

# Ego Genesis

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## 1 The Witness

It's 4004 BCE, once upon a time.

Somewhere in the Fertile Crescent, a forty-strong tribe of neolithic primates is harvesting dates from a riverside palm grove. From the West, a gusting wind is whipping dust devils. Rock goats complain at the sun's heat, but their primate companions are silent. Old Shamash told the troop it would find a great many dates by the Winter River, and many dates there are, so, for now, there is nothing that needs to be said. The old ones are sleeping in the shade of a hawthorn, the Chief is still bleeding from last night's fight, and the date-skins of the rest of the tribe are filling.

The world, it seems, is simple.

There is thought, yes, but no more than that.

It's easy enough - at first, that is - to imagine such a way of being. We only need think of a state of flow. Immersion in song, dance, food; the rolling, rhythmic eternity of sex. We're well accustomed to sinking back - glass of *eau de vie* in hand - into that sea of meta-zero oneness. Such idyllic innocence is, after all, what we're all searching for. And we aren't fools for dreaming: such states exist. But, although we have experience of such pure, existential being, it's hard to think of such an endless sea in the absence of islands from which to observe it. How to picture the vastness of space without stars or planets to give it scale? How to imagine the darkness of night, unless by way of comparison with day? The fact is, until there is matter, not even the vacuum exists.

Picking sun-fat dates at dusk.

Heat shimmers, sweat pours.

The sunset is warm at the back of your neck.

Inner, outer, it makes no difference.

Days aren't days.

Old Shamash sleeps, hidden by a branch.

A crow swoops; a falcon moves higher.

Mixed with the crickets, thunder creaks faintly.

Your head turns.

But the day is sleeping, hot as ever.

The sky is a lake-sky, rippling still.

So you return to the date-stems, calm-simple once more. Time laps unseen, as waves on an empty beach, unmarked. But the sound comes again. Again, your ears prick - *lions? wolves?* - but those thoughts are slow. That sound isn't animal. It's a cave sound, a hole sound, a dropped-rock well sound. It's a roaring of waves, a wind from everywhere at once. But all around, in the dusty still, the others keep picking. They don't see the mood that is rising with the hills.

There's a clink-splash of unseen water.

Inside?

*What?*

And time skips, not that you know it.

The world grows brighter.

There is leaf noise, sky noise, a humming like insects.

Then sight joins the maelstrom. You see a turquoise fish, long as an ox, swim through the wind beside the tree. You blink, blink, blink, but there is no attempt to make sense of it. There is no "you" with which to make sense. There is only shock. Shock at that wonderful, burning brightness. The sun shouts. The air folds back. The others fade out to insects in a whirlwind. You pick another date, but not to feel normal; there is no such thing; there is no intent. There's only existence, unseen by existence.

You pick another date, because you pick another date.

But, as the branch bends, and snaps away...

The tree quivers.

Dizzy, you take a bite.

Thunk.

And it's then that somehow, with a shimmering lift, with a wrenching twist of what was once strong, you turn, blink, see, and then, staggering back, *become*. The eyelids of the world flicker up. Farness, that high eagle, that dweller in the outside, rushes in, and splits a ravine; its talons cut. The world splits like summer clay, rock from rock, eye from eye: there's a crack where there was nothing to crack, and night floods in like a swarm. There are now *two* places, where once there was one.

You are the mouth that eats the fruit.

You are the witness, the taster of dates.

You are the hand that grasps the tree.

You are the ghost in the mountain lake.

And, suddenly, *everything is*.

Sticky fingers, lichen rock, middle earth, cavern sky.

So you stand, one foot either side of the morass, and swallow a howl. Somehow, inside, that cry still cries, but in silence. Then all the fear comes.

Fear as of the one that comes in the dark, wolf-bite, storm-flash, all of it for a far more terrible thing: the you/world which was always you-world. The python has returned your little one - her eyes are bright with laughter once again - and placed her shadow - voidsome, ghoulish - inside your breast, where it weeps. There are walls now: something has built a house. No longer full, but filled, emptily. With you, with this, with all of this. And - *oh, how can it be?* - this "inside-shelter" is empty of them. Those things that once lived in you as thoughts, as pieces of sameness, are no longer so. Suddenly, they're *out there*, beyond the grey river; they're picking dates, dull as puddles. But you, rocking, head in hands, are somewhere else, mocked by a gang of soundless questions.

Noiseless, you can hear words.

Do the rest know? Do they hear it?

No. They can't. You know they can't.

Their faces remain as yesterday's faces.

Blank-eyed, like beasts.

Later, into the time of hooligan madness, their date-skins are brimming, but yours is empty. What is food compared to this brightness? What is shelter compared to this thought-house? Nothing. You slump to your knees in the scrub, and your fingers tremble with joy and horror. But then the Chief barks, and the troop is leaving, making for home in the lee of the hill. Someone - yes, someone, one of those thoughts that are no longer thoughts but people, *people!* - picks up Old Shamash. The children move. You wait and wait, clinging to the rough reality of the trunk, but they turn, and come back, snapping.

And, eventually, you've no choice but to follow.

On the walk, you hide your face.

But, back at the old rock circle, when it comes to time to share, you can't disguise your empty date-skin. The other out-walkers, the "bodies become", have hundreds each, juicy and thick. Mura, good Mura tries to hand you half of hers, but, though your right hand reaches out, your heart shakes no, and, with the left, you push her away. You don't know why. You don't know of "why". All you know is: it hurts in a new place, along the scar. It hurts where the long black snake took your little one.

Your uncle thrusts out his hand, and there's nowhere to look.

"My skin is empty," you say.

And, when they see your betrayal, your theft, your uncle and mother sharpen animal lids, and snarl. "Lake-eye," they spit. They make the sign of a watcher of water. And, divided, you have no reply. Your family march you stumbling to the Chief, who throws you down in front of the gang. Then, as Old Shamash hoots with laughter, you lie still, mute as a river-smooth stone, and the Chief thrashes you bloody. In the end it's Mura who picks you up, throws your arm over her shoulder, and drags you out, beyond the treeline.

Thus it happens that you bury your secret.

Many, many long nights pass.

You forage for food, hidden from the hissed rage, and, lost in parts, you do your time, sleeping in the old caves. There are walls of rock, and walls of smoke. You stay lonesome, solitary, but never solitary. Everything has a *witness*; you sit next to you. Again and again, as the season turns, you try to fit your world back together - to stitch sky and earth like cowhide - but, every time, the wound refuses. Somehow, the seam always splits again, and the torn scab is worse for having started to knit. So, autumn drifts to winter. There are moments of peace, yes, moments in the hunt, moments when action brings the balm of simplicity, but, when the night is calm again, there is always an rip, a hole at the centre.

After some years, you no longer weep.

Then, as the seasons turn, you start to see things. Grain growing, date-saplings sprouting. You build a great shelter, away in the hills, and raise good fruit. You just know, somehow. And, every so often, a young one visits. A wild one. Coming in secret, they whisper "Lake-eye". Some speak, some frown, some smile, but you keep your silence. Then, when the plants are wilted with drought, when all the figs but yours are shrivelled, the Chief dies of the dark fever, and his son, not knowing where else to turn, brings you back to the rock circle. Mura's daughter gives you turtle's eggs.

And, though the sky still screams, you take your place beside the fire.

They don't understand you, but that doesn't matter.

You know where to sow; you know when to reap.

Time passes.

A few times, when loneliness bites, you try to tell the others. You talk of the cave, the cave within, but it does no good; the firelit faces stay as bestial as ever, and there is nothing to be said of the deep cut. They listen, yes, but no one hears; the words soak away like rain on turned earth. And, with the slow passing of moons, the silences between such attempts stretch, until, at last, they join together as a sea rising to swallow the land, and you hold your tongue once more. There seems to be no need of it. There is nothing to be said that is not of the secret, nothing to be thought that is not of these "thoughts", but, though their eyes are open, you know that none of the rest can see.

Thus it continues.

Crumbling down, aging, ever aging.

Sometimes, inside, you feel the gust of the wind, and you rage against your lonely fate, but there's always some part, some thoughtless part that refuses to let you drop the sky. The bright torch, the inner sun, burns your hand, yet on you trudge - summer, winter, summer, winter - until, at last, as the seasons blur, you feel the coming of darkness. Rest. Bent beneath the weight of your long vigil, you sit in front of the tribal fire, apart from the others as always, and watch your siblings' children's children bring the fruit in from the groves. Mura's great-grandson kneels in front of you.

He looks sick.

His date-skin slips from trembling fingers.  
Empty.  
And it's then, deep in the shadow, that you see it.  
The ghost in the mountain lake.

## 2 The Child

You see it in his helpless look, in his blinking, desperate stare. There are unshed tears at his lashes. You see them, and you know. You *know*. This boy, quavering, thin as a stick, squatting on his haunches beside the fire, is no longer a beast. Behind the frail, dark circles of his eyes, there is another place. His day is broken. It's there, right there, glittering on his cheeks. His world is split, as yours is split. He is alone, as you are alone. He sees, yes, as you have seen.

*This* is the moment for which you have lived.

*This* is the end for which you have wept.

And so, summoning the last of your strength, you rise, as you haven't done in years. Darklit, you creak to standing. Your great-grandnephew gasps, stumbling back, silhouetted black against the fire, and the tribe falls silent. In the hush, heads turn like sunflowers, but you ignore them; they don't matter. Nothing does but *him*. You fix your gaze on the quaking boy, whose face is a lamb's, and you sway like grass before a north wind. Your niece leaps to help you, but you sweep her aside. You know full well this effort will kill you - you whose bones are close to dust - but that is nothing.

Fate is calling.

Your secret will not die with you.

Your secret *must* not die with you.

"In the darkness..." you croak.

And there are whispers in the firelight: "Lake-eye!"

"...there is light."

The boy's empty date-skin thunks to the dust.

"This day," you say, "is not the dark. It is born of the dark. Sky above, earth below. Inside, where there was nothing, is sun. Farness." You pause. Then, as wind throws sparks from the fire, you follow the you-thread back to its source, and try to remember the day the universe began. You search on both sides of the world-divide, dredging for every tear you collected, and it all comes back.

The rock circle holds its breath.

"There are two trees," you say, gesturing at the silent tribe, whose jaws full of fig and incredulity. "One is a tree whose dates hang thick. It is the tree of old summer, the tree which has no seed. But the other?" Your gaze returns to the boy. "The other is the tree of... distance. It is the tree that holds up the sky."

"Old one..." a cousin says, in from the smoke.

But you growl, "Quiet, ox."

And your eyes remain.

Another lull descends.

"Those," you go on, "who eat from the second tree move. They fly. They go into the stars." You smile at the boy's silent tears. "And they are more than afraid." He swallows, blinking, and you close your eyes, shuddering with memory. "Afraid, yes." And you almost slump. It hurts, yes, everything hurts, the winds of winter are in your lungs, but that changes nothing. All that matters is the boy, the boy. "But," you cry, "the one who eats from the tree of distance is an old one. For he sees as the owl sees. He sees as the *crow* sees. And, though he is scorpion-bitten, he also becomes like the stars. He looks down. And, when strangers come, brothers alike, he knows them. He, the one who eats the distance, knows the dog from the wolf."

There is quiet.

"This boy," you roar, "is to lead."

There are whispers of amazement. "But..."

"Yes." Your legs are shaking now. "He is Adam, the one who is to carry the sky. The maker of fire and firestones. I am old now, my bones are breaking, but, through him, I will be as I will be. And, when the jackals circle, he will protect you, as I have." Then one knee buckles, and everything lurches.

Down, down.

The boy Adam gasps in alarm, and throws himself, arms outstretched. He catches you in his youngling's hands, strong, soft, and guides you in against his chest. A black wave rises, curling to break, but then you feel his heartbeat, strong at your ear, and heave another breath. The chasm that broke you yawns again. But his love is winding, side to side, side to side, and the walls fight.

"I go back," you say, "to the Earth. To the first."

His voice becomes choked. "Don't go, don't go."

But the quiet is calling. "I must."

"No, no," the boy pleads. "What do I do?"

"Carry the sky."

"I can't," he weeps, "please, please."

It is then you reach up with a blind man's hand, and touch his cheek. There is no sight. "Adam," you murmur, pressed to his ear, "this thing is your weight. This stone that sits upon your shoulders is yours, and yours alone. You must carry it into the hills. You must carry it as I have." A cough rattles, but the words keep coming. "You cannot go back." Barely a whisper. "The grass, the grass is full of snakes."

He blinks, lids glistening.

You murmur: "Carry the sky."

Tearful, he shakes his head. "I can't."

"You *can*," you snarl, with the last of your strength. "Your shoulders are strong. Your heart is stronger. If you, you who have seen the distance, give

up the sky, then all is disease. Fever. Drowning. Your daughters will drown.” You sigh, remembering the years of toil, and nestle deeper. His young body is a fountain. Still the words come, drifting like sea-rain. “Many times,” you shiver, “you will wish you were only one, dead, eating from the first tree. But, my boy, you are to bear the light.”

A flood of tears erupts. “I will try.”

“Fight, don’t fight,” you whisper.

“I . . .”

And, at last, the chasm closes.

You, the old one, make your return.

### 3 The Addict

After your fireside passing, after the day that changed the world, the boy you named as man, Adam, carries your words for the rest of his days. As he leads the tribe, through drought and fire, he clings to your words, he nurtures them, he fashions them. He worships them. Because, on the day his universe started, they were his saviour. You were his saviour. And your long-borne secret, murmured in terms you couldn’t have hoped to understand, saved his life.

So the helix turns.

Some lonely years later, he teaches two more - a pair of twins - to carry the scintilla, to be bearers of the soul-spark. They teach five of their children between them. Five becomes eight, and so it goes on. Wings beget wings, and the thread of consciousness winds its way. And every time some wizened face tells the tale, the tale tells itself and more. It grows lovelier, stronger, truer. More powerful. Until the story is common knowledge, a song of songs, a song of the people, and an elder sings it every night. Many just listen, enjoying the sounds, lost in the fire-flicker, but others *hear*, night after night, and are slowly changed.

In time, it is no longer a salve.

Now, it has become a *tool*, an active chisel for raising the sky. And its very form dictates the shape of its sons and daughters. Its roots find particular fissures, mind-cracks the right size for its thrusts, and opens them wider. Thus, it becomes not a story of an old creation, but, instead, a creation story. It makes people. It literally makes people. Its images define its products, and its products define a people. In time, every neighbouring tribe knows it, and consciousness floods away from ground zero. The myth, in mimicking the process by which a human becomes self-aware, primes the pathways, coaxes them into life, builds them up through mirror-practice, and, in the end, engenders itself. Under its guidance, the sparks of self-awareness catch in a thousand places.

Lake-eye's fire becomes an inferno.

Six thousand years later, in some American Eden, the same distance grows.  
A mood settles on the far hills.

A black vapour.  
Dark ripples collect inside.

Until, one day, the heart-cyst bursts. It bursts in an explosion of lucidity and terror. For a time, all is sweet fire. Glassy radiance. But the light is too much. It is too bright. Then comes the modern flinch. The shutting-off, the midnight emptiness, the shrinking back into bitter little pills. And, in the end, mourning. This is how consciousness arrives now, sneaking into bedrooms, killing unseen. The helix turns in silence. And the fallout of this quiet catastrophe is ever-present: booze, opioids, silence, armour, body-shame, power-greed, suicide, meth. No one mentions the sudden turning-in, the glimpse of the ghost in the mountain lake.

No one ever mentions the *chasm*.

And it is the most virtuous, the most "culturally sound", the most attentive of parents that lack the dark language to talk of such things. In a culture whose myths are intact, homogeneity is fine. But in a culture whose myths have chemical formulae? It's a *disaster*. Without reference to depth, to the unknown, to exile, there can be no hope. What good is politeness? Only dark images heal darkness. Thus addiction - the mistaken filling of the vacuum - strikes in the gentlest, brightest place. It takes the good child, the unabused child, the cared-for child, the adored child. Why? Because all the trappings of bliss - the germless surfaces, the glistening cars - do nothing for the human condition.

They paper over the cracks.  
Nothing more.

We have long been content to pick the fruits of consciousness - science, medicine, pleasure, tech - but we haven't tended to the tree itself. We have fed it rocket-fuel fertiliser; we have tied it back, pruned it, and propped it up - all to persuade it to bear more blooms - but we haven't tended to the *roots*. It has grown so tall, so strong, so fast that it doesn't suit us to remember its origin, the seedling days of our extraordinary gift.

We don't remember what we've each been through.  
We'd rather imagine ourselves fully formed.  
Invincible islands in an empty sea.

And the standard attitude - "well, I survived it" - comes back to bite us

not in some corner of dusty scholarship, not in "Religion vs Science", but in loveless marriages and teenage *hate*. In smiles ravaged by crack. And we are all complicit. We, as the ones who make up our culture; we, as the ones who know. We are all, as long as we do nothing, complicit. The journey to adulthood is history in microcosm, and it is savage. *Australopithecus, habilis, erectus, heidelbergensis, sapiens*, and, at last, *Lake-eye*. But ego genesis is the making of a state of *exile*. While there is no original sin, there is sure as hell an original wound. A separation not merely from meaning, but from the very *apparatus* of meaning.

This is the battle we pretend we never fought.

Why?

Because it is easier to forget.

What is our goal as human beings?

Is it to persuade? To convert? To win over? To establish the primacy of hard rationality? To crush mysticism? To defeat the unknown? *No! A thousand times, No! All joy, all love, all meaning lies there!* The unknown is the source of all bliss. The task is not to overcome faith, but to *update* it. To move to a higher level of consciousness. We all want that, of course - to be as conscious as we can be - but to do so, we each have to hold up the sky. And such a task, as we know, is not without pain. But there is more nobility in a single moment of honest darkness than there is in a hundred lifetimes of feted "success."

The task offers no riches, of course, no accolades, no celebrity.

It offers only Lake-eye's dying breath.

But just imagine going out on those terms!