

Solitary Confinement

The first years were not so bad. He never saw or spoke to anyone, not even when food was delivered through the hole in the bricked-up door in exchange for his pot of excrement. But there was the constant conversation of the herons in the trees below, defending their young against the eagles, and furtive friendly waves from children in a neighbouring tower. He told himself he could understand what the herons were saying: he would shout replies to them and then interpret their answers. Talking to birds might be the beginning of madness, he thought. But he remembered his mother talking to his father, never answered and never even waiting for an answer. He remembered the scholar Menelik writing and writing, one chapter after another that no one would ever read because no one would ever understand. It's for God, Menelik said: he understands and he replies, though I don't understand his answers. Why should the grass understand the scythe? So he accepted what might be madness, and kept on shouting.

His shouts were happy ones and that must have annoyed his captors. They couldn't simply kill him, given the solemn protective curse of his great great aunt the fearsome and possibly immortal princess Makeda. But they could hope that fate and misery would eliminate him if they waited, leaving the succession clear. It was not happening.

Wicker blinds suddenly covered the windows. When they were removed two windows had been bricked up. And the third was narrowed to a slit. Light came through, but he could see neither

down to the herons nor across to the children. It made the room seem smaller. The large sunlit room became a shrinking box, closing its dark sides in upon him. He could feel it confining him, and he feared losing the sense of space around him. Something in his head seemed to be shrinking, squeezing, with him inside it. The cell in him within the cell. Worst of all was the airless, stifling quality. Air came through the slit, at night quite cold air, but it didn't feel like air, and it didn't get to the cell within his head. It was as if he could breathe, but what he needed from the air was not getting into him.

These were the terrible years. He could not be sure they were years or how many there were, as the days ran into one another. And there was no telling the season through his slit. Perhaps he had only been here a week, and the years ahead would be infinitely longer and increasingly unbearable.

He had read somewhere that if you are at the bottom of a deep well you can see stars in the day time. He wondered if he would be able to see stars through the slit. He could, but only for a few hours at a time, which he took to be night. He remembered as a child walking in the hills with numberless bright stars above. They seemed to be moving, though staying in place, and somehow singing to one another. It was as if they had thoughts, though there was no telling what they were, and these thoughts had some special relation to the small boy wandering through the still cold air with his head bent upwards. But he got no such feeling from the few dull stars he could see through the slit. Noticing that made him feel even more isolated.

Spiders are very stoical. They build their webs and wait, often

for a long time. Sometimes the spider catches nothing and she shrugs her many shoulders, accepts fate, and dries to death. He saw the web growing from a single strand across the slit to a fine and thinly distributed network across the whole expanse. Only much later did he spot the little black spider waiting by the upper left corner, waiting for something that never came. Of course he felt the spider was a model for him; but he did not find that at all comforting. Eventually they would both be similar desiccated stoical hulls.

He would still peer through the slit, hoping to see stars and perhaps even herons. He rarely did. The web, delicately placed across the slit, got in the way. He tried looking past it, but then it seemed to block more sight. So he tried to focus on the web, to see exactly where it was. Then he could see past it, as if he was focusing at once on the web and beyond. In fact he felt he was seeing at three depths: before, at, and beyond. Between before and at, between at and beyond, there were gaps. The gaps were fresh. They almost smelt of oxygen. When he felt this he could sense the space beyond expanding, narrow but deep: he could see herons by day and stars by night. It didn't seem right to shout down the slit at the herons, he spoke to the spider and asked her to pass it on. And then he felt that the stars were answering, in their old beyond intelligible way.

The prison inside his head seemed larger and softer, the air in it fresher. He didn't notice this until it was undeniable. And the room itself seemed brighter, more light coming through the slit, the stars at the end of it arrayed in depth. He would wake every morning knowing what he wanted the spider to pass on, and sometime in the day he would say it. He had to find the spider

on her web and he had to think of where the message should go, so he needed the three depths. In the nights he would remember where the web was while looking along the slit and listening with his eyes. Always comforting though he never understood. The slit changed too: less side and more end. A telescope ranging over distant spaces. The cell was bearable again, but he was careful not to make any loud cheerful noises.

Everything ends. He would either die or be released, and either was alright. He was surprised when the door opened. At first he saw a man with something shiny, perhaps a scythe, then a party of murmuring courtiers. They removed the door, prostrated themselves, and brought a bowl of spicy *wat* with a jug of wine, on a sparkling golden tray. Something had changed down there. Reluctantly he left his cell and went out to wide blue skies, chattering friends, intrigue, and many distractions. But he always spoke to spiders.