

‘The eyes have fallen into disuse in their method
of stringing them. Nor is the notch frontally in
the middle ends of the bow.’

Leo Frobenius, *The Bow, Atlantis,*
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The bow I carry with me into the wilderness, I made of Este.

She died just before dawn, ten days before. She had seen her death while working in her garden, saw the places between plants where she no longer stood, an uncapping of momentum in the afternoon sun. She prepared me for what had to be done, walking back into our simple house and removing her straw hat, returning it to its shadow and nail on the north wall.

She was born a seer and some part of her seeing lived in the expectancy of her departure, a breeze before a wave, before a storm. Seers die in a threefold lapse, from the outside in. The details and confinement of each infolding had to be carefully marked and heard without panic or emotion on my part, for I then took on a different role.

We said goodbye during the days leading to her night. Then all of my feelings were put away; there were more important rituals to perform. All this I knew. From our first agreement to be together it had been described, it had been unfolded. Our love and companionship grew in the confines and the constantly-open door of its demand, and secretly I rehearsed my distance and practiced the deceit of loneliness.

Standing before our solid wooden table with her blood drying stiff on my skin, her body lay divided and stripped into the materials and language. As my back and hands ached from the labour of splitting her apart, I could still hear her words. The calm instruction of my task

repeated over and over again, embedded with a singsong insistence to erase my forgetfulness and its fence of doubt. The entire room was covered in blood, yet no insect would trespass this space, no fly would drink her, no ant would forage her marrow. We were sealed against the world during those days, my task determined, basic and kind.

She had explained all this to me while I served her breakfast on a rare rainy morning. The black bread and yellow butter had seemed to stare from its plate with mocking intensity, the fruit pulsing and warping into obscene ducts and ventricles, vivid in innocence at every direct glance. I perched on the edge of the bed, listening to her simple words glide and agree with the rain, while my fear ignited them into petrol wires of ferocious anger which were stuffed into my oxygenless, hidden core.

I shaved long flat strips from the bones of her legs. Plaiting sinew and tendon, I stretched muscle into interwoven pages and bound them with flax that she cut from the garden. I made the bow of these, setting the fibres and grains of her tissue in opposition, the raw arc congealing, twisting and shrinking into its proportion of purpose. I removed her unused womb and placed her dismembered hands inside it, sealing the misshapen ball which sometimes moved a little in its settling. I shaved her head and removed her tongue and eyes, and folded them inside her heart. My tasks finished, I placed the nameless objects on the wooden draining board of the sink. They sat in mute splendour, glowing in their strangeness, untouched by any criminal light. What remained on the table and floor was simply waste. I left it for the wild dogs when I left this place with all its doors and windows open. For three days I lived with the inventions of her and the unused scraps, the air scented by her presence, the musk-deep smell of her oil and movement. The pile of her thick, unwashed hair seemed to breathe and swell against the bars of sunlight that turned the room towards evening. These known parts of her stroked away the anxious perfumes, the harsh metallic iron of her blood and the deeper saturated smoulders of her unlocked interior. On the third day

I buried her heart, womb and head in the garden in a small circular pit which she had dug with her very hands a week before.

I buried the compass of her and covered it with a heavy stone. I obeyed with perfection, tearless and quiet, picking up the arrow that she had made and walking back into the house for the last time.

The bow quickened astonishingly, twisting and righting itself as the days and the nights pulled and manipulated its contours. There was a likeness to Este's changing during her dying, although that transition had nothing in common with all the deaths I had witnessed and participated in before. With Este, an outward longing marked all, like sugar absorbing moisture and salt releasing it. Every hour of the three days rearranged her with fearsome and compelling difference. Every physical memory of her body, from childhood onwards, floated to the surface of her beautiful frame. Every gesture that had evolved into her grace found its origin and almost joyfully puppeted its awkwardness through her. Every thought found its way through her bones and exhaled waves of shadow from a deep ocean floor, rising into sunlight and dispersing, meeting the decay that was closing in. I could not leave her. I sat or laid next to her, fascinated and horrified, aroused and entranced as the procession gently disgorged. Her eyes waxed and waned memory, pale transparency to flinted fire. She was dimly aware of me, but able to instruct and explain the exactitude of the process. She did this to dispel my anxiety and pain, also to confront the ecstasy of her control. In the evening of the third day, the memory in my dreams began to show itself. It refined our time together, the constancy of her presence. Since leaving her village, we had never been apart, except for those strange weeks when she had asked me to stay inside while she dwelt in the garden day and night. When she returned, she was thin and strained.

The bow is turning black now, becoming the darkest shadow in the room. Everything is very still. I sit holding the two wrapped arrows in my hands. Out of their turnings comes hunger and sleep, forgotten

reflections of my own irredeemable humanity.

From the cupboards and the garden I juggle anticipant food, flooding my senses with taste and smell. Citrus and bacon rise in the room, sage and tomatoes, green onions and dried fish unfold. Separation has been hewn by the essential, and a long, dreamless sleep waits to sanction it.



My hands tremble holding the bow and the morning door, the arrows between my teeth. The exact moment has come, and I wrench into dazzling light, the ancient wood sucked inwards and falling from its twisted hinges. Overwhelmed, the house gives up, showing its previously unseen squalor as an act of submission. Heat, buffeted by a bright wind, wakes me to this world and seals the shrivelling house to a hollow.

I untie the dark dry leaves from the arrows while holding the bow cradled to my chest. They are white. An infinite, unfocused white without any trace of hue or shadow. They absorb the day into their chalky depth and I grow sick looking at them. I lift the bow, which I must have strung in my sleep, and knock one arrow into its contrast. The other is wrapped away and saved to be the last. I will make many in between. This was the moment of departure, her last instruction. I draw the bow back with all my strength, feeling the single gesture brace every muscle of my body, feeling the tension lock in as the grace of the string touches my lips. Pulling that great curve silences the world and even the wind stops, holding its breath against my energy and the release. And for the first and last time the bow is silent, except for small, creaking sighs which echo my taut bones. I raise the bow skywards, perpendicular to the track that runs over the low foothills in an almost vertical scar from our home.

It lets itself go, vanishing into the sky with a sound that sensually

echoes through me and every other particle of substance and ghost, in or out of sight. I know I will never see that arrow again. It is not to be my guide; I will have to make that one differently.

That first white arrow is still travelling the spirals of air, sensing a defined blood on its ice-cold tip. For a moment I am with it, high above these porous lands, edging the sea, its waves crashing endlessly below. Above the shabby villages and brutal tribes, leaning towards the wilderness and the dark forest which cloaks its meaning.

The pain calls me back, still standing before the track, dazed in the garden. The inside of my arm is raw from where the bow string lashed it, removing a layer of skin with the ease of a razor, indifferent and intentional. Stepping forward, I pick up my sack and quiver, steady my looping stance against the bow and walk forward into the wilderness.



The land had become depopulated. Too much effort was needed to keep the patched fields active enough to grow clinging tomatoes and dusty, dwarfish melons; it was a country of the old, tending their patches of earth out of habitual purpose, the last days of the clock ticking through daily ritual, the weights almost unwound from their creaking spool. There were no young people to reset it, no one who wanted to wind the well each day and sprinkle the ravenous earth into function. The young had left for the cities and for slave labour abroad. They were underground, digging fossils for other people's heat. They were in venomous sheds weaving chemical cancer. They were automata in chains of industry which did not need identity, language or families. All their saved money was endlessly counted as escape. Some went back to the fields to help the old and infirm raise the dented bucket and spade, others attempted to return as

princes, buying expensive and bland new homes in the crumbling villages of their origin. This would fail, and their children and the land would turn on them and intensify the shuddering fatigue. The scuffed tracks of their efforts were erased under my feet, walking through the few occupied remnants of community.

It would take me three days to clear these places, another three or four to cross the low mountains and be further out at the rim of the wilderness. We had lived in this place for eleven years, healing the gashes and fractures of our past, using the sun and dust to staunch the jagged memories. This peninsular of abandonment had given much, and a part of me ached to plan a return, even though I knew it would never be possible.



The heat of the day became saturated with weight. The brightness became sullen and pregnant with change. Clouds thickened and coagulated with inner darkness; water was being born, heavy and unstable.

This was the breath of the sickly wind called Burascio by the natives of the land. A wind that sucked rather than blew, its hot, inverted breath giving movement but not relief. It toyed with expectation by animating suffocation, tantalising the arid earth with its scent of rain, whilst beneath the reservoirs, caves and cisterns strained their emptiness towards its skies.

This was the reason we lived here. Este said the isolation was part of the treatment, but the mending and evolution of the body and spirit could only take place above a honeycomb of hollows. The skies and the sea would be heard in those places. Their vastness and motions would be echoed down beneath the taut earth, swilling and booming the darkness into quiet against their unseen mineral walls. She spoke of their unity

of voice, from the humblest well to the vastest cathedral cave, how they are like pipes of different sizes in a mighty organ. An organ constructed to shudder in fugues and fanfares of listening, not playing; where a cacophony of silence was only counterpoised by insistent drips of water.

She knew it was their action that influenced the minute physical and the immense mental and spiritual spaces inside human beings. I thought of this now as I walked across the lid of their meaning, of her unfolding these wonders to my baffled ears. I thought of her voice, very close, very clear and I stared in shock at the truth of holding her bones and flesh in my sweating hand.

During the night, lightning could be seen far out at sea. Above the horizon, soundless dendrites of storm flickered, marbling the curve of the earth on its way towards here and the waiting dawn. I took shelter in a dug-out shepherds' cave at the edge of one of the poorest villages. The terraced fields here were worn down, losing their boundaries in limping disrepair, survival and oblivion quarrelling among the falling stones and parched plants. In this domain of lizards, flies and cacti, the human signatures were being erased.

My shelter felt like it had not been used for years, the stitched-together sacking that made its rudimentary door falling apart in my hand as I tried to unhook it. This crouching space had been scratched out from the soft yellow stone, just big enough for a small man or boy and a few goats. There were still remnants of occupation: a low bed or table blocking the far end; a few tools bearing the labour scars of generations; A car wheel, its tyre worn smooth; dry, sand-encrusted empty bottles and a few exhausted shotgun cartridges. Hanging on a nail was a fragment of rusted armour, an articulated breastplate of diminutive size. Whether this was a genuine artefact dug up from some unknown battle, or part of a carnival costume from one of the gaudy pageants that once marked the saint's passage through the year, it was impossible to say. The hot land and the salt wind had etched and cooked it into another time, a time that never

stained memory, because it was too ancient to have yet been conceived.

The cave's bare interior seemed at once empty and brimming with occupation. I curled into the sanctity of this most human shelf and tasted the joy of its simplicity with the edge of my sudden tiredness.

The thunder entered my sleep. It slid between the laminations of dreams with the grace of a panther, its first sound being no more than a whisper or a vibration. Each mile it ran it gained volume and power, each mile it flew it trained my unconscious to not respond, each growing resonance being only fractionally louder than the last. The hours were eaten in its stealthy approach, my nightmares absorbing the shocks until it was directly overhead and its massive percussion shook the ground with light. A huge whiteness, battering the pale morning with a fury that refused all kinship.

The village was awake and active, people darting from one house to another as the sky opened and torrents of rain fell to meet the rising earth's unbridled appetite. Within minutes the fields had drunk deep and were forming lakes. The streets and tracks of the village were alive with rivulets and yellow tributaries of fast water. The villagers fell upon these eddies with a great frenzy of action. Rolled-up sacks and hessian were used to divert the flood into wells and gulleys which led to other cisterns. Logs and stones, even items of clothing, were improvised to divert this precious storm. The feuds and squabbles that fossilised the village were forgotten, water and its capture going beyond blood and its boundaries. The rain was constant and spiteful, the villagers were determined and drenched with mud. People slithered and ran, shouting instructions to the very young, screaming for more sacks, laughing and falling with the very old, who cursed. Those who were normally locked away joined the rush, limping and screaming with exhilaration and confusion. The entire village had turned into mud beings, a chaotic, purposeful mania rattling under the rains. Some animals watched from their stables and doorways, surprised and indignant at so much energy, water and noise.

I could not stay outside of this circus vortex, so I carefully stashed the bow and other goods high in the cave, away from the flood and beasts, and ran to work alongside a toothless elder who was trying to build a dam of rocks and rags.

His efforts were useless against the power of the flow. His slowness gave a pathetic humour to the event, his wall tumbling away every few minutes while he methodically continued to pile, seemingly unaware of the gleeful water and his mechanical futility. Together, we managed to turn the stream, sending it into the corner of the courtyard. It poured into the mouth of an open well, falling into its resounding depth with echoing slopes and splashes. As I watched our minor triumph, in a flash it occurred to me that I had no memory of Este bleeding, no picture of the blood leaving her body, just a vague blur of its presence drying everywhere in the room. Had these sounds caught a reflection, cupped the act in a palm of memory?

The old man tugged at my sleeve and cleared my vision. He had started work on another stream and needed my help. We continued directing the water for two hours, drenched to the bone but satisfied. The storm had passed, the rain stopped and the steaming earth had begun to dry. Birds were noisily making use of the orange puddles before they returned to dust. A saturated heat began to rise, forcing all labour to cease.

The family of the old man insisted that I should join them in their dripping home. Our celebratory feast was simple but powerful: we drank a coarse red wine made from the family's parched hard grapes and ate a dish of fat rice and dark meat cooked in pomegranate juice, punctuated by delicious bread with black onions baked into its crust. There was much merriment and we shared that language of need and alcohol, where the native and the foreign are overrun by excitement, and delicacies of grammar are jolted loose by emotion.

The old man concentrated on his food as if it were his last. I made

some slight comment of jest about this and was carefully told that the rains and the old have a special relationship in this land. I had heard rumour of this before, but our isolation had kept most things at a distance. Our contact with the neighbouring communities had been remote. But the spring rain ritual was true, and my host explained its necessity and the intricacies of its operation between mouthfuls of food and wine.

The old are a burden on their poor economy, becoming increasingly incapable of work. So, once past their useful stage, they are given to the mercy of the spring gods and placed outside their homes with food and drink for three days. At that time of year, the rains are soft and constant, very unlike the autumn deluge we had just suffered. They sit in silence, knowing that conversation or pleading will not help their condition: better to save strength. They also know that this is a more civilised and kinder test than those conducted by their forefathers. In those distant days of famine, the old were taken to steep cliffs and forced to find their own way home, the Gods growing fat on their torn and fractured remains. After their allotted time they are welcomed back inside and returned to their anxious beds.

A quarter of the old would die during those coming weeks, night chills, influenza or phenomena being the divine intervention. The rest would be celebrated, fed and honoured for another year. The old father cleaning his plate with his last scrap of bread had survived six spring rains, and had the intentions of surviving many more.

In the afternoon, I said my farewells and returned to my cave where I slept a peaceful and dreamless journey.

Far to the south, twilight was tasting the air. Swallows darted and looped in the invisible fields of rising insects, restless arrowheads spinning in the amber sunlight. One moment, black silhouette, iron age. The next, tilting to catch the sun, flashing deep orange, bronze age. Dipping and rotating in giddy time. Iron age, bronze age, iron age.

Watching them were the yellow eyes of a lone black man who sat on the mud parapet wall of a colonial stockade. He watched and attempted to gauge their distance and speed, making abstract calculations across the infinite depth of sky, a solemn assessment of range and trajectory for a shot that could never be made. Across his knees lay his Lee-Enfield rifle, a bolt-action firearm of legendary durability, in perfect working condition and untouched by any other hand since he was given it in his early manhood. He still remembered first grasping its solid weight and the smell of the brown oiled paper that it was wrapped in. The excitement of possession, matched by his pride at becoming a member of the bush police. That was forty-two years ago, and now Tsungali was beginning to feel the old rifle grow heavy again.

He and the gun bore cuneiform scars and indentations. They had been written into. Prophecies and charms marked his face, talismans against attack from animals, demons and men. The butt of the Enfield was inscribed against touch or loss, and for accuracy and courage; it also carried the tally of the twenty-three men and three demons it had officially dispatched. Tsungali had not worked for the police or the British army for many years. The Possession Wars had made him an outcast from the authorities, and far too much blood had been shed to divide the beliefs of both sides. So he was confused and disturbed at being called for, summoned to the enclosure that he had known so well and loved as home and had seen turned into the bitter kraal of his enemies.

They had come looking for him, not with troops, shackles and threats like before, but quietly, sending soft, curved words ahead that he was needed again. They wanted to talk and forget the crimes of before.

He had smelled this as a trick and set about carving new protections, constructing cruel and vicious physical and psychic traps about his house and land. He spoke to his bullets and fed them until they were fat, ripe and impatient. He waited in docile cunning for their arrival, which had proved to be calm, dignified, and almost respectful. Now he sat and waited to be ushered into the fort's headquarters, not knowing why he was there and surprised at his own obedience. He was shocked at the scent of homecoming which befuddled his warrior's instinct. He gripped the Enfield to fence it off, and used the swallows to gain focus before, during and after the event. He bled their speed into his anticipation, as the fierceness of the stars took command of the darkening sky.



I set my path by the night and walked out of the village while the track remained luminous. Later, starlight would make it shine in a different way, polishing the miles ahead with a bright, invisible velocity.

I walked between banked walls of white stone as if in a riverbed, the road hollowed out by time, weather and the continual passage of humans, migratory as birds. Tribes crossing and re-crossing the same gully, desperately trying to draw a line against extinction. It was with this herd of ghosts that I travelled, alone.

After some hours, I was stopped by an anxiety of sight. For some time I had become aware of tiny movements in the edges of my vision, fish-like punctuations breaking the solid wave of stone on either side, catching the light in dim flashes for less than a blink. Every time I stopped, the phenomenon ceased. When I continued, the glinting peripheral shoal followed me. There was wonder at first, but it had turned to unease, and I feared sentience or hallucination. Neither was wanted at that

time. I sought only loneliness and distance, not wanting association or introspection, it being necessary to seek one dimension to understand with clarity. I had been crippled by complexity before, and the healing from it had taken too many years. I would not go there again and share my being with all those others who would claim and squabble over my loyalty. I needed only to breathe and walk, but at that time of night, in that albino artery, I heard fear tracking me.

The bow came to my hand, wand-like and unstrung. She gave off musk into my grip, and its chemical blade reached my pounding heart, which had also turned white. It touched my mind like her tongue and I became calm and weightless, ready for the attack. Nothing happened. I stood, still as a post. After a time, I tilted my head slightly to see if anything moved. At first nothing, then a flicker; a single tiny glimmer. I focused on this sprite, moving towards it in the manner of a cat stalking a sound. It was not in the air, but in the white stone. I could see it embedded in its cretaceous library. Starlight had ignited it, a resonance of dim brilliance quivered about its edge. It was a fossilised shark's tooth, a small, smooth dagger encrusted onto the stone, its edges bitterly serrated and gnawing against the distant celestial light. There were hundreds of them stippling the rock.

It was my movement between them that rattled their light to give the impression of movement. These teeth were once greatly prized and, as I recalled, had offered a small industry to the local inhabitants, who dug them out and exported them to political cities where they were mounted in silver and hung in a cluster on a miniature baroque tree. It was called a credenza, a name that became synonymous with the side table that once held it. The Borgazis and the Medici owned rich and sumptuous versions. When a guest was given wine, he or she was shown to the tree, where they freely picked a tooth and placed it in their chalice, its delicate chain hooked over the rim. If the tooth turned black the wine was poisoned, if it stayed unstained then the credence of the wine and the host was proven

and business and friendship could commence.

There I stood in the black night, musing on distant tables and forgotten aggressions. Standing in a stone river of teeth, some of which I could use. Their compact hardness and their perfect jagged edges would make excellent arrowheads. In the approaching morning I would dig them out and clean them, find straight wood for the shafts and hunt swallows; their wings would be my fletching. The wings are only perfect when cut from the bird alive, so I would have to make nets to trap their speed.