

Captivated

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I am surrounded by people who want to kiss me, women and men in all their splendour, who desire me as I have never been desired before and never will again, and finally I understand why.

They play their flutes, which they call *singing sticks*. They dance, which they call *song walking*, and display themselves. Feathered, painted, perfumed, burdened by exquisitely carved bone jewellery, they glory in their extravagance. I am bathed by them and oiled. Massaging me, they apply an unguent to my genitals, my anus, nipples, lips and tongue. These parts of the body they call the *sweet meat*.

Amongst the aromas, I can distinguish frankincense and myrrh. Garlanded with gold, I am invited to suckle milk, sip red wine and break bread. Finally, I am asked to enjoy a cured delicacy dusted with ash. Naturally wary, I bite into the charcoaled flesh and am relieved to find it has the sweetish taste of honeyed pork.

At dusk the love play begins. I wish that it could go on and on forever, but it lasts only until our skins blush in the dawn light. Exhausted by my ecstasy, I finally ask their word for this rapture which we have shared. They smile affectionately without answering, indulging me like a child.

At the risk of insulting them, I feel obliged to persist. My efforts are necessarily crude. All the more so because, for them, conversation is subtle—relying as it does as much upon glances and gestures as the sounds of speech. Which is why their word for talk is *light*, since the dark leaves them almost mute. The example is apt, for their language is resolutely metaphorical. And metaphors (I have discovered) are nothing if not wild animals: we have no idea which way they will leap, whether it is wiser to flee from them or contend with them.

Upon being threatened with capture, I was like a wild animal myself. If allowed, I would have fought to the death. Thankfully, they denied me that, their phrase for such a death being *wicked waste*. Sparing me, they nursed my wounds, nurtured my health, ministered to my needs; I could not have wished for more from my own kind. Referring to themselves as my hosts, they treated me as an honoured guest (which is perhaps best translated as *delight of the gods*).

Hidden within their sparse vocabulary I have discovered a plenitude. No word is wasted. No word without a double meaning is worth uttering. No statement is ever innocently literal. No wonder they laughingly dismiss my desire for dialogue. Masochism, they call it, self-punishment. Escape would be easier, they insist, to *escape* meaning to *die*.

In my ignorance, I was at first forced to accept that the leap of associations within and between words was essentially arbitrary. I no longer believe that. I now know that the need for metaphor derives from a craving for meaning: language is food for thought and feeling.

I would never have arrived at this insight but for a primitive conversation occasioned by my toiletry. As I was being manicured, groomed and tattooed in a manner pleasing to the deities of fertility, I asked my hosts what fate they intended for me and they asked why that was any concern of mine. Undeterred, I tried an oblique approach. Returning to the circumstances of my capture, I inquired as to whether they ever took scalps, only to be told that they regarded this as needlessly barbaric—shoes being the sole booty warriors were allowed. I was puzzled: the only shoes I had seen since my capture were my gold ceremonial sandals. Despite their laughter I was learning: no bodily gesture was without its significance, and they couldn't control their wriggling toes: *shoes* meant *feet*.

Last night at the feast before the beginning of the love play I learnt that there is more than one word for food. This unusual extravagance is explained by the fact that a firm distinction is drawn between *belly* food and *heart* or *love* food, that is to say, between necessity and taste, the material and the spiritual. At that stage I was too intoxicated to make sense of what I was being told.

But now, enlightened at last, I can't but regard their exquisite erotic etiquette as an obscene mask worn to disguise orgiastic gluttony. I no longer need to ask what the metaphors mean: I can make the intuitive

leap as well as any other cornered creature. When these people kiss you, they actually nibble your mouth and tongue, your erotic parts; as well as pressing their lips upon you, they kiss you with their teeth: the word for *kiss* is *chew*. They capture you and kiss you and have intercourse with you because they want to feast upon you.

Freedom ... last night it was the least of my desires, but all that is now a lifetime away. I can't but ask myself: is there no way I can have a say in my fate? I circle the question without answering it, stumble into sleep and dream. I dream they have already taken out my beating heart and are gorging on my steaming blood. I dream my mother is bending over my cradle saying, "I love you so much I could eat you." I wake wondering if the word for *coffin* is *cradle*. Waiting for the knife to kiss my heart, I can't believe I'm going to escape. ⇨

