

Helon Habila At the rail station

Helon Habila's (b. Kaitungo, Nigeria, 1967) first novel, *Waiting for an Angel* (Hamish Hamilton, W.W. Norton, 2002) has won the Caine Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Africa Region). Previously he was the literary editor of *Vanguard*, a Nigerian newspaper. He is currently a writing fellow at the University of East Anglia in Britain.

She is staring down at the rail tracks and talking to herself, on the ground beside her is a stack of *The Big Issue*, which she is trying to sell to the commuters without much luck. She is old; she looks like someone's granny. She looks like she has lost her way, I feel like telling her, "Just follow the rail tracks, all rails lead to Rome."

All roads lead to Rome. I first heard that expression from my uncle Alfa, he had fought in the Biafran civil war, he had returned after the war, shell shocked and forever out of sync with the world around him. He used to go about telling everyone he met: all roads lead to Rome. One day he took the road and never came back.

The rail station is deserted; it is 11 am, long past the rush hour. The overhead address system clicks to life to announce that due to a blockage on the way, the train to Charing Cross will be delayed by 15 minutes. I am not in a hurry to go anywhere. I sit on the cold metallic seat under the awning and stare across the tracks to the opposite platform. It is cold today, and windy. A train stops with a whoosh and disgorges its passengers, they pass before me, their gazes fixed before them, paying no heed to the wheedling, hoarse voice of the paper vendor, "The *Big Issue*, buy the *Big Issue* today!" I idly try to place the woman's accent, West African, definitely, probably Nigerian, or Ghanaian, but years of living in London has given it a soft, glottal burr, like a hundred others I have heard in South East London. If she is Nigerian then she probably would have witnessed the Biafran war – the Nigerian Big Issue in the late 1960's and early 70's. And did she also take that big road to cosmopolitan Rome as a result of something terrible that had happened to her in the war, like my uncle?

Once I fancied I saw him on the train, in the night. It was too dark in the coach to get a good look, and he was wearing a hat with the brim

low over his face. He had a huge, tattered multi-coloured bag on the floor before him; his legs straddled the bag protectively, as if it held all he owned in the world. He looked like a character out of Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*. I was seated opposite him. Although I knew it was a gross breach of train etiquette to stare at a fellow passenger, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I reached my station, people got off; I remained, staring at him. Now we were only two in the coach. He had not once shifted his gaze from a fixed point before him, light from the window alternated teasingly with darkness on his face as we reached another station, and another. He showed no sign of getting off – I recalled a story I once heard from a friend's father who had schooled in London in the early 80's, how, because they couldn't afford to have their rooms heated, they'd take the Circle Line train in the night and snuggle in the warm coaches and go round and round till morning when they'd get off to go for lectures. I finally gave up at the next station. On the platform, just before the doors closed, I turned and saw him looking at me. The light fell directly on his lifted face: his eyes were dull, his chin unshaven, his jaws and lips were sunken. If he was my uncle then the years had been cruel to him.

Perhaps the man had been going away, away from London. That was one thing I had not considered, perhaps because I came from a place where everyone's dream was to come here, the new Rome. But if all roads lead to Rome, where do the roads from Rome lead to? Back to the provinces, of course, away from the grandeur, the anonymity, back to the tumult, to the myriad *Big Issues*.

Now the woman is seated beside me, I have not seen her approach – two Africans in a train station in London, we should have lots to say to each other. I smile at her, not with the grimace people use here, but with my eyes, my whole face: sunny, African. Her response is slower, tentative, perhaps because she has been here longer. Her smile has an English accent.

"Sold any yet?" I ask.

"A few, just a couple," she replies grumpily. She drops the stack with a thud on the seat between us and sighs. A woman with a child in a pram passes, looking up at the train times display screen. At the opposite platform a line of commuters forms; they all stand at the edge of the yellow line, gazing in the direction the train will appear. The wind plays with the legs of their trousers, their skirts, their hair. The old woman pulls her faded jumper tighter round her bony frame, muttering to herself. I wonder why she has not offered to sell me a copy of her ware yet.

"I want a copy please," I say, still smiling.

"African, are you?" she asks after giving me my change.

"Yes, I am a student."

She is clearly not in a mood for chatter. Perhaps she is saving her energy for when she returns to hawking her ware. A train arrives at the other platform, and departs. I watch her behind my paper, she is still staring ahead, her head lowered into her chest. Her still posture, her profile, reminds me of the man on the train, and of my uncle. She is in the same age range: if my uncle had had a sex change this is how he might look. Such things are easy to achieve here. Change is so easy to achieve here, when I first came a couple of months ago the huge billboard opposite advertised a book by Zadie Smith, that changed place with Michael Jackson's face, then a mobile phone, now a group of workers are replacing that with a long red bus. "More bus, less fuss", the sign reads. I have seen hairs change from red to blonde, and winter slowly replaces autumn – one has to be fast on his feet to be able to take in all the changes around. But a less vertiginous way of doing it is to sit in a train and watch it brought to you: the parallax billboards pass outside the window advertising all that is new, the people enter the train with the latest hair tints and clothes, speaking the latest slang into the latest mobiles.

I do that a lot, sit in the train and try to understand it all: it is like being in an African night bazaar where the whole world meets, this is the distillery, the essence, the real Rome.

My train enters the station with a whoosh and a screech. The doors open and people come out. I stand up; the old woman stands up too to resume her hawking.

"Where are you going?" she asks as we approach the rain. Her smile is brighter now.

Where am I going? I am going to do as the Roman's do, I feel like replying. But I smile back and say, "Charing Cross."