

TRAVELS WITH A DUTCHMAN

"Two great talkers will not travel far together." — George Borrow

In the mid-1970s, or thereabouts, I travelled in West Africa with a Dutchman. I don't remember his name. I may never have known it. Nor do I remember how or where we met. Or where he was going or why he was going there. That was often how it was with travelling companions met on the road.

At the bus station in Kumasi, I started talking to the Dutchman about sub-nuclear physics. I knew — I still know — next to nothing about the subject but, at the time, I was reading a popular science paperback, which I'd swapped in a hostel for a battered copy of *Middlemarch*, and I hoped, by discussing it, that I might make more sense of things.

—Anti-matter is extraordinary, don't you think? I said. A mirror-world where particles have identical but opposite properties to those we know.

The Dutchman took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

—Left becomes right, I said, and positive becomes negative. What's more, if matter and anti-matter meet, the energy released would greatly exceed a thermonuclear explosion.

The Dutchman put his handkerchief back in his pocket.

—I'm studying civil engineering, he said. I'm not much interested in anything else.

At the bus station in Takoradi, the Dutchman shared the dilemma that was troubling him. He had, he said, two girls waiting for him at home in Eindhoven.

—There is the black girl and there is the white girl, he said.

(Later it became clear that by this he meant the one was dark-haired and the other fair.)

—I like them both, he said. They both like me. I don't know which one to choose.

For the last hundred kilometres I'd been trying to grasp the neither-dead-nor-alive quantum suppositional state of Schrödinger's Cat.

—Why choose at all? I said.

At first, he didn't understand what I was saying.

—What do you mean?

—Why make a choice?

My suggestion seemed to shock him and we didn't speak again that day. But travelling in silence with the Dutchman — two lone Europeans on a boisterous African bus — was in no way disagreeable.

Each leg of our journey ended the same way. We would climb down from the bus and search for somewhere to drink a cold beer. The search for cold beer was, I think, all we had in common.

—Give me a beer, the Dutchman would say, taking a seat at the bar.

He wanted a beer. He asked for a beer. The barman gave him a bottle and a glass and took the Dutchman's money. The transaction was complete. Solemnly — and with a degree of ceremony — the Dutchman poured his beer.

But for me, an Englishman travelling in the post-colonial Africa of that era, this interaction with an African barman was too abrupt. Too imperative. Too haughty. Entirely lacking in decorum and respect.

—I wonder if I could I have a beer, please? I would say.

And be met with a stare.

—Do you think I might have a beer ... ?

Blank incomprehension.

—Could you possibly bring me a beer ... ?

Nothing.

I would find myself floundering in a flood of words, ensnared and helpless in an effort not to offend. Finally — abjectly — I would point at my companion's beer, tap my own chest and nod and smile several times. A bottle of beer and a glass would then be placed in front of me and the Dutchman and I would sit together under the strip-lighting thinking our separate thoughts.

This scene repeated itself until the evening when we climbed down from another dusty bus and found a bar like all the others.

—Give me a beer, the Dutchman said to the barman. Give him a beer, too.

One morning, at the bus station in Tamale, the Dutchman wasn't there. I paused and looked around. Then I boarded the bus to Accra.