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# HEADFIRST

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## (A DAY IN THE ALIENOCENE)

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KATA BEILIN

For Michael Ippolito

Awañetae was Gabo and Ompodae's father. He was killed by Dabo while sleeping in his hammock, Caento was Dayuma's father. He was mortally speared in the knee by Moipa, crippling him at first. His death led to Dayuma's flight from her home. Dabo is the killer of Awañetae. Later in life, Dabo gave up his life of killing, making the observation that the tribe would have killed each other off had they not stopped spearing each other. His wife's name was Weba, and Dabo's transformation was attributed to her. Weba led all her family away from the war, and started to teach Waorani of the need of peace and wise coexistence with white people. Weba became also a leader of Waorani's resistance to oil drilling. Ené is Weba's adopted daughter. When Ene's daughter, Susana, died, poisoned by petroleum contaminated water, Ené adopted a male child, Oré that had become an orphan as a result of family violence. She works in a northern city in an organization that takes care of indigenous land, life and cultural survival. (Archive of Waorani's history)

He knew now that he was not going to wake up, that he was awake, that the marvelous dream has been the other, absurd as all the dreams are, a dream in which he was going through the strange avenues of an astonishing city with green and red lights that burnt without fire or smoke, on an enormous metal insect that whirred away between his legs. ("A night face up" Julio Cortazar)

Ené opened her eyes. The light was transparent which meant morning, but it was not inviting to get up. There was no sun on the ceiling, no shades of branches dancing on the walls, and no new smells. She pulled herself up on the pillows to get up, and noticed that her eyes did not open all the way. The lower parts remained tightly shut to the outside and submerged in some other space. This was a reason to close her eyes again, slip under the covers, and wait for this to pass. But an hour later the situation did not improve. To the contrary, the space in the lower part of her eyes seemed to have grown and began to show certain activity. She perceived tiny dark dots moving around.

Her dreams had been particularly lucid that night. There was a little boy leaning over the edge of a river with crystal clear water where two blue fish swam. He called them by their names. The water suddenly turned murky, and the boy was worried that one fish became paler and looked as if it was about to die. A feeling of despair about the fragility of things accompanied the dream. But, there was also a budding urge of exasperation to do something, and not just wait, even if movement could only precipitate the awaited catastrophe.

There was no more time for deliberation and leisure since this was the day of action. Ené's group had a plan to hack the University computers to supply pharmaceutical formulas to their partner teams in the poor areas of the world. She was going to meet others on campus in just an hour. Ené opened her eyes the widest she could, looked out at the blue-gray sky, and attempted a sun salutation. But, as she leaned down, the zone on the back of her eyes began to vibrate. The dark spots turned into anxious black insects flying in the closed space inside her face, jostling against her membranes, and tearing apart her tissues. The area around her eyes echoed the bangs of their wings. Ené knew she had to bear the pain. She slowly straightened, and pushed the insects deeper into her skull with the force of her will so as to leave the front of her face unaffected. As she looked in the mirror ordering her hair, she noticed little insects' legs moving through her irises. She heard buzzing and felt vibrations in her head getting stronger, this time deep inside, closer to the center of her brain. As she leaned over the sink and brushed her teeth, the image of the boy looking at two blue fish came back to her again. The boy cried because the smaller blue fish stopped moving and floated like a dead leaf right by the rocky riverbank. The waves were pushing it out of the water, which was filled with pink and blue bubbles. *Chapapote* she thought, crude. She remembered that the dead fish's name was Tuba.

Clenching her teeth, Ené dressed, and realized that she was not hungry. The energy that the vibrations produced was substituting for breakfast and coffee. She put on her bike helmet, covered her face with a bandana and took her bike on the path to do what she had to do. It had snowed, but the bike path was clean. The sensation of cutting through the air, and feeling her body strong, was exciting. It took her almost no effort to bike up the first hill and she was passing the men that had always been faster than her. Trees and houses on the side of the bike path began to look blurred and surreal. Her speed grew as if it were imbued with an alien energy.

A woman smoking a cigarette came out suddenly from a parking lot between the bike path and the hospital. In order to avoid her, Ené turned and slid. Attempting to regain balance, she pushed the bike forward. While the bike balanced on the front wheel, Ené caught sight of a man running in the opposite direction. The tightness of air around him and his blue-gray eyes with an intense energy pushed adrenaline through her heart. How did she know him? She lost her balance, flew headfirst towards the man, hit the ground, and felt that the compartment with insects burst open. Then all was black and she remembered.

She was in a cloud forest enveloping her like a womb. A beautiful old woman with dark green hair took Ené by her hand and they went through the forest. The world was reverberating with insect noises, and with sweet smells. Light was moving up and down high up in the trees. A swarm of black bees flew in front of them leading the way. Ené let herself be guided. They came to a place where a deep transparent lake extended near a murky cave.

“Why have you called my black bees?” the women asked, pointing to the swarm that was now flying in circles above the water.

Ené's head was light, and she was finally able to open her eyes all the way. She saw a little boy, crying over his dead fish so much that the crying made him sick. The little boy had a fever.

When Ené opened her eyes, she was lying on the asphalt of the bike path. She felt pain, and saw a man, whose eyes had changing shades of grey and blue, leaning over her with a worried look on his face. Ené feared that she was surrounded by the black insects that got out from her head through her ears. She looked very closely into the eyes of the stranger, checking if the black bees registered in his pupils. The man smiled and said:

"I was running on this path and I saw what happened. You almost knocked me down." He extended his hand.

"Are you all right?" Enkedi asked, knowing she was not. Looking down at her, he noticed bees coming out of her head. He was afraid of the bees.

"Waponi. Thank you." She said, taking his hand.

"Okagen? Your head?" He said, pointing to her head.

He knew she spoke his language, but he didn't know how he knew it. It seemed a matter of instinct. Ené glanced at the snowbanks piled high around the bike path, and then up at the oaks and ashes whose spindly, bare branches intertwined above their heads. It all looked so unfamiliar and dead. After the shock of the fall, she seemed to begin to remember who she was now, but he surprised her again.

"Ené." He said.

"How do you know... Enkedi?"

He was just as baffled as she. They knew each other's names.

"I have something to show you," said Enkedi. "Something important." Ené seemed to consider her options. Her breath came in puffs of white as the black clouds boiled in her eyes. She looked at him with eyes that invited him in. Good, he thought. He could use an ally...as could she, but he was not sure why he was thinking this way.

First, he could not see this because her helmet itself was red, but now standing closer to Ené who was leaning on him more with every second, Enkedi discovered a large cut filled with blood flowing down her neck, under her coat, and heavily dripping to the ground all around her. Only now, he realized how little time they had.

Bees formed a figure eight and began to move towards the parking lot on the side of the bike path and back as if calling them to follow. But Ené could not walk. Her awareness was beginning to fade. Enkedi set her on the bike, and gently pulled the bike with Ené on it trying to keep her from falling. Her pockets were filled with memory drives and to make her lighter, Enkedi moved them to the pockets in his coat. The bees led them towards a huge billboard attached to the wall of the hospital behind the parking lot. It displayed a soldier wearing a helmet and resting his back on a tree while picking up a child. The smile of the soldier and the smile of the child met in the air. Enormous letters on the top read: "Veterans welcome home." The bees approached the billboard, and Enkedi pointed towards a dark stain on the tree's trunk, high up on the building wall, which after some observation appeared to be an opening as if for a bird nest. "Look." He said to Ené. "This is the way back home. We need to somehow reach that place."

One after another, bees began to disappear into the opening in the tree.

“There’s no way back home.” Whispered Ené. “Not yet. We have a task.”

“We?” – asked Enkedi.

At this moment, the woman who smoked the cigarette reached them, shouting at Enkedi:

“You should not move a person after an accident if they are bleeding. I called an ambulance. It should be on its way.”

The ambulance did not have far to travel since the hospital was right around the corner. A few seconds later it approached them with an unbearably loud siren that made Enkedi cover his ears and Ené, unable to do this, closed her eyes. Three men in blue suits jumped out of the white van, and approached Ené with a stretcher. The tallest one pulled her sleeve up and placed a rubber band on her arm.

“Don’t put her to sleep.” Said Enkedi, but the paramedic only looked at him and pinched Ené’s vein with a syringe.

“Don’t go to sleep. You need to go home.” Enkedi leaned over Ené and she smelled his cologne that reminded her of the resin of the *ceibo* tree. She was not falling asleep. It was her memory returning.

The woman with green hair patiently repeated the question.  
“Why did you call my black bees? Do you want to lose your life?”

Ené closed her eyes and saw the smile of her mother. She remembered her baby brother playing with a capibara, and then turning into an angry spearman. Her big man brother was shouting something over her head. Then she saw the torso of the man who made love to her, and his eyes turned over to the sky in the moment of ecstasy. Her brother and her lover shouted in anger

and speared each other in front of her while she tried to stop them. She was wounded, not in flesh, women are not speared, but in her heart, a blow after a blow. She saw herself giving birth, as if from the top of a tree, and then the company coming to open a well for oil extraction and her daughter swimming in the oil-stained river, and getting sick. She saw her little girl dead from poison, and Oré, an orphan boy that she adopted, struck with yet another fever that no tree bark could cure. Alone and unable to take care of her adopted child, she was lying on the bank of the river, powerless and despaired, looking out to the blue gray sky, turning down and staring at the murky water, with no strength to move, tightened up inside to bear the pain as if it were a yet one more child that had to be born in a violent upheaval. She desired that they cut her open and take it out. She embraced a *ceibo* tree, and asked him to help her, and the smell of his bark gave her relief. She was grateful to the tree, and called it “Enkedi” and talked to him. She saw Oré crying after the death of his first beloved fish Tuba, and then afraid that his second fish, Baso would die as the first one did, like everything around in the forest was dying, poisoned by the malignant black substance that was making the water bubble in blue and pink. “I do not want to look at how Baso is dying,” Oré repeated, “there must be something we can do to save him.” But Baso developed cysts on both sides of his body, stopped swimming, and spent hours hidden inside of a large hollow stone, motionless like Ené.

Ené had her answer ready.

“My little son is very sick. He got intoxicated by the company’s water, and lost strength. The fish that he loves are dying. And, now he has a fever that only white people know how to cure.” She said looking up at the woman with green hair. “Our Wao warriors are spearing each other in a never-ending war, and drink themselves to death out of disdain for life. Hatred and poison are taking over

the forest. I can't look at everything falling apart. I want to do something to help even if I have to give my life."

"Do you want to take the most dangerous trip in search of the medicine and knowledge? You know that black bees are the last resource and that you are not likely to come back home alive?"

"Weba? *pinkenani*, wise grandmother!" Ené suddenly recognized the woman with the green hair. "You have rebelled against your family and your tribe. You lead all your children away from the war. We all heard about your courage. But, if you had not done it, there would be no hope for me. Are you the one whom the black bees obey?"

"Bees took me and my husband to the other side, and we were lucky to return. If you return from the other side, you acquire a great power and peace, but most do not return. I can send you there, but you must be aware of the risk. Also, once you get there you will forget who you are. You will need an ally to remind you. Do you have anyone left?"

"Oré is very sick. I only have Enkedi, our *ceibo* tree. He was my only friend during the hardest times. He understood me because himself he is twisted and filled with pain, but he also knows of joy. There was a *paca* making me laugh from the hollow in the *ceibo*'s trunk. Does the *ceibo* have to take the bees in as well? *Ceibo* tree does not like black bees."

Weba invited Ené to her tent, and cooked barks and leaves that generate lucid dreams. The smoke went up through the roof and spread over the forest that stood silent awaiting the magic. The Ceibo tree shrank, grew arms and legs, and opened his gray-blue eyes, transforming into a strong man who entered the tent of Weba. He leaned over Ené with worried expression. He held Ené's hand,

and together they came down to the lake, entered its waters, and stood there with their mouths barely above the surface, and their eyes closed. The water was warm and it made them feel light. They were becoming a part of the water, sky, and forest that they would struggle for. When the night was breaking down, they opened their mouths and the bees began to come in one by one. When it hurt, Ené thought of little Oré and squeezed Enkedi's hand.

"Hi Enkedi, it's now our time to fight, but don't be afraid of anything. I love you." These were her last words before they departed.

"Get into the car." The paramedic assumed that Enkedi was Ené's family.  
"We are taking her in for x-rays."

Enkedi followed confused. He knew things that he was not supposed to know, but he had a sensation that he was forgetting something important as well. He was not sure if because of this something, he was supposed to stay with Ené, or go back to his running.

Without taking her off the stretches, paramedics spread Ené's body under the x-ray and one of them opened her mouth, and placed a rubber bite between her jaws. The screen above her right arm remained tilted in the way Enkedi could see the naked bones of her skull with a solid crack running above the right ear. The nurse followed his gaze and changed the screen angle so that Enkedi could only read doctors' faces, but they kept them straight and impenetrable. They said that they would staple the bones in the operation room where Enkedi could not enter. He was left waiting, but anxious, and not sure what to do, he began wondering through the corridors of the hospital that led him to the School of Pharmacy.

Suddenly he knew. He found in his pockets various memory drives that he was now filling with precious pharmaceutical formulae. He did not know how he knew to break into the computers and download the data and he did not remember why he was doing this. Something or someone knew through him, and gave him precision and energy to gather all the information he needed.

Nurses pushed Ené's bed out of the operating room. Her head was bandaged all around, giving her the appearance of an astronaut. "You made it," whispered Enkedi, but no one heard him. After the doctors and the nurses left, Enkedi entered the room. They were alone again, but Ené's eyes were closed. He touched her arm, but she did not move. He sat near her bed and waited, hoping that she would wake up before the medical personnel surrounded them again. About 4 o'clock in the morning she opened her eyes and whispered: "Oré! Enkedi! Weba!" and closed them again.

"I have found every possible medicine that we need, and I hacked their computers to discover ingredients of all the most powerful medicines, and the proportions in which they mix." Enkedi whispered. "And now we have to go back." Ené did not move.

"Can't walk." He read from her closed lips.

Enkedi disconnected the I.V., and pushed Ené with the bed through the dark corridors to the elevator. No one saw them crossing the second floor, but getting out to the outside presented a major challenge. Enkedi decided to just walk through as if he were doing the right thing.

"Taking the body out. Family wishes." He said to the guard.

After he turned into the parking lot, Enkedi ran towards the billboard thinking desperately how to elevate the bed and himself to the hollow in the

tree. But, as he was approaching, he felt vibrations throughout his whole body. He forgot that the black bees were also inside him. Now they were lifting him up. Enkedi levitated. He embraced Ené, picking her up from the bed, and both approached the opening. But, the huge bandaged ball of Ené's head got stuck. In vain, Enkedi pulled and pushed her. Imagining her pain, he began to unwrap her head whispering to her tenderly: "We are not from this world of cement and asphalt. We are going home back to the forest, to our *ceibo* trees, to our *huicungo* trees, to our *shiringa* trees, to our rivers, and our *pacas*, to our colibris and tucans, to the smell of ripe bananas and *guanabano*. Resist a little more. Weba awaits us. Here we are dead, but our lives are there."

When Ené's head was free of all the bandages, they passed through the hollow and disappeared.

The next morning, the same woman smoked a cigarette again in the parking lot by the bike path, and saw a bloody bandage wrapped around the veteran's body on the billboard. She swore that the expression on his face changed, his smile turning into a bitter expression of suffering, and his gaze away from the smiling child.

The members of Ené's group learned that Ené had never come to the meeting before their hacking operation because she had a biking accident on her way, and died after an operation at 4 in the morning. They came to say "good bye" to her in the hospital finding her face transparent from the loss of blood. They checked the pockets of her clothing and her bag, but did not find the memory drives that she was supposed to have filled with the data.

Enkedi descended into the arms of Weba, holding Ené. Her head was a mess. The staples came out when Enkedi removed the bandage, and her thoughts were flowing out sadly, and hanging over the forest like clouds.

“Medicines and knowledge for the little Oré.” Said Enkedi depositing antibiotics and drives into Weba’s hands. Weba studied the ingredients on the medicine boxes and sighed. “These are all stolen from our trees.”

She examined Ené’s head with attention. Enkedi looked at Weba with hope, but she said:

“Both of you almost made it, but her head... We need to give it a different form. For your merits, Enkedi, you can also take a better shape. What would you like to be?”

“I always dreamed about being a tiger.” He answered, and as he pronounced these words, his legs began to grow fur and claws and his eyes acquired a night vision, his sense of smell became overwhelming and he felt an urge to run, but he stood still waiting near his friend. Ené’s thoughts were already falling down from the clouds as rain. Weba gently opened her skull wide, revealing pulsating brain that had begun stretching and flowing towards the ground. Neural synapses penetrated the soil and spread deep throughout it, connected with tree roots and became a part of the mesh of the underground. Ené’s body turned into the trunk of the *ceibo* tree. The old pain became a part of her, but she also enjoyed the lianas climbing up her trunk and the woodpeckers tickling her bark, and even the insects eating her from inside. Fungi carried her thoughts through the mesh of wet connected networks to other trees that spoke back to her: “The most important task is to last and regrow what others eat of you. But let them eat. That’s what you are for.” She opened a hollow inside of her trunk for the black bees to guard them for future expeditions. She felt with her bark the embraces of her little Oré, and the calm breathing of Enkedi when he slept after his night expeditions between her roots.

Oré's second fish, Baso, also died right when the medicine put the boy back on his feet. He did not fade out like Tuba, but rather fought till the last moment. Discolored, pale, thin, and unable to swim, Baso still moved when touched with a stick. That heroic slow death reminded Oré of his father who had died of a spear wound after weeks of struggle, unable to drink water, dried out like a piece of wood. Oré cried, embracing the trunk of his mother *ceibo* who whispered to him about letting go of what cannot be changed. But Oré did not want to think that way. He learned computers and languages and understood the data that Enkedi brought. He searched for new allies in the forest. One day he will hack into the world of cement and asphalt himself.