

THE MOUNTAIN OF THOUGHT

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(Translated from Yoruba by Dapo Adeniyi)

In this manner did I excell out of the matter and shortly after this we came face to face with the river of blood. We had crossed this river once, close to the time when we passed the town of Edidare. We were trucked across the river at that time

by a certain boat but on this second occasion, it simply looked as though it was not the same pool which we had surmounted before. Even as we drew nigh to this place we observed that all the forest left and right of us was lulled in silence. The leaves of the forest, creepers, boulders and trunks of trees all assumed a complexion of lighted red and we glimpsed no living creatures whatsoever. Birds did not wail, squirrels did not climb the girth of trees, even butterflies were nowhere to be found and we heard no news of flies. Not long after this, we noticed that we were approaching an iron gate in our front, a flat wooden board placed on top of it was facing us directly with these words inscribed boldly on it.

CONFESS YOUR SINS BEFORE YOU
CROSS THE RIVER OF BLOOD, CON-
FESS YOUR SINS BEFORE YOU CROSS

THE RIVER OF BLOOD. WHOEVER
DOES NOT CONFESS HIS SINS BEFORE
HE CROSSES THE RIVER OF BLOOD
WILL CROSS INTO CHAOS. CONFESS
YOUR SINS BEFORE YOU CROSS THE
RIVER OF BLOOD. IF ONCE YOU HAD
BEEN A THIEF, CONFESS YOUR SINS;
IF ONCE YOU HAVE FALSE-WIT-
NESSED CONFESS YOUR SINS; IF ONCE
YOU HAVE COMMITTED ADULTERY
CONFESS YOUR SINS. WHOEVER DOES
NOT CONFESS BEFORE HE CROSSES
THE RIVER OF BLOOD MEETS WITH
BEDEVILMENT, CONFESS YOUR SINS

BEFORE YOU CROSS THE RIVER OF
BLOOD.

Even as we came up to this gate, its doors swung open for us of their own accord and we trooped in. And even as we trooped in thus, the doors shut themselves again behind us and immediately we found looking back a man bearing a raised axe in his hand following us.

When we had come close to the bank of the river itself, we found another man raising an axe ahead in expectation of us. Beyond him, we observed a long metal slat placed right across the water which appeared to represent a bridge or girder. Now it seemed that we were guarded from both back and front by two men wielding an axe each.

Even as we neared the man in the front he gazed at me who was at the lead and said to me, 'confess your sins lest I kill you'. Scarcely had he said this when my lips seized control and my mouth began to speak things of their own accord, recalling all the sins I had committed since the day I came into this world: the day when I abused a man, the time when I berated somebody and I called woes to afflict some other fellow, not leaving out my petty infant thieveries, all my little little lies, all of these things did my lips recount and I did not have any power whatsoever over them. After I had done with my own confessions, the man ordered me to fall behind him.

Next came my deputy, Ayederu-eda. When this man laid his tongue to confessing his past deeds there was none among us who was not frightened—he said, 'from my infancy have my mother developed a habit of sending me to overhear conversations in neighbouring houses that I may come back and

report to her. It was I whom my mother sent to pour poisons in the soup-pot of one of her junior wives to the extent that that woman died; I delivered poisoned kola-nut from my mother to her younger brother and that man gave up the ghost; I turned the backs of the king's counsellors on one another in our hometown through my devious means; it was I that brought the life of my mother to an end so that I might inherit her riches.

'When the matter of this expedition to mount Ironu arose, I made sure that I spent a lot of money on Irinkerindo and his men who came campaigning with him to our hometown, hoping through it to get a big position from him. Even so the post which he gave me was not very satisfactory to me; it was his own position that I sported. I had plotted killing this Irinkerindo seven whole times but without success—I poisoned water and gave him twice but he did not drink of it; I poisoned his palm-wine hoping he would drink and die but he did not taste of it; what did I not try, even got men at him to shoot him down three times but they missed him on all three times. He himself shot Ojuayedun dead, for it was Ojuayedun whom I deployed for the fourth time. I lied to him that his wife was meeting with a man in the secret and it was I who led him to a place where I asked him to wait and see his wife with another man in the night. I got his wife's sister to dress like her senior sister and I changed dress to meet her, acting a make-believe role for Irinkerindo to see. I always envied Irinkerindo, his wife and everyday I desired that Irinkerindo should die so that his wife would become mine. There was a time when I stretched my hand to pat her bottom but my hand withered on the spot, so have I borne a stump in place of a right hand even to this day etc.'

When Ayederu's lips stopped recounting, the man himself was overcome by shame. And the most pitiful aspect of this matter was that no man had any restraint on his lips, each man's tongue simply continued to dart unstoppably like the stick of a drum. Were it possible for any man to warn his mouth a bit, doubtless, Ayederu would have warned his own; pity. The hunters were amazed to hear the things which came out from the lips of the man.

After him came other fellows whose mouths also confessed; there was scarcely a single vile left upon the earth which those men's mouths did not speak out. If we had but realised that our company was filled with such innumerable bandits and cut-throats! Those who have brought sorrows upon their neighbours did not have count.

It was after each and everyone of us had made these confessions that the man holding the axe commanded us to start to walk in turns on the ledge of metal running across the river of blood. Looking down from where we were into the river below, what the human eye encounters was a most horrifying sight: the place was full of hundreds of men who had dropped into the river from the top of the narrow ledge. And what amazed me the most about this place was that they did not die; they hiccuped, drank and sputtered in the water of blood continually and were extremely numerous. When those on the top floating up had exhibited their faces to the world for a while, they sank again into the deep so that the others in the riverbed would also have a chance to show their faces. And as each one among them gulped blood he cried out loudly gulped some more and proclaimed another sentence from his catalogue of sins. Sometimes, a vicious brute raced at one, grubbed his arm and dashed off from him again while the eyes of the fellow was open to the fact.

I was the first to climb up the ledge on the river of blood. Even before my minute came was I resolved to prepare myself for the worst, for it did not seem to me that any man would escape what was in front. And with great surprise did I find putting one foot first on that object my two feet moving without my having to apply any effort, and so gradually and gradually, believe it or not, I made it to the other side and awaited the turn of my companions.

Ayederu-eda came next after me and even as

he got to the middle of that ledge, the iron broke in two and he tumbled into the water beneath. Before he could guess where he was, we saw a reptile home on him and pluck out his right arm, gnashed at it and chewed while our comrade cried opening his mouth wide in surprise, thus permitting water to rush into his mouth and he drank his first cup of blood. Ayederu's buttocks scarcely hit the water when the broken iron lifted itself up and mended and the next man came on board. Many of our friends arrived hale and hearty on the other side, even Ibembe Olokunrun; he knew no scratch whatsoever. But we lost quite a horde in the blood water, particularly those that added to our numbers from the city of the Immoderates. A baffling thing it turned to be that despite the uncivilised ways of the men from Edidare, not one of them lost himself in the river. They all landed safe and sound on the other side.

I looked briefly among the remaining lot and was I not surprised to discover the famous herbalist and renowned denizen of charms, Ewe-eye breathing out freely? I recall that when it came to his turn to confess, he made no mention of killing or causing the death of any man in all his life, neither had he brought harm to bear on anybody; this was a surprise for me.

After we had left this place and we mounted up a hill, I stopped and counted the number of us whose heads remained on our necks and we were seventy, those who drowned came up to about one hundred. This over, I assembled the voyagers for a meeting to select replacements into posts that have become vacant in the company as a result of the recent deaths. And with exceeding joy the hunters elected Inulayewa to replace Ayederu-eda as my deputy. He was a wise man, blessed with excellent character.

And now that we have finally passed the river of blood we knew that we were now closing up on the Forest of a Thousand and Four Hundred Deities. After we had traversed a further three hours from the river of blood we observed the road paving wider and wider and was flooded from hence with dunes of white sand all through. Left and right of us we encountered assortments of trees of the class and breed of the mahogany and both foliage, creeper and barks of trees in these forests were illumined white. The paths were swept glazing and such was the clarity of this wilderness that it was possible for a man to peer through it and behold a distance of one full hour's trek.

One observation which we made from this

time was that whenever we looked to our front and we caught sight of someone coming in our direction, we would lose sight of him completely before he came near to us and when we had gone a short distance and we looked behind us we would see him again walking away from us. Afterward we saw a man who came right to us, and when his eyes had met mine he spoke and said, 'You are welcome Irinkerindo, get prepared, for the animals are planning to fight with you.'

THE WAR OF THE OUTSKIRT OF THE FOREST OF ELEGBEJE

This was all that the man said to me. I was even desirous to ask him one or two questions on account of what he told me but he did not wait, he by-passed us and went his own way.

Shortly afterwards we came before the gate of the forest of Elegbeje, Forest of a Thousand and Four Hundred Deities. The object that our eyes first encountered here was a giant post standing erect before the front of the gate. On the apex of this post was a certain face which transformed and retransformed itself continually every minute. When we looked up for the first time he had the face of man, and when we looked for a second time he was a lion's face, looking up for a third time he was the snarling face of a leopard, the fourth time he was a viper's with flaring tongue emitting venom. This surely was cause enough to frighten us, it was sufficient reason for us to resolve to retreat home. The forest of One Thousand and Four Hundred Deities itself was a scare-laden place when perceived from the distance. It was a dense and impenetrable black, its crawly plants were without number, thus were the kinds of sky piercing trees that were contained in it.

We least expected that we would find a gate at the entrance to this forest and no sooner had we reached up to the gate than the bars paved open for us but a stocky being leapt up from a corner and confronted us. This, if only we had also realised, was the gateman of the forest—he was draped in a pair of shorts and was long-haired on his head; he wove his hair backwards and left it hanging, thus permitting it to tap his buttocks when he walked. The teeth of the fellow had no resemblance whatsoever to that of the human race, they coiled out like hook-springs and gave a man a little scare when he talked. His teeth was blood-red and his mouth was in fact full of blood.

Even as we planned to enter the forest the

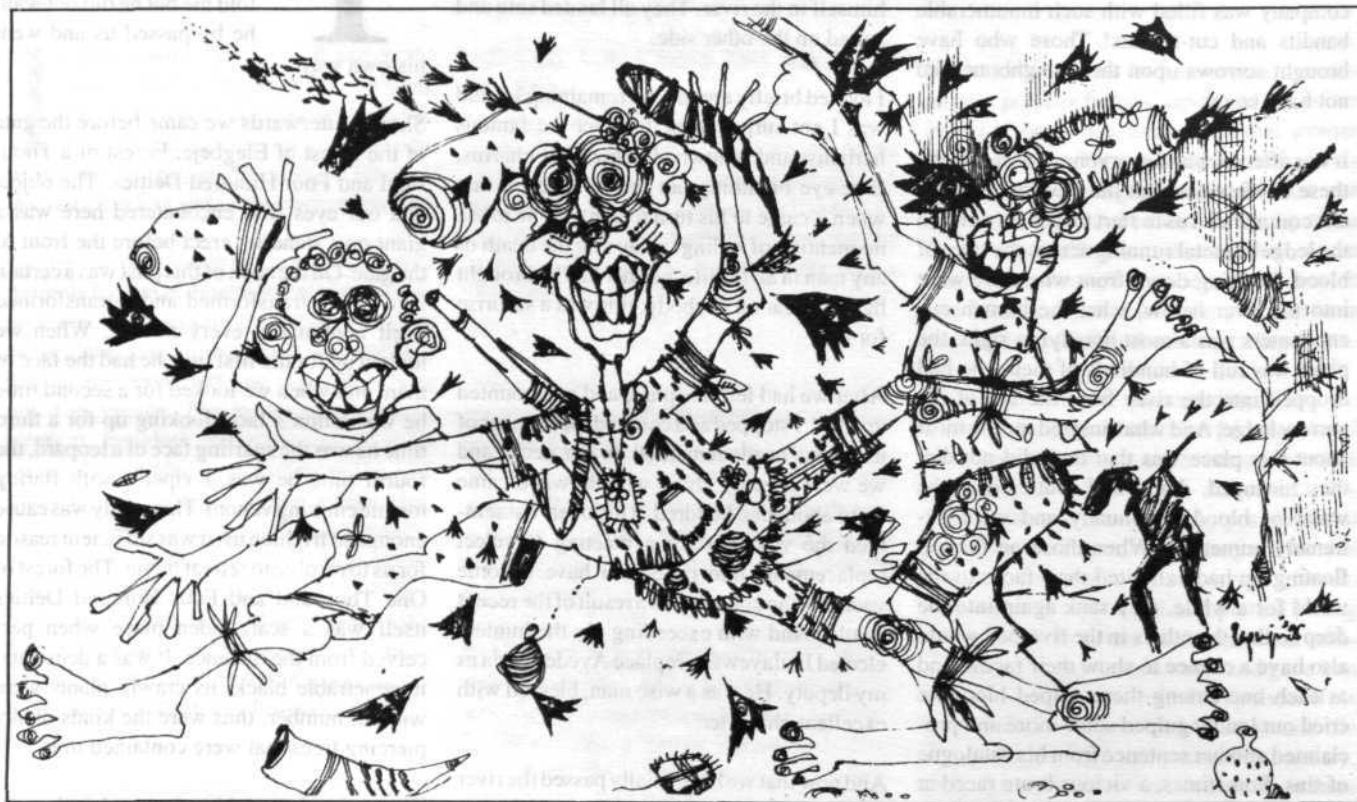
man rooted himself in our way and drove us back. And when we asked him why, he explained that we could not enter just yet, we had to stay on the spot where we were till the dawn of the next day because the birds and the beasts of the forest had informed him beforehand that they would like to have a word with us. If we came to a common satisfaction and agreement at the close of the meeting then all would be well but that if we failed to come to a mutual compromise then there would any remedy be left than that they join in combat with us. Furthermore, the gateman told us to give him his own dues and when we asked what this was to be, he replied that it was a drink and that his drink was blood. This proved to be nothing for one of our members had just shot an antelope so we gave it to him.

knees to his ankles were bangles of brass lined in that succession and numbering up to fifteen on each limb. Even as this man surfaced and advanced on us where we stood, his left arm gave custody to a whole bundle of clubs. When his eyes had met those of the gateman he smiled on him baring his teeth but when his eyes encountered me he squeezed his face and began to scowl the following words at me:

'I am Terrifying-baboon, the general of war for animals. I have come up in the name of every animal and every beast in this forest, birds of the air and fishes, snakes, even trees to declare our charges against you. The animals have heard of how you slaughter their children and how it is that you do not just suffice yourselves with their adults alone but

in particular one gritless Kako who grew so spiteful in his conceit that he dashed the king of birds, Royal king and father of ostriches, Ogongo, on the head! Ha, do the fishes not tell of your unkindnesses unto them? Do they not tell of how you slay both old and young from their midst and pack them all off from the bed of water, hunting down even their eggs from which you invent varied delectable diets for yourselves? Trees also have brought report of your callous ways toward them.

'So for these reasons sons of men, prepare, my battalions are gathered and readied—lions have no count, tigers simply are beyond numbering, the leopards are as a thousand dew drops, one thousand and four hundred octopi stand as representations for the fishes,



On the following morning, I went and spoke with the gateman; he despatched a message to the war leader of the animals whose name was the Terrifying-baboon. And when I myself had set eyes on this man, the Terrifying-baboon, I was truly taken by fright. For much as his head and his eyes had been human enough in appearance and he spoke as would a normal human being, he was complete baboon from his shoulders down to his feet. When he was in the course of a speech his eyes would turn embers red. He was never in a haste when he talked, instead he released his words from his mouth rather methodically, bit by bit. Fronds of the palm had he as clothes for his buttocks, from his

also their babes which you have made your sport, killing one day olds, two days old and three days old all alike. They are making complaint about the behaviour of the men who entered their towns before you, that Akara-Ogun and his group have shown them one thing or two. The birds have made their protestations also saying they have now discovered the device by which you capture their children, to the extent that you build your own cages to keep them, devising your own menus which please you to give them to eat, thus placing them under perpetual confinement, not ever allowing them a chance to fly about. Birds have kept a book of the plain misdemeanours of Akara-Ogun's followers,

cobras and boas have opened their mouths wide in expectation of you. Even trees which hardly can leave their spots where they are standing, they have sent off every spirit and every gnome living inside their hollows to partake in this battle—spirits of the iroko, spirits of the walnut, sprites of paw-paw stems, all of these are waiting readily to lay an arm against you.

'These notwithstanding, they have also demanded that I give you an option, and the option is this — that if you want to prevent the strife at hand from coming onto your heads you should surrender all your guns to the gate keeper of the forest before eight-

thirty in the morning tomorrow. This they have reasoned will give them the satisfaction that you have brought no purpose of harm with you. The animals pledge once you have carried this out to see you safe and clear to the mountain of Thought, and that no man from among them will lay his hand on you. This precaution they are taking to ensure that you have come harbouring no secret schemes in your heads but that if perchance you will prefer not to lay down your weapons, then I am afraid the heralds of war will sound at nine O'clock'.

Those were the words of the general of animals, Mr. Terrifying-baboon. And even as he stopped to speak we heard the trees of the neighbourhood echoing out the following phrase — 'We are thankful to you, we are indeed thankful. You have outlined the matter as we sent you.'

After the man had rounded up his address like this, I promised him that I shall make mention of it to my fellows, that we shall put the question to debate among us and make our decision known to the gateman in due course.

This we did forthwith. The number of our men who voted in favour of the idea that we hand over our guns did not pass ten, all the remaining hunters were in support of the option of strife but I delayed until eight O'clock of the following day before I communicated our resolution to the gateman, asked that the creatures of the forest prime themselves in readiness for war at the appointed time.

Next I set myself the business of arranging our strategies of warfare; I made sure that I set all those men whom I thought to be the more intrepid at the edges left and right of our march, putting the remainders in the middle. My thinking for doing this being that when the approaching warriors of the animals began to gain an advantage over the men of the centre and hence seized that opportunity to advance further down into our midst, the sinews of the edges would thus close in on them and start to batter them from both directions.

But the stratagems of those animals proved to be an amazement for us and the fact that the trees of the forest were also on their side helped them in no little measure. For from the very outset of the war when our men had just gained entry into the wood did we decide to home straight for the locations of the enemy thus underrating the role of the trees which we would be leaving behind us in the

blitzkrieg that was ahead. Those animals had indeed assigned wood-spirits to the chests of trees before the time and there was no way for us to guess that it was this same body of spirits which formed the regular choirs that sang praises of the Almighty God during services in the crag of trees. Even as we burst into the centre of that forest a hymn rose from the way of our rear in a great indescribable sonority and it began to embrace the width of that entire jungle. The effect of this on us was that, we began to peer to the direction of our backs thinking that the armies of the animals were advancing up hither from that way but the truth of this was the very contrary. Hence we lost our concentrations for a crucial moment and failed to set our gazes to the fore.

Not long after this, the infantries of the animals began to surface before us but the manner by which they had resolved to meet us was not anywhere close to what we anticipated. For had not we indeed expected that powerful beasts like elephants, lions and leopards would be at the lead of the onslaught? But no, the theories of those creatures had been of an entirely different kind. It was tiny tiny things like mice and bush-rats which swarmed up at the very front of them. And when those incredible mass of creatures had closed up on a man and embraced him biting us from our heads down to our feet and the shots of our guns had proven completely useless before them, we resolved that we simply had to resign ourselves to the very worst. Even flimsy things like frogs and toads succeeded in giving us a bit of their bothers, for their incessant cries of haww! hawww! hawww! had sufficed and frustrated our bids to communicate among ourselves. When I issued commands to our ranks the pestilential noises drowned my voice; we tried our hands on clubs and batons but rodents and grass-cutters simply leaped at us and were too numerous. Even so did we strive with difficulty until it was dark and both sides retreated to retire for the night.

Even before the commencement of this war, Terrifying-baboon had given us an invitation to dinner after dusk after we of the two sides might have dispensed with warring for that day. So at night time we all proceeded to the place of the dinner. And it was with astonishment that we found a certain lengthy table laid out neatly in expectation of us at the venue, with spoons of silver, cups of silver and delicate plates presented to us before we took our seats. It was ghommids and spirits that the animals made to play host to us and they in fact had also been responsible for the preparation of the dinner. Terrifying-baboon they got a seat at the far edge of the table and

they made me to sit on the opposite end facing him directly. The meaning of this was that Terrifying-baboon was the chief host and the chairperson of the banquet. And we would have enjoyed that banquet greatly but for the presence of the ghommids who sat at the opposite of our fellows. For some of these spirits were one-eyed, the mouth of some was placed squarely on their chests, for some their noses were completely absent, the eyes of some were wide as sauce-pans, others among them were long-necked and they sat their prolonged necks looking as if they were trees beside the dinner table, yet all of these insisted on chatting and cracking jokes with us simultaneously. The animals elected seats for themselves on spots variously in the neighbourhood and it was there that they ate for their kinds of buttocks were not well suited for chairs.

Day-break the following day we resumed our fight and behold most of the fighting for this day was left to birds. And you would have imagined that they were large birds like hawks, eagles or aluko but no, those that flew down on us in large swarms were no bigger than palm-nuts and they sported our different members whichever pleased them and pecked down on us from every direction. Some chose our arms to camp on, some legs, for some it was the top of our noses and no matter how we tried to despatch them our trials could not deter them. Even as one died, another took its place; ah what a great visitation, even to the extent that we had no time to remember our guns, instead we continued to fight for the safety of our bare necks with our hands.

When we reported for dinner in the night, the animals brought an idea that we try wrestling the day that was next. They also suggested that at the close of the event the heads of both camps should test their hands in a brief wrestling spar— this being my own self and the Terrifying-baboon.

I will not lie, for even while we hunters had clapped our hands to approve these ideas, making as though our stomachs had been gladdened thereby, each one of our hunters sighed inwardly at the thought of joining hands in wrestling with beasts. But then they were soon to enlighten us further that the animals would not themselves wrestle with us, instead they would appoint a couple of spirits who would stand in their place, leaving out the Terrifying-baboon alone as the sole representative of beasts who should tug with man. This appeared to be more pleasing to our ears and we resolved that we shall try our best. GR