Adoration (after Pieter Breugal's Adoration of the Magi c. 1551, National Gallery, London)

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Abstract
These things he knew - a calabash scraped of skin and painted in the colours of dusk; an ancient brush of lama branches, inherited from his Master and his Master before him; and vials containing sidyam juice and the venom of water snakes, which only he could blend, to becalm poison with benevolent fruit, so that when a child was born, he could anoint its forehead with the potion and ordain for it a life of constancy: passion contained within wisdom, anger within forgiveness, sickness within hope, death within the intimation of stars. And only he, Manu, originator of life, could read the scroll of light that was the evening sky. It was his task to bear this knowledge, inherited from his Master, and his Master before him, and out of such knowledge to name the newly-born and to determine its future.
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When a child was born, it was first brought to his hut, for without its naming, it could not be displayed to the tribe. These things he knew, the bawling of babies awaiting their names, the night air stinging their new skin, the night air like cinder in their lungs. And the sudden stillness as he brushed their foreheads clean, applied the potion from the calabash bowl and called them Saba or Juna or Ellar, signifying that this one would be the village beggar, that one a planter of eddoes, the other a maker of shrimp-nets.

Calabash, brush, potion, and an evening sky textured with stars: these were the measure and security of his life. His place in the village was constant because he had a particular function which only he could discharge. There was the Elder, schooled from childhood in the remembrance of their laws, who sat in judgement over adulterer and thief and gossipier. There was the Sorcerer, the keeper of the secrets of their masks, who knew what colours and patterns their faces must wear for particular ceremonies. And there was Manu, diviner of stars. The three of them maintained the order of the village, governing over planter and fisherman and weaver of cloth. And all life was contained within the boundaries of the village, the fields of jamoon and guinep trees, and the grasslands for their livestock. Beyond was the habitation of their ancestors, who never appeared to them, not even in dreams. Beyond was unthinkable, for it was the realm of the dead.

As unthinkable as the present was clear; the clearly defined tasks and duties and ceremonies of the village. Until one dread night, when an infant
was brought howling to him, and he scoured the sky for its name, but the stars were shaken from their frames and he was speechless before the chaos, the unexpected sadness of their lives which the brightest star foretold. The child howled and for the first time he felt pity for its pain, knowing that he was unable to determine its future, to moderate its pleasures and its sufferings, so life would become acceptable to it. He brushed its forehead, anointed it, and gave it a false name, for the stars could not be read. The infant continued to cry, and no amount of rocking and singing could comfort it. He knew then that the appearance of the new star presaged their destruction. The ways of their village would be changed forever, and with it his reason for being.

The Elder gave his judgement. ‘Two cannot govern the village’ he told Manu, ‘there must be three. It has always been so.’

‘But I must go’ Manu insisted.

‘There is nowhere to go. Beyond us there is nothing,’ the Elder adjudicated. Manu pointed to the heavens and to the new star summoning him to an unthinkable fate, but the Elder could not distinguish one light from the next. It was not his role to divine the meaning of stars. The knowledge which once gave pride to Manu became burdensome. He felt trapped by a secret which could not be shared with others.

‘Look’ he addressed the Elder in a tone of desperation, pointing again to the new star but what was obvious to Manu was unthinkable to the Elder. He gave his judgement again: ‘Two cannot govern the village. There must be three. It has always been so’. The repetition of verdict which once impressed Manu with its ring of authority now sounded like the stubbornness of the ancient.

‘I must go. Someone is born afar and I must name it’ Manu protested, for the first time in the history of the village questioning the Elder’s ruling.

‘You cannot go’ the Elder commanded, denying him a third time.

So, when everyone was asleep, Manu slipped out of the village, his calabash and brush and vials wrapped in a bundle like a thief’s haul. He slipped out of the village with the guilt of a thief. He had stolen their inheritance, their right to be named, and he was taking such inheritance to give to a foreign child in a foreign land.

The orchards and the grasslands gave way to swamp, then to softer earth, which suddenly collapsed into emptiness, absorbing and negating his terrified humanity. Only his possessions remained as tokens of identity, reminding him of his fixed position once within the village. But now he was the loosened nail in a collapsing universe. He clutched at his possessions frantically, to preserve an aspect of his former self, and he called out to the Elder, to the Sorcerer, but no-one answered. He called out his own name but no-one answered. Once more he panicked, but the distress in his throat was stillborn. In the emptiness his cries were rendered inaudible. He no longer mattered. He slipped out of consciousness with the guilt of a thief.
In dream they appeared, in profound guise, for their masks were corrupt, signifying no ceremony he recognized. The Elder and the Sorcerer wore battered faces, and their bodies were dressed in chains. They headed a procession of villagers, each chained to each in grief. Now and again someone screamed to the crack of a whip upon his back, like the call and response of storytelling, except that the fables were unfamiliar to Manu. A pale man dismounted from his horse and bowed reverentially to Manu. He offered Manu a staff. 'Beat them' the man tempted him, but Manu was perplexed by the gift. 'Beat them, be their rightful Master' the man urged, 'their pain will give you strength. Here, let me show you' and he raised his staff against the nearest slave, breaking his skull. The agony of the dying slave, and the terrified sobbing of the others, inspired the man. 'Look how easy it is to kill' he shouted, lashing out ecstatically. He battered them until he grew bored by their hurt. 'It is true. After a while, people are not fun, don’t you think?' And before Manu could recover his senses, the man clicked his fingers, conjuring forth a troupe of musicians. 'People bore me. I give you instead the finest specimen of animal.' He clicked his fingers again, and a woman appeared, dancing before Manu, offering magnificent breasts and thighs. 'Here is something worth killing for' the man whispered into Manu’s ear, pressing the staff again into his hand. He pointed to the slaves who had stopped their wailing, suddenly relieved by the dancing woman. 'Kill them all before they rob you of her' the man advised, drawing Manu’s attention to their fidgeting. 'They will rise up, snap their chains, murder you and devour her,' the man warned. Manu felt his hands gripping the staff with intent, but even as he stared longingly at the woman’s nakedness his sense of duty revived. He was still the wisdom of the village, determining its future according to the configuration of stars. He let the staff drop from his hands, denying the pale man a second time. 'What will you kill for?' The pale man asked in desperation, 'tell me, and I will summon up anything you desire. Shall I bedeck you in gold? Shall I burn frankincense to beguile your senses? Shall I anoint your body with expensive myrrh?'

'Go from me,' Manu shouted in unexpected anger and the man retreated, startled by the threat of violence. 'You’ve already sinned' he accused Manu from a distance, 'you have abandoned and broken your people and caused them to be sold into slavery. There is nothing you can do to redeem them.' And he mounted his horse, raised his whip over the villagers and drove them to the waiting ships.

Still in dream Manu watched them go, knowing that their names would be cast aside. They would be renamed after mules and hoes and hovels. But the star still beckoned, reminding him of a superior purpose. The desire to save the villagers faded. The Elder and the Sorcerer cried out, challenging him to deliver them from evil, but he turned his face away from their distress towards the West, where the star presided.

It was a plainer journey than he imagined, for he encountered no marvels,
no bizarre landscapes. There were no epic struggles with his conscience, nor with giants and monsters. No riddles blocked his pathway. In no time he arrived and was disappointed not to be greeted. It was a village shabbier than his own, a stretch of dust littered with stones. There were twelve huts and a monkey straying among them. He had expected crowds, but the place was still. He followed the monkey to the nearest hut and called out in a stranger’s voice, but no-one appeared. He went from hut to hut, announcing himself, but all were deserted, except the last where a groan answered him. He pushed open the door to discover an ancient woman slumped on a bed of straw. With great effort she opened her eyes to meet his, but there was no flicker of interest. She lowered her head, closed her eyes and fell asleep. He looked around the hut, seeing nothing, for it was devoid of any sign of human presence. Not knowing what else to do he squatted beside the woman, waiting for her to stir. Eventually she awoke, but ignored him, gazing instead at the bag tied to his body.

‘Give me the food’ she said, stretching a shrivelled hand at the bag.
‘I have none’ Manu confessed.
‘Give me the food’ she insisted, the desperation of hunger giving life to her fingers. She ripped the bag from his waist and opened it greedily. She bit off a piece of the calabash and swallowed it without waiting to chew. He snatched the sacred vessel from her before she could eat more of it.

‘I need it for the child’ he said foolishly. She looked upon him with pity.
‘You are like the rest of them’ she said, not seeing his black skin, his woolly hair, his alien garments.
‘I am from – ‘ he went to explain.
‘I don’t care where you are from’ she interrupted, ‘thousands have passed through here recently from all corners of the earth, places you never thought existed. Yellow people, some white, some brown, then your lot, black, on horses and camels and asses and on foot, all different but all seeking the one fortune.’ She spat at his feet, watching the phlegm tremble and shimmer on the surface of dust. ‘They were following some star, they said, and it led them here. But there’s nothing here, see for yourself, there’s only me, but some of them were so desperate after their long journeys that they’d have me. “Get off you filthy pagan pigs” I cursed the lot of them, “shame on you to try to breed an old woman.”’ She thrust her face accusingly at Manu then relented. ‘Please, do you have any food in that bag your carrying?’

‘I have no food’ Manu confessed a second time.
‘I begged them too, but they wouldn’t give. They just wanted to take. But there was no treasure here, so they left. True, there was a star, but my eyes were too weak to see it. And what’s a star to me, I can’t eat it.’

‘Where are your people?’ Manu asked, thinking of his own loss.
‘My husband was a carpenter. Wolves ate him. I bore no child. I grew old. I walked out of the house, through all the phases of the moon, till I reached here, and I knew right away it was the place to die in. Look how loveless it is. But why can’t I die? I’ve been waiting for ever to die but nothing
happens. Please, do you have any poison in your bag?’

‘I have none’ Manu lied, denying her a third time.

That night, he sat outside the woman’s hut, fingering his vials of poison obsessively. Her sleep was broken by cries of distress. Manu felt useless before the life suckling her breast, a creature of spite refusing to detach itself and allow her to die. The woman sobbed, challenging him to deliver her from evil, and he searched the night sky for wisdom, but the brightest star had eclipsed the light of other stars, like a life feeding off other, more vulnerable lives. There was nothing he could do but witness the rapacity in heaven and on earth. There was nothing he could do, and there was nothing to go back to. And yet he clung to his bag of instruments as frantically as life clung to the sobbing woman. They were useless, he knew, all their miraculous properties so much myth, but that was all there was. The brightest star was all there was, even though it witnessed nothing but a woman’s agony.