entrance to the 25th Quarter. A path led in between and curved out of view. With two steps I was inside. Instantly I felt apprehensive. In front, in the field, dozens of empty car frames were silhouetted against the sky, making shapes like large tombstones. The garbage rose as mounds and arches, rolled over pipes and fell into pits. The ground splintered

as I walked. The boundary with the city was lost; there was no boundary. The garbage seemed to grow in an expanse around me and consume the city as one gigantic slum.

Cautiously I circled the first mound. Behind it stood a boy in a pit of water. The pool was black, like some juice secreted from the surrounding decomposition. He froze when I said, "Guy?" Then he shouted in high pitch; the sound carried beyond; I heard children call: isolated calls. It was as if my presence had become known. I took a seat on a brown-brick parapet while the boy splashed himself, eyeing me like a sentry and scratching his wiry thighs. And perched there, under the force of his stare, I gained a sense of composure. I smiled. The boy babbled something.

The landscape felt deceptively peaceful. From time to time there was the cawing of birds. And the hustled motions of children. Tinny voices could be heard. They seemed distant, and I felt disregarded, separate, that the Quarter didn't perceive me as a threat and continued its regular business. A large crow fluttered and landed on the ground; its horny beak picked at the garbage and scraped against plastic and metal. Two feet together, it hopped about.

Some moments later I heard a sound from behind. I turned. Guy was dragging himself across the field like an old man, his brow furrowed. He looked small, ruined. In both hands he held brushes that began to clack, each hand in succession. *Clack clack*. The noise seemed to resonate inside my ears, and it mixed with the anticipation, sounding strangely weary.

He swooped over my feet, mumbling, "White man," as if in some trance, and not responding when I said his name. He ripped the cover off a can of watery shoe polish and began to paint, acting out the scene like a formal ritual, as if this was a necessary interaction between the street boy and the foreigner. I waited uncertainly, still: a brightness rose through the leather. Guy brushed with vigor. But the intention seemed foolish, and thoughtless, and at the end the solid black of the polished shoes

only jarred against the waste. His lips stretched in a smirk. On his face was a look of triumph. *"Pesambongo!"*

"No," I said, imitating his urgency. *"Moyen té!"*

He laughed at my usage of Lingala. Then he hit my shoulder with the back of his fist. He jumped back and jeered. "White man. Give me money."

"Guy. Where's my phone?"

"Phone?" He paused. "Gone." His French was labored.

"I have money," I said.

"Give me money!" These words came easily.

There was nothing to be done, and I let it go. I had known all along, I thought. I had known better than Mossi: this gave me some solace. And I think how I didn't get angry, and accepted his word, I think this surprised Guy. He held my arm and took me into the field. I felt he thought that I somehow understood his position.

We ran into a group of boys but Guy shouted and they fled. Then we came to a gray car frame. All the glass was gone and the chassis was dotted with barnacle-like clumps of orange rust. Guy looked left and right and climbed in. The ceiling was too low to stand under—we sat on the ground. On the dashboard were arranged liquor bottles. Guy handed me one, pulling out the stopper, while he upturned a nearly empty bottle over his mouth. But the liquor smelled like laboratory alcohol; I pulled out my pastis. He broke into a smile. I only sipped, and when Guy finished his bottle he drank from mine, with its orange label and yellow lettering: "PASTIS. For Export Only. Made in Nagpur, India."

He sucked the last drop with a whistle. He gave a long gasp, stretching over the mud.

We went out again. I felt his wrist. "Come," said Guy, opening his arms, as if showing me some monument—in his tone I thought I caught a sense of his pride. We walked over the fields. For the first time I saw graves. In places I saw offerings: food

tins, prized open and empty, fruit peels, empty frames for photographs. The city used to place its dead here, but garbage, it seemed, had simply been piled on top; and then the cemetery had been reclaimed for new purposes: for waste and unwanted children. We came upon a large agricultural clearing, lined with rows of carrot and cassava; so the cemetery now provided the city with food.

As night fell children materialized from the cars like mice, carrying bottles and blowing puffs of smoke in thick, mysterious clouds. One saw us and cried: a big-boned but skinny boy, he skipped over, rubber slippers flapping, followed by a girl whose blouse barely reached down to her waist. She stopped at some distance and pulled the bottom of her tight black shorts over her thigh.

The boy and Guy pushed each other, quickly becoming violent. "Thief! Thief!" Guy accused. The boy raised his hands and hit back. "Confession!" screamed Guy. "I refuse!" They pushed each other for a while; after this the boy looked at me vacantly. His name was Patrick.

The girl came around, dirty but pretty, with brilliant eyes large like leaves. Her name was Sylvia, and she looked older than the boys. All of them seemed in their mid-teens. Guy and Patrick stood at attention. "Confession?" Guy said. Sylvia scowled. From his pocket Guy drew out a joint that he lit with a match. He smoked with compressed lips. Sylvia looked around appearing bored and suddenly pulled the roll from his mouth; she put the joint in her nose and inhaled it to half the length. Her eyes had turned red.

The boys fell upon her, pinching her body. She rolled, laughing. They fondled her breasts, felt in her shirt. She pulled away. Guy produced another joint but Sylvia snatched it while he searched for a match. She stuffed it into her bra and took two steps back. The boys didn't pursue her.

I wasn't sure if I should be shocked: it seemed natural,

innocent—merely play. Guy now showed Sylvia something on his palm. Patrick lay on the ground. The sky was dark. The breeze had stilled. Worried the taxis would stop running, I announced that I would leave. To where? Sylvia asked. Victoire. How? By taxi. She suggested we take a ride. The boys agreed. Patrick disappeared, all jumping, and returned pushing a two-wheeler. The motorbike looked new—and almost certainly stolen. Guy pulled me on, between him and Patrick, the driver, in front of whom stood Sylvia. We pushed with our feet over the garbage, rolling out of the Quarter. What about gasoline, Sylvia said. I gave money for one liter, which we bought at a garage.

Too heavy to move fast, we trundled through the main road, dark, and then through a street colored caramel by wicks in kerosene. My legs sweated from dampness in the air. The night felt ripe. An occasional taillight reflected in a red patch on the road. It seemed provocative to engage Kinshasa so directly and in the company of its outcasts; it felt reckless to enjoy the wind against one's face. Patrick drove steadily. We had covered almost the full distance home when we passed the tall iron gate of the Stadium of Martyrs. Suddenly the bike swerved. We're going inside? I didn't hesitate. From here the house was only a walk, even if at night I would be less sure of the way.

Behind the gate we passed a fire that a homeless man sheltered by cupping his hands. The fire was small, about the height of my ankles. A child slept beside it. They could not take refuge in the sentry post, a cement cabin with grilled windows that was vacant but locked.

The stadium loomed: a giant coliseum with tall archways and corridors wide enough for tanks. The immensity of the place—pillars thicker than my body, the towering roof—felt like the presence of a government. And so our trespass produced a perverted excitement, as though we defied the highest authorities. We climbed the flights of stairs, wide, and made of concrete. Patrick grabbed my hand, and with the other I held Sylvia's. Guy

stumbled and fell and scrambled to his feet. We pulled each other up, as a chain, toward the end of the corridor that opened to the sky.

Circle upon circle of seats we climbed on all fours until we reached the topmost row and the stairs became a wall. We turned. The stadium seemed impenetrable, totally black.

Joints were rolled and passed around. It was as though we had reached a summit; there was that kind of exhilaration. For a moment I wondered if we could be seen or heard. The children chattered, insensitive. And Patrick killed all my inhibitions by screaming into the blackness.

The echo came garbled. Patrick mimicked it by mumbling. The air felt heavy, liquid almost, as though it rippled. He bowed like an orator. Sylvia clapped. He pointed in the air; Guy laughed. Patrick spit above himself, saying, *"Congo na bísó! Ezalí bosóto!"* He stepped forward and backward like in his own private theater; he screeched; he shouted at Guy; he turned on me. His face seemed charged with anger and bitterness; the boy seemed consumed by some interior emotion. His mouth opened and saliva stretched between his gums. With a cry he fell over Guy. *"Fou!"* Sylvia yelled.

She told me to ignore him, saying he had lost his mind during the war.

Patrick slammed Guy in the chest. "No!" Guy shouted, reeling, but he laughed, then punched Patrick. They hit each other. Suddenly their laughter seemed unreal; it transformed into cries and screams. The violence grew; the boys seemed unhinged. Guy buckled. Patrick coiled his arm and hit him on the back so hard that his head hit his knees. Patrick punched the air. I stepped away. He punched like a madman. He would not stop. Guy leaned toward the stadium and shouted, "Congo!" Patrick stopped, waiting for the echo; "Oo . . ." They laughed.

Patrick became still. The boys calmed down.

We sat in the stadium's silence. Our breaths made fog in the

air, from the cigarettes. From time to time Sylvia would say something to the boys; she spoke in long phrases, properly enunciating words. She had been educated. The boys mostly communicated with motions of their heads, in rude bursts.

Our silence was sometimes broken by a cry from the city; when it was a dog you could tell by the barking that followed: one bark after the other and then a chorus. But sometimes it was like a woman's screech: unaccompanied, piercing.

Sylvia sat cross-legged, folding her long legs and exposing her satin-covered crotch. She drew the joint from her brassiere and had it lit. It passed from her to Guy to Patrick to me. "Do you live at the cemetery?" I asked. "I live with the boys," she said. "And sometimes with white people."

After some time Guy crawled over and lay on her lap.

The ride home was short. The motorbike started uncertainly but found its rhythm, bumping over the mud roads near Victoire and veering dangerously. This was the city that had rejected the children—and in turn the children had rejected it. I reached Bozene between night and morning and banged on the door and stamped out the joint, which they had given me "for the road." It glowed before dying out. I had never been up in Kinshasa beyond zero o'clock, as the Congolese called it. I went to the back room, past the public toilets outside the house, and hissed. "Jose!"

He fumbled with the padlock. I apologized, staggering into the house in a daze and falling over my bed. I writhed on the mattress, succumbing to all the aggressors: the heat, the mosquitoes, the stabbing bedsprings. The choristers started again. I felt I had collided with reality.

At the time what struck me was the freedom I had felt around the children—they were free to seek pleasure; and they did, in sex and intoxication. Their lives were unbridled by the constraints and the repression of society. Yet almost every journalistic

report, NGO statement and academic paper I found perverted their expansive lives and obvious pleasure, depicting everything as a wretchedness. It was important to me that the children be able to express themselves, in terms near their own, and not be described by a moral or even sympathetic prejudice imposed on their experience.

I would experience such incongruity repeatedly: in miserable places I would find the most exuberant *joie*. It seemed to me both extraordinary and implausible, and at first I imagined it to be cosmetic cover-up, a mask worn to hide the suffering, or to help overcome it. That may have partly been true. But I also felt that the Congolese in their delirium truly forgot the misery, that they spoke in verse and caricatured their misfortune in genuine comic spirit and not for farce; it was their way of taking distance, I thought, of suspending the destruction of time. To a degree that exceeded any people I had known I found the Congolese able to isolate the present, and be satisfied. Theirs was a sort of amnesiac solace.

"Fockoff! Fockoff!" The children's last words to me kept coming back.

I woke up scratching the blisters on my shoulders. They had bled. The night had been a frenzied experience, and all morning the nostalgia lingered, making the house seem dreamlike, dreary, looming, like a part of the Quarter, or as though I were still there. That was my first adventure. Good morning, Kinshasa.

3

After this, Nana changed to me. Bébé Rhéma had been woken by my door-rattling in the night. Jose had escaped to the living room but Nana had been forced to stay up and feed her. Angry and tired, she reproached me at the dining table, in full view of the courtyard. The neighbors listened. I apologized. But Nana's irk seemed to run deeper. Whether she now thought I was infected by a diabolical spirit or if it was simply that I had been irreverent and naive, she became morose and began to behave as if she needed to prove that evil lurked in children.

Her behavior was unusual—for she had a child and a nurse's training. But this belief in evil seemed to be something Nana was taught not to reason with, and in which she believed so powerfully that even having a child did not change her.

The new frustration showed one day as I watched a cartoon. It was a Portuguese production dubbed into French about a schoolboy who turned into a superhero and saved the planet. But to Nana it was proof of her convictions—for the boy, transformed, could fly and laser blast a giant octopus. From behind my sofa she hissed, "Turn that off, it's fetish!" But I stayed at the televi-

sion, watching cartoons, until Jose came home and switched to the news channel.

Nana took me aside and told me tales about her nephews and cousins and the children of her friends—a cast of characters who had caused miscarriages, orchestrated poisonings and magically dissolved marriages by infecting fathers with lust for girls. Nana had experienced the evil when she was young. She said children could grow large at night, into giants, and come and eat us. I asked questions—she answered excitedly, as though hoping I would agree with her. Then she overheard me discuss the Quarter with Mossi. She loudly snorted. I began to ignore her remonstrations.

But the standoff was broken one week later when Nana found an opportunity to make a scene. It was a day on which I had woken late and then spent an hour in bed. As I walked to the front of the house, passing the tiny storeroom extension, I saw Nana's two nephews and Corinthian, her preacher cousin, ironing socks. How nice of her to give me a full room, I thought. But I decided not to thank Nana for as long as she was displeased with me—in case she took it away. Then the neighbor's boy, who was again waiting in the living room while Nana grumbled about having no money no sugar no milk, was found eating her hair cream.

The boy seemed in some ethereal happiness. His fingers were covered in the pale-green fluid and he smelled the cream pot, smiling, as though pleased with his discovery. And ignorant of the danger approaching he turned about, hands in the air, searching, presumably for a cloth. Nana came into the living room, her hair undone, stiff, scattered like the rays of a sun. And her eyes opened large with satisfaction. "There! Look at him!" In a shrill voice—urgent and authoritative—she summoned Corinthian.

The preacher appeared: calm, humming a choir song. His

clean white chemise was buttoned to the top so it pinched the skin on his neck. Corinthian gave sermons at the Bozene Evangelical Church, and Nana often nudged Jose as if to say, "See what a benediction my family is to this house." Corinthian had no place of his own, as I understood, so he spent his days at the church, a tall brown building at the street's entrance, and shuttled between families grateful to harbor a man of God.

"He was *eating* my hair cream," Nana said. One could sense the merriment in her vindication. "Just see and you'll know, Corinthian. You know these boys."

The child seemed unsure of what the fuss was about. He smiled stupidly and appeared to enjoy the attention—he looked at us one by one, as if someone might give him a candy.

Corinthian kneeled to the level of the boy's face and quietly asked if the child wished to confess. All at once the small face contorted. The smile vanished. And the boy recoiled and looked around the house as if he was trapped. His mouth opened inertly, speechless. Nana nodded. "That's right." And in a sweet voice she said, "Come now. Uncle Corinthian wants to help you." With wide eyes, a terrified expression, the boy concentrated on Corinthian.

In Kinshasa troublesome children often confessed. The evangelists recommended it on the radio, and Nana faithfully listened—the noise expelled all peace from the house. The sermons were screamed and replete with warning: "The devil is among us, we must protect our infants and our families!" "To go to heaven we must climb, but the path to hell is a slippery slide!" The pastor would wheeze hallelujahs. His anger would seem unending. And at the end he would call for the faithful and their families—especially the troubled souls—to be purified.

There was a trick in this, for the signs of the troubled soul need not manifest in the soul itself. They could appear in the parents, in an aunt or uncle, even in distant family. A misfortune—of

which there was no shortage—could therefore be imputed to almost anyone in the family. The only way to certify a person's purity was by ecclesiastical examination.

When a mother brought her child before a pastor it often marked a rupture within her family, but also in her society and in the child's life. Many children on Kinshasa's streets had been seen by a pastor—sometimes even in a famous church. The stories surfaced only years later, in radio reports and from the city's few orphanages. Courageous children related how the pastors had beaten them, deprived them of food, water and sleep and psychologically manipulated them until they had confessed to working for the devil. Once the evil was confirmed, with the community's approval, the child was beaten more by the family—so as to render the rupture complete—and then usually intoxicated, trussed like an animal and left in a place far from home. The child knew not to return.

Of course, the treatment could also be less cruel. It depended on the gravity of the mother's accusations and the depth of the family's misfortune. But the exorcisms happened all the time, in the *ville* and in the *cité* and on Bozene; even in the best households.

If Nana had acted from an impassioned desire to prove a point—or from some past anguish—she succeeded in ridding herself of the boy as well. He bolted off, startling Corinthian, into the sunlit street. Never again did he come asking for sugar. Nana seemed satisfied: "You see?" Corinthian claimed to be concerned for the child. But he refused to let me witness his exorcisms. He first said they happened too late, then that I was a nonbeliever, and finally that my presence would need approval from America.

And ever since, when the sopranos begin each night, I wonder for whom they sing.

4

The following weekend I made a brief trip outside the capital. Before coming to Congo I had made contact with a student conservation group protecting rare mangrove forests. I wanted the environment to be a theme of my reporting, and the students were enthusiastic to show me their fieldwork. But more than anything, I was curious to get out of the city.

The coast was not too far away: we traveled most of the way by bus, passing forests and market towns, and then made a short ferry ride, until we came to the gushing mouth of the Congo River. The ferryboat curved around the continent, and to the port of Banana.

We lodged at a defunct resort on the beach. The rooms only provided shelter, without beds or electricity. Water had to be fetched from a nearby village. I walked with the students along the mangrove forest, with its stunted trees that seemed raised on stilts. We waded in the rivulets that flowed into the ocean. The students showed me some grunt fish that the locals hunted for food. In the evening we sat on the sand, watching the sun set over the waves. And at night the horizon seemed dotted with several suns—appearing almost as bright as during the day:

Congo's minuscule twenty-five miles of coast was rich with oil; the lights were the flares of oil rigs.

Each morning on the beach I watched a dozen fishermen push out their boats. By evening, when they returned, their fine nets had caught pebble-sized juveniles and discolored adults coated in black film.

It was for these sights that I had come. I conceived of this, my first trip outside Kinshasa, as an exploration of the context surrounding the capital: the sprawling grasslands, the ghostly villages, the gushing river, the giant Japanese suspension bridge ordered by Mobutu, the ships at the port cities (an American naval vessel was docked at one), the heavily guarded oil company premises (visitors were not even allowed to stand nearby). And already I felt my notion of Congo expand: the city had swamped the senses with its movement and noise, but the countryside had an intellectual, less accessible complexity—for whom had the Americans come? There had been no news in Kinshasa. Was the ocean being poisoned, emptied of fish? How much had the petroleum company paid the oil minister? Here the machinations seemed beyond the scrutiny of the people and able to proceed in silence, secrecy.

It would have to be from the city outward that I would grasp Congo. The excursion ended too quickly: the weekend was barely over when we left for Kinshasa. The students piled into the bus with boxes of specimens. We rumbled up the hills. And as much as the trip had progressed in friendly atmosphere, the journey home was marred by misunderstandings: the students had assumed that I, as the foreigner, would pay for their hotel, food and bus tickets. Worse, they believed I had promised. After several arguments—which effectively ended our friendship—I agreed to pay half.

We approached the suburbs of Kinshasa and passed through them one by one. Each seemed a separate city, with a different

vibe: cordial, lazy, tumultuous. Our bus traveled alongside container trucks bringing food and merchandise from the ports. There were the tankers, spilling what seemed like gasoline in a trail from their bottoms. On the tall trees hung black balls like pendulums—weaverbird nests. We drove beside rows and rows of pylons that brought electricity from the massive river dams, and we followed the wires into the city.

The reception at home was cool. Jose and Nana were preoccupied with paying the electricity bill and the rent. Corinthian was hardly around, passing his nights at the church compound. There was some news: the Opposition Debout had marched peacefully on the Boulevard, to which the government had sent riot police. It created bad sentiment in the neighborhood. At the bars, the corner shop, and around the kiosks the discussions centered on the new wave of government reprisals; and like everything at the time the authorities were also blamed when it emerged that a financial crisis had hit Victoire.

The trouble, only now apparent, had begun about a week earlier when overnight the Congolese currency had inflated by 5 percent. That had been attributed to rumors. But after the fourth and fifth days of further rises the crisis could no longer be doubted. Inflation was not new to the *cité*, but now the elections were suspected. There was proof: the Opposition Debout leaked information that the president was printing thousands of bills to fund his campaign. The street's economy was paralyzed.

The *ville* hardly noticed—the dollar prices at its expatriate restaurants barely budged. But our neighborhood was in turmoil. There was a rampage of purchases, and the extra cash accelerated the inflation. Nana, trying to keep up, constantly needed money. Common sense was lost: vendors sold goods by auction. Exchanges were set up between parts of the city to profit from

arbitrage. By the time the frenzy cooled I had bought several crates of water and toilet paper. Nana had bought so much rice the storeroom resembled a small granary.

Our neighbors from across the street visited, but I had to refuse them funds. Jose advised I keep my money somewhere else. "Not to scare unnecessarily, but I don't want you to have a bad experience in my house." Nana began to leave her phone when she left for the market. Jose no longer wore his Yamamoto watch.

The city's most credible bank was in the *ville*. It was called RAW. An Indian family ran it and the manager, a short man with thick, oily hair, welcomed me with special warmth. He asked where I came from, and about my family. On the wall, a gilded plaque boasted of an affiliation with Citigroup, next to a map of India and a garlanded picture of one of the owners' ancestors. I felt reassured, for I had come with a problem: RAW required a ten-thousand-dollar minimum to open an account. The bank catered to diamond dealers—and reputedly to Avi Mezler, an Israeli notorious for dirty dealings. The manager patiently listened to my case and then picked up the phone. At the end of a quick deliberation with his chief he said for some reduced wire-transfer privileges he would be able to make an exception. I thanked him profusely.

The next day I combined some errands with the trip to the bank, to make the initial deposit. It was a relaxed day, and after an interview with an NGO boss, I was near the Chanimétal shipyards, waiting for a taxi. Then, without warning, the road filled with honks. A 4x4 with blinking taillights roared past, followed by two others. Suddenly a convoy of black jeeps. It was the president. But tailing him—almost harassing his convoy—was a rattling car drawing a long opposition banner. People were being called to march against Kabila. Pedestrians cheered at the passing car. Demonstrators would soon block the traffic; I would have to hurry to the bank and hurry again to reach home.

I waved my finger vigorously. A white hatchback stopped at the curb. The driver leaned out, "Boulevard?"

The two passengers in the backseat squeezed me between them. The driver wore a felt bowler hat. The car was in good shape: the seats were clean, our feet rested on rubber mats and the dashboard dials seemed to work. From the rearview mirror hung a miniature penguin. The travelers smiled at me as if they wanted to make friends.

One of them handed out a bag of licorice candy, and soon all of us were holding the thin red straws between our lips. I passed on the bag, careful not to touch the melted syrup on the plastic. They sucked, slurped and ground the licorice to pieces. The bag was emptied.

"You like our country?" the driver asked, chewing.

"Very much. I just came from the coast; it's beautiful."

"Is it? I've never been outside Kinshasa."

"You've never seen the sea?"

"Only on TV."

The driver smiled, looking at me in the rearview mirror. My gaze shifted to the road, then back to the mirror. The driver pulled the licorice from his mouth and held the soggy strand, licking his lips before speaking; there was a gap between his front teeth and though he wasn't fat he had a double chin, which was unusual for a Congolese. "Have you had a chance to see our monuments?"

We passed a wide gray building, some ten stories high, covered with laundry whose dripping had over the years made vertical lines on the walls. "Look at how the army lives in that hospital." A decapitated tank covered in ferns sat in the courtyard. "It's been this way for a long time," he said mournfully. And at that moment the lined gray building looked as if it wept.

The blue presidential compound appeared, with its giant iron gates and battalion of guards. The driver's teeth were now red; he seemed in a daze, looking at the guards and talking in a flurry—

then ranting, like the opposition: "Congo could be the greatest country in the world. If they shared just a little of our wealth. But our leaders only think about themselves. Egoists."

It was a familiar grievance in Kinshasa. I didn't feel qualified to speak.

Our car sped through the streets, through slums and beside rows of misshapen dwellings made of corrugated tin. Women stood with colored plastic buckets in long lines at water pumps. The tin reflected the light and the roofs appeared brilliant, blinding.

"This city is a pile of rubbish," the driver went on. "Look at the garbage on the road. They sweep and pile it up but then leave it for the wind and the rain. What is the use?"

We had reached the Boulevard. It was midday and trucks were in town to deliver goods—their dense exhausts clouded the grim crowds huddled atop each vehicle, their legs reaching over the trucks' dusty tarps and bouncing against the metal sides. Our taxi followed the slow traffic, repeatedly jerking to accelerate and brake. We came upon an orange edifice—the Ministry of Migration—and now the driver completely lost his head.

"I used to work there, but they threw me out," he said, pointing to his side. "It is the Ministry of *Méchant* [Malice]. They should make it a prison. No need to move anyone."

The other passengers laughed. I looked around. The worn condition of their shirts betrayed that they were of the poorer classes, from the *bidonvilles*, the suburban shantytowns. They probably headed into the city for some minor commerce: to pawn a trinket or as day laborers; the going rate was eighty cents for eight hours of work, but that would pay for a roll of bread and a Coca-Cola, and perhaps something for the children. An urge overtook me: I wanted to show I cared about them though I was a stranger—that despite my relative health and riches I sympathized with their condition.

"That ministry stole two hundred dollars from me at the air-

port," I said. "Even though I had a valid visa from New York, they threatened to lock me up until I paid a bribe." I pointed accusingly at the orange building behind us. "That place is full of thieves!"

The driver stopped nodding and he frowned in the mirror, the edges of his face now contorted. The passengers began to shake their legs. Feet rapped against the rubber mats; air whistled through a gap in the window. We passed a street policeman. The driver shook his head, slowly, like a metronome. He became pensive, drumming his fingers on the wheel.

"Thieves," he murmured, so softly that he seemed to whisper, and then his tone was frighteningly hysterical: "*Thieves*? You are who to be talking like this?"

We suddenly accelerated. The driver firmly shifted gears. And when the car swerved off the Boulevard I realized I was in trouble. "I'll get off here please."

"Calm down. I'm taking you, aren't I?"

I leaned forward with an effort—the passengers had wedged me tight. "I've changed my mind. I'll get off here."

"*Tranquille.*" The driver pushed me back with a firm hand. The backseat men pinned down my shoulders.

The man to my left plunged his hand into his pants. Oh, f——.

He fumbled with a black revolver whose handle was misshapen. Deftly he ejected the magazine. "See?" It was full, stacked with shiny bronze bullets. He reloaded the gun, cocked it with a click and pressed the barrel against my temple. His eyes were like two bulging onions. His arms were thick and venous.

I screamed. He pressed his fingernails into my throat. I gasped. I screamed louder, without thinking. His nails cut into my skin; it made a piercing pain. "Shut up or I'll shoot," he hissed.

"Don't do this. I'm a friend of the Opposition Debout. Ask Anderson!"

"Who?" The driver's stained lips made thin red lines like arteries. My vision went blurry. I felt disconnected from the world.

It felt as if there had never been a connection. I was completely betrayed. I closed my eyes. I squirmed as I felt their hands move up the insides of my legs and down the small of my back, over the lining of my underwear and in every crack and crevice they could find. Their rough hands, sandy, coarse. They pushed me open, pulled me apart. Their fingers were powerful. I was immobile, helpless. I gave in, only wanting them to stop.

They dumped me near the river, in a wealthy neighborhood. I fell on the ground and rolled to the side. The door banged shut. The hatchback, speeding away, didn't have a license plate.

It screeched around the corner. All around me the walls were high. Alerted by the noise, two guards came to a peephole in a gate. The people here would not help. They were people who lived in big houses with big cars and big money. You should have robbed *them*! The words screamed in my mind. *Why me?*

And I'd lost the deposit money—thinking the cash would be unsafe in the house I had taken nearly all of it; and now it was gone.

"Police! Where do I find the police?" I shouted, stretching my arms down the street in either direction. The guards shut their peephole. A finger rose above the gate. That way.

In that moment I felt the need for pity, and my frustration came out in this terrible way. My body lurched forward instead of walking; enervated, I wanted to fall. At the Boulevard the beggars were waiting. I heard them first. Moneymoneymoney. Young, old, hunchbacked, stunted, hairy, bald, they ambushed, grabbed. I turned to run but they had made a ring and converged. Suddenly surging I pushed away their heads, shoulders, muscular chests; my hands felt the dirt on their bodies and I started to slap them, jolt them, hit them hard. They scattered: behind cars and buildings; in the shadows of doorways. I was alone, and it was like after a sudden storm. Cars honked and rushed past. The breeze flapped my shirt.

As I traversed the long Boulevard the Congolese faces blurred

into one another. At every corner I became apprehensive; all the figures seemed to resemble the robbers. And on the narrower roads I felt watched. I became conscious of the strange sight I made: the walking foreigner. I kept my distance, careful not to brush against the pedestrians. Physical separation was my small way of escape; but it was ineffective. In my alarmed state I stared at each person, scrutinizing the face; they returned my stares; and I felt angrier, but shorn, small.

The roads had no sidewalks so I had to compete with the traffic for the uneven graveled street edges, ditched and crammed with equipment: generators, barrows, pumps, piping; the taxi-buses I used to travel in now nearly hit me, careening, honking drumbeats, preventing me from crossing streets. The wayside shops were grouped together by type: on one street were automobile spare-parts garages and on the other only furniture stores. Chairs and coatracks spilled onto the driving areas. I passed photography studios, paper boutiques, and rows and rows of dark houses. It took me two hours to reach the police station. I arrived tired and thirsty.

I had imagined the station as a place of authority, like the ministries, or the presidential palace. But it was a simple oblong compound, guarded by a single sentry. Inside the gates was a long tree-lined courtyard. To each side cadres trained and played football. At the far building I was made to register at a desk and then ushered into a waiting area—a cramped room with a few chairs and a mass of silent people who stared. I felt guilty at once.

I was made to wait like the others, without privilege. An hour or so later my name was called. A policeman led me to a room that was airy but bleak: the windows had no curtains, the hanging bulb was without shade and the table's only chair was positioned across from the officer—like in an interrogation cell. The officer wore square gold spectacles that accentuated his sunken cheeks. His navy-blue uniform was regular, thin at the waist and swollen at the limbs. He smiled sinisterly. A white page graced

the table. He drew columns on it with a ruler and abruptly began: "Dead or alive?" His tone was irreverent, even for such a question.

He asked for my parents' names, dates of birth and nationalities. He sneezed. A soiled handkerchief appeared from his pocket and ran over his hands. He asked where my parents worked, which school they went to and if they were Catholic or Protestant. "Hindu?" It seemed unacceptable. "Fetish?" he asked. I said no. He wrote "Other."

He said, "Spectacles?"

"Yes, both of them."

"No, no. Versace? Armani?"

He pulled out a pair (Nina Ricci) and positioned them on his head—he now wore two pairs. Adjusting himself in his seat he asked where I lived, where I had lived and the names of all the countries I had visited before Congo. He sneezed again. The page was spotted with droplets. With his handkerchief he held his nose; his finger probed inside his nostril. For two minutes he cleaned it. Then he asked what I had studied, and where, how I spoke French, for whom I was working. "No one?" He said suspiciously: "What *are* you doing here?"

He squinted at me and slowly returned to his paper. But there was an error in the spelling of "journalist." He sighed. With the ruler he crossed out the word and from his cupboard lifted two small bottles that were shaken spiritedly; the erroneous word was smudged with white paint. He blew over the page at an angle. We waited for it to dry. Then he wrote again, slowly, in clean schoolboy cursive, pen rolling over the paper. He sneezed. The wet handkerchief appeared. He brushed the page and wiped his pen. My patience wearing, I interrupted the ceremony.

"Monsieur Officer. I'm in a hurry, please—those robbers were on the Boulevard two hours ago. If you move quickly you could still find my money!"

He looked bemused. "But there's a process to be followed."

I stood. "What process? Have you ever caught anyone?"

He huffed. A framed photograph was produced from his drawer. Against a red Peugeot leaned four Congolese men, wearing sleeveless jackets, shades and pointed leather shoes. They looked like criminals, but this was the elite unit. "Team Cobra," the officer said. "The country's best." He held the photograph in front of his chest like a winner's plaque.

"And what did they recover?"

"The red car!"

For a moment I considered it. And then, after a little discussion, I discovered the catch: their search could take days, weeks, even months; and all the while I would be paying. "Only business expenses," said the policeman, sensing my apprehension. "Cobra will be working for you full-time."

I closed my eyes and sighed slowly, feeling the last of my hope evaporate. The chair clattered as I pushed it away. The policeman said, "*Ei!* The report costs ten dollars!" Again he sneezed. I stepped into the evening. "Who do you think you are, eh? This is the process in our country!"

The traffic had eased, and I walked intentionally slowly. I was simultaneously thinking about if the money was truly lost—if I had forgotten some possible solution—and assessing what that loss would mean: immediate concerns, of food and rent, mixed with a broader, numbing anxiety that I could not place and that pervaded every possible future I could imagine. It became too much. I stopped thinking. From the outside for once the house seemed settled. Its light spilled into the courtyard, making the mud glow orange. Jose was wiping down the music system with a white cloth. "*Ça va*, Anjan?" He looked up, his expression tender.

"*Très bien*, Jose."

Nana had sprayed my room with mosquito repellent, as a favor. But I felt nauseous inside. Squatting in the corridor I waited for the smell to leave, and I felt my neck where the robber's nail had pierced the skin. The wound was inflamed; it hurt to the touch.

Only when I lay in bed and looked at the overhead wooden beam did I feel the full horror. The scene of the taxi kept resurfacing. I spent hours picturing how I had entered the taxi. If only I had noticed how strangely the passengers had squeezed. The driver's smile now seemed too friendly. I regretted that I had felt pity. I despised my good intentions. In the last visions just before I fell asleep I invented new scenarios that had me catch the driver unawares and beat him up. I seemed strong. And now *I* was able to hold a gun against his head.

It was early morning when I called Mossi, the journalist. I had not told Nana or Jose, and even to Mossi the words did not come out: "Two thousand six hundred and fifty dollars." The shock was still present. The crime had been like a violation that made me, the victim, feel ashamed that it had happened—it was as though not only my body but also my experience, memories and mind had been sullied.

I decided to press on with my journalism plans. The decision didn't require much thought: I had not prepared for any other kind of commerce, and I needed money. There was no time to dally now—I felt I should act, and that this would somehow soothe the growing anguish.

When I told Mossi I'd had trouble he only said, "What do you need?" I was grateful for his discretion. I said I needed to find a story, something I could sell quickly. He paused, then said, "I'm interviewing a drug manufacturer. About bird flu. Don't tell anyone, it's hot-hot. He's a fabulous man, a real magnate from India. Maybe you'll get along." I had expected him at best to give me a second-rate lead. This was a generous offer.

I dressed in a hurry and ran water through my hair. And now the house seemed lively. Metal scrubbed dishes. Flames crackled. A bristled broom scratched cement. The neighbor's chicken clucked in the yard. Bébé Rhéma gurgled on Nana's hip. The baby's nose dripped; Nana pinched out the mucus between her thumb and forefinger and flicked it to the ground.

At my request Corinthian came to the taxi station and had a word with the driver. "I'll need to be back in the evening," I said to Corinthian. "May God bless you," was his answer. He promised to come get me. It felt comforting to shake his hand. And everyone in the taxi saw that I was friends with the pastor.

Mossi was outside the café, carrying a worn-leather bag, heavy with papers. He had brought a range of pens as well: blue, red, green. "Journalism is like art," he said. "Sometimes even these colors are not enough." For Mossi had his proper vision of the journalist life. He refused to own a car. "We should be close to the people. In your car how will you feel the pulse of the city?" He advised me to be thankful for my dingy room: I would live cheap, move like the locals and discuss the issues that mattered to them. "You are the High Representative of the little man," he said, writing *High Representative* and scribbling extravagant messy circles around the words and all over the page.

I felt overwhelmed by Mossi's energy, and by the interview preparations as a whole: we had stacks of papers to read, questions to formulate, the story to draft; without resistance, feeling directionless and dazed, I was swept into the process; and I momentarily forgot my situation.

Mossi said everything had been arranged for our meeting with Satwant Singh. But the office receptionist, a stern Congolese, twirled on her chair and said, "I am not aware of your appointment." She wore a dress with a picture of the president painted on her stomach. Around the image were inscribed the words "My Husband Is Capable." She looked at me starkly; I stopped reading her belly. She said, "Wait over there," as if speaking to a child.

Mossi and I sat on an old leather sofa between two men holding VIP briefcases who leaned against the back wall, mouths open, exhaling hot air onto curls of peeling wallpaper. On the wall was a picture of Satwant, in gray turban, shaking President Kabila's hand. Satwant looked elated; the president bored. They

stood before the building we waited in, half of which was the "Head Quarters," according to a sign, for Satwant's pharmaceutical facility. The other half was his house.

Satwant stormed in and banged heads with Mossi. He was in black turban and black suit. We banged heads as well—it was the formal Congolese greeting (and because none of us was Congolese, it showed a special intimacy). The secretary glowered.

The magnate escorted us inside, taking purposeful strides. A brass plate announced his house: "Shantinivas—Abode of Peace." He shouted for his wife. She appeared, edging forward in a hobble. "Arthritis," said Satwant. I didn't know whether to believe him, because a friend had pointed out to me that in Punjab women are still fattened with milk and glorified in poems:

> With silver crescents in their ears
> The two women walk the village path
> Like vermilion-painted elephants
> Graceful and swaying.

I had begun to feel buoyant. The interview was unfolding perfectly—Satwant was treating us with warmth and sobriety: as important guests, not as common reporters. My respect for Mossi swelled. And I regained some of my curiosity, my previous enthusiasm; again little things amused, offering relief.

"Please," said Satwant, indicating a low table adorned with flowers. The wife served coffee and "ordinary cake" (as opposed to cream cake, but she said this cake was "extra ordinary"). Satwant moved his hand over the hairs of his forearm, delicately, as if feeling their softness. Mossi began expertly, giving the industrialist the stage: "Bird flu, Mr. Singh. Hype or serious issue?"

"Oh, very serious." Poker face. Satwant didn't blink.

"Is Congo prepared?"

"No."

Mossi and I exchanged an appropriately grim look. We were onto something. And Satwant was talking. I raised my pen and asked, "How bad could this get?"

"The first cases of human-to-human H5N1 have already been confirmed. It is only a question of time. When the bird flu hits Congo it will cause a catastrophe."

"Millions?" I asked.

"Easily millions."

Mossi hummed and noted the word. He underlined it. I created a provisional headline: "Millions at Risk from Bird Flu. Government Unprepared."

The interview went so well that we stayed two hours. Mossi read from a list of pandering questions but soon Satwant ignored the script and started on a monologue. He had traveled from India to Uganda and Tanzania before coming to Congo. "This country is Africa's biggest hope. As a businessman I have never seen an economy with such potential. Only two problems: corruption and bad hygiene. Please write this in your stories. I have factories to make medicines but no one wants to buy. It's the NGOs. Only American medicines, they say. They don't want to give Africans jobs. I'm telling you, I used to work at Novartis."

It was mentioned that I had recently arrived in the country. Satwant was surprised, then effusive. "You came to find your potential. That's like me." He promised to organize a dinner for the three of us; and then he stood. I gathered my things. But Mossi had planned the meeting's conclusion. "The camera," he said, gesturing like a surgeon.

Under Mossi's direction we moved to the study room. It was floored with green linoleum and decorated with some shelves of books. The industrialist was made to sit behind the glass-topped desk. Mossi adjusted Satwant's hands on the table. Behind him he positioned the Congolese flag.

"Three, two, one," Mossi said.

Satwant smiled at the camera and raised his chin. Through the viewfinder, his body looked stiff and tiny, but his head seemed large. I clicked.

Mossi raised his hands to his head. I sensed disappointment even from Satwant, who looked around senselessly while keeping his arms flat on the table. "Do it again," Mossi said. "Open your *flash*."

Satwant shook the ruffles from his sleeves. The camera popped like a fused bulb, like a magician's trick; I took three rapid shots; Satwant kept a stupid grin. He looked dizzy, dazed from the rapid bursts of light in his face. Mossi clapped his hands. "What a picture. What a great picture!"

And the industrialist smiled, looking pleased.

I polished off a Coca-Cola while waiting for Corinthian outside Satwant's office. Mossi said he had to leave—to chase other stories. I watched him turn the corner. This used to be an industrial part of the city—few industries now functioned. The roads were wide, the buildings low and large. Some workers walked by, carrying muddy shovels on their shoulders. A child stooped under the weight of a cement bag. The world—with its drab people and trucks—seemed static in contrast to the charge of the last few hours. I waited inside the gated compound, between the silent office and the menacing city.

A taxibus swerved onto the road. From a window waved Corinthian's hand.

I sat out the afternoon glumly on my bed. As much as I had been motivated in the morning, now, waiting for the heat to pass and for Nana's meal of the day, I felt captive to inaction. I listened to sounds, scrutinized the room. Everything seemed remote, new; I felt suspicious of my surroundings. Any familiarity I had felt was gone. And I was taken by an urge to clean.

The room, whose clutter I had learned to ignore, suddenly

seemed a mess. The books on the shelf became especially intolerable. I pulled them down. The books were old, of literature and for self-training in computer languages. There were faded magazines of the intellectual variety: *Jeune Afrique*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*. I restacked them by size. I moved to the curtains, shaking them of dust. With my hands I picked the carpet clean. And as I uncovered the sheets and stacks of cloth left by Nana (my room was used for storage) I discovered odd items: a large black box I hadn't known was a speaker, a set of French vinyl albums, a Flemish Bible, and some wigs, sparsely haired. Soon I stood in a cloud of dust and my skin, normally dark, had turned a luminous gray. Nana appeared at the door. "Someone's here for you."

My first thought was that the police had come with good news.

But Nana giggled.

Frida was Nana's niece. She was more forward than Fannie. "I love you very much," she said, shutting my door. Her blue jeans were short, revealing porous-shaved skin at the bottom of her legs. Her top was fashionable and strappy. Her frizzy hair was pulled back and smothered down with gum. And she would have been a big girl even without her four-inch heels.

"I'm sorry. I like someone else," I said.

"Who? A whitey? In India?" A smile. "But she is there," she twirled her finger, tinkling her metal bracelets. "And I am here. You need someone here to keep you happy."

What is this? The girl was clearly trouble, and more so because she was family. Opening the door, I said, "Wait for me in the living room." But she stared. I went to fetch Nana.

Her smile was warm.

"Ask Frida to leave."

Her eyes dipped. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I just want Frida to leave."

"But what if she loves you?"

"I don't care."

Her face shrank into a ball. "Ask her to leave yourself."

"I did. She's your family. Do something." I stood tall over her, and she looked down at the table. Frida was called. I returned to my room, happily remarking its new cleanliness. I peeled off the plastic wrapping from a new soap. I felt inside the pillowcase with my fingers. I lifted the mattress against the wall. One by one, I shook everything on the bed. I don't know what came over me, but I felt Frida had taken something. I returned to the living room.

Frida stood by the door. She looked away when I appeared, and she then smirked at the wall. "Nana, Frida took something from my room."

"That can't be. Why don't you check your things properly?"

"I want you to search her."

"It's not right to accuse people without knowing," Nana said.

Frida looked surprised, as if she had just tuned in. "Something happened?" She adjusted her bangles. I said, "Give it to me and I'll buy you something." Frida didn't reply. All the emotions of the robbery returned: the uncertainty, the sense of being violated. But now, in front of me, I had my perpetrator. I bristled uncontrollably.

"I don't want to see Frida in this house. Get out," I said to her. "Get out."

Nana clicked her lips. "Who are you?" She addressed me facing the wall. Her voice was filled with loathing. "*You* are not family." I went up to her and pointed, close to her face. "I'm going to tell Jose."

"Tell." Nana smirked, and she loosened and tightened the cloth around her waist. "If you want to live in a better house I understand."

Who said anything about a better house? And why is Frida smiling? Nana looked icy. I fled to my room, and turned on the radio. There was something about Tony Blair, and about the

elections. But I did not listen: I felt helpless. The distress rose sharply, as if it might choke me.

I hardly ate at dinner though it was my only meal that day. Nana served cow stomach. We usually ate the ribs or thigh. I didn't know one ate stomach. "It's a specialty," she said. I tasted the meat's fingerlike projections; they tickled my tongue. I chewed on a piece for a full minute. It was disgusting. "I'll eat something else." Nana pulled the plate from under my nose, muttering: "Whatever you like, monsieur."

I knew I had been rude: I had transgressed the rules by blaming family (the rules of the Donut Society). And this time, unlike with Fannie, the punishment was harsh. I was also riven by doubt: about Frida's guilt, and about the force of my mad reaction. A trust between Nana and me had been broken. *Better house* I knew was a threat to have me evicted. I felt sorry, and suddenly scared. Jose too became cold to me—it hurt more; he had taken her side in the battle.

I called Mossi. The line was heavy with static. He was at a meeting on the other side of town. "What for?" I asked uncertainly.

"Local stuff. The chairman of a local coalition is changing. Did Mr. Singh call you?"

"No." I checked my phone.

"He's invited us to a party at the Château Margaux. You should go."

"You're not coming?"

"It's on the weekend. I have family responsibilities. But you should collect business cards for us."

The Château Margaux was a posh restaurant in town. The party was sure to end late; taxis would be difficult—I wasn't sure. I had really wanted to talk to Mossi about all that had happened—to buy him a drink and spill everything. But he seemed rushed and scattered; and I felt a request for a drink that night would sound too much like a plea.

I could not bear to stay inside, so I left the house. The stars had surfaced. Warm air swirled over my face. At Victoire the multitudes sat around a white pillar with a hand at its top: a monument dedicated to the proletariat. Physically I felt liberated. The agitation in my mind began to lull. The crowd made me anonymous, unnoticed; the people were busy, animated; they made me feel secure.

It was odd that I should find myself under this pillar. The father Kabila had erected it after deposing Mobutu: the hand was to show that the people had won, over Mobutu's corruption, over his destruction. And as with each of Congo's previous uprisings—for independence, for Lumumba, for Mobutu—the Congolese had hoped this victory would bring improvement, and they had vigorously celebrated the father Kabila's troops storming Kinshasa in trucks.

Africa has a history of using geography as symbols: cities are named Freetown, Libreville; arterial roads are called Liberation, Victory; countries are named and renamed as Democratic and Free with each revolution, coup d'état and election. Congo bears these physical scars of its many upheavals, each of which had been seen as a liberation. But, and almost unbelievably, each regime was worse than the previous. Every change worsened life. It created a distrust among the people, and a perverse nostalgia, an idealization of past dictatorships and colonial regimes that, as punishment for poor labor, cut off hands and brutally massacred. This past was not only repressive, it was shameful; so the nostalgia, which gave so much comfort, simultaneously degraded the Congolese self-worth. At times, I felt it had crushed the people.

The nostalgia was public. In Kinshasa it was the "correct" attitude to have, especially before the foreigner: Congolese would readily sink into cloying soliloquies about Mobutu and Lumumba and the Belgians. The abuses, on the other hand,

were only awkwardly acknowledged, and usually with sullenness, humiliation, self-pity. So the two were kept separate: the disgrace in one consciousness was not allowed to taint the ideal in the other. And this is what crushed society: this constant need to switch between two worlds, the impulse to deny what had happened.

The distrust was a private phenomenon. I saw it in Nana's reflexive defense of Frida. The Congolese confined themselves to their Donut Societies and evaded the capricious, lawless world. For this world had possibility: it had a future. The Congolese, having learned to distrust the future, retreated to their families and clans.

The society that resulted seemed intellectually stagnant, half emerged from its history and only reluctantly moving forward. Only around Anderson, so far, had I got an idea of the Congolese potential. In his dissidence and rebellion he seemed to have a notion, a conviction, of how the future ought to be. But he was in a minority.

Congo's history is particularly repressive. And dictators can be hard to shake off. I grew up in a dictatorship—in Dubai—and I recognized in the Congolese elements from my own society: a certain acquiescence, a cloistering within small ambitions, of business and family hierarchy; a paucity of confidence in oneself, and an utter belief in the power of one man.

It startles me how steadfastly I believed, growing up, that our dictator was just, good and wise. I was never told anything to the contrary. The media only carried good news. I did not know that the slick British newsreaders could be censored; I did not know that the opposition had needles stuck in their noses. Out of fear my parents did not speak. My father, in the middle of conversations, would press his finger to his lips. But because the dictator gave my parents jobs, they chose to live in that society.

Congo, I sensed, was a victim of the dictator's myth. It is what I had experienced as a child: the indoctrination that holds up

the dictator as a savior, a sage, as all-powerful. Until recently this myth usually invoked God, a divine right to power. These days dictators have less need for mysticism: they use the tools of liberty—elections, business, schools, art, the media. The successful dictator creates at once a terror of his presence and a fear of his loss. But his myth, which can so profoundly shape society and is indeed shaped by society, is as destructive as it is powerful.

The father Kabila ruled for only four years before he was killed. His reign did little to improve Congo's condition. He began by professing his Marxist intentions, promising to restore to his people their riches. But he ended up spending most of the rule fighting off Rwanda, which had installed him as president. He attempted some economic reforms. But he had inherited a country so profoundly wrecked by Mobutu that it would take years to undo the damage. The father Kabila was an idealist: he had spent thirty years in the bush writing Marxist speeches. Heightening the sense of urgency, Rwanda invaded Congo again in 1998. Impatient, but able to achieve little, the longtime guerrilla fighter became confused, irrational and depressed. He lost his grip on the country and the economy. His allies defected. Inflation and corruption mounted. The story goes—and perhaps its truth is less important than its symbolism—that the father Kabila was assassinated with his hand in a bowl of diamonds, in the act of corruption. So the leader who once symbolized hope for this country was insulted even in death, the most sacred of life events to his people.

I have not lived through a dictator's fall but the Congolese tell me it is like malaria that ravages the body. It pierces the nation's consciousness. And the people, at the end of such upheaval—many times over in Congo's case—can be left quite broken, empty of belief.

The Congolese now mock Kabila's monuments, one senses, from bitterness; for by the same token they mock themselves, and their raucous cheers for Kabila's rebellion. The pillar under

which I sat had, after all, come to commemorate not a victory but regret.

Something darted against my leg: a lizard with a black tail snaked through the sand. I bought a boiled egg from a boy loitering nearby. The shell peeled easily. I scattered the little pieces on the ground, and in the evening light they took on an unearthly gleam.

I trundled back, and the feelings from the day returned. I hoped Frida had left. My escape from the house had been fleeting, but now beyond its walled confines I clearly saw the greater problem: with practically no money I would not last long. I did not want to dwell on this sense of defeat. A solution, I told myself, would come tomorrow. But the streets, the people, Victoire, all seemed resplendent; I had the heightened awareness of details that comes from knowing one may soon be gone.

5

That night I went home and thought about the time I was still in America, preparing for my journey to Congo.

A strange thing had happened to me then, I recalled. The closer I had drawn to my departure, the more I had needed to eat. Breakfast didn't last until lunch anymore; I ate again mid-morning. And my purchases at the supermarket became calorific: cream cakes, donuts, snacks of processed cheese. I didn't force myself to eat; I was just constantly hungry. There was a surprising physicality to my apprehension of the journey.

This happened in near loneliness. It was summer and New Haven was empty. I saw few people. My friends had all left. It gave a hermetic quality to my days: reading, note taking, packing. I put myself on a trial of mefloquine, the U.S. Army's preferred antimalarial, but my dreams disturbed. And my anxieties were promoted by Annie, the bank teller who processed the last of my educational loan payments. She was black, and she spoke with an accent.

I asked where she was from.

"Zaire," she said, using Mobutu's name for the country.

I was stunned. "What a coincidence. I'm going there."

Annie looked annoyed. "You can't just *go* there." She glanced at me derisively.

"Could I ask for your help?"

She paused, without looking at me, before again processing the checks on her table.

I visited her the next day. And the day after. Once I bought her lunch at Dunkin' Donuts. Annie wouldn't leave her desk—every hour was money. By 4:00 p.m. she was done at the bank, and she jetted home to check on her children; at 6:00 p.m. she was at her night-shift kiosk, guarding a parking lot on Chapel Street.

One night at the kiosk she dug into her voluminous handbag and drew out a photograph in which she had pinned up her hair. "What do you think?" she asked. I took a second. "Not your style." She agreed. "That's what I thought." That weekend Annie took me to a Congolese party on the Upper West Side of New York—she told me to dress well, for the party was at the ambassador's house. I made an effort but still failed: the men were all in three-piece suits. At the dance in the basement I hid among the last row of chairs, but a large woman in purple lipstick came over and swept me off the ground. We joined the dancing circle, shaking our buttocks. Annie later told me the woman was a Congolese senator. After that I became Annie's companion on errands: I shuttled food to her cousin, accompanied her children on a lawyer's visit. I met her husband, who wore a Subway hat and asked if I could landscape their garden. They were building a house on a plot near the golf course. Annie took me once. On the upper floor she showed me a rectangular hole in the ground, and I chose the Jacuzzi tub to be placed in it. Her master builder lay on the grass, a Jamaican with his palm on his tummy. He chewed a piece of straw. Rolled up nearby was a manual on plumbing. Annie had been twelve years building her house.

On these various drives Annie told me stories: about her youth in Kinshasa, her family, the coup that toppled Mobutu; but the vast majority of her stories were useless. I think she couldn't get

past thinking of me as an outsider. The stories were all shrouded in mystery and fear. They only occurred in the dark. The one happy story I remember was about when she first kissed her husband, on top of a Kinshasa hill near the old nuclear reactor. That too had happened at night. I thought perhaps Annie was trying to put me off: "It isn't easy to get to America," she would say. "You have a bright future. Why are you throwing it away by going to Zaire?"

I found it hard to answer her at the time. It was not easy to explain the feelings within me.

At one of our last meetings Annie said, "You'll be staying with my family." Jose was her husband's brother, and she called him at once to inform him of my arrival and instruct them to take care of me. But I noticed, once in Kinshasa, that Jose and Nana seemed hardly to mention Annie. I later asked why; and I learned that the last time Annie had visited, she had found the dirt at Bozene so unbearable that she had taken a room at the Grand Hotel. Annie, who had been the family's pillar and matriarch during the Mobutu dictatorship's violent end; who had been seen as a true Kinoise. Her betrayal confirmed Bozene's misery, its suppressed desire for escape. But the family only said, "That *Annie*, she's become de-Congolized."

In the summer of 2005, a week before I left for Congo, Annie dug into her handbag and produced a letter. It was an invitation from the U.S. government. "I'm becoming a citizen," she said. We celebrated with a Dunkin' milk shake. She told me not to share the news in Kinshasa. "They'll want me to sponsor the whole family. Where will they stay? My house will become a camp."

The days that followed the robbery were hard, as I was still trying to find employment. I started them early, waking to the 6:00 a.m. news bulletins, blinking open my eyes as I took notes. At noon

I visited Anderson to check on Radio Trottoir. The bird flu story was written and pitched to several newspapers. No replies came. I began an account of the 25th Quarter—I knew it would be a more subtle report, harder to sell. Life slowly became restricted. I curbed my eating—it saved only a few dollars but it helped create an assurance that I was doing the maximum—and drank bottles and bottles of water, especially at night, when the house was asleep and I worked in the dark.

And at 32 Avenue Bozene, we seemed to sink together. Jose had begun to stay at the office longer, to try to "find" more money. Nana was no longer able to stretch her rations the full week. Meals became poor (more stomach); the condiments on the table diminished. But it wasn't until Jose's big misfortune that Nana cited the evil eye. It was looking, she then said, straight at us.

The cousin of Jose's director had needed a position. We were, after all, in a year of elections, and god knew who would have power after that—someone else's cousin. The shuffling that ensued shunted Jose near the airport, to a quarter called Massina. The shops there didn't pay taxes, least of all to a man in a suit. Jose was too polite to extort. And Nana silently scolded him for it. Each evening when Jose came home, fatigued, she would ask what he'd found; he would not answer. She would say to the ceiling, "If we only had a few francs for the baby," and retire to the bedroom. The couple lived in this muted tension. Nana didn't have it easy either: inflation had risen again, all Victoire was hit. She told me the family of four next door had started to take turns at lunch; each day one of them ate and the other three scavenged.

In all this my troubles showed no visible end; the house and the street gave no respite. So it was a surprise when something good happened.

6

It came to pass on the least likely of days: Sunday, the *jour de repos*, on which as per tradition the family rose together for breakfast and Jose played high-decibel devotional songs. Pedestrians outside sang to our music. The street had a lazy feel: People ambled; they did not walk. Even the dogs seemed to sit quietly. Men and women gathered in clumps along the road. They discussed the events of the week past: a fortunate few mentioned what had gone well; this gave everyone hope; most wished it had been better. There were those who openly prepared for the week ahead: mamas fried stocks of beignets; the neighbor's boy read his textbook. And for a few hours in the morning people seemed to set aside their troubles and make an effort to look their best. Jose wore his flappy brown suit on that day, and Nana a long red dress; Bébé Rhéma floundered in a blue frock. And the family joined the slow-moving procession of churchgoing people, all dressed like Christmas-tree ornaments and looking radiant.

I had decided to leave. Slowly, quietly, I was beginning to prepare. Sometimes I felt as if I had failed. It wasn't my fault, I told myself.

And the slowness of the Sunday helped to soften the feeling.

I rolled over in the bed and flipped the radio switch. The headlines: A governor committed to reducing power outages before elections. Some workers complained about transport to a copper factory; the cycle-taxis had raised prices, citing the cost of oil. The Belgian ambassador magnanimously announced a new aid program for the colony his country had once ravaged. Then an intermission of pop music; but the beats were weary; even the jockey seemed to have just gotten out of bed.

Seeing everyone in their fancy outfits made me want to wear something nice. I hadn't had a clean shirt in a week. Nana normally did the washing, but since our fight she had left my clothes soaking in a bucket. Clothes were important to the Congolese: people were judged by their dress, and I was no exception—I had noticed that my simple, crumpled clothes were not appreciated by the bureaucrats and politicians. But they helped me navigate Victoire: when vendors saw my Mexx shirt, so obviously purchased at the secondhand market and with stitches over its little tears, they did not bristle; some even treated me with deference.

I squatted between the pail and the toilet. The water was murky. I drew a shirt and started to scrub it between my hands. Then scrubbed with more vigor on a sock. But no matter the hardness of scrubbing I could not make suds. The detergent sachet was new; it seemed Unilever didn't sell the same Omo in all countries. The "clean" clothes I hung from the showerhead, over the sides of buckets and over my shoulders and neck while the rest I washed; the detergent dripped; and my skin itched. As I strung all the clothes on the line outside a sock fell on the dirt. I rinsed it under the yard tap and pegged it with a clip. I stood there, sweating. The socks and underwear dripped. On the ground I noticed a small pit where a pipe was leaking sewage, the pressure of the liquid slowly digging into the mud.

I had asked to meet Mossi that day—ostensibly for him to look at my bird flu story and see how to make it commercial. "Selling

to editors is a marketing job," he assured me. "Completely different skill set from reporting." I had not told Mossi of my decision to leave. I merely wanted to spend a little time together—I believed it could be one of our last meetings.

He was late, however, and it being Sunday, the internet café had not opened on time. I walked over to Anderson's.

He sat like a stone. Perhaps it was part of the new persona: he'd obtained a new red kiosk, with Celtel mottos on all its sides. On the front he'd had a painter scrawl "Celtel Center" in cursive. The sassy wood was gone. Anderson had become an official agent—he was moving up. With a little money, he said, he would order a street cleaning, to give his business the proper ambience. "Look at the mess," he said, pointing. Papers littered the ground. I saw the previous day's edition of *Le Phare* with a headline about illegal uranium mining. The yellow cake was apparently being excavated with bare hands for exportation to North Korea and Iran.

Drawing a chair to the kiosk, I asked Anderson what news.

He showed me an Opposition Debout pamphlet, a cheap printout with smudged ink. Corruption in the ministries, political prisoners, angry threats to the government. "Same, same," I said. He shook the paper so it stiffened. "Look." At the page's bottom was a report that some Americans would be visiting for a gorilla conference.

I said, "Conservationists."

"No"—his gaze searched me, and he sounded patronizing—"the CIA. They think they can wear straw hats and khaki and pretend to talk about apes? Fools." He drew a plastic sachet from under his kiosk and unwrapped a mayonnaise sandwich. "Every few years they come, always on time," he went on, "to give a man a suit and call him our president. The elections are no coincidence." He swallowed a piece of bread and rubbed his palm over the back of his pants. "But they won't stop *us*."

"The riots."

"More, monsieur. An inferno." His lips twitched.

And somehow it was easy to imagine our street, the houses and the cars in flames; the scene—of people sitting before broken walls and gates hanging from single hinges—seemed disjointed already, like a Guernica foreseen.

"Do you know *The Matrix*, Anderson? The movie?"

"I don't like Hollywood, monsieur."

"You'd like this one. You look like one of the actors."

He mumbled embarrassedly, as though not knowing how to digest the compliment.

The internet café had at last opened. It was empty but for two workers dusting computers with yellow feather brushes. Four dirty fans, on long stems, circled slowly above my head, with the subdued hum produced by low voltage.

I took a seat and waited for the data to stream over the satellites and cables. It seemed a miracle that we had the internet in Congo, when it worked—which seemed another miracle entirely. Often at the cafés the power would die, and one would wait for hours, not leaving the computer for fear of losing one's seat. There were also risks: Nana said the keyboards carried hepatitis. Her words always came to mind as I began typing. The internet was finally up. The image swam on the screen, as if it might slide off. The *Guardian*, the British newspaper, had replied.

I felt a wisp of hope. And then a sad relief. It was, like the others, a rejection. Mossi appeared in the chair next to mine and without asking began to read from my screen. When he finished he was frowning, shaking his head. "They have just two journalists for the continent and say don't bother sending stories? They are not serious, these people." I felt as he did, that they were at fault—and that we were on the margins, and did not matter.

The internet café boy Stella came by with his hanging macaroni hair and 501 Levi's. I placed four hundred francs on the table. He scribbled a receipt. I could not yet confirm it, but something in his eyes gave me the idea that he was swindling the café.

I quickly went through the news: there were a handful of stories about Congo, none about bird flu, and nearly all from the four big agencies (the AP, AFP, Reuters and the BBC), written by the same four reporters. I leaned back. Mossi squinted at my flickering monitor.

"That one writes in the *Guardian*, I think," he said. "Yes, quite sure."

"Who, Bentley? You know him?" He was an important correspondent—I had seen his reports in the press.

"Not at all. We only met once."

I nodded, and perhaps spoke only because Mossi then stayed quiet. "Nice guy?"

He shrugged, as if he did not know.

But in that moment of inertia, and hopelessness—it seemed something of an audacity on my part—I decided to go meet the correspondent. Mossi had his number. Bentley said he might have time, if I came at once.

The taxis were tardy. They were also unusually full: I had to let two vehicles pass. It was getting late. A minibus slowed, and a crowd gathered—I ran to the door and grabbed a piece of the handle, attaching myself to the moving vehicle. Men and women pushed and crushed me but I held on, head inside, legs running outside the bus; then a woman let go, creating a space. I hauled myself in. The taxi had never stopped; it had only slowed long enough to fill itself with people.

In the relatively spacious Westfalia with windows that opened a fraction and old carpets draped over the seats, we sat face-to-face, our knees touching; the man hanging on the back of the bus screamed, "Gront Hotel! Gront Hotel!" And I began to hope in a small way that Bentley might be able to help me. Perhaps he would call the *Guardian*'s editors—and perhaps they would then accept my bird flu story, and also the one about the 25th Quarter. It might help me to stay in Congo a few more weeks. And this hope, this expectation that Bentley might solve some of my

problems, made me feel as I did before a job interview. I worried about how I would introduce myself, and whether Bentley would like me. That he could help seemed beyond doubt; but would he?

The meeting was to happen at Bentley's residence: the 422-room Grand Hotel, an epicenter of Congo's wealth and the very antithesis of Victoire. The hotel owed its name to the father Kabila, who after deposing Mobutu dismissed its American owners and claimed the hotel for his "grand country." It was a place associated with many grotesque stories—many of killings—but also loved as a national icon. The taxi took us to the northwest district—to a point about equidistant from the railway station and Victoire, just before the president's house—and left me at the foot of an imposing gray tower. The air inside was icy, and came in a blast as the sliding doors opened. A chandelier glittered on the ceiling, dripping with crystal. Waiters wore stiff jackets and carried bread baskets. The hotel seemed something like an oasis in the city. I made straight for the toilets: my biggest stress in the house. I washed my face purely for the experience of running hot water. I inspected myself in the mirror, and saw dirt gathered around my neck. A sullen Congolese handed out white towels. Upon exiting the toilets one came into curved marble corridors lined with boutiques where attendants stood beside bags of leather, fur, rings and bracelets of diamonds and lesser gems like emerald and ruby, and figurines of ivory that the staff would proudly point out as their last pieces—the sale of ivory now being illegal.

I explored the halls in a stupor and arrived at the outdoor café, where Bentley had asked me to meet him.

The foreign correspondent wore a white shirt, brilliant in the bright light. His sleeves were folded up to his elbows, revealing pale and stout forearms with little hair. He was beefy and wide breasted, and as he came through the doors he wiped sweat from his forehead; he carried a notebook and two large telephones in the palm of his hand. I felt the nervousness come up.

He offered me a beer. It seemed an appropriate drink. And almost as soon as we took our seats, I was jealous. He seemed too certain. Of course he did: he lived at the hotel. He hardly had to move to find his sources; he had air-conditioning; he surely slept well. "Do you know anyone who might buy my work?" I asked, hopefully. I mentioned the *Guardian*. Bentley frowned, as though thinking. Around our Swedish picnic table the space was nearly empty. In the air was the beginning of the afternoon warmth; one felt on the skin a picking sensation, as though one's forehead and arms were being baked. Bentley idly cast his gaze about, and up and down the waitress. It became evident that he would not reply. I asked for advice, but he would not extend any. Only when I offered myself as his lackey—it was the most exploitative form of journalism—did he raise his head. I felt small. I imagined him as a buttery toad: with his small slit eyes, even when he blinked he seemed to stare.

He waved at two burly men who approached the next table; they threw heavy keys that clacked on the wood and took their seats, crushing the tails of their fine jackets. The waitress bent exaggeratedly to receive their order. With their buxom chests, expansive walks and sweeping gazes one felt those men occupied a space much larger than their physical limits. Bentley went over; he cupped their fingers delicately with both his hands. They talked with an affected friendliness, and I found their hearty laughs distressing, painful.

Bentley returned, ignoring me. He looked at my drink and grimaced: his glass was nearly empty but I had barely touched mine. He rocked the last of his soda from side to side; a piece of lime stayed afloat in the middle. The cutlery began to shiver. He was shaking his leg. Again he smiled at the other table. And now he seemed weak: supplicating before those men but eager to exploit me, to make me submit. As though I were some proof of his stature. It gave me an idea that he was himself under duress, frustrated, abused in some way.

I did not ask more questions. And I made to leave—and it was perhaps this silent expression of defeat that prompted Bentley, as he glanced at his watch, to relax, and drop his guard.

He said it impersonally. "Why don't you try the AP? Their correspondent recently quit."

I froze. Had he really said that? And though later I would wonder if the look on his face—the way he trained his eyes on me—showed a regret, or loathing, for having let slip that information, at the time my mind was in a flurry; my cheeks felt hot. We both got up.

At Victoire, with the internet café boy Stella looking over my head, I sent the AP a message. "You found a job?" Stella asked credulously. And he decided he wanted to be a journalist as well. Almost immediately I received a call—it was the bureau chief. He hardly let me speak before launching into an onslaught of questions: "Yes, yes, of course we need someone, but who *are* you? And why the *hell* are you in Kinshasa?"

I became the AP stringer—without official contract or salary, or even proof that I worked for the press. But the editor had agreed to look at my stories. I could perhaps earn enough to live. Most crucially I could for the moment stay in Congo—when I thought about this the excitement rose like a current in my chest; at home I locked myself in my room and hopped about, boxing the air.

"*Ei ei ei*! Who's making such a racket?" Nana shouted from her bedroom. My job would calm the nerves in the house, and go some way to resolving our animosity. There had been such a paucity of good news of late that without money, without proof of success or any outcome, this hope was enough. Nana gave me a hug, and I realized she hadn't smiled at me in more than a week.

Mossi could not be convinced to come to Satwant's soiree. "Are you sure?" I pleaded. "Come celebrate, man. It wouldn't

have happened without you." But Mossi had promised to be with his family. "Go have fun," he said. "It isn't every day that one has such luck."

I wanted, at that moment, to be around people—many people. And this was also why I went.

As the taxi progressed toward the *ville* I tried to take stock, but I was moving so quickly from one thing to the next, even that morning seemed remote. I felt I had lost the thread of events; and the emotions of the day seemed blinding.

In such a mood I arrived at the Château Margaux, the party's venue. A double-storied colonial mansion, it was the sole source of light and noise on that tree-lined boulevard. Baritone voices boomed from its upper floor. One climbed the stairwell—and at the top arrived at two golden-colored rooms. All seemed to glitter. Two gowned women, bare shouldered, glanced at me, then smiled, then looked away; it produced a feeling of remote arousal.

I tried to plunge into the crowd and feel in the thick of things. The party was mostly of white people, with a smattering of Congolese dressed in their usual loud colors. In a corner stood a group of Indians, inspecting everyone, sipping ice water and soft drinks. The ambience was made intense by the elegance of dress and the liveried jazz band, too large for the space. The maître d' looked on impassively as servers in black waistcoats casually posed with their platters. I picked a glass ("Riesling," came a whisper) and was almost accosted by a lanky bearded man who was smoking frantically and saying we had met before. Who would deny? I took it as part of the day's luck. Stefano was Italian and new to the UN, and seemed to take an instant liking to me—he mentioned a junior post vacant in his department. "We have interesting stories," he said, ignoring the gray cloud over our heads and lighting another cigarette, its flame flirting with his dense manicured beard. He introduced me to his friends. Soon I felt immersed in the crowd and, separated from Stefano, again began searching for a place to fix myself.

When I first saw her I did not take particular notice. A doctor was telling me about preventable death, speaking calmly, but in moments betraying a hypertension. He made me a list of viruses; they were underreported, he said, only because African People were dying. So the African Doctor, deprived of funding and medicine, had become a promoter of African Disease. She was a tall woman, long-legged and with fair hair. She looked this way again.

And now she drifted in my direction. From the outset she looked disquieted—as if she wanted to say something, or needed help. Her pants and shirt, short sleeved with many pockets, stood out among the Château Margaux dresses. Without any sort of introduction she said, "You seem to know everyone here."

"Not really." I showed her my cache of business cards. "I'm on duty."

"And drinking on the job." I didn't respond, feeling it was small talk. She said her name was Natalie. I waited for her to say something substantial.

But she took her time. We picked fresh glasses of wine and watched people mingle. I learned she was from Quebec, and worked as a radio reporter tied to the UN. The men around us had now loosened their ties, and many of the women, whose light summer dresses showed freckled backs, were visibly intoxicated. They stood body to body, the communication laden with sexuality. The band also seemed worked up; the music was restless. I looked outside, to a yellow square of light that our window projected on the road. Two sentries with Kalashnikovs walked across the illumination, talking, smoking *stems*.

And suddenly their chatter seemed no longer idle. They appeared to be plotting. Look how they talk. In whispers, exclamations. The charm of the party warmed my shoulders again. Natalie lightly touched my back.

She had sensed the feeling. "You probably heard that Kabila received new tanks from China. For the elections." Ander-

son had mentioned it. "Everything is hot now," she continued. "Kabila is growing nervous. My staff as well. Every day there are little disputes . . . but you know when you can tell something deeper is behind it all?"

"My family wanted to throw me out," I said. "I think they're worried. If a riot breaks out, I'll be a target."

"Your family lives in Kin?"

"I rent a room with a Congolese family. At Victoire. You should come."

"I don't know where that is."

She handed me her card. "For your collection." And as she turned away I caught a gentle expression on her face, and noticed the feather-like hairs on her arms burnished by the light.

The conversation had felt mysterious; it seemed to have promised; suddenly I longed for a connection. I fingered her card. A musician blew his trumpet thrice and stopped playing. I looked around. Stefano was gone and I hadn't seen Satwant. I was among the last loiterers. The waiters looked lazy and ready to pack up; the band members hoisted off their heavy liveries and gathered their instruments. I pattered down the stairs. The sentries leaned against the gate. I lifted my chin at them, "Taxi." But the cars had all been taken.

I walked down the empty road, aware of furtive sounds and movements in the bush. Long drains stretched along the roads in this part of town. Leaves around me dimly reflected stray light. The crunching sound of my feet carried. I reached a restaurant but there were no taxis. Three Congolese teenagers crouched over the hood of a pickup truck. They rose hastily and searched me with weary stares. I lifted my palms in greeting and asked if I could have a ride.

"Victoire?" he said. "Hop in the back."

Two teenagers joined me on the pickup's flatbed. The sky was covered in moonlit popcorn clouds. We backed out of the parking lot and sped into the city. The roads were empty. I held on

to the vehicle's sides. One of the boys flicked a match alight; he huddled over the flame so it wouldn't extinguish. He offered it. I waved a hand. No, he said, it's a joint.

"Party?" I asked.

"Tupac."

The boy was a rapper, and his friend a drummer. They played gigs at upscale restaurants, wearing dog tags with engravings and 50 Cent shirts. We arrived at Victoire and I jumped off. They gave me their business card; I said I'd surely visit.

There was no light in the toilet and I spit into the darkness, listening for the plop of liquid on liquid. I tried to throw up but drew nothing. I stumbled away from the commode and sat.

7

Almost immediately I ran a string of stories for the AP. I had never written a news story before, but my acquiring the job coincided with a spate of Congolese airplane crashes. I became proficient at reporting such deaths, identifying the type of near-antique aircraft, the often illegal cargo, the usually drunk Ukrainian pilots, and the number of unfortunate passengers. I kept close tabs on Bentley—as soon as he published a story I too hunted it down. So I was never first to report the news. But it was a way for me to learn my job.

I progressed to other kinds of news—which stunned me for appearing in a hundred newspapers across the world. It was a thrill not only to see my name printed but also to feel that Congo was suddenly getting more press. One story I wrote was about a moving army battalion that had contaminated twenty villages with cholera. And another was about Congolese soldiers kidnapped by Rwandan fighters hiding in the forest.

Almost every element of news I first heard on the UN radio station that employed Natalie. It was the country's best. Sometimes I found myself waiting to see if I would hear her voice. I never did. I tried to imagine what she might be doing.

And I started wanting to go to the war in Congo's east, the center of this region's crisis. My mind was there constantly. It was the main subject of almost all the news on the radio. It was perhaps the deadliest place in the world. It was there that a thousand people were said to be dying every day from the war and the resulting humanitarian emergencies. The violent cities of the east—and a town famous for its massacres called Bunia—started to seem half-familiar. I imagined I could soon visit. I started to dream of the journey. The desire to penetrate deeper into the conflict began to grow in me.

I received my first payment. It was a happy moment of sorts—I collected $340 from a neighborhood Western Union. I got home and paid Nana my share of the rent. She said at once that it would not be enough. Jose was still making nothing and the family would soon be broke. I would have to pay a greater share. I watched as she took the money from my hand. "Is this all they gave you?" Nana asked disbelievingly. She said we would not survive. I felt the pressure build within myself. I made the calculations. She was correct. Despite all those stories I would just barely be able to keep the family and myself going. The climb had gotten steeper—the challenge was in a sense only beginning.

I was becoming attached to the family, and feeling tangled with their fate. It was because, despite her harshness, Nana was counting on me so desperately. I could not simply desert her. And the job had made my possibilities entirely different. I started to wonder if I needed to take some sort of risk—to leap out of this rut.

So when I learned the Indian community in Kinshasa was going to hoist the flag for India's Independence Day, I decided to go. I thought I might find others like me, might find a way out—or some support.

The bumpy journey reminded me of a pebble road near my grandmother's house in India, where I had spent a few childhood summers. Just a few hours earlier, in the morning, she

would have stood salute in that house, facing the television—the national anthem set very loud as the army marched past the prime minister, a small man under a large red umbrella.

I stood in single file with sixty Indians in the embassy garden. The men wore white topees. The women were few, perhaps five. They covered their heads with hoods, to be modest, both for the national occasion and in front of the men. A large flag hung above us, limp on the pole. As I stood surrounded by countrymen, the songs conjured old sentiments; and the scene, though in an alien country, felt comfortingly familiar. We chanted the anthem solemnly, without tune.

After the singing was over the women, all married, with bindis on their foreheads, huddled in a corner and held their sari ends around their waists. The men talked in groups. Several pants slipped down the slopes of bellies and were strapped on with tight, thin belts. One older man, less rotund than the others, held his stomach with both hands, as if in mimicry, and came over. "What are you doing in Kinshasa?" he said, with the air of the old-timer assessing the newcomer.

I said I was a journalist and he touched his head—his tone softened, and he even thought he might have seen my name in the press. "The AP? Oh *my*. We don't get many literary people in our community." His name was Bobby, and I saw from his card that he ran a store. I asked what he sold. "All and sundry" was his answer.

I inquired about the other Indians standing idly around us. Bobby was dismissive: "They're all into business." It surprised me; I thought he could have had a dispute with Kinshasa's Indian community, and I became wary of being seen as his friend. But in his tone, and his comment about literary people, I also caught an idea that Bobby thought himself cultivated, and above the trader. The flag, meanwhile, had picked up. A heavyset Indian showed some guests into the embassy, presumably for cake and coffee; we were not invited.

Bobby offered me a ride. My address gave him a shock. It seemed to jar with his idea of my success, and he spent the drive trying to convince me to move out. "Locals have no culture, no civilization. Okay for business, but how do you *live* with them?" He knew an apartment block that provided meals of Indian food in tiffin carriers. I imagined a squalid setting, and stared glumly out the window. The car stopped—it was his shop. He asked me to get out; he was locking the car.

We were at a cement plaza, not wide on the street but stretching long into the neighborhood. Bobby hurried in, ringing the doorbell many times. His daughter appeared through a curtained doorway; without consulting me he told her to make *chai*. So I became the Indian guest—though I had been more or less kidnapped—to be fussed over.

I thought it must be a storeroom: the place was so dark, with a counter in front and boxes at the back, battered boxes strewn between artifacts: woodcuts, dirty boots, old radios, tins. Black and red cables covered everything; bulbs hung on wires from the roof. I was shown to a small clearing around a coffee table, with two high-backed chairs whose leather was pinned back by large metal buttons. The girl brought us tea.

Bobby crossed his legs affectedly and sipped. And I felt he was acting out some private fantasy. He didn't stop asking questions: about the UN's success, the purpose of the war, my travels. Feeling I had to live up to his expectations I related anecdotes from my trip to the beach. Minor information was a good way of demonstrating deeper knowledge; Bobby nodded, often as though not quite understanding, but always certain of my intelligence and keen to prove his intellect.

I wanted to take a taxi home but he insisted on driving. And just as he pulled in to Victoire's Shell gas station two street boys jumped on his rearview mirrors and broke them off. Embarrassed, I apologized, as if also to blame; it showed that I felt abnormal for living here. Under his breath Bobby cursed the

boys. He said we should have dinner, and his words sounded hopeful, not like mere pleasantry. I got out.

Over time I grew used to such regard. My job changed how people saw me: Nana now commented if my shoes lacked polish, if my shirts were not pressed. Bozene turned to me for opinions about society and politics.

And as people opened up it changed my view of them. Jose introduced me to his friends, pro- and anti-government, for lengthy night sessions over beer. I was often quiet, listening; and even when they became emotional and stammered, when it would have been natural for them to switch to Lingala, for my benefit they stayed with French. I found in Jose a special calm, an ability for defusing tension; he was a natural mediator. Nana too revealed new facets. I gained a sense of her independence—I learned she wanted to start a cooperative for nurses—and of her rebellion: she supported a different politician from Jose despite his pressure. I experienced that period as one of intensity, of expression, of self-assertion—and I felt I began to see the personalities of Bozene in the way that other Congolese saw them.

Then the emotions peaked one day. There was unexpected joy and all else was forgotten. Bébé Rhéma began to crawl, and earlier than the doctors had expected. How Nana squealed on the day of the first sighting: "Jose! Bébé Rhéma! Jose! You have to come!"

We rushed to the living room, wondering if something was the matter, but no: Bébé Rhéma breathed heavily and showed her two buckteeth and, scrambling over the cement, tried to make her way across the hall to her pacifier. The baby cried. Jose and Nana hugged. The baby rolled over and looked at all the people staring. She smiled, and she was gorgeous.

"Bé-bé!" Nana cooed.

Jose flung Bébé Rhéma in the air and caught her in his

arms. He rubbed his nose on hers. Gurgling filled the house. I remember Nana in the kitchen on that day, the towel draped over her shoulder and her face covered in sweat; but she smiled, she laughed thankfully; amid all her troubles and crises, Bébé Rhéma seemed her constant source of comfort, happiness and pride.

That evening Jose and Nana had friends over for rice and chicken. To this modest dinner I contributed three corner-store sausages. And when everyone had come we must have been nine at the table and on the sofas, anticipating the moment. But Bébé Rhéma only played with her doll; she would not crawl; she chuckled, as though mocking us.

Jose was roundly teased. "You called us over for *this*?" "What a hoax." "This is like a Kabila project." And Nana's chicken was praised.

8

At first I thought hard work would find me a solution. Propelled by the needs of the family, and my own hopes of going to the heart of the crisis, I doubled down, looking for every story, writing as much as I could, harassing my editors.

And with the hot season having officially arrived in Kinshasa the house became like a radiator. Outside was worse. Nana advised me to travel only in the morning and evening. "The heat hits your head like a baton," she said, "you could faint in the road." In the shade of my room, but sweating, I listened to the bulletins. The headline one afternoon was of women protesting abuse. Gathered before a UN base they had scuffled with the guards and tried to get in; the gate had nearly toppled.

"Four hundred rapes and the UN hasn't acted," I told the editor. "One woman says she was raped on the road by six policemen but no one was questioned." Hundreds of women had protested, I explained. There had been a spate of human-rights violations in Kananga.

"Where?"

"Kananga. It's near the middle of Congo."
"Was there any shooting?"
"No."
"Any fighting, clashes?"
"No."
"Any violence at all?"
"Not that I know of."
"So no dead."
"Correct."
He paused.
"Nah, not interesting."

From the outside, as a reader, the world of news had seemed orderly, confident, authoritative. But on the inside I felt disoriented, lost. I could not understand why none of the following qualified as world news. It seemed half the country was going unreported:

Excerpts from my notebooks

Young girl killed by "savage mob" in Goma. Stones and pieces of wood were thrust into her vagina. No one in village able to say what she had done.

City of Butembo has plunged into "great psychosis." According to the mayor, population is patrolling the city to combat would-be vampire.

Laurent Nkunda, dissident general, raided eastern village. Huts were pillaged and burned; some eighty people fled; three elderly found dead.

Drama in the Park of Virunga. A fifteen-year-old girl was seized by a hippopotamus. Park guards ordered to attack pachyderms. Girl is presumed dead.

Twelve children survived a rebel attack on Sunday. The children lost their parents and are still in shock. One boy is in coma.

> Thirteen-year-old girl, deaf and dumb, was killed by two men in their twenties. According to the victim's parents, the men drugged the girl and raped her.

Death, as a rule, had the best chance of making the news. And in a country torn by war one might imagine such news would be abundant. But in Congo so many people died that, farcically, mere death was not enough: I needed many deaths at once, or an extraordinary death. A raid on a village—with a hundred people displaced—was only important if it involved the army or the UN. Rape was too frequent to be reported even six at a time. And the constant fear people lived in, if mentioned at all, was either in the penultimate paragraph of a news story or on the opinion page.

Then a sensation broke in Liberia—Charles Taylor was caught at the Nigerian border trying to flee—and it became impossible to sell Congo. The AP didn't take a story for more than a week (and since I was paid by the word, during this time I made no money). I heard three miners died digging a tunnel, and then that a rebel group was planning an attack, but after ten days of my incessant calling with such news the editor laid it out to me: I wasn't to phone unless it was serious. "We're busy," he said. "And I don't have time to explain why we're not taking this."

The editors had their own hassles. The bureau in Dakar covered twenty-two countries, and every day was a grind, a competition to beat the other agencies, to pursue tip-offs from dodgy sources, to edit and translate from patchy language, to identify what would be important to customers—for the AP, primarily Americans. "Think about what my grandmother in Wisconsin would want to read," an editor told me. They were three in Dakar, working in shifts like prison sentries, toiling in front of computer screens . . . and the constant news of rape, death, child soldiers, it must all have blurred.

Lying in my bed I took copious notes, trying to make sense

of the bulletins, for myself and for the outsider. My notebooks filled up. I would become overwhelmed, and pace around the room, unable but to imagine the scenes. They made me numb.

The narrative that formed in those notebooks was disconcerting—for though it was broadcast across the country it remained strangely silent inside homes: Congolese didn't vocally acknowledge it; they didn't transmit or hand it down. They listened, quietly assimilated it and returned to their rituals; and when Nana told Bébé Rhéma a tale—the baby would stare, wide-eyed—it would be about a heroic Congolese warrior or the defeat of an evil king, or about a princess who sought a kind husband; her stories were about valor, hope, love. The news seemed divorced from the world Nana created for her child, from the world the Congolese inhabited.

Thankfully the tragic bouts of news were followed by music, and the BBC ran a nightly classical segment to which I often listened in the dark, lying in bed. In the evenings, after the sun had set but while the day still carried light, I would sit at the corner store with a glass of cold milk. Sometimes I saw Fannie there, buying fertility vitamins (Nana had told me, very casually, that she had found a British boyfriend). And I usually wrote at night; occasionally I frequented a bar on the main street; I found the beer helped me sleep, especially when the night was warm.

On one of those idle evenings I invited Mossi. We met at Bozene, in front of the house, and as soon as we started to walk Mossi slapped my back. "What, eh?" he said with a cheer. I smiled at my feet and basked. He walked with long, slow steps, taking his time. Mossi had just returned to Kinshasa from an assignment, and it was our first meeting since I had gotten the job. Sitting at the bar, we poured for each other from large bottles of frothing Primus and talked about his hometown, on the coast of South Africa, and how his family, opposed to the government, had needed to flee—to seek asylum in Congo, of all places.

Mossi frowned at his glass, sipped, gasped with contentment

and sat back in his chair. And I noticed how the gray hairs rose on his face in prickles, how they moved like a wave when he licked his teeth.

It was the first time he allowed me to pay for the beer. We walked back together, and he dropped me off near the church building, at Bozene's entrance.

I was relaxing in the living room. Music was playing, but beneath the melody I could hear Jose tell Nana about his boss at the tax department; he was tired of workplace politics—he had tried everything, he said. But Nana didn't seem to be in a sympathetic mood. "Why don't you ask to have your old post back? Just pose the question, that's all I'm saying." Jose looked uncomfortable. Our eyes met and I felt I was intruding. I retired to my room, washed, changed into my pajamas and was about to catch the bulletins when Jose poked his head around my door. "Can I borrow your fan?"

"Of course. What for?"

"The funeral." A boy in the neighborhood had recently died—crushed by a piece of cement that had fallen off an old building. Jose unplugged the fan and twisted the cable around the pedestal. He carried it with care through the doorway. "Remember to bring it back," I called out.

"When the funeral is over," he shouted back.

I followed Jose to the living room. "When will it be over?"

"In three days."

"But I need the fan for the night. It's too hot."

"Maybe you can buy another?" Nana muttered from the floor. It was the third time she had mentioned it.

"But we already told them," Jose said.

"They need it at night?"

"For the preparations."

9

News had fallen to a paltry level. The airplane crashes had stopped. I was filing less and less. My income was squeezed. Jose as well was finding no solutions. The family would not make it past the month. It was then that I came upon a chance to go to the east—to the mines, and the war.

I was in the Grand Hotel. Anderson's CIA agents had arrived—hundreds of them. The hotel was graced with posters of silverback gorillas. It was a meeting of the Great Apes Survival Project. I was here to try to find news.

From the conference registration desk I spotted Richard Bentley, chasing a red-bearded man who looked important. This man was surrounded by people. I waved hello—maybe Bentley could get me in, I thought. I raised my hand higher, trying to be seen. Bentley looked in my direction but didn't wave back.

"Isn't that guy a prick?" a man beside me said. "He always makes me feel like I'm wasting his time. *Such* a prick." He looked about himself. "Want to grab a drink by the pool? It's bloody freezing in here." He gave me a card:

KEITH LEPER HALE
War Correspondent & Investigative Reporter

I had so far pursued ordinary stories. It had little to do with a lack of seeming opportunity: reports about uranium smuggling for instance were all over the press; but they felt too remote, too fantastic. As did the revelations on Radio Trottoir. They told you something of the environment of fantasy that people lived in; but the stories themselves—one had the impression—either didn't exist or would kill you.

Keith Leper Hale, *Time* magazine correspondent and erstwhile Congo reporter, pursued *only* such stories. And in a single sitting he expanded my ideas of Congo's possibilities.

I followed the direction he had taken, past a set of glass doors that opened to the swimming area. I spotted him at the far end of the pool. He was bare-chested on a reclining chair and he wore a pair of swimming shorts. The day was hot and sultry; I wished I had brought my trunks.

The plastic chairs were full so I sat on a side table. All around us women in bikinis lounged about, pretending not to notice the men. A group of Congolese women with heavy gold earrings rubbed suntan lotion on their chests and contentedly lay back among the foreigners, looking like a row of piano keys. They slowly rolled over. Some slipped into the pool. All of them looked serious.

"Are you down with malaria?" Keith asked.

I said I was tired, and by way of explanation I mentioned that I lived in an African house.

He smiled. "Gonzo-style. That's the way to be."

No, actually, I thought; I'd much prefer a nice bed and air-conditioning. But I wondered what made me seem so beaten down.

Keith was an old hand in Africa. And he was writing a controversial book: Part 1 was going to be standard fare, he said—what

the AP might publish. Part 2 was to be more "hard-core." Mainstream press might publish it, but only an adventurous editor. Part 3, he said, nobody would touch. "It's the *crack*."

I asked what was in Part 3.

He smiled. "See? You're already interested."

He ordered a waitress to bring chocolate cake. Though the light had faded he lifted a pair of aviator sunglasses from a hard case and put them on—it was popular fashion in Congo. The glasses were called "anti-night." Keith twirled his pen. The cake was brought. Quickly Keith hacked into it with a spoon. "Did you know George W. Bush has a stake in Congo's pillage?"

I shrugged.

"The proof is hidden in the jungle, on the border with the Central African Republic. Tons of wood are being transported by boat. The logging company is three levels down, a subsidiary in a petroleum conglomerate. No petroleum on those trucks. They're raking down half a forest on a daily basis. And Bush sits on the conglomerate's board."

"Sounds like you're all over the story."

"That's nothing," he said. "Listen to this."

Keith lifted his sunglasses and smiled. "You know the famous uranium mine? No? Let's go way back. World War II. Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Little Boy and Fat Man?"

I nodded.

"That uranium came from Congo. The mines are dead. Right?" He bit on the cake, staining his hands. He spoke while chewing. "*Wrong*. The mines are not dead. Have you been to Rwanda? You'll see American planes. Not little Cessnas. We're talking Hercules and transport craft, large enough to carry Abrams tanks and platoons of Special Forces. What are they doing there?"

Keith sniffed and leaned back in his chair. He stretched his legs and with a hand massaged his thigh, shaking the muscle briskly.

"The UN has seventeen thousand soldiers in Congo. But not

a single American, Brit or Canadian. Know why? They're too scared to send their men to this hell. It's not worth it to them. But go down to Katanga. That American military base has maximum security. It's the uranium they're after. Check any public reference: the army, the navy, the White House. That base doesn't exist. What *are* they doing here?" He paused for effect. "You know they've discovered a new nuclear deposit."

"Where?"

"It's top secret, man. This place is *full* of stories. You just eat them like a kid in a candy store."

I heard his words, but what was Keith really telling me? My mind was in a blur, overrun with ideas: soldiers, mines and smugglers crossed with the pool, the sun and the women: image upon image, they shifted confusedly. Suddenly they fell away. I felt a moment of clarity.

As if on cue Keith made me an offer. "I'm working on a new piece that goes to the highest levels," he said. "It's about a massacre at Kilwa. One hundred dead, give or take. You know who arranged the massacre? Anvil Mining. But no one's reported it because Anvil gets World Bank funding. Paul Wolfowitz knows. Kofi Annan knows. There's a UN report detailing how Anvil flew in an armed militia and gave them company cars to dump the dead in mass graves. The White House suppressed it."

"Where is Kilwa?"

"That's what I'm saying. Want to come?"

We paused to watch a girl undo her robe and step into the pool. The women had cleared from the reclining chairs. The light had faded. I could barely see the girl's face. I wondered why she had come so late; perhaps to avoid the stares.

"Kilwa is in the far east," Keith at last said. "It's remote. That's why the story is so sweet. Getting there will be expensive but we'll split it. We'll hire porters to carry the gear and supplies. I'll get started on the shopping list. Let's be talking." He tipped his sunglasses.

That night the AP confirmed its interest in Kilwa—the editor said I should pursue the story, but from Kinshasa. He would not hear about any travel: the bureau's stringer budget was apparently running on empty. I became agitated—I told him I felt the bureau wasn't supporting me. I desperately wanted a chance. "If you smell a story then maybe you should pay your own way," he said. "If it works out then we'll see. Right now I can promise you nothing."

I went home excited—convinced that I needed to take some sort of risk to escape the cycle of hardships at home, and also to get where I wanted. I felt suddenly projected outside Kinshasa—and frustrated, for the country's possibilities seemed beyond my reach. I would have to find a way to make my own luck. Entering the house I again became depressed.

So the conversation, after its heightened middle, ended in a sort of theoretical peace.

We finished our teas. I handed the girl my porcelain.

She gave me the bags and bottle of food.

Bobby showed me to the door. We solemnly shook hands again.

The air outside was choking. The taxibus was covered in filth. The driver screamed at me to get in. I climbed into the mass of humans, the warmth, the bodily smells. This was how I had begun to feel in Kinshasa—always restricted, caught in a sort of interior, unable to sense the horizon.

I had an opportunity to verify Bobby's claims that same evening, when I called Stefano, the UN officer from Châteaux Margaux, to confirm Keith's story about the massacre. I was still considering Keith's offer to travel together to Kilwa, and Stefano had become a reliable informant. It was he who had supplied me with some of the stories about rape. And today he was in a chatty mood: his marriage was coming up. It would be a quiet affair, he said, with only the closest family and friends. There would be excellent food; the honeymoon would be on some island. But the last preparations were still incomplete, and his mind had been elsewhere. He had hardly had time to examine the UN dossiers. "I know, I know," he said. "You need to know about Kilwa. Hold on while I look it up."

He read me the details and I took notes in the taxi. "Any chance you could get me the full report?" I said. I heard Stefano scratch his beard. "It's complicated. We have testimonies but the report is stuck at our chief's office. Political pressure."

"I really need the report."

"Why don't you try at the World Bank? Really it is their affair more than ours. But I'll give it a try. As a favor. By the way, I

didn't say anything about political pressure." I asked Stefano what he knew about Avi Mezler. "Of course," he said. "Major guy, based in Tel Aviv. The UN has been trying to indict him for years. Why do you ask?"

"He's trying to claim this piece of land from a friend."

"Where?"

"In Équateur. We don't know why."

"That's strange. Mezler doesn't go sniffing just anywhere. Listen, we're having a going-away party at my place. We have a pool. There'll be good people. Bring your friend, I want to hear more about this."

I was sitting in the minibus's only vacant seat: on a hot canister beside the driver, my legs spread to accommodate the gearshift. I pointed under my legs and asked what it was. The driver said, "Tank." I saw a pipe from the canister lead toward the engine. On the dashboard a sticker said, "Jesus Protects This Vehicle." But hardly ten minutes afterward the minibus began to glide. The driver pumped the pedal. The minibus jerked. Everybody was ordered to get out. I clutched my bag to my chest and watched the driver walk away. Passengers began to disperse. An old woman and I were the only ones who remained until the end. The driver returned carrying a half-liter bottle glowing brown.

I used the time to call the AP. I told the editor the Kilwa affair was serious. "Anvil organized the massacre. The UN is withholding the report but I might get it."

"Do you have quotes?"

I told him that if we waited a few days we would have the full report; but he cut me off. "Send it tonight. If we have the news there's no sense in waiting." The minibus reached Victoire and I rushed to the house, avoiding the garbage and gutters.

The house courtyard was empty. I locked myself in my room and began to type out the story. Stefano couldn't confirm all of Keith's details—there wasn't enough evidence, he said, though

everyone knew what had happened. I wrote the hardest-hitting story I could. Then the bulbs sparkled and died. My screen waned.

Nana moved about the house like a phantom, setting candles that lit her face from underneath and made her look sinister.

I drummed with my fingers on the chair at the dining table, trying to relax among the sounds of the creatures; small shadows flashed along the wall. I had seen rats in my room the other night. Nana had promised to set traps. "How come you didn't do it?" I said.

"I had another idea," she said. "We will use poison."

I held a candle while she emptied a plastic sachet and mixed a white powder with balls of bread. Going from room to room we carefully placed the balls in cabinets, among the kitchen pots and along the walls. We put some balls around her suitcase of special-occasion clothes, and beside the deep freezer. "Put some under my bed," I said, "and behind the wardrobe. That's where they multiply." She laughed.

The AP editor called, sounding impatient. He wanted to go home and was only waiting for my story. I followed Nana to the living room.

But we were helpless against the current; we waited, listened. The initial silence was gone. Sounds from the road: murmurs from the night crowd, a dog, the resounding cry of a bird. Bars had lit generators; bulbs attracted flying insects, the intensity of lights rising and ebbing with the pitch of the motor. Stoves scraped the ground like chalk on blackboards as women dragged the heavy metal into the courtyard. They began to braise fish. Children came out and pissed over the earth, crumpling the cloth of their shirts in one hand and watching the liquid splash against their feet. The women shouted at them to go inside. The smoke from the stoves attracted large birds that circled above and observed the cuisine from electrical posts. Orange embers

littered the courtyard. Sweating, I flapped a newspaper against my face.

"We should call SNEL," I said. The electricity company. Nana said it would do no good.

"Didn't they fix the problem the last time you called?"

"That was a coincidence. I had nothing to do with it."

"Can't you just call them to try?"

"You do it if you're in such a rush."

The local SNEL officer, an elderly man who had supervised Bozene's circuits for decades, assured me the current would soon return. It always did. How soon? I explained speed was imperative. He said, "I understand, but it may be sensible to invest twenty dollars. The other houses have done so." I thought he was asking for a bribe and was ready to promise payment, but then I heard our neighbor's television running. And the bulb at the next house glowed. I walked up to the gate, slowly, the realization growing: the sounds, the light, the activity of the street, the music playing on two-in-ones. "Why are we the only house without current?" I asked Nana. "Did we do something to the SNEL guy?"

"I've argued with Jose for two years," she said, "you try telling him."

Jose sat on the porch, somnolent, slumped over his hands. He said, "We're an honest family and we're going to stay honest." I looked up at the wires crisscrossing Bozene. I had seen them before but had never realized their purpose. The other houses were stealing current from alternate power lines. Why weren't we? Because Jose was trying to take on corruption in his country alone?

I filed the story from a neighbor's house using one of Mossi's tricks: by making my phone a data transmitter. It was both slow and expensive, but it worked in an emergency. Only then did I realize how exhausting the day had been. I fell on my bed. I

surveyed the room. A pair of red eyes peered from under the wardrobe. I banged with my hand on the carpet. They hid, reappeared. "Go away," I said, my voice ringing. I imagined the rats nibbling at the poison, and to that image I fell asleep.

The fetish boy was being remembered in front of our house, some weeks after his death. The delay was attributed to his family's quest for finances: in Kinshasa one could die poor but one still had to be buried like a rich man. The *évolué* households sensed the contradiction: Nana told me about a boy who died of typhoid because his mother lacked two hundred dollars. Immediately relatives piled her with money—more than two thousand dollars—so the boy could have an elaborate funeral.

Likewise, the fetish boy was having a gazebo erected, and for many weeks we had seen his uncles squatting on the side of the street, setting up wooden stumps with concrete bricks at the bottom and lengths of rope; the neighborhood had come together to provide fine purple cloth to drape over the wood; a tall pole was placed at the gazebo's center to make a spike at its top.

Individual houses made further contributions. Jose was generous. Once the service began, gathered in the shade of the purple cloth was a collection of Bozene's old and weary, sadly singing. Jose's loudspeakers sounded like beating tin. The gathering swayed. An old photograph of the boy stood on a shrine-like pedestal, and on one side of the gazebo I spotted my fan giving air to a few fortunate.

The loudspeaker and the fan substituted for our house's presence; though Jose was in the *ville* no one accused him of contempt. From the house we heard the ceremony last all night and then another full day. Nana stayed at home to arrange her boutique, spreading T-shirts and track pants on the table. Frida was present. Nana unbundled a woman's top and Frida claimed it would fit her perfectly. Nana pushed it her way. Frida didn't have

money. I heard the word "family." Frida picked up garment after garment and at the end Nana wrote her a receipt. Frida gave me a glare, as if to provoke. "Watch out with her," I mumbled. And Nana—even now cold to me in Frida's presence—scowled.

That I was tense on that day was clear to everyone who crossed my path. At the internet café I dropped a hundred francs into Stella's palm. "Boss, I've got something," he said, pushing a paper my way:

> New System of Ravagers of the Male Sex by the Magic of a Mystic Band
>
> True Story in Kinshasa (Information @ Stella Ivinya)

He twitched his eyebrows and rubbed his fingers together. "Want the full information?" He looked around furtively.

I stared at the sheet, and the letters seemed to grow bigger and bigger, and they swam, floating across the page, and off it. I crumpled the paper in one motion. "Be serious, Stella."

He was offended. "What's the matter with you?" he said. "Can't have a little fun?"

The tension stemmed from the Kilwa story. It had been published but only in obscure outlets. The major papers had not picked it up. I could not understand—usually an AP story was taken all over the world. Was the massacre not important enough? Had it been suppressed? Stefano called and I answered the phone in a hurry. "I saw a very disturbing story," he said, his voice Italian neutral.

"About what?"

"I expressly told you not to quote me."

A flurry of thoughts invaded my head. "There is nothing about the politics." Isn't that what he said?

"I'm in big trouble because of you."

"What's the matter? I didn't talk about political pressure. Is there some misunderstanding?"

"I'm sorry but I don't think I can talk to you anymore," he said.

"Stefano."

The line went silent, magnifying my feeling of shame. I covered my face with my hands—I had lost my best source of information. Worse, I had lost a potential friend. At home it was dark. I felt my way along the corridor and to the bed. But I could not sleep. A noise had erupted. In the courtyard water shot into a plastic bucket, making a hollow racket. "Something happened?"

"No water for twenty-four hours," Nana said.

The water company workers had announced a strike. Jose said they regularly took holidays, but Nana had heard an official was protesting Bozene's ceremonies for the fetish boy. She knew which neighbors had complained. Jose still thought it might be the anniversary of the company's founding. The speculation continued as the house took on the heavy task of preparing against the drought. Corinthian stood at the courtyard door, heaving buckets that Nana filled. Jose worked in the kitchen, preparing water vessels for Nana to boil. Joining Corinthian, I lugged a bucket from the courtyard and it swayed between my legs, spilling water in the living room. I ran faster and set the bucket down with a splash, next to the others against the wall: blue, brown, red. From the living room I heard a shout. Corinthian had slipped and fallen. "What is your problem?" Nana glared.

I was banished to my room. Corinthian and Nana continued their merry-go-round until all the buckets were filled. The house regained its quiet. At some point during the night the water system malfunctioned. The septic tank regurgitated; the toilet overflowed with a sonorous gurgle and a sucking noise, like the sound an elephant might make at a water hole. Thinking it could be trouble I appeared in the corridor holding a curtain rod. A thick green mass covered the floor. Bébé Rhéma's cries reverberated through the house. Jose and Nana had opened their door, wearing loose nightgowns. Nana looked at me as though I were responsible; she had always believed my toilet paper would

shade. His wife brought us a buffet of pineapple. The monkey licked its fingers. I ate so quickly I wasn't aware when my hunger was extinguished, and I finished the meal moving slowly and giddily, like a bee that had feasted on honey.

The barge was still stranded, and the only sign of life on it was the clutter around the crew quarters. Another barge had passed in the interim and embarked most of the beached passengers, but it hadn't had the requisite equipment to repair our barge. L'Américain proposed we borrow his motorbike. He offered to arrange a party on foot: local boys would serve as guides. If we waited a week it might be possible to rent a 4x4. But they seemed ideas of folly. The cousin backed out. We would soon reach the peak of inundation, he said, and any journey would be too risky.

Bobby rashly promised that we would return in a few months. The cousin said once the rains slowed he would be glad to join.

Bobby had contracted a cold. Solemnly, sniveling, he made for the bat room.

I sat on the riverbank for a long time. I felt exhausted. Our journey had clearly failed. I had made a mistake by taking such a risk. And I had now gone several weeks without writing a story. The money I had given the family would have been finished. I thought I would have to pick myself up and return to the old routine in Kinshasa. It would be a struggle.

But something happened that afternoon to change the course of my time in Congo. I heard a noise behind me, in the bush. It was Bahati, the Rwandan boy, who came to the water. He had brought his radio, and together we listened to the international news. I told him about our misadventure upriver. He had heard. And after we turned off the radio he said we could perhaps go cycling together. Two Pygmy settlements were located not far away, he said. If I was interested. I was not particularly hopeful—but it seemed a last possibility. So the next day we borrowed two bicycles from l'Américain and set out.

It was raining so the ride was difficult. The high elephant grass

made it hard to see. We reached the village after half a day. It was a semicivilized settlement. A Pygmy chief with a brown civet-cat skin over his shoulder came to greet us. He held a slender shield, the wood carved with motifs.

From a pathway into the forest we saw some children return. They were not particularly short, as one might have expected from popular myths about Pygmies. Armed with bows and arrows, and with catapults hanging around their necks, the children had caught some small birds that they carried in bags of woven leaves. A woman appeared, her face bright red, colored with a pigment obtained from tree bark; in a wooden bowl she carried some nuts and leaves.

The chief said his ancestors had once worked on a colonial plantation. When the plantation closed the workers had nowhere to go, and they had become habituated to the settled life. Most crucially they no longer received the plantation company's food shipments. The village was now destitute: like an urban slum set in the jungle. The wooden dwellings smelled of decomposition; food lay open on the ground, which was wet in places. The fields had long been reclaimed by the jungle. Some men emerged from their houses in ornamental headgear, thinking I was an important visitor, from the logging companies.

The Pygmies had lately been rediscovered by the companies. New Congolese forest laws—meant to conserve the ecology and their habitats—had given these tribes authority over traditional lands. The Pygmy chief had sold his rights to the loggers. He had given away a vast swath of land, and all he had asked from the loggers was some soap and bags of salt. It was painful to hear of his naive trade. I asked the chief why he needed salt. He said his ancestors had once known how to extract the mineral from plants, but his people from years of plantation work had forgotten how. The need for soap was evident, from the dirty children gathered before us. And the chief was certain the loggers could never wipe out the forest—"Just look," he said, "it goes on forever."

There was an odd moment when I asked if his ancestors might have allowed the woods to be given away. He seemed to become troubled. "I will tell the spirit of the forest that his trees must be cut down," the chief said to me. "It is so his people can survive."

I wrote a story for the AP about this extortionate logging. It was a story written with some passion—for the Pygmy chief showed me something about the world, and its crisis.

I had come to Congo with natural sympathy for humans living in the forests, stemming from a belief that these people practiced traditions that were thousands of years old, and that they had over the ages learned to exist in equilibrium with the animals.

But the Pygmy chief showed me that the tribes were no longer living in primitive ways. Globalization had reached even these villages—in the form of sneakers, guns and cigarettes, and most violently as demand for raw materials: wood, food, meat. Severed from the forest, the world consumed it rapaciously. The Pygmies were being encroached upon by this global need. These tribes lived in the forest, but they were no longer purely of the forest. They would not survive the change.

On the periphery of that village area I met a woman with a child on her back. Bending over, she was tilling someone else's field. She said she worked from 6:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m.—a fourteen-hour workday. But she earned only enough to eat the leaves of beans. Her hut was tiny and dark. A white rabbit cowered in the corner. She squatted inside, waiting for the leaves to boil.

This woman struck me as something new in the world. She did not fall into any obvious category of African destitution: she was not a refugee or diseased or the victim of rape or violence. She was willing to work. It seemed to me that by any system of distribution of wealth—communist, socialist, capitalist—she had no reason to be poor.

When the leaves had finished boiling, the woman started to

mash them into a paste. I asked the last of my questions. She replied listlessly, seeming too tired to listen or to tell me to leave.

In the hut the baby had begun to cry. The woman squatted up to him and put a sliver of raw sweet potato in his palm. He made a fist. And like that, holding this morsel of hardly edible food, he fell asleep.

This story about the forest, which in my excitement I called my editor at once to relay, struck a chord in him—and made the rounds within the agency. Months later it won a prize. My editor told me something personal for the first time since we had begun to work together: he too had begun his career in Congo. He had also struck out on his own to find his first stories. In this way we formed a small bond. I got the sense that he wanted to help me. It was the first success of the journey.

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I have it!" I yelled.

"Have you got it?" she yelled back, from the window.

The Italian nuns who ran the convent guesthouse were partially deaf. They were a pair, Mariana and Luigiana, who wore Mother Teresa blue-and-white tunics and lived in an apartment near the front gate, at the top of a staircase. It was Mariana who now came hobbling down. I had intended only to pay my bill (I had just picked up some money from the Western Union, discovering, on the way, Bunia's gold-industry apparatus—shacks that were purchasing and purifying counters, open-air truck garages, government offices that sold fifty-thousand-dollar permits), but it turned out Mariana had been looking for me. A guest was to arrive, a regular client from the UN who preferred the room that I had mistakenly been given. So the rooms were not all identical. I resisted, but Mariana was firm. "You must move." And when I became silent she softened. "I tell you," she muttered, "business is not my charisma." I watched her slowly return to her apartment, pushing her hand on her thigh to climb each step.

The only vacant rooms were on the other side of the convent, near enough, I learned, to the toilets to receive their smell. And

as I packed my clothes and folded my sleeping bag—whether because I did not want to move, or because of the dust—I began to sneeze; the sneezes turned into coughs, and into a wheeze. My eyes teared, my cheeks puffed up, and my nose began to run; the reaction was asthmatic, and of a violence I had not experienced in years.

I spent the morning outside with a kerchief tied around my nose, to protect myself from the pollen. Then Naro arrived. I had forgotten—it was Sunday, and he had said he would bring lunch. In his bowl was couscous, some in a salad, and the rest in red sauce. He said we should eat while it was still hot.

At first I had thought Naro talkative, perhaps a little rash—not unusual for a man who spent his every evening at the bar. But I found it strange that he would choose to befriend me, an itinerant journalist. And the big smile on his face, the enthusiasm with which he had come—it made him seem lonely and bored.

We ate in the convent dining hall, beneath a wooden sculpture of a crucified Jesus. The tender, hot couscous did me good—it soothed the soreness in my throat. We tried to eat slowly, and repeatedly offered, out of politeness, to serve each other. Each eyed the couscous, hesitating to help himself. Soon the spoon rattled in the bowl. We slouched in our chairs.

Another attack was reported on the radio—even on Sunday, I thought, these militias have no pity. I did not see it at the time, but the recurrent attacks had already begun to follow a pattern that pointed to a serious threat to Bunia.

On the way out Naro and I stopped by my room. It was dark.

"What is this place, man?" he said. "It looks like a dungeon."

"The other room is going to be much worse."

"Man, Hotel Ituri is not so bad."

"Their cheapest room is fifty dollars. That's a bit expensive for me."

"Then stay at my house, no? It's small, but we can put a mattress in the front room."

I picked up my bag, feeling buoyant, and locked the room. I would come back for the other things later. But halfway to his place Naro stopped at the Hotel Ituri—he had realized that he needed to inform his landlord. I took a seat outside at a white plastic table, waiting.

There was a crackle and flicker above me—a blue tube. An insect, mothlike, had been burned by electrocution.

On the street was a typical evening scene: palm oil vendors with yellow canisters on their bicycles; motorcycle-taxi drivers, mostly ex-militiamen, chattering in corners. Menial laborers walked by, having finished their odd-job shifts at the shops, restaurants and markets.

And the foreigners: UN personnel, civilian and military, in jeeps; aid workers from Belgium, Italy, America. There were also the entrepreneurs. A group of Indians passed, all nearly identical, in shirts and pants and oily hairstyles. I felt a sudden closeness, and was about to call out, but they seemed focused on themselves.

It had been less obvious in Kinshasa, because of the politicians and the corruption. Here Congolese society was plainly limp, poor; and every aspect of life was organized around the foreigner. And among the foreign employers the Indian had a special place: known as the most exploitative, rarely paying more than the "market wage"—meaning the minimum acceptable to the poor laborers, who were not in a position to negotiate.

The Congolese would complain and complain about the Indian, but they would accept that only one race treated them worse: the Congolese (the African, more generally). In this was a double compatibility: the African seemed to accept and imitate his ruthless masters by an extension of his colonial ideas; and the Indian naturally admitted the black man at the bottom of the castes.

But the Indian-Congolese relationship was more ambiguous than this, and also more intimate.

It was the difference between the two kinds of Indians one met in Africa: there were those who had been brought generations earlier by the British; and there were the new immigrants. The two bore little connection. While the former had built an India within Africa, with strict rules of marriage and gastronomy (it was they who had given Africa the samosa and chapati, now the poor man's staples), the latter lived as a hedonist, producing the *métis*, the half-caste.

This aspect of the Indians was considered a benediction by women, who knew that their *métis* children would have a status above the Congolese. Kabila's government was filled with *métis*. *Métisse* girls, with paler skin, were considered most desirable. And though the Indian *métis* fell below that of the European, he was still more likely to avoid the life of a laborer. He was more likely to survive.

The new immigrants surrounded themselves with Congolese. They were strangers in Africa, without friends or relations, invited by no one. They had been sent, as emissaries of the great immigrant-business communities: the Shiite Muslims, the Punjabis and Sindhis; the Chinese, Lebanese and Israelis. A senior community member, usually a wealthy individual, would hear of Bunia's profits, and front the capital to send a young agent.

Among people thrust into Congo in this way there could be little camaraderie. Naro and Ali knew each other but rarely met. The Independence Day celebrations in Kinshasa had been muted for the same reason. The traders' affairs demanded no collaboration; each created his own world. These were not individuals doing business—what mattered more was the intangible, foreign tribe of which one was an extension. Here, at the extremity of global commerce, each exile was made outcast in the other's society.

I felt a presence behind.

It was Naro standing at the hotel portico, with pursed lips. "I'm really sorry," he said. "The landlord is not agreeing. It's nothing to do with you." The meeting had apparently turned hostile: Naro had been bringing home too many girls, and the landlord wanted to charge for electricity, for water, for the unauthorized use of the house. It would be too precarious to have me stay. "I'm really sorry," Naro repeated.

I don't know why, but that got me down quite badly.

And I was feeling cold—the fever was acting up. A breeze had begun to blow; the sun was setting. I asked Naro for some pills—Panadol, Tylenol, whatever he had. He ran inside to get me some. I returned to the convent with his medicine.

But in the morning I could not move. I awoke feeling giddy. The grill over the window faded and came into focus. My slippers, in the corner of the room, seemed far. I stayed in bed, watching my toes wiggle. There were other signs: my ears seemed blocked. I called out, and suddenly they popped; sounds were exceptionally clear; even the silence seemed present, as a bass static. And my sleep had of late become disturbed. The dreams had grown more vivid.

I gave an account of these symptoms to a doctor who ran a clinic on the boulevard. I remembered his place for its large red cross on the signboard, and because the adjacent buildings, Italian and American aid operations, were guarded and locked. But when I swung open the clinic's gate the yard was deserted. The doctor was on his second-floor balcony smoking a cigarette.

The office was a spacious hall furnished with a glass-topped desk and a long metal table, cold to lie on. Above me oscillated a

halogen lamp. In the corner was a pair of repaired crutches, and next to those, in a tall wooden cupboard, bandages, ointment and little bottles of medical supplies.

The doctor listened patiently. He pulled at my cheek and shone a light in my ear. He asked how the fever had felt. A stethoscope was coiled over his chest, and his white gloves stretched up to his elbows. His eyes, behind chunky lenses, were larger than normal. They looked me up and down with interest. "Do you have your own syringe?" he asked, almost hopefully.

"Don't you?"

"Sometimes foreigners like to bring their own," he said, drawing a needle from his cupboard. It was new—he unwrapped its packaging—but its tip looked enormous. "Don't be alarmed," he said, "it won't hurt."

He pricked my finger and took blood on a swab. The diagnosis didn't take long: "I think you have malaria."

I nearly sprang off the table. "Call a friend to take you home," the doctor advised. But whom to call? He told me to use the malaria pills I had brought from America, still untouched in their box. "And try to take rest for a few days."

But inaction was forced on me. That night, at the convent, as had happened all week, the electricity went out. I came to the front of the convent and yanked on a rusted metal bell; its vacant trill invaded the yard. The beatific boy attendant appeared, his face brilliant, as though covered in oil.

"There's no electricity," I said.

"I am sorry, monsieur. It will surely return."

"Why don't we have a generator? The other hotels all have one."

"Monsieur can ask the sisters tomorrow. Jean-Paul is only a simple employee."

We looked at each other, and I dropped my eyes. Jean-Paul still had his chin up. "Don't worry, Monsieur Anjan, after the

elections we will have electricity. We will be like America and France. We will have democracy."

It was an extraordinary declaration. But a fever had begun to affect the country. The vote, which would pit Kabila against the vice president and former warlord Jean-Pierre Bemba, was drawing closer and gaining proportion in people's minds—no longer was it simply an idea or a foreign-imposed aspiration. There was a sense of mobilization in society, a feeling of ownership. And now, only weeks from the polls, the expectations seemed to have become limitless.

It was bound to be a unique moment for the news. The world rarely turned to Congo unless the war flared up; and now, during the elections, for once Congo would be important. I felt I had to profit. I decided to start preparing. But just as I started to feel the excitement I came to face the bureau's power politics.

The AP called to inform me that senior correspondents were being flown in from London, Cairo and Johannesburg. Without warning I was given a list of stories that I wasn't to touch, stories that were fantastic: trips to the volcanoes, to see the gorillas; to the diamond mines in the heart of the country; to remote reserves that were home to the okapi, a rare cousin of the giraffe found only in Congo; and to the giant copper mines of the south.

The editor wanted me to team up with the correspondents. "As what?" I asked. He said I should continue working as I had planned to—I should know where to look for the news, I had been living in Congo. And the chief Africa correspondent wanted to chat before she arrived, "to pick your brain, share ideas." It sounded as if she wanted to steal my stories. The head of African reporting was in a sense my boss, but before that day I'd never heard of her. Now suddenly I was important.

I had come to see the editor as a friend—and I wanted to be frank. So I told him the plan sounded suspect. He owned up. "I'm only trying to protect you," he said. Once the correspon-

dents arrived the AP would buy fewer stories from me. "I know it sounds unfair but we pay them a salary, so we have to prioritize their work. Anything we spend on you we have to justify. If you collaborate at least it'll guarantee you some wordage."

So that's how it was—Congo was becoming world news, and during this time I was surplus. The call felt like a stab.

I had not anticipated my own camp would become an obstacle. I had counted on the elections for extra money, to live better and for travel. The list rankled more—I had worked hard to earn my place with the AP in Congo; and now, in a stroke, a dozen stories were being taken from me. The correspondents had claimed the country for themselves. The big stories picked off, I foresaw battles with the editor, requests turned down. Areas of Congo, it seemed, would all but close.

There was also a feeling of loneliness. I had come to depend on the bureau. The editor was my most sustained link to the world—we spoke or wrote to each other almost every day. We had never met; he had only seen a copy of my passport; our link was imaginary. But we had, I felt, formed a trust—because the editor had once been a stringer in Congo. Moving about the country alone, I tended to share my impressions, what I marveled at, the emotions of the moment and the banal; often they went to him, for few people understood these places. He had seen and felt the jungle. With my family I had to make them imagine entirely, and often I abandoned my attempts, able to leave them only with half-formed ideas. The editor's sympathy therefore provided little consolation. I felt he had betrayed our alliance.

I became disturbed—more deeply than I immediately realized. I lost morale. There was a sort of mental paralysis. I fell asleep during the day, the bedsheet pulled up to my chin. I awoke, restless. The room seemed friendly; I feared losing it. A paranoia developed. The nuns threatened: another source of authority. Had the UN man arrived? I hid from footsteps, pretending to be asleep. People passed my door without stopping. I felt unknown,

secreted. I kept my radio beside me. My alarm was set to repeat at the hours of the bulletins. In this way I spent my energy, feeling futile, alone with my noises. But I could never relax: in the rustling of the trees outside my window, in the dormancy of the red tulips, and in the voices on the street, there seemed a quiet vigilance, a sense of suspended anticipation.

For the first time we received evidence that the militias were indeed moving—that the proximity of recent attacks had been no coincidence. The radio announced that General Mathieu Ngudjolo, leader of the Congolese Revolutionary Movement, a militia of about ten thousand fighters, heavily armed, was approaching some key electoral sites in Bunia's sector. Of course, this alone did not make world news. We had to wait for something to happen.

It was the day I began to take the malaria tablets. I hadn't trusted the doctor's diagnosis, because I felt my condition had not been growing worse. Then on the weekend I felt ill again, and I decided to take the pills as a precaution. They couldn't do harm. Four pills, taken all at once, for three days in succession. I lay under the blanket and clutched my pillow, feeling the atmosphere infuse with darkness. A sharp banging disturbed me. Naro had stormed into the room; I hadn't heard him knock. He wore a broad smile and was dressed to go out. "I have arranged the evening," he said. "We will meet some of your people."

"I'm not feeling great."

"You'll feel fine after a drink."

"The doctor told me to take rest. I'm on medication."

"For what?"

"Malaria."

"You don't look like you have malaria. Come, come. The doctors here call everything malaria, and the next day I'm always hale and hearty."

BAD NEWS

Last Journalists in a Dictatorship

ANJAN SUNDARAM

BLOOMSBURY CIRCUS
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GRENADES

I felt swallowed by the wide road, the odd car hurtling uphill, the people hissing on the sidewalk bathed in sodium-vapor orange—a tick-tock had gone off in my mind since the bomb.

And were I not so consumed by these emotions I would have savored the immense surrounding pleasantness—the long baguette-like hills on the horizon, the silhouettes of clouds that hung low over our heads, the calm city that offered so much space—that tonight made me feel disoriented, smothered.

I searched for charred metal, the smell of burning rubber, any remains of the violence. A blue-uniformed policeman stood near the traffic circle, tall and rigid. I raised a hand to signal him, and spoke almost in a whisper: "*Mwiriwe!* Good evening! Was it here, the explosion?"

"The what?"

"The blast. I heard it from down the hill."

"No, no, you are imagining things." He spoke slowly, shaking his head.

"What is that man sweeping, though?"

"We always clean the roads."

But I saw fragments shimmer, and I made to take out my camera.

His hand moved in front of my face. "No photos! *No photos!*"

"What's the problem, if there was no explosion?"

"Listen carefully. Nothing happened here." I instinctively stepped back.

Everybody in the neighborhood had heard it. I was told the ambulances had come—their sirens silent. But the road was now practically clean. Traffic was circulating, as it always did in Kigali, in orderly fashion. And the center of town, in this, the most densely populated country in mainland Africa, was nearly empty, as usual.

The discussion in my classroom two days later only heightened the sense of insecurity. Ten journalists arrived, and one by one took chairs. The mood was somber. The curtains fluttered at the back of the room. A stout young man said the blast had been caused by a grenade, thrown to destabilize the government.

The journalist had succeeded in taking photographs, but the police had recognized him and searched his bag. They had found the camera and taken the film—many journalists in my class still used old, outdated equipment—and warned him to wait for the official version of events, not to promote the enemy.

There was a murmur of discontent. The faces in the room were all marked—some by hunger, by fatigue, others with deep gashes. I heard a wooden knock pass the classroom door—it was the figure of Moses, hunched over his cane, stumbling over a leg that had been smashed in a torture chamber.

Moses, a senior journalist, had been responsible for summoning the students to our training program. He was so respected that not a single person had refused his invitation.

The students were newspapermen and -women, both owners of publications and employees. Most were in their thirties, though some were much older than I was. They had been specially chosen for our training program for their independence and ability—the idea was to bring together and professionalize

Rwanda's last free journalists, so they functioned as a skilled unit.

I had come to Rwanda to teach journalists how to identify, research and write news stories in this program. I had spent the last two years in America, but prior to that had worked in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo as a journalist for American news outlets. I was familiar with the sensitivities of news in this region, with its history of conflict, and was eager to return. I wanted to help these students be successful journalists.

Our program was funded by the United Kingdom and the European Union. The mandate was to help these journalists report mostly on government initiatives, such as efforts to make people wash their hands or see the doctor. So the program had been approved by the Rwandan government. It had existed for ten years already. But now it had become a place where these last journalists could work together.

The grenade in the city had come as a reminder of violence. It could have been thrown by armed dissidents. It could also have been an act of the government itself. Regardless, the regime would use it as justification for a new round of repression.

"I don't know if we can survive it this time," a student said.

"The government is making arrests. Secret prisons."

"Many developed countries were once dictatorships. Tell us how they obtained their freedom."

The stout young man said the last time he was beaten he had been blinded by his own blood gushing over his face. It was because he had mentioned the harassment of journalists at a press conference, in front of the president. His name was Jean-Bosco, and he ran a popular newspaper. He had been left in a coma for four days after that attack.

"But we have to keep speaking out," a female student said.

"That's our only defense. The more we speak the more the government will be afraid to hurt us, along with the other activists. And we have to stay together, no matter what."

The speaker was a short young woman with a red bow in her hair. She had just spent a year in prison after criticizing the government. She was sick with HIV, and had endured psychological and physical abuse while in prison. The prison officials had screamed in her face until she was tired, dragging her from room to room so she could not rest. Her name was Agnès.

The room had turned quiet.

Someone muttered: "How can we fight a violent state. Is there a way out for us?"

"America gives them weapons. Israel trains their secret service."

It happened that we were approaching the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and there was a series of commemorative writings about that period.

I read them one such article I had recently come upon. It was a reflection by a former Czech dissident, about his struggles to create a political opposition, and about how everyone had thought him ridiculous, his task impossible, until the dictatorship suddenly crumbled.

Agnès stared at the other journalists.

The Czech dissident spoke about his efforts to create news pamphlets and underground information networks—it was a battle with the dictatorship, a battle to keep alive the information that the regime destroyed, suppressed.

And I felt it was important that he described his pamphlets: for the journalists in that class were from the newspapers. The written word, in a dictatorship, offered possibilities that the radio, often used by dictators for propaganda, could not. The written word offered subversive possibilities in a dictatorship, offered some hope of freedom.

It has been so in every revolution, even in the Arab Spring, in today's digital age. Writers are often at the forefront of revolutions. And it often is they who bear the brunt of the repression.

A radio broadcast requires equipment—an emitter, an antenna. The speaker on the radio might be recognized, and killed. The equipment can be destroyed, leaving the revolution mute.

But the written word belongs to no one. It has no source, no root that can be annihilated. It passes from hand to hand. It is destroyed; new words are written.

And now more people have begun to write, there are more sources. The written word can thus become something sacred to a people seeking freedom, to a revolution.

I collected the homework from the previous week—a report about a city hospital—said goodbye to the students, pulled the white cotton curtains over the windows of the classroom hall and began the walk to my house.

Moses hobbled beside me. It was another peaceful, cool evening. I felt the exhaustion of the day of teaching. I didn't mind his slowness. A sympathetic taxi driver, Claude, saw us on the road and offered a lift. Moses, grateful, climbed into the beaten-up car.

At home, I poured myself a cup of tea and arranged a seat on the balcony. From here I looked over a large garden, and farther down into a green valley. This was without doubt the most beautiful city I had lived in.

The house belonged to the training program. It was commodious—four bedrooms—and had once been a diplomat's residence. Unaccustomed to so much space, I occupied only the common areas and a bedroom whose door, the landlord had eagerly pointed out, was bulletproof.

I went through the homework. And there was a surprise. I had come to know my students well—but a certain Gibson,

a quiet man in his thirties who always sat at the back of the room, had written a remarkable report. The ideas were organized logically, almost without error. He was not afraid to ask large questions. And the hospital was vivid in one's mind: its doctors, the children.

Feeling slightly buoyed, I made for my bedroom. Briefly I turned on the radio. Still nothing about the explosion from the other night. No acknowledgment that it had happened; no sense that people in the country had been wounded or killed.

I did not have to wait long for the pressure to take effect on the journalists. The first notion I had was during a series of pronouncements by the president, Paul Kagame. I expected he would at some point address the explosion, which had been a surprise, even incredible. Rwanda had known an extraordinary calm over the last decade, a calm nearly as absolute as its genocide sixteen years before had been violent.

The president spoke slowly, his voice shrill, almost like a bird's. He spoke about democracy in the country and the freedom that his people enjoyed, and how sad the coup d'états on the continent were, being the result of the absence of democracy. These were at his political meetings, press conferences, ceremonies in football stadiums and at the opening of a new factory. He was a tall, emaciated man, whose suit billowed over his body. He seemed innocuous, laughing at his own witticisms. But he could make or condemn people, villages and entire regions with words—it was almost as if his spoken word became reality, became the world. His was the voice of the nation; this was possible in the dictatorship, for mere speech to attain such power over living and dead things. So when he spoke there was great silence. His words were broadcast all

over the country, with the regularity of a drumbeat; and on the windy hilltops and in homes, the people strained to listen.

The president had fled these same hills as a child. He was only three years old when, in 1960, an uprising against the Rwandan elite forced his family to flee to Ugandan refugee camps. So he began among the dispossessed. As a young man he fought with a Ugandan rebellion, becoming that country's head of military intelligence and receiving training in America. In 1990, he commanded a force of Rwandans who had broken off from the Ugandan army and invaded Rwanda. The invasion set off a protracted conflict that the president called a war of "liberation" and culminated in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. The end of the genocide, in July 1994, was like a new birth for the president, as he took power in Rwanda.

Kagame's control was at first something that needed to be divined. He was the vice president, the minister of defense. Others made the speeches and the state visits. But over time Kagame had done away with his front men. He had Rwanda's previous president arrested for five years, and then pardoned and released him without explanation. The radios now broadcast Kagame's slow speeches.

Some were permitted to ask questions at his events. "Your Excellency, why are so many countries eager to study our roads, hospitals and poverty-reduction programs? Is it because the country is developing so rapidly after the genocide?"

"Our country has learned a lot from its history," the president said. He added that he was happy to share what had worked for Rwanda, and what had not, with anyone who was willing to learn.

The radio crackled, radiated these ideas of the authorities' success. "Your Excellency, I was asking myself the other day why our government is so capable and professional, why we

have so little corruption. Our business ratings are so good. The World Bank, the United Nations, the Americans and the British are praising us. But what is the cause for the praise? Yesterday I realized the answer. It is our leadership, Your Excellency. This is our secret."

I recognized that last voice. It was Cato, one of my students. I felt something piercing in my stomach. He had decided to turn, and evidently join the president's army of flatterers—a group officially called the Intore in Rwanda. By praising the president they incited fear and devotion in others. It was the easiest way to protect himself. Our class had lost a student, but I did not blame Cato; the situation was too precarious for all the journalists.

I found a frightened Gibson in his apartment. He asked me to close the door at once. "Have a seat." His sofa was a wooden frame with soft square cushions, all covered in an old bedspread's maroon cotton. Besides a small center table this sofa was the only piece of furniture in the living room. The apartment had whitewashed walls and was lit by a dim lamp. It had a single bedroom. Gibson lived in a shantytown on a slope of an eroded mud hill.

"I bought the sofa just a few days ago," he said. "Do you like it?"

He was clearly proud of this somewhat pathetic acquisition. I said I would find him some new cloth. He became immensely pleased.

I had come with an idea to travel with Gibson. We were entering the season of memorials for the genocide, in which some eight hundred thousand people had been killed over a hundred days—a rate of murder unequaled even by the Nazis—and in great pain, for they were killed mostly with machetes, not guns.

It had been an idea of mine since I had arrived in Rwanda, to pay homage to and remember those who had died from this human cruelty. But Gibson furiously shook his head. He said it would be too dangerous.

He was a man sized like a fourteen-year-old boy whose hands trembled lightly when he reached out to pick up things. Perhaps to hide this, he wore shirts with sleeves too long that extended beyond his wrists and up to his hands. The shirts were often white and hung over his small shoulders. And besides his best friend, his former roommate at the seminary, he was something of a loner, rarely mixing with the other journalists, who teased him for eating his *fou-fou,* a paste of manioc flour, with his fingers, in a way that tried to imitate the manner of city folk—it immediately gave him away as someone who came from the countryside.

And here as well, in his apartment, he was ashamed of his poverty. I could see it in the way he passed hurriedly into his room. He had little to offer though he had known I would come. A large bottle—shaped like a canister of liquid detergent—containing diluted and sugary apple juice was brought out.

He poured himself a glass but did not drink it.

I asked what he thought might happen if he traveled with me.

He shrugged, seeming to search for words.

I congratulated him on his hospital story, which had won a prize in our class. There had been visible consternation from the other students, particularly Jean-Bosco—no doubt from a sense that Gibson was a peasant boy, and did not have the requisite dissident credentials. Gibson had himself been surprised, and had stood stunned, looking at his certificate during the prize ceremony.

I suggested he try to get his story published.

He shook his head, smiling. "My newspaper will never publish it."

"There's nothing political about your piece," I said, insisting that his editors would not turn down a well-written story.

But Gibson had for some months been writing for the country's main independent paper, *Umuseso,* The Early Morning. It was Rwanda's most popular publication, revered by the people. Within hours of a new *Umuseso* edition vendors had to sell photocopies—such was the demand. Even in far-flung villages, where few could read, one would find old copies making the rounds, being read aloud by the literate. The print press was sought after in Rwanda, as few had access to the Internet.

The government had begun to crack down on *Umuseso* reporters, many of whom had once been close to the president, even living in exile with him. Some *Umuseso* journalists had already fled the country; others were in hiding. An old court case had been resurrected and the lead journalists found guilty of defaming one of the president's powerful accomplices. The president hated criticism.

But like a many-headed hydra *Umuseso* survived the government attacks. This was not an ordinary newspaper. Its stories rarely cited sources, and were rarely verified. Yet they were often accurate. With astonishing success *Umuseso* predicted which officials would be fired or accused of corruption or sexual misconduct. The paper's source was the regime itself. There were officials deep within the government, who publicly supported the president but who felt certain information should be known, and had for this reason become leakers.

This made *Umuseso* the most important paper in the country—its journalism was the only kind that had any meaning in the dictatorship. And the people had long ago learned that it was in presidential office gossip, rather than the theatrical parliamentary or ministerial hearings, that they should look for clues to their future.

The association with *Umuseso* meant Gibson led an extraor-

dinarily private life. He used a neighborhood boy to fetch him beer in order to avoid being seen. And when he got out of the house he quickly escaped, he said, to a distant neighborhood where there was less risk of being recognized.

I turned down his offer of a drink, and asked how often he saw his family.

"Sometimes I worry for them. But it is better we don't see one another. My work could endanger their lives. It is better like this." He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself.

He mentioned that he had a girlfriend. "I would like to marry her. But who would marry me? I have no money, and I am always worrying about the government. I can't offer a girl much. I would like to have a child and raise a family. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a normal life."

He looked around the room.

"Have you read Hegel?" His eyes sparkled.

It had been a while.

"I think his concept of the dialectic can help describe my life. Two ideas are opposed, and they give rise to a greater truth. Sometimes I feel this is why I confront the authorities."

He added: "I think it is also because I realized many years ago that God was dead."

Gibson often cited one of his mentors at the seminary, a bishop who had edited a newspaper. This bishop had written against the poor prison conditions and the harassment of human rights workers. The authorities had seen him as a threat. When the bishop fell ill, the government prevented him from traveling abroad to seek medical treatment. He subsequently died.

We then exchanged some philosophical banter, though I was unable to keep up with him.

"You don't know how much this conversation means to me," Gibson said. "I am always closing myself in, and my mind loses

sharpness. My professors, friends, I have given them all up. I don't have anyone to talk to except poor people. I have nothing against them, I am a modest man, but this kind of exchange of ideas, I have not had it for a long time, and it makes me feel somehow alive."

He read to me from a recent edition of *Umuseso,* which he had salvaged from a government raid on his former apartment—the authorities had been looking for traces of the leakers within the regime. In this *Umuseso* issue was a story about how the president's chief of cabinet had contrived to remove her predecessor, who had fled to Belgium claiming he would attend a training program but had never returned. When the government was silent about those who had fled the people were scared to evoke them. Outside of the independent newspapers it could seem as though these exiles had never existed.

There was a knock on the door.

Gibson froze. Fortunately it was he who had been reading, and I had been silent.

The knocking repeated.

I sensed his terror at being seen with me, and I slipped into his bedroom. Here in this poor neighborhood, not frequented by foreigners, there would be suspicion about my presence, and what we were discussing in private. In his bedroom the floor was covered with stacks of handwritten papers. I moved closer; they were notes for a news report.

Gibson spoke from the doorway. There was a tense discussion between him and a man—it seemed a census of some sort. After a while I heard the door being shut. I waited some moments.

It had been the Intore, the group that Cato had joined. The presidential election was coming up and gangs in the neighborhood were going house to house to ask, "Are you sure you

know whom to vote for?" They were also holding a celebration in the president's honor, and forcing people to attend.

Gibson was sweating.

I asked if he would go. We spoke more quietly now, pausing often, our ears alert for even a slight movement outside.

"Sometimes I tell them that I am sick, and hope they go away. But you can't avoid these events for too long. They are the duties of a 'good citizen.' I too have to go and chant for the president. It is necessary if you want to eat."

I took my leave. Gibson, seeming disappointed, picked up my empty glass, and said he normally would have walked me back.

Before leaving I asked about the explosion. Any news? The event seemed to have almost passed into my imagination. Gibson said there had still been nothing.

Closing the door on me, quickly, he seemed deep in thought. I sensed a despair had grown within him over the evening. As I walked out a small exterior light came on, to help me navigate the uneven mud, shaped with crevices by running water. I looked up: the moon was ringed by a glowing halo. It would rain tonight. The light was put out as soon as I stepped out of range—I turned, but could not spot from where he was observing me.

I slowly made my way down the red hill, tripping, my mind occupied.

A helicopter moved over the city, shining a powerful spotlight on the neighborhood around me—it was the police's night patrols.

I thought much about Gibson in the days that followed: I admired the man. In his tranquil brown eyes, despite the fear, I

sensed an ambition and defiance. He seemed sure of his resistance and in his quiet way courageous. I suppose it moved me that he did not come from a wealthy family that could afford dissent: no. I felt I should do everything to help him, even if it occasionally involved risks.

Gibson was still writing for *Umuseso,* but only "harmless" stories. It was not the moment to be provocative, he said. The genocide memorials seemed to make the journalists newly nervous. In the classroom, again I asked why he would not visit them—I thought Gibson could write a simple story about genocide survivors. He shrugged. I grew frustrated at his evasiveness.

I arrived late to class one day. At home, I had turned on the national television—the country's only channel, it was what people watched when they wished to see the president delivering a speech, or documentaries on topics they were permitted to talk about: the country's mountain gorillas, development projects, criminals captured by the security forces. I saw images of people hacking at one another with machetes.

It took me a moment to understand what I was looking at. And then I felt a new, visceral kind of terror. It was a bloody, insane slaughter.

I watched a grainy video of a roadblock on a red dirt road. An unarmed figure—a man? a woman?—was assaulted. A machete came down on the figure, arcing high through the air. The figure fell to the ground. The machete came down harder and harder. Now the camera moved close up, showing bodies on the ground, on the grass, in latrines. The blood over them was thick black. A piece of a head was missing. Another body was sliced open at the stomach so one could almost see its internal organs. Children, women, men.

Everything about the genocide terrified: the sheer number—eight hundred thousand—of dead; that thousands of ordi-

nary people had participated in such a vile act; that it had all occurred in only one hundred days, between April and July 1994; that so few had seen it coming; that when presented with proof the world had turned a blind eye and done nothing.

On April 6, 1994, the official airplane carrying the then Rwandan president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was shot down, killing him. The genocide began shortly after, as did a military advance by Kagame's forces, which had invaded Rwanda four years earlier. The country at that time was facing an economic crisis, and was ruled by what used to be the farmer class—the Hutus. Kagame represented a section of Tutsis, the traditional Rwandan elite, who had been exiled just before Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962. His invasion stirred fear that the Tutsis would continue an old history of subjugation, and radio broadcasts during the genocide goaded the killers to exterminate Tutsis so the people of Rwanda would never again be oppressed.

The victims suffered alone. As the killings in Rwanda mounted, and the evidence of genocide became clear, the United Nations voted to decrease its troop numbers. The United States shied away from recognizing the atrocity as genocide for fear that it would be compelled to stop the killings.

The national television channel showed us more bloated bodies beside a river, and then a church that had become a mass grave.

Kagame achieved his military victory during the genocide, taking charge of Rwanda and imposing order and calm. His government now regulated minute aspects of the country's functioning.

The journalists I taught and the ones at independent newspapers like *Umuseso* were both Hutu and Tutsi. Some were from the families of Tutsi genocide survivors, others from the families of Hutu killers now in prison.

That day in class, during the tea break between lessons, I asked Gibson about the images broadcast on national television. He silently picked at his piece of sponge cake. We were standing outside on the classroom porch. Gibson seemed too distressed to tell me much. I felt the broadcasts had touched a nerve, and that he was trying to shelter himself from such emotions when he refused to accompany me to the memorials. I knew he had been a boy in Rwanda when the killings had occurred. He smiled and mumbled something about the season of memorials. And I sensed it was more than the history that terrified Gibson, for his fear seemed rooted in the present, in how the genocide was now felt. I needed to seek counsel, for I did not fully understand.

I spent the afternoon teaching the class how to construct the lead paragraph of a news story. The paragraph needed to contain the essential information and grab the reader, yet be brief. We attempted some examples together: the students and I started with the same story, about a flood in America, and each tried to write the best lead.

Then we received news that the government was going to shut down *Umuseso* and also the newspaper run by Jean-Bosco, the student who had once been beaten into a coma. Jean-Bosco had not come to class that day. Several students did not believe the reports. "That would be going too far," Gibson said, particularly of *Umuseso.* "We are supported by powerful people, close to the president himself." He was sure that come Monday new issues would be published and available on the streets.

I called Jean-Bosco. He confirmed the government pressure, but said he was fighting it from every angle and that his paper would soon be up and running. That night I made another round of calls to my students, to learn if they had more news, and also to see if they were all right.

But less than a week later we learned that Jean-Bosco had been alerted that his life was again in danger. Government agents had followed him and told him to make a "U-turn," to stop his reporting and help the government or they would "finish" him. He had fled. It was rumored that Jean-Bosco had crossed the eastern border, over the river, into Tanzania, perhaps as a way to get to friends in Uganda, and that the security services were working frantically to capture him.

The repression did nothing to help Gibson's nerves. He stopped talking much on the phone for fear that we were being listened to.

And the country was still imperturbably quiet, calm. A visitor would have no notion that any of this was happening. No one demonstrated or spoke out. Radios and newspapers continually relayed good news about the government, besides information about the ongoing genocide memorials, and briefly mentioned the criminal journalists.

I passed a difficult few nights.

It was Moses, the elder statesman of the journalists, who showed me the extent of the threat that was looming. The repression was having wider, transformative impact. I told him about my discussions with Gibson. He shook his head, and said there was an acute risk as the journalists were gradually silenced: the changes in the country, he said, were irreversible. Matters had become critical and needed to be written about. "You are concerned for the lives of the journalists. We must look after them. But how can they be idle now? The government is doing things that need to be stopped, and it is destroying our ability to have any kind of discussion."

He was grave about the recent events, particularly I thought

for a man who was so respected by the other students—it made me alert. "You have to understand, in all this," he said, leaning over his cane, "that there are not many journalists left."

I had come to his home to collect him. Moses was escorting me to a memorial.

We were to go to the place where the genocide took root in Rwanda. It was in the north of the country—it was there that the president's forces, then in rebellion, had begun to attack the previous government, launching incursions from the mountains. And it was here that the previous government had conducted retaliatory killings, rounding up and killing everyone of the rebels' ethnicity—already, at this early stage, thousands of people.

I got to know Moses personally at this time. I learnt that he was in fact a survivor of the genocide. During the hundred days of killing he had hidden himself in bushes while street boys had fed him bread and wine that they had stolen from churches. Moses had reported on the genocide by the previous regime at risk to his life. Now he had committed himself to working against the repression, though more discreetly because he was older. We boarded the bus that would take us north. Moses told me he would like to write about some of the president's crimes.

I asked why he wasn't afraid of speaking to me, in the open, at such a tense time, when the other journalists were being so cautious. I was thinking of our program, and also of Gibson.

His answer surprised me. "I died during the genocide," he said. "My entire family was massacred. I should have been killed with them. Now what's there to fear; are they going to kill me a second time?"

He called himself one of the walking dead. It seemed many survivors of the genocide described themselves as such.

Did he go often to the memorials? Not in a long time, he said.

He had attended them in the beginning, just after the genocide. Indeed he had created one of the first committees to organize remembrances. But soon the government had taken over the memorials.

This was our conversation, to the sounds of the pop music that played in the bus, as we traveled alongside the beautifully forested hills, to the town of the memorial.

Moses had gotten me on a special bus normally reserved for survivors of the genocide and their families. I spent the first hours listening to the chatter. And I would have remained silent—I had begun the journey in a sacred spirit, thinking of the dead—if there was not a general lack of sobriety in the bus. It was the Western pop music, and the laughter of the passengers.

I tried to pry out of Moses what he wanted to show me. He was crisp: "You'll see."

He added: "You know, to control people you need to create a great deal of fear."

I asked if there was much rancor against the president for the people he had killed.

I was referring to crimes committed during the genocide and afterward in Congo. The president's forces had killed tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. His army had invaded Congo, sparking a war there that still runs today and has killed many millions more, mostly from hunger and disease. The president had said he was hunting down the perpetrators of the genocide in Congo, but his forces reached nearly a thousand miles into that country and installed a new government there while slaughtering unarmed women and children en route. The massacres in Congo had been documented in U.N. reports—which had called them acts of a possible counter-genocide—but the killings in Rwanda were still shrouded in mystery. The president had suppressed investiga-

tions. When I asked Rwandans about these deaths they said, "I know nothing about them."

Moses and I started to talk without mentioning names so people would not know we were referring to the president.

"He's killed a lot of people," Moses said, "who will never receive justice. Many Rwandan families cannot name their dead because he was responsible." Moses waited a moment. "But did you know he also killed his fighters, including his child soldiers? It was a policy in his rebel forces. There was a word for it, *kufaniya*. It means 'do something for him.' That kind of ruthlessness, we started to realize it later. He cares for nobody. Even his wife means nothing to him. I think he is a little sick in the mind."

I asked why a man would kill his own people.

"He only knows to rule by fear."

Moses had become perturbed. "He grew up as a refugee. He returned from exile with his army and conquered this country. A Pygmy senator, after that war, said that when the big man and his people left Rwanda they had to leave their stomachs at the border, and go with their nobility, so people abroad would care for and feed them. But when they returned, they found these stomachs at the border, hungry for thirty years. They left behind their nobility, and picked up the stomachs."

I waited. Moses became bolder and now mentioned the president.

"Nobility is very important for our people. Politeness, generosity. The president kills people who fought by his side, who protected his life, and were like his brothers. Where is the nobility in that?"

We had nearly arrived—the hills had grown larger and larger, and were often capped by forests. It gave the idea of a natural countryside. But on closer observation one saw that the thickets of trees on those hills were made up of a single species.

They were plantations of eucalyptus, brought in by the Belgians during the colonial time. So there was little natural about the countryside.

And the undulating land, which at first seemed lush, one saw was everywhere divided into rectangular patches—each a shade of green, yellow or brown, depending on the crop. Here, unlike in Kigali, it was possible to sense how populated the country was, occupied to every inch.

The music, as we arrived, changed to religious tunes; the volume was raised. In the bus there was a general fidgeting; a sense of purpose had come over the passengers. Feeling it was inappropriate to talk I leaned back in my seat. Moses was looking out of the open window, his hands holding the vibrating glass. At the venue I saw a van with a satellite dish broadcasting the event across the country.

We walked into a battery of wails. Several thousands of people huddled on a field, dressed in purple, the official color of the memorials, and hurling cries. Women rolled on the ground; others fell over the men beside them. Immediately it began to rain—the sharp cold rain of Rwanda, accompanied by an enveloping mist. We pushed ahead, Moses with his cane, among the incessant cries of increasing volume, and arrived in the center of the field at a set of white stairs.

At the top of the stairs was a white platform, on which stood a man screaming into a microphone: "Repent! Repent!" Music began alongside the wailing, repeating the words: "*Jenoside, Jenoside.*"

I climbed the steps. A group of poor-looking people were lined up behind the speaker, and they had begun to cry. The women began to beat their breasts with palms and fists. And they pushed forward their children—five and seven years old, bawling, with snot dripping from their noses and over their tattered shirts.

I felt a tugging on my shirt. It was Moses. "You see what he is doing?"

There was a pleading look in his eyes. Leaning over his cane, he was totally concentrated on my face.

Coffins began to be carried below the staircase, into a white crypt. The coffins had glass tops, so one could see inside. In the first were skulls, neatly arranged, one beside the other, clean and perfectly shaped. I could not help but fix on one of the skulls, and imagine its past: the anger, hatred, fear, desperation. In the next coffin were femurs, set along its length. A dozen boxes passed by. "Repent!"

This was strange, for the culture of Rwanda would value preserving the dead body as a whole. Even if only a femur and a fragment of bone had been found after the genocide, they should be buried together, to represent the body, honor the dead. But the victims had here been dismantled, and their bones regrouped by part; it had the effect of emphasizing the number.

The children were now crying so hard that they had to stop to gasp for breath. Their voices were strained, grating. They coughed, and liquid spilled out of their mouths. Why had they begun to howl, and bray? "*Jenoside! Jenoside!*" These children were too young to have been alive during the genocide. But they behaved as if they possessed its memory.

And one realized that the memorials also served the purpose of transmission. And that the transmission was meant to cause distress. It was as in Rwandan schools, where teachers complained that during the memorial season the videos on national television made the children uncontrollable. But despite the teachers' complaints, the gruesome films continued. I was doubly horrified: I had expected something else from the memorials: some compassion for society, but I felt only violence. The government of Rwanda had created these events,

which instead of healing society, increased its trauma. The terror of the genocide was being used and spread. One realized that the genocide and the time of war, almost two decades past, were still kept alive in the country. The trauma of the genocide was, in the children, running like roots through society.

"They are manufacturing fear in these places," Moses said, gasping. "We survivors have asked them to stop this violence. What do they want from us?" I could see he had begun to shake, that he had lost strength in his legs. "Sometimes I cry to myself at night. Like this"—he put his teeth over his lips and started to bawl—"not because of the memories of the genocide. But because of how the government mocks the genocide, uses it to get pity from the world, to get money, and at the same time keep us in a state of fear."

The crying around us was alarming.

"The imbeciles, the imbeciles," Moses repeated. He seemed not to care about the government officers standing nearby. "The imbeciles who run this country are negating us, using us, selling us. They are building our country on our bodies, our blood. They hold shows like this, theaters, and pretend. This place is the trauma. They put people in prison for negating the genocide. But if they were serious about it then the first man in prison would be the one who ordered this."

Moses said there were other places: military-style camps across the country for children. Kept far from society, the children spent weeks in them, were dressed in military fatigues, and indoctrinated to be utterly devoted to the government.

The president each year held an event, at which he brought thousands together in the national stadium: films of the killings were played, the crowd was driven into a traumatized frenzy. And the president reminded everyone that he was their savior.

There were other places as well.

"We can't say anything," he said. "And when the president is done, no one will want to."

On the journey home it took Moses several hours to regain some sense of calm. "I don't know if we will succeed against this," he said. "But God knows we have to try."

The explosion had by now become something vague in the mind: the memory of its sound had receded, and the shimmering swept-up glass had acquired an unearthly glow. Without acknowledgment, or any proof, evidence, without the shock that society should normally feel, without a sense of an emotional response from the country, I began to wonder if the explosion had happened at all, if it had not been something I had imagined. It was frightening, that something so obvious to the senses as an explosion—that had wounded and killed—could turn into a sort of hallucination, and be made to disappear.

LIGHTS

In the classroom Gibson suddenly said that he wanted to start a magazine. It would not flatter the president, nor print overtly subversive news. He wanted this magazine to fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of newspapers in the country, and hoped it would one day publish his hospital story.

The anger was lurking; the news was harsh. Already among the journalists only the uncompromising still dared operate. "The more they harass the press," Gibson said, "the more aggressive the news gets, and the angrier the government becomes. Perhaps we can break this negative cycle with some sense."

But he looked away from me as he spoke. I suspected that the stress had become overwhelming. He saw few ways to report honestly without drawing the authorities' wrath. Gibson was trying not to react to the government's pressure on him, to remain calm as the tension mounted. That week he had stopped writing for *Umuseso*.

He asked what I thought. I told him I wanted to help. Gibson said his best friend would join in our efforts.

He would call the magazine: *New Horizons*.

What Moses had foretold began to be. I continued to teach my journalism classes. Without Cato, who had turned to the Intore, and Jean-Bosco, who was being pursued by the government, it wasn't the same. I invited new journalists to take their places, so we still had ten students. But the classes were quieter.

Discussions were less vibrant. It took longer to get through basic material.

Gibson still sat at the back of the room. Agnès was there as well, scowling as always, her back to a wall. I was glad for their presence. Sometimes I felt I was teaching mostly for them.

A student brought in a copy of a government paper. It was in Kinyarwanda, the local language. A picture of the president was on the front page. I asked the student to read out the first paragraph of the lead story.

"Victoire Ingabire, the criminal with genocidal ideology, will be prosecuted by the government . . ."

She was an opposition politician who had been living in the Netherlands, and had returned to run in the upcoming election against the president. One of her first acts in Rwanda was to visit a genocide memorial and say that there were many others who had been killed but were not remembered—she was also referring to those massacred by the president's forces, all mention of whom was suppressed.

I looked around the room at my students. My cup of tea from the morning break between lessons was growing cold.

I asked if there was a problem with the news story. No one answered; this alone was unusual. Before, it would have been difficult to contain the students.

I asked them if the politician, Victoire, had been tried in court.

After a pause, some of the students meekly shook their heads. They sat on either side of a long conference table, at whose head I stood. I scribbled from time to time on a flip board. Now I wrote: "Court."

"No, she has not been tried, and is therefore not a criminal—not yet," I said.

"But the president has said she is a criminal," someone countered vociferously.

"Does that make her a criminal?"

It was futile, for the courts depended entirely on the president. Reformist judges had been expelled so the president controlled the judiciary. This was how dictators destroyed countries, to gain power: they destroyed the capacity for independent speech, then independent institutions—and ultimately independent thought itself. I was bearing witness to this process of destruction, and trying to reverse it.

"Who wrote that story?" I asked. It was the newspaper's editor in chief. "Is he experienced?"

When no one else volunteered Agnès answered that he was indeed experienced, that he had been a reporter for twenty years, and had on many occasions written good, balanced stories. There had been fierce competition for his job.

I reiterated my point: "Is he incompetent? Or does he know what he's doing?"

They murmured, though before they had been reluctant: "He knows what he is doing."

"Then why does he write like this?"

Silence again.

A student finally spoke up: "He wants to make the president happy. The editor in chief knows what he is doing is wrong. But to please the president he will not only agree with what the president has said, but go even further. Out of an excess of zeal. He will accuse Victoire, indict her and judge her for other crimes. It is how we are taught to show loyalty—"

"One journalist has written that Victoire had extramarital affairs. It has no relation to her case. But the government likes to smear its enemies. So we do the job for them, even without them asking."

"When you flatter the president you receive favors, promotions, money."

A woman interjected: "How do you expect otherwise? If we

don't call her a criminal then the authorities think we are on her side. They have even threatened my children. But if we say she is guilty they leave us alone. So we even call her a villain, genocidal . . ."

A free discussion had begun, at least. It had taken some work, but with the assistance of the original group of students, the other journalists were now expressing themselves, debating, thinking, supporting each other, helping one another speak.

I knew that I could not hope to fight the system on my own. But I wanted the classes to be a catalyst, to create a feeling of solidarity, so the journalists knew that they were not alone—the regime was trying to isolate them, and pick them off one by one.

And I could see that the students already knew the answers—even if these were buried deep within. They needed courage, and the solidarity of their colleagues, to speak their minds.

"This excess of zeal is a problem," Gibson said. "We say things we don't believe, just to please some people, and we end up believing what we say."

"To stop flattery we have to stop being afraid."

"It makes us forget the truth."

I had given the students assignments—to visit schools, clinics, agriculture programs. Their stories had more errors than when I'd had the more experienced journalists. I spent hours outside the classroom making corrections.

But the work felt rewarding. Every day that I drew the students out of the repression I was satisfied. I felt that a small part of truth had been won that day. And there seemed hope that this piece of truth could grow, and live.

The office, where I taught the classes, thus became a place of great energy, a place that gave me strength. Class after class was conducted; the students advanced, developed camaraderie, and became more adept in their reporting. With limited

resources and funds, I felt our training program was making a real difference in the country.

Gibson would stay on in the office in the evenings, and together with his best friend, the former seminary roommate, who was to lead the business development—Gibson would be chief editor—we drafted a detailed business plan. The government required this for the magazine's registration. One had to show enough funds for computers, tables and chairs; an office, the government said, had also to *look* like an office. The regulations were meant to dissuade journalists, and make our work difficult. We joked amongst ourselves that the government would soon also mandate the color of journalists' socks. I offered Gibson the use of our office facilities, which had ample chairs and spare computers when the other students were not around.

It was a fulfilling period, of long hours of work with good spirit, during which our friendship grew stronger and more complete.

I understood Gibson better as the magazine took shape, and became increasingly convinced of his sincerity, his courage and intelligence. We grew excited by the possibilities the magazine offered. The project began to occupy our minds. We felt that it would almost certainly succeed with the public, and might even turn a small profit in its first months, if we were lucky.

I remember the office garden from this time. Our office was blessed with an enormous garden that had a quality of privacy and splendor. I had been told that before the genocide it used to be a favorite sitting place on Sundays for the former president's daughter. It had a large scaly guava tree with spreading branches. We could see this tree from the rooms in which we worked, and I associated its scattered form with many strong memories. I was delighted to have gotten to know Gibson.

A first copy of the magazine was printed. The front page was

in color, and he had even found a couple of advertisements, which were of simple design but impeccably printed. It was an admirable effort.

The design, the copy, the printing, the advertisements: all this had been achieved with little fuss. Gibson worked in silence, on his own, as if unaware of his intelligence and his progression. He was lost in his work. There was never the disturbance of achievement.

He still kept his distance from the others, spoke to no one, had no real friends besides his former roommate.

The main story in this first issue was about malnutrition. The government position was that Rwanda had sufficient food and that the president's policies had banished hunger. Gibson had avoided confronting the official line. Without ever stating that Rwanda had a malnutrition problem, and that children even in the capital—the beacon of the government's message of its success to the world—were dying from the condition, Gibson simply provided information to mothers that would help them feed their children.

Fundamental needs of the population like food, housing and health were especially sensitive topics. They were essential to the discourse that the government was doing good for its people. The government might point out problems that arose, but for a citizen to do the same, to say without prior signal for example that people were lacking food, was inherently dangerous. It was seen as diminishing the government's authority. Even posing the question could be seen as a form of displeasure, dissent. It was why one always added that the government was doing everything necessary. Or to be safe, one avoided stating the problem at all.

Language was thus made complex. It was as much for your use as for use against you. The attempt to write or say

something, to express yourself, turned into an intricate exercise. Distrust or unhappiness might show in a word, a pause, a twitch. One had always to feel that one was being watched. And that anyone could use what you wrote or said—or what you did not—to denounce you.

What then was the truth about how people were faring? The president was declaring to the world that he was creating progress: he was growing the country's economy, reducing poverty, reducing hunger. But he suppressed verification of these claims. For instance, when the World Food Programme announced a famine outbreak in Rwanda in 2006, affecting hundreds of thousands of people, the government denied it. To this day, there was officially no famine. When the United Nations released a study in 2007, signed off on by Rwanda's finance minister, saying the number of impoverished people in the country had risen, and that hunger would remain above levels in 1990—the year the president had invaded Rwanda to "liberate" the people from the previous regime—the government forced the United Nations to discredit its findings and blacklist the researchers. A World Bank research team studying the country's progress, directly testing the president's claim that he had improved life in Rwanda since 1990, was forced to destroy the data it had collected when it became clear that the study was willing to contradict the official narrative. Subsequent research teams, at the government's invitation, have found that the economy is growing, poverty is declining, and that people are better nourished. Researchers investigating police corruption were expelled from the country; the country was declared among the least corrupt. A magical nation was thus created.

The government's telling of history was rich in such deceptions. An irony of the memorials was their slogan, "Never For-

get," which to many Rwandans, even genocide survivors, meant the opposite. Rwandans had to forget, for example, that the president had opposed the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers one month into the hundred-day genocide. The president had worried that the peacekeepers would interfere with his military campaign, and prevent him from taking power. Thousands of deaths in the genocide could have been avoided, besides the scores of civilians his forces had killed. But the president had cast himself as the hero of the genocide, as the man who had ended it while the world stood idle.

There were some outlets, like my students' newspapers, where people still dared to describe their lives and memories. Otherwise, one could not question the government's statements, so what the government said became the truth.

Gibson had realized that the solution was to write around these official narratives. In this way he would address the immediate concerns of the people, but ensure his own protection.

One afternoon Gibson came to the office with news we had been waiting for. The ministries of information and health had both approved *New Horizons*. We had been optimistic about approval since his publication was not critical of the authorities. It was a good sign. Gibson's pimpled, cratered face showed both satisfaction and a kind of melancholy. He would soon be able to publish.

Gibson had already charted out the next four issues, their themes. He had lined up journalists, and spent his own money, from the little he had saved up, to pay them for their reporting.

We went to the garden that evening with some bottles of beer. They were almost the size of wine bottles, the standard in Rwanda. Once Gibson had made sure no one could observe us he drank his beer through a straw. It was the traditional way. In villages men would sit in a circle and pass around a flask of

banana beer—a practice the government had outlawed. I think Gibson quietly enjoyed his small subversion.

One still felt the nervousness in the country. The *Umuseso* journalists had been summoned to court. Their lawyers had asked the judge if the president had sent in a complaint, perhaps a letter, as proof of his irritation with their newspaper. The prosecution asked if that were the only way to know of the president's irritation. So this landmark case, with serious implications for the country, would devolve into a discussion about the president's possible emotional states.

"Maybe *New Horizons* will become a way for journalists to open up spaces to speak," Gibson told me. "We can get the message out while worrying less about the government attacking us. People in our country are dying needlessly. If we tell them how to cure themselves they will survive. We just have to be patient, and help a few of them at a time."

The garden had grown more and more splendid. We were in the rainy season, and the humid afternoons came with sharp, heavy showers. The clouds would then quickly disperse, and the sun would light up every blade of grass, every leaf, flower.

In the twilight hour Gibson and I observed the birds with long orange tails, the African paradise flycatchers, swoop down from the guava tree and pick out the flies that hung in midair as though in a stupor.

Gibson was now considering a point of business: should he publish the magazine as a stand-alone or would it be better to distribute it as a supplement with existing newspapers? He felt the latter would be more feasible, particularly to begin with: he would avoid having to build a distribution network, and wouldn't have to craft a brand from scratch. I had not seen any paper use such an idea in Rwanda. I observed the young man. He looked nonchalant, and unaware of his ingenuity.

We heard a noise above. A helicopter plunged toward the city. Gibson and I stepped back. It was not the night police—the rotors were set higher and the engine had a more powerful, smoother sound. It flew low, almost recklessly low over the houses. A professional pilot on his own accord would not fly in this manner. The machine, its belly slender and white, hovered to one side of us. The chops became hard, suddenly audible. I wanted to hide. Feeling exposed, we shielded our eyes, and tried to get a view of the person in the cockpit.

There was a high wall, at the top of which hung a small square picture of the president. And in front of me, against this wall, was a scrawny man wearing a thin T-shirt and khaki shorts. The man smiled repeatedly at me. We stood outside a conference room.

He looked up, at the photograph. And then at me.

I looked up as well. And at him.

He started to laugh. It was a cackling laugh, hysterical and high-pitched.

I laughed.

"It's funny, no?" he said.

"You're funny."

He was unfazed. "When he's watching you, you know everything's going to be all right."

I smiled at the man.

"Careful, careful, he's always watching."

"Only small eyes here," I said, looking up.

"Sometimes the photos are big, bigger even than the man."

He asked if I had been to a certain hotel. I had not.

"Got a photo so big they have to put it on a chair, next to the receptionist. No space on the wall."

A pause. "They had problems with the man, you see," he said, raising an eyebrow. "A big photo pays for your sins."

I smiled at him again, and turned in to the conference room. It was in one of the city's best hotels. The government was holding a seminar on political reforms—I had not been invited, but I stood near the entrance.

A number of foreign human rights organizations had recently criticized the government. Some reports had been released—about the "increasing threats, attacks and harassment" and "serious incidents of intimidation"—that had presented the government in an unsavory light.

The authorities, in usual fashion, had first said that there were no such problems in Rwanda, then that it wasn't the business of foreigners how it ran the country. But the president cared about his image abroad. The government organized a conference on the questions, promising to enact reforms if problems were indeed found. Senior government officials were mandated to oversee the effort.

The major embassies had been invited: from the United States, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Sweden. The European Union, the World Bank and the United Nations had sent their officials. They sat in a row at the back of the hall and observed attentively.

Two Rwandan journalists in the audience stood up and spoke against laws that criminalized reporters for minor offenses. Another said that government officials never returned his calls. No one mentioned the harassment by the police and secret services; it would have been too dangerous.

The government officials, sitting on a stage, looked these journalists up and down. One of them nodded at the speakers, closing his eyes from time to time to acknowledge what they said.

This official promised that the issues would be addressed. Committees would be formed. The journalists would be represented by a man the government trusted—a former police officer had been named to head the Rwanda Journalists Association. It was a way of hijacking the journalists as a group: anyone wishing to hear the journalists' point of view would be presented with this former policeman who adhered to government doctrine.

People would be able to speak freely, the government man assured the audience, glancing to the back of the hall.

Refreshments were offered. I managed to grab a samosa and some passion-fruit juice from the platters, and watched the Rwandan journalists, some of whom ate as though it was their only meal of the day.

As I passed some of the British, American and Swedish embassy officials on my way out, I asked what they thought. They said they would closely watch the government's actions, and that of course human rights had to be respected.

I came out with mixed feelings, but harboring some hope. With the foreign governments watching the president might be forced to improve conditions. Perhaps my journalists and their work might still have a chance.

From the small photograph the president seemed to look down on us benevolently.

I didn't see the scrawny man in the khaki shorts approach—I was exiting the hotel, walking beside the embassy SUVs rumbling out, when he arrived with such speed that I was stopped in my tracks. He introduced himself: "My name is Roger." The smile was still intense, penetrating. He said we needed to talk. Not now and here, he said, let's do a meeting. We exchanged numbers—he gave me his scribbled on a paper scrap, and said I should give him a call.

"Of course," I said, but then completely forgot this man, as a

number of things happened too quickly in the two weeks that followed.

The magazine was having difficulties. It had received approval from all the relevant authorities—even the one for economic development. And the first issue of *New Horizons,* of which Gibson had printed a small sample run, was receiving exceptional praise. Strangers were writing in by SMS to say that they adored the articles and were already using the information. We were on the cusp of the launch. But a government media regulator—reporting directly to the president—blocked the publication.

Gibson was never told that he was being refused registration, but each time he went to this regulator they requested a new form, a new certificate from some government arm, a new letter stating his intentions. It began a cycle of debilitating, and Kafkaesque, confrontations with officials. Gibson was made to repeat information he had already given them, but in different form, on new sheets of paper; he was made to provide irrelevant information; he had to obtain testimony from the authorities in his home village that he had been on "good behavior," that he had attended the community work sessions, had not been outside at irregular hours and had not received odd visitors. That the man had no criminal record did not matter, of course—the people close to the president needed to ascertain that he was not associated with any rumors of suspicious activity.

How to defend himself against rumor? The threat was formless. In a dictatorship it wasn't the facts that determined one's life, it was the claims, the whispers, feelings. There was no escape from the cloud of rumor following, invisible. Still Gibson ran from authority to authority, trying to please officials, trying to provide every proof that they asked for. He was beside

himself, fatigued, overcome with worry that his project would be crushed.

And one afternoon his former roommate arrived in the office while Gibson and I were working. The friend was trembling. He sat down. He had been called that morning to the parking lot of a nearby hotel. The callers had said they were from a ministry dealing with one of the authorizations. But when he arrived he found plainclothesmen carrying revolvers—government men—who snatched his telephone and scrolled down to see whom he had been calling. The men said they wanted to talk to Gibson. The roommate told us he had said his friend was traveling, that he did not know where. And after the interrogation he had run first to a gas station, to make sure he was not being followed, and then come to the office.

He had taken a great risk by coming here. Someone might have seen him.

Gibson was immediately tense. He let forth a flurry of questions—Why him? Did the men say what he had done? He had written nothing overly critical, he said—nothing, in any case, compared to the other *Umuseso* journalists. He could only think of his reports in *Umuseso* about government trials to prosecute killers from the genocide. Gibson had mentioned suspects close to the authorities who had not been charged. But he had written these many months before, and his recent reporting had been benign, as were his plans for *New Horizons.* Was even his malnutrition story now unacceptable? He became quiet and told me at the office, once his friend had left, that this was not normal. "I am very worried."

The friend and he had agreed that they should no longer talk or meet. Gibson had to move out of his apartment at once. But where could he go?

The editor of *Umuseso* had just fled Rwanda. The threat had become too pronounced: the government had begun a widespread witch hunt in the country for journalists from the newspaper. So Gibson was not alone in his danger. But these journalists each faced the government individually; they were already isolated.

We did not talk about what would happen to *New Horizons,* and Gibson said he was trying not to panic. The journalist had a plan. It was out of the question to stay in the capital after what had happened, so he would leave for a little while. Perhaps the tension would die down; perhaps the government had something personal against the *Umuseso* editor; perhaps the government would find a distraction and leave Gibson alone. He would hide himself and watch from a distance. He didn't even tell me where he was going.

He suggested it so naturally that I thought it must have been a plan he had formulated long ago, in case of such a situation. And the next day he was gone.

I did not think he would travel near his family's home; that would not be intelligent. I wondered if Gibson would be safe.

He was pitting himself against a system that was incredibly powerful. It was the same system that could eradicate its explosions. The state was highly ordered and controlled. Every piece of the country was organized into administrative units benignly called "villages." Each village, or *umudugudu,* contained about one hundred families. Even the capital was but an agglomeration of such villages. The president called his office Urugwiro village. Each village had its head, its security officer and its "journalist" or informer, all of whom had to approve of one's behavior if one wanted something from the government—a passport, for example. The system's power was shown in seemingly innocuous happenings: slippers were worn overnight by masses of villagers following a government order. Plastic bags

were suddenly eradicated from the corners of the country. To achieve such control the government had relocated thousands of people in the countryside to new "villages." Directives from the government now could be followed down to the individual. And there was no privacy. Officials and security agents in the villages kept track of visitors and those traveling. Permission was required if someone was to stay overnight. Hotels every day sent records to the security services, with the names of visitors, using Rwanda's network of well-paved roads. Where was Gibson going to hide?

I asked Moses if Gibson had been correct to flee. I also asked if he might protect Gibson for some time, and shelter him, should he return to the capital.

Moses said he could house the journalist for one night. Beyond that it would be too dangerous. In fact, if Gibson was still in the country he could not afford to stay more than a night in any place.

He said that people everywhere wanted to please the state, and would go out of their way to report the outsider who had come to their area, particularly if the arrival was suspicious. The whole country was, in effect, watching Gibson.

It was how the people participated in the country's control. There was a powerful contract between the government and citizens. The state, extending through the people, became omnipresent. In other dictatorships dissidents were able to move between cities, wear disguises and change identities. Anonymity gave them the possibility of freedom. Rwanda's *umudugudu* system made this impossible.

Moses said, "If Gibson is really being pursued by the government, and he is still in Rwanda, there is a good chance that he will disappear." Such a benign word, *disappear,* for an event so brutal.

I imagined him on the run, from city to city, hotel to hotel. He called occasionally, never for more than a few minutes, and often just to tell me he was all right. I think it reassured him to talk to me, as he ran without destination. He knew that the government could use his friends or family—he needed to escape his former life and everything he knew. It was thus a kind of illusion, trying to run away. Though he was courageous to try.

And after two weeks of gradually closing in, the government finally caught up. Gibson called me to relate how it had happened. There was a knock on his hotel room door one night.

He asked who it was.

We had always believed that it would be the secret service or the police who would come for him. But no, the government had used someone who knew him well.

"Your friend, James."

I felt let down: James was another of my students. He too had won a prize alongside Gibson. He was a government radio employee, known for his independence, and had spoken passionately in the classroom in favor of freedom. I had held some hope for him. And now I felt slightly broken. Perhaps he had been offered a promotion, or a loan to build a house. Though rewards were often unnecessary—it was reward enough to be seen by the government as loyal. I had lost two journalists at once.

And we needed no further proof that the government was pursuing Gibson.

Gibson finally opened the door and asked what James was doing there. They were in a city in the far south, a university center with many students and lecturers and guesthouses—it could not be a coincidence that James had arrived at his room.

But the government man gave no explanation. "Just traveling in the area," he said. "Do you want to get a beer?"

Gibson knew he could not refuse the offer. And from the bar on the first floor of the hotel, where they were seated, James ostentatiously made a telephone call. He said in a loud voice, "Hello! It's me. Yes, I am with him. There is no problem."

I received a text message that evening from Gibson. "My life is in danger. I think I may die tonight."

I thought about what Moses had said, about trying to flee the government within the country. Gibson's time was clearly limited—the police were using the country's journalists against one another. It was a form of repression: to turn against you the things and people you trusted, so that you had to fear your own people.

In a dictatorship one gained one's freedom not by defending the liberty of others but by working to diminish it; for each person you turned in you earned more space. Even if such freedom could not last, even if you could lose by betrayal what had been gained by betrayal, it was a kind of freedom: a negative freedom. People's innate desire to be free thus provided essential sustenance to repression, dictatorship.

James decided to take a room at Gibson's hotel. That night Gibson paid for his accommodation, but left discreetly to sleep in another lodging.

Early the following morning he boarded a bus for Kigali. He had nowhere to go, so I asked him to come home.

He looked disheveled. It was the toll of being on the run for two weeks. He had not eaten in several days, he said. And he was tired.

On the first day he just slept. From the night until the next evening. He then came out for a couple of hours, and went back to bed. I did not know if he actually slept, or if he was in some kind of trance-like state. He stepped out of his room looking

ragged, in a strange condition, before again returning, without saying a word.

I had put him in the last room, at the end of the corridor. This room had large windows—with iron bars running across—over which we drew curtains. I told him that he was behind a bulletproof door: I pulled open the heavy door, slowly, as if to prove my point.

I was worried about disturbing Gibson. I did not play music, and made sure not to bang the doors. The house was silent.

I quickened with each move outside the house. Each car driving by, its engine growing louder and then diminishing. Each knock on the door, ring of the doorbell. There was a sense that Gibson, hidden in that last room, was being constantly hunted, and that slowly the entire city, outside our compound, was converging upon us, following his trail.

The following morning he emerged from his room in a rush—as if suddenly woken—and said that we had to make a plan. He ate two omelets with vegetables and a peanut-butter sandwich, and drank a large glass of milk. He said grace before eating. The morning passed without further conversation. Gibson seemed lost in thought. For lunch I heated up a homemade pizza, but he set aside the cheese-encrusted olives. "I have stopped eating things I don't recognize," he said. I ate one of the pieces he had set aside. "Oh, it's just an olive," he said, and he bit into a piece. I too thought he should move. And if Moses was correct we did not have much time.

This question of when the police might arrive made me worry—the station was just around the corner from my house. And we were only two or three blocks from the president's office. It was one of the safest parts of the city, but also one of the most observed.

Gibson walked noiselessly in the living room, a ghostlike figure moving along the walls and never lingering in the room's

center. He stood by the windows and looked out, searching the landscape. But there was nothing to see. And only silence around us.

The gardener would come to water the plants. His quiet footsteps alarmed the journalist.

And in all this something was pushing a man to abandon his country. It was not an easy decision, nor obvious. There was something powerful and instinctual working on Gibson. The incidents, one after the other, had shown him clearly that he could not stay, that his country was no longer welcome to him. Everything he had connection to was now dangerous. He had been ripped out of society, of his world. He was stateless, homeless, being pursued. There were no more sanctuaries against the isolation and fear.

One evening he went back to his apartment to collect a few of his things. I waited nervously at home. He found his landlady in his room—and she began to scream at him, to say that she had thrown him out, that he was useless, what was he still doing here. She left saying she was going to fetch the police, that this was her duty. Gibson hurriedly packed some belongings and departed before she could return. He did not lock the apartment door. This—her sudden hysteria—was a signal of all that threatened.

He didn't even have time to feel what it was like in his apartment, he said. There was no time or space. The separations, one by one, were all wrenching.

That night in the house he sat on his bed, feet on the ground, praying. To his right, on a bedside table, was a small porcelain figurine of the Virgin Mary and her child. It was one of the things he had salvaged from his apartment. Next to his foot was a little suitcase on wheels, Chinese made, on top of which lay his frayed toothbrush. He opened his eyes. They were deep red. He did not speak. I offered him some rice. What would

become of *New Horizons,* he asked, into which he had put so much work? And what about the girl he had wanted to marry? She would find someone more able to take care of her. He looked distressed, and shaken by the episode with the landlady. The police were now undoubtedly on his trail, and knew he was in Kigali. I felt close to his small figure. It was a hopeless position to be in, the individual pitted against the state; I felt his utter helplessness.

Umuseso had been shut down. It was official. The journalists from the newspaper had all fled, and weeks had gone by without a new issue. At a milk and yogurt café near my house, I asked the vendor what he thought. "A light has gone out in the country," he said. I sensed that the people felt they had been divorced from the power, that they were in the dark. They would only speak of *Umuseso*'s absence in private.

It was perhaps no coincidence that the closure of one of the last avenues of free speech in the country coincided with a surge in violence. This would be a turning point in the history of Rwanda. The regime had chosen: there was already no political opposition; but now the regime had begun to silence itself—it had chosen the path of greater repression. There was no longer a valve for dissenters, even within the party. The pressure could only build.

Moses would tell me that that moment, when *Umuseso* closed, was a new beginning—and a return to an older state of affairs in the country. It was the beginning of the *pensée unique.* Of a single way of thinking.

This term, the *pensée unique,* has a frightening history. It was in such an environment that the genocide was conducted. Such speed and efficiency were hardly known on this continent—or even in the world. But when the killing began there were

almost no voices to oppose it. Those who did were imprisoned or killed. The single-minded dedication of a nation unable to think or say otherwise produced one of the greatest and most horrific crimes in a century.

And now, sixteen years on, people were being reminded of that time.

The genocide was also preceded by grenade attacks.

The hatred between ruler and ruled in Rwanda was old. But the *pensée unique* took this hatred to its logical limit. Just prior to the genocide newspapers were launched principally to flatter the government, and they would spur the killers on, and go to great lengths to debase the victims. Flattery was a symptom of the *pensée unique*. It is what replaced the voices that were dead.

Forbidden from speaking their minds, from asking questions, loyalty and fear took over. Ideas of good and evil, and people's convictions about them, became crystallized, and devastating. The genocide went far: mothers killed their children; men murdered their wives; neighbors killed each other; children hacked into their parents.

For this violence as well Rwanda is a remarkable country.

In the weeks following the explosion in the city center, grenades had continued to go off in the capital—and they finally grew too many to be denied. The bodies had been seen; the people were talking. The government, silent, risked losing its credibility and aura of power. The president was forced to mention it at his press conferences.

The explosions thus became real, and were allowed to enter the world. In this place perception was commanded by the president, not by one's eyes and ears and nose and skin.

The regime had given new cause for unease: a succession of senior officials, including those close to the president—his chiefs of cabinet, ministers, ambassadors, judicial and military and intelligence officers—had fled the country over the past

years, saying they had feared for their lives. But the insecurity reached a height when the country's top general, who for many years had led bloody campaigns on behalf of the president, and still retained the loyalty of a large part of the army, deserted. There was a sense of panic in the country, though public expression was suppressed, still calm.

The paranoia became acute because the president and his men were a minority within a minority in power. This general who had fled, Kayumba, was from an elite that had fractured. The president could no longer trust many of those who had grown up with him as refugees, who had fought for him in the liberation war. The threat was on the inside of his government.

Kayumba was felt by many to be the president's successor. He was admired for having fought on the front lines with the soldiers; the president, the strategic mind, had always stayed in the headquarters. To isolate the general, get him out of the way, the president had named him the ambassador to India. But on a visit to Kigali the general was interrogated by the president's men, and sensed the distrust. Just before he was to meet with the president one morning he fled to South Africa and sought asylum.

People were suddenly afraid to speak the general's name. On the streets, in bars, they referred to him as "*lui,* him," or "*wa mugabo,* that man." And they were saying that the president's opponents—so far, mostly civilian dissidents—had now gained an army.

The signs of the hardening of the government multiplied. The newspapers' language became high-pitched. "Enemy of the State." "Terrorist." "Traitor." Such language the people of Rwanda also recognized from before the genocide. Stories insulting the officials who had fled became regular in the press, along with large pictures of the president shaking hands with the powerful—Bill Gates, Tony Blair and Bill Clinton.

The body of a former collaborator of Kayumba was exhumed by the authorities in the capital. This man had died some time ago, but a doubt had arisen as to whether the burial had been faked. Digging up the man's grave was apparently the only measure that would prove he was not alive.

The army saw its salary increased. The presidential guard had its pay almost doubled.

And at a press conference the president at last acknowledged the fears. "Nobody can carry out a coup d'état. Never! Please!" But he was visibly agitated; he was furious that his generals would disobey and turn against him. He guaranteed the country's security. His army was one of the most powerful and merciless in Africa. "Sleep well," he told his people.

On the night before Gibson was to leave, we stood outside my house, in the dark, and watched the capital. From our vantage point we could see across the shrouded valley: cars moved left and right along the high road carved into the facing hill.

After days of silence Gibson was in a talkative mood. There was some annoyance in his voice, some impatience, some agony. He resented having to leave behind the country he had grown up in and that he loved. He had believed in his country, its future.

His fate, to him, seemed unjust.

"Have you noticed?" he said, suddenly.

"Noticed what?"

He pointed in front of us. "The lights. Have you seen anything like them?" He paused. I was not quite sure what he meant, but I looked carefully at the orange sodium-vapor points, followed them both ways along the road.

"You grew up in Dubai, yes?" I nodded at him. "Have you

noticed the space between the street lights? Tell me, are they this close in Dubai?"

I had not remarked this before.

"No. Certainly not," I said after some thought. I asked him how he knew about the lighting in Dubai. He had seen it on photographs and, adjusting for scale, had compared the distance.

He went on: "You would think from the street lights that Rwanda is a resource-rich country. But only four percent of Rwanda's people have electricity in their houses. *Four percent!* How incredible. But this is the first thing visitors see. And this is impressive, they are stunned by the small country in Africa that has come through a genocide, and now has such roads, such lights."

I asked him what he thought of the lights.

"Wait a little," Gibson said. "Look at the bottom of the hill. Below the line of streetlamps. Do you see that it is all black in the valley? What is there?"

I absorbed the effect of his tone, clear, direct—appealing. Gibson wanted to communicate something important, something dear to him. I stayed attentive to his every word.

"Ordinary people live there. They live in that blackness. And now again look at the street." The sudden light, its brightness, mildly hurt the eye. "You see the cars driving up and down. Do you see people?"

There were none. Not one.

"So where are the people?"

I was not sure. What was he trying to tell me? And then slowly I became aware to a noise. The shuffling of feet, the murmur of voices, the hushing of loose clothes swaying over thin bodies. I turned to look down our street, which did not have lights, and was utterly dark. It was a cobblestone street,

treacherous in the night—I had often tripped over the stones and nearly fallen. And the road was on the edge of a steep hill without a fence. One could easily slip down the slope. Yet the people had chosen this road. It was the hour when work ended, and men and women were making their way home, walking at a measured pace, using their weight, throwing their weight forward and sending their legs ahead like a crutch, to climb our hill. A sea of people were making their way up.

"Why do they walk in the dark? You would think we would use these wonderful new roads we have been given—isn't this development, progress? But no. Ah, look at this road! Anyone can see this for himself! And you begin to understand our country. We the poor, we are like the insects, scared of the lights. We hide from the government, which wants to see us all the time. So you now see that the truth in our country is hidden, and you need to look not for what is there, but for what they hide. You cannot pay attention to what they show you, but need to listen to those who are kept quiet. You need to look differently in a dictatorship, you need to think about how to listen to people who live in fear."

I was stunned by this road before me, brilliantly lit, empty, that seemed almost burned into the hill. I had seen it every day, but had never really seen it.

These were the roads that the government had used every day to track down Gibson's whereabouts.

Gibson was still frowning. And he was restless, no doubt from the journey ahead the next day.

I asked if there was some alternative to him fleeing—we could ask at the foreign embassies. They had influence with the president, and could perhaps force back the government repres-

sion. I wanted to know if I was condemned to losing my closest friend in Rwanda, and if the country was condemned to losing one of its most capable and promising journalists.

But the problem with Gibson's case was that it was not official—if the government had pursued him through the courts, through some public mechanism, there might have been a chance. But they had gone after him in secret, extrajudicially. "That is when you really have to be afraid. They will starve you, beat you, hurt you until they get what they want. It isn't for nothing that all the other *Umuseso* journalists have fled. It would be foolish to hope that they will treat me fairly. And the embassies always listen to the government. They always believe what the president says."

I felt his irritation was not just at me, but also at his situation.

He said, "Will we meet again, my friend?"

I understood the question signified much more. I murmured, "Of course."

He put his left hand on my palm. "I wish I could stop what is happening to me. It will not be good." Without looking at him I could tell he had begun to weep. It seemed that he needed to let out the emotions that he had been holding within for so long.

He knew that leaving the country was no guarantee: those who had fled before him had not found escape. Some had been shot in broad daylight near their new homes. The Rwandan government had a secret service with great reach. Gibson knew that it was likely that he would still be pursued, that his flight would be long and difficult and that through most of it he would be alone; it was imaginable now that he could die without anyone knowing.

He was going to sell his sofa, the pathetic sofa set that I had sat on, to put together funds for his journey. I sensed both his resignation, and his attachment to the hope that he would one

day make his own home. The sofa was as much a symbol of a dream: it would receive visitors, and perhaps the girl he loved; it might still be there when he founded a family.

I didn't think he would get much for the sofa anyway. I gave him some money without him asking for it.

Gibson would take a combination of buses as army officers ran many transport companies. If he bought a ticket directly to the border from Kigali the authorities would more easily catch him.

And the next morning as he made to leave, with his small suitcase and in his simple clothes, looking cleaner than he had in the past weeks because he had shaved, he gave me a brief hug and for a moment met my eyes. There was a vagueness in his gaze, as if he were already lost. His feet moved uncertainly and he struggled with the suitcase. His head turned in every direction. I asked him a question; he nodded unthinkingly. He seemed like someone who did not himself know where he was going. He was overwhelmed. And so this man, who had never before been outside Rwanda, stepped like this, an outcast, shorn of his country by his own government, into the world.

Not long after, I was at a diplomatic event in which European parliaments pledged to give the Rwandan government more than $300 million.

The ambassador of the European Union spoke on the podium of the strong partnership he was forging with Rwanda, saying he was profoundly pleased with the government's policies, that he hoped Europe could be of further assistance as the government continued its important work.

The ambassador, furthermore, announced that this new money would go directly to the Rwandan government's cof-

fers for it to spend as it saw fit. The national machinery that the government was building and using on the people required vast sums of money. And much of this money came from Western governments. The goal of their aid to Rwanda was to develop the country and prevent another outbreak of violence. It was for this purpose that Western governments financed the roads, the police, the agriculture and health systems, all of which were cited as improvements in Rwanda under the president. Yet they also served as the instruments of repression.

The police were said to protect the population; they also tortured. The roads were said to increase mobility; yet they also enabled the government to control the people. Dissidents were denied health care that those who kept quiet were given. The Intore were assured of jobs.

The event was held on the lawns of the ambassador's mansion in the city, and it brought together officials and their wives from the various embassies as well as senior government officers. Waiters served wine, each with one arm behind his back. Guests ate slivers of salmon on creamed toast. There were smiles across the garden. It was a victory for the government to have obtained this new round of financing, crucial for it to continue to hold power and execute its ideas.

The Western embassy officials were also pleased that they had managed to obtain so much money from their parliaments. Rwanda, in return for the foreign support, did its best to behave as a model international citizen, sending police officers to Haiti for earthquake relief and soldiers to Darfur as U.N. peacekeepers.

A ministry official took the podium and did not thank the European ambassador. He said that to avoid misquoting he would be reading out a letter from the foreign minister. Wiping the sweat off his forehead with a kerchief, he read a speech

in which the government said it appreciated that the world had realized Rwanda was capable of overseeing its own finances, resources and people as it felt necessary.

It was a new kind of foreign aid, designed to empower countries to be responsible for their own development. Recipient governments assured the donor nations that their policies were designed and carried out in the interests of their people, and that the money was well spent.

I found the ambassador standing on some footsteps, surrounded by his underlings—functionaries, secretaries. A number of other ambassadors came by to shake his hand, offer their congratulations and express support for that evening's announcement.

I shook the ambassador's hand as well. He was a plump man, going bald. The officials around him did not speak much: the ambassador seemed to be holding court, jovially telling the others that after his Rwanda posting he would probably be consigned to a European garden where the ex-ambassadors, without functions but still on the diplomatic payroll, smoked cigars and reminisced. "I shudder to think about that place," he said, but with a smile, so one knew that it would not be quite as bad as he was making out. He looked at me strangely.

"I'm curious," I said, after I confirmed the amount of money he was giving the Rwandan government. "This is not a loan, but charity. Where does the money come from?"

"European taxpayers," he said. "That's where all our money comes from."

"Aren't you worried about giving money to a dictator?"

He bristled a little, and his aides shrank away.

He could have sent me off, but the ambassador seemed in the mood for confrontation. "I have no problem with giving money to a dictator."

"That's a bold statement," I said. "Especially coming from Europe, you know very well what a dictatorship is capable of."

He shrugged. "He runs one of the most effective governments in Africa. I'm proud to be giving him money."

"But you're financing repression."

"Where's the proof?"

"I know a journalist who needs your help. He's being pursued by the government right now, and is fleeing for his life. Can you help him?"

"The government is fixing its problems with the journalists. Wait and see."

"And meanwhile you give them hundreds of millions of dollars?"

"By giving money we influence their policies. We are for freedom of speech. We will influence the government in the right direction."

"Well, do it soon. I'm trying my best to keep the journalists going, but there aren't many left in the country to work with. Would you be able to help them? I personally know a reporter who fled just a few days ago. There are others like him. I've been following their cases. I know how the government does it. They're fleeing the country, fearing for their lives. I can arrange for them to speak to you if you need proof."

"We know all this; we don't need to meet them," he said, waving a hand to say that he was done with me.

A Rwandan official came by and the ambassador opened his arms to welcome her. He had returned to his jovial self.

I walked home, this time taking a well-lit street. It was desolate, and I missed Gibson.

After the dissident general Kayumba's departure, the government ordered the army out of its camps to replace the police on the streets. The soldiers patrolled in groups of four or five, across

the country. Their automatic weapons were not slung over their shoulders, as one might expect in an initial deployment—but held firmly in both arms, their fingers pressed against the triggers.

We learned that in preparation for the election, in towns and villages, mayors and small officials had been purged and replaced with men of or loyal to the army. The country, at its most minute levels, was being systematically militarized.

Power was inverted. At the highest government positions the president would sometimes make a show of accommodating rivals, so the world would see him as sharing power. But the repression was moved to the level of the villages, where only those devoted to the president were installed as administrators. In this way the individual had little hope of liberty. Even if a leader in the capital created an opposition party, no citizen in the countryside would dare to oppose the president.

The classroom was diminished both in number and vitality. Those journalists who had served as role models in this dangerous and oppressive environment were gone. And now it was much more difficult to get the others to talk.

The fast chopping of the helicopter passed above from time to time. I sat in the office garden, under the guava tree and its white flowers. I thought of Gibson, and how he had left. I was not going to let this go without a struggle. I felt I needed to recruit.

So many people had already given up so much for their freedom in this country.

The main story in the papers at this time was about the country's junior football team, many of whose players had been born after the genocide, and their success in a tournament. There was a story about an exhibition organized by the American embassy where one could purchase African baskets

and beads. There was something about how the genocide survivors appreciated the memorials. And an article quoted a senior U.N. official who stated that Rwanda was an example to the world, and that its success in managing its affairs and people should be replicated by other countries.

FORCE

The repression grew after Gibson departed. We tried to save the training program.

Agnès, the fiery girl from our class who had survived a term in prison, was among the first we would lose.

Those who had tried had failed. It was no longer possible to find reasonable voices in the country. The press had been decimated in its widest sense, and profoundly. Newspapers were meaningless: merely repeating government propaganda, publishing public announcements, inventing flattery. News was replaced by funny stories, anecdotal, distracting, little colorful reports on the radio. There was a report about the government donating cows to villagers. About students pleased with government scholarships. A girl had won a beauty competition. The news was empty, deceptive—listening to it one would think the country was at ease. And the frivolity of the tone of the news during the widespread repression had become frightening.

Some Rwandan academics were trying to dialogue with the president's office, to calm the government's paranoia, stem the growing distrust. But they were ignored, and only allowed to talk as long as they were deemed harmless. The president's words had become the news, indeed were becoming the sole voice in the country.

The repression polarized the journalists. The few dissenting voices that remained were extreme, riven with anger. They

wrote in independent news outlets that received little advertising and few contributors. The government arrested them; they emerged from detention centers even more rabid, even more isolated, and consigned to the fringes. Unable to talk, the country's journalists had begun to scream. The last free journalists began to self-destruct.

And the government held these rabid reporters up as proof of a need for greater repression. Other journalists were held up as models: those whom the president invited to his press conferences, around whose flattery he felt comfortable. The free, independent voices were denied information, stood up by the government, made to wait hours for interviews, disdained; they became the wretched. The "important" journalists the president happily spoke to for hours.

It amplified the frustration. The free voices were isolated—and in their solitude only grew more furious.

The fear was growing. There was a sense of terror in the dissenting reports. And there was even greater terror as they were silenced, as praise of the president became more widespread, more intense, more total.

Agnès fell into the trap. More and more upset, she began to write in her newspaper about the most forbidden aspects of the president's repression: about the hate that still existed from the genocide and the president's killings. These were things everyone knew and spoke about in private, but that they knew not to report, even to vehemently deny in public. Agnès had decided to take on the government.

I tried to tell her that she was succumbing to the government's repression, that this was precisely what the authorities were hoping for. I told her that though I sympathized—it was natural to want to give vent to the anger and sense of injustice—she had to think about her place in society: that she was more useful alive than dead, more useful free than arrested, more

effective as part of a group, carefully choosing the stories she covered and always reporting the government's position even if it was a blatant lie. But she did not listen. And she stopped coming to the classes.

We lost a good many journalists from our class in this fashion—seduced by the anger and violence, they were taken into the path of confrontation. The students incited one another. A girl one day refused to accept the certificates I was handing out to attest that the students had completed a training module. She came up to the front of the class and turned to face the students, before beginning to accuse me: "You! I can see through your deception. You are really a pro-government man. Why are you telling us to report on hospitals and disease rates when the real problems in this country are political? What are you really here to do? You are keeping us away from the issues that matter in our lives by making us write these insignificant reports."

I didn't know what to tell her. Her emotion was damning, making it difficult for me to respond or defend myself.

I wanted the students to avoid an offensive against the government, despite all that had happened to their colleagues. I thought that if they waited they might find an opening. Perhaps they knew better than I did about the government's intentions: perhaps they saw there was no hope that the government would change its methods. In this case the only avenue was revolution. But the students needed training—they were not ready to confront the more serious issues in the country. They had first to make mistakes with the more innocuous items.

I was also bound by the Western governments funding our program. The money we received was an insignificant fraction of the hundreds of millions of dollars they gave the government. But the donors wanted on no account to confront the

government even with our small sum. I was forced to use only officially permitted topics like "poverty reduction." It was my hope that the students would benefit from this training more fully one day, when they obtained their freedom.

But there was no telling this to the students—more difficult to address because they were poorer in knowledge and experience than the older batch; indeed, the quality of our new students had noticeably begun to drop. And now many of those with any conviction—the most important of qualities for the reporter, particularly in such a dangerous environment—were lost to the easy satisfaction that anger offered.

As with Agnès, I tried desperately to convince others to remain in our program, but they were unable to think beyond the logic of immediate action. They seemed to feel they were advancing some sort of revolution: that by exposing all the repression of the government at once, by speaking about the disappearances of workers, politicians, friends, brothers and sisters, they would be able to force change. They wanted to speak; it was as if the violence that the government had operated on their communities had become unbearable. And in this state it was difficult to convince them to stay quiet for a little longer. Students abandoned their homework about vasectomy and malnutrition in the countryside and began to write rabid, political reports for the marginal newspapers that they had set up.

The girl who shouted at me soon left. I heard she was working for a paper, then at a radio station, and was fired by both.

There was an aspect of self-defense in their insistent journalism. Continuing to report was a way to protect their society and themselves: the students knew that if they stopped writing, no one would, and the threat would be greater. So their decision to confront the government, and to what extent, had to be a personal choice.

I did what I could to protect the students. I told them to call me should any of them change their minds, or need help. Our classroom was a place of learning and always open. I felt sad and guilty when they left.

Their departures I felt also exposed us. The classroom became a place of bleakness; I too felt lost. I felt that the real combat was being waged outside, that we were in a useless exercise with unrealistic hopes, that we were weak for confronting the repression obliquely and not openly and courageously like the other students.

It was not long after I had helped Gibson flee the country. Roger, the man I had met at the conference, who had laughed beneath the portrait of the president, called one afternoon.

"You never kept your promise," he said, accusingly.

"Who is this?"

"You don't even remember."

It took me a little while to recall. And I only did when he started to laugh, his hysterical high-pitched laugh. I felt embarrassed. I said I had been busy since we had last met, and that it had not been intentional.

"I believe you."

Roger said he would like to meet. Still feeling apologetic, I suggested getting together at a pizzeria.

It was in the city center, in a complex of buildings that included a skyscraper under construction said to belong to the president. People swarmed the entryway, lit by neon tubes. On a countertop in plastic bowls were pastries, slices of pizza, quiches and other fattening foods. An Indian entrepreneur who ran the restaurant hovered over the cash register. The crowd made a low hubbub: the place was popular among families, which made it ideal for a conversation.

The waitresses were Rwandan, all young women. One of them came to take our order. The lights were dull and steady.

Roger said he had already eaten. I wondered if it was true, or if he was being *infura*. This was the local notion of dignity. Gluttony was a particularly egregious sin—it was said that an *infura* could starve to death on a neighbor's porch but not admit that he was hungry. Roger was eyeing the menu. I told him a slice of pizza and a soft drink would not be too much.

Roger was thin, scrawnier than I had first noticed. The veins on his bald head showed. His lips were thick, darkly colored. And he always seemed to bow his head a little while raising his shoulders, as if nervous.

"I just want to let you know up front," he said, "that we are being watched."

I raised my eyebrows.

"They are following me everywhere. See that man there, don't look now," he said. "Sorry, I couldn't say it on the phone."

There was a man sitting alone, without food or drink, at a table not far from us. I became angry for having exposed myself. I considered leaving at once.

He sensed it. "You shouldn't worry," he said. "I am in their good books for the moment."

I asked what he meant.

"They think I can still be saved," he said. "They have offered me a job."

"With whom?"

"The government paper."

"You're a journalist."

He told me he ran a blog that was critical of the government. It had published news about the dissident general, which was forbidden.

"But I used to be one of them," he said. "I am a defector."

My curiosity was piqued.

"I am not old enough to remember the previous regime. I grew up under the authority of the president, believing every word he said. I was even a child soldier in his army in 1991, was willing to give my life for him. I was only fourteen years old."

"What changed?"

"I grew up. I saw. This is not the country he spoke of. My friends didn't give up their lives for this. We have no justice in our country, no parliament, only one man with all the power. We have no independence, no freedom, even to think."

I wondered what this man, Roger, wanted from me.

He looked around the restaurant anxiously. "What do you feel? I don't want to take the job, but I need to make a living. I am studying law at university, part-time. It's hard as a student."

"The salary must be very good."

"They are trying to buy me off. But it's possible I can do better work from the inside. You know, fight from the inside." He looked up at me as though seeking confirmation.

"You can forget about being a journalist once you take that job," I said.

"Can *you* find me a job?"

I said I could try to help him, but could not guarantee it.

"There's a lot going on that's not being said. The government doesn't want it exposed."

"I agree," I said.

"We didn't live through a genocide to get another dictatorship. It's depressing."

Behind us three men were leaning over a counter and watching a music video, their faces almost plastered to the screen. Bikini-clad women, legs bronzed, drank brightly colored cocktails by a pool. "Ah, that's the life," one of the men said. "When will we have that in our country?"

"Maybe in 2020," said the other. "The president has said so." "Vision 2020" was a government mantra that had become

a household word. The new roads, schools and hospitals built with Western aid: they were all part of a plan by the government to make Rwanda a middle-income country in the next decade. The idea had been borrowed from China and Singapore. Money would render the repression acceptable; and the people had given their allegiance in exchange for the dream of wealth.

"Don't believe what people tell you about our country," Roger said.

"One of my journalists left to become a presidential propagandist a few days after he was speaking in the class for freedom."

"This is a bullshit country," he said. "Bullshit! There is no truth." And he started to laugh strangely again.

"They will tell you that people here are free," he said. "Look around you, at the rich people of our country shopping, eating."

The pizza had arrived, but Roger let the food go cold. I bit into my slice, and watched him.

"You know," he said, "people are only free when they are not." Again he chuckled. "You see what I mean?" He laughed, and pointed at his head. "The control is here," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Once you are controlled here, then they let you walk around like you are free."

I watched his face intently. What a funny, peculiar man. He seemed a little off.

"Don't believe them!" he said. "You know they are rounding up people. You know this is happening. They are being detained in secret and tortured for colluding with the enemy. I know, I know!"

He started to eat. Then he giggled, with food in his mouth. "The government thinks I have information. That's why they want to buy me off," he said, with his mouth full.

"Bullshit country," I said.

He started to laugh. "You got it!" Now he became serious. "The job. Tell me what I should do."

"I sincerely don't know," I said. "It has to be your choice, your conviction."

He leaned back at this, and seemed to reflect seriously.

"Yes, we have to go slowly here," he said. "There is too much tension, too many angry words."

He left a piece of his pizza uneaten on the plate. The same with his soft drink, a part of it left in the bottle. "You know, all that has been built—the roads, the new skyscraper, the eight percent growth in the economy—it's been built by the military, and it's all great," he said. "What we need today is democracy. But every time I write something the president's office summons me. Now it's that enemy general. Am I working for him, they ask, just because I question their policies."

"What do they think of people like you?"

He shrugged. "In this place, secrets are everything. Secrets are how you build relationships. They are power. What is his name? Even that is a threat. There are laws against 'laughing at others' misfortune' and 'provoking ill feelings.' How to enforce such laws without looking into, even possessing, someone's soul? You know a few years ago we were very close to war with Uganda. I was very happy, because I knew I would pass my night in their capital."

I did not interrupt his meanderings, the intensity of the mood. "I want three things," he continued. "Peace in our country, the freedom to think and speak and democracy. Give me these three and I will be happy."

There was a clicking sound above us as the voltage fluctuated. The clicking stopped.

It was then that I had a flash of understanding about Roger. I had a sudden sense about him—the strange laugh, the percep-

tion, the flood of words—of isolation. I felt he had experienced a profound seclusion, living in such thoughts alone. It could happen in a dictatorship. And it was why he seemed such a misfit, so odd.

I had already seen something of such isolation. As I ate my last slices of pizza I felt again the melancholy of Gibson's loss. I thought of our time together, and of some of our happy moments.

The man followed Roger out.

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Our fortune in the class seemed to turn when I recruited a journalist. He was a catch, possibly the best in the country at the time.

I was incessantly making a tour of conferences and events, searching for possible new students: I was combing the city for some last sign of courage, some willingness to speak. It was a hopeless exercise. The meetings were long and silent. The journalists merely listened, as if receiving instructions from officials on what to report. I moved from building to building solemnly, fatigued, and was about to give up on my efforts, when at an election event the government had organized to "inform" journalists how to report on the vote, I saw a young man stand up and ask:

"Excuse me, sirs, but in the name of our National Electoral Commission, we don't have the word 'independent.' Is our commission independent or is it run by the government?"

In any other place it might have been an ordinary question, but in Rwanda, in this environment, at this moment, it took a certain audacity to raise the issue. People in the audience turned around. Indeed, the National Electoral Commission,

also financed by Western governments, was not independent—but no one, not even the foreign donors who knew well what they were financing, had publicly pointed this out.

It had fallen on a Rwandan to do so. The official maneuvered around the question, not really answering it. And like much dissent in Rwanda, the idea was buried, passed over.

I asked around, and found out that the young man had in fact recently been hired by Jean-Bosco, who was now working in exile. Together they were running a news website that had replaced the paper the government had shut down. This connection to a former student—and one who had challenged the government—instilled confidence. I learned the young man's name was Jean-Léonard.

I presented myself to him in the parking lot. The government event was nearly finished—he was leaving early. He had heard of our training program, knew some of our other students, and said he admired our work. Jean-Léonard was a soft-spoken man, but with a quickness of tongue, and exuding a kind of charisma. I had seen the authority he had commanded in the audience. He now spoke to me with concentration and urgency.

"The government is using more and more force," he said, with a slight stammer. "But who will stand up for us? There is only one voice, one way of thinking."

He didn't feel that the other students were wrong to go on the offensive, and think of a revolution in speech—to breach the enveloping quietness in the country. He said they were on a dangerous mission, and would quickly need support.

His face was shaped like a half moon, and when he smiled it gave the impression both of docility and friendliness. Now he looked at me, as though he had said what had to be said, and was waiting for a reaction.

I wondered if Jean-Léonard might be convinced to take a larger role in our group, to become something of a lead practitioner, to train the other students and perhaps offer them work experience at his website.

I was hoping to renew a sense of leadership in the class. And I wanted someone from within their cadre. The apprehension had become quite extreme: someone like Jean-Léonard would be an obvious inspiration to the students.

The difficulty was in the training. There were almost no outlets left in the country where the students could experience proper journalism—the process of conceiving of a story on one's own, investigating it independently, developing the ideas, and working to a conclusion that one had been unaware of at the beginning. This was crucial, to allow one's mind to remain open so this new conclusion could find expression.

I did not think the students would understand this point in theoretical terms. They needed to experience the process, needed to feel the sensation of allowing a new idea to emerge and find freedom.

The truth-finding process was becoming alien in the country; and in time, without the ability for renewal, it could be buried, potentially eliminated.

Only a few small, independent news outlets remained, each run by one or two journalists. Agnès and Jean-Léonard were almost alone in their endeavor. We needed to bring everyone together into a cohesive group.

I had high hopes for the new recruit, and what he would do for the students, and for the journalists in the country.

I remembered Jean-Léonard's last words to me: about the *pensée unique.* And I wondered why, despite his quietness of speech, he had seemed somehow agitated.

The classes were in the meantime becoming harder to

endure. I was finding it difficult to get through to the students. But there seemed, from their responses, still to be time for intervention. There was still some pride.

I was annoyed with Moses.

During the lunch break I took the two taxi-buses to his home, in a poor part of town, where the houses were all of tin roofs at odd angles, set against one another. I found him in a small room, watching a Brazilian soap opera on his laptop.

"Was it you who invited the National AIDS Commission man to the class as a new student?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But he's not a journalist. He writes for the government commission website."

"He's not so bad," Moses said. "That's all we can get now."

I was sullen. "It's becoming difficult in the classroom. They're coming from a long way off," I said.

Moses returned to his soap opera. He was evidently not in the mood for a discussion about this. Sometimes he fell into his depressions about the genocide, and was impossible to raise from his stupor.

He said these moods came involuntarily, and they were not accompanied by any great trauma—rather, he fell into a state of uncaring. It was what he called being a "walking dead."

I returned to the class and found the students staring at a newspaper's center spread. It was printed in color, which was rare, for it was expensive. I drew closer. The students said the report praised a government official. I looked at the top, and felt disgust when I saw Cato's name.

The plan for that day was to discuss how to report on the election. The students all wanted to criticize the government—but about how not enough arrangements had been made to

allow people to vote. I asked if anyone was going to mention the right not to vote.

The students squirmed. "It is a national duty."

"Can you *not* vote in this country?"

"They will accuse us of being against the government if we write that."

"The president has declared that we must all vote."

A student explained: "The president has ordered that he be re-elected with a massive turnout. Everyone must go out to vote. It will prove that the whole country is behind him."

So their criticism of the government was a kind of show; it was criticism sanctioned by the government itself. Pointing out the lack of arrangements would help people obey the government's order to vote.

The president excelled at creating a façade of democracy to conceal his repression. Rwanda had more political parties than most democracies, more newspapers and radio stations, more officials fired for corruption. And now it would have a stellar election turnout.

It made the repression difficult to decipher through statistics. One had to rely on people's experiences—but even those were growing more distant, becoming harder to access.

"Will you obey the president's order?" I asked. "Is there a way to indicate what is going on?"

Someone said, "How can we do that without risking our security?"

The students shuffled. They knew what the president was accomplishing. I wanted to offer a realistic solution. "Could we cite the law?" I said. "It's stated that people have electoral rights. The president himself has approved this."

I had perhaps touched a nerve by laying out the president's blatant hypocrisy. A young man said he would investigate whether people had been properly informed about the electoral

law. He might subtly send a message about the government's order in a benign story listing people's testimonies.

I thought this was a clever approach. I asked for other ideas.

A woman proposed a more precise but ambitious story along similar lines. She said that the government had started a competition for the election. Those villages that voted most resoundingly for the president would receive rewards for their loyalty. She would find a mayor willing to confess this.

It was possible that the students were bouncing between the government and their teacher—caught between trying to please one and the other. It was a mentality in dictatorship: the need to please and flatter one's superior. But I felt for them to say the words was a step forward. What we needed now was some conviction, solidarity. And perhaps, with some creativity, we could have a wave of safe but inherently truthful reports.

Jean-Léonard was shot dead. It happened late in the evening as he was driving home. The gunmen killed him in his car.

That morning he had published a report about the dissident general, Kayumba, who had five days earlier been shot in the streets of Johannesburg. The government of course denied having anything to do with it: Rwandan newspapers began in lockstep to report how Johannesburg was such a dangerous city, and how Lucky Dube, a reggae star, had been killed there in a street shooting. But Jean-Léonard had information, obtained from within the government, linking the president's immediate entourage—those who reported directly to him—to the attack on the general.

Kayumba had escaped. A burly man, veteran of many of the president's wars, he wrestled with his assailant despite the bullet wound in his abdomen. An official South African investigation discovered links to the Rwandan government. Reports

indicated the hit man, once captured, had tried to bribe the Johannesburg police with a large amount of cash.

South Africa was at the time hosting the football World Cup—Africa's first. It did not appreciate the negative publicity. Diplomatic relations with Rwanda soured.

Jean-Léonard had paid the price for speaking up with his life.

His funeral, in the city, was a silent affair. A number of obvious government agents—strange figures unknown to Jean-Léonard's friends and his wife, who was trying to comfort their two-year-old daughter—were sent to monitor those who attended, and also to signal that the repression was unfinished.

The classroom was silent. There was no more initiative to take on the government, there were no discussions even when I tried. Sometimes I felt that I was talking to the air. The students now seemed to have lost hope.

And one afternoon, when it was time for lunch and when we all usually walked to a cheap restaurant around the corner, for its local-style buffet, I saw the students go in the other direction, toward the main road.

There, a black Mercedes had been parked at the curb. It was Cato, the Intore journalist. He was wearing dark glasses and leaning out of his window, one arm resting on the top of the glass and the other on his steering wheel. The car was new, as were his suit and fashion accessories. He was evidently doing well in his propaganda job. The journalists crowded around his car with interest, and he started to talk with them, gesticulating animatedly. I think he saw me from the corner of his eye.

I turned and walked up the dusty road to the restaurant with two students who decided to come along. Over lunch I looked at them, at their young and emaciated faces that still showed idealism, and I felt immensely sorry that they were so principled.

The main news in the local and international press about Rwanda that week was that Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary-general, had chosen Rwanda's president to lead a special high-profile committee that would aim to improve the welfare of people worldwide. The president would chair a group that included the Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Bill Gates, the Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus and the media magnate Ted Turner. The group was meant to bring together distinguished voices in favor of development for the poor; it would devise ways to improve people's lives. Ban said the committee would be a collection of development "superheroes." A number of messages of congratulations for Kagame came in from foreign leaders and dignitaries. The president said in response that he was honored.

The more the president's statements went unchallenged by Rwandan journalists and citizens, the more the world believed in their truth. The government's propaganda was being made into a successful export. The killing of Jean-Léonard and the government's massacres had been reported abroad by the United Nations, human rights organizations and the international media. But these voices found ever fewer echoes within Rwanda, and began to seem disconnected and almost unreal.

A few days later I received more disturbing news. Agnès was arrested after she wrote an article titled "It Is Not the King Who Kills, but His Courtiers." This was a well-known proverb from the time of the Rwandan monarchy. Agnès had linked the government to Jean-Léonard's killing, and also written about the massacres committed by the president's forces during the genocide. Agnès' paper was a tiny affair, privately printed and

with limited circulation. But the president did not tolerate insolence. It was unclear what the government would do with Agnès. Her colleague was also arrested, along with a young man who had attended a few of our classes. The man was allegedly responsible for a digitally altered image of the president that gave him a mustache like Hitler's.

I tried to reach Agnès but was unable to get through. She was being kept somewhere, perhaps in a detention center, beyond reach.

But one day she called me. She did not ask for help, money or any specific support. I was ready to recommend a lawyer, though I was persuaded it would do nothing to help her in a dictator's courts: the single law that mattered was the president's word. An order would come from his office that would determine her fate. "I am preparing myself for another term in prison," Agnès said solemnly. I suppose she felt something like a martyr—that she had known implicitly what was to happen and that she had felt it was the only possible outcome for her.

I was shocked. I searched for Moses, and found him in the office, his eyes red.

"They've got the core of the journalists now," Moses said. "The imbeciles."

The government subsequently produced two peasants whom it accused of having killed Jean-Léonard. We only heard their names. Even cattle thieves were paraded on national television, but these men were not shown to us. One began to wonder if they existed; but of course they did. It was no surprise. The men even confessed to murdering the journalist—as an act of revenge, they claimed, for someone Jean-Léonard had supposedly killed during the genocide.

It was routine government method to smear those it con-

ing to write up a piece of propaganda. But his arrest had not been for journalistic reasons. A colleague had accused him of harboring genocidal ideas. He was trying to put together proof against the allegation. People were beginning to be told what they thought, and were unable to speak, to combat these ideas imputed to them. It was altogether less violent and less confrontational now than when Jean-Léonard had been shot. The transition was smoother, calmer and less perceptible.

Journalism in the country seemed dead. One noticed this around the election.

A boy suddenly ran outside the polling station, calling out that the president's party was already planning a victory celebration.

The election was a masterpiece of authority. The vote passed in an ambience of total serenity. No negative incidents were reported in the country: there were no protests, no complaints, no boycotts or demonstrations. The people queued up obediently. None of the opposing candidates claimed procedural irregularities. They were playing the theater to perfection, and vowed they would accept the election's results.

I called the presidential candidate I had met before the vote. He said the latest polls had been disappointing; but he claimed to be still hopeful for a win.

The president indicated he would wait for the official results before making any pronouncements.

The country was teeming with visitors: foreign dignitaries, journalists, election observers. Reports from that day would be broadcast across the world. A careful decorum had to be maintained.

The official observers were unanimous in their praise. The African Union and the Commonwealth lauded the govern-

ment's impeccable planning: how the booths had opened on time, how people had voluntarily lined up with their identity cards in the early morning, and how by 10:00 a.m. practically every citizen—the government claimed a 95 percent participation rate—had cast their ballot. By noon already the booths were empty.

"The world has important lessons to learn from Rwanda," gushed a European Union official. Embassy observers hailed it as the most orderly vote they had witnessed in their careers.

The immense order of the ritual inspired awe.

The young Spanish woman, caressing her long hair, introduced herself to me as a propagandist. Her job was to write up positive stories, in supplements to British newspapers, about governments seeking to improve their image on the world stage or seeking to attract foreign investment.

But she had found no business in Rwanda, because the foreign press was already so positive. "Journalists come to our country all the time," a senior minister had told her. "And are stunned by how well we run it."

The minister had shown her examples of such stories in eminent foreign publications. These were stories about the roads, the economic growth statistics, and how survivors of the genocide supported the president, with no mention of his forces' massacres or his repression.

Even the professional propagandist, who had worked in a dozen dictatorships before, was astonished.

At the counting of the votes that evening I stood in a booth and watched the officials read: "Kagame Paul," which later became "Kagame" and finally "Paul, Paul, Paul," which was shorter, easier to say. Some of the girls marking tallies on the blackboard began to laugh. They seemed themselves astonished at the extent of the control.

I said to one of these girls—"The people are obedient."

She nodded. "Yes, very obedient." She was still smiling.

"The president is strong today."

"Very strong."

"What if someone disobeys him?"

"He will ask for forgiveness."

A few of the ballots were improperly marked, and as though I was some guarantor of fairness the officials held a ballot up to me and asked: "Paul?" I nodded, and did not resist. I felt it was futile to resist against such force.

But later I would hear that in the provinces some had dared to dissent, that in parts of the country—known for having resisted orders to kill during the genocide—only 10 percent of the people had voted for the president. The mayors in those areas had panicked, worried they would lose their positions, and ensured that the ballots were altered. Now the question was whether they could make sure no one would pass on the truth to the president. The source of this information was someone in the election commission.

The results were exactly as Moses had predicted a month before. He had told me that it had been decided: the president would receive 93 percent, the next candidate 5 percent, and the remainder split between the others. The Intore were summoned and put on a gigantic celebration in the stadium. Thousands attended. More Intore made the rounds in each neighborhood. In the dark valley below my house I heard the screams—raw, brutal—until almost dawn.

If some websites and stories even slightly criticized the election, the Intore immediately logged comments ridiculing and denouncing the authors, and saying that they lived in Rwanda and were happy. They wrote vehement letters to newspapers defending the president and his victory—and always gave their

A VINTAGE SHORT ORIGINAL

The Road Through War

Anarchy and Rebellion in the Central African Republic

ANJAN SUNDARAM

They returned to the beginning. War approached, and the city of Gaga was being emptied. I walked two miles into the wild with a boy who showed me how the city—and the country—was being turned inside out. The jungle paths had become the alleyways of a more secretive, older form of civilization: these identical, curving roads without signposts in which I became lost, and these homes of leaves and bent branches. Their roofs collapsed in each rain shower, the boy said, and had to be built anew. As I watched the people abandon everything they had made, abandon their city, for an instant I felt terribly alone. This was a country being atomized. People had become fractions of what they were, now carrying fear.

We were at the front. The sounds of the bombs were like thunder, instinctively making me look up, again, only to see that the sky was clear, and the repeated clarity of the sky was confusing. The sun was brilliant, like a jewel, the jungle thick with humidity and the people were moving their lives to the bush, isolating themselves because trust between human beings had been broken and there was no security in openness. Association in the jungle was kept to a minimum: we heard voices within the leaves but the boy did not want even to look. Suddenly, while I was walking beside men wounded by gunshots, their arms and legs wrapped in dirty gauze, I was forced off the path into the foliage by an old woman coming down from Gaga and holding above her the wooden frame of a double bed.

"*Maman*," I called out, half in surprise.

She said, "Help us, son."

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Living in Rwanda, I had heard of the war in the Central African Republic. But when I called people in the country to obtain more information, their words only confused me. Basic questions could not be answered: How many dead, where, killed by whom? It was not clear that the perpetrators of these killings were allied with their official leader, President Michel Djotodia. He was the leader of the Seleka rebellion, which had toppled the previous president François Bozizé and taken power, but that had not stopped his forces from continuing to murder deep in the countryside. Reports of killings would reach the capital only weeks after they had occurred. I came to the Central African Republic in an attempt to witness and record what was happening. At the airport in Cameroon, while waiting for my connecting flight to Bangui, I saw footage of a foreign reporter wearing a flak jacket, which I did not possess, declaring that she had "discovered" evidence of a new massacre of a few dozen people. I did not know what to make of that report. It seemed at once significant and to explain little of the giant, mounting conflict.

I arrived to find that this was a war of walkers. People walked to and from the shifting front lines, often through the jungle, avoiding the roads. There were many fronts across the Republic, and no one I asked—neither the foreign peacekeepers, government soldiers, nor the militias that opposed the government—could tell me how many, or where they were. A former government soldier told me that after losing a battle he walked for two months and circled the front to find only villages of dead people. The heroes were the cobblers. Everywhere in the country, even in the bush, you could see them frantically sewing footwear for those who needed to flee.

It was their own government the people feared. The government was pillaging and killing, and seemed to have no interest or competence in governance, but it had been recognized by the United Nations and granted all the legal protections due a state. Many Central Africans I spoke to did not understand how such a brutal force could be granted legitimacy. Peacekeepers had arrived to protect both the people and the government bases, and those who opposed the government were being disarmed. At international conferences world leaders discussed solutions. Who should be responsible for the country? The government had the most powerful army, so it had to be recognized. But the government was killing the people. So who else should we recognize? The Central African people were rising up against the plunder and rape resulting from this diplomatic absurdity, forming militias armed with homemade hunting rifles. And this confrontation by the people's militias—called the anti-balaka, or anti-machete—against the government was how the city of Gaga, situated in the jungle, had become the war's newest front.

The anti-balaka were mostly Christian and the Seleka mostly Muslim, and what had begun as a war for political reasons—the Muslim communities had felt ignored and mistreated and wanted power—was now being referred to by Central Africans in religious and racial terms, leading to rumors of impending genocide.

What is the Central African Republic? It is a central African republic, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Chad, Sudan, and South Sudan. Its people, central Africans, are Central Africans. This country, identified by capitalizations, was seized in March 2013 by a rebel force called Seleka, which has caused an emergency of global proportions. Several thousands have likely been killed, but over such a vast territory, much of it so remote, the true toll is still unknown. Seleka—"alliance" in the local language, Sango—brought President Michel Djotodia to power, forming what is now the government of the Central African Republic. But after its conquest, the Seleka's many foreign officers from Chad and Sudan escaped Djotodia's authority and declared their own fiefdoms. The president has said, "I'm in control of my own men, those I don't control are not my men," as if it were an explanation. Meanwhile, the Seleka fighters who rule over the towns as small kings do not know the land and, not speaking Sango, communicate with the population through interpreters. They have taken local officials hostage and made them sign decrees in the name of the government. In many towns I visited I heard the same story: the colonizers who are our government came door-to-door and plundered our money, food, medicine, and killed our young men.

The Central African Republic's war began in December 2012, when Seleka invaded the country. The president then was François Bozizé, the last in a long line of military officers who had seized power in a coup d'état. Coups in the Central African Republic were traditionally supported by France, but Bozizé, who held office for ten years, had been aided by Chad. Bozizé later spurned his Chadian benefactors, who returned as Seleka, allied with Central African Muslims and other anti-Bozizé militias from Chad and Sudan. This coalition of fighters moved easily through the Republic; cities were captured with hardly a fight, according to former Bozizé soldiers and General Abdel Kalil, a confidant of President Djotodia. "We would reach a city," General Kalil told me in his crumbling home near the president's office in Bangui, "and there would be a little fire, but suddenly Bozizé's forces would flee and we would take the town without either side suffering casualties." General Kalil told me he had earned his rank of general in one of the few fierce battles during Seleka's invasion, about eight miles from Bangui, when he saw what he thought was a pigeon that had been shot fluttering on the ground, only to realize it was a piece of his flesh. I met some of Bozizé's soldiers at a military garrison where they had been detained by the Seleka. I asked why

they had capitulated so easily. "Bozizé did not trust his soldiers with heavy weapons," one of them said. "He feared we would overthrow him." Rather than arm his troops, Bozizé called upon the South African army for support. But after suffering casualties while battling the rebels, the South Africans left the country.

This occupation of the Central African Republic by Seleka harks back to a history of regional kingdoms in flux. The fabled Sudanese warlord Rabih az-Zubayr ruled most of the Central African Republic until 1900. Ten years later the territory became part of French Equatorial Africa, which also included Chad. Barthélemy Boganda, a Central African independence leader in the mold of the great African statesmen Nkrumah, Nyerere, and Biko, named this country the Central African Republic because he wished it to be part of an African federation, a United States of Africa. His vision was one of African unity; but he also worried that his country might otherwise be annexed by newly independent and relatively powerful African states like Guinea or Ghana. Boganda was killed—some say by the French—in a 1959 plane crash, one year before the Central African Republic gained independence. His country was left with its peculiar name but bereft of his vision. The Republic has since suffered five coups. France has retained a portion of its colonial role. Its forces have secured strategic parts of Bangui, with the tricolor flying atop the airport.

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When I returned from the bush, walking past a procession of villagers carrying their belongings on their heads, Gaga was shuttered—the blue, brown, and yellow doors of the shops interspersed the avenues of homes whose bricks had disintegrated and roofs were burnt off, all empty but for the pigs: these were also the occupiers. The Seleka are almost entirely Muslim—the country was predominantly Christian—and its fighters had killed people and plundered homes but had not touched the pigs, which had taken over the towns in this inversion of man and beast, of civilization and nature. As people scurried to take shelter in the jungle, the pigs made love in what had once been the kitchens and fed on corpses left on the ground.

I grew uneasy about staying in Gaga, at the front, for I could see that the anti-balaka was pushing back the government: from points in the forest rose black plumes of smoke, each closer to us than the last. The government forces here were led by Commander Yusuf and his deputy, Tony Montana, who aspired to be "wicked" like Al Pacino in *Scarface*, though his voice had not yet broken.

"What about the approaching battle?" I said.

"Our boys are winning," Yusuf replied, sounding convinced.

"Then why are the people fleeing Gaga?"

"Which people are fleeing?" He said he was not aware.

I could not allow myself to be found in this government base, for I might be taken to be a Seleka supporter.

The heat of the afternoon was soporific, and mixed with the tension. I sat beside Yusuf for an hour, waiting to see if he would push back the anti-balaka, when a white pickup burst over the hilltop and into the base. A group of armed boys, chains of bullets wrapped around their bodies, shielded a government general. I had been correct: the battle was at a tipping point. What followed was a scene of a general's fury at the front. But before the general could speak, four civilians appeared on a motorcycle, hoping to pass the barrier and exit Gaga.

"Stop!" screamed someone from the general's entourage.

"We want to cross," the villagers pleaded. They were made to get off the bike, which was in good condition, and told to continue on foot with their casseroles, ladles, and mattresses.

The general, in his olive-green suit and open-toed leather sandals, pointed at Yusuf and began to shout insults, saying Yusuf had sent fifteen fighters to their deaths against three hundred assassins. "Are you a soldier?" the general bellowed. The question may have been rhetorical: Yusuf had told me that he was a professional diamond miner. The general hurried down the hill to Gaga's city center with his entourage of boys. I began to follow him.

Behind me the boy Tony Montana took charge of the base and in his high-pitched voice ordered soldiers many decades older than him to rearrange the chairs and be still. "We need some quiet, why are we talking so much?"

"Who is talking here?" a soldier said.

"Do you want a whipping?" said Tony. He began to dismantle his AK-47, undoing springs and screws and in irritation attempted to jam a bullet into a cartridge already full. He told his soldiers that he needed to think, and that he needed to work out how they were going to win this battle or they could all be killed that same night.

I left the boy soldier. The general was already at the marketplace, where his voice resounded: "Is there any Islam here?" His arms were raised, his fingers pointing to the sky. "We need motorbikes and petrol," the general said, "so we can defeat the enemy. Will you help?" He knew that the front was in danger of being swallowed by the anti-balaka, that in some hours they could arrive at this place. His boys began to swirl around the marketplace, grabbing motorbikes; petrol was emptied into them from plastic bottles. I was witnessing a scene of procurement in this war, which was so inchoate that a few vehicles poached from poor villagers might make the difference between victory and defeat in a battle. The market smelled of fumes. The general climbed onto one of the bikes, crushing its suspension under his weight, and headed into the jungle with his twenty boys and their heavy weapons. I could hear the roars of the engines after they were out of sight. The people in the market had fallen silent.

I found a government fighter in a white singlet on the dirt road into the jungle. I told him that I wanted to follow the general. He shook his head because he did not understand.

"*Aarabiya*?" he said.

"Sorry, no Arabic. No French?"

"Sorry, no French."

"Sango?"

"No Sango."

"English?" I offered as a last resort.

He slapped my back. "My friend," he said, "my name is Colonel Aktahir and I come from Sudan." So in this city hardly accessible to the world outside we were speaking the language of the colonizer.

But the colonel refused to let me into the jungle. "Who will guarantee your safety?" he said.

I told him that I wanted to witness the general's victory. He promised a report of the towns the general would protect. But I knew that if the anti-balaka were winning—why else would the general have arrived at the front?—the government would be brutal, as it had been since the war's beginning, and that with thirty-five men, even well armed, the general could not take on three hundred. What would he do inside that jungle? I had to find a way inside. Perhaps it was possible to take another route.

The boy who had taken me to the new civilization in the jungle, to the houses of leaves, was sitting on the edge of a cemetery dug for victims in Gaga from that past month. Speaking softly so the Seleka would not hear him, he told me that four major towns lay on the road the general had taken—Camp Bangui, Zoé, Dombourou, and Carrefour—and that their many thousands of residents were at risk, for the Seleka would assume that they were aiding the anti-balaka. There was another way to reach those towns, on a poor road. You could only walk, or possibly go on a motorbike, and it would take you hours but it was the only other axis, and maybe it was free of the Seleka. A friend of the boy told me that the journey would take a day. Another villager I asked said that it would take fifty hours.

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Four days after I saw the government general—he was also Sudanese, Colonel Aktahir told me, and his name was Abdallah Hamat—ride into the jungle from Gaga, I arrived in the early morning at the town of Bekadili. I was accompanied by Lewis Mudge, a Human Rights Watch researcher I knew from Rwanda, here to research recent massacres, and Thierry Messongo, a Central African journalist. I was apprehensive about going to Dombourou and Camp Bangui, the towns in the jungle that General Hamat had likely attacked. I wanted Lewis and Thierry as companions. But they feared the journey would be too dangerous. I was not being helped by the motorcycle drivers in Bekadili, who were themselves afraid to go to a place of recent battle. No information had emerged from Camp Bangui in four days—only rumors of an attack. No survivors had arrived from the town, and no one had gone to see, not even from Bekadili, which was on the main road and had access to motorcycles.

I tried to convince a group of drivers to make the journey. It was their community, their people who had been struck. Should someone not go and see what had happened, and possibly report it?

"We suffer too," the drivers said to me.

"More than those people in those villages?"

"Yes."

"All right," I said, "that's fine then, we won't go."

But I waited and watched as they began to chatter among themselves. A man would tell me he was ready; minutes later he would tell me he was too afraid. I said aloud, to no one in particular, that if it grew too dangerous we would turn back before reaching the towns. Two hours later I had three committed drivers. Pack your bags, I told Lewis, we're going in.

Reassured by the drivers' willingness, he and Thierry agreed to come.

The forest was dense and the road almost formless. The drivers kept speaking of a "highway" up ahead; we arrived at the highway, a strip of dirt. Such were the axes that the people used to traverse this country. There were few roads: a strip was so precious that it was referred to as a highway. We rode through tall grass that ripped at and burned our faces. Looking over the driver's shoulder, I could not see the road.

"Is the road still there?" I yelled out.

"Yes, it's here again," he said.

"Are we all together?"

The drivers exchanged honks. The other motorcycles were at some distance from us. "Yes, we are."

"How many hours to Camp Bangui?"

"Two."

"But you said it would be one hour?"

"The road is long, no."

Near Camp Bangui we passed bundles of clothes on the road, towels and skirts that had been dropped by someone. I saw the small shirts of babies, and my mind conjured images of a mother fleeing with her children, but under the stress of the attack unable to hold on to their things. I thought of the infants hiding in the bush, naked, with nothing to clean them but leaves.

The road forked; to one side was Dombourou, closer to Gaga, where the government might still be present. The other road led to Camp Bangui; we took it, hoping that the soldiers had retreated. A cadaver appeared on the roadside, his eye eaten out and covered in larvae, the body still whole to its toes and fingers. You could see where the head had been shot. Our drivers clicked their tongues. "The body will curse us," one of them said.

Camp Bangui was burnt. Casseroles lay on the ground, still filled with food. There were flashlights, towels, and bicycles flung from their places; I could still feel the life around me, feel the people who had been sitting and standing in these places, making their tea and fried dough, listening to the radio, talking to their neighbors. The town's homes were roofless, almost all burnt. No one had come to pick up the fallen things that could be useful; no one had come to bury that corpse. From somewhere in the village, from inside one of the homes, we smelled the stench of another decaying body.

Thierry called out, his voice tense; our voices were all strained and seemed somehow solitary. Lewis walked around like a chicken, his arms now flailing, now on his head. Thierry shouted out that it was all right, that the government was gone and that we were friends. He shouted and shouted and in the distance we saw the first person. It was a woman in a red shirt and a black skirt; and she came running down the town's central avenue, looking at each of our faces, as though she was stunned, and stopping for just a moment to shake my hand and say, Thank you, thank you.

It was that first moment of trust; she had been in her place of hiding, she had heard us, believed us and decided to expose herself; and she had survived. At that moment I felt our presence had overcome some portion of the fear, that the people had gained some trust in the community of strangers. More people emerged from the bush, some running toward our motorbikes. "Do people know what has happened to us?" a man asked me. They said the village had been torched. They said it was General Abdallah's forces that had destroyed the town, and they showed me burnt things that I did not know could burn in this way, whole, like some animal on a skewer: a school, a motorcycle, a human. The citizens had defended themselves against the government and had been winning, when the general, in an act of desperation, employed the method of the Janjaweed in Sudan: he burned down the entire town so as to render the place uninhabitable, sending the people the message that they should submit and that if they dared to resist, more of their country would be destroyed and more dead would be counted. The Seleka had few fighters—such brutality was its way of occupying the country while they plundered its timber, gold, and ivory.

The Republic was burning, here one village and there in the bush another. We could not count how many, and with the people so afraid most of the destruction would never become known. But the villagers told me they would no longer be intimidated. "We are tired of seeing our women raped and our homes destroyed." Like the colonizers of old, this government had divided the people—it had entered villages and separated the Muslims from the Christians. The Muslims had to point out the Christian houses, the ones to burn. One community was thus set upon the other.

The Muslims were now complicit, and knew that they would be decimated if the government were one day defeated. There was talk in the country of an impending genocide.

The journey to Camp Bangui had taken four hours and it was already three in the afternoon; if we stayed any longer we would not return before dark. "We should leave," my driver said. I knew that it was not good for us to be in the jungle, during this war, at night.

The tension of the journey had gotten to me, and I could not sit properly on the motorcycle. We fell, the motorcycle spun, and I had a bloody knee. The driver was mad at me for not sitting properly; he said we were losing balance with the way I was sitting, that I should press closer to him so we were one mass when the motorbike swayed and jumped. But I was not able to hold steady. Two hours in, as we rode through the rivers, and walked through them as well and covered ourselves in mud, after my feet had hit a hundred times little stumps of trees that people had cut to ankle height, so that my shoes were broken and each new impact with a stump made me wince and the soles of my feet could now feel the mud, it all got to me, and I told Lewis I needed to stop, I needed to go. He called out to our convoy, "We have a *caca d'urgence*!" An urgent shit. I got off my bike and trudged, sweating, into the bush and did the job. When I returned I found my driver solemn, for such things can happen to anyone, and he had seen that I had been affected, that my guts had given way; and though I was not able to sit any better for the rest of the journey he would not scold me.

On the road back to Bekadili, we passed through a village where men were preparing for revolution; they tilled their fields, tended to their livestock and turned the cranks of their peanut grinders, their rifles slung over their backs. The guns were artisanal, made for hunting small animals; to kill a government soldier they would have to shoot him twice or three times. But the villagers told us that they were the sons of this country and ready to die to reclaim their land from the colonizer, that the test tubes of medicine stuck against their heads and the vials of powder and the leather satchels of herbs that they carried would protect them like the elements of the gods and would make them invulnerable to the government's bullets. Their long-barrelled guns now in their hands, the men said that they would move upon Bangui, that they were not afraid. The battles were only beginning, they told me, and the war would need to get worse before they could be free.

We were driving now by the light of the moon, the engines revving, and I was almost asleep on the back of my driver, unable to take the journey anymore, unable to think about that city Gaga inverted, its people removed, of that woman holding up her bed and the feeling of shock in the town that had been burned. The leaves in the forest were silver in the light and large like machetes. We saw a hut that was empty. The people, with nowhere to go, were retreating into the bush, and it was from the bush that they would emerge, this burning bush.

Postscript

Could it possibly be genocide? The question was already being asked when I was in the Central African Republic in November 2013. It remains unanswered. The world has been unable to stop the killings in that country, despite repeated warnings and cries for help. It is as though, through the genocides and massacres of the twentieth century, we have learned little. We are conscious but inert.

Statistics, perhaps, give some measure of what has happened. Half a million people have fled their homes, many to the bush. Thousands of people have been killed, though no one has counted the number of dead. One and a half million people are at risk of hunger. In January 2015, 20,000 displaced people squatted in view of the diplomats, journalists, and aid workers who flew into the capital's international airport. Some 100,000 anti-balaka were at large, voicing rhetoric that Muslims should be killed. More than 400,000 people, mostly Muslim, have fled to Chad and Cameroon. Entire villages have been emptied. The price of cooking oil has risen from 70 cents per pound to $13.00. Ten thousand United Nations peacekeepers, some working valiantly, have proven ineffective against the violence. Ban Ki-moon has said foreign experts are needed to rebuild the nation.

It is now clear that what I was witnessing was the implosion of the country. The anti-balaka I saw in the bush eventually moved on to the capital, Bangui, bringing chaos. Some gained revenge for loved ones they had lost to the Seleka; others instigated their own violence. The Seleka's President Djotodia was forced out of office—largely due to the irritation of Chad's President Idriss Déby, the region's kingmaker—and replaced by Catherine Samba-Panza, a conciliatory figure who would not pressure powerful figures like Déby and former president François Bozizé, whom the Seleka toppled. But the Central African Republic, at this moment, needed the opposite: someone with power who could stop the state from collapsing, and who could stop the people from killing each other.

Back at home, I have watched footage and seen photographs of lynch mobs operating in broad daylight. Muslims are chased on the streets by men brandishing machetes, as children might chase one another in a game. The victims run in circles, arching their tense bodies away from their pursuers. Spectators stand, hands behind their backs, observing passively as though this was ordinary life. Muslims have been taken apart like toys and burned in the capital's streets. Children have been beheaded. People have confessed to cannibalism.

Many of the people I met on my trip have been killed. Tony Montana, the Seleka boy soldier I met in Gaga, was apparently tortured and murdered by the anti-balaka, as was the Seleka commander Yusuf. The chief of Bekadili was shot dead by the Seleka as they were driven out of the area. The Bekadili *majlis*, a thatched-roof open structure I was given shelter in for one night to sleep under a mosquito net, has been destroyed. The French photographer Camille Lepage, whom I had met briefly, was found dead in May, in a pickup driven by anti-balaka fighters. The brave motorcycle driver who took me to Camp Bangui is, I'm told, still alive.

Muslim leaders who have appealed for restraint have themselves been killed, and as the rhetoric is thus made more violent, so are the acts. Bangui was once home to 140,000 Muslims. By the summer of 2014, fewer than one thousand remained. The Muslims still in the country were either

being protected by United Nations troops or being forced to convert to Christianity and prevented from speaking their language, living in fear of attacks. International peacekeepers were informed about spontaneous killings but often arrived too late. A ceasefire agreement signed by the anti-balaka and the Seleka in 2014 fell apart as both sides fragmented into groups that continue to be violent. Hundreds of mosques have been destroyed. The country is essentially split, with the anti-balaka controlling the west and the Seleka's factions taking over the east. UN forces secure Bangui and parts of a few other urban centers.

Peacekeepers have helped stop some of the carnage. But they have also brought risks. In 2014 the peacekeepers—ill-informed, under-resourced, and poorly advised—even contributed to the conflict. Suddenly concerned about abuses by Seleka soldiers, international forces began to disarm the government troops. The anti-balaka seized upon the relative calm to mobilize in the bush. With only a little effort, the peacekeepers thus swung the country to a new disequilibrium. The anti-balaka rose, and the Muslims, who had relied on the Seleka to protect them, found themselves exposed.

And now horrendous evidence has leaked from the United Nations that French peacekeepers have been allegedly sexually abusing Central African children, procuring oral sex and sodomy from them in return for food, and that the United Nations knew about this but did nothing. The UN deputy high commissioner for human rights has said she did not follow up on the allegations because she was "distracted" by other issues. The only person punished so far has been the UN officer who leaked the evidence of the abuses. It has added to the sense of impunity and hopelessness in the Central African Republic, and raised questions about the motivations of those who say they want to help.

Central Africans need a sense of justice restored or the killing will continue. The former President Bozizé and his family are said to command factions of the anti-balaka, while officials in Chad and Sudan are allied with Seleka. Many of these leaders direct their forces from abroad. Sheltered from the rising violence in the Central African Republic, they continue to fuel it, hoping to gain control of the country—but what sort of country do they hope to rule?—or to profit from diamonds, ivory and gold during the chaos. There are reports of a slaughter of elephants by the Seleka in southern Central African forests. Gold and diamond mines worked by villagers are controlled by the Seleka and anti-balaka. Forests are being razed to export timber. European firms purchase this timber and thus help to finance the war. Sanctions have been imposed by the UN on Bozizé, a Seleka leader called Nourredine Adam, and the anti-balaka politician Levy Yakete, but the Central African Republic now operates as a separate world, supplied by traffickers. The sanctions cannot replace local magistrates.

In April, President Samba-Panza approved a law to create a special criminal court for war crimes, but the court is yet to receive the financing it needs and it is unclear if it will have the political strength to prosecute the most powerful figures at the heart of the conflict.

Justice has meanwhile become personal and imaginary. Central Africans kill those they imagine are guilty of crimes, and those whom they imagine will be guilty of crimes.

Facts would help to correct such imaginings. But who knows what happens twelve miles outside the capital? Little information makes it back down the roads through the war, whether for the formulation of international policy or for immediate life-or-death decisions. Local NGOs like Le Réseau des Journalistes pour les Droits de l'Homme are trying to help civilians who do not know where it will be safe for the night or where to find food or a working hospital.

There are no genocidal pamphlets in the Central African Republic, no radio broadcasts calling for extermination, no gas chambers or industrial killing machines. What we have in this country are identities that have been cleaved apart, and turned upon each other. Bodies are scattered. The twenty people killed in one village are not just twenty, but part of many hundreds and thousands who are being killed across the country. To save their lives people are converting their beliefs and shedding their ideas of who they are. What are we seeing?