

Goodbye, Babylon King

Essay and Photographs by Tyler Stiem

"OKAY, MY-NAME-IS, YOU CAN GO." The soldier, a Bangladeshi peacekeeper, waved Tamba through the morning's third checkpoint and retreated into his tiny shed. There was little chance we'd make it to Buchanan and back before dark, but we would try. Traveling by road at night presented certain risks, even with all the peacekeepers on patrol. In the front seat Segbe and Tamba were laughing. Security checks often ended in this dance of two Englishes, the soldier's purpose shifting from interrogation to comprehension. Deaf to their own accents, my friends regarded the blue helmets as their well-meaning but slow-witted protectors. Still, experience had taught them to dread checkpoints. Tamba grew tense whenever we approached one, and only the soldiers' blinking confusion put him at ease. "Old habit," he would say afterward, grinning unhappily.

We drove on, through the Firestone Plantation, with its grim workers' barracks and neat rows of rubber trees. Rumors of forced labor still persisted, two years after the end of Liberia's second civil war, and I wondered aloud whether they were true. Segbe nodded without elaborat-

ing. I didn't pursue an answer. I'd begun to feel ghoulish: every question I asked seemed to beget a litany of horrors. Kids chased the rim of an old bicycle wheel along the shoulder, the chrome splashing sunlight against the pavement. The plantation disintegrated into jungle.

More checkpoints, more Bangladeshi boys: groomed, armored, asweat. They were puzzled by Tamba, whose English syllables threatened to resolve themselves into the music of Liberian Creole. The soldiers didn't understand his reckless jokes or the gratitude which curdled, reflexively, into contempt. More jungle: so thick you despaired of total disarmament. The hinterland had been a refuge for errant fighters and the emptied roadside villages suggested as much. Other settlements were full of life, plastered with election posters. We crossed a river, the St. John, a surging, dun-colored estuary as wide as the Mississippi and bounded by mangroves. It must have seemed familiar to the freed American slaves who arrived here from the Gulf Coast two centuries ago. On the other

A UN election inspector outside a polling station in Monrovia, Liberia, 2005.

side of the bridge we passed a family of Bassa peasants slung with sacks of wet firewood.

Segbe had business in Buchanan. He was over-seeing a workshop for local election observers. Tamba was driving, David was taking pictures, and I was along for the ride. I was in Liberia as a favor to a friend, tasked with “checking things out” and reporting back to her NGO. David tinkered with his camera and sorted through a box of lenses. Yesterday, he said, rolling down the window, he heard that Charles Taylor, Liberia’s big-man-in-exile, had dispatched an emissary to meet in secret with the presidential candidates. What did we make of that? he wondered. Segbe, inscrutable as ever, only shrugged.

Rumormongering was the national pastime. Since Taylor had brokered his departure to Nigeria, ending the civil war, people were on the lookout for signs of his second coming. The election was a week away and the country was sunk in a torpor of foreboding. For months there’d been stories of demobilized fighters awaiting the signal from Taylor to take up arms, of mercenary armies massing in the Ivoirian jungle. One of the few credible rumors was that he had placed a proxy in the running for president. If other warlords could run for office, people reasoned, then surely Taylor could rule the country from exile, even engineer his own return—the fifteen thousand UN peacekeepers on hand weren’t reassurance enough. A future without Charles Taylor was unthinkable: years of darkness had circumscribed the Liberian imagination.

FROM THE AIRPLANE I’d admired the quicksilver calligraphy of Liberia’s rivers as they arced and looped along the coast, twenty-thousand feet below, deteriorating into a tawny scribble of creeks and channels as they flowed inland. Riverbank settlements shone in the evening sun. The plane was full of UN personnel and expatriates returning home for the first time in ten or twenty years. Liberia had become, for them, a country of the mind, and its prospects varied from passenger to passenger according to temperament and personal fortune. I listened to one woman argue, absurdly, that reparations would

be the first order of business when the new president was elected. Fears were confirmed and hopes diminished as we began our descent: by night Monrovia was a constellation of dying stars. The entire country had been without utilities for years. My own apprehension must have been obvious as I stood peering into the car park, bag in hand, because when Segbe stepped into the light he was chuckling. “Welcome to the dark city,” he said.

This was 2005. Liberia was a failed state, Monrovia its ruined capital. A caretaker government, one that had proven itself adept at graft and little else, was on its way out. Monrovians, Segbe told me, were restive. They’d known calm before: the purgatories of the peaceful years, always superceded by more violence. Untold numbers lived rough in the city’s nooks and crannies. Internally-displaced-persons camps circled the outskirts, smothering the hills beyond the suburbs. I’d never seen anything like it.

“**THERE WERE RUMORS** the rebels were coming from the north,” Segbe explained, wiping away the map he’d drawn on the inside of his office window. A pair of naked, rain-slicked boys ran laughing and skidding up Benson Street, past the Ministry of Defense, with its razor-wire roadblock and artillery mount, past a fuel stand and its jars of gasoline lit up like church glass, past steaming mounds of garbage and whirlpooling gutters. The taller boy stopped to drink the falling rain and piss into the road. They lived down the block: I’d watched them kick a soccer ball up and down the alleyway beside the office, making a game of anticipating the ball’s errant bounces off the rubble.

“We expected the city to become the front line in a few days. I was going to the office to take away computers. Suddenly we hear shooting. We go outside and people are running across the bridge. They say the LURD”—Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy, a rebel group—“are coming.”

Life amid the ruins of Monrovia. On the eve of the 2005 elections, every crack and fissure had been appropriated for living or commerce.



Monrovia goosenecks along the Atlantic Ocean, terminating in a hilly promontory; it was here that Taylor made his last stand. The 2003 siege of the capital pitted LURD rebels against Taylor's soldiers in a vicious firefight, the last of a series of struggles for control of the West African country that began two decades ago. Historians divide the civil war into two long conflicts, the first from 1989–1996 and the second from 1999–2003, with an intervening period of calm in the city and its suburbs. Few Liberians would make the distinction, though, as atrocities continued apace in most of the rest of the country. When splintering rebel groups and shifting front lines made life increasingly difficult, people sought refuge in the capital by the tens of thousands. They called it “America” because the depredations were thought to be

“Every building here is telling you a story. This one was hit in '96 and again in '03. The first time, the bottom part is surviving and the roof is destroyed. Then there is some small peace. Business becomes good again, so the owner fixes. Then more fighting and his shop is hit again. This time he is killed.”

fewer here, controlled as it was by a single warlord, Taylor, for much of the war. The architect of the chaos in Liberia and, later, in Sierra Leone, he waged a bush war against rival warlords and weak governments for the first half of the 1990s. In 1997 he was elected president. Voters reckoned that since he was responsible for the worst of the violence, he had the power to end it. They were mistaken.

“Taylor's men were here, waiting, so we know the fighting is going to be serious. Then—*pshww*—mortar,” Segbe remembered. “We cannot go to the car and if we go back to the office we will be trapped. So I take Rose and we run for a long time. The office was destroyed.” The fight-

A fishing boat with the American flag painted on its hull. Founded by freed American slaves, Liberia enjoyed a long and historically friendly relationship with the US until the overthrow of the last Americo-Liberian regime in 1980.

ing lasted for weeks, until Taylor fled the country. Peacekeepers were deployed not long after.

Today, Monrovia fizzed with life. Every crack and fissure had been appropriated for living or commerce—confounding public space with private, owner with squatter. Children flew kites from the rooftops. Food stalls huddled inside the ruins of an old supermarket. A salon where men gathered to drink tea and talk politics had sprung from the rubble of a school. Office towers stricken by mortar and rockets accommodated some of the million-and-a-half displaced. Rebar protruded from unroofed columns like a severe architectural flourish. A family collected rainwater by the road, the girls orbiting their mother, their little pails held aloft then emptied into their mother's plastic bucket.

“Every building here is telling you a story,” Segbe said. He pointed to a shop along whose walls the gradations of filth were steeper than usual, rising from green-black to a modest yellow, and the mortar holes rawer the higher you looked. “This one was hit in '96 and again in '03. The first time, the bottom part is surviving and the roof is destroyed. Then there is some small peace. Business becomes good again, so the owner fixes. Then more fighting and his shop is hit again. This time he is killed. He was a Lebanese.”

SEGBE AND HIS FAMILY, the Nyanfors, lived in a neighborhood of tall palms and broken roads. In another African capital it might have been a slum; here the size of the shanties and their yards, the mere fact of them, set the area apart from West Point and Kru Town upriver. Equally, the size of Segbe's house set it apart from the rest of the neighborhood. It was small, immaculate, solidly built. This in contrast to his neighbors' hubristically large shacks. Its construction had been a feat of Biswasian perseverance: Segbe began work on the house during the war and built it up, little by



little, as he could afford the materials. Within the tatters of Liberian society, the Nyanfors belonged to its small and uncertain middle class.

I'd met Segbe a few years before, in Banjul, where he presented a report on the excesses of the Taylor regime. The human rights commissioners heard him out and, predictably, that was that. We kept in touch through the final year of the war. Outwardly, Segbe was a near-caricature of the activist dignified by suffering. He was calm, watchful, remote, his expressions hewn on the sly by some unseen hand—laughter was *emitted* rather than laughed. “Soulful” was the word our mutual female friends used to describe him. In fact he was a shy man for whom silence was a curiously rich mode of expression. He existed in a kind of domestic equilibrium with Rose, his wife, who was loud and funny and beautiful, the funnier and more beautiful because she would lapse into her own self-conscious silences at odd moments, only to be drawn out of them by Segbe's mute appreciation. Her voice was everywhere, all the time: booming as she dressed the kids for school, as she hung the laundry, as

she gossiped with friends, as we watched TV.

They had lived through the war but not grown up inside of it. Segbe was old enough to remember the rule of the Americo-Liberians—descendants of the freed American slaves who, with help from a historically odd coterie of abolitionists and segregationists, founded Liberia as a black homeland in the nineteenth century—but he was too young to begrudge them their former dominance. The Americo-Liberians recreated the plantation system they'd known as slaves, inverted it, and grew rich off the labor of the “natives” and the country's status as a favored trading partner of the US.

In theory, the founding of Liberia was a civilizing mission. Equality was available to those who embraced Christianity and settler culture, but the local tribes proved unwilling converts and the settlers reluctant miscegenators. Early portraits show how literally they recreated the milieu they'd known in America: they pose stiff-backed in high collars and petticoats, the very image of genteel Southerners. The Americo-Liberians established a tiny elite that would

dominate the country's political, economic, and religious life for the next 130 years.

The grandson of indentured laborers, Segbe was from Maryland County, in the far south, the last region to be subdued and absorbed by the Republic of Liberia. He reckoned that his father was the first Nyanfor to read and write. An intelligent boy, he was taken in by the well-to-do family for whom Segbe's grandparents worked. They paid for his education, even encouraged him to take their family name.

"In a way it was a very generous gift," Segbe told me as we finished breakfast one morning. "But my father, he was proud, too. He refused and they were shocked. They put him on the street." Observing family tradition, Segbe chose traditional Grebo names for his own children. Bigma, the youngest, played in his lap as we sat barefoot in the kitchen, dressed for the office and already sweating. We'd been talking about the election and the question of ethnicity. The leading candidates were a famous soccer player, a Kru, and a Harvard-educated economist who was light skinned and popularly believed to be the granddaughter of settlers.

She wasn't, and anyway, even though modern Liberia was heir to the perversity of Americo-Liberian rule, a bad leader was a bad leader. Segbe had seen things go from bad to worse when a semiliterate soldier named Samuel K. Doe overthrew the last Americo-Liberian president in 1980, ushering in an era of violent ethnic rivalry, and worse again when Taylor rose to prominence in the nineties.

"In Liberia, you kill your father to become a man," Segbe observed, prying Bigma's fingers from around his neck. They sought his collar, his earlobes. "That is politics for us." The elitism of the Americo-Liberians made Doe possible, and Doe's chauvinism made Taylor and his divide-and-conquer nihilism possible. Could the upcoming elections break the cycle?

"Bigma, stop—"

Improvising a sort of self-headlock, the little girl nuzzled her father's armpit.

"Child—" he said, relenting, and with an embarrassed smile sat back in his chair. Bigma settled in for a cuddle. I never got my answer.



BUCHANAN WAS A PARODY of the Old South in rusted tin. Plantation houses lined the streets on lots barren and overgrown. Yams and peppers grew in one yard, a burned-out APC had been abandoned in another, and in a third a monkey was being fattened for slaughter. The animal paced the length of its tether, stopping now and again to pick at the knot. I mistook it for a family pet. The houses, once owned by prosperous families, had been occupied for years by squatters. They were enormous shanties. The roofs and gables were laid over with tin sheets and what remained of the original

masonry was streaked with moss. Sun-worn laundry curtained the windows. I'd seen these strange flourishes of Americana back in the capital—Monrovia has its own shabby version of Capitol Hill—but here, once upon a time, the illusion of America, of the antebellum South, would have been complete.

After lunch, Tamba and I left Segbe to his work and drove out to the port. During the war Tamba had worked as a truck driver, transporting raw timber from the forests of the interior to the coast. The port had been a major hub then for the illegal arms trade that supplied Taylor's

A burned-out house taken over by squatters in Port of Buchanan.

soldiers in Liberia and his proxies across the border in Sierra Leone. "You need a job, so you don't ask questions," he told me.

Uneducated but intellectually restless, Tamba had been around. He spent most of the war chasing work, and knew well the histories of the places where he found it. He could be relied upon to conjure the ghosts of the village or town we happened to be visiting: the families burned to death in their homes in the green hills

above Kakata, the Ghanaian immigrants chased from their fishing villages up the coast. There was nothing lurid in the telling; these were grim statements of fact. He marshaled the horrors of the past and in so doing seemed to find peace for himself.

Along the waterfront the only signs of economic life were a dry-goods store and a gasoline stand. We turned onto a road half-melted by the rains and whiskered with new grass. Mud rilled along the bubbling laterite. The road curved past the skeleton of a cement factory and through the shadows of its steeped iron ribs I could see the sawmills of the Oriental Timber Company (OTC).

“When Charles Taylor here, you na own nothing,” the youngest man told me. “He want something, he take it. Your camera, he take it. They run us from our homes. We come back, we build new houses, they take.”

As president, Charles Taylor ran Liberia as a fiefdom, handing out logging concessions to investors from Eastern Europe and Asia in exchange for cash and weapons. Preeminent among them was Gus Van Kouwenhoven, a Dutch arms dealer and Taylor’s longtime business partner. Van Kouwenhoven had supplied Taylor back when he was fighting Doe in the early nineties. Flouting a UN arms embargo, Taylor’s Oriental Timber Company shipped timber and Sierra Leonean diamonds to Southeast Asia in return for millions of dollars worth of Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and armed personnel carriers. At its peak, the OTC ran Buchanan Port as a private city, complete with workers’ barracks and its own militia. It came to acquire a terrible symbolism.

Tamba parked beside the crumpled husk of a

car. I walked ahead, through piles of shredded metal and pulverized outbuildings. Rebel fighters captured the city in 2003 and, with the help of locals, destroyed the port in a spasm of revenge. In a place where abject need trumped politics; where anything abandoned was stripped, looted, and repurposed or sold; the port’s utter destruction was a testament to the kind of brutality Buchananites had been subjected to and the need for catharsis it had engendered. Someone had scrawled “Goodbye, Babylon King” on one of the few standing walls.

Two years on, the port was cannibalizing itself for scrap. We wandered past the empty shipping office to the dock, where a crane was arranging the guts of sawmills into sloppy piles. A security guard caught up with us. His name was Augustine, and we were trespassing. But Augustine was more curious than proprietary, and he was happy to talk. His uniform had the look of a hand-me-down: the braiding was frayed and one of the epaulettes had come unmoored at the shoulder. He’d been hired to guard the scrap until it could be shipped out on Chinese barges.

By this time the Chinese were investing in troubled, resource-rich states like Liberia and Sudan. They arrived shortly after the war ended, supplanting the Taiwanese as the favored Asian trading partner, and now their presence was well established. Apart from the peacekeepers and an American film crew, the only foreigners I’d seen in the country were the teams of Chinese workers assigned to their government’s goodwill projects. They looked only half out of place: the men, attired in market clothes, cigarettes hanging from their round, tanned peasants’ faces as they squinted against the sun, sweating over fresh tar. There was even a Chinese restaurant in Monrovia, though no Liberian I knew had ever eaten there. The old prejudice followed the Chinese here, too: they cook rats and all sorts of unspeakable things, people said.

I asked Augustine what he thought about them. He had seen the Chinese around but never known one personally. Their money helped the country, he admitted, but they were after Liberia’s natural resources just like Taylor, just like the

Lebanese, just like everybody else: “They make their money from us and they send it back to where they come from. It is the same as stealing.”

Some locals had established a work camp in the port’s only surviving timber yard. It was like a scene from Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*. Six or seven ancient figures labored over smoldering mounds of earth with spades and buckets, piling dirt and sprinkling water wherever the smoke pigtailed too thickly. There’s a trick to making charcoal. The wood must burn, but it mustn’t burn too hot lest it turn to ash. It’s dirty work.

“What your business here?” A man in his thirties, the youngest by decades, offered me his hand. He called over the other men. They were attired in rags, grizzled and shirtless, so thin their ribs pulled at the skin of their bellies. Faces sketched with grime, they regarded us with suspicion. Tamba addressed them in Creole. His familiar, teasing manner seemed to put them at ease. The men had brought their families here after the rebels left. The manager of the timber yard was allowing them to collect the rotting wood and turn it into charcoal for cooking. They sold what they couldn’t use themselves.

“I live in Buchanan these fifty years,” one of the older men told us. His name was Emmanuel. “I was a trader. I sell rice and soap by the road. I remember the day Taylor’s men come to town. They make big palaver. The neighborhood boys join in the looting. They treat the people here very, very bad. Your own flesh and blood! God will reckon with them.

“You cannot imagine the people I saw taken away and shot, for no reason at all,” Emmanuel went on. “Maybe the clothes were too nice. Maybe they only speak Bassa. I was a trader, I learn to speak many languages. I believe this saved me many times.”

The others had worked as tradesmen and laborers. Henry, a short man with a baggy face and a gobby, tubercular cough, was a carpenter. During the war he started and lost more businesses than he cared to remember. “Me, I take my wife, she is that one over there, and we stay away,” he said. “We move around in the bush, we come back. But it happen again and again. Taylor, ULIMO [the United Liberation Move-

ment of Liberia for Democracy], MODEL [the Movement for Democracy in Liberia], whoever come—same problem.” Henry could no longer afford his own tools, so no one would hire him.

“When Charles Taylor here, you na own nothing,” the youngest man told me. “He want something, he take it. Your camera, he take it. They run us from our homes. We come back, we build new houses, they take.”

Emmanuel brandished an invisible blade. “The small boys . . . you know what they do? They kill you and they turn you inside out! They cut you into pieces.”

Would the big man face justice?

“He a very wicked man, very wicked. God will reckon with him, sure he will,” the youngest man said.

What about the courts?

“God will reckon with him.”

No one put much stock in earthly justice. Taylor had set himself apart from the atrocities, masterminding the war but seldom bloodying his own hands, so that he loomed above the fighting and the suffering, more icon than man.

I realized I hadn’t caught the youngest man’s name.

“It na matter. We na ha nothing, we na nothing, I light as air.”

I got the feeling that Tamba and I were no longer welcome. Near the gate an older woman, handsome and grey—Henry’s wife—sat on her haunches in an empty charcoal pit. She wore her hair in a wrap and sipped water from a halved plastic bottle. A curtain of smoke drifted above her, fraying as the wind picked it up. Tamba waved. She stared back. Beyond the yard, sky and sea met on the horizon, a grey sheet.

WE SETTLED INTO A ROUTINE: every day was a parade of heat and squalor, every evening a tableau of quiet domesticity. After a supper of *jollof* rice, Segbe would retrieve the television from its hiding place at the bottom of the bedroom closet and we’d watch Nollywood movies, the adults slouched in plastic chairs and the kids stretched out on the heat-wrinkled linoleum. One was a Romeo-and-Juliet story about a



Yoruba woman, a Christian, and a Hausa man, a Muslim, set against the backdrop of ethnic violence in central Nigeria. Another followed an honest cop framed by a politician whose secrets he had disturbed. The acting was feverish and overwrought and occasionally very, very good. I began to see that the West African stereotype of Nigerians as extravagant and corrupt and too clever for their own good was being popularized by Nigerians themselves.

"These people, eh! What are they doing?" Rose threw an arm at the television. Tonight Segbe humored her with an explanation: "That woman is the sister of the mistress. She is evil." But Rose was already uttering incredulities at the next plot twist.

Neighborhood kids gathered shyly at the door. By eight o'clock there would be a dozen little bodies arrayed inside the splay of blue light. House rules dictated that anyone caught dozing was sent home to bed. I watched sleep fall heavily upon them. One by one they were gathered up and set outside. Only when the story involved witchcraft, usually practiced by an evil stepmother or a gold-digging mistress, would the initial buzz of excitement carry them through to the end of the film.

Movie villains roamed the palatial sets like presidents' wives. They seethed with entitlement, wagging their fingers and sucking their teeth in perpetual affront at the world's meager pleasure bounty, suddenly kittenish when the force of their personalities was not enough to get them their way: an intimation of the *juju* at work. The heroes, spellbound, cheated their friends and beat their wives. The better actors exploited the tension between transgression and absolution to great effect, throwing off sparks of their former goodness when our sympathy flagged. The question remained, though: How far could one go before forgiveness was impossible? Everyone in the room wanted to know.

ON SUNDAYS WE WENT TO CHURCH. The day's ritual began hours before the service, on the verandah, where Rose styled her daughters' hair. Belloh,

A group of charcoal burners in Port of Buchanan.

the elder, was first. She sat between her mother's legs, head in her lap, eyelids sliding shut as the yank and twist of braids grew rhythmic. Bigma watched jealously. When it was her turn she hopped like a mudskipper. Ribbons were affixed, posture was corrected, and the girls were sent away to dress. Segbe Jr. stomped around the yard in his shirt and tie, tempted by the bright hem of garbage at the river's edge and the kickable treasures bobbing therein. Through the trees you could see the gold-leaf dome of Congress.

The First Assembly of God Church was barn-like, with raw cement floors and a high tin roof crisscrossed by timber beams. The icon above the pulpit depicted a Christ who was more superhero than Son of God. His arms rose stiffly from his sides, palms upturned and neatly bloody. The folds of his robe rippled evenly from his heart, like the surface of a pond dashed by a pebble, and a mane of dark hair framed his face. A blue aura enveloped him. The painting was poorly executed, yet by an accident of technique, perhaps, the painter had imparted a naturalistic dullness to the Christ's face, a hang of animal annoyance around his eyes that would resonate with anyone who had suffered this heat amid these ruins.

Women outfitted in *pagne* dresses and headscarves settled into the pews while the men stood chatting in the back rows. A member of the church band miked the drum kit and tested it out. The doors were left ajar to let in light and fresh air and through them I could see the ice-cream vendors already jockeying curbside for the best spots.

The congregation was middle class. They occupied the uncertain position between Liberia's abject majority and a tiny, super-wealthy elite. Neither well connected nor well-heeled, they lived in semipoverty, but if the peace held they were poised to flourish. A recovering Liberia would need their education and their skills.

Segbe introduced me to the pastor, a pleasant, bull-necked man in his forties. He clapped my hand in his, snapped his fingers against mine, smiled broadly. He asked me about my religion. I told him I had none. Usually I made something up, said I was Buddhist or belonged

to some other beyond-the-pale religion, because saying you had no religion was an invitation to proselytize. He merely said, “You are welcome in our house of worship. Sit and enjoy the sermon. I think it will move you.”

Temptation was his chosen topic; he meditated on the story of Lot’s daughters. “These days,” he said, “there is everywhere temptation. I read the newspaper, I listen to the radio, and do you know what I hear?”

“What you hear?” the audience cried, playing its part in the ritual of call-and-response.

“I hear stories about our sons going back to the bush to fight and kill. Why? So they can have enough to eat. I hear stories about our daughters selling their chastity and for what? So they can go to school. So they. Can go. To school.”

A murmur of disbelief.

“Everywhere, temptation.” The pastor gripped the lectern. “Monrovia burned, yes it did, but we cannot be giving ourselves to despair. We cannot be giving ourselves to temptation. We have lived through God’s trials, yes we have, and our faith was forged stronger in those flames.”

I could imagine how Monrovia must have felt like a modern-day Sodom, cut off from the world, abandoned even by the Americans, who parked their warships off the coast while the city burned, and how, as people struggled to square their faith with all that had happened, eschatological interpretations presented themselves. But the pastor was a practical man.

“To those who say, ‘Let the sinners be damned,’ do you know what I say?”

“What you say!”

“I say NO!” Then, softly, “I say no. No. Those who are lost, they know not what they do. These times have led them astray. But I have good news for you. Every one of us, we have the power to bring the sinner back into God’s light. We have the power of our faith, the power of forgiveness. The power to save our sons and daughters. Can I get a PRAISE JESUS?”

“PRAAAISE JESUS!”

Each Sunday, after church, after ice cream, after the long drive home, Segbe and I would sit on the porch and listen to the radio. First the BBC World Service, then a call-in program

devoted to personal accounts of the war—talk-therapy-as-public-discourse. Forgiveness was discussed, without much enthusiasm, and revenge alluded to, but a directionless anger prevailed. Through a translator an elderly woman talked about her grandson, a “good boy” who was forced by rebels to shoot his sisters. She didn’t blame him, but she could never take him back. It was a common refrain.

A man from Bong Mines related how his son had fallen out with his best friend over a girl at middle school. They made up, and the matter was forgotten. One day the friend was taken

by rebels and disappeared into the bush. When he returned and discovered the girl had moved away, the friend abducted the son’s wife. He murdered her. The caller could not make sense of it. “This was not possible even one generation ago,” he said.

Stories, everyone had stories.

NINETEEN-NINETY-ONE: There he goes, walking along the road on the edge of night. Over his shoulder, the house where his father stays. Ahead, the glitter of fires. Segbe will not

A congregant at the First Assembly of God Church in Monrovia.

see him again, but he doesn’t know that yet. When his father is lost forever behind rebel lines and his mother and sisters have fled across the border, he’ll start a family of his own, not knowing what else to do. For now, though, his mind dwells on other things. He sees the old man propped on stringy pillows against a dirty wall, sweating in the lamplight. He thinks about his girlfriend, who is not yet his wife. He wonders when classes at the university will resume.





A boy takes a break from selling soap powder at the roadside. FACING PAGE: Supporters of presidential candidate George Weah march to a rally on the outskirts of Monrovia. His campaign attracted the support of many former child soldiers.



The checkpoint sits athwart the road to Bushrod Island. He rents a room there. Adolescent boys with strange eyes stoke the barrel fires, and Segbe joins the crowd that is massed before them. Between the barrels is strung a rope of human intestines. The fires smoke in two thin columns. He expected this. He could have gone another way, but he would have arrived at another roadblock like this one and waited among people like these: Salarymen on their way home from work, peasant women and their children, two or three boys his age. A pregnant girl. All of them seeking safety in numbers.

His feelings toward the boy soldiers are complicated. He pities them: without their Kalashnikov rifles they are nothing, they have no families, they are doomed. Taylor is their family, God help them. Segbe would scold them, chase them away. Any of the men here would. He also fears them: he's witnessed their child's-play savagery, heard their delighted laughter as he looked away. It's harder to take than the unimaginative brutality of older fighters. He worries for the pregnant girl.

The eldest boy, the leader, shoves a man at

the front and with that the man becomes the crowd's proxy. If he lives, they will live. The boy asks the man his name and tells him to shut up before he can answer. The boy shoves the man and the man falls. Deliberately, like pantomime. The boy grabs the man by the scruff of his jacket and yanks him forward. He is not strong enough to drag the man but the man plays along, shuffling abjectly on his knees beside him. He is old enough to be the boy's grandfather. The boy kicks him in the backside and loses interest.

Then he beckons the pregnant girl. How de body? He pats her belly. The girl says nothing, looks the boy in the face. He slaps her, laughs to his friends. Segbe waits, looking past the scene, toward home, wishing he were there, wishing his father weren't sick, wondering when all of this will end, whether it'll be this year, next year, when. And then something happens: They are

let go. Shots are fired as they walk away but no one runs, for fear of making sport of himself. Segbe hears laughter but he doesn't look back.

"YOU KNOW BOOK, YOU NA KNOW BOOK, we will vote for you!" Young men thronged the highway in knots of ten, twenty, thirty, chanting and strutting, seeing and being seen. They performed for the commuters who eased their cars through the swelling confusion. Some teenagers had commandeered a taxi for the soccer-player-turned-politician's final rally. They crouched on the roof as it rolled toward the national stadium. At the back, standing in the trunk, men waved posters and beckoned us to read the magic-marked slogans on their T-shirts, which they removed and brandished, egging each other on: "Degree holder, you broke! DEGREE HOLDER, YOU COUNTRY BROKE!"

"These people," said Tamba. "Na matter what candidate they cheer. They only enjoy to make palaver."

My head hurt. Buchanan had been a success—Segbe had graduated twenty-five election

observers—and we had celebrated over drinks at the town's only hotel. The morning was bright, cloudless, perfect for a rally. We were on our way back to the capital to pick up supplies for another training mission.

"But they support the soccer player," I offered.

"Especially the ex-combatants," said Segbe, "because they are fearing to be left behind."

"But it na matter who they cheer," Tamba insisted.

Much was made of the fact that the soccer player dropped out of high school. He rose from poverty to become one of Africa's great athletes and now a leading candidate for president. His rags-to-riches story resonated with young Liberians, seventy-five thousand of whom fought as children in the civil war and whose prospects were, they realized, as limited as the soccer player's had been. Educated and older Liberians meanwhile feared that the man's political naïveté made him the ideal proxy for Charles Taylor.

"P-H-D you broke, P-H-D YOU COUNTRY BROKE!"

Disfigured faces in the crowd: half-missing ears, split noses, scalps and cheeks wormed with scars. The crowd swarmed around the car, surrounding us, one boy taking an interest first in Harold, a Ghanaian IT specialist who volunteered with Segbe's NGO in his spare time, and then in me, and as I reached over to roll up the window I saw the boy's face, wide eyed and expectant; I pretended to scratch my knee instead. The crowd carried him away.

"P-H-D you broke, P-H-D YOU COUNTRY BROKE!"

"Oh God," said Harold.

David regarded him. "During the last election they behaved much worse."

They abducted children of all ages and ethnic groups and forced them to kill their fathers, mothers, siblings, neighbors, leaders. Plied with "brown-brown," a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder, and trained to kill on command, they made for reckless but loyal soldiers.

During the last election, in 1997, *they*—the child soldiers—chanted, "He killed my ma! He killed my pa! I'll still vote for him!"

At the height of his power Taylor was the self-fashioned patriarch of a large and dysfunctional family of rebel soldiers, a leader who charmed and intimidated in equal measure. He won the election without having to rig the vote. But to appreciate his genius as a warlord and a dictator, you must understand the dynamics of Liberian society on the eve of the civil war.

When Taylor launched his rebellion in 1989, the country was as stratified as any in West Africa. The brutality and favoritism of the Doe regime had begotten rebel groups whose only purpose was to advance the interests of their

tribe. Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was no exception: he recruited heavily from his mother's people, the Gola, and from the Kissi, a related tribe. Half a dozen factions competed for power, but in a society as pluralistic as Liberia's none could hope to gain enough leverage to rule the country (never mind that many devolved into criminal enterprises which sometimes profited even by their own people). Segbe recalled passing through the territories of three different factions on his way to and from campus during his student days.

Learning from the mistakes of Doe and the Americo-Liberians, Taylor abandoned ethnicity as his organizing principle. Tribe became an obstacle to be surmounted. He was not the only warlord to recruit child soldiers but he was the first to use them strategically, as solvent to the societal glue of family, community, tribe. The NPFL abducted children of all ages and ethnic groups and forced them to kill their fathers, mothers, siblings, neighbors, leaders. Plied with "brown-brown," a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder, and trained to kill on command, they made for reckless but loyal soldiers. Unit commanders encouraged their recruits to identify with them as children to a parent, and above all with Taylor himself—"Papay," as he became known. Taylor's ambitions, largely realized, were parricidal: he would tear down the institutions of tribe and family and rebuild them, placing himself at their head. This was how he came to rule Liberia.

Of course, the fatherly image Taylor cultivated among his Small Boys Units, as they were called, hardly jibed with the ruthless leader he really was. Driving through Monrovia one night, Segbe pointed out a field where dozens of child soldiers were rumored to have been shot and dumped, some of them buried alive. These were kids who had been crippled in battle or deranged by drugs and post-traumatic stress. They had returned to Monrovia as beggars, pleading with anyone who would listen that Charles Taylor should take care of them. They were an embarrassment, and Taylor had them disappeared.

But his army of self-orphaned children was effective. Their legacy—his legacy—was to have



destroyed Liberians' self-worth, their sense of entitlement even to their own human rights. This went beyond the customary fatalism that dated at least as far back as the Doe years (one mordant slogan from that era went, "You like it, you na like it, Sammy like it!"). Under Taylor, a culture of impunity flourished; today warlords ran for office and murderers walked free because, who could summon the indignation to see them punished?

We'd seen Paul Mulbah, the former head of the secret police, holding court at a kebab shop. We'd seen Cukoo Dennis—one of Taylor's most vicious generals, famed for his body count and his cannibalism—cruise past peacekeepers in his Land Rover. On the eve of the 2005 election, this was the greatest obstacle Liberia faced—greater than the shattered infrastructure, or the networks of privilege among the political classes, or even the weapons still circulating throughout the country.

THE CONNEH INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS CAMP sprawled across a naked hillside lapped by jun-

A resident of Conneh Internally Displaced Persons Camp.

gle. Filthy, sun-worn tarps cloaked the huts, of which there were several thousand. The camp took its name from Sekou Conneh, Taylor's main rival in the final years of his reign. It was an ironic tribute: Conneh's rebels, the LURD, chased thousands of people from their homes as they marched on the capital. The refugees ended up here and Conneh ended up on the presidential ballot. A pair of skinny, sorrowful-looking teenagers named Aaron and Nehemiah led us through the camp.

"Our talk show is nonpartisan," Aaron explained as we reached the crest of the hill. The sun had burned off the storm clouds and set alight the metal sheds below. "We debate everything. Camp issues—there are not enough latrines. Repatriation—when do we go home? We talk about food rationing, the big issues. Security, what to do with the small boys with the big guns."

They were taking us to see the radio station they had established the year before. "I have

seen refugee camps on television,” Harold whispered, “but this is very bad.”

“With the election coming, we give people a few minutes to talk about the party they support,” Nehemiah said. A group of residents led by Joe Toe, the camp’s elected leader, had attached itself to us. They were eager to tell their stories. Ahead the radio tower, an antenna fixed to a crooked wood pole, rose thirty feet above the huts. The stiff poster smiles of presidential hopefuls competed for our attention. The repatriation of hundreds of thousands of IDPs was a key election issue, and Conneh was as politicized as any place in the country, but the residents’ papering of their drab huts was an aesthetic choice as much as it was a political one. They’d gotten used to making something out of nothing. Small flourishes like these were in evidence all over the camp.

“Look at these tiny houses,” Harold observed, warming to the role of bemused outsider. “They are not fit for living. I could never be so strong as these people.” He talked on, praising Liberians for their bravery and grit while reproaching—congratulating—himself for being shocked by it all. Tamba shook his head.

The station, a two-room cement structure, wasn’t much bigger. The broadcast booth had been soundproofed with blankets and raffia. The DJs culled African-American and Nigerian pop culture for inspiration. Nehemiah showed me their library: thirty, maybe forty bootlegs of hip-hop (50 Cent, Ludacris, Lil’ Bow Wow), reggae (Bob Marley, Lucky Dube), Nigerian gospel, and local singers (Princess Margaret and Sarah Thompson). A mess of salvaged electronics—the transmitter—spilled out onto the broadcast desk alongside a tape deck and a microphone. The whole enterprise was solar powered. On sunny days Conneh Community Radio Network broadcasts reached as far as Kakata, the nearest town.

“We are training some young people to be field reporters. They look for stories and find guests for our shows, people in the camp who can talk about the issues,” Aaron explained. “Of course, there are twelve thousand experts on repatriation here,” he said, cracking a smile.

The studio of CCRN, a radio network established by residents of the Conneh Internally Displaced Persons Camp.

“But it’s good, we have a religion show, and a show about sexuality. One of the people here distributes condoms and educates people. He spreads the good word on CCRN.”

The camp had, over four years, come to resemble a well-organized, if desperately poor, town. They’d established an elected council, three churches, a mosque, a primary school, the radio station. It was as though the residents’ collective trauma had been sublimated as a compulsion to organize, to master.

“This camp,” Joe Toe declared, “is a place of waiting. We are not coming and we are not going.”

Since the end of the war, fewer than half of the country’s 800,000 refugees had returned to their homes, and Conneh was among the camps whose dismantling had been repeatedly postponed. The people here had no choice but to put the trauma of the war behind them and move on, even as they waited to return to what was left of their villages and towns.

“The fighting started in the morning and we were caught between the shooting,” a boy called Dekegai told us. “People were running everywhere, escaping into the bush. I see neighbors get shot, fall down. They try to crawl away. So much screaming. Some of the children are abducted. My family, we are lucky, we escape together.”

Aaron and Nehemiah were high-school students in nearby Bong County when the fighting broke out. The boys fled with their families, bringing what belongings they could carry to Kakata, a day and a night’s walk, on whose outskirts the camp was eventually established. Nehemiah had studied electronics before the fighting and earned enough money repairing radios to complete his last year of high school in Kakata.

“I had technical skills and Aaron had some good ideas,” he said. Following the example of the radio stations in Monrovia, CCRN supplied airtime to people who wanted to share their experiences of the war.

“People want to talk. They feel better, I think.



It is not good to forget,” Aaron said. “We cannot pretend the bad things didn’t happen. And we must forgive.”

But there was resentment. “The fighters, they get money for their guns,” said Joe Toe. At the end of the war, every combatant who left the bush and handed in his gun was registered for the rehabilitation program and given three hundred dollars, a sum that exceeded a year’s wages for most Liberians. The rehabilitation program eventually stalled, for lack of resources and political will.

“We need woodworking tools and tools for agriculture, we need pots and spoons, and zinc to make roofs. We wait for this while the small boys get job training,” he complained.

“But people realize this is the price of peace,” said Aaron, sounding, for a moment, like a politician. What about when combatants return home to live among the neighbors they looted, or raped, or whose family members they killed, during the war? I asked. Would forgiveness be possible then?

“You must understand that Liberia is tired,”

said Joe Toe, “and when you are tired, it is easier to forgive than to make revenge.”

THE RAINS GREW WORSE. Reports from the campaign trail described candidates stuck for days in the bush. They braved Liberia’s glutted highways, lured by the symbolism of visiting the country’s remotest and most disenfranchised communities. Nimba and Lofa counties were so isolated that they had not yet been completely disarmed; fighting had continued there for months after the peace agreement was signed in 2003. One presidential hopeful, misjudging the potency of the populist gesture, hired a helicopter to skirt him in and out of the interior. It did not go over well. Another set off a minor frenzy when he threw money—wads of American dollars—at supporters on a campaign stop. Both were depressing reminders of the obstacles Liberia faced on its tortuous path from ruin.

On the radio farmers vowed to walk for whole days, camp out overnight, do whatever it took to cast their ballots, but few people would admit



A UN soldier explains procedures to voters outside a polling station in Monrovia.

to having made up their minds about the candidates. Even those interviewed at the rallies were coy, admitting that they liked their man (or woman), but insisting they would make up their minds at the polling booth. The whole country wanted to savor this heady moment of possibility, because no one knew what would follow it.

The editorial pages overflowed with speculation: about the frontrunners, about the likelihood of a runoff, about the prospect of violence, about Taylor. Olusegun Obasanjo, the Nigerian president, announced that he would hand over

his famous guest if Liberia's new president wished it. None of the candidates would commit to bringing Taylor to trial, not on Liberian soil. The risk was too great. Taylor had too many powerful allies.

On the Sunday before the election we went to church. The congregants were listless in the heat. Rose chewed a yawn. Bigma dozed in her lap. I sat beside them, feverish and distracted by the loosening knot of upset in my belly. We'd eaten bush meat last night and again, cold, for breakfast this morning.

Scrubbed and puffy eyed, the pastor delivered a sermon about hope. He was in fine form. "Some people," he said, "some people hope wildly, and we call them fools."

Segbe coughed nervously. Since he wrapped up the final training course two days ago he'd been peevish and more talkative than usual.

"There is a saying: 'Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.' We have been fooled, yes. We have been fooled too many times by the promise of peace," said the pastor. He invited no response from the pews. "But

I have another saying: 'There is no shame in being a fool.'

"Your children," he continued, surveying the front row, where we sat. "How old are they? Four? Eight? How many of us have children that age? They are children of hope, born in times of peace.

"Are we fools for bringing these children into the world? No. I say to you, we must hope wildly. We must risk disappointment. We must risk bitterness. Otherwise we are slaves to our fear, and the devil, he feeds on fear!"

The band played. The congregation was invited to contribute to the beautification of the church. A few families made their way to the collection box at the front of the chapel. The pastor enumerated their contributions and sang-chanted a few words of praise. Then Segbe made an incredible gesture: he tithed \$350, an enormous sum, one his family could not easily afford. Rose looked astonished, worried, and—as the crowd, electrified, began to dance and clap its way to the collection box, each family outdoing the next, but none matching the Nyanfors' reckless generosity—proud.

"Wow," I said, when Segbe returned to the pew. My friend shrugged. "Sometimes you need to make beautiful things in this life." He kissed his wife on the cheek. In the end, the congregation tithed an incredible \$3,400.

Was it the weather, the scripture, fever? The following night I dreamed of a flood, of the riverbank's hem coming loose, of soda cans, bottles, clothes, papers, the bodies of neighbors floating through the house on the tide-fattened river. The water lifts the furniture bobbing to the ceiling. The children huddle in plastic chairs, impassive, and someone is shouting. It's dawn; Segbe snores in the half-light, his wife having decamped to the children's room to make space for me, and a rat chews on the sack of rice at the foot of the bed. Rain curtains the house, hanging bluely from the eaves, and there's the voice again, crying "Wake up Liberians! It is time to elect your leader!" ■