

The God Parasite

Once upon a time there lived two boys. The name of the older was Abbabaraktu, and the name of the younger was Ebrinektu. The two boys lived in a cave.

Every morning, Ebrinektu would take the kuva up the mountainside to pasture, while Abbabaraktu pulverised dry blossoms of white clover. By nightfall, when the beasts came in to shelter, the boys would sit together by the dung-fire and milk them into wooden pails. The milk was boiled and skimmed for kajmak, or fermented in bladders for cheese. While they worked, the older boy sang mournful old milking-songs. The younger boy listened.

Sometimes, he would notice crabflowers clinging to the udders of the kuva. Ebrinektu knew all about crabflowers. They climbed to the tips of the mountain grasses, waiting for the undercarriages of grazing beasts. They latched onto udders that brushed against them, taking root in the spongy flesh, inserting their long, thin stylets, and siphoning milk straight from the gland. With the older boy's wistful, melodious murmur in his ears, Ebrinektu plucked them off and cast them into the dung-fire, where they shrivelled and blackened with a squeak. The crabflowers were parasites. Too many, he knew, and the milk would run dry.

When their labours were over, the boys would retire. They slept in stone niches carved into opposite walls of the cave.

Until, one night, the angel came.

Ebrinektu watched it alight from his niche. Framed by the cavemouth, through sleepy, half-sealed eyelids, it appeared, at first, like the pale light of moonrise. Then it approached and stood beside him. The boy lay motionless beneath his mouldering hides. Afraid even to breathe, lest he betray his wakefulness. The angel knelt. Through feathered lashes, its face, though near, was entirely indistinct. Ebrinektu watched it unsheathe an elaborate golden needle.

'What's your regiment?', the angel hummed.

Then it pushed the needle into his ear.

The boy felt nothing. He *could* feel nothing; not the pain of the needle, nor the solidity of the stone beneath him – nothing but for a vague and distant trepidation. Only after he realised the angel was inspecting its delicate golden instrument did he become aware of its withdrawal. The inspection was at once measured and perfunctory.

Then the angel moved towards the opposite wall.

Ebrinektu tried to cry out, to rouse Abbabaraktu, who always slept so soundly – but he could not. He felt as though some subtle cord within him had been severed and hung slack. Moonlight quivered on the upraised needlepoint. A slow, ceremonious parabola described its entry into the older boy's ear. A gasp escaped the younger boy's lips. Piercing the tympanum; clean as a teardrop, the crystal voice of a bell. The angel recoiled. The winds seemed to rise. A trembling word in the night. And Ebrinektu knew the other boy was chosen.

That he would become a god.

The following day, Ebrinektu rose early and took the kuva to pasture. Abbabaraktu made caraway oil, grinding and pasting and straining and steaming the striped lunulate seeds, so that the whole cave assumed their strange, festive aroma.

When Ebrinektu returned, Abbabaraktu would not stop talking about his dream.

‘It was wonderful, Ebrinektu. So wonderful! I dreamt myself a leaf that is just born...’

Frowning, Ebrinektu grasped a wrinkled teat. He had wanted to mention the angel, but now his suspicions were confirmed. Such dreams were known portents of apotheosis. And the elder boy knew it too. He sang a different song, that night – his old song, but newly. There was a knowingness about it now, a winking quality, as of one who knew all wistfulness ill-founded. There was more of himself in it, too. A portrait of the boy he was, that was never there before; as if painted for the benefit of some future audience who would never know him otherwise.

‘Think of it, Ebrinektu! A leaf that is just born...’

Ebrinektu worked his fingernail beneath the chitinous flange of a crabflower. He pulled, watching its stylet unspool like a long silver hair from a follicle. A bead of amber lymph welled up to mark the puncture. Tinctured with milk, the amber bead grew cloudy. Yes, there could be no doubt. Abbabaraktu was elect. He had passed the angel’s test. He would depart this earthly realm, take up the mantle of divinity – and forsake him; and the kuva, and the cave.

The crabflower twitched in Ebrinektu’s hand. He did not grudge the angel’s choice, or envy the older boy. But he did not want to be left alone. And so he knew he must oppose them. And by opposing them, he would add his portrait to the song. Playing the devil, he would cling to their mythology forever, as a crabflower clings to the udder of a kuva.

If Abbabaraktu was to become a god, then Ebrinektu would become a god parasite.

Years passed, and Abbabaraktu spent more time down in the valley. He wandered from village to village, sharing cobs of clover bread and singing. His songs grew longer, more complicated and more beautiful. Many people gathered to hear them. Many even joined him in chorus. In wintertime, the villagers vied to host him on their hearthrugs. Bakers, potters, and blacksmiths offered warm nooks beside their furnaces. Everyone agreed their ovens and kilns burned more steadily after such hospitality – fewer pots cracked, and fewer loaves charred. The explanation travelled in hushed whispers. Soon it preceded him, like the tale of his wonderful dream.

On most nights, Ebrinektu milked the kuva alone. The herd dwindled. He chiselled his sleeping niche longer and deeper. Sometimes Abbabaraktu would return to the cave by surprise, clasp him tightly to his breast, and regale him with eccentric prophecies. Ebrinektu listened, as once he listened of yore, smiling with a gentle sadness. Abbabaraktu always left before dawn. Every departure recalled the angel’s edict. Every encounter whetted his betrayal. While Abbabaraktu wandered from village to village, Ebrinektu explored the depths of their cave. He descended, brooding, to the heart of the mountain, and held court with the podmornè vilè who swam in its lightless pools. The vilè taught him strange, dark sorceries. They showed him a sarcophagus of ancient stone, bearing a skeleton of solid onyx: eight cubits tall, with a twisted, three-lobed ribcage. The skeleton threatened Ebrinektu with unimaginable mysteries – but marshal what powers he might, refused to heed even his simplest petitions.

In these separate ways, the boys grew into men.

One day, the two men crossed paths on the sandy black shores of a tarn.

‘What brings you so far afield?’ asked Ebrinektu, leaning on his staff. It was the end of the rut, and he had led the kuva out to shed their deciduous limbs.

‘Truthfully, I do not know’, replied Abbabaraktu. ‘An unknown force persuades me’.

In silence, they contemplated the waters of the tarn. An extinct volcano, yawning from a great lateral fissure, hung reflected before them. It was the throne of divinity. Neither man had ever laid eyes on it before, but in that moment, in the mirrored obsidian surface of the tarn, its nature was unmistakable.

Abbabaraktu moved towards the volcano.

‘Stop’, said Ebrinektu, gripping his staff. ‘I cannot let you’.

But Abbabaraktu did not stop. He advanced in a straight, unwavering line, heedless of the shrubs of wild rosemary which snagged and tore at his robes.

‘I warn you. Go no further’.

Abbabaraktu did not seem to hear him. His features, usually placid, were distorted by a rictus of panic. Ebrinektu saw, then, that the other man *could* not stop. His heels gouged long trenches in the black sand. Whatever weird magnetism had drawn him here had strengthened, holding him entirely in thrall.

He snarled, leaping forward, sweeping his staff through the air. Its hooked end brushed billowing fabric. Abbabaraktu released a high-pitched moan. Stretching and kicking for impossible friction, his toes skimmed the surface of the water. The god parasite cursed, splashing as he stalked in pursuit; striking with staff extended – always reaching, always short. The incumbent god began to accelerate. Already they had reached the foot of the volcano. The god parasite swore in the sideways tongue of the vilè, causing great fusts of basalt to burst from the earth. He conjured monoliths in sweeping, concentric palisades, blocking the path ahead. But nothing could impede the incumbent god. Dragged on the end of an invisible tether, he had ceased to fight or flail. The panic masking his features could no longer be distinguished from euphoria. The god parasite grew desperate. His body flagged. His vision burned. He stooped, taking forth a heavy stone, thinking to end the inexorable ascent with a single well-aimed cast. But he could not. The distance between them doubled and redoubled. The further Abbabaraktu was dragged up the volcano, the larger he seemed to grow, moulting his form in violent increments, hardening into a statuesque colossus. His arms fell from his shoulders. Great crinoidal fronds replaced them, bifurcating madly, like the fossilised bronchial casts of a giant. His face, already a mask, was discarded to reveal a gaping void. A wreath of twisted spirelets erupted from his temples. Ebrinektu let the stone drop from his fingers. He could not. He could not, because he loved his brother; selfishly, as the crabflower loves the udder of the kuva, loving less than fearing loss, than feeling hunger – but no more. Weeping with grief, the god parasite watched his erstwhile host summit the volcano and assume the throne of divinity. The massive, monstrous corpse fit snugly in the yawning fissure. Thunder smote its mighty gong. Red sprites descended in shoals like spiritualised vampyroteuthids, hanging ominously low in the simmering air. Naked angels,

[4]

waving festal torches. Discharging crimson plasma from their forking, plural bodies. Raising supersonic ululations. Celebrating the involuntary revolt. The terrible, beautiful theogony of a leaf that is just born.

Decades later, a hermit made pilgrimage up the steep flank of the volcano. His staff was tipped with the deciduous claw of a kuva. His crimson stole fluttered in the wind. He had grown old. The passage was long and weary.

At last, he came to the shrine, where a crumbling titan was entombed.

In silence they stood together, gazing out from the mouth of the fissure. A tarn glittered far below. They stood for a long while, with only the mountain wind between them. Each man present at his own fragility.

Then the hermit spoke. With fondness, and with complex, welcome melancholy. While unpremeditated, his speech was unusually eloquent. It bore the honesty of contradiction. It was hackneyed, and sentimental, and bittersweet, and true.

The ruined statue made no response. No response was necessary.

The hermit smiled with tears in his eyes.

‘Yes’, he concluded. ‘This too is a kind of godhood’.