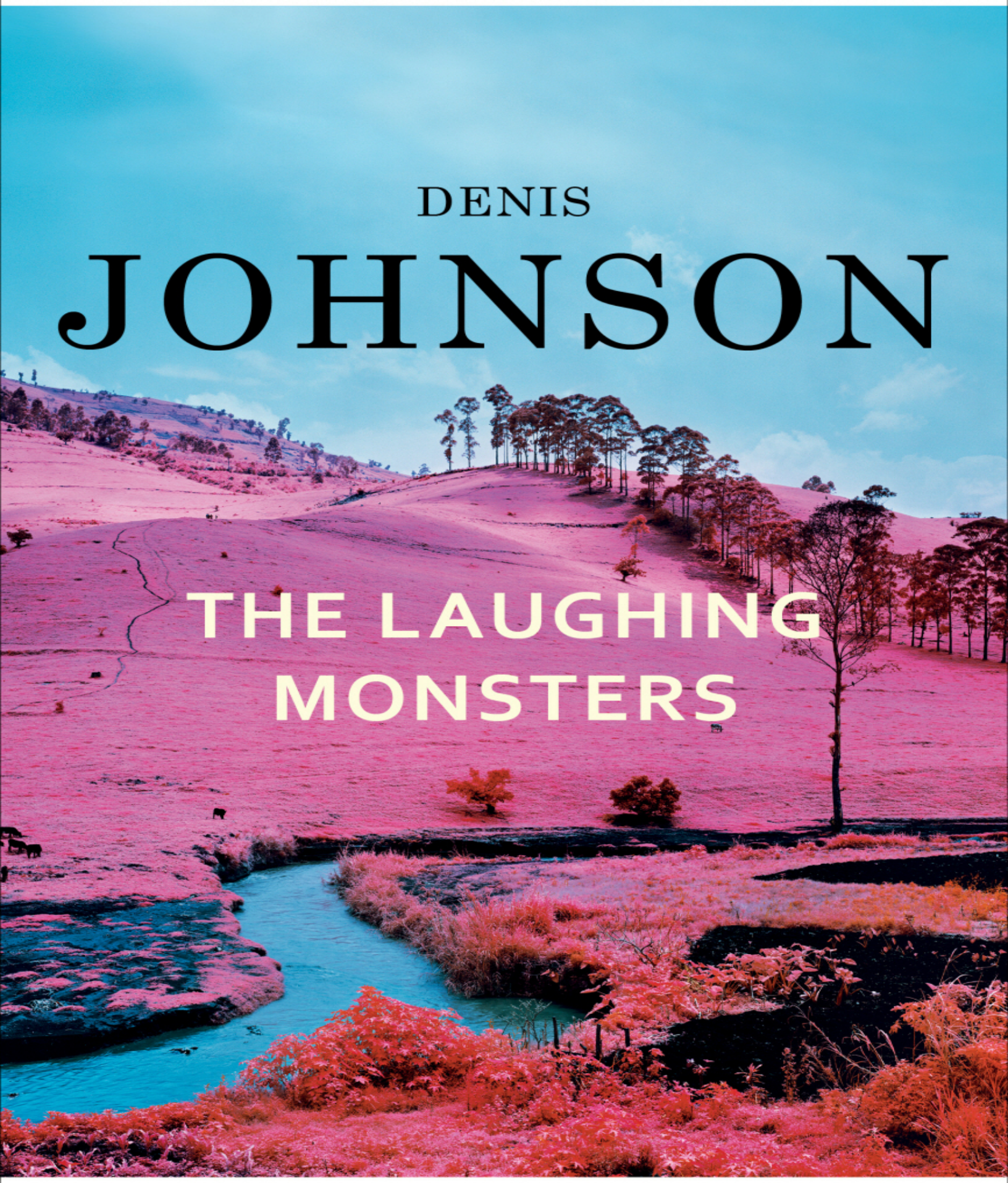
DENIS
JOHNSON
THE LAUGHING MONSTERS

Contents

About the Book

‘In this land of chaos and despair, all I can do is wish for magic armour and the power to disappear.’

Freetown, Sierra Leone. A city of heat and dirt, of guns and militia. Alone in its crowded streets, Captain Roland Nair has been given a single assignment. He must find Michael Adriko – maverick, warrior, and the man who has saved Nair’s life three times and risked it many more.

The two men have schemed, fought and profited together in the most hostile regions of the world. But on this new level – espionage, state secrets, treason – their loyalties will be tested to the limit.

This is a brutal journey through a land abandoned by the future – a journey that will lead them to meet themselves not in a new light, but in a new darkness.

About the Author

DENIS JOHNSON is the author of eight previous novels, one collection of short stories, three collections of poetry, and one book of reportage. His novel *Tree of Smoke* won the 2007 National Book Award. *Train Dreams* was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize.

Also by Denis Johnson

Fiction

Angels
Fiskadoro
The Stars at Noon
Resuscitation of a Hanged Man
Jesus' Son
Already Dead: A California Gothic
The Name of the World
Train Dreams
Tree of Smoke
Nobody Move

Non-Fiction

Seek: Reports from the Edge of America and Beyond

Poetry

The Incognito Lounge
The Veil
The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations
Millenium General Assembly

Plays

Shoppers: Two Plays
Soul of a Whore and Purvis: Two Plays in Verse

For Charlie and Scout

THE LAUGHING MONSTERS

DENIS JOHNSON

Harvill Secker
LONDON

ONE

Eleven years since my last visit and the Freetown airport still a shambles, one of those places where they wheel a staircase to the side of the plane and you step from European climate control immediately into the steam heat of West Africa. The shuttle to the terminal wasn't bad, but not air-conditioned.

Inside the building, the usual throng of fools. I studied the shining black faces, but I didn't see Michael's.

The PA spoke. Only the vowels came through. I called over the heads of the queue at the desk—"Did I hear a page for Mr. Nair?"

"No, sir. No," the man called back.

"Mr. Nair?"

"Nothing for such a name."

A man in a dark suit and necktie said, "Welcome, Mr. Naylor, to Sierra Leone," and helped me through the mess and chatted with me all through customs, which didn't take long, because I'm all carry-on. He helped me outside to a clean white car, a Honda Prelude. "And for me," he said, with a queasy-looking smile, "two hundred dollars." I gave him a couple of one-euro coins. "But, sir," he said, "it's not enough today, sir," and I told him to shut up.

The driver of the Honda wanted in the area of a million dollars. I said, "Spensy mohnee!" and his face fell when he saw I knew some Krio. We reached an arrangement in the dozens. He couldn't go any lower because his heart was broken, he told me, by the criminal cost of fuel.

At the ferry there was trouble—a woman with a fruit cart, policemen in sky-blue uniforms throwing her goods into the bay while she screamed as if they were drowning her children. It took three cops to drag her aside as our car thumped over the gangway. I got out and went to the rail to

catch the wet breeze. On the shore the uniforms crossed their arms over their chests. One of them kicked over the woman's cart, now empty. Back and forth she marched, screaming. The scene grew smaller and smaller as the ferry pulled out into the bay, and I crossed the deck to watch Freetown coming at us, a mass of buildings, many of them crumbling, and all around them a multitude of shadows and muddy rags trudging God knows where, hunched forward over their empty bellies.

At the Freetown dock I recognized a man, a skinny old Euro named Horst, standing beside a hired car with his hand shading his eyes against the sunset, taking note of the new arrivals. As our vehicle passed him I slumped in my seat and turned my face away. After we'd passed, I kept an eye on him. He got back in his car without taking on any riders.

Horst … His first name was something like Cosmo but not Cosmo. Leo, Rollo. I couldn't remember.

I directed Emil, my driver, to the Papa Leone, as far as I knew the only place to go for steady electric power and a swimming pool. As we pulled under the hotel's awning another car came at us, swerved, recovered, sped past with a sign in its window—SPLENDID DRIVING SCHOOL. This resembled commerce, but I wasn't feeling the New Africa. I locked eyes with a young girl loitering right across the street, selling herself. Poor and dirty, and very pretty. And very young. I asked Emil how many kids he had. He said there were ten, but six of them died.

Emil tried to change my mind about the hotel, saying the place had become "very demoted." But inside the electric lights burned, and the spacious lobby smelled clean, or poisonous, depending on your opinion of certain chemicals, and everything looked fine. I'd heard the rebels had shot it out with the authorities in the hallways, but that had been a decade before, just after I'd run away, and I could see they'd patched it all up.

The clerk checked me in without a reservation, and then surprised me:

"Mr. Nair, a message."

Not from Michael—from the management, in purple ink, welcoming me to "the solution to all your problems," and crafted in a very fine hand. It was addressed "To Whom It May Concern." Clipped to it was a slip of paper, instructions for getting online. The desk clerk said the internet was down but not always. Maybe tonight.

I had a Nokia phone, and I assumed I could get a local SIM card somewhere, but—the clerk said—not at this hotel. For the moment, I was pretty well cut off.

Good enough. I didn't feel ready for Michael Adriko. He was probably here at the Papa in a room right above my head, but for all I knew he hadn't come back to the African continent and he wouldn't, he'd only lured me here in one of his incomprehensible efforts to be funny.

•

The room was small and held that same aroma saying, "All that you fear, we have killed." The bed was all right. On the nightstand, on a saucer, a white candle stood beside a red-and-blue box of matches.

I'd flown down from Amsterdam through London Heathrow. I'd lost only an hour and I felt no jet lag, only the need of a little repair. I splashed my face and hung a few things and took my computer gear, in its yellow canvas carrier-kit, downstairs to the poolside.

On the way I stopped to make an arrangement with the barman about a double whiskey. Then at a poolside table in an environment of artful plants and rocks, I ordered a sandwich and another drink.

A woman alone a couple of tables away pressed her hands together and bowed her face toward her fingertips and smiled. I greeted her:

“How d’body?”

“D’body no well,” she said. “D’body need you.”

I cracked my laptop and lit the screen. “Not tonight.”

She didn’t look in the least like a whore. She was probably just some woman who’d stopped in here to ease her feet and might as well seize a chance to sell her flesh. Right by the pool, meanwhile, a dance ensemble and percussionist had all found their spots, and the patrons got quiet. Suddenly I could smell the sea. The night sky was black, not a star visible. A crazy drumming started up.

Off-line, I wrote to Tina:

> I’m at the Papa Leone Hotel in Freetown. No sign of our old friend Michael.
>
> I’m at the poolside restaurant at night, where there’s an African dance group, I think they’re from the Kissi Chiefdom (they look like street people), doing a number that involves falling down, lighting things on fire, and banging on wild conga drums. Now one guy’s sort of raping a pile of burning sticks with his clothes on and people at nearby tables are throwing money. Now he’s rolling all around beside the swimming pool, embracing this sheaf of burning sticks, rolling over and over with it against his chest. It’s a bunch of kindling about half his size, all ablaze. I’m only looking for food and drink, I had no idea we’d be entertained by a masochistic pyromaniac. Good Lord, Dear Baby Girl, I’m at an African hotel watching a guy in flames, and I’m a little drunk because I think in West Africa it’s best always to be just a tiny bit that way, and the world is soft, and the night is soft, and I’m watching a guy

Across the large patio, Horst appeared and threaded himself toward me through the fire and haze. He was a tanned, dapper white-haired white man in a fishing vest

with a thousand pockets and usually, I now remembered, tan walking shoes with white shoelaces, but I couldn't tell at the moment.

"Roland! It's you! I like the beard."

"C'est moi," I admitted.

"Did you see me at the quay? I saw you!" He sat down. "The beard gives you gravitas."

We bought each other a round. I told the barman, "You're quick," and tipped him a couple of euros. "The staff are efficient enough. Who says this place has gone downhill?"

"It's no longer a Sofitel."

"Who owns it?"

"The president, or one of his close companions."

"What's wrong with it?"

He pointed at my machine. "You won't get online."

I raised my glass to him. "So Horst is still coming around."

"I'm still a regular. About six months per year. But this time I've been kept home almost one full year, since last November. Eleven months."

The entertainment got too loud. I adjusted my screen and put my fingers on the keyboard. Rude of me. But I hadn't asked him to sit down.

"My wife is quite ill," he said, and he paused one second, and added, "terminal," with a sort of pride.

Meanwhile, two meters off, by the pool, the performer had set his shirt and pants on fire.

To Tina:

> I saw a couple of US soldiers in weird uniforms at the desk when I checked in. This place is the only one in town that has electricity at night. It costs $145 a day to stay here.
>
> Hey—the beard's coming off. It's no camouflage at all. I've already been recognized.

With the drumming and the whooping, who could talk? Still, Horst wouldn't let me off. He'd bought a couple of rounds, discussed his wife's disease … Time for questions. Beginning with Michael.

"What? Sorry. What?"

"I said to you: Michael is here."

"Michael who?"

"Come on!"

"Michael Adriko?"

"Come on!"

"Have you seen him? Where?"

"He's about."

"About where? Shit. Look. Horst. In a land of rumors, how many more do we need?"

"I haven't seen him personally."

"What would Michael be here for?"

"Diamonds. It's that simple."

"Diamonds aren't so simple anymore."

"Okay, but we're not after simplicity, Roland. We're after adventure. It's good for the soul and the mind and the bank balance."

"Diamonds are too risky these days."

"You want to smuggle heroin? The drugs racket is terrible. It destroys the youth of a nation. And it's too cheap. A kilo of heroin nets you six thousand dollars US. A kilo of diamonds makes you a king."

To Tina I wrote: Show's over now. Everyone appears uninjured. The whole area smells like gasoline.

"What do you think?" Horst said.

"What I think is, Horst—I think they'll snitch you. They'll sell you diamonds and then they'll snitch you, you know that, because around here it's nothing but snitches."

Maybe he took my point, because he stopped his stuff while I wrote to Tina:

I'm getting drunk with this asshole who used to be undercover Interpol. He looks far too old now to get paid for anything, but he still sounds like a cop. He calls me Roland like a cop.

At any point I might have asked his first name. Elmo?

Horst gave up, and we just drank. "Israel," he told me, "has six nuclear-tipped missiles raised from the silos and pointing at Iran. Sometime during the next US election period—boom-boom Teheran. And then it's tit for tat, that's the Muslim way, my friend. Radiation all around."

"They were saying that years ago."

"You don't want to go home. Within ten years it will be just like here, a bunch of rubble. But our rubble here isn't radioactive. But you won't believe me until you check it with a Geiger counter." The whiskey had washed away his European manner. He was a white-haired, red-faced, jolly elfin cannibal.

In the lobby we shook hands and said good night. "Of course they'd *like* to snitch you," he said. He stood on his toes to get close to my left ear and whisper: "That's why you don't go back the way you came."

•

Later I lay in the dark holding my pocket radio against the very same ear, listening with the other for any sound of the hotel's generator starting. A headache attacked me. I struck a stinky match, lit the candle, opened the window. The batting of insects against the screen got so insistent I had to blow out the flame. The BBC reported that a big storm with 120-kilometer-per-hour winds had torn through the American states of Virginia, West Virginia, and Ohio, and three million homes had suffered an interruption in the flow of their electricity.

Here at the Papa Leone, the power came up. The television worked. CCTV, the Chinese cable network, broadcasting in English. I went back to the radio.

The phones in Freetown emit that English ring-ring! ring-ring! The caller speaks from the bottom of a well:

"Internet working!"

Working!—always a bit of a thrill. My machine lay beside me on the bed. I played with the buttons, added a PS to Tina:

> I drew cash on the travel account—5K US. Credit cards still aren't trusted. Exchange rate in 02 was 250 leones per euro, and the largest bill was 100 leones. You had to carry your cash in a shopping bag, and some used shoeboxes. Now they want dollars. They'll settle for euros. They hate their own money.

I sent my e-mails, and then waited, and then lost the internet connection.

The BBC show was *World Have Your Say*, and the subject was boring.

The walls ceased humming and all went black as the building's generator powered down, but not before I had a short reply from Tina:

> Don't go back the way you came.

Suddenly I had it. Bruno. Bruno Horst.

•

Around three that morning I woke and dressed in slacks, shirt, and slippers, and followed my Nokia's flashlight down eight flights to the flickering lobby. Nobody around. While I stood in the candle glow among large shadows, the lights

came on and the doors to both elevators opened and closed, opened and closed once more.

I found the night man asleep behind the desk and sent him out to find the girl I'd seen earlier. I watched while he crossed the street to where she slept on the warm tarmac. He looked one way, then the other, and waited, and finally nudged her with his toe.

I took an elevator upstairs, and in a few minutes he brought her up to my room and left her.

"You're welcome to use the shower," I said, and her face looked blank.

Fifteen years old, Ivoirian, not a word of English, spoke only French. Born in the bush, a navel the size of a walnut, tied by some aunt or older sister in a hut of twigs and mud.

She took a shower and came to me naked and wet.

I was glad she didn't know English. I could say whatever I wanted to her, and I did. Terrible things. All the things you can't say. Afterward I took her downstairs and got her a taxi, as if she had somewhere to go. I shut the car's door for her and heard the old driver saying even before he put it in gear: "You are a bad woman, you are a whore and a disgrace …" but she couldn't understand any of it.

•

I woke to the sound of a groundskeeper whisking dead mayflies from the walk below my balcony with a small broom. Around six it had rained hard for fifteen minutes, knocking insects out of the sky, and I call these mayflies for convenience, but they seemed half cockroach as well. Later, in the lobby, when I asked the concierge what sort of creature this was, he said, "In-seck."

Michael had called and left a message at the front desk. I asked the clerk, "Why didn't you put him through to the phone in my room?" and the young man scratched at the

desk with his fingernail and examined his mark and seemed to forget the question until he said, “I don’t know.”

Michael wanted to meet me at 1600. At the Scanlon. That said a lot about his circumstances.

I wandered into the Papa’s restaurant twenty minutes before the ten o’clock conclusion of the free buffet, the last person down to breakfast, and I found the staff thronging the metal warming pans, forking stuff onto plates for themselves. So this is what they eat, I thought, and by turning up with my own plate here I’m sort of fishing this fat banger sausage right out of somebody’s mouth. You half-American pig. I took some fried potatoes too—the word for them is “Irish”—and then I couldn’t eat, but I ate anyway, because they were watching me. Under their compassionate gazes I ate every crumb.

It was October, with temperatures around thirty Celsius most of the daytime, not unbearable in the shade, as always very humid. Right now we had a cool sea breeze, a few bright clouds in a blue sky, and a white sunshine that by noon would crash down like a hot anvil. The only other patron was a young American-looking guy in civilian clothing with a tattoo of a Viking’s head on his forearm.

The power was up. American country music flowed through the PA speakers. I took the latter half of my coffee to a table near the television to catch the news on Chinese cable, but the local network was playing, and all I got was a commercial message from Guinness. In this advertisement, an older brother returns home to the African bush from his successful life in the city. He’s drinking Guinness Draught with his younger brother in the sentimental glow of lamps they don’t actually possess in the bush. Big-city brother hands little bush brother a bus ticket: “Are you ready to drink at the table of men?” The young one takes it with gratitude and determination, saying, “Yes!” The announcer speaks like God:

“Guinness. Reach for greatness.”

•

After breakfast I went out front with my computer kit belted to my chest like a baby carrier. Sweat pressed through my shirt, but the kit was waterproof.

The only car out front had its bonnet raised. A few young men waited astride their okadas, that is, motorcycles of the smallest kind, 90cc jobs, for the most part. I chose one called Boxer, a Chinese brand. “Boxer-man. Do you know the Indian market? Elephant market?”

“Elephant!” he cried. “Let’s go!” He slapped the seat behind him, and I got on, and we zoomed toward the Indian market over streets still muddy and slick from last night’s downpour, lurching and dodging, missing the rut, missing the pothole, missing the pedestrian, the bicycle, the huge devouring face of the oncoming truck—missing them all at once, and over and over. On arrival at the market with its mural depicting Ganesha, Hindu lord of knowledge and fire, I felt more alive but also murdered.

The elephant-faced god remained, but Ganesha Market had a new title—Y2K Supermarket.

“I’m waiting for you,” my pilot told me.

“No. Finish,” I said, but I knew he’d wait.

I left the Boxer at the front entrance and went out by the side. I believe in the underworld they call this maneuver the double-door.

Outside again I found a small lane full of shops, but I didn’t know where I was. I made for the bigger street to my left, walked into it, was almost struck down, whirled this way by an okada rider, that way by a bicycle. I’d lost my rhythm for this environment, and now I was miffed with the traffic as well as hot from walking, and I was lost. For forty-five minutes I blundered among nameless mud-splashed avenues before I found the one I wanted and the little establishment with its hoarding: ELVIS DOCUMENTS.

Three solar panels lay on straw mats in the dirt walkway where people had to step around them. The hoarding read, “Offers: photocopying, binding, typing, sealing, receipt/invoice books, computer training.”

Inside, a man sat at his desk amid the tools of his livelihood—a camera on a tripod, a bulky photocopier, a couple of computers—all tangled in power cords.

He rose from his office chair, a leather swivel model missing its casters, and said, “Welcome. How can I be of service?” And then he said, “Ach!” as if he’d swallowed a seed. “It’s Roland Nair.”

And it was Mohammed Kallon. It didn’t seem possible. I had to look twice.

“Where’s Elvis?”

“Elvis? I forget.”

“But you remember me. And I remember you.”

He looked sad, also frightened, and made his face smile. White teeth, black skin, unhealthy yellow eyeballs. He wore a white shirt, brown slacks cinched with a shiny black plastic belt. Plastic house slippers instead of shoes.

“What’s the problem here, Mohammed? Your store smells like a toilet.”

“Are we going to quarrel?”

I didn’t answer.

Everything was visible in his face—in the smile, the teary eyes. “We’re on the same side now, Roland, because in the time of peace, you know, there can be only one side.” He opened for me a folding chair beside his desk while he resumed his swivel. “I might have known you were in Freetown.”

I didn’t sit. “Why?”

“Because Michael Adriko is here. I saw him. The deserter.”

“You call Michael a deserter?”

“Hah!”

“If he’s a deserter, then call me a deserter too.”