

## telling it slant

Sometimes a child with wise eyes is born.  
Then some people will call that child an old soul.

That is enough to make God laugh. For instance there is Yemaya Saramagua, who lives in the somewherehouse.

A somewherehouse is a brittle tower of worn brick and cedar wood, its roof cradled in a net of brushwood. Around it is a hush, the wrong quiet of woods when the birds are afraid. The somewherehouse is four floors tall. The attic is a friendly crawl of linked rooms, aglister with brilliant mirrors propped against walls and window ledges. On the second floor, rooms and rooms and rooms, some so tiny, pale and clean that they are no more than fancies, sugar-cubed afterthoughts stacked behind doorways. Below is a basement pillared with stone. Spiders zigzag their gluey webs all over the chairs. The basement's back wall holds two doors. One door takes Yemaya straight out into London and the ragged hum of a city after dark. The other door opens out onto the striped flag and cooking-smell cheer of that tattered jester, Lagos – always, this door leads to a place that is floridly day.

The Kayodes live on the third floor, in three large rooms

criss-crossed with melancholic skipping ropes of gauze. All day and all night they mutter, only to each other, and only in Yoruba. The smallest of the Kayodes is a boy with eyes like silver coins. For hair he wears a fuzzy cap of skull-shaped film. He is so old that he walks about on tiptoes, his ragged heels doubtful of bearing his weight unshattered.

The second Kayode is asleep most of the time. Her braids are woven into a downy coronet. From the arms of a rocking chair by the furthest window, the sleeping woman traces out her dreams on vellum. Kayode allows the sheets of paper to skate off her lap and meet the floor as she finishes each drawing; the figures in her dreams are dressed in witch-light. The third Kayode is tall, thick-set and bushy-headed; his silhouette cuts the shape of a round-headed meat cleaver. His eyes, black discs cast with a rising glitter, unsettle with a glance.

When Yemaya, or Aya, came to the somewherehouse, her battered trunk full of beads and clothes came too. Her bottleful of vanilla essence was wrapped up soft in the centre. And the Kayodes were already there. They had called to each other, harsh-tongued, Kayode, Kayode, Kayode, from room to room. But when Aya settled, they took flight and clustered together in their rooms.

If you were to come in through the front door of the somewherehouse, you would walk into the air born in Aya's pans, the condensed aroma of yams and plantains shallow-fried in palm oil, or home-smoked cod, its skin stiffened in salt and chilli. The smell clings to the rough blue carpet underfoot, drifts over the holes worn into it in the corner where the shoes are stacked. The smell ropes and rubs itself against your hair and skin. You turn, and you are only disturbing the motion of this holy smoke before it

settles around you again. On Sundays, Aya cooks a feast for four and takes tray after tray upstairs to the Kayodes, plates piled high with yellowed rice and beans, slivers of slow-roasted pork and *escabeche*. The Kayodes will not talk to her; the Kayodes don't eat, but Aya doesn't understand about waste.

Aya overflows with *ache*, or power. When the accent is taken off it, *ache* describes, in English, bone-deep pain. But otherwise *ache* is blood . . . fleeing and returning . . . red momentum. *Ache* is, *ache* is is is, kin to fear – a frayed pause near the end of a thread where the cloth matters too much to fail. The kind of need that takes you across water on nothing but bare feet. *Ache* is energy, damage, it is constant, in Aya's mind all the time. She was born that way – powerful, half mad, but quiet about it.