

Fragments of War

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2 April 2011

Tonight, I am sitting at my window in Harlem, drinking a whisky and Diet Coke, watching the M116 bus makes its nightly rounds between the east side and the west side. I had worked late on a rather uninteresting project, and I took the subway home, switching trains at Times Square, reading a *New Yorker* article about the woman who brought garters back into style, walked through the turnstile, where my bag got caught on the prong as it always does. I counted the 70 steps up to my apartment.

Tonight, there are rebels, and soldiers, and militias, and thugs, and hoodlums shooting each other in Abidjan. Children may be watching this killing, children who live on the street and have nowhere else to go. I hope the children don't get caught in the crossfire. I hope they do not see the bullets enter, or that they turns their heads. Their lives are difficult enough.

The armed men are also shooting for a house – the president's house – and a television station and the future of a country – the future of democracy in Africa, as some would have it, though surely they exaggerate – but most of those armed men probably don't know why they are shooting. One week ago, they might have had a notion that this was coming, but they didn't know how or when. They didn't know if they would fight or flee, or how it would feel to pull that trigger when the moment finally came. A week ago, some of them – many of them? – were just unemployed young men, watching the politics transpire like a boring tennis match, worried about their next gig, their families, their children. And now they have been swept up in that farce of war, that nonsensical notion that might makes right. The guns give them power, intoxication, highs. They are high on the fight, and their children are far from their minds. What is on these men's minds? Do they even know?

We don't even know who they are. At this moment, they might not even know who they are. All they know is that they *need* that house – they must have it, or they must keep it, or they must join in the fray – and they *need* this country and they *need*. The guns tell them that they need it, and they listen. It is the only voice they can hear right now, but it has no words for them, only intoxication.

What is Abidjan like tonight? It is impossible to tell, probably even for those who are there. The media certainly won't tell us. They abdicated West Africa ages ago – circa 1960 – resurfacing only to ogle misery. Some friends tell me that Abidjan is calm, that they are hearing sporadic gunshots but that they can still go to the shop on the corner for batteries.

Somebody right now, at this very moment, is buying a pack of cigarettes in Abidjan. There is another couple making love, or maybe there are many, I am sure of it, telling the war to fuck off and fucking their way into oblivion. Make love, not war. Just fuck the images of the roadblocks and the Kalashnikovs and the muscled young men out of consciousness. It is one strategy, probably a good one.

A woman is giving birth in Abidjan, somewhere, right now, at this very moment. She will call her child God's Gift or Maïmouna or Andrew. The child will grow up knowing that it was born during the siege of Abidjan and that its purpose in life is special because it survived. It may not survive.

800 people were massacred in Duékoué yesterday. I used to work in Duékoué. It would be any other small, rural town, but it has beautiful rock outcroppings that protrude from the earth like extraterrestrial mushrooms and beckon passersby to climb them to see the horizon. On trips to Abidjan, we would stop in Duékoué, and I would buy my snacks for the rest of the trip: salt and pepper potato chips, or if I were feeling healthy, yoghurt, and a Diet Coke, or date bars. There are flavored condoms, chocolate and strawberry, available at the cash register. The cashiers never have change, so you wait until enough other people have made their purchases for the coins to build up. The shop isn't big, but the variety: mattresses and lamps and house wares, then the perfume and cologne section, and the dry goods. And two aisles of wines and liquors, ranging from small baggies of banana liquor, made on the coast, that you bite at the corner and drink in a go, to \$30 and \$40 bottles of imported French wine. We drive by the stone domes on the way out of town.

Who killed who in Duékoué yesterday, and why? What did they gain from the slaughter? Was it worth it to them? Has the shop been looted? Did the rebels, or militias, or soldiers, or thugs, or children stop by the shop and load up on banana liquor before they swooped to the massacre? What was in it for them? How could the moment have been stopped? Who holds the global remote control, and where is the pause button that would give us time to think while the selfish, greedy old men - in their own clutches at glory - hastily shove their sons down the paths of destruction? Do we ever have to un-pause to see what will happen? And why are we reading that there are 1,000 refugees, somewhere near Duékoué (Where? And why can't the news tell us? Why didn't the Red Cross tell us where, precisely *where?*), encircled by armed men who are threatening their lives and refusing that they receive food or water? The body can last only two days, maybe three, without water. Who will get the water to them? The Red Cross? What does encircled mean? Are they in a field? In a building? A ditch? A pre-prepared mass grave?

Too many questions. I want to go back to get answers. To fly there, I could leave tomorrow night, and spend 24 hours in the air, then another day by road to Duékoué. But the flights are all cancelled anyway. There is no way to get there to get water to them, or to meet them, or to witness. We don't even know where they are - somewhere near Duékoué. The world is opaque tonight.

When my friends see armed men on the street in Abidjan, there is no way to tell who they, or what they are fighting for, if anything. Is it fighting? Just hooliganism? If they cannot tell each other part, if they cannot divvy and cordon off their identities, or their ideologies, how do they know who to shoot? Is it all discriminate? Isn't war always indiscriminate? Indiscriminate killing - my, that is a stupid phrase.

Some “pro-Northern” fighters arrived at my Northern friend’s temporary house yesterday. He escaped from his encounter with them with only a head wound, knocked upside the head with a Kalash. Why?

Too many questions.

He is an internally displaced person, an IDP. Funny – I cannot think of him as internally displaced, or an IDP, or a refugee, or what have you, even though those are the words we humanitarian aid workers use - we created them, after all – to distance ourselves from the pain. Language is usually a process of distancing.

To me, he is just S*****, the handsome young man with a stutter and a missing tooth and a shoe sales business who had to run away because his neighborhood had been bombed. He had been shot, indiscriminately, in December while going to buy bread around the corner. Pellets were embedded in his skin, a doctor removed them for a tidy sum. The stitches to close his head wound this morning, I wonder if he had to pay for those.

When I make myself think about Côte d’Ivoire, the only things that come to mind are the food, which I didn’t think I loved when I lived there. But tonight, I would give anything for some *poulet Kédjénou* served with *attiéké*, or a chawarma with too much chili powder and half-filled with pickles so that the vendor doesn’t have to put as much meat, or garba – maybe especially garba. Garba, I love the way that the tuna steaks are grilled on the roadside, banishing my notions of tuna steaks as snobby like arugula or dogs with bows in their ears. And I love that the tuna came straight from the lagoon this morning, even if the water is toxic now. Toxic and bloody. And the tomatoes and the onions, chopped so finely.

If I think about the food, I won’t have to think about R*****, who said, “It is so armed in Abidjan, it cannot go well. There are arms everywhere.” Or H***, who knows how to make tofu from scratch and who counsels trauma victims. She will have her work cut out for her once this ordeal, if this ordeal ends, *when* this ordeal ends. We must say *when*.

We must take courage in the fact that in Côte d’Ivoire there are psychologists like H***, ready to help when the bullets have finally stopped flying. May the bullets stop flying.

I started writing this piece months ago, when the elections had just come to pass, when the world believed in diplomatic solutions and the international community and forgot about Rwanda and Sierra Leone and Liberia and and and... I am disgusted at myself for having forgotten and for letting hope cloud my vision. This piece was once called “Fragments of a Civil War Impending.” Somehow I thought that if I wrote that the civil war was impending, it would make it untrue. If we say it out loud – “civil war is impending” – then it won’t happen. People will have to listen. But nobody has to listen to anybody, and certainly not the diplomats. Their ears are designed to take in information relevant only to their national interest. It is a special feature, their ears. It makes me want to grab those ears by the lobes and pull close and scream at the

top of my lungs to see if I can get a message to enter those mutant ears. The image makes me think, "That will make them go deaf." But no matter – they are already deaf.

Many people in Abidjan may be deaf by tomorrow too. Many already are. Deaf or dead – separated by a single keystroke of fate.