

WILLIAM DIREEN

Enclosures

A NOVEL IN FIVE PARTS

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FICTION

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Stadium. Novella. Digital format, 2016.

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OTHER

Versions Translations. Poetry. Paper edition Kilmog 2014

Tourtagebuch. Tour Diary (tr. A. Loeffler), 2012

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Part I was first published *Takabe* 50, 2003.

Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor (Papyrus Ermitage 1115) has been translated into English from the hieroglyphic and transcriptional *Le Conte du Naufragé* (ed. Patrice le Guilloux, Angers, 1996).

The Bible referenced is the Cambridge English Classics

Authorised 1611 Version (1909 ed.), Vol 2.

Quotes from *The Qur'an* are from Qur'an A, tr. in Imam Ibn Kathir, *Stories of the Prophets* (810-870 A.D.), Mansoura, Egypt, 1997, Qur'an B, tr. and Arabic of the Ifta Call and Guidance Edition of Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah 27/10/1405 AH, & Qur'an C, translated by George Sale, London, 1764.

All texts are used with the utmost grateful acknowledgement.

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*I am the emptiness of caskets
and the absence of myself
in the whole universe.*

Georges Bataille, *Oresteia*

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1

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By Tigris' wand'ring waves he sate, and sung
 William Collins, 'Persian Eclogues' (I)

According to the catalogue it is “a hand-held bronze mirror in the shape of a woman”. On the reverse side of its once-reflecting surface is the face of a sorceress, controller of animals, flanked by lions. It has been numbered and arranged with other mirrors in a cabinet marked Ornaments Nineveh 800-500 B.C., where they are, for the most part, ignored. It is not easy to see your reflection in their surfaces and most of those who try are disappointed. Their eyes move from the little card saying “Mirrors” to the tainted mirrors themselves—and they move on. In other cabinets there are lamps and bracelets, medallions, cuneiform fragments and scrolls.

The mirror in question was part of a consignment of gifts from the King of Luristan to the family of the King of Nineveh in the seventh century before the Christian era. The king's only daughter treated it well for many years. Out of boredom she took to using it to reflect the morning sunlight onto the roofs and courtyards around about. One morning in late summer, she reflected the sun towards a maze of distant buildings, and picking out a shaded lozenge-

shaped window, aimed a ray into its dusky interior. The young man who lived inside left off tuning his lute and caught the light in his hand. His hand in the doorway was all she saw of him that day, but the next fine morning his hand appeared and caught the sun, then his fist opened as if he had released a captured bird. The day after when she found his window, he showed his face beaming a broad and guileless smile.

The days grew shorter and the morning sun did not fall in the princess's window any longer. She was missing the excitement of these encounters when the young musician himself appeared in the palace courtyards. Musicians were not highly regarded at this time, some even despised them, regarding them as parasites. Their work was poorly remunerated and exhausting. They started work in the early evenings, entertaining fawners who lived off the generosity of the king. Deep into the night they played, raising the spirits of their listeners, who dared not applaud too loud nor too long, for then they would be obliged to reward the musicians proportionately. Musicians had songs of regret and of contentment, of farcical encounters and of fantastic voyaging. They had songs about traders, card players, drinkers and mariners, songs to celebrate the springtime and songs to brighten up winter. They sang of that which was common and of the unfamiliar, of birth as of death, of Nineveh as of distant lands, of the real and the imaginary. In their repertoires were songs of other musicians, which they had exchanged for their own. Our musician had not travelled beyond the jagged red ochre hills of Hormuz, and when he sang as if he had done

so, when he sang of India for example, a certain exaggeration crept into his expression. When it came to the love songs however, although it was said that he had never known the love of a woman, his expression had the profound restraint of one who knew the sentiment already.

It was early April when a merchant visited the King of Nineveh and arranged to marry his daughter. The merchant's trade network covered the continent and he had accumulated much wealth in Ecbatana, a Persian city famous for its defences of seven concentric walls. Knowing the princess's fondness for music, he announced a contest. The winning song would be presented to his future bride. When our musician heard about the contest, he hoped he could compose the most beautiful song of all.

The night before the contest the city's musicians were at work on their songs in their homes or in secluded huts on the outskirts of the city; the palace was quiet with expectation. There was no dancing, merry-making nor singing. The merchant boasted that he had reduced the greatest of cities to a necropolis, and this offended the princess's father who would one day have his revenge.

The princess was full of misgiving. She was not afraid of the merchant. She had been educated to accept the idea that she would one day be married to such a man and this great merchant was believed to treat his wives well. He lavished precious gifts upon them and people said he allowed them unusual liberties. No, she did not fear him. She would give

him her hand, but her heart. A few hours separated her from the moment when she would vow constancy. She looked into her mirror and ran a comb through her hair, but her thoughts were winding like the corridors of the palace, and when her eyes fell upon her own eyes, she wept. Expression of a loveless life was upon her.

At dawn, she and her nurse left their rose-wood scented corridors and meandered through budding orchards and gardens, following a caperberry-bush lined path to the banks of the canal. A new crescent moon was arcing across the sky and the spreading dyes of dawn were lightening the east as they neared the place where the musician was curled up sleeping. Believing that she was alone, the princess lingered by a balustrade overlooking the canal. When the musician woke and beheld her melancholy beauty a pain shot through him and would have stopped his heart had he not taken up his lute and played. The hares and deer of the woods were distracted from their foraging, a pair of hippos lifted their unwieldy heads from the water in amazement, a flock of swallows swirled in the warm air above the canal and dove about the spot. Many of them landed on the pier to listen, and some say the caperberry bushes burst out in white flower that morning, flooding the air with their sweetness. The nurse kept watch from the balustrade as the princess stepped down onto the riverbank to share, with all of nature, in so much matching knowledge.

A few hours later the musician won the contest and the king's daughter feigned submission to the merchant.

Forthwith, they left Nineveh for the city of seven concentric walls.

With the fame of his award the musician found better employment in Nineveh, and by the time the caperberry bushes next burst into flower, he had saved enough money to make the journey to Ecbatana. Because of his professional renown, he gained entry to the merchant's palace without difficulty. The palace was not lined with silver, as rumour had it, but when he managed to meet the princess again it was adorned with an ore more precious than gold. For many years they loved each other in secret.

Then came the day when the ailing merchant called his wives to his side and spoke to them confidentially one by one. When he came to the princess he told her that nothing would give him greater joy than to meet her lover, for he had always known she had one. The princess was surprised. She had never lied to her husband but she thought that she had successfully kept the truth from him. She believed his feeble voice when he spoke of making a dying gift to ensure her security and she promised to reveal the identity of her lover the following day after the evening concert. The merchant was delighted that proof of this wife's infidelity would be so easy to come by. He gave orders that as soon as her lover was identified, both should be decapitated and the princess's head returned to her father along with a shipment of melons.

The princess's nurse knew the merchant was a wily one. She bought hooded robes off two wandering Indian sages and stole some of the merchant's own precious stones for the

couple, who began the greatest overland journey of all. The nurse disguised herself as a beggar and returned to Nineveh, taking the mirror with her as a keepsake. News of the massacre of some of the merchant's wives had reached Nineveh before her. The king was relieved to hear that his daughter had escaped. He sent assassins to despatch the merchant, and sent word to all parts of the known world to tell his daughter it was safe to return. But the princess and her musician were not in the known world, and within a matter of months in the year 681 B.C. the king himself, whose name was Sennacherib, had been murdered by his own sons as part of a secret pact to restore peace between the cities of Nineveh and Ecbatana.

Years later a letter came to the son of Essarhaddon, grandson of long-deceased Sennacherib. It was signed by a Chinese regent desiring to inform him of the passing away of a respected Assyrian couple believed to have been from his great city. For many years, although they had been befriended by a Chou monarch and could number among their friends a court scribe and many poets and musicians, they had led a simple life near the Lo River. Their bodies had been discovered on the banks of a canal leading from that river to a vast orchard. In the arms of the man, people say, a lute was emitting a melody in the breeze; a swallow nearby was singing in tune with it.

For a few days every year the sun shines into the room in the Baghdad Museum where among other ornaments the princess's mirror is displayed. Visitors file past as ever. Are

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there among them musicians who can tame nature, or bored daughters who might distract passing traders with reflected sunlight? I think there must always be, just as there will always be people who see nothing in mirrors but themselves.

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ADDENDA

Places & People

LURISTAN: near-mythical ancient (and modern) land of the Lurs. It stretched across north-western Iran from Iraq border and Kurmanshah for 400 miles southeast. Breadth 100-140 miles. It separates the Khuzistan low land from the interior uplands of Iran. Few facts, but great finds from 1929 onwards, powerfully designed, technically competent bronzes (vessels, implements, personal adornments and exceptional horse trappings) covering a period 2600 B.C.-A.D. 800. Most pieces date from between 19th & 12th centuries B.C..

SHABAKA (Pharaoh 721-706) established diplomatic (after bellicose) relations with the Assyrian kings of Nineveh. **SENNACHERIB** (King 704-681 B.C.) demanded regular annual tribute from Phoenician cities and dependencies as a sign of fealty to the state. Before this taxes and tribute were made on a sporadic basis. He rebuilt Nineveh, making it the capital until the fall of the Assyrian Empire, laying out streets and public spaces. The palace indeed contained doors of aromatic woods, and beside it was a botanical garden and orchards. A canal brought water to the palace from the Tigris.

ECBATANA: Persian city of seven concentric walls renowned for its palaces of cedar and cypress. Capital of the Medes from 7th century B.C. Fell to Cyrus the Great.

TELMUN: term used by the Sumerians and the Akkadians for the Bahrain.

ESSARHADDON (King 680-669 B.C.): Sennacherib's youngest son.

ASHURBANIPAL (669-627): Son of Essarhaddon, last of the great kings of Assyria.

How the Mirror Came to the Museum

You will remember that the princess's nurse took the mirror with her when she fled Ecbatana. She continued to work in the palace even after the assassination of Sennacherib, and when her own daughter married she was well-enough off to have a ruby encrusted into the mirror's neck. She gave it to her daughter, telling her it carried the secret of enduring happiness.

Her daughter cared for the mirror well and, though she insisted on marrying a humble bangle-seller, she did indeed enjoy a long and happy marriage. They grew old together and died on the same day. The daughter of the bangle-seller claimed the mirror from the belongings of her mother, but she did not care for it. Perhaps she would have done so had she known its purported charm. Her husband was a sailor, some said a pirate. One night he returned drunk and tried to make his wife's dog, a long-legged and hairy beast from Afghanistan, look at its own reflection in the mirror. When the dog would not do as he commanded, he kicked the dog across the room and prised the ruby out of the mirror's neck. Their maid took the disfigured mirror to the market and traded it for a necklace of amber. As for the daughter who had not cared for it, during one of her husband's long absences, she was violated by a lion tamer who boasted of his crime. Unable to bear the shame, she left Nineveh and followed the lion-tamer to the land of the Massagetæ beyond the River Araxes, where she became his willing slave. The trader, meanwhile, sold the mirror to an old man crazy with love for a sailor boy. The sailor boy exchanged it for a single sheet of papyrus from a sail-maker, but it fell from the sail-maker's bag in a tavern and lay unnoticed for some time. When he discovered it, the taverner—an unsentimental man who, in spite of a disfiguring nose disease had been married eight times—threw it out in the rubbish.

The carter passed by the city wells on the way to the rubbish pits. There the 'children of the wells', as the begging children were called, noticed a glimmer coming from its scratched surface. While the driver was flirting with women at the well, the children filched it away under their rags. With them the mirror played many parts—the treasure of the steep-sided tomb of Shabaka at El-Kurru, the dowry of a bride of Deioces (founder of Nineveh), and the weapon used by Essarhaddon to murder his own father, Sennacherib—before being covered by the sands for 2600 years. It was overlooked during an 1845 archeological dig organised by Englishman Austin H. Layard at Quyundjik (the palace of Sennacherib), one that resulted in Hormuzd Rassam taking possession of thousands of cuneiform tablets from the library of Ashurbanipal. During the 1970s archeologists undertaking a routine Iraqi dig chanced upon the buried rubbish mound and their finds were transferred to the Baghdad Museum (established after Baghdad became the capital of the independent kingdom of Iraq in 1921). During the pillaging of that museum in April 2003 the mirror was again overlooked—perhaps because of its battered appearance. It was displayed temporarily at a staged reopening for the press in 2003, and permanently in 2007 .

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i

A city of 120,000 inhabitants. If you follow the coast to the southernmost tip of North Island you come to its harbour. It is a city like any other, with merchants and public servants, lawyers and other wordsmiths, its rich, middle and poor. Most of its earliest buildings have been supplanted by sturdy banks, stadiums, government offices and enclosures for the infirm or for those who break its laws. The earth has moved, floods and epidemics have come and gone, trains have collided, ferries have capsized, but the city surrounded by mountains has remained. Jonah was born to it and he was in every sense one of them until he heard the voice—he was one with the city and one with them, with the people of Wellington. He went between its villages, the ones that cross over invisibly in any city. He recognised others on the street and they recognised him. He admired and was admired and was resented. He was taken advantage of and he took advantage—how else could he protect his interests? How else could he keep his house in order and pay his debts? And yet he wasn't only concerned with such things, even then. When he had time he liked to while it away watching the scavenging sea-birds of the port.

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Paekakariki, 41°S 175°E Alt om, Autumn 2004

When our family used to go to the beach, to Himatangi or to Foxton, my father would bound into the water, partly as an example to me not to be afraid. He would splash water onto his bared arms and chest before plunging into the breakers. I would never leave the shallows.

A man, a father, is on this shore, half-naked.

ii

Jonah is walking on a shore to the north of the city. Cars move as if they are gliding, as if they have been sent, speeding along the packed sand.

What knowledge draws the sun on? The long-travelling swell beaches itself without answering.

There is no instinct in Jonah's watchfulness. He is not watching as a bird or a dog watches. He is watching as if he understands something. Whatever it is he knows, whatever part of the present, he does not know a man is innocent of his own distress. He does not yet know a man may enter a fish. He does not suspect his lost voice will be reborn cursing.

Jonah will enter the mouth of a monster. The creature will take him as a bird takes a fly, as the net takes the Kahawai. He will enter as quickly as a word enters a neighbour's ear and he will find himself within a contracting and raining belly. He will be vomited by the creature that knows no better, and returned with a warning for the people without grace.

Paekakariki

Before, well before, cars approached a hill that marks the beginning of an attitude. Cars after cars full of children and dogs, families after families, even today, pass a white mother Virgin on Paraparaumu Hill and descend to the capital.

On the beach, a man, a woman and a dog. The dog is a curly-tailed, ginger-brown high-country sort of beast. It runs out of the gold as if seeded by the assault of sun on water. The man's jeans are flared. His hair is flowing. He is carrying the woman's sandals. She is wearing a red tee-shirt and a blue denim skirt. Her bare legs and feet are moving more quickly than his. He is confidently swinging her sandals and gesturing with his other hand at the island. Their child has not yet been born.

Since they exist in the past they are not advancing. The dog is snapping at eternal dark shapes. The man throws a stick which it will always retrieve.

iii

Day and horizon vanish. The moist sand is populated by dozens of gulls confident of their numbers. They pay no attention to the man on the shore, unless it is to his succulent eyes.

This morning (was it only this day?) Jonah heard the voice. He was in the inner precinct of Wellington, not far from the new museum that stands right on the harbour on reclaimed land; but when he opened his mouth to speak an emptiness rushed in and he ran. He wanted to go to the island but the launch was full and so... so he is waiting. The captain told him tomorrow... there will be room on tomorrow's crossing.

Now the island is only an outline and the same shade is coming for the dunes. A narrowing band separates the blue-black waves from the island's flogged silhouette. The band narrows, ruffles.

Smoke to the south! A bonfire! Friends are grilling "snarlers". They are laughing and drinking. Children are running to the border. Dogs chase the black-backed gulls which are noisier than ever, cavilling.

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High above, to the north, a moon is hanging half-seen. The departing sun is a luminous excrescence above the horizon. A car with only its park lights on is creeping along the sand, searching or stalking.

The man on the shore imagines other islands far-off, as we imagine faces in the clouds or in the moon. He imagines islands thronging with rapacious seabirds, evacuated islands on fire, radioactive islands submerged, islands of refuge after cities have fallen.

Though he heard the voice and believed that his own city would fall, though he heard the call to warn people an emptiness entered his mouth and he ran from the cement and stones to this place of shrieking where the air is salty and pongy with decaying matter.

Jonah is staring over a slope of driftwood, over the seaweed that resembles the curved backs of whales, over it all to a long, dark island. The spine of the island is like that of a reptile, a tuatara or an iguano, though both of those reptiles are older, in evolutionary terms, than this island rising from the south to its crest in stages.

Dunedin, 45°52'S, 170°31'E Alt om, Spring 2007

Today [I write the word exactly as my mother used to write it] the world is square. [My mother who is unable to escape, and yet who seems—though we cannot know for sure—to communicate with visitors.] A heat disturbance above the eastern horizon makes the distant blue stop dead, as if water reaches the edge of the world and drops, sending up a spray.

I think that people did not so much believe the world was square as that water possessed the quality we now attribute to space. It surrounded us and behaved in ways we explained imaginatively. It was not the substance we believe now, rightly or wrongly, that we know and whose behaviour we try to predict. It was mysterious not only in that it possessed occasional monsters such as the Pacific Ghostfish, but all its creatures were monstrous—nearby seashells, octopi and stingrays. With its salinity, changeable colour and its ability to absorb and reflect light, it must have seemed a medium hostile to our senses, the very medium of insanity, of death. Being able to float upon it, to master a vessel floating upon it, to sail out beyond that clear, near water, surely gave mariners an exclusive rank in society, a rank not far from those who could read the entrails of birds.

The sea is shining. You could believe the surface of the water is light, and that its deeps are knowledgeable.

iv

This morning, only this morning, Jonah was standing by an idle pump when he heard the voice. If it happened to you, you would have listened to it as well. It began as a rushing, like that of the wind and the waves, and he felt it, the voice, for it touched him. It spoke, he understood, but when he opened his mouth a sort of emptiness poured in. He left the city he knew well, its comedy, its cacophony, its regularity and exertion, its metal against metal, its tumult, its wear and exhaustion. On his way here, near a wood, he heard a voice, that of a man in a tent. He went closer to the tent and to that voice. It was repeating the same words over and over, like the noise of a bird in a trap that knows only to cry out.

The descant of the despairing voice repeating in his mind, Jonah continued on his way here. Jonah, like the same son of Amittai, wished himself upon the water come what may. Many men, sailors, writers, traders, soldiers, many have been shipwrecked, some few have been saved. An Egyptian seafarer was thrown upon an island paradise and entered the mouth of a protecting serpent. He gained all he had lost, and returned home assured that he would become young after the moment of his death.

Paekakariki

The sun is descending over the tail, the southernmost part of the island called Kapiti. It weakens and it becomes possible to look directly at it. A belt of deep blue runs from the headland across the horizon and before the island, vanishing into a rally fiercer, brighter than the glitter of drifting kelp. An ebullience of reflected neverstill twilight. The air has cooled. A widening, deepening green claims the water in the channel, as if the bay were imagining a forest.

Are we still ourselves when we return from the sea, or are we again ourselves? The dog's recognition suggests we are, at least, ourselves, though we carry some of it, a little of the sea on our forearms and thighs. When we rise from it, emerging from our origins so like walking fish ourselves, we are heavy without it, so heavy with only air to support us.

Divers, sleek, dripping figures, lead a dinghy up the shore. They are happy the weather has held. The weather office predicted a storm, but they took the risk and went out. The weather office has been wrong this year; its word is not gospel. As they prepare to load some of their gear into the boot of their car the dog races about them, leaping up on each one. It is excited. They smell as they did before.

Jonah does not doubt that dogs have fewer failings than men, but he will watch the sea this night, compelled as dogs

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are never compelled. The divers stand their oxygen tanks together on firm sand. A four-wheel drive and trailer draw out of the line of vehicles parked above the tide-line. Silhouettes roll empty trailers into the shallows to load returning craft. Someone is turning a wrench, bending unnaturally, seeking more force than he possesses. The sounds of iron tightening and of steel resisting emerge from the white noise of wind and ocean. His eye seeks things that emit no sound, a piece of frosted glass, a wet stone, a dark streamlet of fresh water incising the bare slope.

A man and a woman turn back to back and link arms at the elbows. The man lifts the woman up onto his back and lets her down again. The boy gambolling around them takes no notice. He has seen this before—he knows all about his parents, and he is not surprised when they kiss. He knows them so well he will not be surprised when they separate. His parents do not see him as he is, they see him as he was.

They climb inside a car with rusty trimmings. There is something drunken about the way it curves out of the dunes. Something drunken and untimely. Now the waves are red, not with the sun, but with rata. The man and the woman are dead to each other. She will blame the man, not the city that remains standing.

With all the changes of the water, a day by the ocean is like many inland days rolled into one. Where the sun falls waves glitter; where cloud shades the water, a leaden blueness is broken by dark confetti. When the tide is going out there

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are waves that reach higher than you'd expect, washing your feet like it's Holy Thursday.

Divers are letting out the ballast water. Their car, like the local gulls, is light grey with a streak of red. It has rear windbracers, a bar above the boot and an antenna-flagstaff holding a triangular banner.

A gull shrieks autumn. The hour of the day is the same, but the beach is a litter of lifeless relics. The island is aflame under a 'V' of cloud. The sun reflected spreads itself evenly over the wettest sand at the shallowest reaches. There where the sand and the sea are almost one, neither beach nor ocean, there the disc is reflected most faithfully.

If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. (John xiii, 8)

74 'You speak to me but I do not hear you.

75 I am before you but

76 I have lost consciousness of myself' ['I do not know myself
and I no longer recognize myself.'] And so it placed me in

77 its mouth, carried me to its lair (repaire)

78 and put me down

79 without hurting me;

80 safe and sound and in one piece
[without losing any part of me].

Paekakariki

The silences between letters (when I think of you) are like those between waves, longer as the tide reaches its zenith. Then, not even a letter will do.

The highest and driest reaches are guzzling the longest of the waves. It is more night than day now. Moths are flying about seeking fires, of which there is a small one down the beach, but on higher ground. It looks like a campfire, a place of lowered voices and eventually of sleep. Night has fallen and the tide has turned. 6:15pm. 22 April. 1st full moon after Easter. Jewish Passover. No more unfurling, only that black shine speeding into the ocean, water drawing back like a skin as if earth has expanded...

NOTE: As the monster took the shipwrecked Egyptian sailor into its mouth and placed him upon an island, a mother crocodile takes her young into her mouth to move them away from danger. Did this give rise to the story, and to Herodotus's belief that crocodiles gave birth from their mouths? To be enclosed behind the teeth and released; to be apparently taken and regurgitated.... Is this not as wonderful as being conceived or born in regions used for urination and excretion?

...earth has expanded and left us a monster-island of taking-children-into-the-mouth crocodiles.

Is metaphor not a matter of sudden belief? A rock exists as sand, as petrel or as a lamb if we allow it. It remains rock, but rock which we allow to be transformed. If we do not allow it, if it imposes itself upon us, this is hallucination or nightmare. Is there comfort without a denial of the unreal, without a grounding sense of the trite?

In coming here I passed the museum of locomotives, fields of horses and sheep, lone dying cabbage trees and other trees, hardier, shaped by the leaving winds... past the disappearance of the sea, the near-meeting of the island and mainland, the island becoming a distant hill, and those veils of sea-breath blueing its slopes... real, all real.

Rangipakihī, 36°58'S 175°15'E Alt 0, Autumn 2005

A film of the sea? It would have to be uncut, hours of the sea, with silence and wind in the tussock grass, flaring the nostrils of strollers and lovers. A suicide. There will be caravans and tractors and barbecues and other film-makers or photographers, musicians and writers with cold feet all; and fishermen. And it will be little more than a snap, but a long one in our terms. People could sleep in the cinema.

When I was a child I didn't think of the sea as male or female. If it is feminine it is of a hard, masculine kind, if masculine, birthing. It is unlike infinity in being measurable, unlike earth in having fluidity, unlike the wind in having such weight, unlike space with its minerals and elements.

My father bathing always in the same rough way, splashing the cold water on his arms and chest before plunging into the breakers. Always the same gestures. Always the same way. Plunging into the man-woman waves towards the monster beyond.

In order to undergo analysis you have to take analysis seriously. Disbelief in God for one who has truly believed is nothing if not well-informed.

When we went to Himatangi, my mother would be so worn out by the end of the day from looking after us, seven of us or more, that she would fall asleep in the car on the way

back. No one was to disturb her. She would spread out the picnic upon a hardwearing tartan rug... (I can't write more about her. Why?) I used to linger in the shallows. I don't remember seeing my father swimming, I remember only his way of entering the waves. He disappeared from view beyond the breakers I did not dare breach.

When the cold sea water 'touched' my genital area I wanted to urinate, and I was worried enough about pissing as it was—I wondered if the wildlife there in the cold water might retaliate in some way. (See 'Notes' for the Koran's interdiction of same). In the event (I admit it) I was never pinched by a crab nor stung by a 'blue-bottle'. I didn't know about what those jellyfish looked like until my brother showed me hundreds of them stranded upon the beach.

As for swimming I could never master the knack of breathing out under water — I have a certificate for 25 yards "crawl", as it was called. It was the longest 25 yards of my life. I clutched a rail $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way along the "length" of the Hokowhitu pool. My older sisters, two of them, were screaming at me to keep on going as I gasped for breath, but I had never come close to mastering the technique. I was imitating the action of swimmers, rotating the arms, turning the head, gasping, splashing, gasping... they detached my hand from the safety rail and I was again in deep water. So, you see, I never felt good about it, the certificate. I felt I had cheated by clutching the rail. And what if I were expected, because of the certificate, to swim one day, to save my life, or someone else's?

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Panic, and that feeling, sudden and sharp, of water entering the sinuses... a salty, dirty pain... sometimes not leaving them for hours... it would flow out warm, and often at some inopportune moment... I could smell nothing but chlorine or the acrid sea for hours. As for diving, if I descended more than a metre or two my ears imploded; when my ears filled with water it was as if my cranium was filling up: I did not know if or how this could be prevented. I was stupid, I suppose, and remain so, you might say. Perhaps I am revealing too much... Too late! We were returning from a day at the beach one day when the car lurched and I swallowed a counter from a board game which I must have been sucking or rolling around in my mouth. A Chinese Checkers piece. My brother said I should watch out for it and pointed to his lower parts. It was the first day I realised that there was a relationship between shit and what goes into your mouth. You see, I had never thought of it.

So swimming was not my favourite sport, but I loved to go to the sea and to rivers. I loved the look of the latter, their ranging cliffs and one-way waters, their livid “water-holes” where older children dived, and the feel of small round stones under the soft of my feet. So, too, at the beach, the damp sand turning silver about my feet and that feeling, you know the one... you stand on that gleaming grey till a long puddle licks up and around you, and as it retreats you feel the sand slipping away under your sliceable soles. That was really going to the beach.

I never thought that my father was there, out there beyond the breakers, though he must have been far, far out at sea; I don't remember him being there except when he entered the waves. He sometimes encouraged me to do the same, to go out there where the genitals would be frozen and the breakers would surely fill your sinuses, where the swelling ocean was deeper than I was short and people swam or miraculously remained in one place their feet off the ground, treading, "treading water". He was out there all right in the glacial deeps, beyond the smoothly eroding sands, beyond the broken shells and stones, beyond the crabs and jellyfish, out there where a fish may swallow a man.

And so I was called a sissy by boys who seemed like warts, but the name did not stick because on the rugby field I knew no fear. I was knocked about, knocked out, and was particularly courageous when my father came to watch a match. Like any boy.

So I was not a coward, though I played piano and rather liked to be alone. I used to spend afternoons up a pepper tree saying poems and watching people pass on the street below. A tree-climber safe, I suppose, from incoming water. One poem was about a catdrowning. I've discovered that Susan was, in the first drafts of the poem, Harry ('Ode on the Death of Favourite Cat', Wharton MS., 1747, and in Dodsley's Collection, 1748)! Harry would have made his presence felt, imposing quite a different rhythm on the line. I'm for Susan.

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*No Dolphin came, no Nereid stirr'd:
Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan beard.*

But perhaps some of Thomas Gray's readers resented the change to Susan as much as my mother did when the language of the Mass changed to English. *Peace be with you and Let us pray* could never (for her) create the same atmosphere as *Pax vobiscum and Oremus*.

Cloud-shadows darken large tracts of water on the wind-ruffled surfaces. A few lines remain longer than I'd expect, clear lines, as if a boat has passed or currents have differed from each other.



His mouth filled with earth illness stranger than the intrusion of riverwater in the sinuses and Jonah came here passing the stations Johnsonville, Porirua, Paremata, Mana, past burnt gorse, black swans and oyster-catchers, decorated pillars and sunlit cemeteries, past quaint cottages and dilapidated farm-houses for sale, flashing gold on multiform green and that whiff of ocean and of autumn when the doors opened at Muri, the silhouette of a stark and unkempt pine, a clean and cared-for church, vintage telegraph poles, signal bells and protesting brakes; his dread of the curves, the red rust of the lines, the waiting coolly-waving linesmen, all the way back to Kapiti—earth in ocean, in earth. Neverstill blue brown bays and deceptive lakes, whose surfaces played with reflections in the train windows and off the faces of watches or the roofs of rounded caravans.

The topmost peak of the island is smudged with cloud and the distant southern head fogged with mist, a cloud irradiated from within appears above the inland hills, cloud oversweeping the sky breaks and a frizz of clear moonlight appears. Where the town meets the beach a breeze, an easterly,

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carves directly down from those mountains, spreading damp through Jonah's clothes. The cloud-cover agglomerates into masses of blue-black. Yellow lights of the beach park reassert themselves, picking out driftwood, reddish-brown, on the fore-shore.

Rangipakihī

What did the fishermen catch as I left the beach today? I heard them shouting as if they had landed a huge fish, or a rare one, a never-before-seen one, or was it not a fish, but a wearing-away by friction and currents, a water-carving of a bird-fish or a fish-man?

One of seven, born in the autumn. Began school before school-age because autumn-children could start early. Autumn-children were the youngest of their year and the smallest of their class. One called Andrew was smaller and yet he was older than us. He was so sickly he was exempted from rugby—quite an exemption in those days.

It seemed my opponents and playmates were bigger and more capable than me, but my anger and willingness to be injured redeemed me. My oldest sister won a diving competition, high dive; my brother took to scuba diving. I could tackle well.

NOTE [Paris, 2006—for latitude see p.60]: *I am transcribing these hand-written notes on the fifth (top) floor of a division of the Bibliothèque Nationale in the 2nd arrondissement. A hailstorm is raging and clattering against the skylight panes. This is masking the usual noises researchers make, so we can clatter away happily*

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on our laptops without bothering each other. The next page in the “Rangipakihī” notebook has a drawing of a figure fishing a monstrous cocoon from the sea. S torm flotsam? Or is he pulling the monster from the cocoon?

Blue-greens to red-browns. Skeins of grey. Pohutukawa bark covered in fair-green lichen. Their long trunks sway, their leaves shake in the wind. A gull hovers in sunlight through a hole in the clouds as if confused.

I should mention while I’m at it (and because the experience is indissociable from these writings) that in spring 2001, from the bridge of the Isle S t Louis, I let myself be seduced by the polygonal shades and sharp-edged reflections of the surging waters of the Seine. I did not want to enter the water but I felt that I was already a part of it (my brain coursing blood as brains do, surgent as any spring or river). There was something of a great concert about this event—I was spectator and participant. It felt dangerous too—however wonderful it was to be so, as I said, seduced—for a moment I was afraid I was losing my bearings. (And considering I am on the other side of the world from the country where I spent three quarters of my life, the word “bearings” is never used lightly.)

Until last year, 2005, I gave in to the persuasiveness of surfaces of water (not necessarily those of the S eine, though that’s where the effect was the strongest). I enjoyed it for a few minutes—this intimacy with reflected light and inanimateness (minerality, the “other side” of life), but each time “I” (that part of me that was carefully watching the experience) was able to return myself to the usual, more from fear

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than anything. Eventually, I stopped the “spell” of the waters taking effect by an effort of will. By turning away from any vast surface of water, I could prevent the condition from developing, and I can now look at water without any change in my mode of perception.

vii

Jonah is hearing, flavour, parting, place, silence and observation. He has come from stories far away, from tellings, from books, translations from Egyptian, Arabic, Hebraic, Greek and Latin. Do not speak of what is possible. Speak to me of the crocodile-god and of a heart that can accommodate a man.

The moon rises as it rose the previous evening and Jonah gauges by how much it has grown since he saw it in Wellington. As we see one side of the moon, mainlanders see one side of the island called Kapiti. Only logic tells them there must be another side.

We find words to suit our intent—they vary from generation to generation, they help us to overcome inertia and realise our desires. We believe this or that, and having believed, many of us continue to believe even when phenomena (or political events) contradict our belief. We might ignore contradictory phenomena, or hallucinate supporting phenomena, in order to go on believing. Jonah will speak the word that describes the present and in doing that he will announce what is to be.

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And the people, from fear more than anything, will listen to him. And because they listen to him the future will change. That's what Jonah has yet to learn.

Now the sea has become an all-embodying dissonance, whispering, murmuring like nature frustrated, as if it is unable to infiltrate this land of fresh water and fire, rock and fence-post. Jonah believes in the force of the water as he believes in his vision of the present. He believes wrongly that his promise will cover the world like water for all of the future.

Paekakariki

There are those who insist, without knowing, that there is no such thing as accident. There are others who deny, even when predictions are borne out, that the future can be foreseen. I say it again: if the present is correctly described the flow of events is made evident. But the flow of events can change. Jonah interprets the present correctly, but the flow will change because of his seeing and because of his words; the future he predicted will not come to pass. Jonah will not be honoured. He is a servant, a tool. Tools are a means to an end, to fire which may destroy the toolmaker.

Chops are grilling on the embers of the bonfire. It is late to be eating but a few people are sitting around the glowing centre, passing a bottle between them.

viii

Figures are moving to and from the embers and about the perimeter of the circle. Some are sitting and drinking and laughing, eyes glowing, fingers glistening with fat. Jonah is motionless, not as a ghost or a statue, he is unmoving like a mountain that is dreaming the creation of its rivers and streams. He is not hungry... he has been eating the place, as he has been eating himself, in time.

The waves go still. The group that was laughing and sucking on mutton chops is silent and listening. Jonah will return and people will fear the evidence of his time away, the writing upon his face and upon his body, the changes in his manner of walking and talking and the way he looks at them. They will listen to him and strangest of all... they will change their ways.

Some will fear him and some will despise him for being right. A last car cruises along the firm of the beach.

Who can say who will be saved? A man can be swallowed by a whale and delivered. Plants wither and flower unpredictably. Cities remain in spite of earthquakes.

1.  قَالَ نَقَمَهُ الْحُوتُ وَهُوَ مُلِيمٌ

*Then the big fish
Did swallow him,
And he had done
Acts worthy of blame.*

Surah 37 : 142 (Qur'an B, p. 1362)

Commentators (Qur'an B) doubt that the beast that swallowed Yunus (Jonas/Ionah) was a whale; a creature called *Hūt* may be a fish or crocodile. If he boarded ship on the open northern sea it might have been a whale. But in the Old Testament 'Ionah' is said to have begun his voyage for Tarshish in the port of Ioppa (now Jaffa) on the Mediterranean (Jonah 1:3); this is about 600 kilometers from Nineveh. It is far more likely that a man fleeing Nineveh would board a ship plying the Tigris.

2. Odysseus is washed up naked on Phaeacian shores and is later returned to Ithaca (with many riches) while he sleeps. In 1001 Nights Sindbad disembarks, eats and drinks on an island that is in fact the back of a whale (71st Night of my Galland translation). Michel Lapidus in *La quête de l'île merveilleuse*, after noting that Sindbad and Prince Zeyn Alasnam later visit an enchanted paradise for those who respect Divine Law, reminds us that in the Babylonian epic Gilgamesh, a wise man (survivor of a flood) lives on an island which disappears at the end, as at the end of the Egyptian tale. There are parallels in

the folklore of other unconnected cultures.

3. Muhammad Abdel Haleem (who has himself published *The Qur'an* (O.U.P.) points out in *Understanding The Qur'an* (1999) that “in Islamic law it is forbidden to urinate in water. Polluting rivers and seas goes against the functions and purposes stated for them in *The Qur'an*, it is corruption”. (p.40)

4. Boethius (c. 475–524) likens Fortune to an arm of the sea.

Nec cum superba verterit vices dextra ...

“Whan Fortune with a proud right hand hath torned her chaunginge stoundes [hours], she fareth lyk the maneres of the boiling Eurype.—(Glosa. *Eurype is an arm of the sea that ebbeth and floweth; and som-tyme the stream is one o syde, and som-tyme on the other.*)” (Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophie*—written, they say, while awaiting execution—trans. Chaucer c.1380–86 ed. Skeat).

5. *September, 2003*. The unusual states of mind continue; I just have to look at any surface of water. A timeless feeling. I read that 4,000,000,000 years from now replication began—amino acids instructing ribosomes to create building blocks called proteins leading to cells of DNA, nuclei, neurons bathed in our blood. Why should anyone not feel a correspondence with water?

6. The prophet Yunus was also known as Dhu’lnun [Dhan-Nun, Zun-nùn]: ‘ And remember DHU’LNUN, when he departed in wrath, and thought that we would not exercise our power over him. And he cried out in the darkness.’ (Surah 21:87 Qur’an C:163)

ix

And the voice says, 'Jonah! The tide is our sorrow as it is our repairing. Speak from the silence within you. Be mindful.'

Towards Mana Island along the unpeopled beach, there are other fires, their wavering lines of smoke easily visible against the hard promontory. Jonah could join any of the parties as a stranger. They would make room for him. Known or not, someone drawn to such a fire is usually welcomed.

What would he say to them, after all? 'I am Jonah who will go into the waves. My eyes have seen the present.' Or would he tell them of breath, of the wind that dries tears? Of the cause of movement of the hairs upon our heads? Would he tell them that ignorance and bad-seeing bring about false movements of the limbs?

Not a word nor jot of it. What does he know of himself or of our natures? He will speak true in the big fish, he will find voice, he will be heard.

Out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voyce.

Jonah 2:2

*Abjectus sum a conspectu oculorum tuorum,
accensus est furor tuus et contra me tempestas
orta est et infremuerunt venti et fluctus
intumuerunt vallavit me abyssus et cetus
deglutivit me. Sed num quid in aeternum
projecisti servum tuum?*

*Placare, Domine, ignosce Domine, et miserere.
Angustiata est in me anima mea.*

Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674), *Historia di Jonas*

(I am brought low in the sight of thine eyes and thine anger is kindled; the storm is risen against me, and the winds howled and the waves came up; and the abyss has engulfed me and the fish swallowed me. Surely thou hast not cast thy servant here for ever? Appease thine anger, O Lord; pardon and have pity upon me, O Lord, my spirit is troubled within me.)

Rangipakihī

I have found a good spot here but the mosquitoes have discovered it too... I will be eaten before writing in this day-book, as if to be eaten is necessary before we may eat (see/hear) the present. Jonah penetrated a monster, not only its mouth, as the little man of the papyrus did, but its belly, the place of breaking down.

A light shining across the water. Obscured. When it flashes again it seems to have shifted position. That's the way we are. It is hard to hold our position in the darkness. We need points outside of our minds to situate blinking lights. We shift them. We are always shifting. We are our own metaphors. Nowhere moves in Noman's mind.

Six hours to withdraw and to advance, to reveal and conceal, to capitulate and reclaim; the tide is returning noisily now, crossing boulders that separate sandy beach from estuary, as the darkness is quashed by a glorious moon. They say the moon pulls the water harder at this time of year, increasing the reach of full and the retraction of low tide. Photons, neutrons, smooth waves or toothed, whatever this light is made of, it helps me to situate those blinking lights.

Jonah: an alimentary experience! Excretion bypassed (tide reversed). The tollbooth, the checkpoint of the belly. From the belly we are born, outside the belly we live independently,

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without a belly we die. To a kind of belly we go, one of recomposition, the organic model, digestion of earth, of birds, of sky, of fishes, of sea.

The ocean and the rivers—the great zones of recomposing, not evacuating but transforming, bearing, returning. No wonder people found it easy to believe creatures were actually born by the (mothering) mud of the receding Nile.

The sounds of the sea are like echoes of a great roar from a time before human life existed (and speculated upon such things). Aspects of prehistoric absurdity are released when waves break, as they are penetrable in the silence between waves, of unbroken water.

Water of absurdity. Somewhere near Gisborne (38.4S 178E Alt.o) groups gathered to be the first to see the sun of the new millenium. We are in April 2005 [this entry]; in April 3005 the vital repercussions of our stay will have ended; our stay will (I dare say it) have no effect upon those lucky people... if our species will have survived! I am not sure, suddenly, that life, earth, or universe exist outside of our consciousness.

Creature which in some tales tells its own story, does not in ours speak.

Its mouth will open and take what is before it.

It will do this blindly, wildly.

x

Tide controls us, though we resist . Tide is the determination and the will of that which we fear if we do not have terms.

A cat mews. How long is Jonah's night? Long enough for a dream to sink, a moon to pass, a tide to rise and fall? His eyes open. The time, for the island, is dawn.

In the half-light a pile of discarded tractor-tyres now seems like crouched forms leaning one against the other, the kind of wrinkled lumps that Jonah knows, human forms sleeping in the corners of the city. Behind the scattered petrels and smouldering bonfires the island, nascent, wakes from shade and takes on an intermediate shape. The island, haunt of historians, scientists and back-packers, refuge of warriors, murderers and whale strippers, is becoming as great as its name, Kapiti. A white streak from north to south splits the diffusion of the east. The contours of the island reveal themselves. See, it is a reptile beating northward as quickly as it retreats.

The sand comes into its own, grey-violet and brown. Tussock

shoots briefly silver and in a moment golden. Its waves relaxed and rhythmic, the tide is in the ease of near-fullness. With regularity comes agreement in the mind. He can still make out two lights on the island. Officers and scientists there will be rising, washing, and going to the rocks before breakfast, to the dark wheezing seascape. The waves release a little of the true light of dawn and close wilfully like conceding eyelids.

This day is not as the day before. The dogs have gone, the whanau and friends around the driftwood fire, the families driving down Highway One, all have gone. A boy we have not seen before is on the beach, a red handkerchief hanging from his pocket. Alone there, collecting stones and shells, he imagines he is a castaway. He positions some stones along the ridge of a split log as a kind of message. Now he is placing two sticks in the sand. Their shadows reach down the shore. He draws the line of a shadow, then waits for the shadow to move away from the line. He is measuring time. The sea expands. It is deepest green, deeper even than the bush of the island whose shelves mark discrete ecological communities on this, the leeward, the visible side. Ratas are flaming, filled with honey-seeking birds. The boy picks up a handful of stones and all at once throws them into the air.

As the sun rises and the clefts and folds of the island reveal themselves, seven, ten, twelve mountains appear, each with its peaks and ridges and slopes. The sand today is tongue-red. Toi toi flags are breaking up in the breeze.

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Jonah feels the impulse to walk into those waves and never return. He is observed by a one-legged, grey-winged gull whose beak is as red as its eyes.

No one would stop him.

xi

Jonah's forebears are many: soldiers, parachutists and adventurers, knights and peasants, monks and gardeners... homosexuals, womanisers and slave drivers... misers, tyrants and sentimentalists.

Jonah asks, 'How can the Lord permit atrocity? Will the atrocities never end?'

In the ocean there is no air for words but some mammals communicate there. The monster is one of its kind. It is a regenerating tomb.

Paris, 48°N 2°19E, Alt 34m, Winter 2008

And the preacher said to the crewmen going, though they did not know it, in search of Moby Dick: 'I am that man, the fugitive. I am he who did not carry out the word of God.' To hear such a word is to act on it — for what is it but the response of the being to the letter of its senses. Such a word has persuasion and eminence. This is why they who have heard the word and plugged up their ears are truly the damned of this earth. No heathen knows Hell. The preacher carries with him his failure to obey the penetration of his spirit by the meaningful syllable. Though some say that Herman Melville was wrong to argue this.

The biblical story shows us hopelessness in all its form, impuissance of the sailors before the storm, of Jonah before his task, of the gourd-plant before the sun.

xii

The clouds are declaring new forms now. The surfaces of the sea and of the sand are louder. Those tyres lying one over the other are tyres again, sea-going tractor tyres. The strongest light of all is rising.

A petrel, one of the huge birds that follow the ferries between the main islands, squawks a protest at dawn and returns to pecking at a dead lamb. It drives its head and its neck into the carcass and withdraws grisly with blood and filth. Its beak is full and part of its throat is crammed with food. It has to raise its head and shake its whole body about to dislodge what is in its throat. It takes all it can and flies heavily towards the dark island as thousands of gulls toe the farthest-reaching shallows, hoping to breakfast upon the shredded refuse of trawlers.

Jonah left the city without explanation, falling and stumbling. He will take the hindmost position in the fully-laden boat.

Rangipakihī

This full tide is more like a flooding, a release that might not be controllable, than a predictable advance and retreat. The estuary of the stream, a tiny fordable creek at low tide, fills to become a little harbour with a curving outcrop, a miniature of the bay with its promontory, which finds its correlative in the Coromandel Peninsula and Hauraki Gulf leading to the Thames estuary. A fisherman launches a dinghy from a steep bank into this high tide pool.

I suspect that most of us recall only too well that childhood experience we prefer to forget (an experience, moreover, which occurs all the time in the womb), of urinating while dreaming of doing so in some place that in the dream seems perfectly appropriate.

The estuary is filling. A pool in the centre is filling from the inland estuary side; water has somehow got around behind me and is hurrying down a wide slope in a golden-bright cascade.

There was a sensation of warmth and wetness followed by alarm coinciding with consciousness. Few living beings can control the function as effectively as mature man. My dreams convinced me, each time, that the situation was ideal. There was none of the practicality, the “making-do” aspect of

Rembrandt's well-known 'Pissing Woman'. It was an oneiric, not a necessitous function.

Now the bay before me is full. The ocean is gulping the stream, as if it was thirsty for fresh water.

Paekakariki

On the shore at Kapiti the sun is 10° before the line that joins the boy's sun-sticks. The island, like the sun-sticks, runs north to south. It has no other side to speak of, nothing but a plummeting cliff above a slim ledge of stone hardly wide enough for a boy and his father to walk along.

The seaswell increases, storm-boding; further south, a profusion of kelp is making its way to the shore.

The birds fall silent; a car from another epoch glides to a halt. The driver of the car changes hurriedly behind an open door. No one is watching him; although he is hidden by an open door, he is hurrying as if he is exposed, as if all the world, or his God, can see him. Naked, he is like Jesus and Jehoshaphat and Jonah in the matter of circumcision. He pulls on his waders, big-booted khaki green waders that come up over his belly, then he backs the trailer toward the waves which yawn blackly. Some do not break. He disconnects a trailer and pushes it further into the water until the boat is afloat. He anchors the boat and returns to tow the trailer well above the high-tide-line then pushes the boat over the

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nearest, most worrisome waves. His body swivels as he tries to get the motor to catch. The boat is drifting towards the shore but he does not panic. He takes oars and again breaches the line where the rollers first sense land. This time the motor catches. Propeller blades cut into deeper ocean where the imperceptible swells. The outboard makes a sequence of white splashes.

Once, all things seemed possible. A poet called Fairburn could swim across a harbour, a prophet could walk over water. A boat might be bringing news, great news about the present, news all men would hear and understand.

xiii

When the Lord speaks, a gourd, a storm, a fish, even Leviathan, can't help but obey. They are helpless to refuse. Jonah tore his shirts and left his possessions in the street and ran from the city, numb, deaf and dumb, but he will obey. Thousands of winds have filled the sails of ships, each with its captain beset by orders, each with its crew evading the trials of land for the turmoil and treachery of the sea, each of them heading for his own kind of captivity and release.

Rangipakihī

Insects are good at walking over dry sand. I clamber like an amputee and it tires me out. The sting from sandfly bites here doesn't last but they are irritating enough. I have none of the patience of fishermen. There's one walking into the water to cast his line further out to the sea, a few metres is enough to reach the currents and—a catch!

Two dog owners meet on the beach. From the trend of the water and waves it seems the tide is receding. The fishermen confirm it; they are going home. Each time they walk from the sea it has changed. Each time they walk from the sea they have changed.

The tide recedes rapidly from zenith to nadir. With four mid-tides a day you'd need a different type of clock to live as fishermen do.

The waves now are sandy, grey-brown with sand. Where the seafloor drops steeply, a brown streak defines the breaker-sector. Nearby, a green gunge, pustuled with slimy bubbles, is sliding down the slope—overnight rain has washed down algal deposits from fertiliser-rich rivers.

The sun gnaws. The peninsula is visible now, as Kapiti materialised during last year's trip when I stayed at, of all places, a hostel called "Barnacle Bill's".

Paekakariki

When I wake, the pressure between the ears of the past few days is gone. I hear. Und hast die Welt gemacht (Rilke). I have heard the world, and in hearing it, made it. We create the universe an infinite number of times (in all our measurable instants), any and all of us, sailors and failures.

Writing at this little table, my hand casts a shadow which is reflected in a mirror...twice inversed and defleshed. Our shadows belong to us, as the reflections of our shadows belong to shadows—if shadows can be reflected. They have an effect upon the lit-up parts of the room—but they do not exist really! They do not have material substance. It is forms caused by the lack of light that are being reflected. Light—or lack of it—is also “reflected” off the surface of my eye.

Friends drive away, they remain as presence, saddening me as they did not when they were before me, but close to me as they were not.

xiv

The exhausted bonfires are sending up plaits of smoke or flurries of finest white cinder; mutton bones have been picked clean but for a few white tendons that have held fast, like kelp in the current.

The man on the shore says, 'I am Jonah. If we are native to a place, I am native to this place.'

xv

An hour of inactivity passes, so different from the man's hours in that city. Finally, as adults say to children, Jonah's "patience is rewarded". A launch is rolled to the shore's edge by a high-slung rust-red tractor marked Beach Bar. It will carry registered visitors to the island where they will observe bird-life and flora. Some of them hope to climb to the top, to look out towards Australia.

The tractor-driver detaches the trailer. A sign! A great fish is in the water, causing the tourists on the shore to cry out and

point towards it. It surfaces for a few minutes in the long scoop of channel between the mainland and the island and fails to reappear. Even the scientists are surprised, though they say it is not a fish, but a relation of man.

The research boat is towed to the shore line and Jonah joins the group. The sky is threatening and the conservation officer in charge of the boat is not in the best of humours. He wants to get to the island before the rain hits. Jonah's tenacity galls him but he is as good as his word. He makes room for him, shifting some cartons at the end of the passengers' bench. The scientists and tourists are sitting comfortably but Jonah is perched between a crate and a chest marked RAFT.

With everyone on board, the tractor marked Beach Bar backs the launch into the breakers and the driver uncouples the bull bar. Three men in wet-suits guide the trailer into deeper water and as the launch drifts, just before its engine explodes into life, Jonah hears their laughter, the laughter of this region, a laughter specific to this land, joyful and gruesome.

No sooner is the launch in mid-channel than the sky darkens and a wind lowers towards the shore. The officer is afraid. The storm has been brooding offshore, hundreds of kilometers away. Has it chosen its hour? Was the weather report mistaken?

Mistaken. The darkest rain clouds of all are approaching. The sky-sized maw is nearing, drooling, wheezing and gaping, biting and striking at all in its way. The boat is half-way across when it hits. Tall waves drench the launch. The officer shouts to Jonah to grab hold of the railing. From the anger in his voice you would think Jonah has caused all this trouble. Some of the passengers put the blame on Jonah. They feel that he is weighing down the end of the boat.

A force that has no name assails the sense of the inspectors and the researchers on board. It assails the goodwill of the tourist, and confounds the seafaring knowledge of the pilot. A bolt of lightning earths upon the island, and while their attention is diverted Jonah wrests the inflatable raft from its bracket and abandons the ship.

A cry goes up. The weirdo has gone overboard! Some rush to the edge of the boat, causing the launch to tilt. One of them is nearly washed away. The officer orders them back to their places. The launch is being rocked about and the officer is himself in danger of being swept overboard. He grips the railings and continues to call out to Jonah. There! He catches sight of him between the crests, neither paddling nor bailing. The sea rises between them and falls. There! There he is again, doing nothing. The officer calls out to him to paddle and again Jonah, neither rowing nor baling, appears to be deaf to all. The sea rises and falls a third time and this time Jonah is not there. He has gone under the wave!

As suddenly as it developed, the storm dies down. The calm of unbroken ocean.

The storm now is within the belly of the creature. He does not know exactly what form it took, but a second immensity, not Tempest but a relative, sure, of Tempest, has enveloped him as water envelopes a thrown stone. Jonah finds himself in a cavern more terrifying than absolute darkness at the heart of a mountain.

He opens his mouth to cry out, but he has no voice. Within the belly he burns under repeated intestinal showers. A force stronger than any he has known, stronger than the wind, the earthquake, the tide, the hail, the gale or the scavenger is scalding the surface where embraces occur.

Isn't it true that just as we measure them or as we accept their naming—this hurricane or that, this tsunami or that—we think we are somehow greater than them? Is this why we named one God?

Though the walls are pressing in on him, nearly crushing him, he withstands the first convulsions. A mould of his own body remains briefly in the membrane. Muscular spasms contend with him, but he holds his ground as all the other matter about him skids deeper into the body of the beast.

He seeks the voice to cry out, and again he finds none.

A stronger contraction. It is as if he is in the grip of a huge fist. He digs his fingers in to the membrane. He has forgotten the details of his birth and his education. He has forgotten the cult of his city, its intolerance for imperfection, and that willful neglect of the body which causes, even among men of learning, the majority of diseases. And in this forgetfulness, the spasm passes. From an alcove where he has found a pocket of air, wedged into a crevice in the belly of the sea beast, he hears a sound coming through the walls. It resounds through the heart and bones, through the chambers of the sea-creature, growing louder all the time in and around the raining air of that humblest filthiest place on earth. This time he does not resist the contraction. He is carried into a deeper chamber where he hooks onto a cartilaginous ridge as a gush of food passes and his own innards rise. It is as if he is being turned inside out, as if he is becoming putrescence. As he tries to climb back, sliding over the pieces of all that has been ingested by the beast, a succession of small contractions comes to an end and acid rains again, boiling him. And he says, 'Have pity on me!' but then he cries out in anger, 'If I die all die!' And he hears a sound as of a thousand animals stampeding towards him, not from the mouth of the monster but from its fundament. A stinking accumulation! the monster is rejecting him with all that is rejectable within it; and Jonah is carried by the torrent into the same cavities, tubes and stomachs he previously occupied.

The flood takes him near its wide throat and razor-toothed

mouth. He would not have the strength to swim, but he prepares himself for the water, sure that he must now perish. The convulsions have begun again. He hears one stronger and from deeper down its digestive tract approaching. It heaves him and all around him clean out of the beast's mouth. A light blinds him. He feels a shaft passing through his eyes. He has been catapulted not into the drowning ocean, but into light, into giving air... Jonah is on the shore.

The thinnest fluid of acid-eaten excrescence about him, matter at its most advanced stage of degeneration, drains into the sand, to find again the sea; the more glutinous and solid matter forms a sickly puddle. Gulls swarm about him, picking at the undigested food and near-excrement, for such is it. Jonah is less than the rotting lamb, a trophy for a feeding petrel mother. Jonah has been rejected from the lowest gut of the beast.

The big fish ejected Yunus onto a remote island.

Al-Imam Ibn Kathir

Though he has little strength, he waves his arms about a bit. Though he is covered in slime and though his acid-singed skin is weeping, he waves a gull away and crawls back into the sea. He thinks it would be a mercy if the water were to carry him away. The salt-water stings him but it gainsays the burning, and as he stands in the shallows and looks out to sea the beast surfaces again, and raises its head, opening its

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jaw and showing its teeth. Jonah opens his mouth and for an instant the two of them are like members of a choir who have lost their voice.

Gingerly, he washes his head and legs, his blistered arms and his bruised body, and turns from the island. The sun and wind will act upon his acid sores, healing them, though their action will make him even more unsightly.

Word spreads that Jonah has undergone undreamed-of things. His arrival in the city causes wonder, pity and discontent. If he had returned with ill-gotten wealth, they would have opened their arms to him. Jonah walks among them in the trembling present, naked, wounded and staring. And they fear him.

Some offer him shelter and food, and when he vomits the first food out of his mouth, they offer it anew, and when he opens his mouth to speak, they bend their heads to listen, while at the very same moment some buildings of the city emit a cracking sound without actually crumbling. And he says that the city will fall.

The kindly ones take heed and the superstitious take note. Business people stop their work when they hear the cracking sound, even those who resent his suffering. They cannot fail to feel the earth trembling like Jonah himself. And everyone takes heed of Jonah's words when he says, "Earth will swallow

the city if you do not change your ways.”

Citizens take off their garments and cut up sacks to wear, even the wealthiest among them. They will burn money if necessary. Jonah smiles to himself. He thinks they are shamming repentance. And yet in the time of Nineveh it happened when one called Jonah first returned to the city he had fled from, that the people were saved. And in The Qur'an the Almighty Allah says about these people: “Was there any community that believed [after seeing the punishment], and its faith [at that moment] saved it [from the punishment]? None except the people of Yunus; when they believed, We removed from them the torment of disgrace [or Chastisement of Ignominy] in the life of the present world, and permitted them to enjoy for a while.” (Surah 10:98 Koran C)

And so it will be. The cracking sounds do not cease, and the earthquakes prevent anyone from sleeping. Not a man nor woman nor child eats anything. The first days pass most slowly. As the fast lengthens some of their number fall ill. But their resolve is strong, and no one wastes their strength by speaking. None except Jonah, who continues to berate them. And none create any form of art.

Nights vomit forth days. Jonah cannot hide his satisfaction. If they were not so afraid they would think it strange that a prophet should appear so self-satisfied. Has his own reprieve from the belly of the fish turned his mind?

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None enter the city. Journalists gather north of the mountains that circle the city, some of them are hoping to witness its destruction. But after forty days and nights, the city has not fallen.

Forty days and forty nights the people fast and wear sackcloth, performing necessities such as feeding the sick and burying the dead—for some perish. And after forty days the sounds of cracking, and the earthquakes, cease.

And the people of Wellington return to their former ways. Merchants enter the city and trade with the thin inhabitants who have put back on their garments, which hang on them like costly cloths upon sticks.

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And the rain begins to fall. The roof-tiles run with it. You would not think it was something to be feared, as blood is to be feared, or mud, or decrepitude, but Jonah tells them to fear the rain, and only the children listen. They listen, but only as they would listen to a story-teller. The adults gather the rain and drink it, and when Jonah upbraids them, they say that they have been reprieved. And Jonah has lost his mind.

Even the children come to doubt him. One asks him why the adults should fear this rain, and he replies, 'Their words listen back to them. See, there, in the rain, are their syllables returning.' Only a few children listen now, those who cannot yet count. Jonah says, 'See, the truth has risen and entered the birds.' At that moment it ceases raining, but the sky darkens as if it contains much more rain yet. The birds begin to sing, and it really seems to the children that they are singing words, songs with human words. But this will not save Jonah.

And two trees that have been standing side by side for decades — which never touched, but which leaned always with the wind, their tops descend with the weight of the rain

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and their tips touch each other. But this, neither will this save Jonah.

And Jonah looks at the sky and a hail falls that cuts his face. Perhaps he believes that the city is stoning him as he falls, his face streaming, or does he fancy he can hear the skyscrapers of the city falling?

But when he picks himself up the scorching sun has returned and still the city has not fallen, and so he leaves the city a second time to walk in the heat. And the sun beats on Jonah's head so that he grows faint. It is then he says, 'It is better for me to die than to live.' He calls death upon himself. He builds himself a cabin and waits for judgement: that the city should fall or he should die. The city does not fall, but his shelter falls, and he is exposed again.

While the sun is burning him, a gourd grows up about him. It is so lush and so high that it gives him shelter. It blocks out the sun, as it blocks out the city from his sight, but still and again Jonah wishes the city to fall.

The city does not fall. A grub devours the plant, exposing Jonah again, and he must admit the truth now. He must admit that the city, his city of a 120,000 inhabitants is not about to fall. Wellington has been spared as the Lord pitied Nineveh.

Jonah, neither prophet nor profligate, wishes he were dead.

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His return has brought him nothing. His return has been a fool's harvest. His failing has no name and cannot be atoned for. And yet here is a man with a story, a man who has been in the intestines of a great creature.

Happy are those who are not recalled. Happy are those whose virtue is duty. Their recompense is blessedness. Happy are the fish of the ocean and the birds of the air. Happy are those who perish in the gullet of Leviathan. Not for them to be excreted as untenable out of its mouth.

Jonah is one not of the blood nor of the intelligence. He rejected the order of the voice, and was vomited forth. He has been mocked and loathed. He has been pitied and clothed. He is unchangeable in the stubbornness of his heart.

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Dunedin

Tears are of different kinds. Some of them smart unlike the sweeter tears of grief or of helplessness. These tears that smart, they are the strangest of all. They are the ones that say we could have changed all this, by listening... by seeing.

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The immensity has entered Jonah as he entered the immensity.

He has no thought of eating. He is as one who is satisfied. He is relieved of the burden of instructing, of parenthood as of citizenship. He no longer hears the crash of steel, the cries of command, nor feels the contempt of those educated by the contemptuous. He has no thirst. His eyes no longer run in the air of hidden thorns. He feels no pain though you might, as before, deliver blows to his head, to his arms, to his face. Jonah couches always, now, as if he is in some inviting, warm ventricle where he imagines he hears the walls of a city, an ancient city like Nineveh, falling.

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If we were to go with him through the alleys and arcades of the new Wellington, into the vestibules and along the corridors he sometimes haunts, if we were to walk in his skin and think his thoughts, could we say any better why he has

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become one of the wasted wasting, why Jonah has become one who kills time?

Jonah does not see the mechanism of his own actions, how contrivance brings about what we seek to avoid, how false pretext in time realises itself upon the agent. No judgement.

And still his heart keeps beating.

Jonah heaves and vomits moderation and exemplum. He vomits accumulation as self-accumulating desire, the laws of false reformation. He opens his mouth and cries. A howl. And some pity him, but few have time; and some who are full of spite doubt even his grief, saying the wasp imitates the fly to snare the spider.

Jonah howls to all and is taken for an idiot. At that moment news of the wreck of a passenger ship seizes hold of the crowd. He is knocked down and trampled under their feet. When he picks himself up he finds words, but he is made as his words are now, dense and slow.

He takes a day to go from one street to another. So slow are his words they are no more than fragments, he loses the meaning of the sentences he is trying to make. So slow are his actions he loses the meaning of his deeds. He makes no sense, and his words are like a reverberation without decay, sound that has reached and which perpetuates his irreducible density.

A man is a deformity roving, floating, opening its mouth to ingest. Voices are, here, those of human birds screeching and squabbling. Company is those who have contempt for him, those who are, nevertheless, more like him than the crustaceans of the sea. Those who were, even now, within calling, have receded. He cannot remember his intentions clearly. He strips himself bare, no longer Jonah, but man who was fathered and who, one night without the light of stars, became equal to that which even a beast rejects.

He nurtures himself from scraps, and his voice returns in the most desolate places. People watch him from a safe distance. His behaviour is unseemly, why should his words be worth their time?

In the belly of the city he is silent again. The stench in places of non-hearing is strong, but more pleasant than pity. It is only the stench of living bodies. All of life at close quarters is sweet to him compared to the reek of that city at its least humane.

The darkness is absolute. He hears a sound that becomes the voice of a mind facing extinction yet continuing to exist. His confusion clears. All truth is identical.

What do we know?

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*Les choses qu'on cherche le plus à fuir sont celles qu'on arrive à ne pouvoir éviter.**

Jones's great-grandfather, they say, used to live at the head of the Otago Peninsula. Access only by boat. The tide claimed the bay up to his door and left him acres of sand at low ebb. He had pines for wood, sheep, a few, and a horse. And some cattle. All alone at the end, the last thirty years, some said he was from those regions—the farthest reaches of the British Isles... they said it was in his nature to be anti-social and to live apart. Jones thought no one would live that way from choice; and sure enough, a man in the museum at Port Chalmers told him that if anyone chanced near his hut his great-grandfather would talk to him or her for hours—a sign to Jones that he would have been happy enough living among people. Jones thought, however, that such a sociable man should not have let himself be cut off in that way.

* The things we try the hardest of all to escape from, are the very things we cannot manage to avoid.

Jones travels by car and ferry from Dunedin in South Island to Auckland in North Island. It is the beginning of the Big OE, his Overseas Experience. In Auckland International Terminal people he does not know and of an ethnicity he has been told is not his own show him the way down a narrow tunnel which takes him into the side of a great bird. Jones goes over the seas in the belly of a bird. Two days and two nights will pass. The bird climbs till earthly time loses its meaning. Jones is among people of all different ethnicities. He wonders if people put too much emphasis on ethnicity. The higher the bird climbs and the further it takes him from his land, his grandfather's land, the more he feels that we all share the same ethnicity.

TWO DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS IN THE BELLY OF A BIRD.

There are people who exist doubly on this earth. He goes over continents in the belly of a bird and finds a second life, a second tongue. Unlike the time of Jonah in the belly of the beast when he was sick with hunger and burned by acids, the bird feeds Jones, filling him with meal after meal. Not once, not twice, but many times the bird feeds him high above the earth until he feels sick with all the food.

Jones is going to a new land which some say is an old land where he will not find a deserted beach at all. He is going to live in a city built inland on the banks of a trade river, unlike the cities in his grandfather's land, which were built on the slopes of extinct volcanoes—perfect harbours for the ships of the British Empire.

He will learn about cities as he once learned about beaches. At the beach you should always check the place you are leaving; sand can quickly cover things such as keys. On the shore you can lose your sense of where you are sitting, as at night you can lose a blinking light in the darkness. There! Across the black bay. So too in the huge city there will be much to learn if Jones does not want to lose his keys, or himself. He will not be alone. In the huge city there will be people who have the ethnicity of his grandfather, but he will find he has little in common with them. He will not try to convince them that he is like them. He will keep to himself... and they will say Jones comes from a far-off region. They will say his people are like that, taciturn, unused to communicating, in awe of the throb of the city. And Jones will leave these people he does not resemble and live as a hermit in a suburb of the huge city of London among people of different ethnic origins—from the Middle East, many of them... and from further east, from Iraq, Afghanistan and India. These too will find him incomprehensible. Some will suspect him.

Impossible as it is to conceive of the volume of water in the ocean, we use terms for infinite things, sky, sea, light, and

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feel we have understood the universe. Jones is just another man. His voice is the familiarisation of any voice to the point where we would recognize it.

The old gentleman had forgot to ask the pedlar what he sold, and wished to remedy this neglect.

I told him sternly,

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?' cried he.

I repeated 'Nothing,' and made off.

It's odd to think of it, but perhaps I thus became as inexplicable to the old man as he had been to me.

R. L. Stevenson, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*

Jones goes into the belly of a bird. He enters through its side. He sees the clouds pass and the land beneath. He is thousands of metres above all cities and all the seas, and yet he breathes.

No non-human life is visible in the big bird where Jones's left-overs are taken away. He has only to ask for something to eat or to drink and it is brought to him, and when there is nothing left they take the tray, the nothing — but usually there is something, more, more than he can eat.

Miraculous to be in a bird and not to fall.

There are no other species in the belly of the bird, unlike in the belly Jonah entered, with its crustaceans and walking fish, drowned birds, too, and all that they have ingested, and the fish of the creature's diet. In the plane there is not so much as a mosquito. Insecticides have killed everything except the animal man.

At one landing the bird deposits Jones in a kind of waiting chamber. Smaller birds have somehow penetrated that blanched place. This gives Jones confidence, to know that life still exists outside of the bird and outside of this waystation. There are other giant birds docked at bays as if for feeding. There are insects in the waystation too, and fish in aquaria, and sport on screens in rooms where people gather to smoke.

The others in the transit lounge are exactly like Jones, the lounge is full of Joneses with yellow skin, and brown and black. He begins to write: "A fish is rarely out of water, and if it ever finds itself so, it does the only thing it knows, it tries to swim."

From the transit lounge Jones can see the white bird. Unlike Jonah's sea-beast, the bird has a small head, small for one that covers such distances. Its wings are wide, its body slender. It waits in an open area marked with lines of lights.

As he enters the side of the bird to continue his journey, images and sounds resembling music are generated inside the bird. As they climb he feels a terrible pressure, as when he once went snorkling. Even when the bird levels out high above the earth and the ocean, the pressure does not let up.

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Food arrives, and distractions upon screens. He wonders what he would do if he fell from the bird. Would he not flail his arms like one trying to fly?

And Jones thinks: “The prerequisite for building a cell like the first cell is that no other self-reproducing life form exist. The proviso for the extinction of life on earth is that somewhere else self-reproducing life-forms continue to exist. Death permits life. Life inhibits creation. Man, the ultimate life form, is the ultimate inhibitor. There can be no new species.”

*He appeared inspired, and his inspiration affected the scant audience almost painfully. He wore his coat tightly buttoned across his slender chest; his eyes seemed to glow like those of his own raven...**

Maunsell B. Field, *Memories of Many Men*

* A description of Edgar Allen Poe at his lecture ‘On the Cosmogony of the Universe’ at New York Society Library in 1848. At the time Poe, in his own words, “became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity”. He died the following year.

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Where shall you lie when you are dead?

Where they lye that were never bred.

Seneca, *Troas* chor. ii. 30

We were woken by a sound: grain and fresh water were pouring from a surrounding wall into two huge stone bowls. We searched for gateways, for portals, for cracks. We climbed the wall in different places, we reached into the food and water ducts, we climbed near the scorching lamps, but eventually we had to admit that the space was enclosed, and to try to leave it might cost us our lives.

Our captors had dressed us in dyed loincloths binding our genital areas and circling our chests. As the temperature was about that of our bodies, we had no need for more than that. When night fell, we spoke together as long as the lamps gave out a faint glow. After a period of darkness during which I was awake to the slightest sound, the faintest odour, the lightest current of air, the lamps crackled and lit up the dawn.

A wizened woman called Zabu gave us our names. Her cloths were wrapped about her any old how, and in the years

to come she was the only one to openly flout almost all the laws in some way or other. No one dared sanction her. It was believed she had power over our dreams and that she knew the past. She gave us names for all that we could see and touch: earth, stone, grain and light. She called out our names after hers, as if her name was giving birth to our ones:

‘Zabu Axalux! Zabu Kaba! Zabu Xanjal! Zabu Ashraf! Zabu Sevad!’

That night I dreamed I was a limbless trunk without a head or a tail. I felt a glow as heat. A knife cut me into two selves—one continued to tunnel, the other remained in the past.

Kaba established a store pile of surplus grain which became the envy of those who had none. Axalux called a meeting. He suggested that we keep a common reserve and that we observe other measures to ensure order and hygiene. No one objected. The laws would avoid envy and divisiveness. For the moment there was a sort of peace. For the moment the laws were obeyed.

If we were provided for in health, we had no medicines to combat illness. A girl who had climbed the wall was electrocuted when she touched the grid was more seriously injured when she tumbled down the ledges. Xanjal applied pressure to various points to no effect. He needed to operate, he said, but had no instruments. When she died, after a violent paroxysm, her closest companion scratched at her skin with a stone chip and put earth moistened with her blood to her lips. Others put the moistened earth to their own lips

in sympathy. The ground was hard and we had nothing to dig with. It was Axalux who suggested we carry her body to the topmost ledge, where it desiccated under the lamps.

By means of a few grains we kept a count of the days that passed. Months of ten and years of a hundred days passed. A year after that first death, and every year from that day, we took crumbs of moistened earth to remember those who had gone from us. Their corpses were laid around the rim of the wall. The place was oval; an oval ball was chipped out of milky stone; once a year we fasted for two days then sat in a ring passing the ball among us and eating more than usual. This was New Year.

Not long after the first death, the first birth. The child of Xanjal and Ashraf was given the loincloth of the departed and Zabu named him Kamar, or 'waist-band kid'. Xanjal announced it was a boy, though his genitals were somewhat confused. He was, it is true, more boy than girl.

When more ambiguously-sexed children were born, a small council with Axalux at its head ordained that all children were to be pronounced male or female at birth. More importantly, couples were to be discouraged from having more than one child. Family groups of four would have no more food than families of three.

I became friends with the one named Kaba. She had discovered by experimentation that germinating grains were more flavoursome and easier to chew than grains in their raw form. She was full of the spirit of inquiry and loved to

take risks. While walking around the border one evening I found her cutting forms into the wall. She had dreamed them, these strange creatures, and she believed they existed “elsewhere”. I thought she meant outside of our enclosure, but she put her palm over her chest saying, ‘Not out there, but in here. A place of beings such as those I have been carving. A place we can escape to.’

Escape in any form seemed to me a risky idea. I countered, ‘Might we not need to escape from the place we escape into.’

She would not be discouraged: ‘We must be prepared for more than we know, Sevad.’

‘What do we—, what can we know?’

‘You are full of doubts. Remember when Zabu gave names to everything? We had seen stones before she named them. We knew what they were. We had had thoughts before she expanded our language, complicated thoughts. Allow yourself to think them, Sevad! I imagine a place of internal completing and I tell you we can go there.’

‘You want me to be a part of yet another experiment?’ I was referring to the commonly-held belief that we were already the living test of some idea.

‘Even if we are part of an experiment already, it is not a frivolous one. Our lives here might seem insignificant, trifling, but the mind that invented us, we who have such thoughts and dreams, we who can be so happy and so despairing, what mind would use us to simply amuse itself? An experiment is not, by definition, futile. I expect mine to succeed.’

‘Waking, being, talking is enough for me. Isn’t that enough? Don’t we have all we need here?’

‘We exist but incompletely, Sevad. The darkness beyond the lamps offers us nothing, that is true, but the recesses of our minds offer us experiences beyond captivity, beyond the imitation of gestures, beyond the constraints of Axalux’s laws, beyond the mystery of our mutilation.’

She was referring to our adjusted bodies. To me, their mutilation was not much of a mystery. We, the original inhabitants, were at birth like all our new-born ones though we have no memory of that state, nor of the operation. But her inner place, that worried me. She said it was the place of her drawings and dreams, but where was that exactly?

Her reply was all the more convincing for the immobility of her face and the simple way she spoke, without resorting to any persuasive technique: ‘It is space freed from captivity. That space is open to us. Our forms are the past, we carry them and can enter them. We can come to know our full history, in body and in soul. Come here tonight, Sevad, and we will find ourselves.’

I returned to my sleeping group, who were making plans for the upcoming New Year, polishing the oval ball, and reminding each other what had happened during the last time-cycle. Axalux, the most persuasive of the lawmakers, and Xanjel were working on a chronicle of our people:

We once possessed a homeland. Its cities were the flagships of a great civilisation. A disease caused by ambiguity decimated the population.

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We learned how to make our children one or the other and grew stronger. As a result of this we prevailed over our enemies...

To hear history being concocted like that I realised how lonely Kaba must feel seeking the undeceiving self.

At nightfall, while the lamps were still glowing, I felt my way along the wall and found her hand. She offered me a scooped-out, wide-mouthed bowl of fermented grain-mash. The potion was strong, and stimulated a vision of our selves in other forms, original, parallel or of the future. If “original”, we developed from one being, not from two nor from several beings; if “parallel”, we continued to ‘selve’, having consciousness of one self while other inner or co-existent selves developed; if “of the future”, our forms would devolve, losing our superiority over descendants of other life forms that might resemble the beasts of our dreams. For I dreamed of them too, types such as “rat”, “cheetah”, “serpent” and “marsupial”. What is more, the visions were not of this, our enclosure but of another place of shadowing monstrosities called trees. As for history, this was not the end of time, but a part of the beginning. It was thrilling but exhausting! We drank again, and the images the potion aroused were of each other.

We spent many nights together after that, sleeping in each other’s arms. We enjoined in the stimulation, the waking dreams, in that entranced pleasure of discovering true things. For a few weeks I whose womanly aspect had been excised, loved her whose maleness had been infolded to

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form labia. She saw her inner self in me, and in those of her gestures that I adopted. I saw my self in her. Is there anything stranger than that, to see yourself in another whom you love?

Some adolescents, born during the term of our confinement, were drawn to Kaba's end of the playing field, and Kaba invited them to undergo the same inner voyages. They went further than I had been able. They travelled upon Kaba's plateaux of consciousness, which, she said, move about in the soul like hands through water. They had a glimpse of Kaba's own re-incarnating parent-tree, a form of cellular life that was eternal, self-nourishing, protecting and healing. Some believed they had tasted of the fruit of that tree, and realised his or her own creature during their travels, a fellow being from a distant parent strand. The nights were filled with their trance-sighs as they felt wings in their arms, fins in their shoulder blades, and a sense of supra-natural power, of speed, of flight. Kaba was pleased by their revelations, though the density of experience drained her spiritually and physically, and she finished the nights exhausted.

The parent groups did not disguise their distaste for Kaba who had, without laws and without really trying, usurped their authority. They did not think much of Kaba's "discoveries" of the soul or the imagination or whatever she called it; they honoured a determining Unknown of which their laws and ceremonies were a reflection. Their councils and orders became exclusive to the extent that only members

were authorised to vote in new members.

The groups diverged until the single observance they had in common was the day of remembrance for the dead. It became so charged with emotion that Xanjel was able to cure the sick of both communities on this day. Faith in his powers and in the day itself cured many, and I suspect that that same faith precipitated more than one illness in the weeks leading up to it.

At other times the two camps couldn't have been more separate. The family-groups carried out their ablutions formally; the Kabaites, as they came to be called, washed and ate without regard for decorum. The family-groups, under Axalux's guidance, demonstrated an exaggerated respect for the ill-defined powers who had incarcerated us. The Kabaites believed that power inhabits the inner self, and nothing must prevent the seeker from using mind and body, wakefulness and sleep, consciousness and unconsciousness to yoke it.

I decided to dissociate myself from both camps. I had enjoyed an intimacy with Kaba that had saved me from one kind of despair. Now it had led me to another. I longed to be whole like these adolescents, but nothing could render me my atypical self. I felt inadequate among the undifferentiated and as for Axalux and his people, I could never excuse them their predisposition for that very sort of mutilation.

I would inhabit the divide between them.

The population now comprised two groups and two outsiders, Zabu and myself. My neutrality was put to the test

when Kaba confided to me that she believed certain of the Axaluxians had been plotting to mutilate her young disciples. It really did seem to me that they wished they could commit such an atrocity, but after careful observation, going between the camps, I found no evidence of any active plot. By day, intoxication calmed Kaba's paranoia, but by night she was prey to the wildest imaginings. She was no longer making everyday connections between sense perceptions and language; and her followers were behaving more wildly. One evening under the influence of elixir they devised an escape plan and it was impossible to prevent them trying it. Death, or rather its imitation, would be the means. Kaba would go first, the others would follow when they received a sign.

She pretended to be ill, to waste away and to die. Her followers laid her body out at their end of the enclosure. They wept and passed earth and sang, feigning a state of genuine mourning. Kaba's breathing slowed and seemed to stop. After three days a bulb shattered. A sign! Kaba had broken through! They prepared to follow. They feigned illness and appeared to waste away. They lay apparently lifeless in the centre of the field—it was terrible to see it! Their breathing slowed, and the heartbeats too. It really did seem to me that they were willing themselves to the point of death and beyond it.

I went every day to sit beside the thirty unconscious ones who grew only slightly thinner. They were alive, but suspended, and the flickering of their eyelids showed that they were dreaming!

Axalux wanted an end to the spectacle. It was, he claimed,

having a bad effect on the population. I argued strongly against waking them, as I was afraid the shock might kill them. It was agreed that Xanjai would touch them gently and blow onto their eyelids. They did not wake.

In spite of Xanjai's failure, or because of it, Axalux honoured him with an incision and tattoo, the wound being impregnated with burnt dust that had fallen from the flood-lights.

I came down with a sort of sleeping sickness, becoming helplessly melancholic and drowsy, and I could do nothing to prevent Xanjai laying hands on me. As he did so I was sure he had touched me before, I was sure that he had cut me, that he was the one who had operated on me. Was I now suffering from wild imaginings? I asked him whether he knew anything of such operations before we came to this place. He replied cautiously:

'Nothing, Sevad.'

'Isn't it possible you were one of the surgeons?'

'Ha! How can I know? It's not impossible!'

'You have the skills. If you had the means would you do it now?'

'Why do you want to know? What difference would it make to know?'

'It would help me to know the present better. Would you operate on our newly-born ones if you had the instruments?'

He hesitated between truth and avoidance, but I had seen the interest he had paid to my scarring and I pressed home the advantage. Exasperated, he replied:

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‘Yes! I would make them like you, Sevad. Are you satisfied now? I would make them clear and strong as we were before.’

‘Before! Before what?’

‘Before we became the inferiors of our enemies.’

About this time, the nature of dawn and of evening changed. Dawn had consisted of one then another of the floodlights flickering from sickly green to pallid violet, before gaining a brilliant light that forbade inspection.

One morning we heard a chorus of chirping and muted animal calls. Though we searched high and low we could not find a trace of any other beings. The sounds were loudest as the light was strengthening and then again at dusk. After some days we noticed patterns in the noises, and recurring imperfections in the sound. We were listening to recordings. Had they been turned on by Xanjal’s and Axalux’s “powers”, or had they been triggered by some cosmic accident? No one minded the sounds. The fact is that their regularity appealed to our need for order at this time. It helped people forget that Kaba had led their children into a state from which they appeared less and less likely to awake.

How much time passed? Enough for geometry, mathematical truths and more of Axalux’s impositions. In my free time I studied with the youngest children, solved problems with grains, calculating in the dust, or exercised perfunctorily like one seeing out a sentence. One day, a tiny plant appeared at the end of the space previously occupied by the Kabaites. Its leaves were deep green and tough, its branches were

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brittle. Zabu named it the Kaba Tree. It grew quickly into a bush of human height. I scraped a circle in its bark with a stone and it gave off an aroma like sweat, like the sweetness of a healthy body. A circle, I hoped, might bring them back to consciousness.

In the time just before the discovery of the place of heaviness, more of the bulbs above us blew. The space was darker and the temperature had dropped a degree or two. Through gaps where blinding light had once defied inspection, we could see the welded criss-cross of a great iron trellis.

Xanjal's son Kamar had become distinctly male now as he approached adulthood. Such clarity was not always the case; the new generations differentiated unpredictably if they differentiated at all. Kamar had offended Xanjal by arguing with his mother, Ashraf, who set great store by the laws. He had questioned the justice of proposals that gave the right of excision and of execution to members of the highest order, namely Axalux, Xanjal and nominated councillors. He had called Axalux's argument that the lawmakers should have the right over life and death 'think-trickery'. True, the people had ceded the function of making laws to this so-called "noblest" order, and so they had their mandate, but Kamar believed some things were beyond laws and lawmakers.

If Kamar's spirit of questioning gave me hope, a conversation with him soon caused me disquiet. He had been noting the changes in our biosphere from the slightest to the most obvious:

'The bulbs, Sevad. There are fewer of them than before,

aren't there?'

'Of course. Quite a few of them have been shattering lately.'

'And haven't you noticed, it is getting colder, isn't it?'

'I hadn't noticed. Yes, perhaps you are right.'

'And you know... there is less grain in the stone bowls at mealtimes?'

'Really? I haven't been paying attention, but now that you mention it.... It might be just a cycle. Perhaps there will be more grain than usual before long. Perhaps the powers—'

'What powers? I thought you didn't believe in them?'

'Oh, sometimes I am lazy and I talk about them as if they are real. Everybody else does... except you, Kamar. What do you think, really, about us? What is our situation?'

'I think we are proof of a mind whose thoughts were once expressed as human history. When the mind died, our common past ended—we were no longer cadets within time accountable to consecutive things. Differentiation, necessary for the union of opposites and regeneration, was no longer incumbent upon us.'

'And now? Where are we? What are we now? How can we go on existing if the mind that created us has been extinguished?'

'We go on because a magnificent mechanism set up before the extinction of that mind is still running, but it is running down. It makes sense, doesn't it? You admitted that the light and food supplies are diminishing.'

'I will watch it closely now, in case you are wrong.'

‘And if I am right?’ ‘If you are right the last of us will die unmourned!’

‘Yes but... should we not have an escape plan?’

My heart skipped a beat. Kamar’s thoughts about our existence had already reminded me of Kaba’s mental peregrinations. Was I going to lose my new friend to the darkness? I retorted angrily, ‘Kaba’s lot have tried and failed! Look at their bodies—neither dead nor living.’

‘Yes. Their escape bid failed, and do you know why? Duplicity! You see, they were no better than Axalux. Through trickery you can escape everything but trickery! I don’t think they came close to escaping. I don’t think they have left us at all. But if they had tried to escape by honest physical means.... I think it can be done. Will you help me, Sevad? You will be helping us all.’

The work was arduous. We removed some cracked stone blocks from the wall and after a few months, having created a tunnel six blocks deep, we struck a sheet of oxidized iron. When a small hole was smashed through it, we could see some machinery and technicians’ coats on pegs within. We tore away scraps of rusted metal and had soon cut a hole large enough for Kamar to squeeze through.

Immediately inside he seemed stuck in invisible gum. He turned to me and opened his mouth but no sound came out. I beckoned to him to return but, as determined as ever, he moved toward the equipment in slow, unreal steps. I smashed away at the hole and climbed into the laboratory myself. It was as if my body’s density had increased exponentially. I

felt cold, as if my blood was being prevented from flowing. Breathing, too, was difficult. By taking five or more breaths for every step, by the light of dim lamps that flickered on when, it seemed, they detected our movement, we could walk about and take careful note of the abandoned equipment.

Back in the wide oval space which seemed open, bright and easy to move in by comparison, we drew plans of the laboratory and its side-rooms. Corridors led to vaults, vaults to side-rooms, side-rooms to corridors and vaults. None of them led to an exit.

As for the equipment, when we made a noise some beads of light flickered under the grime of a central console. Kamar worked for several weeks trying to understand it, drawing circuits, following cables, thinking and experimenting until we woke one morning in the greater oval space to find that the Kabaites had vanished. There was no sign of them without or within.

One morning we heard Zabu cackling and calling a name. A cat of sorts was crouched by the Kaba Tree. It resembled one of Kaba's drawings, having three eyes, highly developed paws and a jaw whose flexibility made it capable of much more than simple gnawing or chewing. It could stand upright for long periods, and this was not its only human characteristic. It did not regard us blankly, instinctually, but as if it were calculating, reasoning. It appeared capable of thought. When we made a move towards the tree, it darted to the wall

and shot half-way up it to a ledge from which to carry on scrutinizing us. Axalux deduced that it had come from the place of heaviness. And yet there was no trace of its having been there—neither fur nor excrement—and neither Kamar nor I had seen or heard anything as we worked. Eager to shift any portion of the blame from ourselves, I suggested the animal had been introduced by the benevolent ‘powers’. It was obvious enough to me, however, and to Kamar, that the cat resembled one of Kaba’s carvings named by Zabu “cheetah”—and I wondered whether this cat might in fact be Kaba.

The recordings of dawn choruses ceased and the cheetah-like animal was joined by other creatures: some mammals, a species of flightless bird and a higher marsupial. Presently, we were living in company with representatives of all the orders of the animal kingdom except apes. The dawns were now filled with prattle. That is the only word for it, for these beasts could speak. Here were creatures that bore a resemblance to the cats, lemurs, birds and snakes of my dreams, speaking their own languages, using long and complicated sentences and reasoning. I thought of trying to learn these strange tongues, but our human mouths lacked the necessary physiology to make their strange vowels and consonants. They were able, however, to communicate with each other, as if their languages had evolved in relation to each other and this they did at the far end, at Kaba’s end of the stadium.

They formed a kind of village there, a village characterised by a strict and fragile territoriality. Transgressions were noisily resolved through posture, language or violence. It was a noisy and bloody violence but did not differ so much from that silent and ordered violence which had informed recent laws regarding executions.

The hubbub became unbearable as the daily quantity of nuts and grains diminished. Not only was there less food than before, but the temperature dropped further. We had to huddle together at night for warmth. Inevitably, the higher rodents raided our grain supplies. It was the first theft of the colony. What is more, one of the rodents was seen emerging from the sculpted orifices that the nuts and grains spilled from. Were we to guard these apertures day and night? We were forced to consider eradicating the offenders.

The first hunt brought out the worst in us. We tracked an offender down and beat it to death. We were no better than they were. The evening after I had watched it die, the rodents carried out a reprisal that cost us the life of one of our younger members—she was literally torn to pieces.

A war ensued whose brutality defies description. We adapted ourselves for defence as well as attack. We were the hunters and the hunted, snaring and guarding ourselves against the advanced beasts who also fought among themselves. It appeared that all of us were indeed closely related and naturally inimical. More lamps failed. We would be no match for our enemies in darkness. Having to defeat them as quickly as possible, we devised what we called military tactics

that were downright scurrilous. I am ashamed to relate them. Let it be recorded that we betrayed whatever code had existed among us up to that moment. By trickery, ambush and superiority of numbers we eliminated or captured the last of them. The prisoners were herded into the labyrinth of heaviness. No food was going to be wasted on them. The bones of our own kind were gathered and honoured. Their dead were skinned and the fur used as clothing in the cooler, darker age we were entering. It was an empty victory.

We had suffered losses, and though we had intentionally sacrificed some of our own kind Axalux called for some form of retribution. Xanjai took it upon himself to organise the execution of the three-eyed cheetah, who had been most vicious in attack. He led it to the execution stone, laid it on its back, and ripped its throat open using the sharp edge of broken bird-bone. The blood was collected for drinking.

Kamar was not happy with the slaughter of the higher cheetah. Although Xanjai had cut its throat with all due discipline and without anger or blood-lust, this offended him most of all. Killing in the heat of exchange, in defence or in anger was defensible, but not, in Kamar's opinion, this premeditated outrage. It was just a step away from execution of our fellows, a power already insinuated into our laws. Were these prisoners, Kamar argued, were they not advanced beings with higher understanding? I supported him, not least because I was still haunted by a fear that these animals were impossibly Kaba and her followers.

There was an acrimonious meeting. Axalux took the floor. The prisoners were likely to breed and outnumber us. We might not win a second war. They were enemies who would not have shown us mercy if we had ended up as their prisoners. They deserved death. Their execution would be punishment for capital crimes listed in the laws. Their butchering would provide food, clothing and tools.

Feeling outmanoeuvred by Axalux and Xanjal, Kamar asked permission to present our case using a new form of argument that would employ volunteers from the colony. Permission was grudgingly given. Players would represent prisoners and people. Kamar and I composed lines for the players to recite. A large egg sucked of its contents and filled with sand was passed among them to give each the right to speak:

PRISONERS: Where did the people come from?

PEOPLE: From non-being. PRISONERS: How did the people arrive?

PEOPLE: By means unseen and unknown.

PRISONERS: Who watches over the people? PEOPLE: The kindly eye.

PRISONERS: What do the people eat?

PEOPLE: That which the kindly eye provides.

PRISONERS: Where have your dead gone?

PEOPLE: To that which watches over us.

PRISONERS: When did they return?

PEOPLE: They have not returned.

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The voices were echoing off the encircling walls as if the walls themselves were speaking; the question and answer routine was reversed.

PEOPLE: And you, prisoners, where did you come from?

PRISONERS: From the wilderness of non-being.

PEOPLE: And how did you come here?

PRISONERS: By means unseen and unknown.

PEOPLE: What do you eat?

PRISONERS: That which our claws provide.

The spectators began murmuring. Some found the use of the egg sacrilegious—it was too much like the smoothed stone that we passed among ourselves at New Year; others were looking suspiciously upon the whole “play” as if it was a kind of double-dealing or magic that only Zabu was permitted to practise. And the repetition of the words of the victors in the mouths of those playing the prisoners, was this not a travesty? As we carried on, some of the ‘players’, carried away by the importance of their task, were beginning to shout:

PEOPLE: You have stolen our grain. What have you to say in your defence?

PRISONERS: We were hungry.

PEOPLE: You have murdered our kind, we who were here before you.

PRISONERS: You’d have done the same. You do not own your own violence.

PEOPLE: (facing outwards in all directions appealing to the audience): We shall put them to death? Shall we not put them to use? Let us put them to work?

It happened in a few seconds. Some of the audience had stood up and would certainly have spoken, but Axalux was approaching the playing area with a bunch of his lackeys and Kamar was prepared to bar their progress onto the playing area when a noise arose from above and around us, a noise that resembled laughter.

As it died away Axalux turned the moment to his advantage. Saying that the powers were evidently displeased, he ordered the arrest of all players except Kamar. They would have thrown us into the labyrinth with the beasts had Kamar not pleaded our cause to his father and mother. And Kamar reasoned well. The laughter was not a sign that we had offended some principle of our existence there. It was not a judgement on the play, but a phenomenon caused by reverberations of the excited players' voices within the oval colliseum. A re-enactment was staged. Members of a newly-created caste, the warriors, spoke from the same positions on the playing area. When the "laughter" again arose the detained players were released, but such spectacles were banned and we could do nothing to prevent the executions of the prisoners. The flesh of victims was eaten every tenth day.

Then it happened that Xanjai, who dissected the victims' bodies while they were still fresh and with great interest, himself fell ill. During his fever he raved about a forgotten

tribe and about an underground journey with a man carrying a golden bullet. At this time I ate the bare minimum, and did not take part in collective life.

It happened some time after the last of the animals were eaten. Kamar had learned nearly all there was to know about the recording machinery in the place of heaviness and was preparing to make the first experimental recordings, when the green beads of light on his machines began to register sounds he could not hear, sounds that must have been coming from deeper inside the labyrinth.

Fearing monsters more grotesque than those we had executed we moved loose stones to the mouth of the entrance and kept watch through the night as the shuffling and scraping grew louder. At dawn a thin voice, but human, definitely human, called from within the labyrinth! We dared not answer. The highest of the stones moved and toppled towards us. We armed ourselves and were prepared to do battle when the voice called again. It called my name!

Kamar stayed the arms of the defenders and instructed the intruders to retreat. We cleared more stones and called to them to advance. We made out shapes, dark, humped figures, moving towards us. No sooner had they raised their heads to face the light than they dropped, exhausted, to the ground. All were naked, and horribly wounded.

After losing consciousness, the escapers did not dream themselves into the rich image forests of their earlier hallucinations, but onto a flat, clean, hard surface of polished

wood. The wood gave off an aroma like that of the Kaba Tree but the landscape was eventless. Neither light nor other changing conditions signalled the passage of time. The escapers experienced neither hunger nor need. Keeping together, they walked about silently, scoring the ground so they could know if they had passed that way before. Later, when they found none of the marks and scratches, they left strips of their loincloths behind them, but they never saw these cloths again.

One of them took it upon himself to go out alone as a scout. Presently, a blurred shape approached from the other side of the plane from the one he had gone towards. Was the plane itself a sphere? Had the scout crossed to the other side without them noticing? Were flatness or roundness not what they had believed them to be? Did the surface have some other form beyond their comprehension? As they watched, the blur they had taken to be the scout alone, turned out to be two forms. The scout was with Kaba. She had not seen a tree and yet she believed they had migrated to a tree-like place—that they were walking upon an infinitesimally small part of an infinitesimally large tree. She had not eaten or drunk and yet she felt nourished and satisfied. She felt a sense of inexplicable nutrition, and a sense of the past, not that of wild beasts, but that of one beast—man. At different times she said things like ‘We are those who knew not to kill and killed, who knew to honour and disgraced,’ ‘We are the ones who sold into slavery,’ and finally, ‘We are the people who have forgotten its people.’

She told them to follow her, and that was the moment when, in the great oval space, in our reality, while the rest of us were really sleeping, they rose from their places and walked after her into the place of heaviness. In the deepest room of all she took up a little box of striking matches. 'This is ignorance of what we were,' she told them, and lit one. All around them substanceless images of beasts, those of their dreams, were staring at them out of the void. She lit some torches set into the walls, and the members of the group felt one image drawing at them physically: the image of an ape. They began to slip into it, though it was itself like a flame before them. If they resisted by gripping the jamb of a portal, they lost patches of skin to the attraction. Kaba went first, disappearing into it. The others heard her voice calling to them, and after being transported into the flame, they experienced such a pain, a mental pain, a sense of unutterable rejection and found themselves dumped like carcases upon the floor of the labyrinth. From there they made their way towards the opening.

As if to prove their story, Kaba produced the box of striking matches and lit all but one. With each ignition we saw, in the flames, one of the beasts we had slaughtered and eaten. With each image Zabu called the name of that animal and touched the wound of one of the returned. And the skin-wounds of the returned were healed.

The Kabaites had received knowledge of our condition by failure. We, those who had remained, had received knowledge of our instinct by victory. Although we shared this

understanding of what we could not escape, and of what we had become, and notwithstanding the miraculous curing of their wounds, Axalux was quick to assert his authority over them. They were in a second infancy of language-usage and were easy to control. A period of quarantine was imposed. The returned would lodge at the far end of the space near the Kaba Tree. They were given animal fur and minimal provisions. I was authorised to go between, observing a strict procedure.

In quarantine, the Kabaites gathered and categorised the bones of the dead birds and animals. Such an ordered activity surprised me. Kaba had changed. She spoke of her adventure only obliquely: 'We have returned with the failure of false escape and fruitless searching. We have returned with the knowledge of abasing abasement. But I ask you, What is immense to something immense? Can such a relation go on forever? We have known our smallness and our ignorance, we have known what is less than smallness.'

We sat together for a time, then she added, though I do not say she spoke, for it was more like singing:

The voice of the darkness is silence.

The inhabitants of the darkness are absent.

The matter of the darkness is nothingness.

The gift of the darkness is dispossession.

The fullness of the darkness is deformation.

The disappointment of the darkness is freedom.

A dispute arose between the camps over the use of grain. The returned had begun to silently work their ground, digging in their excrement using as tools the jaw-bones and tibias of the slaughtered animals. When the earth was ready they asked for lentils and barley for the planting.

The amount of grain delivered to the stone bowls had further diminished. There was not enough to feed everybody as it was. Were we to go without so the returned could try another of their experiments? We agreed by the slimmest of majorities to allocate them an extra share for planting, but when Axalux learned that Kaba was going to burn a part of this as an offering at the planting time, their planting allowance was annulled. Any grain for planting would have to come out of their own rations.

Undeterred, they developed the art of fasting and just before the time of planting conducted ceremonies where they burned grain and established a dung fire that smoked away for several weeks. The curls of smoke rose up before the weakening lamps so that disconcerting shadows passed over us. Thereafter, accompanied by dancing and face-painting, they planted the seeds. When shoots did, indeed, appear, they passed moistened earth and sang in a strange tongue of

the joy of release from false escape.

At this travesty of our own rites of mourning Axalux isolated them even more. I had to place their rations in a No Man's Land for them to take. Before taking up this tiny portion, they bowed to the lights above and to the earth beneath. They kissed the earth, raised their palms, and Kaba recited a chant. They took such grain as was offered, tilled their land, carried out sacrifices, fermented their mashes, fasted, and in time reaped pitifully small rewards of corn and wheat. Out of this they allotted a third for eating, a third for us, and a third for fermenting intoxicants.

In renewed states of intoxication, the Kabaites developed secret noises with which to privately communicate. The overall noise that resulted was reminiscent of the animals' babble, and caused the law-makers to legislate hours of silence. I endorsed this and encouraged them to be silent when asked. Obedience served a double purpose: if the Kabaites could observe the laws, they could not be accused of having turned into animals.

The returned, who had allied themselves with Kaba when they were adolescents, now looked older than their parents. If Axalux could derive smug satisfaction from this and point to their return as the failure of their escape plan, neither he nor the various 'orders' of those who had remained could draw much pleasure from this droning and babbling. The Axaluxians may have scored a moral victory, but they were stubbornly surviving on diminishing amounts of grain, and

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resented having to accept the smallest of offerings from the Kabaites' garden. In desperation, Axalux ruled that if anyone should die, instead of being laid out for removal, they would be eaten.

Meanwhile, Kamar had set up microphones at the entrance to the labyrinth and with the available power was making recordings for a few minutes each day. He captured Zabu's ululations and her warnings to beware of a flood. The next day he documented a recitation by Axalux of some of the laws. Early the following morning Kaba accepted his invitation to recite her chant as if it were a kind of sentence. She went to the entrance of the place of heaviness and addressed the microphone not like one addressing future listeners, but as if she were already dead:

*Self- and object-loved
Pleased and denied
Sing the misery
Of escaping.*

*By providing
By evacuation
Our past is destroyed
Over and over.*

*Law and measurement
Withhold and displace
Past destroyed over
Return in revolt.*

*Sounded our hard-boned night-flight
 Kissed our walls and food bowls
 No raiment but vowel
 For those from the plain.*

*Body echo with song
 Song of the heart's silence
 Silence will never
 Dishonour our compact.*

*Darkness' violation
 Face and image covered
 Land of lie: purblind
 Land of waste, we hunger.*

*Hands roughened
 Hands ready
 Let life let death spring
 Ill or well-forming.*

*The grain is ready
 Growth our release
 Up! Depart! Lives part as words
 To birth, to rapture!*

*The germ be born
 To speak through silence
 From absence, our instance
 From instance, our leaving.*

The chant recorded, Kaba succumbed. Within a matter of hours she had passed away. Her followers sat around her body for two nights. On the second morning, fearing that Xanjal would not show her due respect, and feeling that I had the most right, I took the matter of her cooking in hand. The mourners did not move from their places until the earth had been solemnly prepared. We dug calmly. I think that if any of those digging had made any sudden movements they would have taken their digging tools and beaten us to death. But I was mourning Kaba as much as they were, and since everyone knew that I did not eat meat I was, in a sense, disinterested.

Kamar, young Kamar, showed the greatest respect, carrying stones to the pit and it was he who ignited a taper at the dung fire to light some dry corn leaves at the base of the oven-pit. We lifted Kaba's body onto the red-hot stones (how can I forget that sound?). We covered her body with soil.

Now her followers were around the steaming mound. One sang a fragment of her chant, another picked it up and tried to continue, but only fragments ensued. When Kamar returned to the place of heaviness to replay the recording of the chant in full, they gathered in wonder around the entrance to the place of heaviness. They rose up at the refrain.

At the moment when the body was uncovered for serving, Zabu let out a high-pitched scream. The Kaba Tree

had withered. Out of the pile of dust a spring had been born, red as blood and hot as our own. At this source, Zabu gave birth to a dwarf hermaphrodite releasing a baby's wail.

In an instant Kaba's followers ran to the equipment and drove bone shards into the loudspeakers. They followed the cables to the machines, where, overcoming heaviness, they toppled the equipment from its plinths. They tore the cables from their sockets. We were helpless to prevent it. They dragged back pieces of the wrecked sound equipment, bursting into the lighter atmosphere of our place shrieking and wailing. They set up a circle of machinery parts around the body of Kaba and honoured her baked remains morning, noon and evening, repeating fragments, ever more fragmented, of her chant. Kamar went to the place of heaviness, vandalised now, but it was the place furthest from the babble, furthest from the horror that he saw in the failing light, and from the horror that was in store.

We could only watch and wait.

The Kabaites did not eat, but neither were they practising the fast as they knew how to do. They were in the throes of passing away.

One by one, feeling the last of their strength draining, they lay down around the oven, which had become the tomb of Kaba, and breathed their last.

I was moved in a way I had never been moved before. Irretrievably. As I had been intimate with many of them,

I performed ritual acts of mourning. Axalux could hardly hide his satisfaction. During the nights, some of his lackeys sneaked in and dragged the latest of the dead away so that Xanjel could carve them up and secretly cook them. In time, only Zabu, her double-sexed infant and I remained outside the community of the orders.

Zabu and the infant attracted their attention first. Axalux's health was failing. One of his last proposals was put to the vote and summarily passed more out of respect for his suffering than his rhetoric. The child would have its ambiguous parts altered. Zabu was convicted of sorcery. She would be eaten. It was the first execution of one of our original number. She went to the stone indifferently. She said, 'We are heavy with having been', and her throat was cut.

Xanjel administered a huge dose of elixir to the hermaphrodite and set to work, but his knives and forceps, of which he was so proud, were nothing more than splinters of bones and tainted metallic parts garnered from the place of heaviness; the girl, as the hermaphrodite became, never regained consciousness. With this succession of needless deaths, the hope, one I had secretly clung to, that my existence in the enclosure was a dream-precursor to freedom in another, real place, vanished. Axalux did not outlive them by more than a few days.

We let Xanjel have his way: he was not be eaten, not that his stringy body would have provided much nourishment. As Xanjel prepared it for the last upraising of one of our

kind, few paid it any regard. He and I carried Axalux to the uppermost ledge to rot there, for the lamps were no longer strong enough to dry out any of the corpses.

The last few nuts and grains have fallen from the aperture. Today, only a few bulbs continue to flicker. And this fatigue! It is as if our light and our lives are being filched away. Some have had visions—they have seen the dead walking around the highest edges. Kamar, ever practical, has got this portable recording machine to work and I am telling our story into it. You see, even now I believe that there are others. Even now I believe you exist.

Kamar has discovered the door which the Kabaites must have gone through when they entered the deepest and darkest room during their absence. He has found some inscriptions on wooden strips. While bringing one out he dropped it and it broke in two, exhaling the same aroma as the Kaba Tree. We are learning to read the words and pictures, and to write them.

A few days ago the red spring began flowing with greater force. Kamar dug a hole for the liquid to flow into, and since this was soon overflowing, he cut a channel to the place of heaviness. He believes the inner labyrinth is unending. He believes that light will return, and with it fresh water. He has brought the tablets to the highest ground, laying them out as far from the spring as possible. One of them reads:

WILLIAM DIREEN

There are many enclosures. Nothing is required of the subjects. Their presence assures our survival but no colony is indispensable. The concluding of one of them will be marked by the coursing of an effluent resembling their blood.

The news did not surprise me. We refuse to give in to despair. To pass the hours, to cheer ourselves up, we sing, we comfort each other, we tell each other fabulous stories.

NAMING IN 'THE STADIUM'

The names in this last story are derived from words found in the Caucasus region. *Zabu* is from Georgian *zabun*, a woman's long fitted dress, under this was a blouse or *sidriyya*, which was seen through the opening of the *zabun*. Worn today only by older women. *Sevad* is from *sevad-i* (from Arab *sawad*, blackness) niello, an attractive black inlay found on leather-bound wooden scabbards. *Xanjal* is from *xanjal-i*, dagger. *Ashraf* is from *ashraf*, descendants from the prophet's lineage. *Kamar* is from *kamar-i*, belt. No Caucasian would have considered himself fully dressed without his belt and dagger. *Kaba*: Georgian *k'aba* (female dress) was adopted by the Abkhazian people as *a-k'aba* (male dress), and, in Mingrelian (a language which was for centuries a buffer between the Abkhaz-speaking and the Georgian-speaking areas); *k'aba* is used (in addition to the Georgian borrowing *axalux-i*) to refer to a special male-worn (white but sometimes black) shirt (made of silk, satin, staple, brocade and demi-cotton). This would be natural if at some stage in its development the shirt more resembled a woman's dress. The Georgian for male dress became *axalux-i*.

