

once more. Stretching out his hand, he plucked some dry leaves from a wild bush, then crawled on along the wadi. He remembered patience. But for patience he would have fallen into the pit. He made one more mighty effort, summoning the last strength left in his heart, and crawled on, along the length of the wadi.

It was desperate progress, a final move. Movement now decided life or death, spurred on by the resolution of a man in the grip of death to take in one last draft of life, even if his head should be sliced from his body. A goat breathes, takes in air, long after it's slaughtered. Even when its head's cut clean from its body. As for a slain *waddan*, it gets up, headless, and runs off a long way, before giving in at last and submitting to God.

Then there's the waran. With that things are even worse. You kill it in the morning, then, when you fling it on the fire to grill it at night, it leaps from the blaze and runs right off.

There's another life, between life and death. A third state neither void nor existence. He was in that state now, crawling along the wadi like a snake, his eyes blinded. He could see nothing, feel nothing; he was just seeking the drop of water he'd left yesterday down in the bottom of the wadi before the battle began.

With a trembling hand he felt the canvas wrapped around the canteen. He drank. Then he slept. He woke again at night, the second he'd spent away from his mother.



12. THE TRANSFORMATION

*He wanders the wild forests
Among the caves and crags
Like a moufflon exhausted
With sorrows, seeking
To flee what is ordained
In the eternal tablet
But fate's dispensation
Flies forever about his head.
—Sophocles, Oedipus Rex*

After this he felt an aversion to meat, to meat of all kinds. He noticed the change first when a small kid died and he found his mother cooking it in the cauldron at the mouth of the cave. He'd returned from herding, and the smell assailed him from far off. He felt dizzy and nauseous, and retched repeatedly before finally arriving home.

Meat aroused his disgust now. He was astonished he'd once been able to enjoy it. How could one creature eat the flesh of another? What was the difference between the flesh of an animal and that of man? If someone could eat the flesh of the *waddan*, then he could eat human flesh too. Had his father come to dwell in the *waddan*, and the *waddan* in his

father? He, his father, and the mighty *waddan* were one now. Nothing could separate them.

All this irritated his mother, who said it was the work of the jinn and urged him to seek help from a magician's talisman.

"Be a man, won't you?" she scolded angrily. "Have the merchants from the caravans bring you an amulet from Kano or Timbuktu."

But he didn't deign to speak to the merchants on the subject. He wasn't afraid of the jinn, nor had he any wish to seek protection against the *waddan*. Who seeks protection against himself? But he didn't tell her the secret—the secret of his transformation.



13. THE JOURNEY OF THE BODY

The people in the oases wove many myths around the transformation.

He was driven from the desert by drought, and had, for the first time in his life, to go down to the oases and venture his lot among people. His "pilgrimage" to Ghat happened just as Captain Bordello was launching his campaign to seize the young men of the oases and force them into the camp he'd prepared, to train them for the invasion of Abyssinia.^{vii}

Before that drought came, the sky had drenched the desert wadis with floods. These floods had taken them by surprise, driving the old mother from the cave, and he'd found her remains three days later in Abrahoh. Stones had torn away her limbs as she was swept on and on. Her head was disfigured, and the bushes had plucked the short silver hair from her small head, leaving it almost naked; nothing was there on the skull but a few scattered hairs caked with mud. The right eye had gone, ripped away by the stones on that savage journey, and an empty, gaping space was left. The other eye was shining, staring up at the sky. With the head he found part of the neck covered with a layer of mud, which had dried over the blood. The arms and legs, and the rest of the

body, he'd found scattered along the length of the wadi, torn apart, over those three days, as if hacked by a knife. The right hand was still clinging on to the thorns of an acacia, as it had been before it was ripped from her body, and on the arm the bones shone through in several places. The merciless stone had eaten up the soft parts. He tried to wrench the thorns from the crazy grasp, but in vain; the flesh had all fallen away, but the bony fingers still clung on stubbornly. She must have gripped the tree as the waters swept her away, and still held firmly to the thorns. But the frenzied might of the flood overcame the mad desire to keep hold of life and breath. Then the body had been severed from the arm, which was fixed fast to the thorns of deliverance. The thorns of life! Here was that third state, between life and death, being and void, heaven and earth, which he'd seen in slain animals, which he'd known himself as he crawled along the wadi in search of a drop of water. Between life and death was a space from which a creature could return to life, or else cross over into death, go on into the void and darkness.

He couldn't, there in the long, broad wadi, find the other remains. Whenever he found a piece of her body, he'd place it in his bag, climb up to the heights and bury it there, so that his martyred mother had five graves along the tops of the wadi, each far from the other. The memorial stones stood like signposts, condemning the unknown transgressor.

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14. THE TWO OPPOSITES

The flood had set on them with its old, immemorial weapon—treachery. He'd seen no sign of it coming. The sky had been clear since morning, quite bare of clouds, and this had led him to go out early with his goats. At night, too, he'd noticed no lightning, heard no remote rumbling of thunder. But Tadrart and the whole Akasus mountain range were seeing streaming night rains, heavier than for many long years. And, as usual, the wadis didn't gush with the flood for two days more. The torrent had taken his mother by surprise, at dusk, while he was away in the pastures.

Man in the desert had to die by one of those two opposites: flood or thirst.

After her death, he spent some weeks on the heights with the goats he had left, until the rushing waters abated and the thirsty wadis began to absorb them. Thousands of years of thirst had caused the land to do away with the rivers. It had become dry and cracked, parched for water.

That year the wadis and plains, and the fringes of the mountains, became thick with forests and plants and grasses. He saw trees he'd never seen before, ate herbs he'd never eaten. Where, he wondered, had the desert hidden the seeds

for these plants? No sooner had the rains poured, the waters flowed to every corner, than the cruel, gloomy, drought-stricken land had turned green with plants of a thousand kinds. They simply sprang up, and the dull, dried-up trees turned green in a few days. It was as though the seeds strewn in nothingness, in the folds of the sands, among the massive rocks, had been waiting for that moment, eager for the sky to meet the earth. And when that consummation came, the seed buried in nothingness quivered and breathed out its relief, cracking earth and stone alike, stretching out its head in search of sun and life.

It pleased him to stoop down and contemplate the small leaves that had cracked the layer of mud and raised their heads from the void, impelled as they were by the force of life. They'd ripped through the veil of darkness to find joy in the open spaces. Water grants life to the desert, just as it had granted death to his old mother.

And, as usual, the surging floods were followed by drought. This drought was long, lasting more than four years. In the first and second years he lived on the plants the generous floods had provided. But in the third year the south wind, blowing over the desert in waves, destroyed what trees remained and sucked the last hope of life from the wadis' plants.

In that third year the herd of goats began to perish too. All he'd nurtured during the year of plenty, kids and goats, was wiped out by that south wind. The wadis all turned yellow, became wilted and desolate. The goats, finding nothing else to eat, searched for dung among the rocks, eating their own droppings from the years of flood.

Asouf would sit on a rock above the well, pour a little water for them to drink, and gaze at their bodies, withered and scrawny, listless and gaunt. Where was the robust spirit that marked goats out? The energy and mischief? That natural

virality of the kids? Where were those strong he-goats endlessly butting one other, fighting over some beloved she-goat? Where was the clever gaze, from the black and luminous eye?

All this had vanished. The goats couldn't, at last, find any cakes of dung redolent of the grasses of that strange year. Even the merchants from the caravans were no longer willing to barter. Once he'd gone and tethered three beasts up on the heights, then withdrawn some way off and waited for the caravan to pass on its way to Kano. The merchants had arrived, taken a close look at the she-goats, talked among themselves, then gone off without leaving him anything. They'd rejected the goods—his goats were no longer fit for exchange. What was he to do? How would he live without dates, and without barley?

But that disaster was easier to bear than the one that followed. The herd began to die off. One morning he rose at dawn to find a she-goat had perished during the night. Then two more she-goats followed, and a he-goat and a kid. Then the corpses became regular.

He grew ever more anxious, and began to think seriously of going down to the oases. The decision wasn't an easy one, but he could see death creeping closer by the day. The wadi was strewn with the bodies of goats. He'd watch them die, not even moving to slaughter them; for, since what had happened there at the pit, he no longer butchered or ate meat. He'd be woken at night by the noise of wolves fighting over the stinking carcasses. Then, in the morning, he'd heap sand over the rotting corpses, with their bellies and entrails torn by the wolves, their eyes, so black and sad and beautiful before, eaten out by maggots. Even so, he didn't leave the caves for the distant Akasus mountains until the last goat had died. Then the final thread with Massak Satfat was cut.

15. INTO THE FIRE

Captain Bordello's men seized him the day he entered the oasis. Finding him sitting against the wall in the ironmongers' market, trying to catch his breath after the long trip, they manacled his hands and led him off to the Italian garrison on the hill. Inside he found a group of young men similarly taken, who laughed as they saw him coming, exchanged mocking remarks, then started bombarding him with questions. When they learned he'd just come down to Ghat from Massak Satisfat, remote and afflicted with drought, one of them laughed uneasily. "That's what you call coming out of the frying pan," he said, "into the fire." They all laughed.

Next morning they were packed together like sheep, in a long line, and led off toward Uwaynat, en route for Marzouq. There the crazed Captain was waiting to train them, then use them to fulfill his heroic dreams of invading Abyssinia from the east with troops on camel back.

On the way something happened—something the people of the oasis constantly recounted, around which they wove legends. The young men told them how they'd witnessed a miracle for the first time in their lives. They'd seen a man break loose from his captivity and change into a *waddan*, then

run off toward the mountains, bounding over the rocks like the wind, heedless of the bullets flying all around him. Had anyone ever seen a man transformed into a *waddan*? Had anyone ever seen a person escape the Italians' guns, running on until he vanished into the darkness of the mountains?

The wise oasis Sufis, enraptured, rocked their heads from side to side and threw incense into the fire, convinced one and all that this man was a saint of God. That evening they went to the Sufi mosque and celebrated a *dhikr*^{viii} through the night in praise of God and in homage to the saint, filled with joy that the divine spirit should have come to dwell in a wretched creature of this world.

That was Asouf's first and last encounter with the oasis people. He went to Massak Mallat, where he tended his herd of camels. And there God opened for him a door He'd open only to his saints: a passing cloud crossed the lower wadis, and they flowed with water. For several months he stayed there in the sandy desert, with his camels, until the depths of the sky at last took pity on the mountain desert and he returned to the caves of Matkhandoush.

Had the Sufi dervishes, in their vision of the holiness of God's spirit incarnate, read the secrets of the unknown?



16. PRAYER

Cain insisted Asouf should go with them in search of *waddan* in the nearby mountains, seating him between the two of them while Masoud drove the truck. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he cursed the desert with vile words Asouf hadn't heard before—he'd never in his life heard such ugly expressions. What had the desert done to deserve all these insults? The truck sped on, eating up the plain that merged into the horizon.

This was the second time Asouf had ridden in a truck. The first time had been with the white-haired Italian expert, who'd seated him next to himself in a land rover and asked him to point out the caves of the Wadi Aynesis. He'd scoured the surrounding mountains with him, rock by rock, setting up stones near some of the caves and sprinkling a white liquid on them to mark them out from the rest, then returned with him to Matkhandoush. The Italian had given him some cans of food, a loaf of bread, and a packet of biscuits, then, with a smile, he'd gotten into his Land Rover and driven off eastward to Abrahoh. He was a good, friendly Christian. On their way back they'd encountered a pair of *waddan*, a male and a female, running slowly toward the mountain. The

26. THE BLEEDING OF THE STONE

*Now at that time Libya was dry and bereft of moisture, and
the band of nymphs, their hair unbound, bewailed its springs
and lakes.*

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The sun sent down its twilight rays, so that Asouf couldn't open his eyes. The sun, after first rising, is always angry, arrogant, vengeful. Only with sunset does its fierceness begin to fade, as, overtaken by age, it kneels a humble supplicant before sinking toward its daily void.

He remembered how the crazed *waddan* had led him on, then flung him down into the pit, leaving him hanging at its mouth; and how, but for the great secret his father had bequeathed him, the gift of patience—the sole secret able to vanquish the desert—he would never have been delivered from his plight.

That dreadful thing, though, had happened in his youth. Now sheer weakness forced him to bow his head, to break in pieces on the rock as the proud sun does when it vanishes at its setting. But for old age, he would never have surrendered so quickly to the third condition. Before, at the pit, he'd

resisted long before reaching this state, resisted until the wondrous *waddan* had plucked him out and he'd found himself tumbling down the slope. He was like the possessed waran now, which he'd slain in the morning and put in his bag, only to find it run off, dead though it was, when he'd flung it into the fire that evening. Here he was now, leaving life and yet not entering death. He was knocking on a door, between death and life.

Cain stood there, in front of the crucified body on the rock, beating his head with his two fists to lessen the sharp pain. A long thread of spittle, dripping from his mouth, glinted beneath the rays of the twilight sun, then fell to the ground. The south wind blew, and Cain's madness grew more raging.

"Speak up, you cursed old fool!" he shrieked. "Where have you hidden those animals?"

And the herdsman murmured his charm: "Only through dust will the son of Adam be filled."

He uttered this fainting, behind a door between earth and heaven, life and death.

Cain pounded his head once more, then shouted to Masoud.

"I remember now. I remember! This is the animal that came to me the other night. This is the devil that flung me down in the pit. How could I ever have forgotten? What made me want to come to this empty wilderness anyway? I remember! I was clutching on to this devil's horns." He laughed. "Look! Just look at his horns! Aren't they the horns of the accursed devil in the Quran?"

As he began laughing again, more spittle began to drip, in thin threads. And each time he broke into fresh shrieks of laughter, further shining threads would spew out. The sight turned Masoud sick. He'd never seen Cain in such a state.

Feeling a lurking anxiety now, he went up to his friend.

"That's enough," he said pleadingly. "That's enough now. It's time we left. We'll look for some meat in the nearest oasis. I'll find you some meat, I promise I will."

Cain thrashed out with his hand.

"Are you mad?" he shrieked. "Or is this your idea of a joke? We've crossed deserts, we've put up with hunger and thirst. And now we're supposed to go back to the oases, without any *waddan*? Go back there empty-handed? Get off! Get away from me!"

His eyes, sinking into their sockets, became fiercer and crueler. He moved toward the tent.

"Why don't you stop talking rubbish," he shouted, "and try to loosen this cursed wretch's tongue? Find out where he's hiding those *waddan* of his."

He rummaged among the crockery, then came back to the sandy area. His face was pale, the cheeks sunk deeper, and his eyes were bulging out. The odd light in his eyes left Masoud still more anxious than before. He saw the knife glittering in Cain's hand as he moved ever closer toward his victim. He ran to block the way.

"Cain!" he entreated. "What are you doing? The sun's got to you. Why don't we get away from here, now? I—"

He swallowed with difficulty, then fell on his knees in front of his friend.

"It's all right," he went on. "I know where he hides those animals of his. We'll go to Massak Mallat. It's less than a few miles from here."

Cain gave a crazy laugh.

"I don't need your animals now," he said, brandishing the glittering knife in the air. "I've my own sacrificial animal. Look! Do you see that *waddan* hanging there? It's a *waddan*."

Why didn't I see it earlier? What an utter fool I was!"

He struck his own head with the blade of the knife, and began to sway. Masoud got up and once more blocked the way, but Cain thrust him aside. He lost his balance and fell, then, getting up, tried to snatch the knife from Cain's hand, but Cain stabbed at him viciously, and Masoud only just swayed away in time, escaping with a wound on the wrist. Blood came spurting out, the drops falling onto the thirsty sand.

Cain stood there at Asouf's feet, where Asouf hung from the rocky face, his head dangling down on his breast, his face drained of color, his lips white and cracked from thirst and the south winds. His body was thrust into the hollow of the rock, merging with the body of the *waddan* painted there. The *waddan's* horns were coiled around his own neck like a snake. The masked priest's hand still touched his shoulders, as if blessing him with secret rites.

Cain turned to climb the rock from its west side. Masoud yet again tried to block the way, stretching out his arms as if to embrace him.

"Curse the devil," he muttered, "and throw away that knife."

Cain waved the weapon menacingly in the air, and Masoud retreated. Then Cain climbed the rock from the flatter side, and, laughing wildly into the face of the sun, bent over the herdsman's head where it hung bowed. Taking hold of the beard, he passed the knife over Asouf's neck in the manner of one well used to slaughter, one who'd slaughtered all the herds of gazelles in the Red Hamada.

Asouf didn't shriek or make any protest. It was Masoud who screamed, the sound ringing through the nearby mountain peaks. The jinni maidens in the caves responded with their lamentations, and the mountain was rent. The face of the sun turned dark, and the banks of the wadi vanished in the eternal desert.

The murderer flung the head down on a flat stone there in front of the rock. Asouf's lips moved. The head, severed from the body, murmured: "Only through dust will the son of Adam be filled."

Blood dripped onto the surface of this stone half buried in the earth. On the stone, in the mysterious Touareg alphabet resembling the symbols of Kano soothsayers, was written the following:

I, the High Priest of Matkhandoush, prophesy, for the generations to come, that redemption will be at hand when the sacred *waddan* bleeds and the blood issues from the stone. It is then that the miracle will be born; that the earth will be cleansed and the deluge cover the desert.

Still the blood poured over the surface of the stone buried in the lap of the sand. The murderer had no eyes to see how the sky had darkened, how clouds had blocked out the desert sun.

Masoud leaped into the truck and switched on the engine. At the same moment great drops of rain began to beat on its windows, washing away, too, the blood of the man crucified on the face of the rock.