

I Spy With My Little Eye

I see a village nestling in familiar bush, dust and thorn trees, mud huts and a weave of trodden paths. A woman is carrying water in a calabash on her head; her feet are scaly, dark, and dirty. The mealies rustle, shaken like swatches for people are working amongst them, half-seen between the green stalks. Children shriek and scatter, their bellies full of starch. There's a chicken pecking by a caked, mud wall and chanting song is coming from somewhere.

Into the village comes the news that strangers are arriving and, while the news is still being passed around, they burst in. The village headman gives them a traditional welcome; the women bring out food. The sun is going down. This would be a scene of ordinary hospitality, were the guests not guerrilla soldiers, so that behind the offers of food and drink lurks fear and indecision. The guests, by their visit, have brought turmoil to the village and their appearance has meant that the village headman must make a judgment which could cost principles and lives. He must judge whether or not to report the visit to the other side, to the government troops.

On the face of it this might be a simple issue, for his sympathies lie with the guerrillas. If he were approaching the question with pen and paper he might place a tick beside the word "guerrillas" and a cross beside "troops", but he has a stick and he is scraping it across the ground in front of him, 'til the patch of earth is ribbed by loose dust.

He dislikes killing.

Distaste for killing has no place here, for his actions won't stop it.

He decides to focus only on the welfare of those who have not chosen war, considering only their safety, his principles left to one side, for the moment a mound of sand. His loyalty belongs to his people's survival. However, when he lifts his head, he sees that his guests have gone and he allows himself the hope that they'll not return

During the following weeks he goes to that patch of earth again and again, wondering what he should have done, knowing what he must do if there ever is a next time.

It comes. The guerrillas return, more stealthily, and now there are fewer of them for they've been involved in a skirmish with the troops. With bloody wounds, and speaking in angry whispers they demand refuge. Now they take without asking, rounding up the young boys and girls who will be held hostage overnight and marched to training camps across the border in the morning. Protesting parents retreat from their guns.

The village headman slips away, armed only with a stick, like a shadow moving between thorn trees under moonlight. When he reaches the road leading into town he is stopped by a group of soldiers who circle him, taunt and kick him until finally they've listened long enough to hear that he had reason for coming to town. They get his message and a pale hand offers him a cigarette.

He must go back to his village and they'll come and take away his guests they tell him, with a kind of sneer which holds no respect for him.

Some way from the town he spits in disgust.

The skies are raising the sun-coloured banners of the day when he reaches his village which is apparently still, but for a cock strutting. Yet the village is not

asleep for there are bodies lying senseless in the dust. Events have sped past the headman. While he was away the guerrillas became uneasy and left with their new recruits.

For the villagers, there was a silence before the troops crept up through the bush, not needing any word to tell them of the guerrillas' presence. Before the first light of day they had opened fire. Those who panicked and died were the villagers and when the troops realized their quarry had left, they took up their trail. Now the headman sees that his action was useless, impotent even in theory. In the great, brooding silence which swells though the village, the cock crows.

The headman feels dead to his world, numb, though not for long for pain rouses him. With inhuman cries of fury, the surviving villagers are pelting him with stones. Missiles from the hands of his own people deal him blow after blow 'til he is knocked off his feet, unresisting, absorbed. He sinks down beside the body of a woman. Warm blood trickles over the scales of her skin and seeps in between her dark and rigid toes.