

Ayi Kwei Armah

TWO
thousand
seasons

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for Ekua Korkoi Armah and Li Chun Hi

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The Way

We are not a people of yesterday. Do they ask how many single seasons we have flowed from our beginnings till now? We shall point them to the proper beginning of their counting. On a clear night when the light of the moon has blighted the ancient woman and her seven children, on such a night tell them to go alone into the world. There, have them count first the one, then the seven, and after the seven all the other stars visible to their eyes alone.

After that beginning they will be ready for the sand. Let them seek the seashore. They will not have to ponder where to start. Have them count the sand. Let them count it grain from single grain.

And after they have reached the end of that counting we shall not ask them to number the raindrops in the ocean. But with the wisdom of the aftermath have them ask us again how many seasons have flowed by since our people were unborn.

The air everywhere around is poisoned with truncated tales of our origins. That is also part of the wreckage of our people. What has been cast abroad is not a thousandth of our history, even if its quality were truth. The people called our people are not the hundredth of our people. But the haze of this fouled world exists to wipe out knowledge of our way, the way. These mists are here to keep us lost, the destroyers' easy prey.

Pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments. From the unending stream of our remembrance the harbingers of death break off meaningless fractions. Their carriers bring us this news of shards. Their message: behold this paltriness; this is all your history.

Beware the destroyers. It is their habit to cut off fingers from the hand itself uprooted from its parent body, calling each fallen

piece a creature in itself, different from ears, eyes, noses, feet and entrails, other individual creatures of their making. Is it a wonder we have been flung so far from the way? That our people are scattered even into the desert, across the sea, over and away from this land, and we have forgotten how to recognize ourselves?

We are not a people of yesterday. Until the utterance of Anoa the reason itself for counting seasons had been forgotten. It had been swallowed up among a people sure of our past, unharried in our present, assured of a thousand thousand tomorrows easily flowing. Ours then was the way of creation. From the cycle of regeneration we had not yet strayed on this exile road, though even then the hearers and the seers, listening to sounds not yet arrived in the present, their eyes peering at entrails yet embowelled, these silent utterers had begun thinking uncertainly about disasters growing out of too secure, too sure a harmony.

We wander now along steep roads declining into the whitest deaths. Along these highways whatever we may do will fight against our self – how could there be other possibilities? For seasons and seasons and seasons all our movement has been a going against our self, a journey into our killers' desire. Killers who from the desert brought us in the aftermath of Anoa's prophecy a choice of deaths: death of our spirit, the clogging destruction of our mind with their senseless religion of slavery. In answer to our refusal of this proffered death of our soul they brought our bodies slaughter. Killers who from the sea came holding death of the body in their right, the mind's annihilation in their left, shrieking fables of a white god and a son unconceived, exemplar of their proffered, senseless suffering.

We were not always outcasts from ourselves. In that fertile time before far-listening Anoa made her vatic utterance we were a refuge on this earth for those – hau, too many – bitten hard among their own. In our generosity they found their denied sustenance.

A ruinous openness we had, for those who came as beggars turned snakes after feeding. The suspicious among us had pronounced fears incomprehensible to our spirit then, words generosity failed to understand.

'These are makers of carrion,' the wary ones said, 'do not shelter them. See their eyes, their noses. Such are the beaks of all the desert's predatory birds.'

We laughed at the fearful ones, gave the askers shelter and watched them unsuspecting, watched them turn in the fecundity

of our way, turn into the force that pushed us till the proper flowing of all our people, the way itself, became a lonely memory for abandoned minds.

It is not that we had not travelled before. We are not a stagnant people, hating motion. But in that fertile time before Anoa's utterance even our longer journeys were absorbed in a lasting evenness. From that long, forgetful peace our exile has been harsh and steep has been our descent.

That we the black people are one people we know. Destroyers will travel long distances in their minds and out to deny you this truth. We do not argue with them, the fools. Let them presume to instruct us about ourselves. That too is in their nature. That too is in the flow of their two thousand seasons against us.

How the very first of us lived, of that ultimate origin we have had unnumbered thoughts and more mere fables passed down to us from those gone before, but of none of this has any of us been told it was sure knowledge. We have not found that lying trick to our taste, the trick of making up sure knowledge of things possible to think of, things possible to wonder about but impossible to know in any such ultimate way. We are not stunted in spirit, we are not Europeans, we are not Christians that we should invent fables a child would laugh at and harden our eyes to preach them daylight and deep night as truth. We are not so warped in soul, we are not Arabs, we are not Muslims to fabricate a desert god chanting madness in the wilderness, and call our creature creator. That is not our way.

What we do not know we do not claim to know. Who made the earth and when? We have no need to claim to know. Many thoughts, growing with every generation, have come down to us, many wonderings. The best have left us thinking it is not necessary for the earth to have been created by any imagined being. We have thought it better to start from sure knowledge, call fables fables, and wait till clarity. But from the desert first, then from the sea, the white predators, the white destroyers came assailing us with the maddening loudness of their shrieking theologies.

Of our first home we have more certainty. That it was here, on this same land, we know. We have crossed lakes and forded rivers changing resting places, but never have we had to leave our land itself, though we have roamed thousands of days over it, and lit a thousand thousand fires in thirty thousand varying places.

This land is ours, not through murder, not through theft, not by

way of violence or any other trickery. This has always been our land. Here we began. Here we will continue even after the thousand seasons' scattering and the thousand seasons' groping, though the white death sometimes openly, often covertly, seductively now, brutally at other times, changes means but always seeks one end: our extermination.

Our clearest remembrances begin with a home before we came near the desert of the falling sun. Thousands upon thousands the seasons that have passed since the heavy time of parting, countless those among us who have rejoined the ancestors since we left, but the knowledge has come surely down of the skirting of great waters, kin to the sea, lacking only salt; of long and tiring seasons spent journeying through high forests; of our settling down at the foot of beautiful mountains joining earth to sky again; of the fearful wailing rush when these same mountains of our admiration, now belching smoke, vomiting hot mud, throwing on our bewildered heads ashes and rocks of fire, like demented demons forced us out of all shelter; of other forests where, astonished, we met predecessors we thought had disappeared along other paths, people who had lost half our language but still had our ways, who gave us the water of welcome and after we had rested long with them guided us the length of all the paths they knew; of a hundred seasons spent journeying till we came to the wide, clear plains before the desert, that place in spirit so like other remembered places our people have called home.

There before the desert the howling regret, the longing for homes left behind, was sweetened by the promise of new homes found. So much of familiarity the place had in it, it called our weary spirits to rest. Tired from long journeys we answered the welcome of the place. We built homes it was not our intention to leave again. We lost count of stable seasons, lost count of droughts, lost count of good rains and in the ease of thirty thousand seasons forgot all anxiety.

Yes, there was motion. The surrounding soil, the air, the rivers called our younger blood. Generation after generation, growing groups journeyed a day, three days from our outer reaches looking not for escape but for greater space in an open land. Disasters there were, but the land was always larger than any calamity. It absorbed them. We continued, mothers, brothers, spreading connected over this land.

There were those who also travelled but not over land and not

over water. Movers in the mind, their news was of communities we would have forgotten without them, roots to ours but gone from our waking sight. Their news was of communities too far off for us immediately to remember, places where the sun rising approaches over sea, not land. Their news was also of relationships of a beauty still to be realized, of paths still to be found. Their news was of the way, the forgotten and the future way.

Our fears are not of motion. We are not a people of dead, stagnant waters. Reasons and promptings of our own have urged much movement on us – expected, peaceful, repeated motion.

At times, in the aftermath of good seasons when for too long a time none among us had had to think of such motion, when our people grown in numbers had been surprised by some unexpected change – furious weather, drought longer than usual, spastic rains too staggered to be helpful – the urge to motion swelled.

Then the time and our need for continuation called for motion. The flow of our warmest blood answered the call. We spread connected over an open land.

Of those that journeyed most stopped close by, their new homes soon mere extensions of our old. A few went farther in the heat of some small anger or some unusual fear. Such, to pause briefly here, was the hunter Brafo.

In the thirty-fourth season of Brafo's life his father – may like disasters strike those among our elders whose greed overwhelms their knowledge of the way – saw the amazing beauty of his own ward Ajoa and grew helpless before his dotard passion. The girl was in the thirtieth of her seasons, a few seasons' woman in body, in her spirit still a child. Brafo's father was close to a hundred seasons.

Growing up together, Ajoa saw in Brafo a hunter greater than his father. Brafo saw in Ajoa a beauty and a skill to match his mother's. The father, surprised by the discovery, was first struck impotent with rage, then maddened with a desire to destroy both his son and the beloved child.

The children were wiser than their elder. Silently – distance is the hatred of those who love – they moved away. With them went Brafo's mother, together with others of the family tired of an old man's greed. Such was the knowledge of the father's vengefulness that the fugitives ran far, so far that even news of them became uncertain, and in only thirty seasons had taken on the sound of legend. Such as Brafo travelled far, but always we knew

this land would keep them, would not let them disappear.

To return. But that a new thing would interfere, that an external force would add its overwhelming weight to the puny tearing efforts of the ostentatious cripples, to the attritive attempts of the askaris, those whose fulfilment lay in our abasement, that even the seers and the hearers did not know till Anoa spoke.

Before Anoa's utterance then, our migrations were but an echo to the alternation of drought and rain. Who is it calling for examples? The people of Antobam spared exhausted soil and moved closer to the forests. True it was the drought was fierce that season. Three baobab trees were struck at once by the same instant bolt of lightning, three trees standing far apart. In their places not one faggot of wood was left, only ash.

Another: Tano and his people moved from land turned to soggy dough after ceaseless rains had brought the Kwarra into our homes and turned us into neighbours for crocodiles. They left vowing never again to curse dryness, for the rain had blotted out the sun it seemed a whole season, and it was not even a reasonable season for ordinary rain.

Another: In the slow drought Ambantem, every day for two seasons promised rain, promised and held back. The baobabs themselves drank up all their water. Those who left then we also came to call Ambantem after the cruel rain.

Another time there was no flooding surface rain, but water lying too near the air held soil together so fast it was great labour making the earth ready for seed, greater labour still for inserted seed to sprout. But why should we make an unending remembrance of drought and rain, the mere passage of seasons? The desert was farther then. Close to it, close against it we brought a fecundity unimagined there now in the glare of all the present barrenness, eternal in its aspect.

It was not always so. The desert was made the desert, turned barren by a people whose spirit is itself the seed of death. Each single one of them is a carrier of destruction. The spirit of their coming together, the purpose of their existence, is the spread of death over all the earth. An insatiable urge drives them. Wherever there is life, even if it be only a possibility, the harbingers of death must go – to destroy it. See the footsteps they have left over all the world. Wherever they have been they have destroyed along their road, taking, taking, taking. They have wiped the surface barren with their greed. They have dug deep to take what the

earth needed for itself to stay fertile earth. They have taken everything within their reach, things that made the earth good, and they have put nothing back but hard, dead things in place of life destroyed. Even their putting back has nothing of a sense of reciprocity. Their semblance of giving is parcel of their greed. It is their habit to put dead, useless things in the hollowed earth to help them take more coveted things.

You do not understand how the destroyers turned earth to desert? Look around you. You are ignorant of death, but sleep you know. Have you not seen the fat ones, the hollow ones now placed above us? These the destroyers have already voided of their spirits, like the earth of its fertility. Barren, unproductive pillars have been driven into their brains. Then, left to walk the land, they do their zombi work, holding up the edifice of death from falling in vengeance on the killers' heads.

We have been handed down a vision of a slave man roaming the desert sand – a perfect image of our hollowed chiefs today. Language he had not, not ours, and not his own. It had been voided out of him, his tongue cut out from his mouth. He pointed to the gaping cavity. Thinking he still had a soul, even mutilated, we imagined he was after sympathy. We were mistaken – he was pointing to the hole with pride. They who had destroyed his tongue, they had put pieces of brass in there to separate the lower from the upper jaw. The slave thought the brass a gift. Its presence made sweet to him the absence of his tongue. He communicated his haughty pride to us, indicating in the sand with precise remembrance when he had achieved each piece of brass, what amazing things he had been made to do in order to be given them.

Hau! It is not only rife among the fatted chiefs, this idiocy of the destroyed. Among ourselves we have seen beings thus voided of their souls, sent deep into earth on their mission of destruction, injected with the white people's urge to devastation, sending what they take across the sea to the white destroyers' homes.

The destroyers take. That is their way. They know nothing of reciprocity. The road to death – that is their road.

Follow the falling sun, you who still are fascinated by glittering death. When you reach your destination, there too you will find our people scattered, sold to destruction. Most are already pulverized. Those not yet visibly broken into fragments, they are zombis, death's inspired vessels, voided of our soul. There you too will wonder, looking upon them, whether any can still retain the

seed of life in them in the centre of death's empire. Their destroyers are friends of themselves alone. All else is prey. They themselves, they are not friends even of their isolate selves. Split, each victim fraction warring against every other, they prepare the way for their only possible victor, our enemy. Among them you will find it impossible to remember that the smallest self is the self most destroyed; that our best self is our people; that if we have shrunk from all the black people to the portions that moved on the longest of journeys, from those to the fraction that came to Anoa, and among these have further shrunk till we are dwindled to the friendship of utterers, all that is merely destruction's work.

Creation calls the utterer to reach again the larger circle. That communication must be the beginning of destruction's destruction, the preparation for creation's work. That, not an incestuous, unproductive, parasitic gathering, is our vocation, that our purpose. We will not betray this remembrance: that all unconnected things are victims, tools of death.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected sight, the fractured vision that sees only the immediate present, that follows only present gain and separates the present from the past, the present from the future, shutting each passing day in its own hustling greed.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected hearing, the shattered hearing that listens only to today's brazen cacophony, takes direction from that alone and stays deaf to the whispers of those gone before, deaf to the soft voices of those yet unborn.

The disease of death, the white road, is also unconnected thinking, the broken reason that thinks only of the immediate paths to the moment's release, that takes no care to connect the present with past events, the present with future necessity.

Our vocation goes against all unconnectedness. It is a call to create the way again, and where even the foundations have been assaulted and destroyed, where restoration has been made impossible, simply to create the way.

Remembrance has not escaped us. Trapped now in our smallest self, we, repositories of the remembrance of the way violated, we, portion that sought the meaning of Anoa's utterance in full and found another home on this same land, we, fraction that crossed mountains, journeyed through forests, shook off destruction only to meet worse destruction, we, people of the fertile time before

these schisms, we, life's people, people of the way, trapped now in our smallest self, that is our vocation: to find our larger, our healing self, we the black people.

Of the time still known as the time of men our knowledge is fragile. The time is bound in secrets. Of what is revealed, all is in fragments. Much of it was completely lost in that ashen time when loneliness, bringer of madness, nearly snapped the line of rememberers.

That was the long time of single, despairing dwellers in the farthest grove. One rememberer herself lost speech before she could finish telling of that time, and there was none to give even borrowed voice to what her dying body held.

Nothing good has come to us of that first time. The remembrance is of a harsh time, horrid, filled with pains for which no rememberer found a reason, choked with the greed, the laziness, the contempt for justice of men glad to indulge themselves at the expense of their own people. The time's tale is of jealous, cowardly men determined to cling to power, and the result of that determination: the slaughter of honest people, the banishment of honest words, the raising of flattery and lies into the authorized currency of the time, the reduction of public life to an unctuous interaction.

Below the powerful the ordinary multitudes, in their turn seized by the fever of jealous ownership, turned our people into a confused competition of warring gangs, each gang under its red-eyed champion seeking force or ruse to force its will against the others. In the end it was this hot greed itself that destroyed the power of the men. They had smashed up everything, and in their festival of annihilation they had forgotten to spare each other and themselves. It was left to the women to begin the work of healing.

It was not any violence from females that cracked the rule of fathers. It was the fathers themselves who, splitting in their headlong greed for power into seven warring factions, broke each other's strength and left themselves impotent against the coming of more reasonable nights. Always above the horror brought by the memory of such unthinking carnage rides the utterers' shame that murderous gluttony such as this has had power to hurl our clans one against the other.

The remembrance is of the leopard and the dupon together waylaying the lion; of the wild eagle snatching the ram, the duiker lying surprised under the claws of the parrot turned from

eloquence to war; of eagle and parrot both self-hurled against the lion and the dupon tree. All the clans clawed each other, so that in the end exhaustion, not reason, not persuasion, not the women's voice speaking of the future now forgotten, exhaustion was the real peacebringer.

So the end of the rule of the fathers was violent. The beginning of the rule of women was not. Here was easy movement, natural, imperceptible to impatient, unconnected eyes.

The masculine carnage had exhausted everyone. As after all destruction, there was much heavy building left to do and after that there still remained the steady patient work of maintenance. For this the men – opprobrium fill their new-grown paunches – showed no extraordinary stomach, preferring to sit in the shade of large bodwe trees or beneath the cool grass of huts built by women, drinking ahey, breathing the flattering air of the shade, in their heads congratulating the tribe of men for having found such easy means to spare itself the little inconveniences of work while yet enjoying so much of its fruit – so easy it is for men's feet to dance off the way of reciprocity.

The men, at length announcing a necessity to nurse their strength for the work of elephants, with the magic of words made weightier with furrowed brows successfully pulled themselves out of all ongoing work, leaving only phantom heroic work, work which never found them, while generously they welcomed the women into all real work, proclaiming between calabashes of sweet ahey how obvious it was that all such work was of its nature trivial, easy, light and therefore far from a burden on any woman.

The peace of that fertile time spread itself so long, there was such an abundance of every provision, anxiety flew so far from us, that men were able to withdraw from even those unusual jobs they claimed they were holding themselves ready for, and their absence left no pain. They had elected to go with the women every farming day to sit in shady places guarding against danger. Danger came seldom. Pleading boredom the men replaced the shady places on the farm with shades closer home, next to the fragrant breweries of ahey. After this, even on those rare occasions when such work as the men had named their work happened, there were no men in sight.

The women were maintainers, the women were their own protectresses, finders and growers both. The lost exile seeking an

end to his loneliness in rape out on the open farms; the huge python blindly spreading the terror gripping it in sudden discovery; the cat of the fields hunting unusual food; the maddened elephant: every danger the women tamed, bringing tales and skins and meat home to triumphant husbands.

Drought came. The men grew eloquent describing to each other the terrors of a long dryness. That was when Yaniba, a woman unwilling to tolerate the dryness outside and the indolence of mind among us, went past the farthest tributary here of the dry river, obsessed with our people's need of water.

Those seasons fords were things to laugh at. For six seasons babies did not fear to crawl along the riverbed itself. The water was so far we forgot the blackness of its flowing. The clouds left in the sky were streaky, wispy, barren, white. It has come down that the men – cursed the tyranny of belly and tongue – were most concerned to have water enough to mix their ahey in, and then they sat through moistureless afternoons season after season consuming stored supplies, staring up at the clear white skies, muttering mutual incoherencies about the beauty of such skies – how often the unconnected eye finds beauty in death – while the women looked at the same whiteness, saw famine where the men saw beauty, and grew frightened for our people.

Yaniba went past the farthest tributary to its source. She lifted a rock, one after many, and revealed to thirsty eyes a pool, the feeder of springs then dry. Other women came bringing help to her. It was ordained the scarce water was not to be wasted cooking selfish food. No one was to brew the drink ahey, a thirsty drink, till rain in abundance fell again.

The men succumbed to the reasoned beauty of this ordinance. But already the ahey had brought forth a strange, new kind of man, his belly like a pregnant woman's, of a habit to consume more food and drink than he gives out in work and energy.

It came simply, the rule of women. They razed the men's unearned privileges, refused to work to supply the unnecessary wants of men. All enjoyment, the new order said, was to be the result of work accomplished. The men were resentful, but this was not a venomous resentment. It was an embarrassed kind, impotent to cause any spilling of our blood. Whether from sheer astonishment or from their drunken lethargy, they attempted nothing disastrous.

The time following – it is that we still call the fertile time – was

creation's time. In its abundance generosity became our vice. We lost the quick suspiciousness of the deprived, gained unwisely generous reflexes, grew able to give without having to worry about receiving, became accustomed to producing without taking thought of the future depredations of destroyers. As yet this fateful generosity disturbed no one – there was no hardship. A fertile softness enfolded all our life. Ease, the knowledge tomorrow would sing as sweetly as the present day, made all willing to forget the past, to ignore the future. Past and future, neither weighed unpleasantly upon our mind.

The general astonishment was therefore sudden, shattering, when with no warning save five brief, uncomprehended, easily forgotten fragments, twin voices rose from one breast prophesying pain. They were not ugly voices. But in the common ease of our surroundings then, with nothing to put danger in the front of our mind, the voices shook us. Their message, like shouts in the middle of long, restful sleep, angered us, like screams interrupting slow, restful dreams.

Who was it prophesying? And what was it she said to pierce our comfort, the ease of ages?

Concerning the two thousand seasons thrown away to destruction – we speak of the central prophecy that heard the curse of our present coming before its violence burst upon our heads, we speak of the vision that saw our scattering before the first shattering stroke exploded from the desert's white light – of destruction's two thousand seasons against us Anoa was not the first to speak. Three we remember who spoke before her birth; and after, in her childhood, two.

The three spoke of a time impending, a time heavy with carnage. Fire, and in the fire blood hissing out its life: that was the definite burden of their brief utterance.

Concerning reasons why this fearful holocaust was to come upon us, whether truly it was a vision directed unto us and not something that merely chanced unluckily to glance across the mind of one, two, three among us; concerning all this the first three were mute as the mighty odum tree.

The two who spoke after were no more definite. They spoke of a different portion of our destruction. Their hearing was of fantastic journeys over land, one long, incredible traversing of a place neither land nor water, and after, worse: the forced crossing of oceans with no life at the other end, only lifelong slavery. They

heard also how our people would come to know the howling agony of humans craving death itself not from impatience for reunion with ancestors, not for any reason of peace but to escape a life turned into an endless cycle of ever sharper cruelties.

Concerning causes why this fantastic destruction was to visit us, whether we were fated completely to disappear or to emerge from the whiteness of this fire living still, concerning all this the two spoke too briefly, stopped too abruptly to utter any indication.

The three and then the two had seen, had heard, had even uttered. But uttering, hearing and seeing were not their vocation. Sounds and visions seeking uttering vessels had caught them by surprise, possessed them briefly, then flown from their stricken minds. After they had spoken the three and the two fell almost entirely mute. Some thought they had no remembrance at all of the heavy utterances they had made. The most sagacious judged they had glimpsed truths that had stunned them to silence amid all the lying sounds and sights of surrounding life. Their utterances were at first not easy to understand, but it has come down that none of them were ridiculed. They did not suffer the fate of the suspicious ones, they who, speaking warnings not from any fundamental fear for the whole but from their own inner fear of generosity, had been laughed to scorn.

Anoa was not the first, not the second, not the third to speak. Hers, however, was a different, fuller utterance.

The vision of disintegration had been a stranger knocking on the doors of the first three for a mere day's welcome and had thence disappeared. The sounds of impending fate had shaken the earskins of the latter two with a passing message and had as swiftly vanished – whither, the hearers of a moment, shaking their ears like cats astounded, had no power to tell. With Anoa the vision found sufficient stay. The sounds came clear, lasted for repetition, and made error impossible. Anoa's utterance was not a shrieking fear ignorant of causes, oblivious of results, but a whole, clear utterance holding back neither blame for the two thousand seasons of destruction nor the promise of the way discoverable again at the end of the many seasons of our exile.

And Anoa, she was not even the first to bear that name. Among the most secret remembrances imprisoned in the memory of communicators one – so short it maddens the ear stretching to hear more – tells of a priestess Anoa, she who brought the wrath of

patriarchs on her head long before the beginning of the fertile time by uttering a curse against any man, any woman who would press another human being into her service. This Anoa also cursed the takers of services proffered out of inculcated respect. It was said she was possessed by a spirit hating all servitude, so fierce in its hatred it was known to cause those it possessed to strangle those – so many now – whose joy it was to force the weaker into tools of their pleasure and their laziness, into creatures dependent upon their users. It has come down that the same spirit possessed the women of the desert white men's harem, possessed Sekela, possessed Azania, possessed all the women who slew our predatory tormentors. It was that spirit Anoa breathed. Her life followed the urging of that soul, one among the guardians of the way.

At the time she spoke she was not of an age to have gained wisdom from experience. She had not lived enough. She had not had time to move patiently from one hilltop down the next valley up the adjoining hillside to the sounds and visions possible at the top then down again and on. But an intensity of hearing, a clarity of vision and a sharpness of feeling marked her character even in childhood, the time when most knowledge sprang from play. Thoughts seized her, and young as she was her seriousness itself imposed a silence around her no matter where she was. This intensity marked her; it did not close her off from others of her age. From the smallest sensations entering her, like riversoil she put out more, made more things audible, made more things visible out of what had entered her than others had an art to do.

At the time of her training, when it was thought she too could be led into choosing mother chores, she foresaw the intended separation, spurned it and asked to be trained with her brothers in the hunt. Rejected, she lost all interest in sustaining life, refused food, would touch no water till she was admitted to the training of her age. She confounded the plan to give her only trifling instruction by herself extending every hunting principle given her. She had a will to try out every stratagem to see what changes would be necessary under what conditions, what changes in the paths of the hunt for what different, larger, swifter or slyer animals.

Then when Anoa was possessor of the art of hunting she further discomfited her teachers by reminding them aggressive hunting was against our way, that the proper use of hunting skills should be for halting the aged lion seeking human prey in its dangerous

impotence, for stopping the wild hog prowling about the growing farm, for teaching the sidelong hyena to keep its distance, not for wanton pleasure.

That such talk of the way should arise at the time at all was a surprise, and not to the elders alone. That such knowledge of our way should have reached one so young with help from no older mentor, that the child Anoa could of herself have caught floating intimations of the way and in her mind have woven them into such coherent utterance, that was a wonder. That her knowledge should be of a kind so hidden and – after the elders had finished shaking their heads – found to be so true yet in such a danger of being forgotten, that filled the elders with chagrin. The spirit of Anoa seemed to have moved from peak to peak, so light it had no need of mentors to reach the hilltops of the soul, from there floating to other, higher peaks.

She was slender as a fawn stalk, and supple. From her forehead to her feet her body was of a deep, even blackness that could cause the chance looker to wonder how it was that even the surface of a person's skin could speak of depths. Her grace was easy in the dance. In the work of every initiation she was skilled enough to have chosen to be a fundi. Men not commonly known for their lechery grew itchy-eyed looking at her. Her voice was torture to the greedy ear. In her twenty-fifth season there were askers for her in marriage. Anoa knew her soul was shaped for other things. It was not that she was scornful of the wife's, of the mother's life. Her ears heard other voices, other thoughts visited her spirit.

It was in a season of rains that Anoa began her utterance – another season of good, prompt rain, opportune to every need, rain of a kind to lull the mind away from the thought itself of disasters, floods, droughts, anything but the pleasant, easy sufficiency of the time. That season was Anoa's thirty-ninth.

All were astonished not by what she said alone but also by the way her utterance was made, for she spoke in two voices – twin, but clearly discernible one from the other. The first, a harassed voice shrieking itself to hoarseness, uttered a terrifying catalogue of deaths – deaths of the body, deaths of the spirit; deaths of single, lost ones, deaths of groups snared in some killing pursuit; deaths of nations, the threatened death of our people. That voice uttered fiery extinction, destruction among ashes and white, voracious conflagrations. It spoke of bodies driven to exhaustion for no

purpose of their own, it spoke of souls stranded away from all the waters of the spirit fit to give them life. That voice told of salt-water washing over thousands upon thousands of our dead. In its uttering this voice was exactly like the briefer three and the curt two before Anoa spoke – except in its greater frequency.

From the same prophetic throat came the second voice. It was calmer, so calm it sounded to be talking not of matters of our life and death but of something like a change in the taste of the day's water, or of a slight variation noticed in the shape of grains of salt. For every shrieking horror the first voices had given sound to, this other voice gave calm causes, indicated effects, and never tired of iterating the hope at the issue of all disasters: the rediscovery and the following again of our way, the way.

Of the two thousand seasons of destruction what was it the first voice of Anoa said? This:

'Turn from this generosity of fools. The giving that is split from receiving is no generosity but hatred of the giving self, a preparation for the self's destruction. Turn.

'Return to the way, the way of reciprocity. This headlong generosity too proud to think of returns, it will be your destruction. Turn.

'But our voice is not harsh enough for your hearing. You are hastening into destruction so fast its flavour, its very name, will be sweetness to you, to your children, to so many generations of our people hurtling down the whiteness of destruction's slope. Two thousand seasons: a thousand you will spend descending into abysses that would stop your heart and break your mind merely to contemplate. The climb away from there will be just as heavy. For that alone can you be glad your doors have been so closed, your faculties are now so blunted. You will need them blunter still, to make less perceptible the descent of a thousand seasons. Two thousand seasons: a thousand dry, a thousand moist.

'One thousand seasons with the deepest of the destroyers' holes behind, beneath you calling, taking many of you even to the last day on which we, people of the way again, reach the lip and leave our destroyers forever behind.'

And then the second voice, the voice of causes:

'There is one cause – all else are branches: you have lost the way. You have forgotten the way of our life, the living way. Your ears have stopped themselves to the voice of reciprocity. You yourselves have become a spring blindly flowing, knowing

nothing of its imminent exhaustion, ignorant of replenishing reciprocity.

'Reciprocity, that is the way you have forgotten, the giving, the receiving, the living alternation of the way. The offerers, those givers who do not receive, they are mere victims. That is what in the heedless generosity of your blinding abundance you have turned yourselves into.

'Ah, but this is wasted breath. Your doors are closed. You will not open them to hear the destroyer hiss before his fangs are buried in your eye. You do not see this, but not far off, ah, so near, already so near, another race is stalking, hungry for victims, thirstier than the desert it calls home.

'That race, it is a race of takers seeking offerers, predators hunting prey. It knows no giving, knows no receiving. It is a race that takes, imposes itself, and its victims make offerings to it.

'Slavery – do you know what that is? Ah, you will know it. Two thousand seasons, a thousand going into it, a second thousand crawling maimed from it, will teach you everything about enslavement, the destruction of souls, the killing of bodies, the infusion of violence into every breath, every drop, every morsel of your sustaining air, your water, your food. Till you come again upon the way.

'Reciprocity. Not merely taking, not merely offering. Giving, but only to those from whom we receive in equal measure. Receiving, but only from those to whom we give in reciprocal measure. How easy, how just, the way. Yet how easily, how utterly you have forgotten it. You have forgotten that justice is not ease.

'Harsh and unjust was the time of men, and justly ended. An unproductive time it was, uncreative, a time which buried reciprocity and confused the way with crazy, power-thirsty roads. It was well for that time to end. Its correction should have been reciprocity, not this. Because the present path creates not harshness but a soft abundance, your minds are crammed with kapok and you too now confuse the way with thoughtless ease.

'Know this again. The way is not the rule of men. The way is never women ruling men. The way is reciprocity. The way is not barrenness. Nor is the way this heedless fecundity. The way is not blind productivity. The way is creation knowing its purpose, wise in the withholding of itself from snares, from destroyers.

'In your abandoned abundance how forgetful you have grown.

This overflow of yours, its fruit will be bleak-eyed exhaustion, staring poverty. Fools again, you will think to repair faults stemming from your loss of the way by straying even farther from the way.

'You too will know the temptation to become takers. Some among you will succeed too well. Their souls voided out of them, they will join the white destroyers but only in the way of dogs joining hunters. The rest, all of you, your children, their children, their children after them and generations after them again and again, all will be victims till the way is found again, till the return to our way, the way.'

The utterance was impossible to refute. We had indeed strayed far from the way but thought no harm could come of mistakes made in such generosity. The prophecy first unsettled sleepy souls, but then we found ways to pass all Anoa had said under an apprehensive silence. How difficult it is to change habits already entered into.

Concerning the hollow-eyed beggars seeking refuge from their desert people's cruelties, concerning the easy hospitality with which we welcomed them there was still no change. But among the beggars themselves there were changes. More of them came. Cured and fed, they thought us fools and said so, then acted on their thinking to try and cheat us of things we had. In the fertile time we laughed at this, laughed because we could afford to part with what the white beggars from the desert so coveted, laughed because we had strayed so far from the way it was the paltry quantity of the thing coveted that drew our gaze, not the heinous nature of predation itself.

We did not have long to wait. We did not have to wait at all for the beginning of the unfolding of the truth of Anoa's utterance. The truth was unravelling itself even as she spoke. Under the calm surfaces of the fertile time a giddy disequilibrium swallowed all lasting balance. Control became an exile. As for the guidance of the way, it was far – distant as the bones of the first ancestors.

The Ostentatious Cripples

The predators, their first appearance among us was that of beggars. Haggard they came, betrayed and lonely in their hunger of soul and body. We pitied them, for is it not a part of the way that the stranger shall be given sustenance and helped along his road? But the way is not a partial remembrance only. How was it forgotten then that it is also a part of the way, inseparable from every other part, that the guest who turns contemptuous is a guest no longer but a parasite? How was it forgotten that hosts who spread a welcome for parasites prepared their own destruction?

None among our rememberers have ever sought to claim the first predatory attack could not have been foreseen. True, the attackers had come beggars. But time had passed. The wounds the beggars had come trailing on their bodies, the wounds afflicting their remnant spirits we had healed for them. Strong under our healing they turned parasites yet still in the ease of our hospitality we did not even think to throw them out. They grew yet stronger, and in the fullness of their strength turned sudden predators against an easy host. Thirty days of unrelenting massacre brought them the fruit they sought: the power of new masters over their old hosts.

Fear was the mother of the predators' first empire over us. The constant threat of murder in the course of time cowed all but the most determined of our men, those who chose the lonely life of hunters in the grasslands. Our women the predators from the desert turned into playthings, for their decayed pleasure. And our women, they endured, acquiesced in the predators' orgies so uncomplainingly that in time a profound confidence drew the predators to them.