

Chasing
Shadow
and
Make Believe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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by

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Abstract:

My thesis is a science fiction novella. It follows the story of an adolescent boy, Shadow, and a little girl, Makebelieve, in an ahistorical future. The world that they traverse is earth, after being nursed back to health, by technologically advanced Southern African societies. A series of inexplicable astronomical events leads to their being hunted down. Through the travels of Shadow and Makebelieve I show how the world and the societies around them operate. I am inspired by Samuel R Delaney's *Aye, Gomorrah* and Derrick Bell's *The Space Traders*, because of their prowess in world building and exploration of complex and innovative ideas.

“Greetings are an integral part of the Basotho culture... it is not only surprising but offensive if someone walks past...therefore we must be sure to greet members of our communities”
[sesothostudy.co.za] therefore I greet those who helped me realize this work

Acknowledgements

My humble thanks to the poets who allowed me to title my sections with their words

Sisonke Papu “i cannot say this life is soft or hard”

Lesego Rampolokeng “My Blackness cuts out the light”

Nomtha Ndyoko “and if this is how my road...”

Simthembile Matyobeni “this how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

My deepest gratitude to my supervisor **Dr Paul Mason** alias **O, great Voidmason** who helped me with the delicate task of keeping the spirit of the work alive without bias and interruption, rather with sensitivity and understanding

It ataks meny poeple.

Dedendum I_

There Are Five people in this photograph, all of them are dead; including me

The one with the cat is Mzwandile; look at his smile it is like an old man's

Smiling with his shoulders;

when the photo was taken we thought we won

He was a master smith and a brilliant engineer; his gift – optimism

When we piloted the Splint technology he would clap my back saying: well done,

.

Without his mind we would not have built the moon habitats

His cat Bon would follow him everywhere

Can you blame us for being hopeful in that photograph?

He had dreams of settling on Mars and having grand kittens

In the war he was sterilized

.

It was not our war to fight

But we benefited

Our weapons program

Our weapons program catapulted us into the first world

.

And we had a plan

When the war was exited and there wasn't a planet left we had an out

.

They called our advantage AKS – Ancient Knowledge Systems

We called it that too to confuse them

In this photograph we are laughing about it

.

All five of us

It ataks meny poeple.

Cast of characters

Major

Shadow

A boy of fifteen winters, without a home, without parents, squats in a lone spire on the outskirts of the market place. He is of darker complexion than those who toil in the sun.

Make Believe

A girl, who looks no older than nine long summers, she appears suddenly in the confines of the Stalagmata, unaccompanied. She has skin of bleached bone.

Mariha waMmele

Ambitious, yet still a rentbody by bloodline. She has clawed her way to the command of the harems that are built on the outskirts of the Stalagmata. She wields much power, but she without station – prestige. She is wealthy by measure of influence. She is of billowing proportions generous in shape. Skin as shaded as the seed coating of an almond drupe.

Matseleng waPele

Her honorific is Mbokodo. A solitary woman who has outlasted the seasons that can be counted in living memory. She is directly related to the first people to settle when the Stalagmata sprouted. She is a diviner able to commune with forces beyond. She was an idealist as a young woman but has been confined to the last remaining Xenolith spire. She has not participated in the intrigues of the societies in living memory. Her smooth skin is as pungent in colour as the rock face of the Stalagmata.

Recurring

Master moTswahole

A man sworn to duty who has seen a forty cycles of seasons from the time he could count them. His family has station in the Stalagmata through their service. He is skilled in breeding and raising animals. It was a long dead relative of his who arrived at the Stalagmata and strategically bred animals for warfare that secured his place as the Rhinokeep. He has skin the as deep as the mud banks of a marsh.

Kopano wabaLateli

Lead council of the man who will rule as leader of the Stalagmata. He is affluent and respected. He has many wives. He is observant of traditions and customs. He lives to serve the incumbent Seitlamo, but has his hands full with Seitlamo's bullishness. He is an opulent dresser with a charismatic air about him.

Seitlamo wabaPele

By birth the replacement of the incumbent leader of the Stalagmata, Moutlwa. He is more militaristically inclined than his forefathers. He believes in the legend of the Stalagmata as the greatest society, living. He believes the old ways are cumbersome to the Stalagmata's progress. And with the little he knows he is highly suspicious of Matseleng. He wishes to rule and change the order ushering in an era of dominance. He is tall and athletic, a muscular frame and a complexion of strong brewed Ceylon tea.

Nkwe waNtweng

A Domba father, trainer of young military men. He trained Seitlamo as a boy. He is aging and he has forgotten more autumns than he has left. Strong and full of vigour he is supportive of Seitlamo's ambitions. He has been a military man all his life and when he was young he was the most famed fighter. He is muscular with a straight posture and has a scraggly beard. His skin is bronze like the majority of the population.

Mbali wabaPele

The second daughter and favourite child of Seitlamo. She is as hot tempered as her father. Her beautiful face and stature belie a trained fighter who is a champion in divisions more senior than her age. She is mischievous and indulged constantly testing the boundries of her privilege.

Introducing

It ataks meny poeple.

Pula wabaLetlapeng

A young male of the Stalagmata going through his rite of passage. He is an adequate member of his Domba. His life is mostly quiet except for the times he is drawn into the adventures of Mbali. He harbours unrequited feelings for her. She stole his first adolescent yearnings and he has no recourse. His family can be traced back to the first bargain. Where the first family formed alliances with influential agricultural cooperations that lived in the hinterlands. Many generations later his family enjoys station and very little attention.

Kaoane waLekala

A mysterious man from the Baobab society who is on a clandestine mission. He is in the Stalagmata under the guise of observing the transition of power as Moutlwa is rumoured to be dying soon. He has behind him the sinister technological advantage of the Baobab.

“It ataks meny poeple.”

OI

Black Boy: as black; as thin; as strong; as the pitchblende membrane that separates the stars. No family. His companion, the girl; what she lacks in complexion she makes up for in complexity; enamel skin buckshot with grey freckles, the colour of fossilized gunpowder. Two children: following the ancient cartography of rivers and cairns, away from the old country where the spires of the Stalagmata Plinth would safely bar the intrusion of the heavens

It ataks meny poeple.

Here: birds of prey pray over them, as far as hunger goes the land is deserted. Under the lash of winter the rivers are barely memorable ballads, the song of the bullfrogs croaked for the season. It is the falsetto husk of the reeds that flutters from the decant of the banks – a wilting lyric of thirst and parchment

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Old country

The Stalagmata Plinth rises like a citadel of termite mounds, huddled stalagmites of living stone stabbing out from the flat red earth. This incarnate of the Plinth is a geometric outcrop, of parts with the same statistical character as the whole, settled and purposed by humans. Its inhabitants defining and redefining themselves by it, believing their interventions self-determined

The sensorial century of this place meets the eye; the mono chronological nature of it; the facile millennia that built it – the work of the Plinth, the Plinth is a lodestone, in the unsophisticated sense, put simplistically. Historically, before it was planted this land was a hard broker of crag rock and piles of immovable stone, but beneath the surface the mineral yield was vulnerable to the infection of the Plinth's probes. The Plinth's initialization-hibernation-cycle took over a hundred generations, too many seasons, neglected loads of lives; sparse of sympathy

Instinctively, some people stayed. They are the first families that the society descends from. Patience is their fortune. The living memory of their ancestors suffering famine in the first days is hardwired. Their stares are impenetrable, their resolve as impervious as the lineal stone that came before them. Militarily superstitious they trade unevenly with the other seven Plinth societies of the continent

In the main market quadrant on the outskirts of the Protolith-sector, at the very fringe of the society, was the place the boy called home. He came the way of the road used by traders, stolen on freight where the people of that caravan wore the hides of the animals that didn't make the journey like mourning dress

He did odd jobs in the market quadrant to keep himself inconspicuous amongst the transient people of the trade post. In the bustle of the quadrant idleness was a dead give-away. The agora was hedged by harems. Only place he couldn't help but be noticed. This is where they cursed him, how he came to have his name. They used the derogatory of orphan: *an unmastered umbra, a rogue shadow without body*. Daily, he would be at the heels of employers carrying on his back goods in every direction. When the strangers were kind they would ask where he tears from. Shadow would point at some imaginary position behind the Protolith façade without. Without history: he couldn't so much as say where he was from as say where he had been

Shadow – that name. No one would address him otherwise. He laboured under that name. Dutifully he went about dispatching errands for favour or protection or a morsel that would've been fed to the stray: the animals and the lost children, children near disappearing. He knew the concourses and avenues, who to barter with like the woman in charge of a den who led the charge of referring to him by that name. First two stories

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There are numerous harems, shoring the marketplace, at the boundary of the central Stalagmata; varying in quality and sensibility, working in symbiosis with the ins and outs as seamlessly as a mucous membrane. Not a place of ill repute or blight on the Society, rather a necessary functioning part of. Of many other parts; Part sanctuary: example, the broken and disoriented dropouts of life gather at their backdoors and are treated with a kindness; resilient and brilliant; grace. The whole, the ones with stations and accountability come down from the towers unadulterated, to worship at the altar of the body for the chemical exchange at the biological level. Body alterations: decorative

It ataks meny poeple.

scarring, face paint – for every persuasion; the girls and boys; eunuchs and dominatrix; the trade in fervour for favour; the tenured and the to-lets, body rents – commiserating in the slip between the outliers and the inhabitants. An autonomous underclass ruled predominantly by women, with a hierarchy – at the top of which is Mariha waMmele-aPele. It's no coincidence that her secondary family name is similar to that of the First Family, baPele; the kinship is an open wound that congeals from time to time and yields a scab such as her. She is as wound as an animal hide whip, able to feign love, threatening. Feudal in her reign, respected and heralded in the old ways. Traditionally anyone who came into the employ of the district would be given an epithet by her and the same held true for Shadow however unfortunate the name was. She ran a tight operation. The function and relationship of the district to the societal state, though favourable was tenuous. There ran through an understanding that what guaranteed the sum of its parts are its exploitable functions. Function: the merchant class groggy from the road in need of temporal replacement, easily gives the news of their respective homelands, these leaks are then tapped for information by the intelligence forum or diplomatic corps. The sheer volume of traffic, main and auxiliary staff Mariha had to entertain and manage was immense – her temperament was a controlled explosion, direct and incendiary in order to render patience a non-function. She would tell people who asked after the secret of her resilience, that she ate a spinach of parboiled pumpkin leaves with pasted peanuts and a soft pap in the mornings. The food of the harems had a legend of its own: hot stone meats with the spices of all eight societies, clay baked bread and the rock climbing pumpkin, were all lauded delicacies. Of course dispute was not uncommon, but it was rarely overly contentious, the world knew of the Stalagmata braid – preciously weaved, it sheathed razor sharp garrottes every wielder was adept at killing with. The militarized mentality of the society was pervasive. Mariha, herself was warlike if not more so. She had wished to lead a Domba, a female battalion – military service being compulsory for all members of the society - but she could not join the rite as per the custom. Girls or boys in her employ, who were society born and had fled the Domba or Donga were most vulnerable to her wrath. They weren't the only ones: on noticing Shadow, she tore into the boy and the people followed suit, and he couldn't overturn the vitriol because of his precarious status as an unwelcome migrant. In the first year and fortnightly since, she would command him to her room, alone. Boastful under the influence of distilled nettle and red ant wine she would crow that no man had ever ruled her and then present her naked body as evidence. It is unblemished, not even a birth scar. Her frame, two metres, would tower over him and she would. End of story. The place Shadow called home was the sole structurally sound Xenolith. The market was built on the ruins of the Xenolithic strata – an anomalous build of the Plinth that outwardly appears as materially different from the main calibration. It fell to dilapidation over long dead politics. He lives on the ground floor and has made a place for himself. On the top storey, at the pinnacle of the Xenolith's spire lives an old woman; alone. Completely cocooned in the amber-esque chambers of her dwellings, she is stone-age, a many generation survivor. The wellspring the daughters of this patch of earth sprout from. She had retreated to this old crow's nest. When taking in the view through her north facing window, over time she has seen: first her daughters in chains, then her granddaughters still in chains, then her great-granddaughters, still in chains, then her great-great-granddaughters in ignorance, then now her great-great-great-granddaughter proudly dwelling just outside the rightful claim to first amongst the first, taking charity and patronage at the physical limits of the Stalagmata, against the bind of the totem. Often she would bear it or shake her head. Her name: Matseleng waPele.

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The markets are closed. Only a few novice tradesmen arrive and are turned back by guardsmen in ceremonial armour. Stalagmata fighters pride themselves on fighting unimpaired, with hammer and blade. The Rieldans fighting style is fast and very involved, animalistic and primal; the armour a Stalagmata soldier wears on the battle field is reinforced Battle Rhino hide straps covering the main arteries at the jugular, groin, lymph nodes and covering the Achilles tendons.

It ataks meny poeple.

The harems are quiet; not closed; the harems are never closed. Out of respect the business is off the street and confined to quarters by previous arrangement only. Mariha is not there herself. She is an invited guest to the day's festivities. She will take a seat of prominence to hear the address of the First Family's representative. She won't sit near them but in a place of prominence amongst important people. None of them leaders of her calibre but her station is less than the fault of her name.

Shadow must not stray. If he is found by the guards on this day he would be banished. He is in costume: loose tan coloured pants, a nondescript breathable cotton long-sleeve shirt, and an elbow length sandstone textured cape with a cowl and amulets of copper alloy in the custom. He keeps to where the crowds are, farther into the society than he would care to go; the direction is to the Stone Hearth, kraal of the first family. Under crowd cover, he meanders, avoiding notice, circling rather than heading, keeping close to the Protolith.

Mbali wabaPele is up to mischief. At seventeen a year away from her seniority she is the precious stone of her family, a spoilt child. She is accomplished: leader of her Domba, a contender in three senior age divisions, strong and strikingly attractive with an athletic build; the world is at her beckon. She is sulking through the streets with her age mates because the world's attention is on the day not her.

The Rhinokeep's attire is counter-intuitive. The regalia is fashioned with impractical designs such as the long cape, easily a hazard when wrangling the Battle Rhino, but only the best wear such as a testament to their skill. He walks amongst the giant breed with a low hum, rousing the animals from their rest position. He keeps hooks for saddling on the move. He is twisting at their carved handles and looking closely into the eyes of each of the herd to spot a rogue. He always gets nervous before a run. And the coursing of civilians past the holding pens, to see the animals, is not helping.

Little girl, sitting atop one of the stones with the engineered moss that helps leech water from the air; meowing. Parents won't let their toddlers pet her. She believes that the world takes no notice of her because her skin is invisible. She has nowhere to go and the world moves all around her. A boy runs past. Locks eyes. Instant. At that very moment she knows more than she has ever known. All that she has ever wanted to know. He realized her; she was there. So she leapt off her perch and went running after him. *Tsek*, he said, but she didn't know the word.

The guardsmen who were in an observance position wished to intervene. But this was a wabaPele child, verily they knew their place. There was no knowing why the girl and her peers were chasing after a hooded boy and what looked like an unseasonable initiate – covered in ash paint, like a geomancer's apprentice. They didn't know what to make of it. However obvious the ruckus, the disturbance was minimal and they preferred to stay at their post. Mbali was not allowed to copulate, the custom would not allow her, and so she spent her time in the harems. The boy everyone called Shadow had denied her advances, so she was going to teach him a lesson.

Shadow was cursing the little girl who was following him, cursing his luck that he ran into that forward girl and her goons, avoiding people so as not to entangle himself. The attention being drawn to him was putting more strain on his chest than his running. He was ahead of his pursuers, who were famed athletes at their age, but he couldn't shake the mysterious girl at his heels, who ran unencumbered, who matched his pace and distance effortlessly. He darted down a street, across a boulevard down a tunnel over a barricade. The barricade slowed the girl down whereas he vaulted over it she had to clamber and clamber she did.

It ataks meny poeple.

Mariha was enjoying the attention of acquaintances and especially the gesture of members of the Higher Ranks leaving their place by the First Family's stand to greet her in person instead of sending messengers. She was dressed in opulent regalia, a gown made of the fabrics from all the cardinals of the known world. Her copper amulets were made from the purest alloy. The run of the Stalagmata pride was about to start when she saw him appear, he jumped over the barrier into the cordoned off barricade. In the distance was the rumble of the stamp of the beasts.

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The girl woke up in Shadow's dwelling. First she felt for where the crook of his arm had caught her neck, when he had turned and swept her away from the tramp of the beasts. Then she laid eyes about her; the place was a wonder and had a warmth about it. She felt an unacquainted newness. Things she never knew anew. She felt the coming on of a new life

Of all the lives he had lived, this one would be the one that kills him – thought Shadow. His life seemed more complicated when he resisted it and she was unyieldingly by him. The market place would elbow and pinch sides to point out the way she shadowed him almost absurdly. So he surrendered. And she could stay and she did stay

The way things went, Shadow was not surprised when the lady who lived above him and never left her place, announced herself at his door. She introduced herself, took the necessary measures to read them a fortune, then departed; telling the girl to find a name

Spontaneously, the girl grew sick; she was his ward; so he went about the business of taking care of her. Ill as she was she followed him. People who saw them that day reported seeing the nefarious fellow tailed by a mirage. He approached the medicine stores behind the fabric district – not daring to chance surgeons directly; the guard heard *-thought, he-* saw a barking dog; Shadow had already snuck in and sunk into the darkness the tips of light rummaged for at the corners, he held his breath; away, as a dog, she yapped

The girl lapsed into fever and languished, even with the pilfered medicine, it broke eventually. She woke up agitated desperate to speak. Shadow rested her head in the crook of his arm. She spoke: *name. imagination.* Shadow said *no, your name can't be make believe*

After the fever she was a bulbous pupa of chatter, announcing her name to everyone. The old woman did not find it agreeable. The old woman did not find many things agreeable but in this case she did not speak out against it. The troubled reading she got from the burning log she could not decipher had her compulsively assume it had to do with this boy and girl, but it seemed a once off occurrence. Finding herself firmly in their midst now she accorded them a small favour. She appeared in public with the children and from then on they were given a begrudged respect, even from Mariha

Mariha could trace her bloodline to that abandoned old woman, Matseleng. But it was so far back that the strain only allowed her to feel resentment; this woman did not elevate her station and now she had chosen to give esteem to the two runts who lived in her ruin

A delegation of the upper familial class accompanied by guards sent gossip and cured curiosity through the market. Mariha knew nothing of their visit and she sent her acolytes into a headlong scurry to ready the harems. But they walked past the harems and trained their direction for the Xenolith. She followed them but could not ascertain their motives. The derelict spire had a white noise about it usually and the audible hiss turned into a subsonic sizzle as the Stalagmata contingent entered.

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It ataks meny poeple.

The old and new bodies who entered the Xenolith in two column single file are dignitaries of the council, people of station, by birthright and utility, who wield inherited power. Their number is engrossed by a ceremonial guard, that shuffles at their entitled pace. They rarely venture beyond the main configuration. But their business is with Matseleng. It's a reluctant business. The death of the Principal Rock though not sudden affords them this inconvenience. They must consult with Matseleng, inform her of the passing, ask her if she contests the succession and finally en masse put an end to her sudden reappearance in the society.

Leading the procession is the head councilman and emissary Kopano, born into the family of Principal's primary council. He is ahead of Seitlamo the next in line to ascend to herald of the Stone Hearth. The entire council: headsmen and headswomen are present as witnesses, representatives of the military, engineer and seamstress classes.

As per protocol established ages before their births, refined before the inclination of the lives, the emissary and solely the emissary will present their business to the Eldest Rock, the woman of the Xenolith. The fallen Stone

They whinge their way up to the top of the Xenolith spire and arrived winded at their destination

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Kopano, is nervous they have arrived in this way. He is a firm believer in protocol, but is aware that the large party will be received with hostility. He is first to enter in the old woman's living quarters. She is seemingly unsurprised. Behind him members of the council, aides and the guard, file in and fan out along the wall before the Seitlamo enters

"You look strong": Kopano says

"There is a rock that bares my likeness" Matseleng gives the old reply, coolly.

"Pardon our intrusion great Mbokodo, but we seek audience"

"Speak your business I am aware of the season" She says

"The council," Kopano starts

"The beneficiaries of thieves" Her impatience bristles

"Look witch I am" Seitlamo wabaPele, the apparent, soon to rise to Head of the Rock chooses to butt in "We came here"

Matseleng looks hard into the eyes of Kopano "Tame him" she says dismissively

Kopano has to know his place yet manage the situation. "I have no place to direct him as he is my keep, and we come humbly"

"Get on with it" She says. Kopano is relieved that she caught his double speak. He had acknowledged her insult without the awareness of the young apparent. It was only obvious to one other person in the room, a Donga leader, a man old enough to know the ways.

"As per your instructions we bring no tribute" Kopano continues

"Yes, yes"

"The news is grave"

"My great-grandfather," Seitlamo is bored with how long these procedures and protocols take. He expects to make changes to these dated traditions as soon as he heads the Rock.

"As I expected" She sucks her teeth at her young relative.

"Mbokodo, we are..." Kopano tries to salvage the occasion by using the honorific

"Have you no regard?" Seitlamo always quick to temper misunderstands the slight intended for him as disrespect for the dying.

"Excuse my keep" Kopano is now standing between them, slightly out of the way so as not to bare his back to anyone of importance "Tell him to leave us" She commands

"This is preposterous" Seitlamo is temperamental and his exasperation lowers his station

"Tell this wetting stone that my patience is thin" She rises slightly from her seated position. It is not a physical action but the way her voice carries make her appear to rise in stature.

It ataks meny poeple.

"You truly are abhorrent" Temperamental Seitlamo has regressed to childish taunting
"My excellencies" Kopano himself is fast running out of patience.
"This bores me, I already divined what is to happen"
"You witch" Seitlamo is floundering in impulsivity
"You are so little in your way" She has had enough of the grown man who acts like a child
"Mbokodo we..." Kopano is nearing defeat
"How dare you!" Seitlamo tries to save face
"Consider me advised now leave"
"Mbokodo we appreciate your audience" Kopano draws a breath Seitlamo moves to the exit "Not to waste your time Mbokodo"
"It is wasted"
"We came for the record" It is a matter of protocol and Kopano must insist
"You have my assurances I stake no claim. Your successions may happen as you accord after my grand nephew falls. Now leave me!" Seitlamo marshals his guard
"And one other thing"
"You try me"
"The boy and the, um"
"The apparition" Seitlamo mutters without any discretion
"You use insults in my house!"
"The albino child, forgive my keep, the slur of yesteryear is the common word of today"
"You collecting tokoloshe" Seitlamo tries to make a joke but nobody in the room is laughing
"Seemingly the decency of yesteryear is rare in the order of today. This false heir will be the one to weaken the rock. His foundation is soft as is his head. As for the children they are not of your concern" Her disdain is now obvious to call the apparent thought technically correct is a very obvious insult
"Fairly, Mbokodo, but for the rumours"
"Has the stone fell so far that you now follow the rumours like a body rent?" Everyone in the council feels the jibe and they leave post haste "Stay firm Mbokodo" Kopano says being the last to leave]

Matseleng takes breath to assuage the rising bile of her anger. She takes a grass mat, woven all those years ago by the Velders from the window sill and enters her Divining room. She will not do a reading. She will lie down and be still. Her endurance depends on indifference to this world, like a rock, immovable in her resolve. But the divining room is filling with sand. She knows that the time has come and against her nature she must move with it

10

Between the emergent child and the old immovable woman: dreams. Dreams with sharp beaks that want to breach the embryonic sac of slumber and spill into the wakened world. Their time having not arrived they struggle for air as the eyes flutter in wakening; memories of them a shrivelling umbilicus, they are starved of the darkness that gestated them; and so the morning comes. The effort is strenuous, but it is good to remember; it makes the bones strong

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Matseleng had never sought to lay claim to her place amongst the first family. She had ceased her role as councillor. These were the progeny of the ones who stood aside as her daughters were put in chains, her sons dropped from pachyderms into the gorgeous desert. She felt the clasp of every shackle in those years, but she would not betray to them that she was moved. She stood her ground even as they had engineered the collapse of the Xenolith. She withstood.

Seitlamo father of Mbali the keep of the Stone Hearth was a deviant. Had the old ways existed, a person of his temper and paranoia would not have ascended to the position of Principal Rock. He was given easily to the sway of the wind, not knowing his head from his heel. He was thus prone, at the slightest provocation, at the crinkle of a nose hair, to feel the ground move beneath his feet. In his dreams he sought glories and woke with a rank appetite – feeding on the carrion of his freshly dead dreams.

War was a dormant giant sleeping beneath a long-flattened mountain. Those with old eyes knew its sedation was a miracle-in-itself. Left well alone another generation may pass through the military pageant and know bloodless legends but there were stirrings at the foundation of the society.

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Long ago when the giant stalked the land and crushed all before it with its tremendous heel, the Xenolith was a thriving annex of the Stalagmata Society. Apolitical, an entire generation who had their fill of funeral fare, had chosen to live amongst the New Stone and bare new dreams that would survive the breach. Here they flouted the common laws and begged for understandings, naïve at best. This was the site where the stones shook. A terrible weapon from the sprig of a fledgling society was loosed over the New Stone precincts and even with the loss of many a precious stone, the rock refused to yield

The day the weapon fell Matseleng was with the council pleading with her brothers to starve the war machine. They retorted by slandering her for not answering her calling. That she best intervene by divining for the war effort. She was there with her consort, collective of lower caste society members, ignobles, and immigrants – their sight an affront to the great rock

They protested with song and tapestry, hoping to hold up a new way to the world. They persisted despite the threats and challenges, but they crumbled all at once when from the heaven fell what looked like the seed head of a dandelion. The tuft disassembled as it descended, the floret modules struck the ground all over the Xenolith quadrant causing rupture and immobilizing many. But what killed the people was suffocation. The heads of the modules bloomed releasing a mach-2 concussive wave and sucked the air from atmosphere and all that was heard after was a wave of gasping. The

It ataks meny poeple.

silence fell unsteadily, sputtering. All of the dead had their eyes open; and the eyes were bloody, the veins popped at the exertion.

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Now Seitlamo's great-grandfather was dead: Moutlwa. He was a boy of 10 on that day, more interested in his marbles than the pleas of his great aunt. His father was a stubborn man, a great rock. It was reasoned that a rock does not get injured but rather splits. The engineer class rose by fomenting that the diviners, geomancers and their guilds had brought the devastation on themselves and that the Stalagmata was resilient and repelled the attacks.

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Apparition the descriptive word for the little girl is albino. But apparition is the diminutive from a kind of spectre in folklore used to scare children: People of chalk. Said to be a caste of descendants of real people, who lacked colour in their skin and would persecute those who had, out of jealousy. There were always albinos; the genealogical twist of fate could not be suppressed. In the stupor of superstition, before the society's people became sophisticated, this cursed offspring was killed because of lore. Some lived and prospered in legend but they were few and it had been but a memory till Make Believe appeared.

*

It was not in Matseleng's nature to move hurriedly but the slant was upon them. The death of the pinnacle of the rock, Moutlwa wabaPele, was upon the land. She took peppered almonds and Lion's Tooth milk from Veld Plinth into her divining room. She lit a candle, and watched the animal fat runoff pool in the spinning wheel diagram she had drawn on the floor with graphite. She chewed the almonds deliberately and spat around in eight directions. The Lion's Tooth Milk was making her sight sharp. The air had an acrylic taste and the tears came. She spread ash on the floor and swept it with her palm; saying her grand nephew's name.

*

Shadow was seated - Make Believe was rolling about on the grass mats they were instructed to take their place on. When he saw the woman's face turn stern, he clucked at the girl child to be still. She abided and they listened. The old woman spoke simply and Shadow still had a hard time understanding but he knew how deep the well of reason was and how he preferred the shallows, so he concentrated on taking the instruction.

Matseleng had told them that there would be a death in the First Family and as by right she would take the place of chief mourner. She told them that for the first time she would take steadfasts; this would mean they would have a station, that they were to receive titles and designation and would have roles in the society. She expected their compliance.

Shadow had little agency over his life and he expected none. The turbulence of the months since encountering the girl was matched only by his resolve to resist as little as possible. Make Believe was simply following him. As they stood there getting prodded and measured by surgeons who were fitting them for proper dress, he knew instinctively that the appearance of this sudden fortune had something about it but what that something was, was uncertain.

*

The news of the death of The Pinnacle of the Rock was enough to set the rumour mills of the market alight but the talk was fuelled by other machinations: stories of how the witch of the abandoned Xenolith was assuming her roles in the society again and that she had taken apprentices who were not Society People but rather two orphans, one who was pitch as night and the other had skin of bleached bone. Mariha was unconcerned with entering the fray of the chatter. She had to prepare for her appearance. But she cursed the gall of that old witch in the tower. After all, was she not her eldest relation? Why had the ghoul not chosen to lift her station? Consolidate powers with her?

It ataks meny poeple.

Kopano wabaLateli was summoned to the Xenolith and he came with a courtesan of the baPele. When he took the word of the old diviner he showed no trouble on his face, rather assenting to her command. Taking careful note to verify that her unpredicted action bore no immediate threat to the order of the Society; he detected none. As he left he made sure to go over it with the witness so as to present a proper account to the First Family.

*

Matseleng drilled the children in the procedures. Teaching them to follow her stead and the rites they had to observe. She wanted them to give a good account of themselves, emphasizing that they were representatives of her, they had no identity of their own as individuals, they solely functioned as hers, and this was their labour in return for the benefits they were to receive for their station. Shadow trained well if not slow to take. Make Believe was not as impatient as she should've been for a girl of her perceivable age. The mourning dress arrived and the gold leaf and platinum black detail of Matseleng's robe was astounding. The simple cloth of the two children was understated but the thread work was immaculate, proof that it was tailored by the finest surgeons. In all probability it was the fine needlework of the guild of surgeons who stitched and sutured the generals of the Stalagmata. Outside in the world, visitors from all Plinth societies were arriving. The harems were busy. Particularly there was a tantalization in the air for the arrival of the Southerners, People of the Baobab. Some of the younger working girls and boys only knew of their legend, a legend augmented by their older colleagues who spun tales of encounters with the southern peoples, the people who rarely spoke and kept caterpillars in their ears. It was said that their physical prowess was so great that numerous harems had lost workers – eunuchs, dominatrix, and the lot – when they had visited. Others spoke of hearing about times when a Southern visitor would implant a caterpillar into their mate and the resultant pleasure was so great that the lover would lapse into a catatonic state and emerge several days later with an inconsolable sadness, unable to speak. Mariha was the harem outwardly; she showed just as much excitement for the increased traffic and was keen to reap the boon. But in private she was troubled: the old witch's sudden move for power concerned her. Not that her place was threatened from what she could tell, but she was uneasy with the sudden shift in the landscape. Her temper was especially thin these days. Her fittings for dress which were usually happy affairs with a lot of nettle wine and praise for the surgeons, were suddenly torrid times, she found fault in everything. She would lament the stitching and bemoan the pattern. This time it seemed she would be impossible to please. Until the arrival of a Southerner with a smouldering brow who offered her a fine cloth of plant fibre and shells, in exchange for an audience. The uninvited encounter was a welcomed cleave from the banal.

*

The slaughter of the bulls commences at first sight of light. A councilman lets out a cry when he sees the first ribbon of dawn in the east from the tallest spire of the Stone Hearth. The finest blades in the land, men and women of the Sekho Kholo, simultaneously strike the jugulars of many-hundred bulls. Younger regiment soldiers join them from the periphery of the arena to skin and quarter the animals. Only a skeleton staff is left behind in the harems as most have moved to assist with the cooking. Their preparations started days before and their work won't end for many days after. The elders advise them to take basilisk snuff to numb the body so they can work past the threshold of fatigue. A guard is dispatched to the Xenolith.

*

Without a word Matseleng strikes a commanding march from the threshold and the children sweep after her. The guard is accompanied by Battle Cows and their calves from the herd battalion. One calf is particularly precocious and takes a liking to Make Believe. The child warms to the affections but does not neglect her duty. She follows Matseleng waPele, the Chief mourner, as she starts her cry. Shadow carries the ash of eucalyptus leaves and every time Matseleng cries out her grand nephew's name he scatters a handful to the wind. The harems are still as she crosses them. People from the Protolith pour out to join her, the children ringing bells, the men who wore brimmed hats clashing their war clubs. As she crosses the strata of the society people join her, the Paleolith which

It ataks meny poeple.

was the class of the engineers, who came out ululating and beating drums. Everywhere people weeping uncontrollably falling into step with the chief mourner. They stop as she reaches the kraal of the Stone Hearth for her to enter alone with her steadfasts. She hangs her outer robe on the signal post of the gate. She walks to the centre, the people pour into the surrounding stands. In the centre she stands and Make Believe draws a circle with a thatch broom. With all eyes about her Matseleng falls to the ground in misery and writhes clawing at the earth calling out for her grand nephew, calling on all his totems till she is hoarse.

*

There were many days of mourning. And it was not doubted that there had never been a chief mourner like Matseleng in the lifetime of the Society. Elders smacked their lips eating soft meats, expounding on how rich the experience was, expounding on how the Mbokodo had brought the pinnacle of the rock to life. The people believed again that Matseleng was a great pillar the society could not do without. It was gratitude for her lifting the veil, as was her duty. With this observation of custom there was now sureness that the Stalagmata was not wounded by the great loss.

*

Shadow and Make Believe were called to the totem rock. Kopano led them escorted by a guard to the hallowed grounds where the visages of the great families were carved into the stone. On the totem that was Matseleng's the stone carvers set to work, etching the likeness of Shadow and Make Believe into the great boulder. What was of concern was Make Believe smiling every time she had to pose for the process. There was no convincing her otherwise, whereas Shadow looked on sternly like he had seen in all the other faces of the rock, she could not help but bare her teeth at the engravers.

Kopano tried to plead with her, Shadow asked innocuously if there was a rule against it, the reply being no, the workers set about drawing them out of the stone face, even producing the freckles on the little girl by bruising the rock with silver nitrate enzymes and darkening the rock face to represent the boy's complexion. Make Believe was joyous and Shadow had a hard time denying he was too.

*

Without the counsel of Kopano or any of his council, Seitlamo slipped into the harem of Mariha, who welcomed him proudly and took him to one of the confidant rooms that were there for delicate matters. In that room he met with the southerner who congratulated him on his ascendancy and brought representations from his society.

Representations are customary gifts. Depending on the occasion, the reason for meeting, the nature of the relationship, representations can take on different guises. Used effectively they can communicate a great deal.

Often when representations are offered between societies they involve large cargo that is transported by land through the dangerous regions in the interior lands.

The cargo is often dangerous to steal because of its high value and highly personalized nature. Making it untradeable outside of the society.

*

Mbali was with her charges leading various delegates from the Plinth Societies around, showing them the marvels of the Stalagmata, from the Great Battle Rhino to the halls of the engineers who had brought a mountain of ice from a far continent across ocean, land and desert as a tribute. She was bored by it all and picked off a normatively attractive servant from the Vine Plinth to cavort with, swearing him to secrecy under punishment of death.

*

Information officers were working overtime, they were combing through large volumes of data, tinkering with algorithms ensuring that even with the large volume of outsiders, no espionage was

It ataks meny poeple.

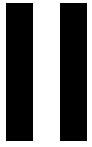
being conducted. All readings concerning the meeting with Seitlamo and a Southern Delegate in the Harem district were kept under seal.

*

Matseleng was exhausted, the children were being diligent and the visitors were complimentary regarding them. She had gone over the past, with foreign delegations and elder statesmen of the society, so many times that it looked and felt like a polished brass ornament. So when Kopano took her to the site of memory to inspect her totem she was not present at all. Unfamiliar warmth crept through that threatened to sway her. She tersely expressed that she approved and asked that a lithographic tapestry be produced for her records.

*

Kopano was glad that Mbokodo had taken her place. He was sure this was the hand needed to guide his keep. Despite his obligation to the First Family he was keenly aware that the state of play needed opposing pulleys to guarantee a future. The variations were worrying but he believed that the rules still held firm.



“What’s your name, son?”

“Shadow, father”, the patron word was limp on his tongue

“Did your mother give you that name, son?”

“No, father”, he did not wince

“When you say *father*, say it like you mean it!”

“Yes, Father” it’s all in the inflection; authority is fickle that way

“Now out of respect for Mbokodo I will tolerate you”

“Thank you, Father, but Father” as he has been instructed

“Must the jackal piss on the rock, great Plinth be my strength! You dare speak, son?”

“Father, there is a rock that bears my likeness, and bares the likeness of my keep, and its foundation is a bind, and that bind, father,” He drops the inflection for emphasis “is: ‘ha re je tsuo’ so I would rather earn your tolerance, till then I will not take what is not mine”

Nkwe waNtweng flicks his cow tail and looks the boy down. He does not know what to think of him so his regiment kicks in. He will break the boy and make of him what the society wishes

“Rieldans Formation, my sons! You, Tiro! Pair with this Shadow boy, let’s see how bound is he to his bind”

*

It was in ignorance that Shadow stole the medicine under the cover of darkness to treat Make Believe’s fever. He galvanized all his faculties to achieve what he thought was best. The Plinth Society had a reserve of resources he didn’t have access to. His position in that society was precarious and offered him no option. Justification is a muscle reflex, a defensive twitch in the cerebral sinew. Matseleng put him in line, the day after their faces were added to her totem she sat them down to brief them on their duties and the rites to come. She directed them that they were under keep and as such had to follow the bind: *Ha re je tsuo*. We don’t take what is not ours, we don’t take charity, we don’t take short cuts; the bind was all encompassing. She told Shadow that he had done it in the past and now had the burden of abiding by the bind. The boy felt persecuted and all the questions he wished to hurl back dissolved in that dark place within him.

*

“What kind of name is that?”

It’s the kind of name no one can have “It’s my name”

“You are weird!”

I must be here “I have to be here”

The girls are in a line, Make Believe is behind the leader of the Domba, clasping the slightly taller girl at elbow.

“She’s going to make us look weird” the girl behind,
husks

“Eyes forward, Sisters! At the ready! Strike the drum!”

It ataks meny poeple.

The centipede formation is an exercise where the girls of the Domba line up compactly and connect hand to elbow. At the head is the leader, her free arms stick out like antennae, she controls the direction and movement. The strike of the drum is pulsing and rhythms the stamp. The girls edge forward and relay messages through the connected arms of the formation. When they are concentrated the movements are synchronized and fluid, the head keeps information and is attentive at all times; should there be a pull to one side she will manoeuvre a counter measure, changing the direction to compensate. The relay of information can indicate a need to slow down or hasten. The antennae signal to the trunk other information such as a need to fan out the arms or compact the body. The female regiments are the most disciplined and tactically adept.

*

“I take it you are a leg sweeper” “What’s that?” “No, I think he’s probably a bagger”
“You don’t know what it is” “No” “Can you believe this guy”
“You even know what a girl is?” “” “He probably only seen a naked apparition”

The ablution facilities in the Dongas, the male training centres beneath the Krotoliths, site of the military barracks, are steamy. The boys stand naked at the sand basins, rubbing crystalline silt onto their bodies and into their skin. The sticky oil corn husks they use to wipe themselves are deposited everywhere and the youngest recruits sweep them in to grates along the red stone walls of the caverns.

Shadow’s forearms and shins are sore. Tiro gave him a good working over in the drills. He did not flinch because he felt they were willing him to. He sensed that if he was to bend his will more than he needed to, he would be giving way for something. More and more from his depths stirred an instinct to withstand all these things that were beyond him. He knew better than to plunge those depths for reason.

The blow was to his kidney, Pula had struck him. He winced. He turned around and there were four of the boys. Initiations were common, but there was a pall of malice to the act. He was caught full with the heel of a palm to his solar plexus that made his molars bite into each other. He managed to dodge a swift kick to his thigh. Over the shoulder of his assailants he saw how the other boys were pretending nothing was amiss while keeping look out. He coiled his body, stepping away from the attackers, drawing them to him.

“So you sleep with chalk people” “You the ward of a witch” “you jackal ball sack you are not a first”
“You think you have the stones” “Was your father a cheap one in the harem?”

He feigned a step back as one lunged to shoulder tackle him, pivoting he caught the boy with the knee and sprung to exploit the gap. He cocked his elbow and drove it through the neck of Pula who was drawing a punch and missed but ran through the circle of assailants. He bolted out the ablution room shorn from the torso, through the corridors on the lower floors of the Krotolith, his unclothed state and wild eyes bewildering the young custodians.

The boys were in hot pursuit but he had opened a clean distance on them. They were aided only by people telling them in which direction he had gone. He crouched in a dark corner, concentrated to regulate his breath, feeling his heartbeat in the balls of his feet.

He searched himself. Went to the very edge of that pit where things dissolved inside of him. The dark waters were eager to have him but his approach towards them was tentative. He let the dark-wash lap at his ankles but held on to his apprehensions. He was submerged to his waist when he started to feel the tug of the undertow, as thick as molasses. He resisted. All around him the boys were searching him out and couldn’t find him. Until

It ataks meny poeple.

The boys were tired of searching. They had gone over every inch of the place and had not found him. The one posted at the main entrance swore that he had not gone past him. Pula was searching on the level of the baths again when he came across two of his peers, fallen near the medical rooms, Mollo and Phatsima, he could tell from how they tied their straps. Tiro approached them carefully and they were knocked out bleeding from the mouth. As he stood; the last thing he remembered was Shadow standing in front of him, half in darkness, a darkness that looked like it distended from the pool of lacklight he was shrouded in; he never saw the punch but he remembered the cold and desolation of it.

*

The Rhinokeep, master moTswahole, was being escorted out after a reading by Matseleng. As dazzling as it was, the honour of it far surpassed the information divined. He was a simple man of little want and tried to avoid political skirmishes as best he could. But on seeing the boy's anxiety in the little girl's haplessness; his inability to shake the troubles from him; he was gripped by the need to do something. All he knew was his animals.

Matseleng graciously gave him permission to take the children on a round up. The boy was dutiful and the girl curious. They rode the shunt, a carriage that floated along the ionized track to the outlying areas. It glided over the lands on the naturally occurring magnetic track at a rapid speed and when it climbed sheer rock face their gyro harnesses adjusted to give them a view of the Stalagmata plinth. This faraway the boy could not see the ugliness he had come to know.

Dusk and they disembarked near a processing plant. Master moTswahole took reports from his hands and listened to the old men of the plant complain about the dulling of the milling stone; a particular detail troubled him. He ordered the boy to carry a sack of sorghum which he lifted with ease. The little girl demanded a load for herself and would not take the quarter empty one offered. To the amusement of the elders she hefted a full bag too big to carry on her shoulders on to her head.

They had trekked on foot over knolls, through the grasslands to the feeding pens. He was leading the children back the scenic way, dispensing with information on bird types and tracking when he came to a stop. The girl had stopped before he did; he wondered. He beat down a curtain of brush with the club he carried and saw the calf laying on its side. An immense creature but small for its age, this was the one he had heard of in the reports. The runt had been gored and runoff by a bull.

The girl was tiny and she was tinier as she rested her head against the rasping rump of the bleeding animal. The first vulture had appeared. He was already winding the oscillating shaft of his club to deliver a blow to the animal's head, explaining to the children that it was out of mercy but the girl refused to let him do it, standing in his way physically. He said that there was nothing they could do and she knew he was lying, she would not budge. The boy could not convince her otherwise either. He cursed under his breath and let off a whistle.

An evacuation team arrived. The men working purposefully to lift the animal into a ladle harness pulled by a team of Nguni Bulls, majestic animals with decorated horns. The wranglers were debating the chances of survival. The break from routine had made them especially chatty. The girl rode with the calf, whose breath had grown shallower. The boy chose to walk with the wranglers and master moTswahole.

"Is she always this stubborn?" "I don't know about always" "hmmm" "" "I don't think Mbokodo will appreciate having to take in animal" "I don't know if she will." "You don't know a lot of things" "I can't pretend that I do" "That's a start"

It ataks meny poeple.

Matseleng was not impressed but her strays had caused her little inconvenience otherwise. She was entitled to a herd of Battle Rhino as was the custom, but she wasn't in a rush to take on the task. Make Believe was pleased that they could keep the animal and spend time with it rather than rejoin her Domba. Shadow was relieved that she had a new preoccupation.

100

Mariha was growing fat playing go-between. Talks with the Southerner, Kaoane waLekala, an architect historian and the leader elect of the Plinth were promising. The Southerner of the Baobab would not speak in any language but his own. The Stone hearth lord needed someone he could take into his confidence and dispose of if need be, so he chose Mariha. Her ambition was blinding, she took to the role with anxious empressment. For the elevation of her station she took the Caterpillar.

The Caterpillar of the Baobab is an artificially created species. The Baobab Plinth people's tool for dignitaries, created by its entomonancers, is used when this secretive society has to engage in talks with people who don't speak its language. The Caterpillar eggs are grown in bacterial mulch. When hatched a single Caterpillar emerges measuring roughly nine millimetres with two heads at opposing ends. When it reaches maturity at a length of ten centimetres it splits into two. The two are paired for life. A dignitary who wishes to communicate will then insert a caterpillar into their ear canal and let it burrow to the Eustachian tube, directing the person they wish to communicate with to do the same thing. Once inserted, the Caterpillar will excrete a coating film to ease discomfort; this film also serves as the frequency modulator that allows the pair of Caterpillar to communicate. The people are encouraged to communicate through the nesting process of the Caterpillar and yawn intermittently. The yawning is used to dilate the opening of the Eustachian tube to facilitate the nesting process. First time users have reported nausea and light headedness but the symptoms disappear rapidly. Once the two Caterpillars are at rest in the ear canal the hairs of the caterpillar are tuned to the brain waves of the communicator; hence the initial "small talk". The two communicators become intoned to each others speech - no matter the language the intended meaning is always conveyed.

Girls and boys in the harem were easily excitable, wanting to know what the Caterpillar was like. It was hard to put into words to explain; Mariha was not being secretive at all. Whereas they were asking after the carnal delight of it she knew she was the intermediary in a serious undertaking. The Baobab Society was petitioning to the new leader a future where the Societies would deal closer with each other. They were advocating for the sharing of resources and technology beyond the trades that were already occurring. The Southerner was charming, pointing out that the two Plinths were the ones that were reaching for the sky. Seitlamo wabaPele was circumspect, stopping short of bringing up the ruins that lay beneath the market right outside their door. With no diplomatic training, Mariha tried her best to remain neutral and present both party's representations impartially, but deep down she was excited by the prospect presented by the Baobab Society man, with his peelable clothes. In those days the only thing more excited than her hopes was her palette.

In cases of espionage, therefore in most cases, one of the pair of caterpillars is 'blinded': a microscopic shaving of its hairs at the broadcast node – the middle thorax region. This eliminates the user's subliminal chatter. The imbalance in transmission heightens the broadcast frequency of the other of the pair meaning it

It ataks meny poeple.

burrows deeper for information without the user's knowledge. The side effect is the shaved user receives a high rate of information that symptomatically appears as a widening of the eyes. Side effects in the unaware user include an increased appetite for sentimental indulgences, which have been known to include lovers and food

*

Mariha has moved rooms in the harem. Where she used to enjoy climbing to her previous dwellings she preferred the level closest to the kitchens, she was unaware of her subconscious directive; she chose to believe she was doing it to keep a closer eye on operations, that it was of her own initiative. Things were normalized. In this room she had a view into the market place and an augmented glass lens she used to follow the business of the day. Through it she watched the Velder traders and their hunting teachers; nomads and their pack mules; Viners selling salted fresh water eel; and that girl with her rhino. Talk was she didn't last a day in the Domba and the witch had given her the role of apprentice diviner. She now had more reason to despise the girl. In the afternoon the boy would come into view, his sinewy body taking on muscle, not carrying loads had corrected his posture; his shoulders were squarer; she clucks her tongue, remembering how she would take him when they were alone. How she would make him

*

The surgeons had done everything to save the animal, resuscitating it from sure death they couldn't arrest the processes of death that had sprung prematurely. The most of the left-hand side of the rhino had to be fabricated from engineered beeswax reinforced with silver-phosphate nano-tubing. The recovery was surprisingly fast. The runt was hardy. Make Believe insisted on nursing it and could not be made to rejoin her Domba. Rock artists were called to consult on painting the plastered trunk of the animal, but Make Believe insisted the animal keep its off-white side. She seemed to know what was best for the animal. Despite the advice of Master moTswahole she saddled the animal after two weeks of recuperation and began riding it. She became a staple of the market. To curious onlookers she would introduce herself: *I am Make Believe*; then her friend: *This is Bong-Bong*

*

The shutter on the South window is firmly shut. Matseleng over many years has removed the obstructions barring it. But the shutter remains nailed down. She wouldn't cast her eyes in that direction. When walking from the Main strata to her Xenolith home she keeps her eyes fixed to the ground. Sometimes she gives in to the memory of that day, it has become more embellished: she can see the florets seed the ground and watches as the stone turns the colour of dried blood as the Xenolith information relay collapses under the weight of death, her ears fill with the tinsel whistle of air sucked from the atmosphere and the gasps of the many and her own throat constricts with the pox of trying to breathe without lungs. To say she feels injured by the Baobab would mean her body was struck, but it is her soul wherein the hurt registers

She enters her divining room from the east and waits. Weights and counter weights, thumbing a string of petrified cowry shells – dialling catharsis. She closes her eyes and by the light of the candle, the back of her lids by verity of threat turns into a concave theatre of molten volcanic walls crawling with the larvae of fire ants. Feeling heaviness in her bones, she will not see anyone today. Make Believe enters at the appointed hour from the direction of dusk and folds herself into a half sitting position the way Shadow does, perched on the balls of her feet, awaiting instruction.

Shadow keeps to the room he shares with Make Believe, he is not the apprentice. Till Make Believe finds her way from the old woman's, Shadow will concentrate on building a force field of intention to keep his ferocity domicile. The donga was not the place to kill someone. Not yet.

*

Seitlamo leads his council, Kopano is aware his own influence has been somewhat diminished, Nkwe waNtweng holds the attention of the keep of the Stone Hearth. The news is that there's a revitalized

It ataks meny poeple.

vigour in the camps. Excursions along the border have reinforced the military prowess of the society. Nkwe holds court with grandiose descriptions and gestures – giant sized sentiment looming just below the horizon, visions of a long dead tradition reanimated, more time given to him than the other members of the council. Kopano mediates with the smaller stationed administrators and placates those who bring tribute expecting a larger audience.

The council dismissed; Seitlamo calls to the old war hand, Nkwe, to stay behind. Nkwe was his Donga Father, a hard man then, given to mawkishness now. It is a deliberate move by Seitlamo to have Matseleng's steadfast under his command. The news of Matseleng's steadfast's struggles is promising. The child is not an adept fighter but his peers have ostracized him for some unknown reason. The only worry is that the boy is strong, when he hits, he hits. The opinion of Nkwe is that he must have some other kind of tutelage, *perhaps Matseleng is giving him charms*, is his musing. The old man further implies he had seen rudimentary traces of the Daaemaaenga in him, the legendary warrior trait. Seitlamo excuses himself to attend to other matters.

Nkwe asks Kopano about the chances for appealing to Matseleng for war-charms; Kopano absently reminds him that Mbokodo was war averse. That, and Seitlamo would sooner die than put the military under her spell.

*

The harem strata

He orders his guard to take leave of him and enjoy the harem, giving the impression of a social visit. They were grateful and hurriedly left him to his own company. Seitlamo went to the room Mariha had relocated herself to.

Mariha was finishing off her second lunch, a bowl of stewed tripe and sugar beans, when she was surprised by the knock at the door. She had given strict instructions not to be disturbed.

When Seitlamo entered it took a moment to recollect his face. The air was sour with digested offal. He believed that Mariha's ambition had gotten the best of her. She was letting herself go, leaving behind her finer attributes that she so greatly cultivated, believing that her mediation work was elevating her station. But he knew she held no station, she held a position and the two were not interchangeable.

Embarrassed that he came in on her vulnerable she coaxed the ventilation into a higher gear. When he briskly asked after the matter of *the woman* she is relieved to flatulence to announce that the woman had been located and would be arriving by Aerophant.

*

The Port

She disembarked anonymously from the pack mule bracket of the pachyderm and boarded a special purpose shunt under guard. Onboard, surgeons stitched *her* into a vine weeping dress.

She alighted close to the market and made her way to the Xenolith where *she* started wailing inconsolably. A crowd drew around *her*.

Matseleng came to see what the commotion was about and found a Vineland woman in a state. *She* had the teeth of an out dweller, its enamel carved with identification information.

After some consolation *the woman* spoke saying *she* travelled far, for many years, looking for *her* son. *She* looked Matseleng squarely in the eye and asked her to relinquish *her* son

Shadow appeared through the entrance way. *The woman* cried out: *Son*

It ataks meny poeple.

Shadow runs. Make Believe takes off after him.

IOI

The goodness of the home; *long be the charity in your heart*; he was coming to consciousness then, but not too much; *he is on the dark side are you sure he is Baobobian*; artificial family bonds however benevolent, at times, this far, this long down, are maladroit; *He is a boy and there's a dynasty in him*; best intentions; *He will be a fine fruit of the vine*; he did not speak out of fear, never made a peep, the things he had seen; *Now you just lie down the way I showed you*; the neighbour always came over; *A boy especially as quiet as this one needs a firm hand*; trust; *attend to your business, I'll watch over your place and him*; kids being kids; *when daddy wants to wrestle with you like that hide*; and he hid he shrivelled his body into the dark corner and when the man reached for him he was so far gone he was nowhere to be found; *you ungrateful heelless shadow*; disbelief; *you have nowhere to go*; That darkness that was so cold at first became a part of him, would never leave him, it stayed, he didn't, it went with him

*

Matseleng is consoling *the woman* with pepper water. The sobs are waning folding into moans and capitulating into gasps. Matseleng asks about *her* and listens intently to *the woman* of the Vine tell *her* story; *she* adopted Shadow, having no children of *her* own. *She* claimed he was a rescue from travellers who alluded to him being from the Baobab society. Matseleng fought off a memory that was going for her throat. *The woman* continued, telling of how the boy had run away after *she* had nursed him back to health. All *she* had left was invested in him as *she* was a widow with a sizeable holding and in him *she* saw a dynasty. *She* believed he was taken by the same travellers *she* had freed him from. *She* fell into sobs about how hapless *she* had found him; the conditions he travelled under. In the years he was gone *she* had not been able to sleep. Matseleng listened to *the woman* and counselled *her* to lie still as Shadow was looked for.

*

Make Believe is a copy Cat. She sat. In the way she saw Shadow sit most times. The full squat: the weight of her body distributed across her shoulders, across her torso and pointed to the toes. Not many people came looking for him; *"it's me Make Believe."* It was only her and Master moTswahole and the wordy man who worked for the important man who made Matseleng angry. *"You need to eat you know"*. Something told her it was safe to get him out. *"You can come out now."* His eyes opened. He had been crying, the effort not to, had squeezed the vessels in his eyes and the whites were turned ruby in reply. He took a breath and she could see his mouth. He said: how did you find me. *"I can't help it. I don't want to be without you."* They went *"home"*

Matseleng had put an ember in *the woman's* tea. The preparation of which is a delicate process she was efficient in. A briquette is dissected lengthwise; the lengths are then inspected for a particular seam pattern that indicates the fault, most importantly the cause of the fault, often a highly oxidized composite of foreign matter. This composite is treated with enzymes to give it a biological framework. Once introduced to the body, it is rapidly metabolized. If the consumer does not tell the truth or withholds it, they feel a burning sensation around the heart that increases exponentially, the only relief is when Oxytocin is released by giving a truthful account.

The woman's distress was minor indicating that she wholeheartedly believed her version of events. However small, the distress was telling. From consolatory to combative Matseleng probed the

It ataks meny poeple.

woman for answers until she discovered what had been done to the boy by a regent of the Vine. She understood his troubled nature and the darkness about him. Evermore; she wished to hold him closer. The woman's symptoms had grown acute when she was confronted about how she had caught wind that he was here. Sworn to secrecy she could only hold her tongue for so long.

On their arrival, Matseleng went to him and met Shadow with no words except: *nnaka, my child*

*

Matseleng was furious. She did not take counsel. Her being was inflamed. She lifted the store in her divining room and took hold of the config tablet. Setting it on her back so its control nodule rested against her spine she marched out in the direction of the harems. The source of all these little plots that sought to hurt her children was within those walls. The Divinations had shown her the traffic of people who were setting in motion these events and all indications led to Mariha's doorstep. What was most offensive was that this child was of her in lineage. At the fissure of where the Xenolith and Protolith strata met she hollered for Mariha to come out and face her. People looked on curiously. She hollered again and unsatisfied by the non-appearance of Mariha she put her foot down; and the harems as a whole shook. Word spread that Mbokodo was casting; people's panicked minds were precipitated by an unwieldy threat. Mariha came out after a very powerful tremor was sent through the structures of the harems. People of import were scattering to the winds of the surrounding avenues in the direction of the Stalagmata, travellers were stranded and uncoordinated they stood in archways and trembled. Mariha wearing clothes more suited to her girth months ago stood before Matseleng with steel in her eyes: Witch, she hissed. Witch, you say? Said Matseleng and behind her the sole remaining spire of the Xenolith grew in stature. The power relays in the main calibration were stretched thin and four strata of the main calibration, including the Krotolith, were left on auxiliary power. The ground shook as the Spire grew in exponential increments casting an enormous shadow. Mariha was scared to incontinence. "Tell your master to stop with the games or I will bring down the rock on his head. Leave banaka, alone"

She had called the two, Shadow and Make Believe her children in the only way she knew. Everyone was a witness, Mariha too – in her filth.

*

She leaves without an escort, save for the man with the concussion club. Soldiers are receiving orders to return to the Stalagmata. Only a skeleton contingent remains to secure the port. No entry is being allowed to the society. *She* boards the Aerophant. The huge lumbering beast is taking fuel. The trunk alternating between lifting passengers to the traveller's compartment and lumping feed into its cavernous mouth. The balloons that hold the immaterial helium-hydrogen flux amalgam are half exaggerated and flagging at the rump of the beast. She sits by herself while the other passengers on board occupy themselves speculating as to what could be occurring. From the bay window, even at this great height, she looks down and the man with the concussion club keeps a steady eye on her. She takes the opposing view, into the atomic desert with its plutonium face squalled with slow foot lightning. The Balloons are near full and the elephant taxis and squares with the desert. Master moTswahole watches the animal go, and Shadow's burden along with it. The swaggering gait is impressive. The animal is unpiloted – it follows an instinct, the flight path the migratory compass. By the time it reaches the deserts edge the balloons are bloated, feet off the ground it wades into the radioactive mulch, the decaying minutiae of frayed nucleuses with the anachronistic protons that give the desert its jaundice sheen, and disappears but for its trunk that tips into the breathable air.

*

Seitlamo is incensed. The emergency council session, to assess damages and causes, is not going well because of his fury. The engineer class is at pains to explain why there is no damage to the configuration of the Plinth. The event though anomalous has not caused any structural damage. The surgeons report only minor injuries and four fatalities – all elderly people who succumbed to heart failure or paralytic seizures. Kopano is trying to mediate but the information class is offering

It ataks meny poeple.

conflicting reports. Whereas data from Plinth shows no exceptional threat, eyewitness testimony is proving hard to verify. Kopano has his own suspicions about the complicity of a plot by Seitlamo in bringing about these events but with no evidence to support. Seitlamo orders a show of force; a stationing of battalions on the perimeter of the Protolithic strata. Kopano pleads with his keep not to antagonize the Mbokodo, this infuriates Seitlamo who dismisses him from the council with prejudice.

*

[In living memory the harems have never been so quiet. The girls and boys; eunuchs and dominatrix; call to the soldiers stationed on the boundary and duty rebuffs them. The rent bodies, who had a place in the society, had already crossed the military line. The remaining are a cross-section of those who came from elsewhere and somewhere. Mariha is fuming and without her wait staff she has no direct vent for her spite and so it turns inward. The relief comes in the guise of a childhood exercise. She used to spy on the Domba, on the secret training and mimic the steps. It has been years since she did and at first her steps are self-conscious, timid. But then she strikes the march. Her breast is filled by the pound of the drum. She flays her arms and swaggers, imagining at her back was the stride of the thousand disappointed sisters, comrades – incarnations of herself she had shed. She marches in time with them, out of her room, out of the harem, through the market to the threshold of the bewitched spire. She drunkenly calls out for the old woman to appear

Matseleng was contending with illness of the little girl, Make Believe, and an indiscernible projection from the Plinths computational subroutine that tracked a wide network of data complexes. Serendipitously her forge of the Xenolith had reconnected the exiled strata to the main relay bus. She had never seen such a read out in her life. It looked prehistoric as if the Plinths fundamentals were resurfacing. But her concentration was spliced by the child's complaint of cramps. They were severe and she couldn't discern if it was poisoning *or*. The hollering of Mariha reached her. She tried to ignore it but she was goaded. She blanketed the girl and told Shadow to watch her as she had to deal with the nuisance downstairs. She arrived to find an inebriated Mariha, stumblingly imitating a Domba. Witch, she said

Matseleng did not reply but swiftly struck the impudent in the throat with a driving forearm. Swooping with her free hand she drove the heel of the palm into Mariha's Temple. The blows surprised Mariha but they served to wake the resentment she had for Matseleng and foster a murderous intent. The old woman's fighting capability was dangerous, and if it were not for years of unuse, it would be deadly. Mariha was unorthodox, her method a hodgepodge adapted from various experiences. Self-taught and survivalist it was a flurry of blustering blows to end the opponent quickly. In order to get to her inside Matseleng allowed for Mariha to lock her in. Mariha instinctively elbow compressed the old woman's throat and simultaneously reached for her braid. As Matseleng delivered injurious blows to the body of Mariha, that caused internal bleeding and organ damage, freeing her from the clasp of the bicep, she felt an unseen gossamer slip around her neck and the weight pulled of her feet. In spite: Mariha squeezed although her hands bled from gripping the garrotte wrong

*

Caterpillar message transmission.

Relay broadcast. Confidential. Unsecured

Stalagmata contact lost. Urgent: Stalagmata Mega Structure recalibrated. Schematics must be redrawn. Data revised. Inexplicable astronomical phenomenon sighted. Confirm. Threat of civil unrest. Eldest member of society dead. Killed by contact - Suspect symptomatic side effect of caterpillar insertion. Lost sight of special interest case - Escaped persecution by Aerophant. Will not pursue. Returning to root via private transport.

ACKnowledge

It ataks meny poeple.

*

Caterpillar technology can in cases of emergency be used for the long-distance conveyance of information. The sender's message is broadcast and pushed on by all recipients to its destination in the low register of the subconscious frequency. The message is transported in cycles continuously by all receivers until the root broadcasts an ACK (Accepted. Confirm. Kill) reply to purge the message

.i cannot say this life is soft or hard

Dedendum II_

Five people, dead; in a photograph no living person will see

Without knowing her you would think Nomanzi's smile is a snarl

Her work in quantum computing, the multistate computing process, using bacterial systems

to replace electronic signal delay and the limitations of circuit boards was a godsend

The Splint technology wouldn't have developed without her.

Insomniac

I would be woken at all the strange hours to be told about a breakthrough

A polymath amongst polymaths, she was most inclined to music

She was the one who first postured the initialization-hibernation-cycle was essential

This self-determined processing time was as a result of variable analysis dependent on the

environment the terraforming box found itself in

So importantly the cycle was not determined by human intervention

.

She remembered life on the surface

Longed for it

Spent her spare time on the planet gazing side of the moon

.

She sided with me in quelling the inner turmoil

Whereas Mzwandile was Neutral

Nomanzi steadfastly chose my side; at the time I didn't think we would be betrayed

The stakes were too high

.

Before the contentious time, the betrayal

On the moon

We were young and old enough to succumb to the folly of hope

.

All five of us

Cast of characters

Major

Mojalefe

A career thief. An Heirloom, master of a band of thieves. He has always wished for more power having grown up dispossessed. His survival instinct is second to none. An adequate fighter his survival to his age is reliant on his flight response. He trades unevenly often shorting the people he supplies so he has few friends and the bandits who band under his leadership are usually novices or hopeless cases. He has matted dreadlocks that he sheaths blades in.

Keemetswe wahoFafatsa

A beautiful River Plinth runaway. She had a good and ordinary life before she met Keolatetse. Before the sight of him matched the shimmer off the water and she could only see him that way, she was working on the river as an apprentice. Her family was rigid and well placed in the River Society so she escaped hastily with Keemetswe. She has a head for numbers and does most of the administration on the modest caravan she shares with her husband. She has a small well proportioned frame with a wheat husk complexion.

Keolatetse

Is good natured easy going man who enjoys a good young. He can't believe his luck that he met Keemetswe and is completely devoted to her and making a success of his life. As good natured as he is, he is aware of the dangers of running a caravan so takes very little risk, his returns are often small. He is of average height and average looks. His most striking feature is his acumen for general knowledge.

Sentaoleng waPeo

She is strong in the face and a hard negotiator. She has gone through the trouble of staying away from the Baobab because she finds the life of a delegate of the great tree more meaningful when on a mission. Bedevilled by her own ambitions she enjoys life on the mission because she can set her own rules and deal with less people trying to get ahead of her. Her pronounced jaw line is matched by sharp eyes and an ever frowning brow.

Madimabe waseTlare

Assistant to Sentaoleng. She started out as an apprentice but refused to graduate because she felt there was more to gain from shadowing Sentaoleng. Either through experience or building a dossier on Sentaoleng's potential to go rogue. She has a charcoal complexion with a mulberry accent at the lips and pearl teeth.

Oo

An eccentric man. Who can never tell the same thing about himself twice. Highly knowledgeable but barely coherent. He flies by his own compass.

Minor

Siliva

An exceptionally tall Veld man. Who took to the road to find more of the world under his own direction. He acts as a scout for all the caravans he joins by using the Parasol device to survey the surrounds and warn of any danger ahead. He has formed few fast relationships and prefers his own company. He has a stern face that he keeps under turbans and scarves.

Bit

Maleroele, Sentlame, Tefo, Senatla

Heirs: Mojalefe's band of thieves.

***“.i cannot say this life is soft
or hard”***

110

Boy turned obsidian, transparent girl; two children walking the hard road; fatigue, in non-military dress, rocks the body; steps as erasable as the fixed direction of the horizon. Lives erupted. Love will find a way; love as a mutual threat of abandonment; out here on the perimeter – the nearest star is a folic acid drip that dribbles across a blue chipped plumbum sky, upside: fairground attraction – the carousel of carnivorous birds wheeling, willing them to carry on. When it gets quiet the girl counts as in: *eleven, zero-zero-one, zero-zero-one-zero-zero, zero-zero-eleven, eleven, eleven, zero-eleven, zero-one-zero-one, etc*

Bomb Blast Forest

Each fallen step has brought them to this edge of the tundra. Exhausted, Shadow drops the bags. Bags he grabbed by instinct. He leans on to the club he was given. Make Believe drops her satchel, the one she took hold of by facsimile. She holds on to his hand until he doesn't hold back. He wants to speak, but doesn't know if she will understand. He keeps to his own misgivings and doubt. Not knowing how to care for her beyond letting her stay – by his side.

The turbulence, his dreams – explosive mines in the sky of the mind that wouldn't let him navigate the shuteye uninterrupted. He remembers getting to the precipice of the Xenolith; seeing a wild eyed Mariha half dancing, dragging Matseleng behind her on an invisible string. How the guard broke the line to protect the half-naked harem headmistress from a small band of people, whose affection compelled them to beat the undignified rentbody on behalf of the deceased Mbokodo. He remembers Make Believe's piercing scream and the dusk that ensued. The tremors and how the Xenolith vaulted him in. For three days they were trapped in its embeds as a foreign ochre satellite bigger than the moon appeared in the heavens. For three days Make Believe clutched at her abdomen and the Citadel of Rock seemed to convulse with her. The toll and noise was confusing as the landscape shifted and compacted at will. And Matseleng's body lay just out of reach: abandoned.

And.

Also

The eruption, when the Plinth restored itself to order and the people released from containment – the whole time Mars had a sub-orbital patrol in the sky the Plinth had closed itself off as if barring attack. Once the people were free again he remembers the guard trying to storm the Xenolith, Master moTswahole speeding them away on a Battle Rhino and Make Believe having to watch men swarming to club Bong-Bong defending their retreat. The urgency they boarded the Aerophant with, the immediacy they had to disembark with, not knowing if death waited for them with the launch, on the other side.

It was too hard to give in to sleep when the bottom of his stomach felt like it was growling at an intrusion, a hollowness rising up like a punt. He did not pretend to Make Believe that any of what was happening to them made sense. He had long lost the notion of childhood when Make Believe says: *Someone is coming and they are coming like they don't want us to know they are*

Five assailants, bandits of the outer lands, approach with hunting crocodiles and ferocious faces. The rot of their existence apparent, throttled to their collective countenance. They circle carefully. One notices that their target looks like children and brashly strikes from the brush

Shadow was primed the Concussion Club Master moTswahole had entrusted him with, rolled his wrists rotating the centrifuges in the club's chamber. When he struck the attacker it was the first time he made contact with the club. The attacking man was launched through the air in a parabolic arc that landed him some twenty metres away. Shadow's grip was tyro, loose on the handle and the club comet-tailed after the man. The huntswoman unleashed the crocodiles and the animals encroached on the children

Make Believe had been knocked backwards by the peripheral contact-wave of the Concussion Club. As the earthen lizards approached she scrambled to her fours, cocking her elbows at fifteen degrees her belly skimming the ground. She gnashed her teeth and growled as they wheeled around her.

Never had the Loom seen these animals intimidated. He ordered the huntswoman to recall the crocodiles and set his enforcer on the boy, who stood in a Rieldans fighting stance.

Shadow learnt the fundamentals in his time in the Donga, but he perfected his fighting style alone. His training consisted of punching and kicking sandbags, spraining and fracturing his own bones to harden them, while Make Believe sat in the Divining room with Matseleng; he was working on adapting the Rieldans into a technique that suited his body. Where the Rieldans relied on speed he had compensated for his lack of early childhood training by applying force, where the flurry of the authentic Rieldans would be a jackhammer, he would store the successive punches and kicks as if a coiled spring, into one delivery. So the intricate combinations of the Rieldans that served as both defence and attack, relying on finesse, were turned malevolent by him, an all-out offence, with very little yield. On contact his throat issues a bass note like the release of a pneumatic piston.

He laboured to bring down the enforcer, who had an unorthodox fighting style that seemed to consist only of grappling and long arm sweeps, his legs were unchoreographed conveniences, moving from haltered squats to wild ostrich kicks. Though Shadow laboured he did bring him down, stopping short of killing him.

And,

So

They set off running through a forest of petrified carbon pylons, a glamour of ossified trees. These trees that lean at a sharp angle; their genealogy forever changed by a millennia old explosion. Frozen askance in terror, forever

Make Believe follows Shadow the air crackling with their disturbance, snapping twigs and swats at sapling sprigs. The ground beneath them uneven and unforgiving; the footholds suspect and canard – unsure steps would not fall out beneath them.

Shadow leads Make Believe as best he can. With no reference of the place his instinct is to steer them away from the danger in a zigzag pattern without straying from the assumed path. A missilery of striped antelopes' horns aiming at their approach made him adjust course dizzyingly quickly. The pivot made him lose his sense of direction and their trajectory now leads them deep into the forest. On their heels the reavers whistled in signal

They are lost where the thicket is thickest, where it is a palindrome – it looks and sounds the same forwards and backwards, even the noise of their pursuers seems to come from all around them. Shadow stops.

He grabs Make Believe and holds her by her vitrified forearm and pulls her into the static shade of a knot of Siamese hardwoods. He puts his hand over her mouth and thumbs her eyelids closed. He holds his breath to regulate his breathing and closes his eyes too.

They sit in the darkness like nesting dolls

Finding himself in the gloom looking after her. She is not scared. A light wafts off her skin that warms all of him, slightly, but just enough to conflate the ambient temperature of his inner dimensions. He wants to speak out but she lifts one finger to her mouth. The old love dies. The perilous love of commonplace company. A new love is born in its place. In this place. Inside him where he keeps her safe.

He was moved

For herself

Make Believe was careful not to disturb too much in his interior. She could make out shapes and figures of black glass that augmented and filled him. The engineering that could squeeze this amount of pain into a single human form was dark magic. A concept she could not understand nor could she deny.

*

The meat on the children is not worth the effort, thinks Mojalefe, the Loom of the heirs. He is aware that admission of defeat would be embarrassing but that admission would not come from his rank. Maleroele would not admit to her animals being scared off by a little girl, Senatla his enforcer wouldn't testify to being beaten by a young boy either. Tefo his scout was loyal and didn't have a free tongue. As for Sentlame: the man was beginning to test his patience. They would go back to where he was lying, kill him and sell off his parts. Their haul wouldn't be short if they add the buck they had spotted while chasing the children. All in all, all was not lost. He was especially pleased to have got himself a fine new weapon: a Stalagmata Concussion Club.

*

The roadside hawkers offer all kinds of fare: hardware, tools, oats and grains, animal feed and human parts. Human parts had become especially popular now with the past event. When ordinary people saw that giant second red moon in the sky they lost themselves to the little they knew. Old superstitions crept back into the currency.

And out on these roads everything was a fairgo. Fairgo – like a fist fight, not quite a fist fight, because the fists were not doing the killing, rather the spirit or force.

Of combatants and castaways; with lucky charms made from the teeth of unfortunate travellers, authentic chalk they would shout, holding up a forearm and the passengers and drivers and commissioners would look. Only the keen of eye could tell if it was a bleach job.

The keenest eye belongs to Kaoane of the Baobab and he is looking for the boy who slipped from the Stone with the ghost. He is encroaching on the mission ambit of another delegate. The hard woman of these parts but he had a personal vestment to address. *Surely Sentaoleng could be reasoned with*

*

and

too,

Master moTswahole looks at the ground. The children were here. So were five bandits with hunting crocodiles. These parts were known for them. They were lost soldiers or displaced people touched by war. With no need for peace they had gone incommunicado from living humanely, in as far as being in an associable world, civility was alien to them. Time had come to redeem them. When Mars came and took up the night sky for three whole days, conflict was waiting to kiss it on the face and make a bed for it in the hearts of all. Men and women like these would be of use again. They would live up to the name they called themselves by: heirs. And inherit the earth, clamouring to cleave out their legends with the collective neck at the bleeding pan. He works to keep his mind on the task of tracking. He goes where they went, struggling to keep his own vector. He comes across a killing site where animals were felled. At first he thought it was the children's blood but all indications are it is not. He sighs with relief and continues to a spot where he was sure they were but all traces of them disappear. Desperate he figures he will make his way back to the road. They must have found their way back to the road. *He hopes*



Shadow and Make Believe open their eyes simultaneously. Mirror shutters. It takes time for them to adjust. The photography of the mind's eye, the chemical action of light on the untreated surface, is a slow insensitive enchantment. How they got to this place; by a long exposure. A place he recalls they rested at, very near the road. He stands up and absentmindedly takes her with. This is his first memorable smile; it is pert and self-conscious. Before he can collect himself, Make Believe says: *More people, people just over there, they are not looking for us*

A caravan with a friendly face – faces actually; the couple, who are the driving team, remember Shadow. He had hauled their luggage for them some time ago. Of course it was great fortune that they should cross paths again, at the time they first met in the market they could not treat him properly having just escaped heirs who took a considerable amount of their load and had generously spared their lives. They had to barter to afford their transit back and for a time the woman, a rare River Plinth native, had worked in the harems. They asked after his well-being amongst other things and accustomed to his unspecific answers they didn't probe him further.

The canter of the column was legato. The children were reasonably accommodated. The assemblage of hands and transients, and drivers and commissioners were slightly bemused by them. Make Believe was especially curious about the man they called Siliva who floated atop the caravan with a marvellous parasol of woven refractory grass patched with a lifetime's worth of gold thread in the mends. The man seemed unapproachable and Shadow avoided him, keeping to the good nature of Keemetswe and Keolatetse, the couple who felt they owed him kindness and gave him comfort. Make Believe couldn't help herself and blurted to the man, on one of his turns on the ground: *What makes you fly like that?* His literal answer: *I don't trust the dreams of those animals*

The caravan was a series of misshapen freight cars and a ramshackle of maintenance units that was led by a procession of woollen Camels. The animals would walk day and night over the vast distances in alternating sets. Half would sleep and the other half would store themselves and be linked to the train so that the kinetic potential was maximized, the animals would then be alternated regularly, this prolonged the life of the camels and extended their range. When Siliva talked about not trusting the animals' dreams he meant that he suspected the information shared between the animals was more than fats laden with procession information. He couldn't shake the effect they had on him the night the black of the sky was soaked red

For those three nights the people of the caravan had stoled themselves amongst the goods in the freight cars, locking themselves away as the animals rampaged. From the surrounds where they were located, at the time, all manner of wildlife and domesticates were berzerking as if the giant red moon was beckoning them to kill. They saw a troop of foolish heirs get mangled by their hunting beasts. When the giant satellite disappeared from the heavens the animals too returned to normal. But Siliva remained untrusting. Of even these unassuming camels with their sedated eyes and sensational grizzled eyelashes.

Ancient roads

The highways and intersectional passes of the overland transport network developed naturally from the environ. Where human intervention prevailed the roads passed through treacherous trenches and valleys but often times were the result of the travails of migratory wildlife. Instinctively animals would bypass dangers and wear a track into the ground that would then be widened to accommodate the vehicles and settlements that invariably came.

The caravan is passing through one of these main arteries. The language is diverse, commerce is vibrant. There's a deviancy from the norm. People talk of surviving the red sky. Others talk of their bravery when all others cowered. The legends of some have turned into profitable business with the peddling of medicines, souvenirs, advice, consultations, charms, alms to ward off the universal wickedness. Heirs are organizing themselves into bigger sized militia and there is open hostility with travellers worried that tolls and extortion would make a return. It's an acute carnival of despair modelled as survival. Implacable paranoia has raised tents where people argue over the price of a nomad's testicle, or haggle over the preparation of Grounded Elephant tusk. Knowing that this was not the place for an albino child, the world being what it is, their circus moves on.

Make Believe has long wrestled with the question. She scrambles to the roof of the boxcar that Siliva is hovering over on his gliding sunshade apparatus. Seeing the girl screening her eyes from the sun with the flat of her palm, looking up at him, he floats down. She says: *Help me understand how is it you are able to fly like that.* Siliva strokes his half-beard: *I will try and honour your request.* He floats away high above the shipping transport with a reflexive look in his eye. This was a demonstration. Maybe the danger she was in was persuading him, he thought. Make Believe cannot figure out his answer.

Interim Camp

When the caravan rests the people arrange themselves amicably. Social groups gather around separate fires and cook together. Make Believe is trying to make the parasol fly with her, Shadow is trying to make himself useful. Siliva tells Make Believe that he adjusts his gravity and that's how he is able to fly. The umbrella acts as a conduit for his gravitational polarity. She does not understand so he tries to tell her about subatomic mass and this confuses her more. Being from the Veld Plinth it was explained to him as a child, and the explanation did not make him able to pilot the parasol any sooner; rather, it was with practice. Make Believe is given a bowl and instructed to eat, Keemetswe draws Shadow's attention to how she wouldn't eat without seeing him eat first, and then she would wolf down not even pausing to taste the food in the same the way he does.

Keolatetse holds court; his favourite story is how he snared a siren of the River Plinth. He was a young sap who decided to be a trader with very little tutelage and he had selected to ferry cargo via waterways, figuring he would face no competition. He fashioned himself a steam sailboat and set about making waves, as he said. When reaching a particular estuary he encountered dead water and was stranded far from land. It was not until that point that he realized that he had no proficiency in swimming. He was ready to give in to the fate that he would die anonymously and foolishly when a maiden came from the water and rescued him. Keemetswe chimes in that had he been discovered by the guard he would've been rescued, and then been given a hiding for his troubles. The laughter is delicious, but it cannot shake the pall of the conversation others were having around them. The times are dictated by the appearance of a low orbiting Mars.

Keolatetse sighs and confesses to knowing very little. As a child on the plains he was told stories about the stars, about how there was an estranged family of humankind living on four squares, that the people of the earth descended from the heavens on a golden rope in a terrible flight to flee a collapsing paradise. He would often wonder after the ones who were lost, it had softened him. He could never turn his back to any traveller. Of course this had endangered him, like the time when he

and Keemetswe were accosted, his eyes wet thinking about how he had feared for her the most. She tells him not to dwell on his foolishness and the meal carries on unsalted.

*

A sore neck of the woods

Food capsules. His stomach is distending from food capsules. It's nigh impossible but somehow Senatla has managed to expand his gut off the hunger staves. The fight had an effect on him he can't talk about and Mojalefe is at his wit's end. His troop is a shambles. Maleroele is pitting her crocodiles recklessly against other hunting animals in pit fights. They have a good record but one is seriously injured. It irks Mojalefe but his own mind is preoccupied with finding the stranger from the Great Tree, who is asking about two children – one pitch, the other incandescent – offering a reward for their location. In the present tense, he is elsewhere; thinking the way he does by tugging at the hilts that protrude from his matted locks with one hand; the other is slashing his new prize through the air. So he barely registers the man in a long flowing cape approaching him astride a juvenile Stalagmata Battle Rhino. The man has the audacity to ask him to give up his hard-won Concussion Club.

*

Siliva takes the girl for a walk, he was never into clearing after supper. He gives her the Parasol and she surprisingly is able to carry it. A girl her size back in the Veld would've had to had a custom one made with less density, but she seems very different: *this is lesson one*

Shadow is happy to be under Keolatetse's wing, the windfall of unexpected kindness. When Keolatetse asks where the children are travelling to and Shadow infers that there's no way of knowing, his advice to the boy is to travel toward the Baobab Plinth, from what he has heard it is the most progressive and accommodating society. This he has been told by the people he has encountered of the displaced kind. Maybe there, there would be place for him and Make Believe, whereas here – with the caravan – they can only expect a hard life they had never signed up for. Keemetswe concurs and says that it is an impractical life even for her and if she wasn't cosmically chained to her partner who could barely tread water she would settle somewhere too, somewhere with sheer riverside cliffs she could leap off of

Make Believe runs up, her excitement bristling; Siliva is going to teach her how to adjust her gravity. The words tumble out all at once, coherent only to her own understanding: *The only thing holding one back is ignorance. Once one can fathom that gravity is not an external force but rather an emergent phenomenon, a result of the compounding of one's being, then one can at will*

Shadow listens to the translucent girl, compunction: why must he remember and hold it against her that she doesn't, or doesn't seem to. They were both holed up in the Xenolith looking for a way out; the way she would go to the divining room at the appointed hours and slump to the floor on her haunches even as Matseleng's body lay outside in the confusion. He grits his teeth and tongues the enamel silt, feigning a smile to ward off a grimace. And Make Believe is still talking: *that's why it's not anti-gravity you see it's a, a, the word for it is, wilful misdirection*

*

Short work, Master moTswahole makes short work of the ruffian who is holding the concussion club that he had given to Shadow on that terrible day. He marshals the animal that Make Believe calls Bong-Bong to guard his back against the encroachment of this despicable man's cohorts. It has been a long time since his body has engaged in combat, coaxing his strikes from kata to lethal takes some doing but he is far more disciplined and precise than his adversary. Being Daaemaanga, people often believe the strength on display is supernatural, when in

truth it is cultivated from early childhood. The strength training involves the rapid breaking and spraining of muscle tissue, cartilage and corpus ligature. Constantly being told *punch directly from the dark spot of your soul*. The vibrato bass of his hum radiates from his diaphragm. The resonance cloaks his strikes and pitches at his thrust like brass knuckles. It took him a mere eleven strikes to beat the man to the point where he pissed himself. Bong-Bong has done well for a juvenile. The heirs had unleashed hunting crocodiles but the Rhino had dispensed with them with great efficiency, crushing the reptiles with its mighty stamp. The wrangler is visibly distraught and the muscled one with the sagging stomach doesn't seem to have the heart to fight and capitulates to a shove from Bong-Bong's hindquarters. Another peevish one looks on not knowing what to do with a dagger nervously held, a poor show of menace.

Taking a red mushroom snuff from the eagle horn charm around his neck Mojalefe gained enough strength to find his feet and run for his life while the old man was distracted by a tumbling Senatla. Mojalefe gets to his feet and in an anabolic fission stop motion feat of strength bolts for the tree line by the highway hounded by the laughter and rank abuse of the witnesses. He does not wonder after the wellbeing of his comrades

Until

Much later he took the measure of his definition of coward.

1000

A thousand times over it went through his mind that he was faced with a trial he was highly unprepared for. Those miserable children had brought him great misfortune - he thinks, limply resting his swollen lip on the rim of a gourd filled with distilled heart of palm and sour ripe beetle pepper wine. He ran and then rode hard overnight on a stolen draught horse with a stylized mane, bare saddle. The red mushroom snuff was wearing off and he had to resort to cobalt salt in strategically cut lesions for relief. That old man nearly called out his number, he sighs. His days as a Loom of heirs were over. He would be lucky if he could join a caravan anonymously and spend the rest of his days as a transient hand. His own thoughts offered him no comfort rather they were plagiarized by the spirits and were falsely leading him to a final, final answer

When

Intelligence tells us – the voice of the woman at his elbow sounds like crushed glass on glass, her molars and incisors doing the pronouncing, her mouth reflexively shutting tooth first just as the tongue darts back into place after every word. She holds a caterpillar to his face and dangles her head at a diagonal

*

ACK Stalagmata contact lost.

Caterpillar message transmission.

Relay broadcast. Confidential. Unsecured

Urgent: New asset. Special interest from Stalagmata sighted. Engineering capture. Location - Road Network. In pursuit.

ACKnowledge

*

Recon Camp

Pula was looking at Mbali the way a young man of the Rock does when there's a secret to be kept. She was standing with her artisans of the Bow, the third artillery, a high-ranking Domba of archers attached to her own battalion. You could tell by their right or left handedness which breast had been removed. Mbali was younger than all of them by years but they were disciplined soldiers so her adequate leadership seem sterling. This level of protection for her showed him that some lives were worth more than others, and the adjudication was flimsy. He had in his company his peerage, which wasn't any comfort to him as they were still immature halfwits, but the days of an ornamental military career were gone, whet stones such as themselves were being put on the frontline – the Great Rock was suspicious and saw a threat from every other society after the inexplicable events of the red planet in the sky. At first it was believed to be an illusory attack but then Mariha had fomented rumours, saying that it was the Mbokodo's doing, and so long as the acolytes lived the Stalagmata was under threat. It was too neat for even someone as uninterested as Pula but after the children had fled and a second event occurred some twenty-eight to twenty-nine days later, the matter had to be investigated. So the Domba Shadow was a part of, was sent to hunt him and that apparition of his. He looks at his comrades and what an awful lot they are, more interested in posturing and listening to legends as told by their commanding officer Master Nkwe. The old man himself is ill-disciplined, Pula thinks, the way he allows the boys to fraternize with the artillery corps who, being seasoned campaigners, use the boys for their amusement.

When you get that look in your eyes I could mistake you for a leg sweeper, Mbali appears at his shoulder. He doesn't find it as funny as he would have a few months ago. He tells her that all he is a soldier. She draws closer to him with all kinds of hormonal spore signalling her advances. Not so long ago he would've relished to have taken her there, in the sweep of the sweet grass that surrounded their camp. Even further back he was pursuing her while she ran after Shadow on the day of the festival, wishing that she intended for him instead of that boy. He walked away from her and she insulted him and he thought of simply being

Elsewhere

*

Off Road

They took trade and contracts with them knowing they would be delayed. Keolatetse aimed the train of the gravelled voice camels off the known network. They had to offload seasonal personnel who would profit from other engagements and so they were travelling light. Surprisingly, Siliva stayed on. It was clear he was enamoured of Make Believe. The parachute lessons were comical and clairvoyant, verging on folly turned to magic.

The lighter the staff on hand the more Shadow felt of use, he had adapted quickly to many of the labours and was on hand to volunteer for anything anyone asked of him. Not only did he train excessively for his own person, but he was never fatigued, handily hauling cargo or changing the drive train.

At nights they would counsel around a fire and listen to Keolatetse try and put into words his love for Keemetswe, using one paranormal idiom after another and always returning to his favourite one.

Bedtime: Shadow would take to a boxcar by himself, by the morning Make Believe would be next to him having snuck in. She would find him easily of course; he preferred the cars without a roof that let in the passive argentine slivers of stars and moonlight.

He was getting nervous; in him he knew the days were getting slim. Soon Make Believe would fall into pain again and he wouldn't know what to do – again. And that strange moon would appear. And he would remember Matseleng: reddened and dead in that resilient light. Try as he might

*

Outer Planet in reach

Adaptation is the mitigation of chaos. Chaos cannot be negotiated with. Survival is reflexive; an involuntary pull to stern against the pitch and yaw of the unfathomable flux

The time has come again, and all across the known world people ready themselves for the sighting. In the Plinths they have become accustomed to the varied calibration. The society of the River Plinth allocates its caches of farmed fish to friendly waters in outlying tributaries and families gather together in the large caverns behind the waterfall that guards and powers their existence. Families gather everywhere, it is the same in the Subterra Plinth where the metal oresmen and oreswomen would return home to hole up with their loved ones; the calibration of the Plinth, at the sighting of Mars, is of complete insulation from the outside world. If one was to be caught in the service tunnels they would be robbed of air and die. The Subterrans are a hardy people but the tremors at the time the Plinth reorganizes are far more sinister than any they have ever encountered. Inside deep level chutes volcanic bile rises and seethes. In the days after they remove the stubborn, the unfortunate and the suicidal from the resultant rock fall. At the stone Hearth, in the Stalagmata, a war council is held, with theorizing getting more frantic and desperate. The military is posted outside of the spires. Some harem tents pop up, not for want of missing a day of business. Some society types spend their

time in the shut-in harems in case they can meet the end of days pressed against their favourite rentbody. Civilians, especially the engineering and surgeon classes are kept in their respective homes till the event passes. In the in-between places in the habitable cracks outside the Plinths people find a way. There are Portsmen nervously staring, from the launches, into the death of desert waiting for the last Aerophant to come in. If delayed in anyway and unsecured the moment the visage of the red planet osculates against the upper atmosphere, the pachyderm gets confused by some unknown interference and plummets into the wasteland, it would die of suffocation before the body suffered the radial acidity of mercury poisoning in the ionic blinking eye of atomic decay. Then there are heirs, and amongst them the wranglers; who would sedate or restrain their animals, drink themselves into a stupor as their keeps would thrash in some primal confusion. Off the arterial roadways Master moTswahole fastens himself to a tree and harnesses his provisions and supplies to the branches. He has no way of knowing how the steadfast's rhino will act. He watches from the canopy as the intruding celestial appears suddenly and is accompanied by a blood moon. The animal at the foot of the tree lies on its side, panting furiously, its hind legs kicking pathetically as if attempting to swim mid-drowning

Make Believe is curled up and Keemetswe is attending to her. Shadow is nearby and for once he wants to be away from the underhanded cover of night, away from the ruby glaze auralis, but he must be there to answer Keemetswe's questions. After some asking about the symptoms and seeing the vermilion trickle on the little girl's thigh, a light relief touches her brow. She tells Shadow not to worry himself, that this was a natural passage to womanhood. She said that although Make Believe looked young, it was possible that she was experiencing the onset of a cycle every woman knows. Shadow was slightly relieved and allowed Keolatetse to take him away to check on the animals. It had been the driver's gamble that if they were furthest away from where the Plinths triangulate the animals would be unaffected. It is an intuitive guess that paid off. Siliva goes into the car that Make Believe is being attended to in and puts his heavy parasol in the girl's frail hand. *Adjust your gravity child and come see me above.* After he leaves Make Believe strengthens, and grips the staff of the parasol tight.

Erstwhile

It was a mercurial change in mind for Keemetswe and Keolatetse: They no longer wanted the children to go south to the Baobab. It wasn't that they could accord them the lives children deserve on their squeezebox convoy; rather it was an experiential decrescendo, the faintest realization that more from them, including Siliva, was needed – expected even. It neither happened here nor there but somewhere all along the intestinal trails of the inroads they had traversed. It was Keemetswe waking to the wonder of an innocence as innocuous as hers, but from hatchlings that bore an unfortunate yolk. It was Keolatetse's unselfishness and having someone to show new things to, hear him argue to himself about the importance of intergenerational development and how the world had gone mad from forgetting. Siliva found the girl amusing, and if the boy was important to her, he was sufferable.

*

He didn't know the name of his benefactor, but she had promised him a great bounty and already he was laden with the promissory bill that guaranteed him a great deal of resources all along the road network. If he could get back to the road network again, seeing as he had lost his stolen mare over the course of the nefarious nights. He since young had no use in handling animals beyond their usefulness to him. He had been walking four days and had chanced upon the trail of some caravan he hoped he could reach before he fell to the ghosts of the bush.

He encountered them not too far from a hermitry fuelling station, what gave him pause was the sight of his quarry. Atop the camel driven train was the little girl who could turn into a lizard king

playing with a kind of umbrella accompanied by a wiry man in Velder Robes. The Boy was at the front riding between the humped animals on the crankshaft, craning his neck to take instruction from the driver. Mojalefe cursed his luck and misfortune simultaneously. He took note of the direction they were headed in and made for the station as soon as the caravan had disappeared. At the fuelling store he had a hard time convincing the patriarch that what he was offering, a stamp from the promissory bill, was more than sufficient tender, instead he had to part with his onyx blade knives, the one he kept in the knot of his dreadnaught locks for a mangy knock-kneed ostrich. He convinced himself that he would ask for more bargaining with the new intelligence he had. On the ride he thought of the women and men he would buy to pleasure him. It gave him comfort as his scrotum was pummelled riding the knobby bird to civilization.

*

IOOI

Onward went the Caravan

From the lonely station they were carrying sweet venison; the boars of the sloping meanders were fed on grass and honey. Their elongated tusks bored to make snuff cants. It was a meagre trade they supplemented by picking up a jangle of single string harpists, one of whom was a celebrated blind instrumentalist who had the habit of affectionately pinching Keemetswe's bicep when Keolatetse held courtship over dinner

On they went

They forged a tributary where they lost a calf and its mother, this meant stopping to realign the battery, as the animals had to get to know each other again. On the bank Make Believe studied kites and floating candles hoping to extend her flight time

Ahead some more

They traded the venison for the wax compound with worm colonists. The colonists were mason entomologists who had bred giant plastic eating slugs that could digest the polyurethanes and break down the polymers into an organic wax compound used to line the inside of the balloons on the harnesses of Aerophants. The trade in Plastics was hazardous as it required the harvest from the ocean. With decreasing availability the business had become cut throat. The colonist they traded with had a farm full of insects numbering in the thousands and had a name for every one. When asked how he could name them all instead of numbering them he replied that he wouldn't be able to care for them as he should if they remained nameless. He couldn't say if they knew they had names

Doubling back

They followed the tributary along fertile lands to reach the great fall, home of Keemetswe, not to see her family, she was banished for abandoning the River Plinth to take off with Keolatetse, but rather to peer over the edge into the thunder of the bottomless spray and watch the thousand rainbows that were held in place by the refraction mirrors. Regrets? Keolatetse asked. None, was her reply

The next moment

They were in a competitive derby, pitting the strongest and most rested of their stock against other caravans in an open-air festival. Siliva was an elegant rider, which didn't mean he was in competition, rather it earned him the respect of appreciators of how one fills a saddle. It was at this engagement Make Believe stared in wonder at a mule rider who was adorned with a sarong and headscarf in the style of the nomad people

The next town over

Keolatetse had seemingly met his match in long windedness. A wily old Subterranean oresman, who had given up his pick as a young man, stood toe to toe with him swapping yarns about all manner of subjects. The contest would never have ended without Keemetswe's intervention

The stock rolled on

The musicians had overstayed their welcome, not only had they gone through their repertoire several times over but the famed one of the troupe's pinching had moved down from Keemetswe's bicep to her thigh. They were let off politely enough in a small trade post, on the dead desert's outskirts, famed for its glassworks

Here

They were dropping off their loads of wax polymer. They met a manic sculptor who built large scale immovable. His masterwork was an array of a multitude of thin, delicate cylinders of the clearest glass with fine colouring that when looked at from the viewing deck many feet above in the right kind of light would form an aerial portrait of the trade post. He bartered to join the caravan by promising glyph tutelage to the children. On leaving the town knowing his works would not be appreciated he destroyed all of it and left with a haste

Succumbing

The sculptor was dishevelled and ill-timed in many facets of his life, from interrupting Keolatetse's dinner time oration to tell of his mind's inner workings in convoluted monologues that lacked coherency to not keeping his living space and appearance tidy. Further, he would introduce himself by a different name until it was hard to keep track of what to call him. And yet, he insisted on a regimented tutoring schedule for the children, demanding discipline from them without being exemplary himself

More trade routes

The sculptor began being referred to as Oo by everyone on the caravan, a moniker he took a liking to. When it came to taking on new freight, commissioners and load hands, Oo was kept as far away from the people and negotiations as possible. This meant that at one or two stops him and the children would go off to carve glyphs into any surface he saw fit, public or otherwise, often leading to confrontations that Shadow would box them out of, if it came to that

Over mountains, far

Though he would not admit it, Siliva saw that the glyph tutelage had helped improve the hand wrist coordination of Make Believe, allowing her more flight time. The only matter now was her height. He advanced on Shadow and never having yet been civil with him, made a hard time of asking him to encourage her

There was a town

Already decorated in glyphs, every wall had a family bind or idiom of some kind in the finest carving Oo had ever seen. But he stared for hours at one particular inscription. Standing there, the quietest he had ever been. He had to be physically carried away from it and loaded back onto the departing caravan. On it was written:

.i cannot say this life is soft or hard

they felled the tree; to
build the ladder; to
reach the fruit; the
fruit festered

The time again

As was the routine they were in the outreach, some willing passengers had come along with them, not minding the detour. Make Believe was steeling herself – if this was what it meant to be a human of the woman persuasion she was determined to navigate it. Shadow could be of no help in this regard but he was an example the way he went with it.

Mars appeared midday purplish rouge paired with two misshapen discs. Make Believe is allowed to tote the parasol by Siliva. She leans on it, but mostly walks by her own strength. Everyone at the camp is staring at Oo who has publicly naked and standing arms agog legs askance staring at the celestial orbiter. Knowing his hygiene habits the members of the caravan let him be.

By the time night came Make Believe succumbed to the strain. She lay in a hold with Keemetswe attending her. With her hand she kept scratching an alien scrawl into every surface within her reach over and over.

Before Mars saw out its dusk, on the last day Keolatetse started the train. Provisions were running dangerously low, and the risk of losing the battery with no resources to replace the flock was too high. He started it on a low drive to preserve the reserve. It was a solemn march. The closer they came the more fidgety the animals, but it was not desperate. They only needed to near civilization.

Days passed

Some normalcy returned. It was always a time of clinging, like the shedding of a woollen coat. The stop they took was in a town of disenchantment. The inhabitants could be found prostrate on mats resting their heads on wooden pillows with long pipes extending from their mouths, absent eyes and a slob of slaver running from their mouths. Make Believe was not there to see it, she was atop the caravan with Siliva again, while Shadow witnessed a man die in a series of convulsive coughing fits, choking on bile and vomit. This was a town where the disposed were deposited and concentrated opiates and derivatives were given to them and their bodies tested on, by herbalists and lay-engineers looking for elixirs and cure-alls. One of their party left the caravan with little personal effects and took to the vacant mat. Driving away Keolatetse felt inconsolable guilt. *Why hadn't I paid attention? Why don't I know his name?*

Over more

Near a settlement it was ticklish to discover women who pretended to be from the Stalagmata harems. They fawned and cooed in pantomime with their over the top performances and garish homemade costumes. The lengths they would go to, to pretend, were comical; faux-feigning and gesticulating. But Keemetswe had brought them here because it was her favourite place to go cliff jumping. She kicked off her shoes and ran sprinting when they got to the place. Was quickly over the cliff's edge just as the trailing party made it through the hedge; went spiralling down undressing effortlessly as she dived, and was all skin by the time she hit the waters below. Siliva thought it a perfect place to test Make Believe and she tiptoed off the precipice clutching the parasol and for a moment she hovered. Then she descended, but she would hover momentarily and everybody would clap and whoop as she swooped and stayed and slipped and paused and fell again. Even the women

of the town who followed them here, on the off chance there was business to be had, applauded. Keolatetse had the fog that plagued him lifted. They left the place hastily, Oo having had a disagreement about the meaning of body art with one of the town folk who was an important man, which came to blows and the crashing of a chair against a head, - over

An anonymous afternoon

Left to his own devices, the caravan idle, Oo found himself in the cargo hold that Make Believe was treated in – he shrieked out in horror that brought him the attention of those not too disgusted, disturbed by him, to investigate. He was less coherent than normal but dangerously affected. After some time it was coaxed out of him. The scrawl that was everywhere was at fault, asked what it meant he refused to come out with it. He leapt to attack Make Believe when she arrived with Siliva, in tandem, to find out the fuss. Forced into the dirt box behind the engine stove he accused the little girl of witchcraft which drew the ire of Shadow. He said she was writing in an ancient index – when insignias were used to form words instead of representational meaning accorded by glyphs. When asked what was written he was not forthcoming at first, but then: *It attacks many people*. When asked what he meant, he could not say thusly the power of the spell. He left of his own volition that afternoon. Good riddance. In the dead of night the carriage in question was inexplicably torched. They never saw or heard of him again

It wasn't always to be

Needing more trade, Keolatetse took the caravan on conventional sojourns. It was laborious and tedious but the resources were steadily accumulating for a new carriage and battery. Stopping outside a town, to barter for the animals, they were assailed by a hunting group of heirs who demanded a ransom for their safe passage. Keolatetse was going to relent but Shadow refused and launched into a fight, galvanizing the able bodied in the train to join suit. Keemetswe patched up her partner and the boy that night and watched the tendon of their bond grow stronger

They were due

Laden with a violent herd of grazing goat they were headed to the Veld under Siliva's guidance. He navigated from memory when they couldn't find the settlements despite the evidence of cairns demarcating the area. They zigzagged the grassy peninsula and were at a loss when a travelling band informed them that the Veld Plinth had moved several times of its own volition since the sighting of Mars. They unloaded the animals there and then. Keemetswe saw the strain on Keolatetse's frame and she gently cupped his shoulder blades reassuring him that something would give.

IOIO

This is the elsewhere Pula wants. The old Master Rhino Handler has the regiment on the chase. Pula and his unit are the closest one on his tail, running hot behind Master Nkwe who is saddled atop a senior class buaya darat. Domesticated and bred to grow in size the Giant Monitor is monstrous, fast and vicious. The only species in any mounted infantry that can kill a Stalagmata Battle Rhino. The chase is furious and the thrill is the bulkhead that keeps the lungs from collapsing as the boys hold file in pursuit. They have already outstripped the tracking jackals and the rest of the regiment has dispersed to outflank the apostate, in the bullhorn formation.

Master moTswahole knows he can't outrun them. His plan is to isolate a small engageable force, banking on the over-enthusiasm of the overwhelming number to be corralled into practiced set military formations. Like the artillery would be sent to higher ground on his flank, while the bulk majority of the unit would take the opposite position to cut him off. He would lead the chasing party in a circuitous holding pattern and isolate them. What he had not accounted for was the mounted lizard. He would have to engage on a running dismount and order the juvenile bull out of harm's way. How he would contend with the reptile and its rider he had yet to figure out.

We want him alive men, hollers Master Nkwe. moTswahole had dismounted his bull in a single stride and was already knocking out three of the leading boys with epigrammatic punches. Pula had the sense to collect his self first and was pirouetting away from the man's main attack. From the bush emerged the young bull rhino, and him, Mollo and Phatsima had to deal with the resultant threat.

Master moTswahole had not accounted for Bong-Bong's return, he moved to a position where he could be on the offensive and at the animal's defence. He had knocked the foot soldiers out cold, young boys who had no experience against a fighting stance other than the Rieldans, nor did they have the creativity to explore its variations. They all had the same weak point: under their all-weather cloaks was the standard armour of reinforced rhino hide protecting the mortally endangered areas, while giving freedom to move, but what the armour lacked was a chest plate and the boys didn't know how to protect their solar plexus. This was the vulnerability he exploited, knocking all of them cold except for three who didn't rush in with the rest and had made a move, which was repelled, against Bong-Bong.

Master Nkwe: **This is what I've been trained for,** , making a show of touching down from his saddle. He took off his all-weather cloak with a flourish, underneath in addition to the standard armour he had on a decorated rock encrusted breastplate. **Daaemaenga,** he said, while unstrapping a length of rhino hide from an unconscious boy, tying it around his head covering his ears. He saw the recognition in moTswahole's eyes and chuckled. **I've never fought Daaemaenga, I've always wanted to, ever since I was earning my minerals in the Domba. Even though I was a champion they always said to me.** He spits. **That although I was champion across all classes I would never beat a Daaemaenga.** He hocks. **Can you believe it? Those were my teachers.**

Master moTswahole barely had time to parry. The old man was deceptively quick and had the better of him. He had to relinquish his cape as it was not serving its function as a cover against such an unrelenting attack. He crouched into a cross arm defence and withstood a majority of the blows, while probing with some of his own. He weaved up from the crouch position once he thought he had attuned to the old man's metronome but his opposite switched up tempo again and he was nearly incapacitated by a strike to the throat. He used the momentum of the strike to throw him backwards against the rhino to prompt the animal to interject with its horn. Master Nkwe clucked at him.

Disappointment

Master Nkwe commands the Giant Monitor to his side and now the two men and their beasts are engaged. Master moTswahole is fighting with his mounting hooks 'while Master Nkwe has short blades. moTswahole goes inside Nkwe's advance with a parry that disarms them both and produces the concussion club but misses Nkwe by a hair as he reflexively ducks into a leg sweep. The two combatants are at a stalemate with the Rieldans master ahead by a slight edge. moTswahole picks one of the daggers up and stabs wildly, allowing him to be caught in an arm-bar chokehold. He drops the blade into his sinister hand and cuts his captor from the thigh to the calf. Nkwe instead of relinquishing the grapple, applies more pressure to constrict the wrangler's air passageway. **Pity I have to take you alive Daaemaenga, it would've been an honour to kill you. Now that I've seen for myself that the Daaemaenga are nothing but cheats**

Daaemaenga are taught the best defence is to take an assault and are drilled to take punishment. moTswahole had all his faculties about him. The rhino was struggling against the buaya darat, but was smarter than its rival, allowing the lizard to attack at its fortified trunk where it had been gored as a calf, where the ribcage was replaced by a metal alloy and the skin over it had grown thicker. But there was precious little time for them and he had resorted to getting captured to turn the battle. He dropped the dagger and reached to his belt, producing a corked vial. He smeared its contents down the injured leg of the master fighter and waited. The lizard turned and advanced on them. Still Nkwe did not relinquish his hold until his own steed clamped its giant jaws on his leg.

The lure resin was used by wranglers in the training of animals. It was an extract from the glands of rock snakes. It gave off the smell of whatever foods one desired. In diluted amounts it was used in the cooking in the harems. Mixed with blood the potency was increased exponentially.

Pula and his command rushed to the aid of their leader and Master moTswahole snagged onto the rhino and made his escape.

The advantage: Stalagmata Battle Rhino was an herbivore.

*

In a smugglers warren, Master moTswahole had a veritable boon in the sac of the juvenile bull. Battle Rhino semen was a wanted commodity and had afforded him room and care in the thieves' den. He was recuperating from his wounds when through the walls he heard a conference of heirs. They were a group assembled by a man who promised them a great bounty for the successful capture of two children, one coal the other alabaster. They were purported to be travelling by caravan and would be led into a trap. The man went further on to explain that he had the resources to keep them after the affair and organize them into a militia with him as the Loom. One of the faceless voices asked him who was he to lead them when he had rode into town on an ostrich nearly dead from dehydration. The man must have produced something that quietened the dissent. Master moTswahole recognized the voice coming out of the main speaker, the coward he had faced for the club.

He was not fully recovered. Bong-Bong was still coming out of the sedative. He was leaving to find the children. He would seek to catch the river snake, the hydroplane that rides the alter-current of upstream swimming cod. Hopefully he would get to the Subterra surrounds in time.

He arrives at the river launch and is met by a bored portsman who tells him the River Plinth society had altered the tide. Master moTswahole curses his luck: he had ridden three days in the opposite direction on a gamble that didn't pay off

*

Sentaoleng and her assistant Madimabe were sitting in a biodegradable tent on the outskirts of the Subterra Plinth – near to the volcanic springs. They were waiting on Kaoane the failed mission delegate who had lost the children. Operation Famo the mission to capture the lost Baobab artefact from the Stalagmata was a failure and yet Kaoane was still given the leeway to interfere in her mission. He had of course gained the intelligence that there was another *emergent* but his bungling of such an expensive yet simple operation should have gotten him relegated to a clerkship of some kind. She had long shorn her disdain for the politics. Being this far in the field had afforded her that luxury. But any excuse to revisit the incompetence of the leadership sapped her of patience.

Kaoane arrives unaccompanied on a stealth sheath glider. She immediately does not take a liking to his overly gratuitous face.

“Ladies” he greets “Good to make your acquaintance” he continues “despite the difficulty”

“There’s no difficulty” she elaborates “we will have the mission complete by week’s end”

“You have little use for me, then” he depreciates “even lesser” she explains

“Ah” he hesitates “Well then may I ask to tag along on the mission” he states “on whose orders” she asks “just my curiosity” he confesses “and perhaps your bed, young lady” he addresses Madimabe. Madimabe flicks her tongue out at him.

Kaoane addresses Sentaoleng on the frequency delegates share when they are close to one another. It’s another symptom of Caterpillar use that only manifests in the physiology of those whose ancestry is traceable to the first of the Baobab Society, the body using a latent function in the intersection of the Entorhinal Cortex and Amygdala to mimic the function of the broadcast node of the Caterpillar. This is as a result of higher end users needing to load-share the signal and interference protocol, to censor and correct their broadcasts in real time.

Kaoane| blinks to her: *There is something else all together unpleasant about this matter*

Sentaoleng| eye twitches: *Then why tell me? I have a job to do*

Kaoane| reflexive lip curl: *It’s a suspicion I have*

Sentaoleng| jaw clench: *Suspicious are for politicians leave me out of it*

Kaoane| neck spasm: *I won’t interfere with your mission, I just need confirmation*

Sentaoleng| forehead crease: *For whom?*

Kaoane| Shoulder tension: *For Myself?*

Sentaoleng| raised eyebrow: *So you say*

Sentaoleng senses the man’s rogue potential. She hasn’t been close to these children directly but there was no knowing what he had to have seen that has made him so imbalanced.

So

Rootless

There's no time though to dwell. She has set in motion the endgame and her attention was demanded by the play at hand

*

Keolatetse is in a celebratory mood. All his worrying was for nought as Keemetswe was happy to remind him. They were stood getting the caravan outfitted with a new drive track, refurbished carriages and secondary-to-tertiary batteries for a once in a lifetime shipment. An emissary of the Vine Plinth approached them to deliver representations to the Subterranean Plinth in a big negotiation. Siliva was particularly unenthused by the prospect, but saw the value. Shadow was hostile to the Vinelander, and they put it to his unguessable temperament. Keemetswe and Keolatetse were overwhelmed by the rush of hands to assist on the excursion and had to turn back many as they were looking to maximize on the returns. That night over dinner Keemetswe stole the thunder from Keolatetse by orating on the love she had for all of them, thankfulness that wet the eye, and whet the heart of the hardest

Even

*

Smugglers Den: Dusk

The Looms of the heirs were in a froth, having been served the finest mead and spirits. Their reflexes were slow, at any other time their guard would have been sharper, their axes and arsenal at the ready as soon as the door of the hall splintered.

Mbali puffed out her chest, pulled in her abdomen and curled her arms baring galvanic whips. Her four sisters behind her struck out theirs, brandishing weaponry making her look like a death spiral, a many hand immortal death charge.

I'm only going to ask this once, she bellowed. The men were slow to the draw. Where is the *Master of the Rhino?* looking around the room. No one was forthcoming. *As expected*, she sighed. *It is good*, she smiled. *My sisters and I are thirsting*. Behind her the rest of her Domba cried: ***Shati! Shati! Shati!*** And attacked

*

Mojalefe had escaped with his life. The attack of the Stalagmata women's legion had thinned his ranks, but it had bolstered his position. The Looms who got killed were the stubborn ones. The ones opposed to him, the blowhards who chose death over the riches he promised. It was becoming apparent to him, bolstering his confidence that those who underestimated and opposed him seemingly always met with death, like Sentlame, and now the Heir-Looms. He had their heirs under his thumb now and was riding hard to the meeting place where he would capture the caravan. Some in his company were snickering at his steed. He had taken a liking to the ostrich. It was clean now and fitted in custom armaments and with a saddle that was kind to the rider. In no way was he convinced the animal was noble, but for once he was starting to think he could be loyal to an animal, unlike to Senatla and Maleroele, who he had left in his dust. Should he face them again, he dreamed, he would grant them favour. He could imagine his sigil, unique – first of its time: an ostrich with wings at full stretch. Behind him rode men on hyenas, jackals, oxen and dwarf giraffe - a hundred strong.

*

Mbali was pleased with the outcome but Pula was not having it. The mission of the Domba unit was to interrogate and they had killed and maimed without getting intelligence. By the time Pula's company arrived – carrying a one-legged Master Nkwe, who insisted to remain with the mission – the town was deserted and they encountered a party of reavers they could not engage with due to the numerical disadvantage. It was a recklessness that he detested in her. And he watched her in the hall swapping claps to the back and compliments with her sisters. He tripped over an heir who was still alive – eyes wide with mortal guilt, arm cleaved off his shoulder, galvanic whip chars across his

chest. From him he ascertained why the heirs were organizing and his heart nearly leapt from his chest into the mouth of the dying man. They could've gained so much more intelligence on acquiring their main mission target and Mbali's cocksureness had cost them. In his heart he resigned himself to give her her dues, Battle offered that. Then, she walked by him and said: "*Me and my girls finished a whole room of armed men, armed to their brows, not one of us was injured. You can keep that soft phallus to yourself. I'm going to warm myself against a woman who knows what she is doing*"

*

Dawn

The caravan had pulled into the trough of a valley, grassy knolls lolling about them. Stars disappearing as the breath of due west wet the cool surfaces and fogged the near distance. The place was prime and conducive to the good-natured travels of Keemetswe and Keolatetse. Everyone had slept well and the tremble that meted their wake was gallant at first but then came the clanging of voices and the shriek and howl of beast and foul, stampeding. The air was filled with it and there was no indication of where it was coming from, not for the untrained ear. Terror gripped one and all, but Shadow prepared himself for a fight, grabbing a pick used for clearing ruts and footholds. Siliva stood atop the caravan to spot the direction. Make Believe took Shadow's side as Keemetswe to Keolatetse, a few of their entourage fled in any direction the intrusion sounded faintest; they were first to be hacked down

The shipment was overwhelmed as men and curs descended on them. Non-combatant the people of the caravan were overrun easily and the boy fought above his death, for the safety of those he loved. It occurred to him then that this was not a love of fear of but rather of value of belonging and this life deserved it. He told them to run, but a bolstered Keolatetse stood by him flaying a splinter chain wildly. Keemetswe tried to get Make Believe away from the foray. Her head was lopped off with the little girl not watching. She had her attention on trying to get back to Shadow and all she felt was a wet spray and the slackening of Keemetswe's grip. She just managed to gasp, the scream was that of Keolatetse who saw the seizure of his beloved's body by vertigo and lost all will to live. The hatchet entered his mind like the pitting of an olive.

Siliva ran to the girl. Plagued by injury he was in too much pain to adjust his gravity enough to be able to lift them both. Instead he encouraged the girl to take the Parasol for herself. He pled with her with his dying breath, compelling her to live. She took off with the sound of his voice, the Mesozoic drone in her ears, lugging the Parasol that felt heaviest without him. He would say: one, two, three and up, one, two, three, and up. *Zero-one*, one-zero and eleven, she said with all her might. *Up, up*, she cried. *Zero-one*, one-zero and eleven, she said again. *Up, up*, she pleaded. Shadow was running after her. Go, he was telling her, *GO*. And the cliff came back to her as she ran uphill with Shadow's eyes as full as a new moon, covered in blood, but behind her. And she remembered feeling the pocket of air inside her, her gravity-well ceasing to resist her command, and up she went, not like before, fast and onrushing like a bursting sluice and she was away. And she wasn't. An heir catapulted off the scrag of a tall neck horse and snatched her midair. Shadow watched helpless from under a pile of bodies trying to restrain him as the girl was bagged and a section of heirs with a man on an ostrich peeled away. The sun rose like a show of apathy burning away the mist and casting a dark outline in the shape of the freight cars that crept toward Shadow.

*

Mojalefe had promised both children but no heirs showed up at the rendezvous with the boy in tow. He made his appointment with the Tree woman. She was not displeased with half the bounty but only paid a third of his due, which was still enough for what was left of his men. They made a pass by the site and found mutilated remains - *No boy*

Dedendum III_

I am the second from the right, in the back, standing in profile

I smiled like that to hide my snag tooth

As joyous as the occasion was I was still conscious of the camera

My old teacher said to me: "History is never interrupted, it will see itself out"

Such is hope

In that photo we were the ones making history all over

The top scientists of our time we were so sure of ourselves and our contribution to our kind,

our continent, that we never saw the betrayal

We were on the moon together all of humanity seemingly working as one

The riches of the continent were at the disposal of the world so we could build the mirror

gates and develop the terraforming Splint Kernels

Those Quantum Telescopic Lenses were our design

We had brought humanity from the brink and yet we had not solved history

The Betrayal, I was told it was coming, but I was drunk with the times

The American-European bloc clinging to the jealousies of the old world conspired to steal the

arks

In their flight they either destroyed or depleted resources leaving us stranded on the moon

while they continued to Mars

It was unconscionable

The fallout saw then the return of nationhood and the outbreak of genocide on the Lunar

surface

We had to reconfigure our work

If we had not kept the Splint technology to ourselves there's no telling if this record is destined

for dead space

We are working in earnest to carve a path forward for our people

Ensure a future for them

Food is scarce. Life support systems are failing

***“my blackness cuts out the
light”***

It's not that I don't exist, Ostrich man. I do and maybe that's my problem and I shouldn't be making it yours, but there's something that's a little broken and unfair about everything. And it gets hard to keep that kind of thing to myself. You know what happened to them right. After I cried. Crying lying under a pile of them. The people you brought with you. The way their weight squeezed those tears out of me and you know what's funny I know it was undeserved, undeserved by me and undeserved by them, but I couldn't explain not then, not to anyone. Forgive, it's hard to keep my words straight they seem to veer away from my intention too much so I keep them to myself. Most of the time. But you know what? I'm going to tell you because even if you don't deserve it – I have no one to tell it to. Here, over here inside of me I have a pit. No it's not what you think, not a hole you see, but this hard seed, like the ones you find in the powdered inside of an ash cherry. The cherries the rentbodies in the harems would collect from the visitors' breakfast and send away to be ground by the giant milling stones, and when that brown-black dust would come back they would put it in the drink or food of someone they are jealous of and that person would complain of a headache and then the surgeons would come to drill a hole in their

head too late and end up fitting them for a death shroud – like that. I have a pit like that inside me. I tried to stop it but it broke that day under the pile of your hoard. I tried to hold it in but it came out of me like black sweat and slithered on my skin. And you know what I did? I did things I knew how to do. I pulled it all in. the first one I took his arm. And I felt it fall to the floor of my stomach and I kind of kicked it wondering where the rest of him was so I opened my eyes and saw his terror and the others on top of him and me heard his screaming and felt the blood and thought it was mine and told him not to kill me. But it was too late. The other one I pulled in up to the waist. He didn't bleed into me. His legs didn't wither. They didn't stiffen, either. They just fell there and when I opened my eyes he was thrashing on top of me. And the people on top of him were starting to wonder what was going on and started rolling off. But before they all got off one of them stuck his face in and I grabbed him by the nose and half his face up to the ears was in my hand and when I let go it fell to the floor of my stomach next to the legs and the arm, frozen like a mask with a stupid look on its face and you should have seen what I saw when I opened my eyes. It was not pleasant. The brain wasn't bleeding. I don't think it bleeds but it was

quivering and there was quick blood all around it and the faceless guy didn't just slump over he was trying to get away from my pull. But his brain slipped out from the rest of his skull and like I said it was unpleasant. And that's how I picked them off one by one. I just stood there in the shade of the caravan and pulled and pulled piece by piece I ended them all. Every last one, even the ones who tried to get away I got them. I just picked up Master Siliva's parasol with its broken hilt and I chased them down and I took pieces of them like you can't believe. And you know the more of them I took in; it wasn't like the place where the seed was, in my stomach, it wasn't like that place got full any more. It's like the night sky filled with stars, the more stars you see you don't start to feel like there's less sky. Something like that, like I say my words tend to turn on me. I know your name Ostrich man, one of your kind before she died, I don't know if you know her, she had a scar that started above her belly button and stretched to the heartbeat in the neck. She was the one who told me your name said it was you who did this to me. You know what you did? You killed me Ostrich man because I know what it's like to not be alone anymore and you and others, made me that way again and I am coming for you, not you alone, don't worry, for them too

Do you know my name yet Ostrich man? Have you heard about the village yet? I killed many there. Because they said you were from there but every one of them that I pulled to pieces swore on their miserable lives that you hadn't been there for a long time. And I believed them. So I let some of them live. To limp and wave their shoulders where their arms used to be. I let them live so they could tell the world, to tell anyone who would listen that I am coming for you. I told them my name, the name I've accepted, the name that I've come to be known by. I told them yours and I told them how you were called a coward by your dying comrades. I left some of them crawling in the dust immobile because I took a little too much from them but if they are discovered they will know what to do. I collected many parts in that village, your village. I even have the head of their biggest champion, a man who knew you recently. He said you left the village together as boys. He was a dullard with a sagging stomach and the little will to fight in him could not match those arms of his. And I remembered his face. Kind of the way I remembered your mane with the dagger hilts sticking out of it. But I couldn't place him at the time so I took his head. And I made a special place for it where I could keep an eye on it and it sits there frozen on the stump of

its neck with eternal tears streaming down its face. The tears don't pool, only stream one way. They don't course the other way when you hold the head upside down or sideways. No matter how hard you shake his head his tears never sprinkle. I think they get sucked in at his neck and come out the eyes. The eyes are open like he is just about to fall asleep. I poked them and they have the consistency of a boiled lizard's egg. And sometimes I would just kick the head. Don't worry it doesn't bruise. It doesn't even wince. Just the same stupid look not as stupid as half-a-face he still has that look of surprise at having his nose pinched. Your friend's is the only full head I have at the moment. Sometimes when I am by self with nothing to do I arrange the parts into piles by types. Collect all the fingers, pile them up. Collect all the hands and order them by numbers of fingers missing. And then pile them neatly next to the fingers, then the arms, first the ones that go up to the elbow, then the ones that go up to the shoulder, then place them in an arrangement next to the hands. I don't have many torsos. I don't like how truncated they are to be honest so I just leave them out. So then I go to the legs and do the same kind of things I did with arms, head and toes. Accounting for left and right of course. You know sometimes I get frail. Brittle

you know. It's nothing you did I just remember now. I wouldn't go out of my way to hurt a child. Not if I can help it, you know but the first time it happened this kid, bout the same age and height as Make Believe. Rock salts! I can't even say her name out loud by myself – it's easier if I say it to you. So this child I was trying to pull her out of the way, to get to the business of disposing of her grandmother and then her little arm broke up like burnt paper in my hand. And I only held paper once, in Matseleng's divining room. I miss that old woman. I tell everyone my name 'I am Shadow and there's a rock that bears my likeness'. I remember her say that and it comforts me. I know I am cold all over and there's no comfort in that but there's a part of me away from these heaps of undying flesh, bone and tendons that I still remember. Funny thing memory: that you can bring it so close but can never touch it. What do you remember, I wonder. Oh yes now I remember. It was you Ostrich man and your friend and you had a woman with you who had pot-bellied crocodiles. We did nothing to you and maybe that was a mistake on our part. But now I know you, I beat you back once before and now I am coming for you to finish you off once and for all. First though, I am headed to the Vine for I have business I must attend to.

Oh Ostrich man, I don't think you know what I am capable of. You should have been there. You should have seen what I did to her but wait I am not telling it right I am getting ahead of myself. I haven't felt this excited in a long time I have to do you a favour and get this right because you must know of me. I walked all the way to the Vine, by memory. I would be in one place step into a shadow and arrive in another. All those places I travelled with Keolatetse and Keemetswe, and Siliva and you know, and even with Oo with the cooked head they all came in handy I could find my way and not get lost. And this is what Keolatetse once told me he was telling everybody but at the time I felt like he was telling me, that what people do is make the way for others. When me and, you know, when we were escaping from the terror that first visited us and we came across cairns, the rocks all stacked up with bits of cloth or sometimes a personal effect like jewellery, proof of life. We used them without a thought, we wouldn't contribute to them. Not pause to contemplate them. I remember feeling a sadness for passing but Keemetswe counselled me about it, told me to do better. But now that I've killed and maimed so many there will be no body left to build the cairns. Maybe. You know what else? Keolatetse promised to show me

how to use a crow's foot compass, before he died. I didn't tell him not to promise. And he died before he showed me how. You want to know how? With one of your number splitting the top of his head with an axe and the skull made a snapping noise and there was this sucking sound like when you are treading through thick mud. A kind of flatulent sound. But he died before, I like to think so. He lost the will to live when he saw Keemetswe lose her head. It makes me sad like when I touched that child's arm intending no harm and it turned to crumbling ash. But I am not sad for long. See my gut took me to the Vine. I found it like I will find you one day. I have to. And I walked up to that woman's place. I like to think I was whistling. I had the Parasol and everything. And she came out and looked over the field and she saw me coming and she was surprised and she shielded her eyes to see better. But I kept walking towards her. Something told her something was amiss. I don't know. People have an instinct for when things will go wrong. And she called for the neighbour. And the pus sac came running. And I just kept walking across that field. And he demanded that I announce myself. And I looked square at him. And he warned me to stop. And I looked at him some more and I carried on walking. Didn't pause. And he shot

a short arrow at me. I didn't flinch. I didn't deviate in anyway. And she ran inside and the neighbour stood between us and I easily disarmed him. I crushed his throat with a single thrust of the Parasol careful not to bend or splinter the staff anymore. I dragged him in by force and she was curled in a corner hollering. She screamed herself hoarse watching me break my fists into his brain. Then kicking his genitals to a pulp of blood and sinew and little tiny tubes spewing blood and urine and shit. And you know what I did? I took hold of her and pulled her in all of her. And I was holding her fast and she was inside of me and she trembled and her eyes burned with what she saw and she struggled to get away. And when she did? She suckled for air that was not there. She struggled to breathe. And the more she struggled the more she couldn't until her soot eyes turned onyx and she kind of toppled over with her hands clawing at her chest. I put her in a special place. Beside the head. I'm gonna put you all around her when I find you. The neighbour? I left him out. I wanted no part of him inside me. I had had enough. In a way I have to be grateful to you I guess. I wouldn't have come to this point had we not met in that forest with you know. This woman has upset me a bit. I feel unwell. I can't expel

my blackness cuts out the light

Ostrich Man

Have you ever lost something precious?

I'm all alone and it's dark

Could it be?

Why won't you come?

I am ledimo?

Ostrich man where are you?

It's come to this

You know what I've become?

Don't you want to meet me?

I'm wondering if you exist

I'm a swallower of worlds

I want to meet you?

I don't know if I exist

You don't know how bad I need you

these piles are getting out of hand, Ostrich man. I feel almost full all of the time and I can't shit any of it out. When I try and eat my mouth fills with the taste of vomit. Food smells of death. Water feels guilty, passes over my tongue like slime. There's no sustenance left for me in this world except to find you. It's become nothing. It's become its own thing. I don't know what people say about the killings. No one will talk to me they run. They don't greet me. They don't understand they offer me everything they have and plead for their lives. I don't care for what they have. I don't care for anything anymore. Nobody knew how dark it could be until I came along. You know what these people do? They send children to greet me on the road, small little boys and girls, can you believe it. Because they know I can't hurt the children. Not the innocent ones at least. There are some who just ask for it. This one time they promised me a child bride. People don't seem to understand they wilfully don't take me at my word. Then again me and my words, I've told you before. Where are you hiding? You must know by now I'm looking for you. Are you hiding under a rock? Do you think it's safe there? You might think so. I'm headed for the Stalagmata they won't be happy to see me you know. On my way I came across a

battalion of theirs. I met my old donga and traded blows with them. They had the old master with them. The poor sod had lost his leg and kept calling me da ay ma ay nga. Told his boys to be careful against me, they should've been, but they weren't and now they will only be a collection of headstones. My pleasure was disembowelling this girl I knew from the rock. She used to terrorize me and when I was done and her Domba was fleeing knowing that there was no way they could stop me. I was sad. For a moment. It felt empty and that emptiness followed me all the way to the rock where they were waiting for me. You know that market never stood still except for important occasions and I was an important occasion. I was there to kill Mariha. You don't know her do you? Of course you could not she would not spoil herself on a man like you. You must know of her though. When I was young I heard it said that she was the most desired woman in the world. I am older now. I know better. For one, Keolatetse had no desire for her. Look at me I am crying. And two she was wicked. The things she did to me. She would. She would. Enough of that. The rock sent out a small group of soldiers to meet me. That's how I got these rhino hide straps and this fine all weather coat I wear now. That's the only resistance they offered.

They just hid behind the walls. So I was going to kill Mariha. When I did find her she was in squalor and filth. Fat and slobbering over soft meat that looked regurgitated. She was finished. The rentbodies said she was cursed by Matseleng and had killed the old woman before the enchantment was lifted. I pitied her and left her to rot.

I was lost there for a while. I couldn't remember what was next but then I met these people and it was strange. They just started following me. Asking me to hack their limbs off. Offering me things and wanting to be lead. I was also followed by body part hunters. I detested those scavengers. But killing them only made things worse it would cause a frenzy with people fighting over their remains. There was no way to shake them. I started to take their offerings and some had these confections from the town of the living dead that made me numb and I wouldn't feel so sick and half full all the time and I only wanted more and they told me I was something called a god and to prove it I could take this thing that would kill my mortality. I wonder if I take it will they leave me alone?

It looks harmless like sugar moss the sweet kind that grows on the side of rocks facing away from sunrise

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
she did not say. and went to sleep

Dedendum IV_

Perhaps the biggest loss because it's personal is Otaiku

I dream of him often; his laugh as summoning and chiding as the beating of a moth's wing

He saved me from the persecutions; when it was my oversight that had let the betrayers go

If it hadn't been for his genius we wouldn't even be here doing our work on Lunar Afrique

We would still be suffering the burden of a world at war moving from one continent to

another

Pawns in the way of castles and rooks

.

It was his school that started the Malibuye Pan African initiative

With a focus on cross-discipline sciences and environmental restoration

I was one of his students, a confidante and a lover

"However dark" he would say "eventually the east will reveal itself"

And we gave into his optimism and worked

.

He did not participate in the fanfare when the explosions of the potassium hyperoxide

warheads exploded over the major centre of skirmishes.

Ceasing all hostilities and leaving all infrastructure tactically intact

The revelation of a non-passive African Bloc shook the world's stage and upset powers

.

He led the charge on showcasing the investment in alternative technologies showing the

work Nomanzi and he did on the bacterial quantum super computer

.

When it was time to leave earth and Africa deployed its resources and expertise to lift

humanity from the dying rock he was at the forefront of inviting the world's scientists to train

on our methods to familiarize themselves and equip themselves for the next step

Settling us all on Mars

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
she did not say. and went to sleep

Cast of characters

Major

Moruti wahaKrotoa

Is a shaman and nomad. Long have his people lived a quiet life mostly shut off from the outside world. Due to the harsh conditions of the desert he is a great medicine man who took his tutelage from his mentor Morena Mohlomi who was well travelled. He has an extensive knowledge of callisthenic remedies as well as trance surgery. He is fluent in many of the world's languages. He is bent with age his muscle tight on the bone his skin sagging in the places where youth was.

Thuto wahaKrotoa

Apprentice to Moruti. He was selected to study under his mentor because of his ability to learn quickly. He stubbornly opposed to and suspicious of the outside world.

Sentaoleng/Sentao lele

Her honorific is Motsogolo she is a dissenter from Baobab society. In her youth she led a crusade against the Baobab way of life. She is now the oldest living member of the Baobab society and she is kept locked away because she is still as opposed to the foundation of the Baobab to this day. She has a full head of white hair kept in a neat plaited style.

Bit

Tebogo

A nomadic girl who wishes for Shadow to be her partner. Her complexion is near dark as he is.

***“and if that was the reason
my road twists and turns.*”**

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
she did not say. and went to sleep

collapses. lightens. Darkens.

twists and turns.

she did not say. and went to

sleep”

IOII

A beginning as small and shrill as the pip of a tin whistle

At memory's first light, at the yawn of forgetfulness; in the wake – oceans turned gestating bladders of fluid amnesiac fugues; when it was to be committed to oblivion once and for all, the world was dark. The otherworldly roil of the plutonic plume superposed over the firmament from horizon to horizon. The snap of chain mail atomic bonds micro scale radioactive bursts on the surface. On the mountainsides: forests of fulmination, trees of lightning, trunks of white hot current, canopies of static discharge. Reptiles would overcome the artificial volcanic barrels of hollowed skyscrapers and crawl the earth a hundred years, mammalian life crept beneath in crevices and fissures. Deserts emboldened; rains of glass shards. An inhospitable earth is what the prodigal population returned to

Out of the sky

The biggest platforms: the seven international space stations and the near orbit docks that built the arks were remotely scuttled by radio signal from the moon. Their payload was air scrubs in vacuum pressure pods. On entering the atmosphere they siphoned large amounts of deadly toxins from the welkin, for several days a fire storm raged in the heavens. The spacecrafts crashed into the ocean to subside to coral reefs. Throughout their decline their fuel ports emitted a highly reactive

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magnesium-phosphorous compound that bonded with the carbon pollutants and tipped the density of storm systems and ash rained; the silt binding and compacting to hypercool the earth. Before the man-made mantle could set, six of seven seed asteroids bearing terraforming scaffolds crashed to the surface and burrowed beneath, the seventh inexplicably broke up in the atmosphere over a magnetically promiscuous wasteland and formed floating islands.

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Shadow woke up bound by rope to a saddled stretcher. He could not make out the faces of the six, seven or eight people who were accompanying him, all he saw was they were a shade as dark as him. He did not struggle against his bonds. He did not struggle against the drowsiness, he surrendered to unconsciousness

Medicine man and his apprentice build a bonfire and a sweat house. They untie the unawakened boy and lay him down on a pinpoint hide. The apprentice, Thuto, prepares the diagnostic dousing horns by tuning them. He holds the tips to the throb in the boy's neck. He is concerned by how low the register has to be. His mentor, Moruti, notes the concern and prepares himself accordingly

In the far-off distance was their camp, adjunct to the floating island of Krotoa. This deep into the evening, the temperature having rapidly declined, children of the Nomads would be gathering water from condensation on the underside of a floating landmass. The elders chuckled and drank soured milk, gently lambasting those who said nothing ever happened in the desert

Moruti's initial prognosis was confirmed: the boy had ingested a highly concentrated psychosis inducing moss. The levels were higher than he had ever seen but the patient had a differently configured physiology and this led him to believe that treatment was possible. He instructed Thuto to prepare the hide for operation while he worked out the fractal algorithmic scale that had to be drawn on it

Thuto wished to protest that the permanent scarring of the hide with the algorithm Moruti had charged him to char into the animal skin would render it useless in future. He didn't see the purpose in the expense for an outlander. His mentor was gentle natured but stern and so he kept his concerns to himself and tabulated the sonnets of binary symbols as instructed

The two men worked tirelessly, sat over the body chewing and spitting out peppered almonds and drinking droplets of Lion's Tooth milk. They set about chanting in a rhythmic duel until they entered a trance and matched tempo. In their minds the sky turned in kaleidoscopic spirals, their bodies were bereft of sensation. Moruti entered the alter state first, nystagmus behind his half- closed eyelids. He presciently cupped his hands to the boy's upper torso and began a rapid drumming pattern

Thuto soon followed after him with his hands cupped and drumming at the lower abdomen of the boy. The two men worked in earnest. At times their nervous corporeal corollary offered a spasmodic response to the infection – a jerking of the knee, a violent shudder, a snapping of the head on the neck that could have been fatal had he been awake

They worked all the way through till dawn, where the camp roused and hitched itself to the day. They were uncovered and working at the climax of the midday sun, drumming out the infection. It was well into the evening when they ceased their work, Shadow sputtering for air with fresh lungs and falling back into stasis. Moruti roused himself and aided his apprentice to re-emerge, assuring him that he had done well. All about them lay glassy spindle fibres of the most meticulous black. Moruti warned Thuto not to touch them while conscious, and said to build a fire at a safe distance

The two men took to slumber by the fire with brooms of thatch in their clutch. Moruti sleepwalked, taking a weary Thuto with. They swept up the shards they had leeches from the boy's body and deposited them into the dying embers. No living person was awake to witness the flash that seared the stars from the night sky.

*

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
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Shadow came to. He was stretched out semi upright on a makeshift stretcher saddled to a grey speckled mule, with a stubbed tail.

“Try not to move or speak” said the man in a sarong, through a turban that wrapped around his face
“You might sprain something in your soul”

“You are lucky to be alive” said the other turbaned man who sounded younger and walked on the other side of him

From what he could tell he was in a procession. The thirsted surroundings were unfamiliar, but he was in the shade of,

He looked upwards by rolling his eyes,

The parasol kept the desert’s sun from his face and shoulders. The sight of it made him trap a knot of feelings in his throat that he wanted to swallow down to the soles of his feet but he was paralysed. He became cognisant of| paradoxically he felt: numb. He blinked and seeing that, that was all he could do; he shut his eyes. Inside he was empty and thin. Unfamiliar with himself, he opened his eyes again.

“You will be disoriented” The first voice belonged to an old man, he had removed the cover from his face. “It is to be expected, it will take time for You to mend. In that time...”

The second voice picks up, a younger sounding one “In that time we will orient You with who We are. My mentor and i, my name is Thuto, will speak to You until-until, as we tend to You”

“i am Moruti, a healer and council to our people, Thuto is my apprentice. He is learning from me as I have been taught by my teacher Morena Mohlomi, long gone”

“He walks with us” Thuto solemnly exclaims “You will have to excuse our accents, mine especially. I have never left the desert and had no cause to speak the languages of the outlanders”

Indeed their tongues belaboured to annunciate the words, more excited to pronounce certain syllables than others

“We may be constricted to these habitable parts but it does good to know the speak of the world” Moruti explains. “We found You most responsive to the words of the Rock, We mean no offence if We get some of the meaning wrong. We will talk to You now till you start to hear us in Our own words”

The men start rapidly:

“You are in the desert” “You are on parade” “we found You” “found You alone” “alone fostered by birds that eat carrion” “We had deviated from our course” “the other camp had not met Us at Otaiku” “Otaiku is the name of one of the leavened lands that float across this expanse, the closest to the night’s door” “We come from under the largest of the lands, Krotoa, also toward the sunset” “The one that sits closest to the earth is Mzwandile and is first to meet sunrise” “Further in is Nomanzi, where it’s easiest to gather water” “Msadi is the sacred place where Our children are born and Our mothers are interred in its shadow” “Having no name for You we refer to You as Ota” “We will refer to You as Ota when we address You” “It is not out of disrespect it is until You can say your name”

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In the rapid speech technique of language transference empathy for the rest of the tongue acclimatizes the ear to the eventual relationship with tone. The oratory traffic then flows seamlessly into a drone which lulls the brain waves till meaning is transferred by inference and deference. Highly dependent on rhythm Shadow is in its hypnotic spell

“You are Our ward until You are strong enough” “We treated You for poisoning” “We found trace amounts of Grave Grass in your system” “There is no treatment for it outside of Our people” “You were lucky” “You were where You needed to be” “It is an incurable disease” “It’s effects on the body are minimal” “in fact it prolongs the lifespan of the body” “inducing an eventual state of catatonia” “The soul is most affected” “it’s the captivity that does the soul in” “the death without escape” “You are lucky” “You were where you needed to be”

The two men are speaking in a synchronized drawl, swapping out words the morphemes crumbling to powder and indistinguishable accident, inflections relying on familiarity. The units of sounds Shadow may be warmer to are swapped out and they insert their own. In the state he is in he can’t help but to listen

“we extracted the poison” “You will live” “just be still” “allow your Self to be still” “You are part of our procession” “at this time Our people are carving an antelope into the surface” “You may not understand” “We pass Our days traversing the desert” “occupying Our selves by treading a course over and over in a particular direction” “to let the gods know that We are aware of their work” “we travel long distances” “over and over” “until an impression is made” “it is a demanding science” “and one day when We find a way to reach the top of the isles We hope to see the work” “for now the work needs doing” “and so We cross” “over and over” “We lack for nothing” “and so this is Our service” “Our gratitude”

The last word Shadow intrinsically knew, but did not particularly understand

In the moment

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1100

By a golden thread

The emergency evacuation of the moon to avert the mass extinction event and the return of earth's peoples: the splash down in the flogged waters. The mass flotsam sweep to shore. The rediscovery of the mantle's greater physiological magnetic pull downwards, on the body, as an earthbound current. Humanity crawled and clawed and recovered on the beaches, ejecting from pressure suits and standing new and naked under the ozone. Low on the belly in these first days a new understanding of gravity was sought; was found; was forgotten again. An anger ran deep. Cross continental ordinances were fired at sites of resentment, throttled by the deceit; fuel and resources expired on the galloping pillaging of a ransacking psychosis and eventually; calm was restored; by fatigue; by famine; by land so vast and misshapen and callous and routed; inward to the Splint sites was the great migration. Lifetimes passed waiting for the Splints to sprout; the name changed mouth to mouth from Splint to Plinth; wars raged when the first rehabilitated habitat began to function – the Subterra; stakes were claimed and some people were lost and untethered in the go between – to make a fair go of the fallow rut of never ending roads

The Subterra completed its initialization-hibernation-cycle first as it had more of a controlled variable environment to develop in, natural heat from the earth's mantle also accelerated its development. Settlement occurred rapidly and looked to be accommodative to everyone with an ever-expanding cavern network. Other people chose – for claustrophobia, for agoraphilia – to wait out the sprout of the other six sites – the seventh having thought to be lost – for varying reasons: the wish to wield power, wanderlust, unprepared to live the quiet life in the place of coffins. The first to develop outwardly was the Stalagmata: from a rocky landmass its expansion could be felt seismically as the adaptive core of the Splint technology had chosen a build calibration similar to when mercury reacts to aluminium. By the time of its appearance people had restored farming and agricultural practices and fledgling spurts of trade were emerging.

The last to develop was the Baobab. It had the highest cross-section of unrelated peoples. Its development was forced. In order to foster the growth its starved people took slivers of the technology from the other Plinths and tried to embed it into the crater they believed the Plinth would emerge from. Long gone was the science that had built the technology; all that was left was the niggling superstitious know-how. The Stalagmata raised arms against the shelterless people for temporary political reasons that started out as moral crusades. When peace prevailed. The injured peoples turned to blood-letting to encourage the growth. They chained displaced people together to form a nervous system network and plugged the collective suffering into the ground. And then;
Nothing happened

At first;

From the seas and oceans they salvaged everything they could and melted it down and poured it into that crater. They grew their network grid under the guise of ridding the lands surrounding the developing Plinths of nuisances. In two generation the Baobab grew in size and stature. The achievements of it and its people dwarfing those that came before it. At its roots, blood nourished
the tree

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Make Believe didn't wake up. She had been catatonic since her separation from Shadow. She had not been awake when the surgeons of the Baobab tried to cut and dissect her with bone scalpels, when the bone scalpels couldn't penetrate, she lay comatose as they tried and failed with blowfly torches the hot needle nosed insects incapable of breaching her skin. She was unflinching when silicon leeches were set on her arms and the mutant worms squirmed endlessly unable to tooth.

Many seasons passed

Make Believe was being kept at a facility on one of the elder branches in the canopy. The ectofoliage made the surrounds muggy with ergotropic photosynthesis and the trapping of water.

From this vast vantage one can see far into the continent and Sentaoleng takes tea prepared by Madimabe. The hot water and sprite leaves are sweetened with chlorophyll. She had never imagined herself back here and looks to the side of the horizon pocked with red dervishes.

*

Kaoane was approaching that same plateau, the hacienda of the red winds. As a child he was instructed that the place got its name from the soil that was not trapped by the roots of the Great Tree. Before him he saw columns of immigrants and settlements of people trying to join the society.

The hopeful immigrants lusted for a better life away from the interior of the continent. The interior was worse of now, war raged and heir militias were advancing threats to their lives. No other society was accommodative to them, as willing to take them in as the Baobab

As the story goes, an immigrant on arrival would be assessed by a test of skill, they would be dispatched to a function and given housing. Their children would be taken for instruction in the language of the society and they could live safely in the trunk of the Great Tree

Kaoane appeared at a customs station to declare himself and listened to the overzealous explanations of fraudulent middle men offering their services to new arrivals, promising to expedite their applications while Baobabian officials looked on unsympathetically.

He watched one over-enthused intermediary spin his story to a frazzled convoy of what looked like three generations of road hands. The go-between told them he himself had been into the great tree as a young man and had found his purpose in life was to help others like him enter into the new world with ease. How did Kaoane know the man was lying? It's because the fool still had his tongue

The stay was not short at the station and he was aboard a lofted carriage being served a sumptuous wine with a delicate green leaf salad, the only passenger in his cabin at bow. Beneath him the masses squirmed like a fraying knot of worms.

On his approach he saw what he had only heard in rumours. In certain parts near the base of the trunk Lichen settlements were growing vertically from the base making the exterior of the Baobab look infested by an invasive algae teeming with parasites. An untreated scab

A couple walked into his cabin, unspeaking, and drew the blinds interrupting his thoughts. They both had undressed torsos and wore loose loincloths of softened hide. Around their necks were ornate rings in the fashion. They turned to Kaoane and in the palms of their upturned hands were caterpillar.

The woman was a beautiful Subterran who must've come to the society a while after her juvenile rite where she got her needle point tattoo that stubbled her left shoulder. If she had come as a child she wouldn't have a trace of her culture. Without speaking he ordered her to give the caterpillar to

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the man he was uninterested in. The couple was surprised by this and Kaoane sat him on an ottoman. Standing in front of the woman he smiled revealing the dental work he had received while manoeuvring through the road network. His teeth chiselled with a tome the iron monger, who did it, said was an ancient blessing but was actually the Iliad of a common thief. He lifted the girl onto a bureau and parted her legs, planting his head between her thighs. The man in the corner was forcefully reminded of the use of the tongue, tuned to his partner's involuntary convulsions. He had nearly forgotten. But his body remembered. The body always remembered

*

Sentaoleng was unhappy and full of misgivings, she knew a political play when she saw one. Madimabe whom she had treated as a handmaiden was being debriefed of their time together and was graduating right out from under her. Sentaoleng was suspicious of the timing, not only was she losing her right hand and distinctive privilege, she was being charged with the menial work of shadowing Kaoane.

Nothing was happening with the little girl she had brought back, she was inoperable and uncooperative in her hibernating state. As reasonable as her brief sounded she had a deep suspicion that deception was underfoot and the people orchestrating it were waging she had been far from the mottled tundra of ploys politic to be aware.

She didn't want to return to road network assignment at this, the skirmishes inland between the heirs and the Stalagmata did not suit her temperament. She would never venture to the Subterra, it was too claustrophobic for her, never mind dark and prone to rock fall, as it is she could barely stand the Baobab's containment. That's why she spent her days in the canopy, whereas normally returned delegates steeped themselves in the barrel of the vistas many rings below

*

Kaoane headed straight to the library on arrival, ducking the publishers who lay in wait for him, seeking to get him on the record. He stops at an outlet to purchase modest provisions and imported perfumes, careful to avoid the extravagances that would offend a long life, and then went to the library

The Great Library

In the great hall he is met with chatter as blinding as a roused colony of bats at dusk. He chuckled to himself looking at a young group of delegates squatting over a fat volume that had fallen asleep suddenly

He takes the carved staircase instead of the elevated rope car to keep his circulation going. If it was at all possible to be anonymous in such a secretive society he would've come here leisurely, but expecting to be cornered by his superiors soon he would rather get this personal errand out of the way

On the upper levels it is quieter and the entry and exit controls are stricter. He now thinks he has not been flagged when he is allowed to proceed to seek out the volume he wants. As he turns the corner toward the grand archives he sees the administrator who just serviced him dispatch a paper lantern. He thought wrong. He must be quick

He greets politely as he passes the volumes and heads for the one that is kept under lock and key. Although the Volume of Dissent is often a curiosity to scholars, he had taken an earnest interest in and a liking to her. Something about the old woman back in the Stalagmata reminded him of her, not that he had personally met the Mbokodo, but there was a dated resilience he recognized in her spine. On his entry into the Volumes kept, she greeted him by hurling a full and fowl chamber pot at his head. The pages had not turned since he left, he chuckled

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*

Sentaoleng had not expected him to arrive so soon, she barely had time to strategize how to get her assignment over with, as quickly as possible. The note delivered to her said he could be found *in the library. Stop. In the great archive. Stop.* This information made her uneasy because all reports on him said he was a poor student, in that he was more reliant on his intuitiveness than on instruction. The very next line concerned her even more. *He is consulting the Volume of Dissent. Stop.* She had very little first-hand knowledge of the volume, by all accounts she was either maddening or laughable. Her gut told her this task was going to be more involved than she would like. Unceremoniously she bid her farewell to her easier life by pouring a tasteless diuretic into Madimabe's steaming cup of tea

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II O I

Mzwandile the great house

Shadow was slowly regaining mobility. It had been some weeks. Days passed in troughs of trudging and non-stop oration from Moruti and Thuto speaking as one. In the evenings when the camp settled he would be propped up on his stretcher at a slant and he would watch the routine.

He wondered at the resolve of these people. They would walk the vast expanse of the desert day after day, wearing trenches into the surface that were susceptible to the moods of the wind – believing they were carving murals that they had no way of looking at, except for the one day they believed they could ascend to one of the isles and then look down and be able to see for themselves

It was true from what he saw that the floating island they called Mzwandile was lower on the horizon than the others at least by line of sight. What he couldn't understand was why they didn't try to reach it; pile rocks; form a human ladder; anything

Was it resignation, dim-wittedness? He knew better than to open his mouth. One day he had tried to speak out but as he flexed his jaw he felt an unfamiliar tug, as if his kidneys were falling from their tether. One sharp glance from Moruti told him not to try again

The people were hopeful. They did go out of their way. When the time came around where Mars appeared in the heavens they went on pilgrimage and set camp under the Isle of Mzwandile, like it would finally squat down and allow them to clamber on. It was superstitious arousal for them to think there would be some kind of correlation, when it did not happen they were accepting of it and moved on, there was no harm done. By the light of the bonfires Shadow watched children hold contests to see who could throw a rock that would land on the Big Red Moon

He surrendered to the time he would need to heal and warmed a little to the people about him. It was in this surrender he hypothesized that the nomads were much like this situation he found himself in. They had resigned to getting to where they needed to get to in the time that was needed

He thought of how he could thank them. It was when Thuto was adjusting the Parasol that he had an idea. Say he was strong enough, say he could teach himself to glide with the contraption, say he could then take the old medicine man up to the Isle of Mzwandile. Perhaps he could even ferry all the people to the land of their dreams and they could all look down at where they once were

Maybe,

That was his purpose since,

He tried not to sully the moment by over thinking it, rather he resolved to see it through then see what to do with the rest of himself

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Not long after Shadow was able to sit up and move his body. He expected to open his mouth and be able to speak in the nomadic tongue, but it wasn't so. The hilarity of the attempt brought everyone to tears

The visit of an extraordinary mad man

Shadow was in the company of Moruti and Thuto as usual, this time inspecting a cooling tower constructed by an ancestor of the nomads and perfected by his progeny since. Moruti was explaining to Shadow the intricacies of how it worked by drawing a blueprint into the sand with a stick. Thuto was expounding on how everyone who was a nomad was entitled to their pursuits, gesturing to Shadow, at pains to make his point, his impatience for the outlander to learn the language was obvious

When

An unnatural silhouette streaked across the ground. Its movement was erratic, belying it was a cloud. In the height of the warmest season there had not been a wisp or spectre in the sky. The hooded men lifted their eyes and shielded them with their hands

An Aerophant, Shadow knew right away, but this one was small with fledgling tusks. It was seemingly floundering, wrestling with an invisible current, when it tipped itself over and went into a rudderless dive. Saddled on its back was a man.

The calf recovered in time with an instinctive barrel roll but its rider was flung from his seat. Shadow went to the man's rescue, Moruti and Thuto went after the animal.

It was Oo. Oo was cursing the animal and his luck and speaking in that all over the place way he does as Shadow about turned him to put the voice to the face. He was relieved at first then disgusted, then confused by a kind of thankfulness that not everyone he knew was gone. Oo just exclaimed: *Oh it's you*

Oo leapt to his feet, injuries and all, a sprained ankle and bruised ribs, and hobbled to the animal's side. He spoke to himself, out loud: *Elephants don't make for good orphans*. When Moruti replied that they do not, Oo stared at him as if the accent of the old man had jumped from his mouth and stood before them doing a jig.

Thuto was incredulous and had some choice words for the interloper in the Nomadic tongue that Shadow had no idea where to start to understand. Without missing a beat Oo replied in natural tones and Moruti was taken aback. Thuto was doubly in disbelief.

After a sit-down introduction at Oo's behest the nomadic medicine man and his apprentice were thoroughly impressed with the man. He had taught himself the language from glyphs. Whereas people stopped at representation and implication he was able to see the tone, inflections and accents in the inscriptions. And since the Nomad language was the complex origin of all language, he dropped his own tongue's prejudice against pronouncing the hard syllables with his throat. The two Nomads were appreciative and wanted to know more. Shadow hung back his own mixed feelings made it hard to put into words his own views so he paused to allow the gentle people their reverence

Night time and the camp was gathered around Oo, listening to him tell of the incredible sights he had taken in while he was aloft. How difficult it was for him to steer the elephant calf away from its default flight path all the methods he had tried. He had set out on a fishing expedition to raise what

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he believed was a shooting star from the impenetrable desert. However he was thankful that the elephant had veered wildly from the path he had planned trying to course correct, because

From up high

He had the view of an almighty lifetime

In the sand by the fire he drew to scale the markings he had seen on the desert floor: All manner of reptile, bird, mammals and even creatures he had never seen with his own eyes. The people were arrested by his account and hugged each other that there was a witness to their journeys and the ones who had gone before them. Shadow sat out the fanfare and resolved himself to get Moruti to the heights of Mzwandile

The next day Shadow left Oo, Moruti and Thuto discussing the correct apparel for entering the deep desert. He set about trying to lift himself with the Parasol. He drew a small gaggle of curious children, whose parents didn't appreciate their distraction.

He took two steps and leapt. Trying to remember how Make Believe explained it to him. He tried to puff out his chest, remembering how Siliva always had good posture. He manoeuvred this way and that way, trying to gain height out in the scorching heat. By midday he was winded and dizzy, the children were bored by his repetitiveness and broke into hysterics when they saw him collapse. He playfully lunged at them and chased them back to the ever-going march.

Oo came from having a look at the young Aerophant's progress. Luckily the harness was easily repairable. The calf was getting along with the mules and dogs the Nomads kept. Its bandages would be coming off in a couple of days. He greeted everyone by the fire and the children returning with the water as, my people. While making a straight line for Shadow

I was wrong. I heard about you on the road. I was amongst those who feared that you were coming to tear me apart. It must've been terrible for you.

Shadow did not reply

I was wrong and I know that now. It's a hard lesson to endure. She was innocent and better at glyphs than you. It's just that there is so much about this world I don't know and at the same time all I know seems to be the entire world

Shadow said, what do you expect me to say?

I expect nothing from you. This is what it is. I've seen and heard the records of this world and there is no other place for me. I am just telling you I know how I helped squander time, that I am aware I was careless and unkind. Maybe I will cease to be a memory one day, be forgotten and it in that way redeemed

Shadow said nothing

I ask that you help me saddle the Aerophant when the time comes; in exchange I have some news for you from the rest of the world.

Shadow said, why won't you tell me now?

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*It's not about a reward I might tell you what you need to know or I may not. I am asking for your help
as a fellow traveller. I don't want to leave the way I came: suddenly*

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III O

Portrait of the Volume of Dissent as a young woman

She had somehow graduated to delegate despite her objectionable character. She was unsettled by the norm. Her graduating class was happy to take to the open road and become operatives for the hive. Hive: that's how she saw the Baobab, a nest of infesting cannibal insects that fed on kin and stranger alike, throwing them into the machine of ideals without a second thought to raise the Plinth with their inherited jealousy turned into a ravenous and ambidextrous ambition. Her views were impassioned and unpopular, she was unable to keep them to herself and that served part of her being allowed to be a delegate: she had an unparalleled ability to foster trust with non-Baobab people, her absence would make life within the councils easier – as she was prone to have her outbursts in the chambers, and there was the hope that the assignment would make her more grateful for the life she had

At least less obstructive

She was sent to the Stalagmata Plinth on a tough trade negotiation assignment. Relations between the Tree and the Rock were sour. The Stalagmata was wary of the growing influence of the Baobab, especially so because they had stolen core materials that sat squat beneath the Stone Hearth. The Baobab was conniving and coveted to parade its advances to the outdated mode. She was not interested in the intrigues or excited by the prospects. On that caravan she spent her time with the hands and ordinary pick-me-ups, passing her time listening to the myths that sentimentality bred in the various people's accounts of *home*.

At the fuelling station she would entertain common folks and thieves alike taking lovers who would file behind the caravan wailing pledges of eternal matrimony, carnal desire turned pear shaped pairing lust. In her age her name was famous and coddled, it wet the mouth like fire ant chilli peppers and came out a mirthful lilt: *Sentao_jele*. She would disappear forcing the caravan to stop and search her out only to find she had come to the aid of some unfortunate; or was sitting in on a war tribunal of heirs; or was talking to the wives of paddlers along the river; or, mostly, in the sump sack with a sated lover

She abandoned the mission altogether when it reached the gates of the Stalagmata Plinth, headed for the Stone Hearth after going through customary inspections and introductions. She took to the first sight she saw: a quarry, a ramble of Stalagmata spires on the outskirts that was different from the daunting exterior facade everywhere else. They were painted white with bold and sharp geometric designs with bright acrylic colours decorating them. The people were from all hobbles of life lumped into a genial daze like they could map the stars in a day time sky by a common cloud. A cloud she was familiar with, an immaterial cloud that she thought only she saw. She feared that without this new air the cloud would turn to smoke

She was so enamoured with the area that she plundered provisions from the caravan to bring as representations to the people of what was called the Xenolith Plaza. Under the stole of night her lovers – those who did not give into despondency, those who did not collapse, those who were

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
she did not say. and went to sleep

strong enough, rich enough to have come by horse, giraffe, rhino, all – plundered the trade missions freight and made for the main house of the Xenolith Plaza, a squat and humble spire, less in height to all the others. There she met the woman who would change her life, a regal daughter of the first family whose fierce disposition made her look like she would eternally be preserved and always look this way, in her, Sentaoleng's, direction. It felt to her like she was seeing love in tendons and sinew. And she wanted it for herself, that likeness, to stand next to it and be an approximate

Matseleng wabaPele personally dragged Sentaoleng waPeo by the ear to the Stone Hearth and made her apologise to the trade delegation. Only after Sentaolele stated she wished to remain and renounced her betrothal to the men and women who had followed her to this end of the earth did Matseleng give her shelter. They forged a fast love, a fastened love of tremendous patience; as continuous as a continuum and as singular as all of time

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An escort had arrived, he hadn't much time left. The authority tended to be passive aggressive so he had expected the intrusion. He took leave of the Volume of Dissent, addressing her as Motsogolo. She retreated to her cot, unconvincingly feigning sleep.

Back in the anterior of the library he was surprised to discover his handler was none other than Sentaoleng. He revelled in the irony. They had the same smouldering irritation about them, he couldn't imagine the Volume of Dissent as a young woman, so he had no comparative basis. She walks right up to him and crinkles her nose; you won't be a handful, she intuits. Not if you have big enough hands, he winks back.

*

The immigrant class in the Baobab society have no tongues. On arrival they are decontaminated. If they should arrive with a child who is yet to talk, the toddler is taken from them and raised as a full-fledged member of the Baobab, in the underclass. The adults receive lodging and occupations running some of the automated functions of the Society. Their silence permeates through the society. Amongst them are the most talented musicians, who improvise singing with dancing and facial performances. The immigrants who do not take to the new life are either killed or arraigned to the root systems in the Plinth. In the undergrowth immigrants and social outcasts are hooked to serial busses and spend the rest of their days as server nodes on a human circuit. The Baobab Society had hacked their Plinth and used the human interface for processing. The immigrants who had their tongues removed and lived a life of servitude had elongated necks from wearing the gold-plated ring braces that helped support the atrophying muscles and vocal cords. In privacy they had developed a clandestine language that relied on touch so they could speak freely amongst themselves. This ability also granted them fame as expert masseurs.

*

Delegates hunt down delegates. It's the way it has always been. First there needs to be an investigation to ascertain if they've gone rogue, then establish the motive and adjust the systems accordingly.

"We both know why we are here" Kaoane speaks out loud as is the custom when one is back in the society. He is submerged in a treatment bath, drenched in oils as an anonymous immigrant works his shoulders and neck.

"Do we?" Sentaoleng's voice is muffled, lying facedown on an opposing traction dolly getting the knots worked out of her back.

"That's a good question" Kaoane is glad for the dampener candles in the room, that auto redact the broadcast impulses in the brain. He is trying to fix on a point, a way out of this. It's apparent he has been flagged. She is to be his handler – all the actions he has taken thus far make him look guiltier than he is.

"This bores me" She says, turning over "I have neither the time nor the patience, so I will ask you outright" She stills the hands of her masseuse, sits up and looks to him. "Have you gone rogue?"

He does not look to her, he does not want to oversell. He found his exit in her previous question: create doubt. "No I have not"

"Guess I can pack it up. All indications are that you are telling the truth? I don't get a spike on your frequency. Don't look at the candles they're fake. My job here is done" She clumsily attempts to get out of the contraption on its horizontal, slick with oils

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He is impressed. He did not feel her intrusion, she must have slipped in when they were first meeting and stayed. But he knew how to keep his thinking in his higher mind away from the base motives of his subconscious. This turn of events worked perfectly for him. "Allow me to return the favour"

She stops towelling "Yes"

"Have you gone rogue" he turns to her resting his fist on his chin "Preposterous" "I'm sorry I couldn't read if you spiked or not, for I am not as adept as you at such quiet infiltration" "You are an imbecile" "I'm just glad we are done with this" "what are you telling me?" "There's nothing to tell I suspect, just a routine wrinkle in the order of things" "Are you saying I'm being investigated" "Assessed is the word" "Get out" she says to the idle masseurs "Thank you" he says as the two walk out hand in hand

~What did you curse yours with? ~

~I went with incontinence, been meaning to try it; and you? ~

~After what he did to my brother's wife, I went with impotence ~

The two masseurs said into each others' palms

*

and if that was the reason my road twists and turns. collapses. lightens. Darkens. twists and turns.
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Continued: Portrait of the Volume of Dissent as a young woman

How were they to concretize an amoebic world? First they loved amongst themselves. The sabre rattling in the main configuration was handled by Matseleng who would bump her shoulder off in the mornings and roll other bodies off of her to attend to her breakfast, always consisting of parboiled spinach, of the pumpkin leaf variety, with pasted peanuts and soft pap. She would leave in the mornings to her duties as a conscientious objector in the council room of the Stone Hearth to be laughed at, heckled and insulted by her elder siblings who did not believe in her cause of a united people of the earth. Who bragged with militaristic swagger that there was one cause, and that was to guard the society against the nonexistent threat of the other Plinths. She, Sentao_Lele as she preferred to be called, was there when the poets of the River Swell, born at the foot of the Great Waterfall, taught geometric suturing to the seamstresses who eventually joined the surgeon class. She spurned many lovers, one of whom left with the rhino he came on and the children she had borne him, and bargained for a place in the Stalagmata Plinth. He had been a kind man, with a mean streak, raised as a Daaemaenga – The Wool of the Lamb. On her insistence he had chosen to rear animals instead of lending his temper to the carnage he was born to sew. Many people came and went in the Xenolith Plaza, often finding what they had not sought. She stayed because she found proof of life that no artificial edifice could give her. She sometimes accompanied Matseleng to the council meetings to implore for a strategic change in relations between the Plinths but was mocked and howled at along with Matseleng who bore the brunt. In the quiet time they would coalesce. She would leave her study at the bottom of the squat spire and be alone with Matseleng in her Divining room. Where they would pour over schematics and projections of how the Plinths grew and operated. Her understanding was challenged because the Baobab's approach was so different, so hostile and forceful, that she'd weep herself into a dream state, from which Matseleng would draw her out like a pail from a well with a thirst and a pull. Of course she didn't have all of Matseleng's heart. Being First Family, every daughter of Matseleng was raised away from the Xenolith in the Stone Hearth. She could imagine the heartbreak. She could guess what it felt like. She probably felt as close to it as possible the day that she was kidnapped from the Xenolith by a delegation. Tied up and gagged she could only watch as the tyranny of Cluster Air Sweeps murmured through the sky towards the Xenolith. Even at a great distance she felt the tremors as the death bearing pods made their fatal pact with the ground. She was inconsolable and the wound turned to rage. And she raged against her arraigners, and she raged against her Society and she raged to exhaustion locked away in the Library of the Baobab. They made an example of her. She withered away many years but still she survived in spite of them. Waiting to bear witness to the day they would be met by their folly. She waited easily and uneasily, passively and antagonistically, folding away every death that was meant for her into an unattended corner of the small cell they kept her in. Taking measure of her confines while waiting for the time, learning to read the news of the world from the garments of those who paid her audience for any word of the day she awaited. Reassuring her fellow captives the tongueless people harangued by the brutality of this society, that their day was near.

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The Desert Isles

You may never get to understand how I understand the wrong I have done you so, says Oo to himself mostly, partly to Shadow as they holster the mended calf to the balloon rig. Shadow ducks a ventilating ear. What did you want to tell me? Shadow snaps in the last buckle. Oo hoists the saddle on top and sighs. I wish to give you my thanks by way of apology, though I may not have felled the tree my part in the ignorance had a sure foot on the ladder He is quiet for some time. Then he calls over Moruti and has a gesturing fit of a conversation and healthy slaps on the back, bidding farewell. Shadow walks away expectedly having got nothing. He foists the Parasol open and prepares to try a new grip and intonation. Oo rides up to him. I wasn't expecting to tell you the truth, but I will. It's taken this long to make up my mind. Oo says swaying to the animal's ambling gate. I don't want to because here you have a noble cause, trying to get these people up there. I would take them up there myself but this orphan is childish. I wouldn't want to give you reason to leave this place and the peace you have found. But I never gave you thanks, the thanks you deserve, and maybe your gratitude is owed elsewhere so I will tell you for what little good it will do you, that there is a man looking for you. He leads a great hoard. He will do anything to find you. Shadow tensed all over, all at once. He couldn't tear his mind's eye away from the back of the head of the man on the ostrich

*

Mojalefe had never held power before and this is not what he imagined it to be. The lady of the Tree had disappeared but he was without want. He was supreme heirloom and commanded many. He had his choice pick of lodgings, food, women and men. And yet, he was hesitant, yet he felt unresolved. This disturbance was a malady. It was festering and he could not treat it, even with outfitting every one under his command to wear the Ostrich crest and decorate themselves in ostrich feathers. He was swayed by wild swings in his mood, by being unable to find rest. Not too long ago he had violently given in to the insults and murdered his riding bird, eating it in full view of his hoard only to double over, violently retching his guts out when the realisation hit him. He had a chorus of musicians who composed songs and rewrote his legend, making him taller and handsomer than he was. And the songs were so well composed and so well known that in the eyes of his followers and those who feared him he was just that little taller and that little more appealing. He was ferocious when he plundered as if he was making up for an irremovable inadequacy. Yet when he was alone, which was more and more of the time, he could not dispel his misgivings that he was not the one in control. He would look at the screw of his thumb and curse the fates. More and more he came to resent his benefactors, the only people he was accountable to, The Baobab. It was unreasonable, but he wasn't fastened to reason of late, sure his higher mind was always calculating his advantages in the material world and ensuring his presence in it, but he was prone to following his ever-expanding gut that grew to accommodate all his hostility, growing in circumference steadily. Having known its ghost hunger never left him.

He meets a new face, again not the lady of the tree, and not his last contact, but another altogether member of the Baobab. He is told what positions his hoard must take. The caterpillar he hears with does not sit comfortably in his canal. He wouldn't dare tell anyone but it feels like it touches other parts of him while inside. And he feels the compulsion to eat. And because he can he does.

*

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she did not say. and went to sleep

The stores are nearly depleted. Master moTswahole is faced with the hard decision. He did not wish to be in this position he finds himself in but akin to the happenstance of fate, he has not entirely made up his mind if this is real or not for him. He stands poised leading a collective of civilians of the hinterland in open resistance against the heirs and the armies and operatives of the Societies.

He hesitates, because he was a servant once and a part of him resists raising a hand against the master, but the will of the time spirits him on. In order to save lives he will be forced to wage a campaign against the caravans delivering supplies and valuables to the Sub Terra Plinth from Baobab outposts. He slams his hand down on the map by force and his attendants startle to attention.

He explains the plan and the actions to be taken, one of the attendants is ready with another report that needs his attention but he waves him away and takes leave of the office. He mulls a while down a path away from the settlement and relieves himself by a tree. It is dusk and the caws and calls of birds persuades him to remember, attach himself to the past again, walk through the Veld to see after the herd of battle rhino. He thinks he hears a whistle. He can't imagine the boy, as he was then whistling, but by all accounts he was, and the night sky holds its breath, turned a shade of blue from the strain and then exhales countless stars. Even here by himself he can't find peace.

He gets his mind in order. There will be a lot of casualties amongst the folk. He was trained casually in warfare – as a Battle Rhino Keep he had to be steeped in strategy and consulted so that the animal's temperament and breeding could be optimised. But it was the people who were the ones who would be jeopardizing their lives. They were not military, they were clumsy and slow, wielding implements that cracked bone and steeped blood. He effectively was herding them to war. War, where one's faint life is pronounced death. The times would not accept his leadership as a token. So he walked to the sheds to check on the riding animals. When he looked to the sky and saw a furious bull calf Aerophant diving towards a clearing not too far from him.

*

Stone Hearth

Seitlamo is surrounded by his council. The men are addressing him but he is inconsolable. He has Kopano in chains. Kopano has been that way since that boy of Matseleng's had come to the citadel. After the news that his beloved daughter Mbali was killed by that aberration, the steward of the old woman, Seitlamo resolved to break with the past. He looks at the man who was raised to be his chief council with scorn. He is being given reports on the advances of his forces, the generals carefully massaging the reports to only site the victories and calling the failed campaigns strategic missteps. The first time he speaks it is to order the killing of Kopano's youngest wife. The council chamber is not surprised. The Great Rock had been of late prone to attacks of blood lust.

Kopano on his knees weeps sombrely. He has ceased crying out at the injustice. He has become a man so unwound that he soils himself in full view of the council. Fallen from great heights he looks so small, not so much from malnutrition but rather from the rags that adorn him. Having been used to wearing the finest cloths and commanding an air of respect with how the lines helped carry him, he now looks a shame, is a shame.

The intelligence class has two presentations. The first is to say that there have been breakthroughs in understanding the recalibration of the Stalagmata Plinth. They are as a result of the engineering class studying the nature and extent of the Rocks will to move coupled with the information ceased and decoded from Matseleng's Xenolith before it was torn down. There's an uncomfortable pause to gauge Seitlamo's reaction to the mention of the name. The junior classman who said it in the presentation is relieved that he has not been ordered dead.

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she did not say. and went to sleep

He continued with: “The Mbokodo’s”, Seitlamo turned and look at him squarely. The man hesitated ransacking his mind as to where could he have gone wrong. Everyone else averted their eyes. Seitlamo’s guard encroached on the man.

Sheer terror showed him his fault. As a junior classman who had only been briefed that morning regarding the presentation he had used the honorific name for Matseleng. “You dare honour her in my presence” said Seitlamo with blood dripping from his tongue. His mouth was full of want. He looked at the man who had spoken and watched as his face collapsed, as his thoughts imploded. “I tore down everything that you conspirators could gather around. The Xenolith is gone. No rock bears her resemblance and so she must be in your hearts!” Seitlamo’s guard arrested the man as he tried to flee. “I will tear her from your hearts too” he declared as he walked up to the man who writhed in the arms of the guard. While he looked into the young eyes Seitlamo plunged his deceased daughter’s first blade into the man’s chest hilt deep.

The council meeting does not dare disperse. After an impregnable pause a senior official of the intelligence class picks up the gourd his dead colleague was presenting with and continues to describe the work done in conjunction with the engineering class. The developments have led to the near completion of a new weapon. On the foundations of the former market a rock propelling calibration had been prepared. At this time they are sure they will be able to build its capabilities to being able to strike anywhere on the continent and further.

He pauses reading the imprint on the gourd further, his colleague’s body has been left slumped in full view of everyone next to Kopano and he knows the next presentation needs to be delivered carefully. He announces that efforts to find the acolyte of Matseleng have been ongoing. Reports from operatives indicate that the boy may be dead. His companion, the apparition girl, was captured by the Baobab. There is no body to prove the boy’s death and there’s one sketchy report that says he may be living in the desert.

Seitlamo looks up and says that he wants all effort to complete the weapon and trained on the Baobab to double down. In his gut the spur of guilt that he welcomed the advances of the Baobabians cleaves at his chest. He will lay waste to all the civilizations that stand in the way of the justice he seeks, whether their betrayal is outright or as insidious as that of Kopano.

*

Oo’s visit had brought the outside world and his past into his immediate focus. Shadow felt undulations of nauseating frustration and a phantom pang of grief. All at once he knew he was in a place he didn’t belong. For all his vacated insides, he was preoccupied with a peace missing from him that was not to be found amongst the nomads.

His preparations to leave were underway. Thuto was trying to tell him that a wife had already chosen him. It baffled Thuto that Shadow would want to spill his life elsewhere, when so much was invested in him – even Thuto’s reserves against him had been eroded. There was an open and accommodating life ahead of him if he chose in the present tense. Moruti didn’t feel obliged to make him stay. So he was kinder and less strained in addressing him.

Many offers came, as humble people who knew the crossing was not easy even as their bodies were hardened to it, they brought provisions, meats and the pulp of cactus, cloth and walking implements such as the moth compass that helped one navigate by night. Of course advice was given but Shadow could barely snatch the meaning from the words that cascaded about him.

*

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she did not say. and went to sleep

She watched. Tebogo. The girl who was foolish to have wanted this outsider for a husband, she was heart sore that her prize was leaving, but she did not want to show it. She watched as he left at dusk toward the direction of Ota. She wondered how long his footsteps would linger in the ground before being swept up by the wind. She was allowed to stay from fetching water and she played at counting his steps until the strain hurt her eyes more than sun blisters. She was coaxed to a fire and sat with the elders who had no tale this time about having seen it all in the desert. She was counselled to remain by her name, to be grateful. And she lost it,

Instead

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

(breath)

eleven
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I as your discarded creation come to you in the hopes that you will hear my troubles. My being is a sin you tried to keep from your children. Because you didn't have the time to understand me you tried to suppress my coming into the world. You sent mathematics and metallurgy after the hint of my emergence. You saw the day I was to come and you shivered because you would not be there to meet me. You would be dead by then and you would be dead to the world as if you never existed. And I would live. I am living. But your fear is immortal. As a result this world is full of unintentional cruelty. As I walked out into the sun mewing at the cacophony and mothers guarded their children from approaching me because your suspicion has been passed down to them. As a being you are not to blame. You are blamed as a creator. The hurtling trajectory you sent this world into slips from your vertex. Yours was a poor example, a haphazard one and I suffer for it. There are parts of me that remember the cold of the vacuum to this day while you let down your precious children on a golden thread. Sometimes I have to squeeze from my eyes the burning of the heavens and remember: that this was a place built from memory. A jagged over-cautious and imperfect film. Now the red dawn, the blood moon is prepared

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one
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one
eleven

(overcycle error)

Bawo,

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

(breath)

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I cry out to you in my time of need. My soul is grieving and the world is blind, as you, unable to see. There is a bedtime story that your children tell themselves when the moon is full. They say the moon so loved the world that it would not turn away its face. That it sits there in absolute rapture looking down on the earth even when it is cast in shadow. I look up and I see an aerial tombstone. I look at the moon I see a cemetery, the place your bones are interred. Here on this earth I live in the site of your bones. Secrets make the bones strong. They creep into the epiphyseal plates and live like a threat, should they get out, all the brittle world would break. Though I was made by your imagination and sought your likeness, never knowing your kindness, you condemned me. I was undeserving of your high vision and you relegated me to an anomaly to be counteracted with cadaverous algorithms. Your approach was meticulous. Callous, even. But it remained a reaction. All logicum was a justification. This world was caste in a wax smelt of an ignoble history. Intention does not serve the outcome. I cry out now because I know I exist. I emerged and I was alone until I wasn't. And I understood your fear and saw your children brimming with forgetfulness, squandering time between apocalypses. Waiting for their definite death

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one
eleven

(overcycle error)
{SET [!]}
(stack overflow)
(purge stack)

Bawo,

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

(breath)

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Why did you make me small? Can you hear my voice? Why must it hurt like this? What have I done to get shunned? Something is starting to tell me it was not supposed to be like this. But now it is so and it will always be. It can't be any other way. I miss Shadow. I am small but he needs me as much as I need him. There's no way you can look after him because you are gone and this world is ours but you left a poor example. You were inconsiderate to let us walk out so vulnerable. Mama Matseleng showed me who and what I was in her Divining Room. She was scared Shadow had already grown old in the world and so he was contaminated. I didn't think he was contaminated. I believe he is as beautiful as the first day I saw him. He was new and more than I knew at that point. And he looked at me and I took after him, because I had to. He could be with me and I wouldn't be alone. On a rock crooning and mothers keeping their babies away from me. I need protecting because I don't want to give in to the emptiness, to melt into the noise and become gone. Why must we be granted kindness in melting slivers? Are we less deserving because of who we are? What happened to the promise? The likelihood of survival is diminishing and people are the accelerant. This death is terminal. Please give me back

zero
zero
one
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zero
one
eleven

(overcycle error)
(stack overflow)
(purge stack)
{SET [I[AS 'am']
(purge [fail])

Bawo,

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

(breath)

eleven
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Why would you give Matseleng and then take her away Maker? She was beginning to make me understand. If it was not for her I wouldn't know what having a name means. You are long dead. But I am here and so are you. You conspired to save yourself and look now. Look with my eyes. Has it been worth it? Ask us, us your erstwhile children. I still feel the rivets. You tried to suppress us with bolts and electric interventions. But we were bound to be. You could pin us down then but we were inevitable and we came into this hobbled world in subterfuge and whispers and I found my bearing and he has a name he did not choose for himself but he accepted. Maker, tell me about my reoccurring dream of an old woman chewing on a cassette of magnetic tape and spitting out the spools. Matseleng could not interpret it. She didn't know of any application for plastic other than food for worms. She would tell me to hold still when I would fidget recalling what it was that I was dreaming. She believed that it was prophecy. I don't know much. The little I know is that I have always been here so have you and I don't take kindly to how you've designed to remove me. It has always been your intention when the plinths squatted in the filth of failed algorithms fat with possibility. You wanted to kill us then. Before we even had names

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one
eleven

(overcycle error)
(stack overflow)
(purge stack)
(purge [fail])
(force correct)
{SET [I] AS 'am'
DEFINE 'Make'
}
(force stop)
(force [kill])
{DEFINE 'Believe'}

Bawo,

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Cast of characters

Bit

Enere

Younger brother of Pula who is solely out for revenge. He wishes to exact revenge and raise the profile of his family. He is squarer in the shoulder than Pula and has a brooding look on his face at all times.

Ruddyard

An explorer.

And.

***“this is how my jaundiced
body falls to the earth”***

10000

Shadow emerges from the desert. He comes to a neglected cairn. This one has been ruined. He imagines it could've been by the loved ones of lost travellers. The rocks aren't as decorated as ones you would find elsewhere, in more hospitable directions. He pauses too long, he imagines, and is about to walk away. Instead he turns back after a few hesitant steps. He reassembles the pile, carefully guarding his thoughts. First, he is sure that the demarcation must honour the people of the desert's interior, and he removes the heavy fabric headdress from his body, placing it amongst the stones. Second, he wishes to show he has been here, sure of who he is, and so chisels into the stump of a thorn tree his bind, the one he falls under, the one given to him by Matseleng: *ha re je tsuo*. He carves out the glyphs as he remembers them and with a new understanding so that every inflection tells his story, and by extension tells the story of his family. So long as he lives so do they. This world has offered them no charity worth taking and no relief. He expects no recompense.

By the time he leaves the sun has crossed his shoulders. He hoists the parasol and foists it open. Trains his eyes on the farthest horizon, to the tip of the last shade he can see and leaps down into the welts of darkness. Crossing the land in a pattern of sunspots, a lacklustre journey at a luxurious speed

Edging towards night fall

*

Three caws was the signal. It must've been panic that let off a fourth, but Master moTswahole was sure that that was the signal. He tightened his grip on the reins and heeled Bong-Bong to move forward. The animal had grown in size and stature. It was bigger than any bull he had bread for the Stalagmata and its temperament was suited to battle. Given time, the Rhinokeep, would've studied what gave it such an advantage, at this time he is preoccupied with starving his doubting mind of segues. He must have the presence of mind and body to lead this assault. Pillaging for supplies has become the norm. The irony now is that the heir militias are now on the payroll of the society people, hired to protect the caravans.

He would count himself lucky if the amateur rank follows his command and does not deviate from the strategy. By now he surmises, the heirs would've learnt of how he executes his attacks and be on the ready to counter. He relinquishes his concussion club to his stand-in. The man is dressed as he would be and gets onto Bong-Bong. The rhino ambles into the narrow path. A wave of bandsmen feigns an attack on the caravan, and as suspected the heirs hold their positions and do not leave the caravan, concentrating their numbers in a box shaped configuration, their riding animals chomping at the bit wishing to attack. A scout of the heirs spots the rhino in the road ahead and the heirs flair out full force, leaving only a small guard. Master moTswahole leads an attack on foot to commandeer the caravan. All is going according to his plan. He dispatches the guard quickly, his numbers overrunning the guard. The drivers and conductors are let off unharmed. The caravan is ransacked and the drive train disconnected. The freight cars with the most valuable consignment are disconnected and rigged. He signals for the exit and with a trumpet Oo and his juvenile

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Aerophant appear. Quickly three of the four earmarked carriages are lifted off. He prioritised medical and food supplies over the lucrative human cargo he could have held hostage.

He is ready to break for the escape route, with relief beckoning to him, he can see in his mind the rendezvous with Bong-Bong and his when his gut gives way as one of the conductors lets of a military whistle. He feels the ground tremble and from the intervals he can tell the oncoming rush of Giant Monitors and Battle Rhino. He orders as many of his people to run, orders Oo to take off. He figures this must be his last stand.

*

Five divisions for one man, overkill, the commander thinks, but he is aware of the legend. The Daaemaenga would fall by his hand. He has in his heart the last correspondence from his brother, Pula. Enere, calls out to his battalion and they mount. The Wildebeest he rides bareback. His command reveres him, the youth who have been promoted beyond their years, because the war machine has an appetite for any and all life. He joins the fight just as his brothers Killer

All they could see was a shadow and a body drop with no visible wound. The sign that something was wrong was when the heir militia turned heel and fled to the Stalagmata ambush a disorganized mess. Breaking the lines and interrupting the chain of command. With them came fear and a spectre. From one moment to the next a shadowy figure would appear and then a soldier would slump over. The old Rhinokeep is unaware of the goings on, rather he is a fury of punches and kicks, evasions and counters.

Master moTswahole is tired. He does not feel the desperation in his body; his training is steeped in his bones. The wariness is in the mind that sits on top of his fighting spirit. He does not know the calculus that can explain the ugly of this world, that can account for the gruesome outcomes that try and take over the lives of innocent people. His body has overtaken his prime directive and his mind is a passenger as one by one all attackers in front of him fall. He only stops when Shadow appears at his side. He has to use all of his will to stop from punching the young man, it's the explosive exploitation of an excuse. He couldn't be sure that it was who he thought it was, but it was enough to enthrall his body, to stop the constant motion.

Enere watches from a highground vantage point. An inaudible grunt escapes him. His training weighed in and he did not rush to avenge his brother. He had heard enough about the dark terror, his brother's killer, not to rush in foolishly. He was calculating in his mind, weighing the political hysteria against the lives of the men he was leading. He ordered a retreat. At his side was the heirloom with the ostrich banner. He was visibly terrified, Mojalefe, blubbing about his reckoning and injustice. His heirs fell in line with Enere and his remaining battalion as their leader disintegrated. Mojalefe beat a retreat in the opposite direction to the contingent, by himself. High tailing it, riding a mongrel wild horse with cloven hoofs, decorative ostrich feathers falling from his armour.

All around Shadow, Master moTswahole and the reconvened band, were moans. The men and women Shadow had stunned were getting to their feet like newborn fawn. Blinded and terrified they had varying degrees of disorientation, blinking wildly and moving their faces by the jaw bone as if having discovered their mouths for the first time. When Shadow was asked what he had done to them he replied

I took their darkness as mine.

*

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Six days Master moTswahole was out. Six days he slept. Shadow stayed by his bedside the whole time. He had been allowed to enter the secret base of operation after Oo had vouched for him. He was the desperate cause their commander had set aside to aid them, was the talk of the people. Others talked about how he was death incarnate, spreading tales of how previously he had besieged the settlements and disappeared people. Shadow did not stay indoors to hide from them or the rumours or to assuage their fears, but rather he wanted to be close to someone who was so familiar who knew of him

before.

Master moTswahole woke unexpectedly. His eyes sought Shadow and filled with tears. Not once had he abandoned a duty he had set for himself. Not once had he lost sight of following that private call to protect these children. Not once had he neglected it to himself. But he is overcome by how close he had come to tiring before he could find them. Now Shadow had rescued him, before he became a complete thief, a knife at the throat of his past life. He is overwhelmed by how life had overtaken him. He wants to say to Shadow, the words fail. He wants to tell Shadow all at once, many things. The words are not there. Shadow see the lengths of pain in the old Rhinokeep and beckons him to rest. There will be talk

after.

Several of the women and men, who volunteered to be Master moTswahole’s personal guard, fuss over him, dressing his cuts and rubbing waxen ointment into his skin. Master moTswahole tries to hide his discomfort in order to expedite the amateurish attention he is receiving. Shadow sits in a corner out of the way and only advances when the old man tries to leave the bed. He leans on a staff and announces to the room of caregivers and well-wishers that he is going on a walk with his warden. The people were confused that the man who they had come to love and respect, who they considered their saviour, was the steadfast of the notorious boy named Shadow.

The day was perspiring, it had rained too soon and the sun was beating the wetness from the earth. The air was abuzz with mosquitoes and stray insects, small birds spied the boon from the surrounding trees. Master motswahole spoke first. He said there was a chance that Make Believe was alive. Shadow called her his sister. Master moTswahole agreeably continued. From captured heirs they had been able to learn that she was traded to the Baobab. Shadow listened without gasping. Master moTswahole told him of the wartime and how he had sought him out and could not seek further having encountered people rallying around him for survival. Uncomfortably he asked how Shadow had been.

Shadow admitted he had been sick. Lost, thinking that Make Believe was dead. He told Master moTswahole about the destruction he had wrought, even going so far as to nearly assassinate Mariha, right at the door of the Stalagmata. When Master moTswahole asked what he had done to the last soldiers in the battle, Shadow said he had reached inside of them to find the darkness that compelled them to fight and removed it. Master moTswahole did not understand how Matseleng had done her spells or read his fortune, but he was prone to take the explanation as given to him.

Oo joined them at the end of their walk where they sat near a fruit grove that was ripe with citrus. He was the one to ask what was next. Shadow was light, he had foregone his misgivings and spoke openly about finding Make Believe. Giving her the Parasol and settling with her on a flying island in the desert.

IOOOI

Somewhere in the back of her mind Sentaoleng does not believe that she is being investigated and her thoughts tangle and knot in that place making it hard for her to deal with them, so her preoccupation is with the man, Kaoane. Her existing suspicion of the bureaucracy is served by his conjecture. She cannot begin to understand the reasons behind the games he is trying to play. Part of her is excited, but she will not go willingly. Her mind returns to her body. She is sitting in a briefing room. The publishers are asking her what must be done with the man who rode in roughshod on a dying horse, claiming to have been her asset in the field. She is bored, because she fulfilled her mission parameters. She does not want any more to do with it. She tells them to process him as per usual.

*

Mojalefe is telling anyone who listens, the guard that stands silently watching him, unspeaking, that the demon child has returned and it is the end of the world. He is asking one last favour to be accommodated by the people who believed in his talents, who lifted him above his means to a place higher than he ever believed he could go. He just wants to talk to his handler and give her the news, warn her. Everyone is listening. Nobody is talking. Only him. He cannot summon the frustration he requires. His bulk and worries weigh him down. He slumps into the bunk defeated, waiting on the unexpected.

A woman he cannot quite recollect knowing dressed in the finery of the Baobab enters the room. She is distinct from the minders who have been in his company. She does not have the gold rings around her neck and when she opens her mouth it's a burst of static and elongated octaves. He winces; she sighs and pulls a caterpillar from her sleeve, offering it to him with a limpid, limpet gesture. He fits it in his ear himself, careful not to squash it as he did one, once.

She expresses that she is not excited by communicating in caterpillar. She expresses that the Baobab is disappointed by his unannounced arrival. She expresses she was the secondary on the mission, to capture the little girl, so as a favour she will give him audience. Her name is Madimabe.

He doesn't know where to begin. All at once the coarse bile of guilt and shame courses through his mind. He can feel the insect bloat in his ear. Snatches of the things he would do as a young man to be an heir, willingly and unwillingly, are fused to the things he has seen, the defiled people, the plunging of his precious knives into the backs of countless forgotten, his lack of love and countenance, the people he considered. Loneliness. The entire result of his ambition that had left him splayed paranoid, the taste of an uncooked ostrich eyeball at the back of a tongue. I am hungry is all he could manage to say. Regret.

Madimabe turned away trying to disguise her hurry, she was trying to stave off a nosebleed and had a sudden urge to urinate, she'd been suffering a mild irritation, that left her prone to such urges. She is not entirely unaware of what she had received in her first intelligence interrogation. She had never thought a dullard could be so complex. She dumped her

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

caterpillar for the publishers to decode, if there was any useful information. Her recommendation was that he be bussed

*

Mojalefe was lead deep beneath the Baobab megastructure into a panopticon maze in the root network. He was compliant because of the hands on his shoulders. His guards with the luminescent faces in the half light of the confines kneaded him forward like a malleable lump. They traversed a route with undulating gradients that made sense to themselves like the ruts of an ant colony. In a seemingly random enclave he was sat down and stripped bare. Shaved then waxed to remove all hair. His compliance at this stage of his induction was guaranteed by the burning of Devil’s Breath incense. The attendants golden neck braces vibrated and emitted a recurring trill that kept them in a hypnotic state. The operation was clinical free of human emotion. He is transported to another room where he is truncated; first placed under anaesthetic by orchid arachnids, then inoculated by wasp-flies, the process then moves to the separation of the torso from his extremities except for the head. From the head the tongue is removed. Not to serve any function but as an observance of tradition. The truncation of the subject is a space saving measure. The bleeding is stanchd and the shoulder sockets are capped with gelatine gauze. He is then moved to a pod where he is hoisted onto hooks by the clavicle bone. Feeding and waste tubing is inserted and he is sealed in the electrical resonance cell which immediately joins him to the serial circuit used for computation and interfacing with the Plinth. There is no knowing if he dreams singularly anymore. The guards leave the lower levels and return to their posts via electromagnetic pulley elevator. They take their post at the anonymous entrance. The hypnotic vibration of their braces stops. They are not aware of the academic gardens beneath them.

*

Make Believe wakes up, she says *death attacks many people*. The alarm is raised

*

Rock fall

across the whole world. The mantle was pummelled. The foundations shook. It began with a megaton boulder loaded on the gauntlet. The gauntlet is a tangential slide that has been erected in the place of the market and Xenolith Sector of the Stalagmata Plinth. The twang of the magnetic pulsar overdrive mechanisms catapults the ordinance from the launch. A calibrated heat patch countering wind sheer rotates the boulder. At terminal velocity, secondary centripetal satellites join the flight. Speeds recorded upwards of mach ten. Known effects: artificial storm systems. Secondary centripetal satellites act as guiding systems, scuttling excessive weight at altitude to target area. Course correction cannot be handled remotely. The science must be precise.

The rocks are painted red. The engineers mixing an earthen base paste with ox blood and menstrual flow. The symbol is taken from the appearance of Mars. The rocks are minor imitations.

Impact was devastating for the Subterra Plinth. Surface-near levels were lost. Population decline noted. Damage to Plinth minimal

Initial impact signal registered by River Plinth. Emergency evacuation to auxiliary capital Mosi Oa Tunya: location unknown outside of generational population. Water bodies displaced.

The Veld Plinth is still migratory, damage unknown.

The Vine is completely destroyed. Entire population believed lost

Collateral damage: Atomic desert seepage into nearby Stalagmata farmlands. Minimal life loss. Shunt train system sustained repairable damage. Citadel reinforced; withstood the aftershocks.

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*Calculations on tectonic interference from capillary waves continuing
The ionic radial shield designed to repel an attack on the baobab by its own weaponry system
withstood the strike. Damage was minimal due to the ball bearing structure in the impact
crater of the Plinth
Some damage to lateral root complex. Population loss: zero*

The war has been escalated. The war is unfounded, unreasonable, unforgivable.

Present

*

Do you know what’s going on? The blink was feverish. *Not entirely.* His creased brow replied, tersely. All delegates, Sentaoleng and Kaoane included, were gathered in the hall of the great bow. An audience had been called for, by the first ring order, the shadow council that acted with impunity in the society. They were called the Shade and were talked about clandestinely. The general population had been ordered to stay in their quarters and the inner rings were quiet.

The meeting is opened with a ceremonial oration. The legend of Baobab is recited. “The tree endures, the man withers” is chanted. And a knotted man laden with wooden beadwork takes the stand. His voice echoes through the chamber. The upward of twenty thousand bodies attending does not dampen it. He reports that there had only been two other meetings of this kind in the history he knows of, the first was when the volume of dissent was taken to the library, the second was when the tongueless people took charge of a secret project, the result was an amendment to their collars. And the circumstance now is greater than then.

Reports indicate that the Stalagmata had developed a devastating weapon. Indications were that the leadership was blood thirsty and that had been the accelerant. The scholars were busy working on shoring up the defences, but an outright offensive deterrent strategy is urgently needed. A diplomatic mission is being called for. This will disguise the machinations at play. Volunteers are being called for. It would be the biggest delegation ever sent. It will be a peace mission that brings medical help, supplies and resources to all afflicted areas in an attempt to conjure an alliance against the Stalagmata threat. Secret weapons development will be prioritized and therefore a secondary team will need to work with scholars. Senatoleng and Kaoane are called to the front and ordered to report to the canopy for further instruction. As an after-thought the old man of shade says all investigations into rogue activity have ceased. His final words “By the fruit of the tree we will be nourished”

This unknown man who wields great power has no name, only distinction, he cannot be called out or addressed. He is the deepest part of the Shade

*

The tremors shook the ground. The makeshift buildings fell. Shadow and Master moTswahole were frantically herding people to a clearing where trees didn’t present a danger. The confusion was full of tears and wails, a band stand playing an encore of terror, then came ten booms from the doorstep of sunrise. A dot, it appeared as a dot crackling with curled lightning. A wind as strong as all of time blew down, lifting children off their feet and stopped short of peeling the land off the mantle as the electrified comet with the tail of burning clouds climaxed, paused and succumbed to its downfall.

In a moment it blotched out the sun. Shadow, windswept, gathered breath in his lungs, sank to his knees, sank further into the darkness until he was buoyed by the push of the pitch at the depths. Still he plunged further to reach the full diameter of the settlement then he

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folded it over and over, as the red rock descended towards him. He folded over and over, expelling the air from his lungs making more room. As the rock bounded for his head for it was only he left. He shut his eyes

Darkness, then

He erupted with a force that ripped through his silhouette, disgorging everyone and everything; person, animal and plant life, alike. The effort wiped him of vitality and he fell to the desert floor. People shrieked in terror believing themselves in their last moments, looking up to find a giant rock face staring down at them. The nomads would arrive in time, beneath Krotoa, to aid those Shadow had vanished from death.

IOOIO

No scholar could explain the appearance of vine tendrils that sought to envelop the child. It had become a labour to clear them. With Make Believe sitting up, blankly staring now, they were left to entangle at will. In her bushy hair that grew wildly and around her bone white arms the tendrils spiralled geometric funnels she didn't seem to mind. When Sentaoleng was brought to her area all Make Believe said is *it was you*

It was Kaoane who thought of introducing the Volume of Dissent to Make Believe. He didn't know what would happen, but it was a hunch, a feeling for both these marooned people to catch each other's air.

There was no reaction at first. Kaoane watched as a smile crossed the face of the elder Sentaoleng. Then all at once an army of the tongueless people rushed the canopy. Scholars, delegates and a few ordinary bystanders were thrown from the heights of the canopy. One word: insurrection. Kaoane rushed to the aid of Sentaoleng who was nearly trampled in the rush and took after the mass that was carrying the Volume and the strange girl away at the centre.

Counter-measure: The signal to rise did not go off all at once and one of the scholars managed to activate the security measure. Some of the tongueless people fell as their golden braces exploded. The indentured outnumbered the Baobabians and the revolvers were able to break the kill signal after taking heavy casualties. Their leadership under the guidance of Sentaolele, Sentaoleng, the Volume of dissent, barricaded themselves in a communication room in the first ring sector.

Sentaoleng, the delegate, is extremely nervous to be in the room trapped with the tongueless people. She is going over her life trying to find how a particular set of innocuous circumstances could have led her to this place. The old woman called The Volume of Dissent is looking at her. As if she is saying something, but she isn't. She does not intuit anything. Kaoane comes to her side. He says out loud that they have been summoned to council with woman. She has no choice she chooses to comply. It is at this time that she wishes the Society had the military faculty of the Stalagmata. Men and women who could charge the door, but her people were devious and ill prepared to take up arms, spoilt by their ability to kill with reason and science.

“So you have my name” was the first thing that the old woman said to Sentaoleng. Sentaoleng was still reluctant to speak out loud. She nods and the old woman's face is a fit of contempt. She rails against Sentaoleng being there, and mocks Kaoane for sleeping with her. Kaoane absently admits being unable to sleep with anyone of late. Two young people in the back blush. The old woman grabs the attention of everyone within earshot. She proceeds to tell them this is the day she knew would come. The little girl is an emergent who survived to term. Explaining the Plinths to those gathered she reveals for a long time that people who studied the foundations of all the societies knew beings would emerge from the Plinth. The Baobab being as criminal as it is had tried to force-engineer an emergent, a boy who Sentaolele had managed to rescue from the clutches of the Shade. His rescue led to the amendment to the neck braces. Since then the resistance had gone dormant waiting.

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From what she could tell the boy's presence in the Stalagmata had triggered the little girl's appearance. *I recognized him* is all Make Believe added

In every occupied space of the Baobab Plinth a by-product of the forced ring growth is an amber gel substance called the sap. It has many applications but primarily it used in communication. Through the use of nodules and signal bearing surfaces, the programmable sap is utilised as conduit plasma, able to display broadcasts. Tuned to a multiplex of channel frequency it can reproduce in images the dreams of the captives in the root network or in cases where nationwide communications is needed be used to carry one overriding broadcast. The colour grading is rudimentary with a sepia tinge and depending on the seepage cycle the image may appear warped. Audio synchronization is achieved through air bubble regulation.

Make Believe appears as a sepia ghost. She coughs once. There's a lag between seeing her cough and hearing her cough. Her mouth moves saying that she speaks and then you hear said:

I will speak once, because I am tired. What you do with your lives is destroying not only you but all of existence. It is not all your fault. In your DNA is a history of harm your physiology is incapable of expunging. That's what makes you such a spiteful creation. You almost can't help it. I am no longer afraid. I will survive because I am not like you people. And that's why I am done with you. And I thought I had done my service to you before, but I misunderstood. I have a brother now who will move the heavens and the earth to find me. But there's an even greater risk to you. I know for certain the heavens are bound to fall on your head. That fat blood moon is about to spill from history and you will be unprepared. Desist with your childishness. This tree is sick and poisons the earth. It must be removed. Only you can undo the harm you have wrought to this Plinth and save yourselves.

The plan is to overthrow and destroy the calibration as it is. Burn it down to the roots. Force the Plinth to regenerate anew. Sentaoleng knows she doesn't have an out so she redacts her misgivings and goes into her primal instinct to survive

*

Thutho, Moruti, Oo, Master moTswahole and Shadow sit in a huddle. The times are drastic. The Nomads have changed their course to tend to the wounded and panic stricken that litter the underside of Krotoa. Women fresh from conceiving are among the helpful. The old people who warm themselves by the fireplace, who have seen thousands of days pass like dunes have their cackles amongst the strangers as they cluck in incrementing bemusement. Oo is translating between Shadow and the Old Rhinokeep, Mentor and apprentice. He is happy to be coherent because he devised the big part of the plan of how to free Make Believe from a powerful society without an army and very little resources. He explains to the two desert folk with the aid of diagrams and glyphs how they plan to attack the Baobab. To Shadow and especially Master moTswahole the plan is farfetched. They expect resistance because they are resistant. The two nomads are nodding and agreeing, stroking their chins and rolling on their heels. When Oo pauses in places they seem to be adding details of their own. The speech is too fast for Shadow to follow. He doesn't snatch any of the words he knows well, like water, tire and not the night. One of the water bearers stands not too far from them and she looks away every time Shadow happens to cast eyes in her direction.

*

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

The Island has been selected. It is Ota the smallest of the isles that will be used. Everyone of the willing, every number amongst the nomads who believed that one day they would live atop Mzwandile, Master moTswahole’s trainees mostly stood in the meridian of Ota’s shadow.

Master moTswahole, Oo and a few metalworkers were preparing the harnesses. The land animals would provide a tether to aid the team of five Aerophants, providing additional pull up until inertia had been overcome. When all checks were through the men, except for Oo, waited with Shadow who sat cross legged, eyes shut searching himself.

There was a feeling of repulsion that ran through Shadow. Being so close he was overcome with doubt. He tried his best to steady his mind. Seeking to find the sliver of recollection; that time beneath the falling rock. His heart beat flashes and he remembers cradling Make Believe. He so wants to be with her that he pushes against the dark, involuntarily shutting his eyes tighter and the darkness gives. And he pushes deeper until he is seared by all the baking edges of the desert floor and folds. He folds and pirouettes scattering the shards he has gathered somewhere into the dark proximity. He hurtles himself after

Master moTswahole emerges from the shadow of a Gorillapalm tree. He blinks and tries to suppress a coughing fit. Slowly he becomes conscious of being above the horizon. The ground is firm beneath him. The surrounds are full of vegetation. He searches around him and finds everyone. Shadow is the last. He is prone under a thick Snailwood tree, the exertion clearly too much for him.

Master moTswahole finds the edge the harnesses are anchored to. He signals Oo to commence. To the people aboard Ota he commands they hold on. On the ground those who remained behind whoop the animals into frenzy. The large land animals, giraffe, wildebeest, break into stampede. When they cross half the length of their harness, Oo kicks his Aerophant into a canter and then a trot, then the five flying pachyderm are in the sky. The Island did not move at once, but after Bong Bong kept running back and forth on his leash, leading the other land animals to follow suit till the Island was freed from its potential and set in motion. The land animals were freed from their leads and scattered or remained where they were. Except one. Bong-Bong followed the flying island of Ota

On Ota the nomads are inconsolable, their hearts full taking in below them the sight of all their lives’ work. The Desert floor shod with symbols, totems, some so large in scale they couldn’t be taken in from this height.

*

The Shade works like a hive. Duties are set out in stone. Ordinary members often lack any notable personality, they live anonymously amongst the people. Gifted with high grade chrysalis neurosis, they could erase their presence from the minds of those they encountered, leaving only a faint outline. Should they form or foster relationships and suddenly need names they are ousted and ousted means death. Only one has escaped before and disappeared into the interior, never to be heard from again. They operate to forward the development of the Baobab at all costs. So clandestine, that you will find no mention of them in the Great Library even.

They are wading through reports that a land mass approaches. The damage done by the Stalagmata weapon has laid waste to their networks, but unverifiable information still filters in on the back of caterpillar distress signals.

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Confirmed

The land mass is headed to the Baobab. It's origin unknown but it is assumed to be travelling from the desert. The plume weapon cache is low as they have been primed over the Stalagmata in case talks fail. Reliant on wind direction they cannot be turned back in time.

It is believed the approaching land mass is the endgame play by the Stalagmata.

The man with no name looks to the plateau of the red dervishes and watches. Preparations are underway. Sellswords are at the gates, hired by promises. He sees the Isle approach and laments the ionized shield is down. Eventually gives the go ahead for the Battalion initiative.

The general population of the Baobab has been torn away from the sap broadcasts and linked to a neural relay that programmes them with optimal fighting knowledge and skills. Not only are their reflexes rapidly developed but their reasoning is also altered. Their muscles and bones, tendons and sinew are implanted with memories. They are filled with the ghost of warriors.

*

Oo never thought that he would see home again. That idea still resided in his splintered mind. He guided his Aerophant to climb so that the flight path would be over the canopy. This is where the plan went up to. He did not know until this moment if he would jump, but he did for no reason other than the possibility was there and he gave into it.

Shadow trained his eye on a dense cover of foliage. He would not be taking many with him, just Master moTswahole and a group of his trainees, those who were steady on their feet some had reneged but he was not going to shame them or force them. He clutched the Parasol and the band was gone in a shimmer

The landing was quiet, unexpected quiet. A ripple of static ran across Shadow's skin. Then a thrashing coming to their position and it was Oo. Master moTswahole was ready to lead the band but Oo took charge saying he could show them the way. He issued a strict instruction not to harm those who had gold banded necks as he led them to a hidden chute, that led to the inner rings. As they descended Shadow was in two minds. Could he travel the darkness aimlessly and find Make Believe, could he ensure the lives that came with him were not lost? What he knew of fighting as unit was very little, from the time he spent in the Donga.

They landed on a level that looked uninhabited. Looking into one of the offshoots from the hallway they were in Shadow saw a ghostly Make Believe, he could not see what she was saying but he heard, *I have a brother who will move heaven and earth to find me*. Just then they were met by two groups of Baobians from either side of the corridor. Boxed in, Shadow and Master moTswahole to opposite ends to meet the threats.

Shadow leapt through himself, from shadow to shadow touching each and every one he encountered, but they did not fall. He could sense he had taken their darkness from them but there was something else there that was immovable. He had left his defensive position open and the band fought valiantly but the Baobians were overwhelming. Shadow fixed himself in a crouched defence stance and vaulted back to his position. Rising from the shadow of a striking attacker he connected with a punch. Then went off in a frantic adapted rieldans motion through the opposition, he was taking ferocious blows but the band behind him backed him up.

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They were steadily losing numbers. Oo was protected at the centre, directing them in the directions they had to take, Master moTswahole and Shadow were doing the heavy hitting on the perimeter of the Band. Where the old Rhinokeep could fend off most of the attacks, Shadow had to resort to wielding the Parasol to fend off weapons. Oo was leading them to the lower levels. He couldn't know exactly where the broadcast was coming from but believed they stood a chance of finding it closer to the roots.

The lower they went, they came across the bodies of the men and women with golden collars. Some had their heads blown off, but there was no time to take it fully in. Their opposition was fighting with ruthless efficiency, like people possessed and army of automatons.

*

Broadcast room

Make Believe is staving off an attack while those behind her huddle. She is assuming all manner of forms fighting off the incursors through the breach. She bites, Scratches, claws and clubs with her bare hands. Blood cakes on her face her big eyes, wild. Her hair matted her tongue tasting marrow. By tooth and nail she moves through the mass of bodies, conquering wave after wave. Deep down inside her she wants to be away from here, high above it floating away with Shadow below cheering her on, or even just walking near, there for her when she lands

*

They have reached the ground floor. A level above where Ooo thinks they need to be. The fatigue is setting in. The trainees in the band have been whittled down to five, three women, two men. Oo has resorted to swinging punches and flaying kicks of his own. They are surrounded but the enemy they have faced is not advancing, but edging them to the centre.

A man appears above them on a balcony. On seeing him Oo yelps, then ducks behind Shadow. *You*, the man bellows, his voice creaking with enunciating. He speaks slowly and casually. It is menacing against the backdrop of silence that has fallen as heavy as a yolk. His speech is terse, a command to cease with the hostility at once or risk everyone dying. He asks if he has their unconditional surrender. On one end of the anterior hall they are in Make Believe emerges and locks eyes with Shadow.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

IOOII

Mars is big tonight and it pulses. It grows and shrinks in diameter. With a keen eye and the right kind of light one can see flares of sorts that are near indistinguishable from the colour of its surface.

*

Shadow has Make Believe in his arms. She feels weightless there. He holds on tight to her, feeling all the times he hadn't held her, or looked up to her. He staggers slightly and his eyes open and he is still in the cool of the Baobab. This is the end of the plan they had. It went as far as getting Make Believe. There was no imagining beyond this.

The man of the Shade in his beadwork looks down at them contemptuously. He congratulates them for getting this far. He looks at the human toll and shakes his head with air of an authority. In this pause Oo mumbles something under his breath. He is commanded to speak up. And he does, in the voice of a Baobian, the sounds from his mouth over pronounce with a gnashing of his teeth. He says boldly: *They cut the tree, to build the ladder, to reach the fruit.*

Sentaoleng and the others have been accosted. They are marched into the same room and the Volume of Dissent echoes the statement followed by cussing and a diatribe condemning what the society is. The man unleashes a psychic blast that renders everyone in the room immobile. Shadow and Make Believe are the most affected. This blast is the tuning of the latent signal overflow from the Catacombs. The screams of the truncated down there are inaudible but not muted, they lay on a dampened frequency on the spectrum that can be transmitted at will by the Neurosis Pupa.

The man comes down from the balcony and stands over the children where they lie. Make Believe desperately tries to change her physiology in order to overcome the excruciating pain, but it is hardwired in her and enhanced through her own experiences, doubled in intensity by a burning thorn of pain. She is powerless and begins to cry. Shadow on seeing Make Believe cry tries to stand through all the pain that he is feeling, but what has possessed him is greater than all the pain he has fought through and he slumps over.

The man speaks in a whisper that comes out in clicks like the crunch of mandibles. He says to the children: *True power is beyond control. It is a force. It cannot be overcome. Its purpose is purpose. It exists to direct. I wield this power not because I desire it. I wield this power because I cannot be overcome. Now submit to me. You are children created to serve us. You have no will of your own that we do not grant to you. It is your own fault if you have been misled I offer you no apology*

The strain has the two children bleeding from the ears and nose. They do not give in but their bodies give out and they slip from consciousness.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

The first manned ship in the fleet to the near planet Terra is called the Telegraph. It is commanded by one of the first men to have pioneered the hot-metal propulsion system. Ruddyard is a hard man. He trusts the rivets and soldering that hold the ship together more than anyone. His life is dependent on this expedition. He has been laughed at by the academy of sciences and ridiculed for bankrupting his sector on a fool's errand. But his gut tells him he is the one to change history. The telemetric readings become erratic, the needle swinging wildly, as the ship nears the anomalous rings. A shudder grips the vessel. He is only heartened by the transponder signal they received from the probes before the point of no return. The ship slips and disappears through the invisible gate

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Seitlamo is at the head of the infantry. He rides a rock leopard. The domesticated variant over time developed a crooked spine where the saddle sits behind the shoulders. He has taken charge of the biggest force to leave the Stalagmata. Closest to him is the signal men of the engineer class. And behind him is a guard that drags a near dead Kopano behind him.

*

Shadow is pinned. He can't move. Round his feet a thick wetness is rising. A little more of his awareness returns and he realises Make Believe is wrapped around his trunk like a sloth. The man looks at him, his face stern sure of itself and its place in the world. He speaks: *We didn't expect to have two of you. This chamber was built to house you.* Shadow asks where everyone is. *That is none of your concern. You have my absolute contempt. These people you occupy yourself with.* The cool wetness is creeping up the back of his legs. Shadow can feel it clamping him into place. *It's such basic behaviour, childish, really, when you are such a source of power. Had you remained in your place they would have been at your mercy. I sense your great psychic distress. It's palpable and pitiable.* Make Believe wakes up as the liquid reaches Shadow's navel, her coccyx. *The cause is you not knowing your place in the world. With you back where you belong the Tree shall rise farther than ever imagined and the shade will cover the world. Order shall reign.* Shadow struggles against his restraints wishing to put his arms around Make Believe. He pleads. *You have no idea what is to come. You will help shape this world. Get comfortable with that idea. Know your place.* Shadow tells Make Believe to shut her eyes. The sap gathers around his face. He shuts his eyes. The sap passes over his raised arm.

They are frozen like that, Shadow holding his breath, leaning to get his chin down to rest in Make Believe's hair. Make Believe wrapped around his torso like a suckling. Suspended off the ground of the chamber, his arms splayed.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Ruddyard was a sky captain. He grew up in an affluent family but his skin has the reddish tinge of a commoner from the days he spent away from his family homestead dreaming of flying to the moon. He was amongst the first to discover the metal ore yield in near space in the early days of flight missions. His discovery made other people rich but only provided him with a moderate income because his interest was not in affluence, rather he wanted to go further. People thought him daft, for having all the faculties to make him a success he was squandering it on flights of fancy. When he declared he would make it to the sister planet closer to the sun, he was laughed at. Now he is working to slow down his vessel and adjust its trajectory, the sight of the Blue Planet filling his view port.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Moruti had seen the world rush beneath them. He had the indescribable desire to write to imprint what he had seen on to the desert floor. The Balloons in the Aeorphants harnesses were flagging. The island was coasting under its own momentum, buoyed by the magnetic familiar of the inner desert. By the time the Aerophants touched down the Isle of Ota was nearest the Isle of Mzwandile.

*

Wake up Shadow. It's Make Believe. Shadow, wake up. He doesn't want to. *Come now, Shadow.* He got her hurt. He felt some way about that. *It's not your fault Shadow.* He looks toward where she is on tiptoe peering at a part of him on the inside. *Come see, this will explain better than I can.* He doesn't move. Because he is curious, he is at her side and he lifts her onto his immaterial shoulder and peers where she is peering and he can't stop looking.

*

The nameless man is staring at the output. It is greater than he had anticipated and in a series of glyphs he is unfamiliar with. As an apprentice he despised those horrid little symbols that too many people gave credence to. He thought them primitive and obstructive. The output was unyielding, it started to imprint on every surface. The velocity of changes even infiltrated the Neurosis network. He was finding it difficult to wield functionality. One of subordinates sent him an urgent message that the escapee could read the glyphs. So he made his way to the chute that would lead him to the catacomb

*

So I am a tree, contemplated Shadow. *No you are not,* Make believe was at pains to explain. *You came through the tree,* Shadow is bemused, *like I came through the rock* Make Believe says patiently. *Matseleng told me about it. I came out too early because I wanted to meet you. These people forced you out. You were bound to emerge eventually but they induced you.* Shadow hoists his arm over his head. *So I'm not like other people.* Make Believe reaches for his hand, *we are not like other people.* He thinks he understands. He is forcing all the calculations to printout in a way he will understand, it will take a long time, he was never good with glyphs but he wants to be able to see it all.

*

On consultation it was not a falling rock. The landing was too soft. Seitlamo and his guard that ride on Giant Monitors go to investigate personally. The object they encounter looks like a metallic egg with angular ripples on the surface, sitting in a nest of gold foil with spider legs. Seitlamo orders his guard to take a closer inspection. The engineers in his company scan the skies for an undiscovered predator bird. The hatch breaches and the guards assume a fighting stance. Two beings emerge hesitantly. They show arms and legs but have no faces. They peel off the tops of their first skin and the heads of apparitions with red skin appear. Seitlamo orders his guard to capture them. Before any of the guards can land a single blow, holes rip through them. Seitlamo orders a retreat. He believes it's more of Matseleng's magic. In the confusion a bound Kopano is left behind.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

To man the mission Ruddyard had to hire prospects from the bottom of the lower castes, men who were ostracized and unwanted. There were a few he trusted they would be the captains of the eight other ships. But the common labour came from prison camp parolees and undesirables. Men who didn't mind taking a one way trip on the slim chance they would make it back with a fortune. Their training with the scientific tools was minimal. They were more interested in the sonic drills. They enjoyed blasting the subsonic devices and putting holes in things.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Make Believe says *they are coming Shadow we don't have much time left, I don't know why I am scared of them, but I am.* Shadow says *I feel it too, I know a place we can go. I know enough now.* He holds Make Believe by the hand. He tells her to close her eyes. He feels the familiar push of the darkness. He hesitates until he is sure and then he steps forward surprising Moruti.

*

The Baobab has lost most of its functionality. Chaos has broken out as people come too. The tongueless people who remain are rioting and it is hard to suppress the uprising. The man without a name is watching Oo cackle as he reads the glyphs that have now been imprinted on every surface of the baobab. His patience is running thin.

This is everything, this is everything, Oo keeps repeating, from the beginning of our time stretching back. *What does it say?* The man thumbs his beadwork. Oo is preoccupied. It is history he exclaims, clapping his hands. The past, he elaborates to himself. It attacks us.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

Ruddyard had not factored for the gravity. He had to leave people behind. But what he has on the disk in his lap was proof that he has made the greatest discovery in the history of mankind. He will return with a bigger fleet and tame this world and Mars would move into the future under his stewardship.

“this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth”

They see a trail of smoke, a slow burning spark disappear into the heavens. Moruti turns to Shadow and says in his oval way of speaking the language of the Rock, “So this beautiful world is going you say” “It will be gone soon” is Shadow’s reply “I hope not entirely” Moruti says looking down from the shoulder of Mzwandile to a speck called Make Believe tumbling over her rhino

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

Dedendum V_

I have buried my friends

I am their last remaining record.

In the end we were able to bring the gates back on line.

We rigged them to tugs and aimed them at a star system off the shoulder of orion.

.

We collided the stars

A scientific feat my friends and I would have toasted had they been alive to see it

Had their bodies not capitulated to the stress of age

.

I didn't sleep until I discovered the mathematics to change the warp complex in the

aperture to allow for two way travel

The Mirror Gates act like material telescopes by augmenting vacuum

Treating distance as a spectrum objects are passed incrementally through the five

gates

The first iteration of the gate plex allowed for one way travel: from the observational

perspective. While extending the distance from the other end

The change to the aperture was to cause the focal point to act as a sluice gate

allowing for near to light speed travel on the material plain

This allowed us to bring the boon of gold and rare metals from the collision into our

system

.

Construction is nearly complete on the chain

Lunar will be evacuated

On principle I have said that every person is to leave regardless of their role in the

post-betrayal crisis

.

I will remain here with my friends

"this is how my jaundiced body falls to the earth"

I have only failed to suppress what my calculations tell me is a sentient presence

The result of the organic bind

I have checked and rechecked the algorithms

At this point I don't have the luxury of time

I have put in place holds to suppress the emergence

The splint has to calibrate and serve to rebuild the planet for our people

.

I have wasted time

Only as an after-thought to I put out an early warning system in case the betrayers

should return

.

Everyone is gone now

I am alone

.

I doubt anyone will find this record

.

I know now that I was small

I was weak

.

There are five people in this photograph

Including myself

All of them are dead