

MARGARET ROZGA

Awakening in Waukesha

I raise my head, see red numerals on the black face of a clock: 4:15. No sound of easy breathing in the bed next to me. I sit up. Why is this bed so wide, this room so big? Why am I alone? Where am I?

Under layers of quilts, I feel warm, but it's a well-padded rather than bare-armed warmth. Light seeps in from the window, but not from tropical sun. Instead snow-swollen sky, snow-covered earth. How strange.

This must be home, Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA. Not Dakar. Chrissy, my daughter, is still away, finishing her junior year of college in Senegal.

I try to get my bearings, look out the windows to my left: an expanse of land down to the creek and up to the long red cow barn of the Emslie farm. A cold winter sun begins to break through the overcast, begins to rise over the Emslie fields. There is no ocean nearby, no sounds of waves breaking against the shore, no urge to fish the high tide. I cannot walk side by side with Chrissy down to breakfast in the sunny dining room facing the ocean. I cannot look out at the waves and wonder what floats in from Brazil. Here at home in this big room, I feel hemmed in. I know to the south, west and north new buildings go up even in the winter cold: duplexes, condos, living spaces wrapped around garages.

I cannot walk out around the circle drive in front of the Novotel past the attendant at the end of the driveway, past the group of taxis waiting for a fare: "Bonjour, Madame. Taxi?" "No, merci."

I will not make my way up Avenue Albert Sarraut to Place de l'Indépendance and beyond that, beyond the banks where tourists exchange traveler's checks for West African currency, CFA, to Marché Sandaga, the main marketplace. I cannot linger over bolts of fabric, bargain to get two meters of cloth for 500 CFA lower than what the vendor calls his final price. I will not puzzle to translate the "sink sont" I hear my daughter say into the French words Cinq Cents I read on the bill into the English words five hundred and finally into the American equivalent, 85 cents. I will not watch the tailor cut and sew my dress in an hour, while I peel and eat oranges, sitting on a bench in the hallway across from the alcove in the marketplace building where he works at his sewing machine.

In my mind's ear, I hear Chrissy again telling me, "Well it's probably not really his, in the sense you think of his, that is, personal property. Probably a dozen different men share this machine."

Chrissy now speaks Wolof as well as French and English. Her host family calls her Khady. She calls herself Khady when taxi drivers and vendors ask her name, ask where she learned Wolof. I find it difficult to imagine her here in Waukesha, Wisconsin again, dealing with condos rising up out of farmland. Even before leaving for Senegal last summer, she stood in this street where she has never been at home, where I rented an apartment after she left for college, and called out to neighbors who were tucked within vinyl-sided colonials, not there in the street to hear her, "People, what are you thinking? You don't need Styrofoam pillars."

I'm awake enough now to let the demands of home take over; what do I have to do today? I have to call Midwest Airlines to see about reimbursement for the unused portion of my ticket. Rather than wait for the snowed-in JFK to reopen, I rented a car and drove the last stretch of the trip home. New York to Wisconsin, 900 miles, 16 hours.

Also later this morning, I'll have to clear ice and snow from the driveway. I'll put away my passport so that I'll be able to find it next time. I don't know when there'll be a next time.

I drift from that sense of disoriented focus, or focused disorientation, a traveler simultaneously at home and away, with which I awoke. I knew that moment of cold, clear dawn and fine-stitched warmth was too fine, too rare, too delicate to last. If I concentrate intently enough maybe I can coax it back, an enveloping mist, something that blurs and reconfigures what is home, what family, what sure, what full of hope, what passing, perhaps already gone.

Home—physical, social, familial, geographic, political, philosophical, attitudinal, relative, relational, tactile, a set of comforts and a set of points settled.

Away—a cobbled street with slick stones, the need to pay more attention to my feet than I do at home. From the first moment leaving Leopold Sengor Airport, the sight of ox-carts, the overloaded mini-buses, everything so overwhelming I grew dizzy from concentration. I wanted to shop for souvenirs, to buy things, a way to get control. Then Chrissy--Khady--and I headed toward the old colonial capitol, St. Louis, in a bush taxi with six other passengers, one a long-legged Senegalese soldier whose knees practically touched his chest as he hunched in the third seat of the old American station wagon with 249,000 miles on the odometer. No one complained. Only when one woman asked to stop to buy oranges from a roadside vendor did anyone speak.

The miles whizzed by. The vegetation changed, the color of the ground reddened, the texture loosened, trees assumed new shapes. Then the sun set, not a ball of fire, not even a blood orange, more like an arm stretched to reach the nightclothes rumpled at the foot of the bed of the earth. And overhead a sliver of moon. Korite, the end of Ramadan, time to break the fast. If the sun is the muscled arm of God, then that new moon must be a fingernail clipping caught midair. Cast off yet imperial.

Five of the other six passengers in the bush taxi congregated around one man who extracted from his bag a package of crackers. Each of the others silently reached into the package and took one or two slim wafers to eat. Chrissy reached into her bag, pulled out the camera she inherited from my dad, took a half dozen giant steps toward the horizon and began to photograph the evening sky. I listened as my fellow passengers spoke softly and passed the package of crackers among themselves. I was outside their group, outside all groups. It did not matter. I was inside that moment, the holiest moment of the trip.

In Senegal, I knew nothing, no French, no Wolof, no Islam, hardly knew to look to the sky for the new moon. Every step into foreign territory amazed me. I had only nine days. A culture cannot be taken in a gulp like a dose of medicine.

Home—I know the ground so well, each curve in the road, each twist of the creek, each position of the sun. Home—where I listen and understand immediately. Or think I do. All is so familiar that the day goes by without seeing a thing save the motion, without hearing, except for the surface of words.

I write to my daughter, to myself, to catch again the sense of this morning's awakening: light from winter and tropical sun, warmth from Amish quilts and others' prayers, secure in a moment that is both past and present, both strange and familiar.

I want to know Senegal in Waukesha, Wisconsin, USA. I want to keep with the clarity of cold air that awakened sense of who I am, we are, in this world.