

Amid

Amid was waiting for his dead grandfather who he knew would be waiting to meet him after the torturer had completed his work. The torturer hit him again. Boots stamped on his bare feet. Amid could not stop spitting blood. It dribbled down his chin. He felt damp. His neck ached. His hands were strapped together. Amid listened to the sound of the snake whip as it echoed through the Python Cell deep below the royal palace.

Yes. Now, he could hear it. A clear rhythm. Amid became conscious of his spitting as his contribution towards his torturer's rhythm. Once again Amid tried to see the face of his torturer. He looked beyond the darkness towards the small window of his cell. It was not yet dark. When would grandfather come? Amid saw sweat dripping from the man with the whip and machete. The torturer was getting tired. Silence. The whip stopped its angry dance.

The torturer muttered obscenity about Amid's mother, and his whip came close to Amid's face. He watched the muscular arm move up and down. Amid listened to the sound. The pain was different now. In the beginning, it had been unbearable. Each blow had made his body jump. A blow on his shoulder hurt his body in several different places, like a ball bouncing on his inside. After the first time he fainted and awoke to hear the voice of the torturer call him a cockroach. When was the beginning? He could not really remember. His memories of that time were of darkness and light. Both frightened him. At night he thought he saw snakes on his cell. In the day he saw death in the eyes of other prisoners. He was sure that there were small grey snakes crawling in the rivers of sweat on the torturer's face.

Amid thought about his grandmother and her wisdom. He recalled how on the day of circumcision he had been happy. He was now a man. His grandmother had worked with the other women to make the great feast for the young men. Then during the dancing a woman had screamed when her baby died. Amid had watched the mother and father throw themselves on the ground holding the dead child. He did not sleep that night as he feared for his own death.

In the morning his grandmother took him by the hand and they both drank fresh water from the well. She told him that the baby was ready for death and murmured as she held his hand. If it was now, then it would not be in the future. If it was not to be now, then it would die in the future. She held his hand and she said we must always be ready for death. Grandmother told him the story of Zoumi. It was in the hunting time. All the young men were away hunting. Only the old, weak and mothers with young children remained.

On the day before the young men returned day a lion came out of the forest looking for food. Everyone hid in their homes. But the lion did not go away. The villagers were afraid it would break into a house and kill everyone. Zoumi was the oldest man in the village. He looked at the lion from inside the house and then stood up then said goodbye to all his children. Grandmother said he touched her in farewell and then walked outside their house. He shouted the lion's name until it appeared and then faced the animal. When the lion jumped and killed him, Zoumi did not make a sound. Grandmother said Zoumi knew that it was the time to join his ancestors as his time in the sunlight was over.

Amid listened. He said nothing and wanted to talk about it with her again, but it never happened. One day Grandmother did not wake up.

Amid knew now that the sound in his head were changing. It used to be a loud crackling noise. It reminded him of windy nights when animals howled at the shadows of trees. But now, there was a softer quality quality sound.. It was becoming pleasant - the sound of birds wings fluttering. Amid knew all the different birds in the fields.

Amid could only see the torturer's eyes, and the sweat moving slowly along the small dirty lanes on each side of the nose. Amid could hear the torturer's feet move as he approached him. Shuffle, click, click, shuffle.

A new sound. A new prisoner came in and was kicked and hit with the knobbed stick. The torturer hit the new prisoner again. Amid watched the torturer's eyes. A mud bank with a river of sweat. The new prisoner groaned as the boot hit his groin. He screamed. Another kick. Another scream. Kick, scream, kick. More screams.

Amid needed to know the name of the torturer. He wondered what tribe he was from. Amid had been in the room with the small door for longer than he could recall. He used numbers to recall and protect his mind from confusion. I am here for so many nights. But how many days and nights? Days with light, darkness, shadows, fears. Hotness and coldness. Numbers rattled through his head. One hundred days. How many shadows. He could not remember. How long was that- he could not recall. The only number left was infinity. He knew that within infinity, he had a safe place to bury days of hot, cold, seasons of sweat and memories. Amid began to panic as he felt he would soon die. He had to find out the torturer's name and his tribe. This was custom. Only when he named the man who tortured him could he think of his journey towards his ancestors.

Amid heard his name being called. He recognised the voices. His wife, Zara, his father Hamid. Who was calling him now? It must be Zoumi, his grandfather. Amid could not remember anything about him. Zoumi had died when Amid was still drinking from his mother's breast. There were no photographs of Zoumi, but many stories. Zoumi knew his history. Zoumi could read the stars. Zoumi could always find water in the dry season.

Amid remembered what his grandmother had told him. It was necessary to get as close as you can to the first ancestor, so that you would hear the message he would bring. Amid had been told that that ancestors were always awake at night.

Amid thought night and day had been eternal since he entered the Python Cell. He had no idea how to measure time now. He never knew when the night began as the Python Cell was dark. He had been hit so often around the eyes that he could not see clearly. Darkness was a black face and a shadow.

I am aware of night by the sounds of what is happening. It is night. Crickets are singing with the high-pitched cries of a raped girl as the soldiers use her once again. An animal howls or is it other prisoners? He is unsure. Amid knows some of the sounds. Snuffling, feet being dragged. But, are their animals in the prison cell? He had seen a snake, more than once. Was that the python that moved in the shadow. And the smaller snake. He remembers a warder. A snake in his hand as he goes towards the raped girl. And what about the leopard? Was there one there too. He thought he had seen the staring eyes in the corridor.

His mind was confused. Amid sat down and looked his leg and the dried black blood around his ankle. There was light shining on it. He moved the leg. It did strange things the light. He realised his leg looked different each time he shifted it a little. And it hurt. He knew how to measure the duration of the sound of the pain. When the torturer first kicked him, he had felt the pain as a colour. A bright colour. He chose purple. He was hit again. Then the colour changed. Amid wanted yellow, but the colour had been chosen for him. Why am I so confused, he thought? I know what happened. A clear pattern. Only then I will begin to understand the ancestor's words.

When Amid had arrived in the prison he had asked the torturer his name as he had been kicked and hit with the whip. But the torturer never spoke. He just kicked and kicked and whipped. Amid remembered the blood and pain. He asked for water. When it came, it was brown and foul tasting. Amid drank and vomited.

He remembered the clicking of the whip as it lashed his face. He had closed his eyes. When the clicking stopped he waited for a while and then looked up. The man with the whip had now gone to another prisoner.

The clicking sound stopped and the torturer came back. He was tired. Instead of sitting on the chair, he dropped to the floor. Amid watched. He could not understand what was happening. There was a chair for the torturer. He was obviously seen as important by his bosses. Otherwise, why would they have given him a chair? The torturer now lay resting on the floor instead of sitting on the chair. Amid had never sat on a chair like the white man and the Chiefs. In his village there were only stools. Chairs were for white people and chiefs.

When the torturer slept, Amid looked at his own body. He saw his feet. The blood had dried. One foot was in a different position to its normal position. He remembered when it happened. He had thought of numbers when the soldier hit him six times with a rifle handle. He recalled the face of the soldier. Amid saw different faces in his torturer. A skull face with an open mouth. A snake dripping spit from its fangs. A dark cloud. Rain. The soldier hit him hard, one, two, three, four times. Then there had been a pause. Amid had counted during that time. He knew the torturer was sweating. It trickled down the dirty channels etched on his face. He was a man from another tribe. When he was tired he sang a song. Amid did not know it. It sounded like a warrior song. Amid listened to the words. The insults, you are a cockroach, a dog. Words about women giving birth to snakes and hyenas. The soldier's eyes were red. He looked drugged like all the soldiers were when they raided villages. Amid heard the voice get louder as the soldier kicked him. There had been pain. So much. A lot of pain. But why was now going away? Amid wanted to touch his blood soaked foot, but he could not move it.

Amid remembered the soldiers coming to the village. He told his wife to go into the jungle and to take the children with her. When she left he also gave her his farm tools. Amid knew he would never come back to his village. His wife had asked him to come, but he said that some men had to stay behind to be captured or the soldiers would go into the jungle and find other victims. Every few months some soldiers would come. They wanted prisoners for the leaders, girls to rape, girls to cook, boys to become soldiers, drugs for themselves and food.

Amid watched his wife hurry away for safety. His last view of her was her gold capulana with the smallest child going into the safety of the jungle. She had never turned back. She knew, like him, that he would not come back to her alive. Amid would never know that his wife and son would also be captured and killed.

Amid slept and suddenly awoke. He felt a kick in his side. He turned and saw a dark mouth. Most of the front teeth were missing. There was a hollowed out space where a right eye should have been. It looked like a cinder. The face stared at Amid and muttered something he did not recognise. Warriors from the other tribe, she said, come to our village. Two of my sisters were taken. One was found dead, the other was never seen. We always wanted to kill them, but our village never had enough young men. Our life was farming. One day Amid you will see them. It may be that when you see one, you will know that you will soon be dead. Before you die my child, look him in the eye. Ask his name and do not show fear. Defiance in death is the way we show strength. Later, you will then come back to the village as a dark elder, a guardian of darkness who looks after the trees, the gardens, the water and the fires that keep us warm.

Amid was thinking about his grandmother as the boot hit him again. He could feel something running down his skin where the boot had been. He looked. A small snake. The pain was stopping but his head was making a noise. He tried to hear what the noise was. A tree falling. His baby son crying. His wife sobbing. Again it changed. The cry of the village girls as soldiers held and entered them with penises and then with knives. He remembered the blood dripping from the young girl's slit and her dirty torn dress covered with mud and blood.

He saw a face come closer. The burnt eye stared at him and the voice growled. Amid heard the voice of his grandmother telling him to ask the torturer his name. He asked. There was no

answer. Amid asked again. No answer. He closed his eyes and listened. He needed to know the name of his torturer. Amid's grandmother had told him that no matter what happened, it was important to be aware of who did it. Kindness to all people required that you know their names, their tribe, their ancestors.

Amid could smell a fire was close by. Cooking. A small cry. But it was not an animal or a bird. He listened. A low groan was rising from where he thought the fire was. He could smell smoke in his nostrils. Again, the low voices. This time he knew what the voices meant. They were coming from outside the Python Cell. He heard a voice from his tribe making an offering to the gods. They were telling the story of the first people. How they arrived, planted the first banyan tree, farmed the land and celebrated the first crop. Their voices murmured for a long time. Amid knew the villagers stayed through night talking with the ancestors.

He opened his eyes. The boot was still in his face. The torturer appeared again. One shining eye and one dark cinder. Amid watched as the torturer held his machete up high above his head. Your name, what tribe are you from? The shape blade began to fall towards Amid's neck. You should know me, said the torturer. I am Tumbul Tamba. I am from the President's tribe. I killed your brother, I killed your uncle, I am going to kill you too.

Amid listens as he hears the name of the torturer. At last. He is calm. The swish of the machete on his neck does not hurt. He hears only the sound of leaves moving on the trees and a voice saying softly. Amid, welcome, welcome.

He feels a hand touch his hand. In the dark he knows the wart just above the nail on the left thumb. He feels it again. The hand of his long dead grandmother. Another hand touches him. He feels her long fingers. His mother's hand. He hears another voice. But, it is a deeper voice and more like the growl of the great lion of the forest. It is Zoumi. Amid hears his name being called. Come Amid, says the voice. We have been waiting for you

I stand up. My pain has gone. My body looks untouched. I look at my hands. Both are there. My feet are no longer aching and broken.

I could see them all now. Father, and mother and my small son who died in his mother's arms. I follow them as we walk out of the Python Cell through the walls and towards my village. Zoumi, my grandfather is waiting.