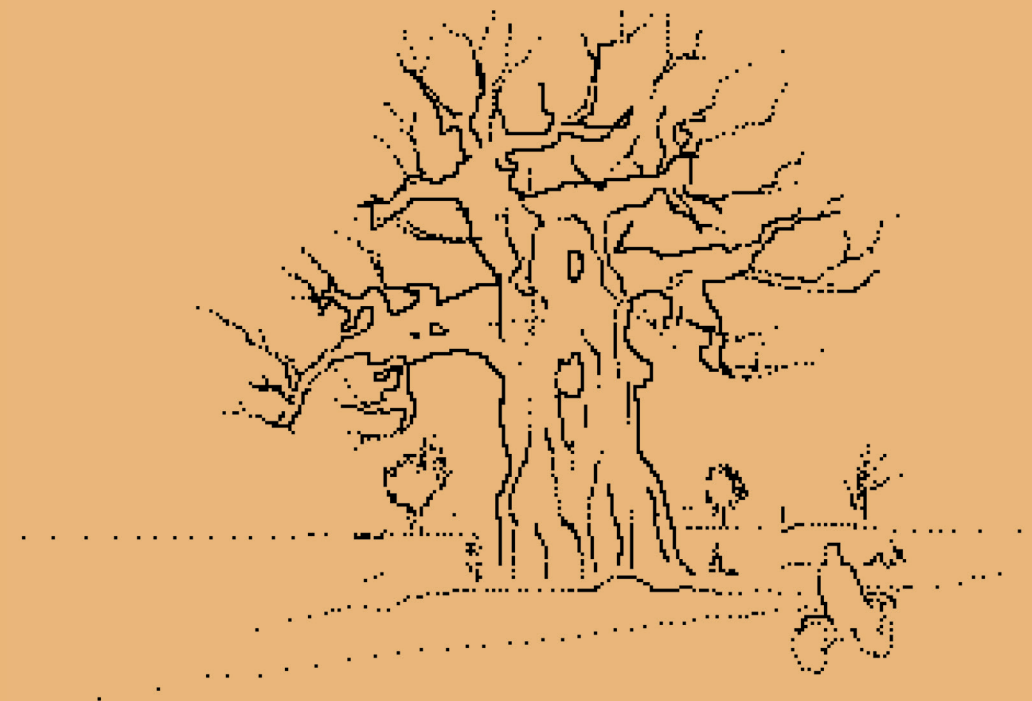


## 0°00 Navigation Part II:

Notes from a Journey Across Europe and Africa

**Simon Faithfull**

...as we have slowly progressed south, the vegetation has become steadily thicker. The trees have crept closer together until their branches have begun to touch...





## **Introduction**

*0°00 Navigation* is a body of work by the artist Simon Faithfull. It relates to two epic journeys he undertook in order to trace the 0° line of longitude (the Greenwich Meridian) across the planet. It seeks to explore the paradoxes and absurdities of this hypothetical line.

These notes were made by the artist whilst travelling along the Greenwich Meridian in 2015. This journey started on the north coast of France, then proceeded through Spain, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Togo, ending on the south coast of Ghana.

This publication coincides with the opening of a new installation by Simon Faithfull on *The Line*, co-curated with Arup Phase 2. Thirty-eight York paving stones, engraved with the drawings made by the artist as he journeyed along the Greenwich Meridian, which are set into the towpath of the River Lea, near Cody Dock in East London.



## 1. France/Spain

A strange line of jagged clouds takes shape below us. As we fly nearer, their angular forms become clearer – the snowy tips of the Pyrenees ripping through a landscape of soft white clouds. The plane is heading due south. It's now midwinter, but hidden beneath the sunlit clouds is a landscape I struggled across last July in a boiling hot campervan with an irritated two-year-old and her stressed mother. The journey took us from the north coast of France, near Le Havre, through the high Pyrenees and then down through Spain. The first leg of an odyssey tracing the 0° line of longitude ever further south. My goal is to follow the Greenwich Meridian until it reaches the Atlantic Ocean in Ghana, while recording my journey in a series of drawings and photographs.

After the Pyrenees, the clouds fizzle out to reveal the dry, flat plains of Spain. We are now almost exactly above the Greenwich Meridian. From my window ten kilometres high, I can see the towns and landforms we drove through last summer.

As we went through the high pass in the mountains, the landscape had abruptly changed. The green meadows of Lourdes on one side gave way to the dustier, more ochre terrain of Spain. The campervan got hotter and the landscape drier. The 0° line finally disappeared into the Mediterranean Sea near Alicante, amid pockets of industry and industrial-scale tourism.

## 2. Algeria

I am standing in line for the airplane toilet. A bald man with rings under his eyes pushes in front of me, and then waits further along in a row of empty seats. He catches my irritated glare, but he smiles back:

*"Non, non, monsieur! Je suis après vous ..."*

A few minutes later, back in my seat, there is a commotion behind me. Two flight attendants are talking loudly with the bald man from the queue. My French is terrible, but I think I understand that he has been smoking in the toilet. The flight attendant is angry; her mascara-lined eyes are wide and hard. The man's passport is demanded and then taken away.

The engines of the plane whine.

The Mediterranean Sea is passing below our wing. Two miniature ships draw faint white marks across the green surface. A yellow stripe emerges on the horizon and becomes the coast of Algeria. The plane banks and follows the coastline westwards – oil tanks, refineries, gas flames, towns, hills, ports, and fields.

After we land in Oran, the door is opened and there are two policemen waiting at the top of the steps. Shiny blue jackets, radios, gun holsters. One of the policemen is holding a piece of paper. As I exit the plane, the bald man is being detained. I get on the waiting bus.

Eventually the bus doors are reopened and one of the policemen enters with the man.

At the line for the passport control we shuffle slowly forward. For a moment I can see into a back room where a new set of policemen with different uniforms are interrogating the man, whose eyes are sad and resigned.

### 3.

I am the last person at the passport control. I had to borrow a pen from one of the three grumpy border guards in the glass booth and they are now questioning me hard about the purpose of my visit. They are confused as I don't seem to be employed by an official company. Eventually I discover 'University of Oran' is the magic phrase that opens the door – or perhaps they have just got bored.

Belkacem, a Professor in the 'British and Commonwealth Studies' department, has helped me plan this part of the journey. He has used his connections to get inside the security area, and his friendly face beams through a final glass partition. We wait for my luggage and he asks me about my journey before driving me to my hotel. Next to the hotel is a busy grill-house restaurant that also seems to double as the hotel's official eating place.

The waiter understands nothing I say in my lousy French, and so his compromise is to bring me things and I eat them. The restaurant has the feel of an evening canteen and I am the only white person amongst the tables that are filled exclusively with men. A series of fierce white lights illuminate the smoke that drifts in from the street where the meat is being grilled.

It is a principle of physics that everything in the universe tends to run down. Things seem slightly broken, or cracked – holding together through layers of mends and tape. The roads are a patchwork of different textures, sudden holes and random sleeping policemen. I elect to eat my second course at a table outside and watch the traffic and noise weave past me as I eat a sweet, creamy pudding.

#### 4.

I am a passenger in the front seat of a small car heading out of the city. The rough urban motorway takes us past the last few housing blocks of the city and the landscape begins to open out. Wobbling gas flames are painting dark marks across the pale dawn sky. In the weak first light of day the flames are illuminating the oil refineries beneath them. Walid, a bespectacled young student acting as my assistant and translator, is in the back seat. Beside me is his father Hadj, who will be our driver and general problem-solver on this journey.

Hadj likes to drive carefully. He is an unflappable ex-engineer with a moustache and smiling eyes. I never learn his given name, but his nickname is a sign of respect for someone who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. The rules of the road are different here. Driving is a process of constant negotiation, with motorists sensing the emerging presence of the other vehicles around them. There is a continual calculating and adjusting of paths – a weaving of trajectories and erratic flows. The drivers seem to use mental radar and horns to judge where a vehicle will be. Road markings and lanes are only approximate guides and Hadj's preference, when the traffic allows him, is to drive right down the dotted dividing line – positioning himself neatly between what I would think of as lanes.

Using my GPS and maps, I locate the exact site where the 0° line of longitude emerges from the Mediterranean Sea. A rocky, rubbish-strewn coast outside the small town of Stidia, with the large port of Mostaganem in the background. Hadj wanders, bored, along the low cliffs whilst Walid and I line up the first shot. Walid, the tripod and myself (as subject), all balancing on rocks among the gentle surf.

Crouching between the rocks all along the coast are groups of fishermen. Each group of silhouettes has constructed an improvised boat from driftwood with a small plastic-sacking sail. In the offshore wind, the tiny crafts carry the fishermen's lines out beyond the surf, where their sails are now catching the first rays of sunlight.



## **5.**

We join a long line of cars at a petrol station. A man in a silver-grey suit has got out of his car in boredom. We inch closer and I can see the attendant ahead in greasy overalls, the pump in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He stares in boredom at the nozzle chugging petrol into the white 4×4.

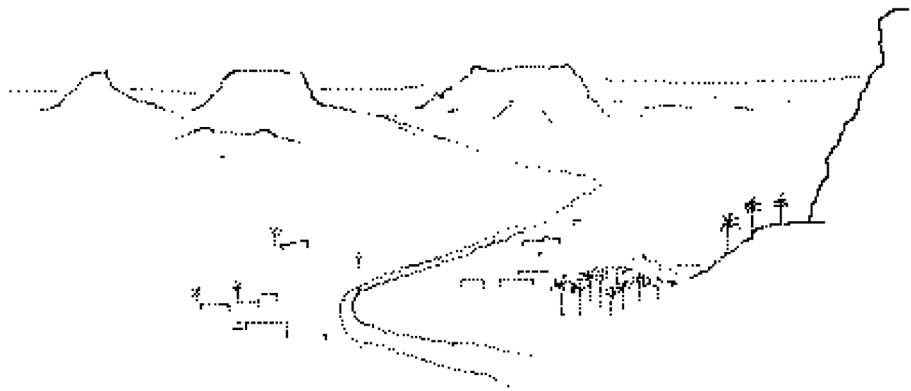
He waits, looks at the pump, and grinds out the cigarette beneath his foot.

## 6.

It feels like there is a different relationship with light here. In the breakfast room of my hotel, the thick curtains remain tightly drawn all day with the fluorescent lights full on. I am the only person who opens the curtains each morning to let the sun in and to look out on the town below.

Light seems to be viewed as nothing special here, not the rare commodity it is back home in Berlin. As the sun drops out of the sky, insanely bright bulbs light up the cafés, shops and waiting rooms. The kind of light that hurts the spaces behind your eyes. Between these overexposed scenes, there are long stretches of deep, concealing darkness. The lack of winter light in Berlin is remedied by carefully lit interiors, but here it seems that no one pays much attention to the quality of the light, or of the darkness.

There is another thing about the night; a strange feeling that took me a few days to pin down. After dark, the customers and the staff of every café, every group hanging out on street corners, all the traffic in the streets and all the sellers in the shops are men. As the sun sets, the women seem to disappear at the approach of the lengthening shadows.



Drawing 1101: From Ighzer

## 7.

The last photo of the day. Down a dusty track in the mountains, on the outskirts of a rundown-looking village. We walk into an olive-grove and a big white 4x4 pulls up on the track. The village policeman gets out and a heated discussion ensues – first between Walid and the policeman and then with Hadj. Walid interprets: "Your documents." I go back to our car and leave the three men discussing excitedly. The policeman takes my passport, and the conversation is over. For the first time the policeman looks me directly in the eye: "*Pardon, Monsieur.*" He seems to sigh.

The policeman gets into our car and we drive to the village where he disappears inside a small building with my papers. Thirty minutes later, we all drive to the next town where the policeman hands over my passport to the local military police. Walid and I are led into the compound. The children of policemen play in the yard. We are told to sit down in a small holding room. Hard wooden benches. Walid chooses the one without a broken leg. A curtained window is behind us, and opposite us is a wall of posters of wanted men; terrorists and criminals, explains Walid. The wall to our left is covered in photos of coach crashes. Flipped, smashed, crushed – one mangled white bus with dried stains dripping down from the windows. The wall on the right is covered in lifeless mugshots – staring eyes and smashed faces. "Dead men found in the mountains," explains Walid. "The police are looking for names so they can be buried."

The fading prints on cheap paper flutter in the wind, which is coming in through the curtains behind me. This is the material of police work. Out of the sun I'm getting cold; Walid gives me his jacket. After about an hour we are called in to see the police chief. There is a discussion between Walid and the chief. The chief turns to me and says: "Hello..." He is pleased with his English but uncertain; he turns to Walid, who nods. "Please ... Sit down." I sit and smile.

"... stand up ..." He laughs before I can move. "Sit down." "Stand up..." "How are you ..." "Good morning ..." His English is slowly coming back to him.

I smile.

A long discussion takes place as Walid tries to explain my purpose. Walid rings Belkacem back at the University of Oran. The police chief's phone rings. Polite but irritated, the policeman listens and eventually responds. Excited Arabic peppered with words in French: "... *étranger... étranger.*" I watch and listen as Walid and the chief take turns to talk: "...*le Greenwich Meridian ...*" Walid is earnest, the chief is incredulous. The chief then explains through Walid that we should have informed the police before we travelled. It is dangerous for foreigners; we need protection. We are led back to the waiting room. We wait. From time to time young policemen look through the door and smile. A builder arrives with two planks of wood. The children play outside. A middle-ranking policeman looks through the door and catches my eye: "*Ça va?*" "*Oui,*" I reply with my terrible accent. "*Anglais,*" explains Walid. The policeman becomes interested. He again explains that we cannot travel without informing the authorities. Foreigners require an escort. He asks me where I live. I decide to say London. "...ah... 'Chelsea'..." He beams. "*Didier Drogba,*" (referencing the ex-Chelsea African footballer). "*Oui... Oui... mais ce n'est pas mon équipe.*" "*Quelle est votre équipe?*" "*Arsenal,*" I reply. Instantly I realize that all the names of the current Arsenal players have flown from my mind.

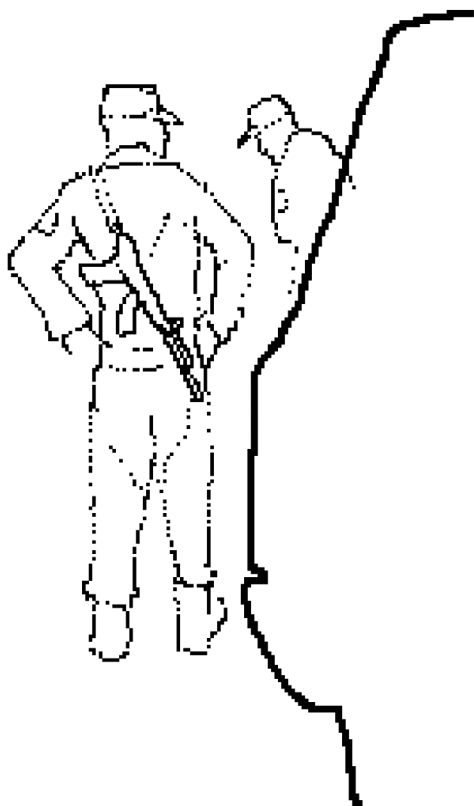
Through Walid I am informed that we will have a police escort back to Oran. We wait another two hours on the hard benches and eventually we are escorted back to our car and reunited with the patient Hadj.

## **8.**

I feel like the president of a small country.

I am at the centre of an armed cavalcade sweeping through the traffic of small mountain towns, ignoring traffic lights and forcing people off the road. Four armed gendarmes in a fast 4×4 drive ahead of us with their lights whirling and sirens screaming. Another car is centimetres behind us.

Hadj sweats and mutters as he attempts to keep up with the speed and omnipotence of the police cars. When we reach the edge of the gendarmes' jurisdiction, my passport is handed to another set of gendarmes in identical cars and the ritual is repeated. After yet another change of police cars, we arrive back at my hotel in the city. I am told that I am not to leave the hotel without an escort. The flashing lights disappear into the darkness as the policemen hurry back to the mountains and their waiting children.



Drawing 1105: Gendarme Escort

## 9.

The green plains below me grow emptier. The edges of the rectangular fields no longer touch. The spaces between them get bigger and their rectangles grow less distinct. From the air, the mountains look like wrinkles in the fabric of the planet. Greens slowly fading into ochres. The early morning sun leaving the valleys in darkness. Trees being made visible by their long shadows. Then the trees grow sparser, and a huge salt lake appears with stretches of dunes. Little pockets of sand continue after the lake. The dunes fade out and the long spines of mountains push through the plains again. Creases begin to be softened by tails of sand. Shivering old skin – vertebrae, knuckles, and ribs. Areas of sand clump together, wrinkled up into dunes. Clouds cast shadows across the landscape below.

Scale is confusing. There are things I recognise from the English coast; a pebble left on the sands of Ramsgate beach creates cuttlefish forms downwind of the obstruction. But here, far below my window, the pebbles are in fact massive boulders, or mountains. "Not sand," explains Walid. "*Hamada* ... little rocks." Walid is accompanying me south in the plane; his father left yesterday in the car as I am not allowed to travel across the desert.

The roads have stopped now. The towns have stopped, and the rectangles have stopped. There are only the looping lines of the endless crenulations between sand and rock. Then these features fade out, leaving just the soft plains of blank sand and dust. A low-tide drainage-system wrinkles across the plains but it looks like the tide left a few millennia ago. One road. One black dot slowly inching along a line of dark Tarmac. Walid's father? What looks like a small town glints in the sunlight. "No, desert farms ..." says Walid. "You are seeing the plastic sheeting."



The pilot announces our descent. With no guide as to scale it is impossible to tell if we are actually getting lower. A video-game background that never gets any nearer. Wing-flaps pitch us into an even steeper descent – into nothing. The aircraft's display tells us that the town of Adrar is approaching. Out of the window, there is still no sign that we are nearing anything but sand and hamada. One line drawn across a yellow screen – gills of sand quivering out from its edge. Otherwise, nothing. Sand and nothing. One black dot casting a shadow. Lower and lower and at last maybe there are signs of a surface. The landscape has the flatness of a still lake.

When the propellers have stopped, we descend from the plane and at the small terminal my passport is again taken away by the gendarme. We are told to wait. Hadj argues pointlessly with the policeman. We are allowed to stay in the café. All the passengers from the plane have left and the café owner wants to close. We wait. The café closes. Another policeman appears – Hadj and Walid explain again. The first policeman returns, mutters into the ear of the second and hands him my passport. We are escorted out to Hadj's car. We follow the police cars through the desert with their lights and sirens pulsing out across the twilight sand until we reach the airport town of Adrar. When my passport is away, Walid and Hadj's attitude seem to change. They rush to carry my bag. I have become an escorted object.

## 10.

To travel across the desert to the next oasis town of Timimoun (where we will find the line), we have been told we must have a police escort, and to arrange the escort we must present ourselves at the Délégation Sécurité. Hadj's navigation method is to shout out of the window at passersby: "*Salaam 'alykum!*" and then ask directions. It always seems to work (eventually) and we find the town hall down a side street. We enter the compound: a series of low buildings connected by covered walkways. Like all the buildings in the desert, the walls are a dark dust-red. We walk down long corridors, past silent offices. Most are empty. Some are so still that they appear empty but when my eyes adjust, I realize that in this one there is a man sitting quietly behind a large desk. He gives us further directions and I follow Hadj down more corridors, across a courtyard and into another building. A large office, empty apart from a desk, a man and a small box. Many years ago, the cardboard was carefully covered in pink paper – the man, the office and the paper have all faded in the sunlight. The box holds a row of black passports, but we are not this man's responsibility – these are the passports of French nationals.

Further corridors. Hadj asks whoever he can find and finally we arrive at the Délégation Sécurité but everything is closed. We will have no police escort today.

All the hotels in Adrar are full and Hadj has lost his patience. He tells me what we are going to do. We must drive today without the gendarme escort. Walid translates instructions to me. This time, I am travelling in the back: "When we come to a checkpoint – you sleep. If anyone sees you," says Hadj, "*mauvais estomac*" (holding his hand on his stomach to explain).

I'm tired and my stomach actually does feel a little strange, so I decide it's easier to remain lying down and to close my eyes. The car accelerates out of the town towards the desert highway. The car slows. I can feel three curves: a sharp turn to the left, a slalom back to the right and a final straightening out. Hadj's car crawls through an unseen checkpoint. We accelerate away. From my place in the back, I can see the roofs of occasional passing trucks and the dark blue of the desert sky. Another slowing and a slalom of turns, and then we are accelerating away from a second set of unseen gendarme. From a new series of slowing and slaloming, it becomes clear to me we are finally approaching Timimoun. I get up.

"No, no, Simon, sleep!" I lie down again until Hadj tells me we have reached the Ksar Messine hotel.

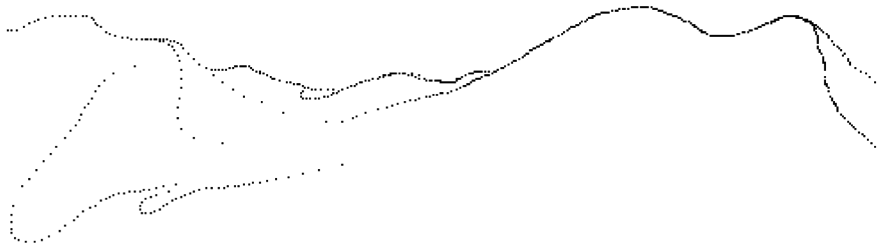
## 11.

Everything here seems to be in the process of being built, but nothing seems to reach completion. Almost all the buildings have steel bars poking out of the rough concrete columns on their roofs, as if perhaps one day someone will want to build an extra floor. Some constructions have got further, with the structure already having the concrete skeleton of a stalled first floor. Curiously, other buildings have only a top floor completed while the ground floor is left as an open grid. Some are nearly finished, some are prematurely occupied and others are waiting shells. And as they wait, the mends and patches merge with the beginnings.

Roads are half-finished and half-destroyed. The main street is a dual carriageway of which only one side was finished. The other lane is used as an extra space for adventurous drivers avoiding the mounds of waste and rocks that were left by the absent road-crew.

Everything is breaking. Hadj explains that the sand destroys machinery in the desert. To protect their engines, the cars must stop in a sandstorm and the 4×4s all have high plastic snorkels that attempt to suck dust-free air into the engines. At night the car's headlights light up the banks of dust hanging in the air. The last rays of sunlight illuminate long shafts of dusty air that slice diagonally through the gaps in the buildings. You can feel the dust in your throat and at the end of the day, you are confronted with what your nose has filtered from the air.

Everything is in a state of becoming and unbecoming. Structures are at once ruins, building sites and homes. Nothing is complete as everything seems to be unpicked by the sand and wind – even whilst it is still being woven. But perhaps my understanding of things is back to front, including time. When the gendarme asks me for my name, date of birth, and the nationality of my mother – they translate the sounds into Arabic and write them from right to left across the paper. To my eyes, the newspaper left in my seat has its title and headlines on the back page, from where the news stories work their way to towards the front.



Drawing 1104: In the Dunes

## 12.

Water wells up through sand. Ancient water that has nothing to do with rain emerges into the sunlight. The sitting rooms and hotels in Timimoun are decorated with seashell fossils found in the desert. The water percolates up to the surface from eons past, and on its way flows over the petrified corals and timber from millennia ago when forests grew here and waves crashed.

The water flows across the sand in carefully channelled streams called *foggaras*. Hadj explains the mechanics of the system. At intervals along the stream, a large slate stone is placed across the flow. Regularly spaced slots, carved into the stone, divide the water into precisely equal parts. Centimetres wide, these streamlets then head off in different directions – under walls, streets and houses if necessary. Miniature fish and snails grow in the tiny streams which are divided again and again until eventually a tiny rivulet reaches one family's plot of land. I watch a farmer directing the flow to individual carrot and potato plants – building temporary walls of sand to divert the stream of water this way and that, as each plant receives its quota. The gardening looks something like hydroponics to me – there is no earth, just carrots growing in sand and ancient water.

Above the palm trees of the desert spring, a swallow swoops low over the rooftops. The bird screeches and draws the same looping lines as it drew above my Berlin balcony back in August. A yearly commute for better insects.

### 13.

The only things with completed lines are the dunes. Perversely the forces of chaos are building perfect shapes that flow and shift in front of my eyes. Any presence is immediately reacted to by the contours of the dune. A bag left on the surface, or a foot planted for too long starts to be reflected in the geometries of the sand. The flow of air is disturbed and the sand that it's carrying is settled down in new ways.

Eddies at the base of an object cause the sand to flow away from the obstruction, leaving a dry moat surrounding the obstruction. Downwind, in the lee of the object, a small sand tail starts to grow. Reflections of forms and ripples in the surface modulate downwind until the disturbance is dissolved or incorporated into the lines of the greater form.

In places, the sand is heaved up into forms that are three or four storeys high, like futuristic architecture with looping lines and sinuous peaks. What seem like cathedrals of sand are actually slow-moving waves. Their crescent shapes are slowly traveling backwards across the dry-stone plains that lie beneath them. At their crest, their sharply drawn spines are always in motion. Sand or dust is constantly flowing up and off their edge, flying momentarily out into the air before settling downwind.

## 14.

The leaves of the palm trees rustle in the desert wind, and the low winter sun throws patterns across the wall of my chalet. A huge wall-mounted TV with the rolling news from the English language channel of Al-Jazeera:

Afghanistan; children with shrapnel wounds, Syria; "UN hopes for a cease-fire" but casualties and dead in their millions, Iraq; Sinjar Mountain, US air strikes against ISIS positions, Niger and Mali; large guns mounted on Toyotas, Gaza; Israeli soldiers showing a missile crater in a field, Pakistan; protests against a school massacre, 21 Taliban killed. Then ... A little Ebola, a little HIV, a flood in the Atlas Mountains before getting back to the wars - this time starting with Libya before moving on to Nigeria and Boko Haram.

At lunch, Walid made a surprisingly convincing argument that ISIS was created by the American CIA (everybody here seems to believe this, even Belkacem the university lecturer). Walid's argument runs that the organisation suddenly appeared from nowhere, equipped with large guns and sophisticated intelligence. Oil prices crash, Russia is weakened, arms are sold. I don't quite believe this but it's hard to argue against the logic.

But now Walid and his father are gone. The armed guards on the gate won't allow a foreigner out of this compound without a pre-arranged military guard, so Walid and his father have left for the town, in search once more for the Délégation Sécurité.



At the back of my chalet, behind the carefully watered palm trees, is the first line of razor-wire and a high fence. Behind that is a narrow dirt track that allows the hotel's armed guards to circle the compound. And beyond all that, obscuring the desert, is the even higher perimeter wall topped with watchtowers and lights. I am a kind of luxury prisoner in a hotel that from the outside looks like a military prison, and on the inside resembles a three-star resort. This is not a place for tourists; it is designed for the Chinese and European workers from the oil fields and construction projects.

Hopefully, this time Walid and Hadj will succeed in their search for the armed police, so that I can be carefully escorted to the airport and get out of this place.

## **15. Mali**

Kilometres beneath me, Mali is a blurry expanse that I am not able to enter. I am advised that the war has left the northeast of Mali too dangerous for a white European to travel through. In the growing darkness beneath my plane's window, the landscape remains a mystery.

## 16. Burkina Faso

A dusty wind blows across the hot Tarmac as I walk towards the tiny terminal of Ouagadougou International Airport. I'm arriving from Berlin for the next leg of my journey, and the Ebola epidemic has reached the neighbouring land of Mali. There is a queue at the entrance to the terminal where each passenger is being directed to wash their hands in a tingling, antiseptic soap. A camera device opposite films each face as we enter the country (or perhaps it is taking my temperature). Before the regular passport control there is another booth that checks the little orange inoculation booklet that I was given in Berlin. I thought this booklet was only for my records, and it's lucky that I brought it with me. The booklet isn't for my benefit – it is a passport for the populations of bacteria and bugs that I am carrying inside me.

Later, I am sitting outside my hotel. I miss my two-year-old daughter already. She is learning words at an amazing speed, and apparently she has told a mum at the kindergarten that her Daddy is in Ouagadougou and the mother presumed she had invented this name. When I checked in my bags at the counter in Berlin, the airline staff laughed at my itinerary. "How do you say that?" "Waga-doogoo," I explained.

The street life is so different from Algeria. Women and men bustle through the loud thoroughfares. Arms and legs are visible. Suddenly everyone has bodies. There is a sense of theatre and style. Groups of waiting men, sitting backwards on their parked mopeds, chatting to each other and striking poses. They know that they look good. There is a showmanship to how people wear their clothes. A knitted ski-hat perched on the very tip of a man's head – the fabric tweaked upwards into a little Mount Fuji. A burgundy corduroy hat pulled down almost over the eyes. I feel like a stranger in town, but that feels OK here.

## 17.

I am driving across the flat dusty landscape in a beaten-up pickup with two new comrades. Amidou is tall and elegant. He studied English and quotes Milton and Brontë. He has a shop that sells African handmade designs but works on the side for Jovial Productions (a film company I found through a French friend). Abdoulaye, our irrepressible driver, is very short. He has a fantastic high-pitched laugh that bursts out spontaneously and frequently through the rhythm of his speech.

Spaced across the flat plains like fortifications, we pass ranks of baobab trees. The gnarled trunks are wider than our pick-up truck is long. Like massive, squat water towers. Thick, stumpy arms that abruptly end in twisting, arthritic fingers. They all seem dead, but Amidou tells me that when the rainy season comes they will sprout leaves and flower. It's a rare sight though, Amidou says, to see a baobab with leaves. Standing under one of the trees, Amidou tells me that a Boabab as thick as this might be more than a thousand years old.



Drawing 1113: Abdoulaye

## 18.

Trucks are strapped high with cargo and leaning over at crazy angles. Bulging nets of goods teeter above the trailers and cabs. The trucks lurch slowly along the potholed roads, tilting scarily like drunks on their way home.

Small buses are stuffed full with people and sheep, with mopeds, bikes and more people on the roof. Other people are holding onto the doors at the back. One young man rides his moped even whilst its strapped upright on the roof – his black coat is pulled around him and flapping like a bat in the wind. The traffic judders to a stop at the toll booths for the *péage*. A flood of sellers rush to the buses' windows, thrusting nuts, sesame biscuits, carrots and little bags of water towards the passengers.

## 19.

Everywhere thin, dusty plastic bags are snagged on stems and rocks. They flutter like endless flocks of tatty birds that have settled across the land. Sun-bleached colours: black, blue, faded red but especially a ghostly see-through white.

Street dogs, street pigs, street vultures and, in the smaller villages, street cows. All roaming amongst the detritus, turning things over, looking for scraps. A bunch of kids kick sections of discarded watermelon rind to a happy cow.

Honda 50cc mopeds weave along the bigger roads. Some bump past with big, furry bundles strapped onto the rack at the back. A web of strings and ropes of different colours knit together a brown tangle of legs and snouts: hairy bundles of sheep. It's only when one of the snouts poking out of the bundle starts to bleat that I realise they are actually all alive. Moped after moped slaloms through the dust and potholes, each with a brown planet of fur attached. All are utterly passive except for this one angry lamb, unhappy with his lot in life.

## 20.

Little stands of metal or rickety wood are dotted along the roadsides. Lines of bottles filled with a brownish murky fluid. The remains of the stained labels sometimes show the bottle's original use: 'Special Dry Gin' or 'Lola Pastis'. For days now I've been wondering what this fluid is that everybody seems to need. Sometimes there is a young girl with five bottles, sometimes a bigger stall with 50 bottles lined up and ready to go. It was only when I finally saw a girl pouring bottle after bottle into an old Mercedes, that the secret was finally revealed. It struck me that this was the first time in my life I had seen the colour of petrol.

Abdoulaye drives the old Toyota expertly. I am in the back where the cool air from the basic air-conditioning doesn't quite reach, and the shocks from the road seem less cushioned by the truck's aged suspension. I'm sharing the back seat with piles of baggage that collapse on me periodically. The benefit, though, is that I can listen to the uninterrupted ebb and flow of the conversation between these two old friends and driving companions. Sometimes, there are passages in fast French that I can just about understand but mostly they converse in Mossi, the central Burkinabe language. Their conversations have a beautiful cadence and flow. The syntax of their passionate discourse is woven with high exclamations when something is deemed too expensive or unbelievable (something like an American 'Jeez', but much higher and falling away at the end). There is also a little double-kiss delivered with a slow shaking head when the speaker wants to underline that something is incomprehensibly bad. Invariably the other companion agrees and adds their own emphasis. Amidou is the more earnest of the two and when agitated about a subject he raps the dashboard in percussive stabs; once, twice, or three times for special emphasis.

Our progress is occasionally halted by the crossing of nonchalant animals. Cattle with long dignified faces and a slow, catwalk gait. When Abdoulaye honks his horn, they turn their heads and look with eyes full of pity and disdain - oblivious to us and the flocks of mopeds buzzing around them.



## **21.**

In Algeria, there were cats everywhere. Mangy, hungry but tolerated, slinking under the tables looking for scraps from the lamb *brochettes*.

In Burkina, there are dogs. Lean, fast hounds that leap out of the little village compounds, barking at the wheels of our pickup.

## 22.

The 'residence' at Ouargaye is the worst hotel of my life. Cracked and stained remnants of a toilet seat with a broken flush. A layer of ancient dust has settled on everything except the bed sheet (thankfully this is freshly washed, but is still patterned with faded stains). One short fluorescent tube above the bed whose harsh light almost reaches into the bathroom. Swollen windows and doors that don't close.

I am so glad I brought a mosquito net with me. The idea of it was claustrophobic, but the reality is like a silken childhood den. A delicate force-field spun around me, repelling the unseen or imaginary mosquitoes. Each buzz is weaponised by my imagination with an array of missiles marked: 'malaria', 'yellow fever', and (irrationally) 'Ebola'. Within my silk tent though, I feel like a minor princess.

Waking up is a slow process. Through the walls of the hotel, before the first light and the call to prayer, I can hear various snorting and rasping noises – the clearing of noses, ears and throats afflicted by the constant dust. As I'm gradually woken, I soon have to join this dawn chorus.

The dust is as pervasive as the rain in England. Amidou and Abdoulaye are regularly popping pills in the front of our car. Medication, they explain, against the effects of the dust in their throats. Amidou says that although they may look healthy, at this time of year, in the dry season, everybody is ill.

## 23. Togo

We have crossed the border into a tiny slice of Togo. The *Charlie Hebdo* attacks have just taken place in Paris. "*Je suis Charlie ... Je suis Charlie ...*" Amidou is angry with this slogan of support for the victims. "*Non, je ne suis pas Charlie*" (the *pas* expressed with a Gallic explosion of disdain). "Are some people worth less than others?" he asks.

At almost the same moment, two thousand people have been killed in Nigeria and almost nobody noticed. He is angry with Africa's leaders, who don't mark the event with marches and tears like the French. He is angry with the Western media, and I worry that he is perhaps angry with me. I ask if he thought that this unrest might spread to Burkina. Amidou explains that Burkina is a mixed and tolerant place – Muslims, Catholics, and evangelicals all seem to live easily amongst each other. But he explains that yes, it could come to Burkina. Nigeria was the same. Ten years ago, Boko Haram didn't exist, but Amidou's fear is not that the Burkinabe might also get caught up in ideas of hate and truth. Amidou explains that his fear is that it might happen here for the same reason it did in Nigeria.

"Boko Haram is created by the Americans. How else is this possible? How can they suddenly have better weapons than the Nigerian Army? New tanks. New Jeeps. How can Nigeria do nothing against these people? Nigeria is powerful ... a wealthy country... No, no... this is not possible. America has done this because they want to control Nigeria, because they want to sell arms, because they want to control the oil."

## 24. Ghana

After a long-haul flight above Europe and Africa, I arrive in another new country for the last leg of my journey – this time at the edge of the ocean. Nii, a choreographer and musician who has helped plan my journey and will be my assistant in Ghana, spots me amid the chaos of the arrivals gate. It's hot, my clothes were chosen for a winter day in Berlin, and we are meeting in person for the first time. I'm tired and a little confused.

Nii shepherds me through the hawkers and taxi drivers and escorts me to my hotel. I gladly leave Ghana behind for a few hours of proper sleep. At 6.10 am, the reception desk calls me. I fail a few times to understand what they are trying to tell me. Eventually I grasp that they have woken me up to tell me that the electricity is back on. Now I'm totally confused, and entirely awake. A big hot sun is just rising behind the rooftops.

## 25.

We have driven to the north of the country along erratic roads and have long since left the last shreds of Tarmac behind us. Richard, our driver, negotiates the red dust tracks in silence and Nii is horrified that there is no working CD player or even radio in our smart 4×4. The car belongs to a tour company that usually employs Richard to ferry rich white tourists across the countryside. Richard is withdrawn and seems confused by both our mission and by Nii's role.

As we travel further south, the landscape begins to change. Up near the Burkina and Togo borders, the trees were still spaced out across flat open planes, but as we have slowly progressed south, the vegetation has become steadily thicker. The trees have crept closer together until their branches have begun to touch. There are more palm trees and mango trees and now the odd banana plantation has begun to appear by the roadside. The grass has grown higher and thicker, and the undergrowth has begun to merge with the vines that droop down from the tangle of branches above.

Along the roads between towns, we often see men and woman swinging a long blade nonchalantly by their side. Ghanaians call the huge knife a 'cutlass' and it does lend the walkers a piratical air. Actually, the knife is employed in the farming of yams or cassava but is also used for simply cutting a way through the undergrowth.

At intervals, rising above everything else, are strange trees that I've never seen or heard of before. Excessively tall, their elegant bare trunks rise four or five storeys high into the air. Their bark is smooth and shiny like a snake. Right at the top, there is a dense crown of green leaves raised absurdly high above the canopy below. At their base, the trunks sprout fins like an early Russian rocket. The thin wooden blades emerge from the trunk above head height and run down into the earth to form a kind of organic buttress to the trunk.

## 26.

Left alone by the side of the road, there are often sacks of yams or charcoal, presumably waiting to be collected. I ask Nii if nobody ever steals the sacks? Nii explains an elaborate system of beliefs that apparently acts as a reliable deterrent. Theft is rare because the perpetrator lives in fear of the 'small gods'. Nii explains that after two or three days, if the goods aren't returned, the aggrieved party makes a sacrifice of a goat or chicken to honour their personal god (apparently Antua, a little river god, is particularly effective and deadly). The god receives the soul of the animal in the spilt blood (the sacrificer retains the flesh of the animal to eat). In return for the soul of the animal, the god will enact a deadly form of retribution upon the thief.

It seems everybody believes in the system of gods to some degree. Nii tells me, for instance, that professional footballers can sometimes be seen walking backwards onto the football pitch at the behest of their own small god. But it seems that people are somehow embarrassed about these beliefs – the footballers often hide their backwards walk by pretending to turn and wave to a friend in the crowd.

The system seems to work amazingly well. In town, I am always worried about my suitcase left in full view in the back of the car (containing my laptop, hard drive and camera). Nii and Richard, though, look at me as if I have an odd nervous condition. They assure me that no one will break into a car – partly because of this belief system and partly because everywhere is so full of people and life that there is no space left for thieves to operate.

The 'small gods' are small in comparison with the larger monotheistic systems of belief that were imported later. In the south of the country, we often pass Anglican churches whose stone-arched windows and bell towers loom above the ramshackle roofs of the towns. The churches look like they have landed from another universe. In the north, the minarets of mosques rise above the roofs. For now, the three systems of belief seem to cohabit and overlap amicably, if chaotically.

## 27.

Further south we reach a stretch of brand-new road. A skin of Tarmac has been laid down onto a wide bed of flattened bushland. As we've travelled, I have slowly begun to grasp the full cycle of how Tarmac roads evolve back into dirt tracks.

First, potholes begin to appear randomly and intermittently across the smooth new surface. At this stage, Richard can still swerve across the road in a delicate ballet to avoid the holes. Then the potholes become more frequent and the path between them ever more convoluted. Cars and trucks travelling in opposite directions now veer across all parts of the wide carriageway ahead.

Then the holes multiply until there is no viable path left between them. At this point Richard sometimes chooses to leave one wheel on the still mostly intact ribbon of Tarmac at the very edge of the road and the other, a foot lower, on the levelled dirt strip that runs along the side of the road. The potholes then start to join up, until finally there are only isolated islands of black in amongst the flat, red dust. These Tarmac islands, which rise about half a foot out of the dirt, then in turn become the objects that Richard must dodge. Once the road has reverted entirely back to dirt, things actually become slightly easier. It's slower and dustier, but at least we can drive in a relatively straight line and there are no vertebrae-jarring jolts when a wheel drops down into an unavoidable chasm between Tarmac and dirt.

My photographs have taken longer than expected and now the sun has dropped from the sky (like it always does in these latitudes at around 6 pm at night). In the gathering darkness, clouds of dust are rushing towards us through the headlights of our 4x4. I have no idea how Richard can see anything ahead, let alone sense the deep potholes he swerves around intuitively. The darkness reduces our world to a boiling sphere of illuminated dust, just ahead of us.



When we finally arrive in Yendi, the town is dark. There is yet another power cut or 'Light Off' as people say here. Some stalls have a lantern, some trucks have lights, but otherwise everything moves in darkness. We find the lodge where we will be staying, but it also has no lights. They tell us they can't start the generator till 8 pm, so we decide to try to find something to eat and blunder off into the darkness. In a back courtyard, someone with a generator and a fire is making *fufu*. They dish out lumps of unidentifiable meat and the soft, slimy dumplings of *fufu*, all floating in a delicious, oily soup. In the light from Nii's phone, we eat the *fufu* and red stew with our hands. The generator grinds in the darkness and a crescent moon drifts on its back above our heads, hanging exhausted in the dusty sky.

## **28.**

The people we meet in the street seem to be almost universally welcoming and friendly. They are interested in who we are and why I'm here. The people who end up in the background of my photos, the people selling things in their stalls or the women running their 'chop shops' (food shacks by the side of the road) all seem to be glad that I'm here, or at least tolerant and generous with their time.

But as soon as we step into a hotel or a waiting room or anywhere that a service needs to be done, there is a Jekyll-to-Hyde transformation. The friendly, smiling faces become stony, implacable and surly. The Ghanaian staff members barely answer a question and seem insulted that they are being asked to deliver a service to you. It's hard not to be paranoid but I notice that the rich Ghanaian businessmen in hotels receive exactly the same reception. As soon as we are back outside again, the joyful and loud world resumes.

## 29.

We arrive into the loud chaos and dirt of Accra. For the first time since Algeria, we are stopped from taking a photo by an angry set of policemen. Nii attempts to argue our case, but he quickly retreats when it becomes clear this is futile (he later tells me that the officers were actually looking for a bribe). Nii solves our problem with a phone call to an old friend. We drive for two hours through almost stationary traffic to pick up the old schoolmate, who now joins us wearing his Ghanaian military uniform (even though this is his off-duty day).

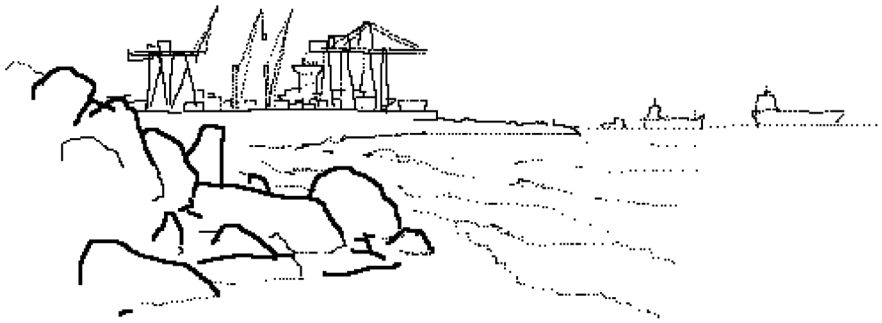
We then resume our photography in Accra's teeming streets, docks and railway lines, protected by the magical shield of the friend's uniform. At the coast, we reach the old colonial area of Jamestown. I wanted to see the remnants of the British colonial past. From these forts and trading posts the British invented the Atlantic slave trade. But there is little left to see. The buildings and traces that do still exist are collapsing, boarded-up or squatted in by the homeless. One part of the fort that we try to gain access to has been appropriated by a group of self-appointed caretakers who demand a small fee for their 'stewardship' of the collapsing rubble of history.

### **30.**

I have reached the end of the line.

We take the last photographs on the empty beach next to the industrial port with the containerships studding the horizon. There are still two nights before my flight back to Europe, so I check into a tourist hotel on the ocean. Even though the hotel is called Palm Beach, a huge fence prevents access to the white sand and the ocean waves. Although it keeps the rich tourists and Ghanaian businessmen in, the barrier is actually designed to keep the beach-hawkers and vagrants out. But actually, no one seems to want to go further than the thatched 'African Village' bar or the palm-fringed swimming pools. Nobody except me.

Stuck behind the fence, I drag a sun-lounger from the pool to look at the ocean. I doze and dream – tired from months of travel and happy to be in one place for a day. I watch the distant waves crash onto the continent and the container ships slip over the horizon. An occasional plane paints an empty sky that stretches all the way to Antarctica.



Drawing 1122: Port at Tema, Accra

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