

STADIUM

by Bill Direen

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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 Zabur 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. 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 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?

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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 Xanjai 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 Xanjal would touch them gently and blow onto

their eyelids. They did not wake.

In spite of Xanjal'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 floodlights.

I came down with a sort of sleeping sickness, becoming helplessly melancholic and drowsy, and I could do nothing to prevent Xanjal 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:

'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 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. Xanjal 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 pre-meditated 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 Xanjai, 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.

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 coliseum. 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 carcasses 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 like singing but barely comprehensible:

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 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

ulations 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 Pleasured 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 battle, 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 lack-eyes sneaked in and dragged the latest of the dead away so that Xanjal 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.

Xanjal 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 Xanjal have his way: he was not to be eaten, not that his stringy body would have provided much nourishment. As Xanjal prepared it for the last uprising 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:

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.

*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.*

END

Some Notes about NAMES

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.