prisoners' final moments. Most had suffocated, though many also seem to have died when Dostum's guards shot into several of the containers while they were parked at Mazar. The dead, and a few who were merely unconscious, were loaded into lorries and taken into the desert, where Dostum's soldiers raked them with bullets to make sure there were no survivors. Then they buried them.

With Qureshi's help, we found the right spot near the village of Dasht-i-Leila. The evidence lay abundantly on the surface: tattered black turbans, charred shoes, a prayer cap, jaws, femurs, ribs. A bit of digging turned up most of a skeleton. We found teeth and thick human hair. The site was littered with spent cartridges. It was easy to imagine how these people had disappeared on that cold day in November 2001.

We poked about for a while among the debris and the indifferent sand, and then we left. □

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GRANTA

ANOTHER AGE

Helon Habila

From left: Helon Habila, Odia Ofeimun and Tony Kan, Lagos 2002

The first time I saw Odia Ofeimun was at a party in Lagos. We came late, Toni Kan and I. It was a Friday, we had left the office and stopped at several barrooms on the way, and by nine o'clock, when we arrived at the party, we were tipsy. But we were in good company: almost everyone was high. There was an air of euphoria in the room; it was the same all over the country. This was November 1999. The country had just emerged from fifteen years of military dictatorship. Everyone was savouring that feeling of having survived a shipwreck, or a plane crash. The future looked bright, especially for the people gathered in this room: over a hundred of them, poets and writers and playwrights. In everyday life they were journalists and teachers and out-of-work graduates, a handful who had narrowly survived General Abacha's elite-exterminating agenda which saw a lot of pro-democracy intellectuals killed or exiled or compromised. Those who could not afford to go into exile during the reign of terror, and who refused to become turncoats, had lived in a sort of limbo, occasionally bringing out a book of poems or stories or essays whose oblique metaphors and idioms made sense only to other writers. Tonight these writers were being hosted by Maik, a novelist and journalist, and the booze was flowing. They were exchanging stories about fellow writers exiled in foreign capitals. Next to me two young men were arguing about a poet who had been found strangled in his car the year before.

'He sold out!' one insisted.

'Then why was he killed?' the other shouted back angrily.

'He refused to sell out, that's why!'

The poet's death is still a subject of controversy in Nigerian literary circles. He was found dead in his car in a ditch close to Omole Estate on the Lagos mainland. The car boot was full of poetry books. It is one of the many unsolved murder mysteries from the military era.

On the balconies, in the rooms, people came and went, talking about their latest works. Toni pointed out a slim, fair-skinned man in a corner. 'That's Chiedu, he won the MuSoN poetry competition last year. He's the hottest poet in the country right now.' The story was that after he had received the prize (awarded annually by the Musical Society of Nigeria), Chiedu and a group of poets had gone into the nearest bar with the prize money and emerged the next day, the money gone. Odia, perhaps the oldest man in the room,

abstemious, avuncular, wearing his trademark batik *dashiki* and a matching cap, went from group to group, listening, nodding, putting in a word here and there.

Later, in my novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, I tried to recreate that occasion using the same mix of ingredients: poets, alcohol, camaraderie, euphoria—but in the book the euphoria is not of celebration and hope, but of panic and despair. I put the time back to 1997, the last days of General Abacha's reign of terror. Those were days of wanton killings, of activists shot in their cars in broad daylight, of student riots controlled by guns.

In the story, Lomba and James, a reporter and his editor, are running from Abacha's equivalents of the Tontons Macoute, and after going from one back street to another, all of them lined with dead bodies and queues of cars waiting for fuel, they finally end up at the house of a fellow poet and activist, Emeka Davies. A party is going on: two poets have been arrested at the Nigeria–Benin border and the party is in their honour. There are readings and speeches. Outside, soldiers roam the streets, and Tontons Macoute in their dark glasses patrol the back alleys, eliminating anybody who sees things differently from them. It is usually necessary to exaggerate and defamiliarize events in stories to make them captivating, but sometimes real events remain scarier than fiction.

In the story I made the soldiers knock on the gates of the house to be let in while the revellers, including Lomba, slipped out through a back door. In real life the headhunters were more subtle: they didn't knock on your gate when they arrived, and they didn't give you a chance to escape through the back door. In the novel I don't dwell much on the circumstances of the arrest of the two poets, but in real life it sent a big shock through the small community of intellectuals. It made them realize what other African writers, such as Ngugi and Dennis Brutus, had known long ago: that to these dictators a poem was as much a threat as a rally; that you might [illegible] arrest or death or exile just by joining one word to another.

Back to the party at Maik's house. We stood at the door, Toni and I, weaving slightly, trying to see where the booze was. There were couples on the floor dancing to a Hi-Life tune from a huge CD player in the corner. Solitary figures were slouched against the walls,

determinedly knocking back their beers. Toni shook hands. I nodded and smiled at the strange faces. I was new in Lagos and this was my first such literary party.

'Aha,' Toni said, 'Come, let me introduce you to Odia Ofeimun.'

'Odia Ofeimun!' I remember repeating it, following him, not sure if he was serious or not.

At that time Odia Ofeimun was probably the most influential and the most visible poet in Nigeria. He was something of a cult figure among young poets, and few poetry books were published in Lagos during the 1990s without his name among the acknowledgements. He had arrived on the Nigerian literary scene in the Eighties, first as the youngest poet in Wole Soyinka's influential anthology, *Poems of Black Africa*, then with his own collection, *The Poet Lied*. The poet he accused of lying was none other than the great J. P. Clark who, together with Chinua Achebe and Soyinka, had an almost oracular status in Nigerian literature at the time. It was a gutsy thing for a young poet to do.

When I was at school, Odia was a fixture on the syllabus. Our teachers called him 'the last great Nigerian poet'. By this they meant the very last of our poets to be published by a multinational publisher, in his case Heinemann, in the Eighties, before the great pull-out of foreign publishers began.

After 1985 the military regime systematically undermined the once-buoyant, fuel-driven economy of Nigeria. The country's infrastructure collapsed. There were no plans for industrial and technological recovery. Local manufacturers couldn't compete with the cheap foreign goods that were dumped daily on our shores: everything was imported, including toilet paper. Publishing was one of the businesses that was worst hit. What small market there had been, thanks to a pre-independence curiosity about African literature—which had encouraged energetic literary activity inside the country—fizzled out because ordinary people couldn't afford to buy books for pleasure. The big publishing houses disappeared, to be replaced by small-time hustlers moonlighting as publishers. If you add all this to the political tension and suppression of any intellectual activity by the military, you can understand why we aspiring poets held Odia in such high regard: he had reached a position which fate and circumstance seemed to have decreed that we never would.

'Helon Habila, a poet,' Toni introduced me to Odia.

'Sir,' I said tremulously, holding both his hands in mine, 'this is a great moment for me.'

'Call me Odia,' the great man said, patting me on the back. I was surprised to find he was no taller than me. He asked what I was working on and I told him: 'A novel.' We stood there: Toni my best mate, the great poet, and me. Toni and I couldn't help exchanging significant smiles.

We had both dreamed of such a moment since we first met at university about ten years before. Toni, like me, wanted to become a writer, and university was simply the means to that end: to get the necessary education and the necessary connections.

We'd become friends immediately. I was from Gombe State in the north, and Toni from Delta State in the south-east, and in Nigeria that meant we were supposed to be wary of each other. But our common aims proved greater than our different backgrounds. We had read the same books, admired the same authors and, when lectures started, we'd both read more than half the books on the reading list. Toni, like me, had never met a published writer. Whenever we heard of a lecturer who had actually been published, we'd say, 'Wow, how did he do it?'

Our friendship was underscored by rivalry: each of us wanted to be the first to achieve literary glory. We went in for the same BBC competitions, then hid the rejection slips from each other, claiming our manuscripts had been lost in the post. But in 1992, in our second year, Toni won an essay competition. The prize was a six-week trip to Britain. Of course I was happy for him, and depressed for myself: I'd entered the same competition. But then, a year later, one of my short stories was included in an anthology of Nigerian writing, *Through Laughter and Tears*. I was a published author. It would take a lot of trips to Britain by Toni to best that. But he did. He won a radio competition, and this time the prize was two weeks with a family in Switzerland. After that, try as I might, I couldn't win anything. The return of my manuscripts became almost routine. But one more defeat was still waiting for me: when we graduated, Toni got a 2.1, and I got a 2.2.

'It's not the kind of degree that matters,' I told myself. 'It's the use to which you put it.'

Toni was offered a job by a magazine in Lagos, the cultural capital of Nigeria. Before the end of the year a rival magazine had made him a better offer. He was a star.

And me? This was 1996, perhaps the toughest year in Nigerian history; the economy was in a shambles, we had just been suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations and had sanctions imposed by almost every country in the world. It was, among other things, a result of the hanging of the pro-democracy activist and author, Ken Saro-Wiwa, by General Abacha and his junta.

Graduates walked the streets looking for any kind of job, some turned to crime just to survive. I was lucky to get a post as a lecturer in a polytechnic in Bauchi, my state capital. I worked there from 1997 to 1999. It was a lonely period for me. Bauchi is a small town and there was no outlet whatsoever for my literary work, either in print or in conversation. My only escape was to continue writing, and reading. I read like mad. Friends would find me with five books on the table in front of me: I'd read a chapter here, a page there. They'd say, 'Take it easy, man.'

Toni was a household name by this time, and whenever I wanted to impress people, especially girls, I'd tell them, 'Toni and I were in the same class.'

There was plenty of opportunity during those two years in Bauchi to look deep into myself and ask whether I shouldn't forget this dream of writing and do something else. I could be a banker, for instance. Lots of young people were making it as bankers. But whenever I picked up a book, a poem or a story, I felt that this was where my destiny lay.

Then one day in 1999 Toni wrote me a letter. 'Come to Lagos. There's a place on the paper for you.'

He had become the editor of his magazine. In 1999 things had started to change in the country. Abacha had died the year before and his successor, General Abdulsalami, bowing to international pressure, had hastily organized elections. A retired general, Olusegun Obasanjo, an ex-military head of state and an ex-political detainee, was the new civilian ruler. I didn't hesitate. I left Bauchi in August 1999 without even resigning from my job. In Lagos I became a columnist and an editor on Toni's magazine, *Hints*. Toni introduced me to the Lagos literati, and told me which competitions to enter.

'The most important one,' he said, 'is the MuSoN poetry competition.' It was the biggest in the country, both critically and financially, worth 50,000 *naira* in cash, more money than I had ever held in my hands.

'The second place is worth 30,000 *naira*, and the third place is 20,000. You should aim for second or third,' Toni said, 'because I'm getting the first place.'

We set to work refining our poems. Winning became almost a matter of life and death for me. I needed the money. I wanted to prove once and for all to myself that I could win a competition, and that I was in the right profession. Besides, I'd burned my bridges in Bauchi.

Some of my friends advised me to get close to Odia Ofeimun, because in Lagos he decided who won which competition. I was shocked by this. For me it wasn't just about winning the competition, it was about being a writer. If Odia helped me win this time, what about all the competitions I'd have to enter in the future? I put my trust in my craft and in God. When the results came out my poem, 'Another Age', was first and Toni's, 'A Dying Man I Reflect', was third. The next day I was in all the papers and on television. But my most treasured memory from the whole night is this picture of Toni and me with Odia in the middle. Odia had come up to us and asked us to pose with him. 'I will treasure this picture of me and two great poets,' he said as it was taken.

This snapshot of us in the foyer of the MuSoN Hall has come to symbolize a lot of things to me. Our smiles seem to say that the worst for our country is over, we are gazing beyond the camera into a new and brighter future, where we could be poets without fear of arrest, murder or exile. We had cheques worth 50,000 *naira* and 20,000 *naira* in our pockets. But above all the picture is a confirmation of my deepest dream, that of becoming a writer. □

GRANTA

SOFT CORE

Joyce Carol Oates

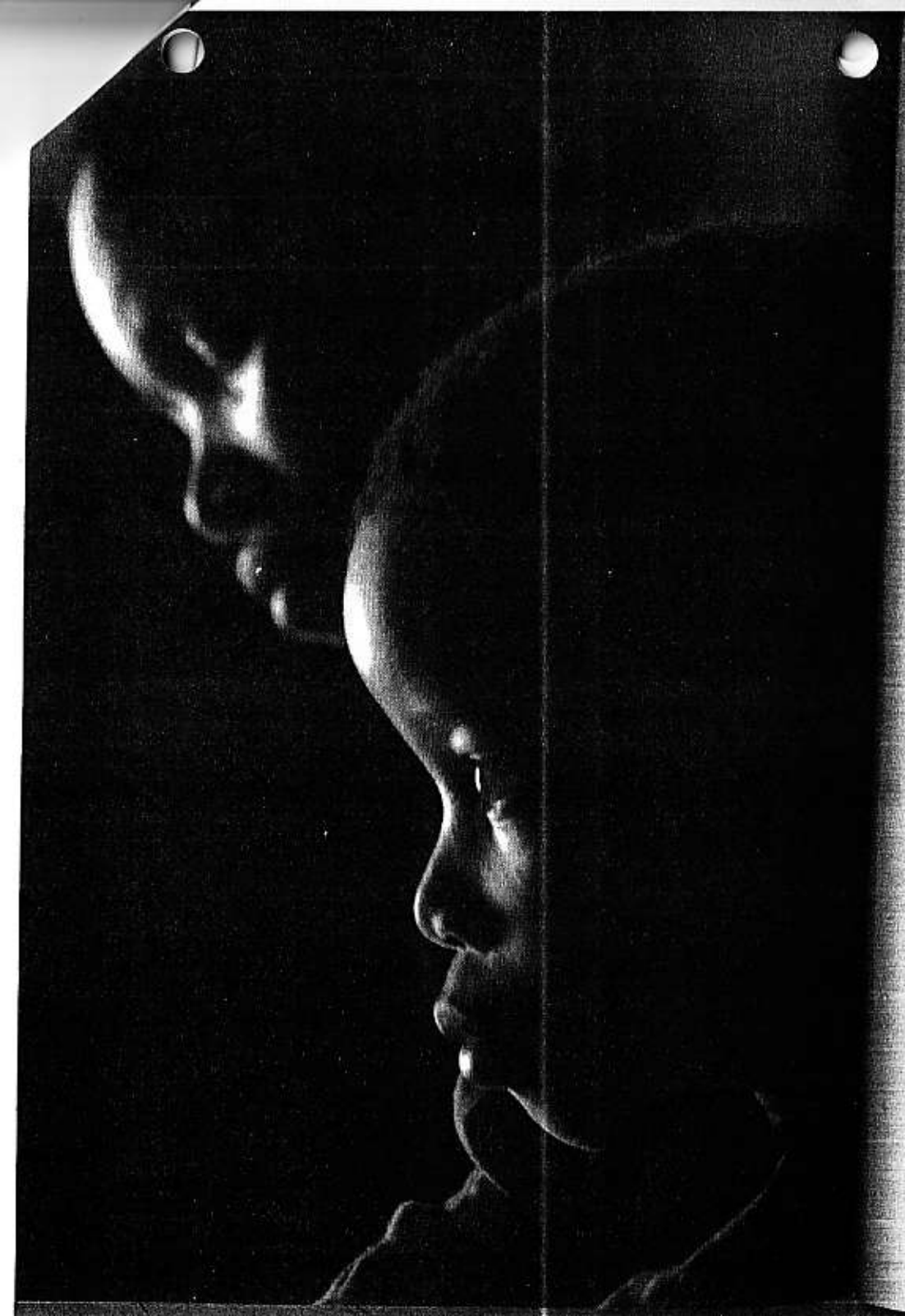
Granta 92
Winter 2005

GRANTA

THE WITCH'S DOG

Helon Habila

Nigeria



GUEORGUI PINKHASSOV/MAGNUM PHOTOS

They had just turned twelve, and today was their first day at secondary school. School was over and they were in the mango grove, reluctant to go home. Their father was away on one of his business trips, and their aunt Marina wouldn't be back from the farm until late in the evening when the sun hung over the hills, low and burning red. The dog's loud barking gave Mamo the idea. They were up in a tree, their legs dangling in the air, their mouths yellow with mango juice. He stopped gnawing on the mango seed and said, 'You know, dogs can see spirits and ghosts.'

LaMamo looked at him. 'How do you know that?'

'I read it somewhere, in a book.' LaMamo couldn't read, so he didn't argue. Mamo went on, 'You can see spirits too if you rub dog's rheum in your eyes.'

LaMamo was immediately captivated by the idea.

'Let's get Duna,' he suggested. Duna was the old witch's dog, and because it was perhaps the most vicious dog in the whole village, they knew without discussing it that to get its rheum they'd first have to kill it. They got down from the tree and picked up their school bags where they had dropped them in the grass and set off for home, immersed in trying to find the best way to kill a dog. Halfway home Mamo hit on a solution.

'Batteries!'

'What batteries?' LaMamo asked, puzzled.

'We poison it...with the black stuff in radio batteries.'

'How do we...?'

'Come.' Mamo was running, his bag flying from its strap behind him, his spindly legs jumping high over the thick grassy undergrowth. Their compound was a few metres from the edge of the grove. They found used radio batteries in the garbage pit behind the outhouse. TIGER HEAD BATTERY, FOR LONG LIFE. They spread out old newspaper pages on the ground and cracked open the batteries on them. The black carbon powder poured out on to the paper—it was a disappointingly small amount.

'More, it is a big dog,' Mamo said, pushing another battery on to the paper. When they had enough they carefully poured the black powder into leftover bean cakes. This stage was easy, by now the outer skin of the akara was tough and membranous, it didn't crumble when they made a tiny hole in it and hollowed out the inside. The

tricky part was to make sure the carbon did not touch the skin on the outside, otherwise the dog would be repelled by the strong smell before it had a chance to swallow the cake. They overcame this by putting in a pinch at a time.

Soon they were back in the grove. The old witch, Nana Mudo, lived alone with her dog on the other side of the grove. Her house was a tiny mud hut fenced in by a wall of straw and sticks; she spent the daylight hours seated on a log under a tamarind tree outside her house. The tamarind trunk was human shaped, people said it was her husband, trapped in there by her witchcraft. A footpath leading to the market passed before her house, and though she was blind she could tell from the footfalls who was passing and would call out their names and harangue them with gossip. Duna was always beside her, a huge black mongrel that loved to growl and chase after passers-by, children especially, while the old woman encouraged it gleefully, 'Go, catch them, Duna, get them. Ha! Ha!'

Many a parent had come to complain, his tearful, dog-bitten child in tow, only to be greeted by her wild cackles, her sightless eyes shining, her toothless gums pink and crooked. 'Tell your child to stop calling me "Old Witch"!' Nana Mudo would scream at the parent.

As the twins approached the old woman's house they perfected their plan. 'You will play bait,' Mamo, the elder twin, said to his brother. 'Stand so the dog sees you. Wave and throw stones at it, when it gives chase, run and climb up the tree where I'll be waiting. It will stand barking under the tree, and that is when I'll throw down the akara. Any questions?'

'What if it doesn't come after me?' LaMamo was smiling, his eyes shining with anticipation; his brother looked the opposite, his feet dragged, his hand which held the spiked akara was sweaty and limp.

'It will,' Mamo said shortly. They chose a tree in the centre of the grove. It was small but leafy, easy to climb and a fair running distance from Nana Mudo's house. LaMamo did a few test runs, jumping from the ground and grabbing a lower branch with both hands, then swinging up into the tree.

'Easy, let's do it.'

First they reconnoitred to make sure they were alone in the grove—but this was July, the mango season had ended in May, and not many people came to the grove when the mango season was over. In the

muddy ground beneath their feet last season's mango seeds had already begun to sprout tender shoots. Insects and tiny frogs flew out of the undergrowth as they passed. It was hot, the moisture hung in the air, trapped beneath the mango leaves. Mamo sweated profusely; he used his sleeves to wipe his forehead every minute or so.

'There she is.'

She was seated in her usual place, on the log under the gnarled tamarind tree. Her faithful dog was stretched on the ground beside her, its huge tongue lolling out of its mouth.

'You...you know what to do?' Mamo asked. His mouth was dry and he kept licking his lips.

'Stand in view, throw stones at the dog, make sure it sees me, then run.'

Mamo returned to the tree to wait. He did not wait long. A few minutes later he heard deep barking, then the sound of feet racing through the grass, then LaMamo appeared running, almost flying over the undergrowth, dodging trees. The dog was a blur behind him, a black ball moving faster than the eye could register. Then with a sinking feeling Mamo saw that LaMamo had missed the tree—the trees all looked the same anyway—he was running round in circles, his eyes searching desperately, the dog snapping at his heels.

'Here... here... here!' Mamo croaked, shaking with nerves. Without thinking he dropped out of the tree and started jumping about, waving his arms frantically. LaMamo saw him and made straight for him, breathing hard through his mouth; they both jumped as if on springs and grabbed at a branch and they were up and safe. The enraged dog rushed at the tree and stood on its hind legs, scratching at the trunk with its front paws, jumping up, all the time barking, its fangs bared, saliva dripping out.

'Where is the akara, where is the akara?' LaMamo shouted at his brother, breathing hard, laughing, high on adrenaline. But Mamo couldn't get his hands to move, they were shaking uncontrollably. He was staring down into the dog's wild, yellow eyes, mesmerized.

'There,' he croaked, pointing with his mouth at the parcel in the crook of a branch above his head. LaMamo reached up and took the parcel and threw it down at the dog. Duna charged at the parcel, its body quivering with rage, then, scenting food, it stopped barking and poked its snout into the parcel. The twins leaned down from

their perches, eyes fixed on the dog. Suddenly the dog looked up and growled at them, once, then it lowered its head into the parcel and began swallowing the bean cakes hungrily. As soon as the parcel was empty it resumed barking up at the tree, but the poison acted swiftly—the barking grew progressively weaker, and soon the dog seemed to have lost all interest in them. It turned and headed for home, staggering from side to side as it went. Then they heard the old woman's voice, it sounded close. She was calling the dog. 'Duna! Come here, you crazy dog. Duna!'

The dog made for the voice, wagging its tail weakly, but it did not get far. It stretched out in the grass, and after a few thrashes and turns it went quiet. The twins looked at each other. 'Do you think it is dead?'

'It should be. It finished all the akara.' They spoke in whispers.

They cautiously descended from the tree. Now the old woman came into sight, tapping in front of her with her walking stick, all the time calling, 'Duna, Duna.'

'She can't see,' Mamo whispered to his brother needlessly. Soon she was out of sight, her voice growing fainter as she went. They ran to the motionless dog and stood over it; they were undecided what to do next. They were shocked and momentarily scared by the sight of the dog, dead on its side in the grass.

LaMamo knelt down and felt the dog's black coat with his hand. It was still warm.

'Let's get the rheum and go.'

'How?'

Mamo hesitated, then he said, 'Rub it into our eyes.' He shrank as his brother reached for the dog's eye and scraped the rheum from the edge with his index finger then carefully rubbed it into his eyes. LaMamo looked up and saw the expression on his brother's face.

'Come on, let's hurry and get out of here,' he said impatiently as he scraped the rheum from the other eye. Mamo knelt beside his brother and presented his eyes.

The rheum turned out to be a disappointment—initially. They did not wash their eyes that night while taking their bath before going to bed, so as not to reduce the rheum's potency. Their house was a big, L-shaped, rambling structure; their father, Lamang, had built it incrementally. Originally, before the twins were born, the

compound had consisted of two mud huts, which still stood. He had built the shorter part of the L when he was getting married, fourteen years ago. It was squat and rectangular, consisting of two rooms and a living room, with square zinc windows and heavy wooden doors: the effort of local builders more used to working in clay and thatch. But in its time it had stood out among the surrounding thatched structures as a piece of architectural magnificence. Then five years after his wife's death Lamang had added the longer part of the L; the children were growing up fast and they needed more room. Also, he had reinvented himself as a businessman and he could easily afford the expense now. The new house had louvres on the windows, and netting to keep out mosquitoes.

So the house stood, the old linked to the new: the living room was the juncture where the two met. The children and Auntie Marina occupied the new section, while Lamang preferred the old section, with his dead wife's picture and memories hanging over the bedpost like a guardian spirit.

The children's room was next door to Auntie Marina's: it was her job to keep them quiet when their father wanted some peace, to wake them up when they overslept, and to make them sleep when they stayed up too late.

But on the night of the dog rheum there wasn't much noise from the children's room. They shut their door soon after the evening meal, and each went to his bed and lay shivering with anticipation—they left the lantern on, low. Mamo was the first to drift off into a fitful slumber, he muttered in his sleep, tossing and turning. LaMamo was the one who heard the gentle tapping on the window, the one overlooking the grove. *Tap... tap... tap...* It came again, and again, regular, insistent. He froze under his sheet, his eyes fixed on the window.

'Mamo...' he said. 'Can you hear that...'

But Mamo was asleep. Eyes still fixed on the window, LaMamo got out of bed and crossed the room to his brother's bed. He grabbed his brother's arm and shook him awake.

'Can... Can you hear that?' They listened: faraway, dogs howled into the night, voices of drunks coming back late from the market rent the air in raucous notes, then the tapping came again: *tap... tap... tap...* The glass louvres amplified the sound until it seemed to be coming from somewhere inside their heads.

'It...is only a branch knocking against the window,' Mamo said, trying to conceal the tremor in his voice. He was glad when LaMamo slipped into the bed beside him, but they did not go to sleep immediately—they lay in the gloom of the lamp, their eyes tightly shut, their limbs stiff as if with rigor mortis, their ears focused on the tapping on the window.

When they finally fell asleep they dreamed that it was raining outside—which indeed it was—and as the rain fell the world grew darker until not a ray of light could be seen, save when bright fissures of lightning lit up the air suddenly, followed immediately by thunder. In the mango grove the water was shoulder high: bodies floated past the window, their dead eyes glowing like lamps. First was their mother, her mouth opening and closing as she passed by. She was trying to say something but water kept filling her mouth, drowning the words. She struggled against the strong tide, but it took her away, her eyes still fixed on them, glowing, turning the muddy water translucent and silvery. Next came the old woman with Duna on a leash, she was cackling dementedly, struggling with the leash, fighting the water to get to the window, and all the time the dog barked and barked, the sound blood-curdling. Now she was at the window, she hammered at it with her walking stick, *tap... tap... tap*, until gradually the glass began to crack under the insistent hammering.

The twins woke up screaming. The scream became louder when they found out they could not see. They scrambled out of bed, kicking their legs out of the sheets, knocking against each other, knocking into the table, beds, chair, each other, the walls, in their desperate search for the light. And all the time their eyes were wide open, blinking.

'Mamo, I can't see!'

'Me too!'

Then they heard Mama Marina's voice outside the door. They threw themselves at her, sobbing with relief when she opened the door and they saw the morning sunrays behind her, clear and strong, as she stood on the threshold. □

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POLICEMAN TO THE WORLD

Daniel Bergner