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Ritual of fire

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Abstract

I watched them pull out the heavy-tailed reptile from the murky water. I watched its shape sprawled out on the bank of the canal bordering the creek. The others were watching it too - tense, anxious, all of us children. Our hearts palpitated. We looked around at each other, expectant, wondering what would happen next. Then the adults took over.

Ritual of Fire

I watched them pull out the heavy-tailed reptile from the murky water. I watched its shape sprawled out on the bank of the canal bordering the creek. The others were watching it too — tense, anxious, all of us children. Our hearts palpitated. We looked around at each other, expectant, wondering what would happen next. Then the adults took over.

I cringed within: I imagined the beast curling up under my bed at night when I was fast asleep. I imagined it unwinding in the shape of an anaconda, inhabiting my dream — I continued to flinch.

Its board-stiff alligator's tail moved a little. I looked around, wondering if I was the only one who had seen this. Then I imagined water rising up in the air, a commotion all around: and waves and ripples, very wide, everywhere, suffocating me further.

'A fire!' one cried, sending out the inevitable signal.

'Yes, let's see if it is really alive!' another chanted.

Everyone talked about the fire with urgency. And the solitary man with the gun who had shot the reptile, stood aloof, as if he knew what would happen next, as if he regretted what he had done; and in his eyes I saw the burning, the roasting, that would now occur.

The tropical sun burned against my skin. I put a hand against my forehead to shield the intense glare, hoping for a shadow. Someone nudged me.

'Look! A real fire!' I cringed immediately as he forced a grimace, his lips awry. I looked up at the sun next, virulence all around.

I glanced at the aloof one, with the gun still by his side. The air smelled of gunpowder. An empty cartridge rested by his left foot like an omen. No one dared pick it up as would ordinarily happen: it was now his testimony of a deed done!

Still the shouts, with everyone forming a circle closer to the half-breathing, still palpitating beast.

'It's not dead yet!'

'It's not! It's not!' came the obvious cry and chorus.

I looked around once more, feeling the intense heat: the sun seeming to melt with the actual fire against the board-stiff tail of the twitching alligator. I watched it cringe and convulse as the flames ate into the hard skin, etching itself against the coarse flesh.

Eyes wide open I dreamt of the fire — at night — the same fire etching itself in my dreams. No! No! I wanted to shout with closed mouth, eyelids quivering.

More sun. More grimaces from time to time, the hard virulence registered everywhere in the village of my growing up.

Someone pushed me. I drew closer to the circle: still on the fringe nevertheless. I looked as the blaze rose up — almost against my own skin. And I thought of the alligator splashing water in frenzy: a wild commotion next, with waves hurled high in the manner of a veritable leviathan, overwhelming me totally.

The tail twitched again.

'Look!' came the warning and chorus.

'It's almost dead ... no!'

'Not dead! Almost dead!'

I drew closer — and with my back to him, the aloof killer of the beast, I imagined him cringing too: his face and the alligator's were one. His eyelids were the same knobby eyelids of the reptile. And I saw the two of them in the blinding haze of the sun, somersaulting, a white underbelly next as the bullet tore through the weeds and water and hit solid flesh, splattering corpuscles and sinews and mixing with water and mud.

The cry went up louder.

My lips puckered, words forced out — I was chanting too. And still the blinding, almost unendurable sun — like a sickness.

More somersaults. I wasn't sure if I was imagining this or actually seeing it. I looked up into the sky, hoping for a mirage appearance, a real world next.

Nothing happened.

And the shouts, still in unison.

Where was I?

The beating of water — and waves. Palpable beats everywhere, crowding the canal that formed part of the long creek that fringed the village. I longed for the aloof one to come and stop the ritual burning — for him to assert himself, to take command!

And then I saw smoke rising up, forming patterns of more formidable things everywhere. I looked down at the ground: hard, hard under my

feet. I kicked dust.

I spat. I studied the foam of spittle like the rain itself, hoping that the fire would be drenched almost miraculously.

Yet the tail twitched.

The cries increased, carrying far. More villagers, mostly women and children this time, joined the crowd. All wanted to take part in the ritual. And I longed for escape, for a place in which I could hide from the assault which I interpreted to be against me. But I was also part of the crucifixion: I was the hand that lit the match, the flame that etched itself against skin and flesh. I was also the board-stiff tail beating against water. And smoke curled up like a living thing: smoke was elemental as the breeze itself; it crossed water, hailed over weeds. I watched with more fulsome sun in my eyes. And I day-dreamed each moment I remained longer, watching, taking part vicariously in this exercise.

Water ... water; I yearned for it. I wanted the flames to be extinguished, I wanted the ritual to stop. But the gun boomed in my ears: it was the signal for the fire to rage further. Continuing conflagration in my mind, in my heart-beats: in my viscera and bones. I was shot and torn limb by limb by everyone around.

'It's not dead!'

'No, not yet!'

'It is, it is ... it's no longer moving ... it must be dead!'

'Yes, completely dead!' cried another.

Voices resounding, like a storm — like a baboon's howl in the neighbouring forest. The trumpet call of distant birds as well, some mysterious. More cries, shouts of exultation everywhere.

My eyes opened wider. I looked at the dead beast's head, the eyes rolled in almost. Anger burned in me. I was impatient: why did it have to die? Why did it not keep being alive? Alive-alive-alive! I stamped my feet heavily against the hard ground. I cuffed against my sides, arms flailing next. Tears streamed down my cheeks. For how long I was doing this I wasn't really sure.

Then, as if awakened, I found everyone looking at me. What was the matter? What had happened? Embarrassed, I looked around, my head slightly lowered next. The sun began declining, like a conspirator, escaping after the deed was done.

I wanted to lift my head, upwards, to the clouds — to look again for the living image.

But I didn't. I was intimidated; and I kept digging holes into the rain-filled ground with a big toe, indifferent and in a daze all at once.

Eyes still holding me. Even the alligator's dead eyes, piercing holes into my flesh, my bones. Oh no-no-no!

Was he too looking, the aloof one with the empty cartridge at his feet?

And then I felt him — he was walking up, a heavy, palpable shadow, drawing closer. By my side next!

His hand touched mine, sending waves through me.

His voice next, something whispered.

All eyes still on me, the resounding silence with continuing reverberations: a million baboons and trumpet birds.

Dead beast, save me! Dead alligator, swim away from them. Take them all by surprise. Let the road be a river, let the stones be transformed into ripples! Let them drift away, one by one, swallowed by weeds! I yearned for this happening — my eyes closed, imagining.

He was still talking, whispering. I wasn't registering anything however. I was only aware of the alligator moving.

'It will be alright, it's dead...' he muttered.

'Is it?'

'Well, sorta ... it could be alive too ... in the creek ... you will see it there again,' he grinned.

I was distrustful now: I knew he was trying to make me feel good; yet his grin. And then the others — they began laughing, their sounds lashing against me. I wanted to run away. But he held on to my arms stiffly. I pulled heavily.

'No! You must listen!' he commanded.

Silence for a while.

I pulled again.

'Listen! Wait!' he repeated, his face a half-grimace; he was now the sun itself. I looked at the empty gun at his shoulder: it was like a living thing; it took on a mouth, a body. He invited me to touch it. I did.

He smiled.

'Ah, see — it's not really dead ... it's alive ... it can swim in the water. It can take over the entire canal, it can drift with the weeds. You must understand...' In a way he was pleading with me — which was all I was aware of.

The others watched warily; then they became totally resigned to what he was saying; hypnotized even.

I was merely glued to the barrels of the gun: this thing that could kill with one blast; that too was alive!

He smiled again. He let go my arm. I felt my legs moving — I was walking away from him, going home now.

I felt a million eyes on my back — all eyes of reptiles, of watery things. Alligators at my feet next. But I dared not stop. I merely rubbed my eyes for a moment, and continued walking. Then I felt more water, perspiration dripping to my neck. I cringed a little, without my lips puckered as before.

In the silence of the trees rustling, I could hear his voice, the ultimate crucifier, shouting to me, 'Everything'll be okay ... wait an' see! Yes, wait an' see!'

I wanted to turn around.

Was he talking to me?

But I didn't: I kept walking on, hurriedly now, with the wind blowing from across the far Atlantic, fanning my cheeks.

A hurl of wind next: a chorus of leaves rustling their musical magic. I felt relieved the farther I was from them. And I hurried on, with the million things following: I was carrying the elemental world with me, away from them, away from the village. I was like a Pied Piper with strange powers. Realizing this, I began to exult — laughing loudly.

More wind rustled, more leaves danced on the trees.

His words kept echoing in my ears: I was entering a narrow cave where I'd have everything, all the reptiles, to myself. I'd nurture them, protect them: they'd protect me too.

But amidst this I heard a loud boom. I saw that one living, but mystical thing, the gun, against me. And I knew that the ultimate crucifier was still laughing. And I imagined pulling my arm away from him in further frenzy. I was asleep now: the hard sun taking refuge behind the clouds, far away, but not without its glinting iridescence.

It took me days to get out of this oblivion. I remembered the talk after.

'You had a sun-stroke,' one said.

'No,' I denied. 'I can remember everything. That alligator ... is it really dead?'

'Yes,' came a quick laugh.

'Really?' my repeated question.

More laughter.

'What about him?'

'Who?'

'The one with the gun? They knew who I was talking about from the beginning.

'He's no longer with us. He has left us — the entire village. Just rumour mind you.'

I was surprised by this information. I cringed softly. They laughed again.

'Maybe he'll come back ... he will!'

'Why did he leave?'

No one seemed to have an answer.

'Maybe he's afraid...' came a tentative reply.

'Afraid? Of what?'

More laughter.

I was looking into the canal, its murky brown mystery, its underwater turbulence. I knew that there would always be leviathans hurling themselves in and around; they'd splash about in my dreams turning them into nightmares. I'd want to run away from them, but I knew how trapped I'd be.

'You ... you're strange again ... just as before...'

'No ... no ... you do not understand...'

They were impatient with me. 'It's another sun-stroke ... a real illness,' they walked away, keeping distant as I knew, from then on.

And I spent the rest of that day looking out for the ultimate crucifier. I'd look into the canal, alone, looking at each brown and dark-headed thing, thinking it was an alligator surfacing again. I'd peer closely at each driftwood and expect movement, a commotion, all in a matter of seconds.

But I knew it would take a long time before something really happened. And when it did, when another alligator really surfaced, palpable as the gun itself, it would be elusive — like a blotch of shadow in the blinding haze of the sun.