

# Looking north

Joel Ratcliffe



A

t the prime meridian there is a boy. He is standing with shoulders straight, on a mound of dirt, a few degrees above the equator, looking north. He loves the evening. The air tastes like old books taken from high on a shelf, opened and the crisp pages touched with your nose just to smell their long stillness and age.

The boy can smell the same now, clouds of the ancient land are blowing down from the north, dust billowing off the Sahara and throwing a pall over the countryside. The village cowherds call it Harmattan. The coming of Harmattan means that this is the dry season. Across the foreign land, the elephant grass is dead and dusty, grown up in the fields after harvest and forgotten rain. Old cornstalks still stand to speak of that green time, here and there now, yellow, like outnumbered scarecrows against flocks of feasting pigeons. The boy's eyes sting, blinking in the twilight. He is white skinned, strange in this land of people with black faces, though his arms and legs are caked with dirt and look therefore brown, like an out-of-place Indian. In the silence, as both an imagined warrior and a boy covered in dirt, a smile plays at the corner of his mouth.

The boy is alone with crossed arms, looking north. He looks out to where the earth curves away and at dusk there is a thin line between light and dark, between night and day. He sees lofty baobab trees. At eleven years old, with a little shimmy of imagination and twinkling eyes, he is defender of the realm, lord of all this silent savannah who stands on a castle turret looking to that sliver of north. But then, suddenly, he realises that after that line there is more and more of what he can only imagine or piece together from the fragments of old memories.

Memories fly north across the plains, over twisted trees and outcrops of tumbled granite and quartz. It is here that juju is worked by witchdoctors on nights of the new moon. Past Bolgatanga and rising into the highlands of Burkina. Onto the mist-covered slopes of the escarpment. Grass, dew-soaked in the dusk, will make your shoes wet as you trudge up the mountain and ponder the truth held in a guide's tale of a great, white elephant. Then out of the shroud of descending darkness, lions roar. Further north after that, into the Sahel, the semi-desert and you come upon the twisting Niger river. Here there are barges with lanterns burning right now and the chatter of women cooking and calling to each other across the muddy water. The barges have run aground and their captains are waiting for southern rain. Then: Timbuktu. An American in his four-wheel-drive taps his fingers and waits on one of few dusty roads, window down, sunglasses, a bottle of sweaty Coca Cola in hand. He waits for a caravan of nomads, leading their mumbling camels across the path. They are nearing the sandy streets of the mud city, the end

of their wilderness trek. North again, across the Mediterranean: Rome. At that same moment of twilight, young girls clop in high heels upon the footpath, cleavage legally just covered and jolting, chaperoned by serious older brothers and jiggling with glee and chatter at their first chance to dance in the real world and take a thrilling swig of the entertainer of masses.

Europe—somewhere in that cacophony of noise and sparkling lights are shreds of a culture to which the boy knows he belongs. Somewhere among the flashes of roaring subway cars and spot-lighted billboards are memories of a hundred people that he has met but will probably never meet again. He cannot remember their faces now. Like that pilot. The one the boy met flying across the Sahara. He had just woken in his Swiss Air economy seat, lips dry, three hours out of Accra. He had asked for a glass of Coke and ice with a slice of lemon on the lip. It had vibrated with a tinkle on his tray table. Then, 'The captain has invited you to come up on the flight deck'. Trying to remember that pilot's face is like trying to remember the likeness of a grain of sand falling through an hourglass. All the boy remembers is a Rolex watch on a hairy arm, the yellow earth stretching away below the cockpit window and wondering whether the pilot would really eat his present of faded M&K's saved for weeks in a jar.

M&K's are imitations from Nigeria, like so many other imitations in Africa. The boy had given Asana some M&K's to taste on her last visit. Asana used to sell food to the boy's parents. She used to live in the village, standing now just north-east of the boy's vantage, with its clump of mud-walled huts and thatched roofs and white smoke smelt suddenly on the evening air. Every day she would tie her baby to her back with patterned cloth. Then she would hoist a metal bowl upon her head filled with cassava and yams and corn to come, hips swinging, bowl balancing, through the grass to the house where the boy lived. The boy remembers how her face had contorted with a scowling grin at the sweetness of the coloured, chocolate beads. The next day Asana had been bitten by a rabid dog. The uproar from the village could be heard and seen for miles around as clouds of pigeons rose in fear of the yelling and wailing and roar of a gun.

If you fly north again across the highlands of Burkina, across the Niger, past Timbuktu and over the sparkling blue of the Mediterranean, you will find that the people there, the boy's own people, are sure of no cure for the

foaming mouth and rage-filled eyes of rabies. However, they are convinced that they are the smartest people in history because of a vaccine that, if administered before one contracts the disease, will undoubtedly protect you. Asana never had a vaccine. In the village she lay in the murky darkness of her hut, the smell of mud walls strong in her nostrils, and thrashed and thrashed against the rope that held her down and screamed and gnashed her teeth with blood-shot eyes. But the sickness broke itself against her on the third night and she was calm. By the end of a week she was sitting up, eating. After that her husband sent her to the witch doctor for the protection of ancestors. In dark night Asana had stumbled along the narrow path to a mound of black boulders, which the boy can see now, standing a mile north of the village. There the witch doctor made his juju in the flicker of fire. But Asana's husband had no money to pay him and instead of calling down protection he cursed her. In sleep, two days later, she died.

A breeze, cool under the armpits after the shimmering heat of day, is springing up and making the grass breathe at the boy's feet. A cock crows at the hazy glow of the set sun. A wailing call breaks out from the village, drifting. It is the familiar chant from the village mosque, strangely muffled in the dust. The boy stands there alone and looks north. Why do people hold so strongly to their ideas, so strongly to their great medical breakthroughs, to their ancestral black magic? Because if they didn't they would feel like the boy feels now in the face of this strange and beautiful and foreign land, standing in one of those rare places where you can see so much you realise you can barely see anything at all.

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Joel Ratcliffe was a third-culture kid. He grew up having adventures on the northern plains of Ghana in western Africa. As his journey continues, he writes to find significance in his and others' experience. He lives in Adelaide but wonders where home is.

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