

A woman is sitting on a dark surface, possibly a boat, in a dark environment. She is wearing a light-colored top and a headscarf, and is reading a book. The scene is dimly lit by two small lanterns, one in the foreground and one in the background. The background shows a dark, textured surface, possibly water or a boat's interior. The overall mood is quiet and focused.

READING

IN THE

DARK



# 1

Kids across the neighbourhood shriek when the electricity trips in and the lights turn on. An incandescent bulb here. Another there.

It does not last. The night rushes in through the mosquito nets, but no one skips a beat in their conversations. Someone reaches for their phone, turns on the torch and points it at the ceiling. In another room a rechargeable LED lamp from China casts a blueish light.

I was halfway through the first chapter of *In the Light of What We Know* when the distribution company took the power. They hadn't lent it to us long enough for my phone to charge, so I reached for the stub of last night's candle, lit it and squinted at the page.

Each sentence is a shadow against the murky orange paper which I decipher slowly in the half-dark.

The candle gutters and disappears into its own smoke. I remain still for a moment as the after-image of the page fades. Alexandre's little face, asleep, pushes through the grey. I hear, then see, my mother at the table in the other corner of the room humming to herself. I sit up, stand up, shuffle to the window and light the kerosene lamp. I put it on the table for my mother and take three steps to the



door, holding the book with my middle finger marking my place.

The flames from the old oil drums used as fish smokeries give off some light. I move towards them and look for a nearby perch. I hold the book open towards the flame and read.

Children are still playing outside on the

sawdust-strewn ground by the hanging toilet. Hopping, drumming on tins, kicking about a ball made from crushed plastic bags wrapped in tape.

Then the wind turns. The smoke gathers the firelight in itself and pushes towards me. Everyone and everything here, clothes hung on the lines, fabric on furniture, carries the

dried fish smoke in its grain. This close and this thick it smarts and tears the eyes. I close my book, stand up from my perch, push past the kids and head back home in the dark.

Two rooms; five people; an unfinished book. On the Tiger battery-powered radio in the crowded dark, some commissioner or other is speaking of social distancing.





## 2

There is no water's edge in Egede down. No clear line where the land ends. The creeks that fringe the city are tidal, they ebb and ooze. Banks of oil-coated plastic trash, roots and branches from the mangrove, sodden cardboard, tangled old fishing nets and hair extensions in thick mats mask any demarcation - some is piled on land, the rest is floating in thick drifts.

Rickety plank gangways angle to the hanging latrines that sit on stilts at the bottom of the community. At high tide the crap that falls from them floats away in the water. At low tide it piles up on the black mud. In the sun it stinks.

A congregation of canoes, some moored to the toilet stilts, is aligned by the flow, all their prows converging.

I wake before dawn. Children, mother, still asleep. I walk out through the low haze toward the creek. Behind me, beneath a patchwork of rusty tin roofs, rows of face-me-I-face-you rooms crookedly assemble like a clutch of stained matchsticks fallen together on the ground. This decades-old makeshift crush opens silently onto the mangroves and I can climb into a canoe and read in peace.







CITIES  
AND THE  
HEALTH  
OF  
MANKIND  
THE BOOK OF  
THE FUTURE  
LIFE



### 3

Dumle lives in a single room. Before the shutdowns, he taught in a private school in town. Sudor sold smoked fish at Creek road market, before that too was ordered closed. For six years they have lived together in this room barely bigger than Dumle's chalkboard and choked with smoke whenever the wind turns up from the fish fires by the creek.

In the evenings they often sat together on

the front step, with their eighteen month-old daughter. Life inside their room was largely peaceful. I know this because their life behind our shared wall is lived in fully audible detail. As, I suppose, is mine.

A quiet, bookish man with a woman often out tending the smoke fires and turning the fish, I thought of them as good reading neighbours and turned my pages in quiet appreciation.

Dumle managed to find work as a security guard but hadn't received his first pay-cheque when the total lockdown landed. Sudor begs and borrows to feed the child, who cries often. Some have turned to fishing. Dumle has taken to drinking late with other men who live in single rooms without salaries or savings.

Now chapters are punctuated by sudden thuds against the wall. The front step, empty.



## 4

1<sup>st</sup> October, 2020, the headline that grips the men gathered in the lean-to by the canoe moorings: 'Madrid Confirm that Hazard is Injured Again!'

One of the men, shirtless in canvas shorts, is pulling a large needle through his fishing net bunched and hung over the beam under the tin roof. Another four or five are seated on a bench made from rough planks and a

few more sit on upturned plastic buckets opposite them across a draughts board. The board is a dashing white and turquoise check, shot across by a single arterial red diagonal. The plastic counters are slammed down with elaborate flourish. This is a spectator sport and excited conversation swings between the local state of play and important international news being read out about the Premiere League in the day's vanishing light.

The fires beneath the fish smokers are tended. My brother stokes one; a young girl with a shaved head, strong arms and lemon-yellow dress pushes wood into another. People are opening cartons of frozen fish and chipping away at the ice beside the flames.

Children play hopscotch and flick-the-lid with bottle tops and chase each other between the rows of washing line poles.





Small stalls set out on tables in front of rooms narrow the alley to a squeeze with cup-sized piles of peppers and tomatoes, onions, sweet potatoes and dried fish. Narrowed elsewhere, threateningly, by red-eyed young men wrapped up in smoke of their own making.

There is nothing apparent this evening that would indicate we are living through an accelerating pandemic. No masks; no public

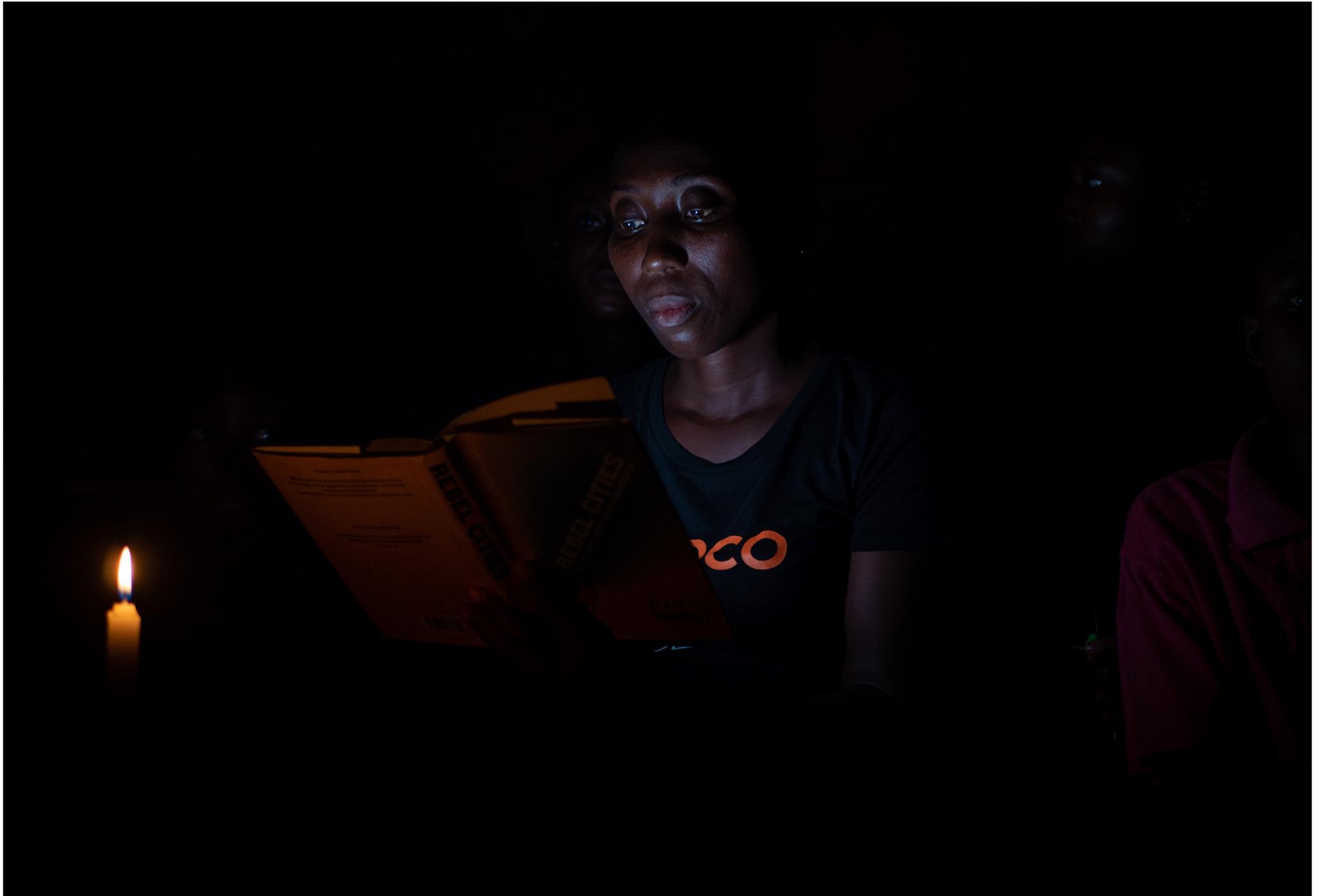
washing of hands. Gathered groups are perhaps larger and denser, with more people home and fewer working. How calculations of risk might have changed cannot be read on people's faces and the epidemiologist would find no data from this hood to decipher. People still catch fever. If a person dies here, the cause is inscrutable.

During the lockdown, it was food rather

than phones that were stolen. What the long term impacts of this virus might be here are difficult to imagine. The long term is difficult to imagine. For decades we have lived in well-established short-termness: makeshift; making-do; day-to-day; hand-to-mouth. For decades we have lived with poorly controlled infectious disease and unexplained death.

The headline the men playing drafts that







evening didn't mention reads: 'President Trump Tests Positive!' In days that follow, one can read of the experimental treatments he received and his oxygen saturation levels.

Through these days, as through the days before, I read my novels and report our news. Those stories which matter to us and those, which through an exercise of imagination, I can make matter to us.

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# READING



# IN THE DARK

**Books:**

*Radical Cities: Across Latin America in Search of a New Architecture*, Justin McGuirk

*Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, David Harvey

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers, Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, Katherine Boo

*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs

*In the Light of What We Know*, Zia Haider Rahman