

Whom shall I dance for?

A tale of selfness, womanhood and coming home
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On the last week in Thailand we visited Kao Yai national park. It's a really beautiful piece of earth, with a lot of woods, and a lot of animals. And one evening, about an hour before the sunset, we were taken to a field, a few miles before the entrance to the park. And we were told to watch closely, to fixate our gaze on a specific point. And the breathing becomes as focused as the gaze when one really focuses.

And a few hundred meters ahead of us there was a cliff, and if you watched closely, you could notice that there was a cave inside it. and about forty five minutes before the sun was setting, things started coming out of the cave. Like a fog, like a magical fog, an ever-moving living cloud. And there were 1.5 million bats coming out of the cave, flying out in orderly arabesques for their nocturnal journey to feed in the park. And there were all insect bats, so they cannot see very well, they have to navigate with sonar. Just imagine closing your eyes and sharpening your hearing so you could really follow, just by listening, just like that.

And they were flying in a fog, climbing higher into the woods, disappearing like fumes from a mystic cauldron, what a spectacular view. And above them, peregrine falcons glided down to snack on the odd bat, yet they seemed to have no influence on this ever flowing cloud of bats.

And it became difficult to talk, and unimportant to move, and the breath was ever so strange, as if it was just going on without deliberation, and it is quite a pleasant experience, if unfamiliar, to let the story of the breath effortlessly unfold. And so we got back to the lodge.

And when we were sitting there, in the cool evening under darkening skies, still a bit shocked, we overheard a conversation. A young Egyptian woman sat there, talking to a friend. And because I had nothing to do, and because the mind could not but empty itself and drift, because the eyes found it easier to close and the ears to open, what a delight it was to have the possibility of listening to this young woman telling her story. How good it is to permit the ears and delight over the increasingly manifold possibilities of a tale.

“There is a cave, not unlike this one here, in Egypt,” she said.

“And every night, about half an hour before the sun sets, over a million insect bats come out of the cave for the night hunting”.

When I was very young, about three or four or five, my father used to put me on his lap, and when the body was pulsing a rhythms which is neither sleep nor awake, he told me the story of the bats.

And he said that many dozens of hundreds of years ago, in ancient Egypt, when the people of this country talked in a different language, and the people of this country had a different colour of skin, and the people of this country wore different cloths and had different costumes, the bats were still here. It was a time when there were no cars, no computers or televisions, no supermarkets or ice. No CD-players.

And even at that time, ancient as it was, the sun was still rising every morning, just like now, and setting every evening, just like nowadays. And at that time too, every evening, about half an hour before the sun would set – over a million insect bats would come out of the cave for their night hunting. A mystical thread of dark cloud would spread from this particular place, a sacred place, a sacred cave.

Every night the king of Egypt, Pharaoh, the son in spirit of Amon Ra, would wait outside of the cave. And once all the bats have left, he would send his most important priest into the cave to gather the bats' manure, which was so rich with nutrients and fertile that it was considered the most precious, most powerful and expensive fertiliser.

Every morning they took the fertilizer in a ritual of sacred dance, the highest priestess would dance around and the people would fertilise the gardens of the temple of Amon Ra, the god of sun, the father in spirit of Pharaoh, the one who handed Pharaoh with the Ankh. Generation after generation the ritual repeated itself – in the evening by the bat cave, in the following morning in the gardens surrounding the temple of Amon-Ra, who were said to be the most beautiful gardens in the entire world.

One such time, ruled a Pharaoh who was a little bit depressed, and his spirit could only be cheered by one person alone, and so he called for her – he called for his priestess to dance before him. The priestess was so sacred that she could only dance before the gods and their like. And he called for the priestess and the door would close as the priestess danced before him. And she danced her sacred dance, the same dance she danced before the statue of Amon Ra, in the privacy of his shrine. This woman was famed for her dance. It was said she could not only wake the spirits but also negotiate with the gods and bring the dead back to life, or better still – ease their journey into the land of the dead.

And she circled herself in the meticulously calculated moves. It was a very particular dance – there were no emotions in it, no place for hesitations, errors or doubt. She would dance, abandoning herself to the movements, abandon and dance. And you could see, as she is dancing, how colour comes back to the pharaoh's cheeks, how the breaths slows down and calms down, and at the same time becomes more alive. Deeper and the smile, ever so slight.

Almost every day he called for her, and the priestess left her apprentices and answered the call: she danced before the gardens of Amon Ra while the bats' fertiliser was applied and later came to dance before the king of Egypt, the god who was also flesh, the pharaoh. The man that in his body embodies eternal spirit. And in her dance she soothed the god's suffering.

One year, after the draught was broken, there was a celebration for Amon Ra. All the priests were gathering in their sacredly chores, and no mortal human was allowed to see them. And they were dancing, and the priestess spent this day with her students, aged four to twelve. She taught them the moves and rituals and the art of dancing. One day one of them would become the priestess; one day one of her students would replace her in her eminent stance. The classes took place this day quietly, with almost no sound, and the taps of the dancers could be heard like rain blessing the earth of Egypt with a promise of food.

Pharaoh woke up on one such morning in the darkest of moods, black bile surrounding his soul; heavy weights pull his lips down, his eyes down, foul breath. Be it man or god, he felt defeated. Feeling miserable and angry and sad; so sad that he could barely get up from his bed. But even with his sadness, even with his anger, even with his depression and despair he knew that today he wouldn't be able to send for the dancer – no human servant would be allowed to see her face today, not even pharaoh's servants. Indeed he was a god, but his slaves weren't – and so, reluctantly, he got out of the bed. With the most miserable gait and foul mood ever to possess a pharaoh, he walked towards the practice room, and entered unnoticed, sitting down on a bench; sitting – fixated, and watching.

And I don't know if you have ever seen a dancing class engulfed with sacred energy, where movements seem to be carried out effortlessly, naturally, flowing from an assured place; students and priestess; dancers; servants of the gods and pharaoh. And the girls were dancing with abandonment. And the girls were dancing with meticulous precision; and the girls were dancing with particular attention and abandonment, so calculated, so perfect, so unemotional. And pharaoh watched.

Suddenly he saw that there was one girl, not older than five, who really tried. And he saw that this girl could not master the level of abandonment the others had, although she tried with all her might. She tried to dance clean and empty of feelings and yet her fear was showing underneath, and her anger and frustration was clearly visible; her face contorted with and effort to control it, but her body showed sadness, and humanity, and fallibility. And yet, more than any other dancer – she touched him. She touched him because Ansu the girl danced as if the lives of people depended on her dance; she touched him because he knew this feeling. She touched him because she danced as if the responsibility of everything she knew was laid on her small body. And she couldn't let go of these feelings, and he was touched by the profundity of the responsibility Ansu the dancer was taking, and for the first time in many many years pharaoh cried without wanting to be saved from his tears. And the Pharaoh sighed and the priestess turned her head and noticed him.

“My god” she said, “you are here.” And she knelt before pharaoh and kissed his feet. “Let her dance before me,” he said, pointing at the girl.

And the priestess looked at him and said, “but my god; my lord; she is but a novice, a useless dancer. She cannot conceal her emotions; she cannot transcend herself into sacredness. She would not grow up to be a priestess. Surely we can find a better dancer to dance before you, my lord, my Pharaoh.”

And the pharaoh looked at her, and it took solely one glance for her to remember whom she was speaking to. And the pharaoh needed not repeat his sentence asking: I want this girl to dance before me. So the priestess bowed and, walking back, still facing pharaoh, she hurried Ansu, the little girl to stand before her god.

Ansu the little girl stepped forward and started dancing before him. it wasn't a perfect dance. She danced with such seriousness, as if the eternal life of pharaoh depended on her 'getting it right'; she lacked the elegance and control her teacher possessed. She danced as if her own father and mother no longer existed, as if she had to reach perfection for anything to matter, and yet she couldn't – by default of her being human she couldn't reach perfection. She danced so seriously and the spirit of

pharaoh lifted to such heights that even the priestess, with all her creativity and experience, has never managed to elicit in him. He could see her fear, sadness and anger showing through and he delighted in her, and something in him leaped with recognition.

And so, as you can imagine, from this day onwards Ansu the little dancer became the apple of the pharaoh's eyes. Almost every day he called for Ansu, and the more he called for the little girl, the more infrequent were his asking for the priestess, who felt denied of her king's favouritism; and the more his love for the little girl grew and developed in his eternal heart, the more the priestess became bitter, and resentful, and jealous of her. Naturally, the priestess could not directly express her anger and envy at the girl, not now that she was pharaoh's favourite, so she did so subtly, in the way she knew so well. Her toxins of envy and shame were fed to Ansu in her criticism and exclusion. .

She criticised the way Ansu moved, and criticised the way she breathed, she criticised her body shape and her motivation; she criticised her feelings. The priestess encouraged the other girls to laugh at Ansu, the little dancer. Ansu was bullied and felt excluded and abandoned, so much that she became her own worst bully. However much the other bullied or criticised her, she was always one step ahead of them biting herself up, hating herself. However much the others found faults in her, she saw even more – never could be pleased with herself. Ansu was constantly looking to dance for others, learning to develop her eyes to foresee what they would ask of her, what they need; learning to develop a yielding place in her to meet their needs, to satisfy their wantings. She was keen to find the right dance that will cheer someone up, that will bring a smile to someone's face. But the harder she tried, the more difficult it became to like herself.

And Ansu the young dancer was eating herself inside out, cannot find happiness but in the satisfaction of her watchers, needing to make other people happy increasingly for her to manage and tolerate her own presence.

The time has passed. Weeks gone by and Ansu the dancer was dancing. Months passed and Ansu the dancer was watching for others and dancing and years flew by and Ansu was dancing still. Sure, her technique has improved, yet always some emotions were shown – Ansu was incapable of hiding them completely, and although she tried daily, she never managed to truly conceal them. She wasn't the best of dancers, but given Pharaoh's choice it was clear for all the other dancers that it was she, Ansu the imperfect, that would one day become the high priestess in service of Amon Ra and Pharaoh.

One year came, the day of Amon Ra was once more approaching and all the priestesses were practicing in their room, and so has the highest priestess. Once more, pharaoh, the son of Amon Ra, has fallen ill. But this time it was different. His face was so pale, that the doctors thought he would die. His breath was so foul that the priests could smell death. The pharaoh could not see; he could not hear; he could not talk. The priests and doctors knelt before him, praying for his father Ra to remember his son. They prayed for Anubis, the jackal headed god of embalming, to hear the cry of their king, and for Osiris, the god of the dead to help Pharaoh be accepted among the gods. The royal cats started gathering around pharaoh's bed out of their own

accord. The priests started to prepare pharaoh for the afterlife, and the priestess was called to dance a last dance before him. With her most celebrated costume, she danced before him but nothing happened. No smile, no colour, no breath.

As a last resort, Ansu the young dance was called. And Ansu, now not older than thirteen or fourteen, looked at her god, at her king, at her saviour, and she could feel her pain of not wanting him to disappear. So she started dancing.

First she moved slowly, searching for his soul with her movements.
And then she moved
And she danced all the way down to the land of the dead to find his body
And she danced all the way within the land of the dead to meet with him
And she danced to call him back
And she danced while he was walking blindfolded and confused with her
And she danced to make him smile
And she danced and danced and danced
Circling around herself
And she danced for breath to come back to his body
She danced for the colour to return to his face.
She danced for hours and hours for the spark to come back to his eyes
She danced for the eternal soul to return and reside once more in her king's body
She danced for hours and hours, abandoning herself.
She danced for hours and hours, and she was unimportant – she was nothing. He was everything.
He was everything she'd ever known.
He was everything she'd ever wanted, she'd ever could possibly want.
She danced for a day and she danced for a night.

After thirty-six hours have passed, pharaoh opened his eyes. And the rosy colour came back to his face, and his lips once more became plumper. And spark came back into his eyes and his breath deepened. And still, Ansu was dancing. And after forty hours Pharaoh sat and walked to his throne taking his rightful place in the chair of the ruler of Egypt. As soon as he was sat, Ansu the young dancer collapsed. There he was – pharaoh, the king of Egypt; the god of the Egyptians, holding the key of the Nile, the emblem of eternity – the ankh in his hand. And before him the young woman who saved his life and she was collapsed. She looked as if all the life Pharaoh was now possessing were taken away from her, she looked drained. Her breath was too weak to make an impression on the body.

Ansu was carried gently by the priests and doctors and dancers to her room. And the priests gave her herbs and chanted spells and blessing and prayers and nothing changed. Already they were preparing the sacred ritual for embalming her, once more prayers for Anubis and Osiris were heard when an old old man stepped in. The old man took her hand, and he smiled, and gave Ansu a small kiss on her left eyelid and a small kiss on her right eyelid. And the priests and witches and doctors could see how, ever so swiftly, life was coming back to her. Her skin became more alive, her breath fuller, and her eyes started moving under her eyelids. Everyone felt relieved, everyone felt lighter. And after some time that may have been a year or may have just been an hour, Ansu the young dancer opened her eyes.

She realised that the worst of nightmares became truth – she was blind.

She has lost her vision.

“How would I save people like that?” she thought.

“How could I dance before pharaoh if I cannot see him”

“How could I dance for Amon Ra, how could I dance for the priestess, how could I look for people who need me if I cannot see them”

“I have lost my vision, I have lost my direction.”

And she cursed the man who kissed her eyelids and made her live again, and swore to herself that this would be the last day of her life, as it was surely destined to be.

On the small hours of the night, when everybody was asleep, even the slaves, Ansu got up quietly and half crawling half stumbling, she left the palace. She knew the palace well, so she could find her way out relatively easily, and once outside she walked with abandonment and fearless resolve. Stumbling, falling, and getting up time and again, bruised, only to continue and walk again. Until she arrived at a place that had a strange atmosphere.

It was damp, and cool, cooler than the unbearable heat of outside. And it smelt acidic and, although it was cool it still felt heart-warming and welcoming. It felt sacred, it felt moist, and it was mysterious and unknown and at the same time familiar. And the young woman knew that this is the place where she was going to die. So she prayed, she prayed for Amon Ra to give her peace and she started dancing.

For the first time, she danced a different kind danced; a dance that hasn't been danced or eons.

First she moved slowly, searching for a place that would allow her flexibility and expansion.

And she danced her anger and the place rumbled with her

And she danced her fear and shook with all her might

And she danced her sadness and her betrayal of herself, of all that mattered to her

And she danced her terror

And she danced her hopes

And she danced her spirit

And she danced her womanhood

It wasn't the calculated dance she has learned, although the years of training proved useful in freeing her up.

It wasn't the meticulously unemotional dance of the sacred ritual.

She danced for hours on end. Surrendering to the dance, yet not abandoning herself.

And the more she danced the more alive she became, for hours and hours and hours she danced.

What she didn't know was that at that time the day was almost gone, and the sun was almost setting and pharaoh and his priests and priestesses were waiting outside of the cave for the bats to come out. And when the sun reached the spot where the bats came out every day, the people of the delegation held their breath, as they always have done. Pharaoh knew that the bats are coming. Yet the sun was going lower and lower, descending in its daily journey, making space for the yellow of the moon but still no

bats. The sun was totally set, the sky were purple and the bats were not seen. Concerned and frightened, Pharaoh sent a priest inside – and he entered the cave; with his eyes closed to ease the transition, praying. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen – and no sign of the priest.

A second priest was sent inside and the man went in praying. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen, twenty – and no sign for the priest.

Then pharaoh made a decision fitting a king, and together with his delegation, he entered the cave. It took them all a while to get used to the dark. But then they saw it – a million bats were moving in rhythm. Their eyes were blind but they were seeing with their bodies, seeing with their ears – watching the wonder that was taking place underneath. There she was, the dancer, dancing her most magnificent dance that was everything about emotions, everything about her. They saw her.

They saw her dancing her anger and they rumbled with the rest of the cave
And they saw her dancing her fear and shaking with all her might
And they saw her dancing her sadness and her betrayal of herself, of all that mattered to her
And they saw her dancing her terror
And they saw her dancing her hopes
And they saw her dancing her spirit
And they saw her dancing her womanhood
And they saw her dancing the joy that awoke in her
And they saw her dancing the life that was awakening in her

Each and every being in that cave could feel the sadness, the joy, the spirit, the anger, the fear, the betrayal. In themselves, each and every being in that cave could feel the fire, the earth, the air, the water, the wood. This is the dance that the ancients Egyptians have forgotten and were now reminded of. She is dancing. She is dancing of life and they are watching the most sacred dance that ever took place upon the earth. She is dancing for herself, yet they are all touched. Their spirit becomes fuller – perhaps not happier but real and full. This is the dance like a dance could only be. This is the dance of life

“It is said,” her father told her, “that the priestess started a new path, and although her life were never the same she did not die that day”. She became the most honourable priestess ever. It is said that from that day onwards the dance was no longer carried out unemotionally, that dancers were encouraged to follow her vision and surrender without abandonment, that a new tradition emerged. The dance was the dance of the dancer’s soul and the priestess was dancing with herself, of herself. And the priestess became one of the most cherished figures of Egypt.

“And once a year,” she told her friend, “once a year – in a very particular day – they bats don’t come out of the cave. They stay in the cave to commemorate the enchanting dancer, and to honour the day when their lives have changed”

And it is said that anybody who sees the magical fog of bats coming out of the cave, gets a sense of that dance, and the soul starts dancing its own sacred dance.

We were supposed to leave Kao Yai in the next morning, but have decided to stay one more day. And in the evening, once more, we went to the same spot. And I was secretly wishing for the bats to stay in today – I wished that today would be the day of remembrance. And yet they have come, and as they were flying in a long chain – in a long magical fog into the woods of Kao Yai, something in the body was reminded of the dance, something in the body is awakening into a dance. And even though it was far away from home, something in the body is reminded of what home really is.