



PARABLES OF THE MOON

Contradiction of being human.



MARK UKAH



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Contradictions of Being Human

By Mark Ukah

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

These are not stories in the ordinary sense. They are parables — short, and meant to be read slowly, each built around a single soul and a single unbearable truth. What follows is not a summary of what happens in them. It is only enough to know who is speaking, and who they lost, so the weight is felt rather than deciphered.

The Umuala are a people who believe a soul buried wrong cannot cross into rest — that it wanders, homeless, between the living and the dead. They learned this the hard way, long before anyone else did. Theirs is the first parable, and it is not about one person, but about where the belief itself was born.

Two figures stand where a corridor ends — one who keeps a ledger of every debt, one who holds her hands open and empty. They are not statues. A grieving man speaks to them without knowing why their voices feel so familiar, or why the things they say sound like two men he lost. Theirs is “Justice and Mercy.”



The one who wanted to be forgiven carried a guilt too heavy to set down, and asked to be relieved of it. He was. What is left of him now teaches a room of everyone he used to be — for there were many of him, each whole, each alone, before the forgiving. His is “The Hall of Fragments.”

Mizuki was a scientist, a wife, a woman who could leave nothing closed. She understood her work, her body, her dying — and understood her husband so completely there was nothing left in him to discover. Then she went looking for the one door she had never opened: the truth beneath her own name. Hers is “The Moon and the Self.”

Anselm was Mizuki's husband. He did not lose her cleanly — he watched her, unreachable, for fourteen weeks, and called the watching devotion. What he could not admit, even to himself, was older and uglier than grief. His is “Two Blind Men and a Mirror.”

Read slowly. Nothing here explains itself twice.



Chapter One: THE UMUALA

Inspired by Khalil Gibran's "*My friend*"

*The Umuala say a soul buried wrong cannot cross
— that it wanders between the living and the
dead, belonging to neither. A homeless soul.*

Mother, hear this, and forgive me the hearing: what you rock to sleep still answers to my name, but the name is borrowed now, and the answering is only kindness, worn like a coat that no longer fits the one inside it.

There is a place I must go, deeper than the reach of any lullaby, and I would not have you follow — not because you could not survive it, though you could not, but because I am not yet ready to be seen there, by the one who first saw me whole. When you say the child is cold and in need of warmth, I say yes. For I would not have you know my secret place and what dwells in it. I will be vast alone.



Call it punishment if it comforts you. I have not called it anything myself. Let the smaller word stand between us a while longer. For it is a kind architecture. Grief and hunger.

When you reach into your memory of me, I descend into what I am, and even when you call out "my child, my child," some small stubborn part of me answers, "my mother, my mother."

You are faithful, Mother, and you have come so far. But the day has come when I stopped flinching at what I am. And I would not have you see me, for the sight would unmake you. You have wept in the language of your love for the child, and I, for your sake, say it is well to love him. But the child is sprawled in the vast like ink on water. The child is complete. Yet I would not have you mourn him, and I would not have you know I mourn him no more.

I am not your child anymore, Mother — I am something else. But how do I make you understand that? My door is not your door. And still, I will let you hold what's left of my hand in the dark, for as long as you need to call it holding.



This parable turns on a single recognition: love and consumption are the same gesture. The void keeps the child for the exact reason the mother came for it — neither can accept an ending. So the monster is not the opposite of the grieving mother; it is her mirror. Beneath it runs a second blade: to be known completely is to be erased. The child has been so fully learned by the void that it no longer mourns itself — it has become the thing that took it. What survives of a person is only the part that was never fully understood. And the loneliness at its center is the 'My Friend' paradox: the child guards its true nature from the mother as an act of love, so that even hand in hand, they are unreachable to each other. We protect the people we love from the truth of what we are — and that protection is its own solitude.

THE BECOMING WE CANNOT FOLLOW

A parent's fear is not the opposite of love. It is love, encountering the one direction it cannot travel.

There is a moment in every raising of a child when the parent understands, all at once and too late, that the thing they made has begun to become something they did not choose, cannot fully see, and will not be permitted to stop. This is not a single



moment. It is every moment, disguised as ordinary days — a first steady walk away across a room, a door closed for privacy, a silence where a whole confession used to be. The child is going somewhere. The parent is not invited to follow past a certain point, and never was.

We like to tell ourselves this is simply growth, and that growth is good, and that a parent's fear of it is a fault to be corrected — an anxiety to manage, a grip to loosen. Modern psychology has, for the better part of a century, offered parents a specific comfort on this point, and it is worth naming plainly before it is taken away, because the comfort is not foolish — it is kind, and mostly true, and it is what most parents are handed in place of an honest answer. The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott built much of his life's work around this comfort. He described the “good enough” mother — not perfect, not endlessly protective, but one who fails her child in small, survivable doses, because a child sealed away from all risk never develops a self strong enough to meet the actual world. Some separation, in his account, is not merely tolerable. It is the mechanism by which a person becomes a person at all. Margaret Mahler, watching infants and toddlers directly, gave this process a name — separation-individuation — and showed that it is felt as loss on both sides of it, parent and child alike, even when it is healthy,



even when it is exactly what should happen. Growth, in this telling, always costs a grief. But it is a grief in service of something worth its price, and the parent is told, gently and often, that their fear is simply the toll paid for a process that is, on the whole, benevolent.

The Umuala parable does not offer this comfort, and this is what makes it worth sitting with rather than resolving too quickly.

The mother's fear, in the myth, is not neurosis. It is not an attachment that failed to mature, a grip that should have loosened, an anxiety a wiser mother would have released. Her fear is accurate. The child does not become someone she can no longer fully see because sight is a parent's limitation — the child becomes something diminished, hollowed, taken. The 'becoming' here is not growth mistaken for loss. It is loss, correctly perceived, dressed in growth's clothing so that no one, including the one it happens to, notices the substitution in time.

This is the harder philosophy underneath the myth, and it belongs to more than one thinker willing to look at freedom without softening it first. Kierkegaard wrote of anxiety as "the dizziness of freedom" — the vertigo a self feels when it looks down into the sheer possibility of what it might become, with no guarantee, none at all, that the becoming will be for the better.



Heidegger, a century later, gave the condition a colder name: thrownness — the fact that we arrive already in motion, already becoming, into circumstances and directions we were never consulted about and cannot retroactively approve. A child is thrown into its own becoming the way it was thrown into being born at all, with no hand, not even its mother's, permitted a vote on where the throwing leads. Kierkegaard names the vertigo; Heidegger names the shove that causes it. Between them they describe a freedom that comes with no promise folded inside it — not a gift the parent can inspect and bless, but a sentence the child begins serving the moment it is capable of becoming anything at all.

And so the fear and the love turn out to be, in this telling, very nearly the same motion. You can see it in the smallest places, if you know to look — in the parent who says be careful to a child who has only asked to cross the yard alone, and means, underneath it, I love you enough to have already imagined every way this could go wrong. You cannot want a good outcome for someone without simultaneously holding open the possibility of a bad one; the wanting and the fearing are not two feelings arriving separately; they are one feeling, examined from two angles at once, the way a single coin shows a different face depending only on which way you happen to be looking at the



moment it is tossed. The mother's terror at the door is not separate from her love. It is what her love looks like once it has done the honest arithmetic of what freedom actually risks, and has refused to round the number down for comfort.

This is why the child, in the parable, understands what the mother cannot yet say: that her fear is evidence, not obstacle. And it is why the child must go regardless — not because the becoming is safe, not because it will surely turn out well, but because there was never, in truth, a version of loving that came with a guarantee attached. To have raised a self free enough to become anything at all is to have already agreed, whether knowingly or not, to the terror of not knowing what it will become.

It would be a mistake, though — and a serious one — to let the myth's darkness stand as the whole of the matter, and the parable itself does not ask you to make that mistake. What has been rendered here is one outcome of a becoming, drawn at its most extreme so that its shape could finally be seen clearly, the way you can only study the anatomy of a wound by looking directly at it rather than away. It is not the only shape a child's becoming takes, and it is not even the most common one. Most becomings, most departures through most doors, arrive



somewhere whole — changed, unreachable in the old ways, genuinely gone from who they were, and still, by any honest measure, more fully themselves than they were before they left. The myth tells you, with total honesty, what it feels like to fear the worst version of a thing every parent must eventually release. It does not tell you, and was never trying to tell you, that the worst version is the only one waiting on the other side of the door. Most doors, opened, lead somewhere a mother could still call home, even if she is no longer permitted to live there.



Chapter Two: JUSTICE AND MERCY

After Gibran's Scarecrow

At the end of the moon stood two statues — Justice with her scales, Mercy with her open hands. I did not go there to speak.

I went there most nights, the way a man visits a grave he tells no one about. "It must be a hard thing," I said, "to hold a pose so long and so well that the pose forgets it was ever a choice."

Justice answered first. "There is nothing hard in it. I have counted every debt that ever came due on the wrong man, and the counting has never once worn me down."

"Nor is there in mine," said Mercy. "I could hold my hands open until the mountains wore flat. It is the closing that would undo me."

I thought for a moment, though I did not mean to answer. But something in me had been waiting a long time for permission, and I gave it. "It's true. I too know the pose well and kept count myself of debts that came due on better men than me. I have



stood with my hands open a long time waiting for something to be put back in them. I never once called it tired. I called it faithful."

Justice turned toward me then. "Only those who have already lost can hold the pose so well," she said. "The faithful are only the bereaved who haven't turned around yet."

I did not answer that. I did not know how to respond to a thing that had just told me the truth about myself in the voice of someone I used to know. I left the corridors of the moon the way you leave a room after bad news.

Time passed the way it always did there — which is to say it did not pass so much as accumulate, without dates, without weight, until one day was indistinguishable from a year.

When I came that way again, there were three statues where there had been two.

The third stood between them, scales level, hands open, and it wore my face so exactly, the way a name wears the mouth that has spoken it too many times.

I understood, before I understood anything else, that it had not just arrived. It had been waiting for me. And underneath all



three faces now, something small and patient had been building itself a home — quietly, for longer than I let myself notice — and it did not intend to leave.

Where the first parable is confession, this one is recognition. Elias mistakes the postures of devotion for the postures of loss — and learns they are the same. To keep count, to hold your hands open, to wait faithfully: these are not virtues; they are grief that hasn't turned around yet. 'The faithful are only the bereaved who haven't turned around yet.' The blade is that fidelity and mourning are indistinguishable — that waiting for something to be put back in your hands is just refusing to admit it's gone. And the wordless final image completes it: he becomes the third statue, and the void nests in all of them, because a man who holds the pose of loss long enough becomes a monument to it. Devotion, held past its object, calcifies into the thing it mourned.



ON THE LEDGER THAT WAS NEVER KEPT

A moral order does not fail. It was never a promise. We only ever heard it as one.

There is an assumption buried so deep beneath ordinary life that most people never examine it directly: that somewhere behind the visible world, a kind of accounting is taking place. That cruelty is logged. That patience is registered. That the universe, whatever else it is, contains something like a ledger — an entity or a law or a structure that notices what is owed and, eventually, in some form, settles it. Call this assumption Justice. Call the gentler half of it Mercy — the belief that what is given in good faith is received somewhere, held, and answered in kind. Almost no one states this belief outright. Almost everyone lives inside it.

Nietzsche spent much of his philosophical life trying to make his readers see this assumption for what it was: not a discovery about the universe, but a human invention, built because the alternative was unbearable. He argued that entire moral orders — entire structures of desert, reward, and cosmic fairness — are architecture people erect and then forget they built, mistaking the walls for weather. His warning was not about any particular belief, but about the danger of forgetting that a comforting



structure was ever built at all: once a scaffolding is mistaken for bedrock, its collapse feels like betrayal rather than what it actually is — the discovery that it was scaffolding.

This is the philosophical ground the man in the parable is standing on, though he does not know its name. He asks two statues whether they are weary — a small, almost polite question — and receives, in return, something closer to a confession that the entire order he has organized his life around was never load-bearing to begin with. Justice tells him she has counted every debt that ever came due on the wrong man, and never balanced one. Mercy tells him her hands have been open since before he arrived, and have closed on nothing, the entire time. These are not two tired guardians admitting fatigue. They are the moral order itself, admitting, plainly, that it never functioned the way it was believed to function — that the ledger was never kept, because there was no one behind the counter to keep it.

Camus built his philosophy on the exact shape of this discovery, and called it the absurd — not the world being ridiculous, but something colder: the collision between a mind that demands coherence, fairness, a why behind what happens, and a universe that was never built to supply one. The absurd is not a flaw in



existence. It is the precise, permanent gap between what consciousness requires and what reality was ever obligated to provide. Camus insisted this gap could not be philosophized away, prayed away, or waited out. It could only be met, clear-eyed, without the comforting fiction that closing your eyes tighter would make the ledger appear.

The man's own suffering — his years of counting, his own hands held open — is not the center of this parable so much as its evidence. He is the instrument by which the reader discovers that the moral order was hollow, because his life was the experiment that tested it and returned, after a long trial, an empty result. His faithfulness was never separate from the order he had faith in; it was a symptom of believing the order existed. Remove the order, and what remains is not a man who is now, additionally, revealed to be suffering — what remains is the discovery that the entire frame in which “faithfulness” made sense as a virtue has collapsed, and with it, quietly, so has the distinction between his devotion and his despair. This is why the statues cannot simply comfort him. There is nothing behind them to comfort him with.

And this is why, in time, he becomes the third statue — not as a personal tragedy alone, but as the final proof of the essay's true



claim: a moral order with no one behind it does not stay empty in the abstract. It fills, eventually, with whoever stood in front of it long enough, believing. He does not join Justice and Mercy. He completes them — a third hollow figure, standing where belief in an order used to stand, because a corridor with no ledger and no receiving hands does not remain a corridor. It becomes a shrine to the absence, attended, in the end, by everyone who ever needed the absence to be something else.

It would be false, and too easy, to close by restoring the ledger — to say that justice is real after all, if only sought differently, or that mercy waits somewhere it has simply not yet been found. That would betray the very collapse this parable insists on. What can honestly be offered instead is this: the absence of a cosmic ledger does not mean nothing is worth doing, or that no debt is worth honoring, or that no open hand is worth extending. It means those things must be undertaken without the comfort of guarantee — chosen, not owed; given, not collected on. This is a harder ethic than the one the man believed he was living by. It may also, in the long accounting no one is keeping, be the only honest one available.



Chapter Three: THE HALL OF FRAGMENTS

In a hall with no walls sat the fragments of a man, and each was whole, and each was alone.

One held a pair of scales and wept that they never balanced — and this was his Justice. One held a lamp with no flame and swore the light was coming — and this was his Hope. One held an empty bowl to his chest as though it were full — and this was his Longing. One held a stone and would not set it down — and this was his Guilt. There were more. There were three hundred and thirty-two, and each was perfect in its single passion, and not one could reach another, for a thing that is only one thing cannot touch what it is not.

At the front stood the teacher, who held nothing at all.

The one with the stone spoke first. "Teacher. You carry nothing. How?"

"I set it down," he said. "Each of you is chained to your one thing — you to your stone, you to your empty bowl, you to your unlit



lamp. You are whole, and so you are imprisoned, for wholeness in a single passion is only a cell with very fine walls. I asked to be relieved of my passions, and I was. Behold the freedom on the other side of wanting."

The one with the scales lifted its head. "But if you set down the stone, you are not the guilty one. And if you put out the longing, you are not the one who reaches. Teacher — which of us did you keep?"

"None," he said, and was proud. "I kept none of you. That is the liberation. I am not the grieving one, nor the hoping one, nor the guilty one. I am free of every part."

And the one with the empty bowl said, softly, "Then, teacher — what is left, when a man is free of every part of himself?"

And he went to answer, as a teacher answers, from the whole of himself —

and found no whole to answer from.

A person is not one thing but many things at war — and to end the war does not always mean becoming whole. Sometimes it only leaves



behind the rooms the parts once argued in. Division, difficult as it was, was still a kind of aliveness. Each fragment was whole in its own single passion, and alone in it too — a single feeling, held by itself, makes for a very small room. But a small room is still a room, and it was also, in its way, a self. The teacher mistook subtraction for liberation: he set down guilt, longing, hope, justice, one by one, and called what was left freedom. Only his own fragments can show him what he has actually done, and only by asking — a hollow thing rarely notices its own hollowness on its own; it takes a question to find the edges of it. The parable withholds its answer on purpose. There is no whole left, not yet, to answer from, so the page, like the man, simply pauses. Freedom and emptiness, it turns out, were the same room all along.



ON THE WHOLENESS THAT WAS MISTAKEN FOR WEIGHT

What we call transcendence is sometimes only amputation, performed slowly enough to be mistaken for growth.

There is a promise certain teachings make, in different words across different ages, and it is a seductive one: that the self can be lightened. That the difficult parts of a person — the guilt that will not resolve, the longing that never arrives anywhere, the anger at injustice that never quite finds its target — are not the person, but weight the person carries, and can therefore set down. Set enough of it down, the promise goes, and what remains will be free. Clean. Enlightened. The self, finally, unburdened by the self.

The psychologist John Welwood gave this exact mechanism a name, because he saw it often enough in people who had genuinely devoted themselves to spiritual practice: he called it spiritual bypassing — the use of transcendent language and



technique to sidestep unresolved emotional material rather than move through it. It is not always a conscious deception. Often the person doing it believes, entirely sincerely, that they have grown past their grief, their rage, their shame — when what has actually happened is that the difficult feeling has been relabeled as beneath them, unworthy of their evolved attention, and quietly exiled rather than faced. The relabeling feels like peace. It functions like avoidance wearing peace's clothes.

This is precisely the error of the teacher standing before his own fragments. He did not integrate his justice, his hope, his longing, his guilt. He set each one down, one at a time, believing that a man lightened of his passions becomes a man freed by them. He calls the result enlightenment. The parable calls it something else, and does so without raising its voice: it simply shows you the hall. Three hundred and thirty-two fragments, each whole in a single feeling, none of them able to reach any of the others — because the very thing that would let a justice and a longing and a guilt speak to one another is a self holding all three at once, and that self is exactly what he gave away in the name of freedom.

Carl Jung spent much of his working life arguing the opposite path toward wholeness, and it is worth holding his account



directly against the teacher's, because they could not be more precisely opposed. Jung believed a person becomes whole not by discarding the difficult parts of themselves — what he called the shadow, the guilt, the unwanted appetite, the buried grief — but by doing the much harder work of owning them, consciously, and folding them into a fuller self rather than exiling them from it. He called this process individuation, and he was explicit that it does not produce a lighter person. It produces a larger one — heavier, in a sense, but coherent, able to hold contradiction without needing to amputate one side of it to survive the other. The teacher performed something that looks, from a distance, like individuation's mirror image: not integration, but its precise reversal. He did not grow large enough to hold his passions. He made himself smaller by scattering them, and mistook the scattering for growth because it felt, for a while, like relief.

This is the particular cruelty the parable is built to reveal, and it does so only at the very end, in a single quiet reversal that undoes everything the teacher believed about himself. A fragment asks him what is left, once a man has set down every passion he was given. And he turns to answer — from the whole of himself, the way a man answers who still believes, out of old habit, that there is a whole self standing behind his voice, gathering the answer, delivering it. And he finds nothing there



to answer from. Not silence. Not peace. Simply no one home, no gathering place left, because the gathering place was never separate from the passions. It was made of them. Remove the guilt, the longing, the hope, the hunger for justice, one at a time, calling each removal progress, and you do not reveal a purer self underneath. You reveal that there was no underneath. The parts were not weighing the man down. The parts were the man.

It would be wrong to conclude from this that every difficult feeling must be clutched and never set down, that all letting-go is disguised self-erasure, that growth and shedding are always the same trap wearing different masks. They are not. A person can, in fact, outgrow a grief, forgive a debt, release an old anger that no longer serves any true purpose — and this is not amputation, but healing, and the difference between the two is not always visible from outside, which is exactly why the difference matters so much. The test the parable leaves standing, quietly, in its empty hall, is not whether a feeling was released, but whether what released it was a fuller self that had already made peace with the feeling, or an absence pretending, to itself most of all, that absence was the peace.



Chapter Four: THE MOON AND THE SELF

A woman sat in the peak of night, searching for answers behind the stars. Her brown skin glistening under the twinkle of the void.

"let me understand you as i wish, for i have understood everything else and wish to be called kin. For we are the same, you and I"

"Everything? How can one understand everything and wish to be the same?"

"My work, my teachers, my body, the cell it lives within, the small machineries of dying. And my husband - i understood him in a year, to the last room and loved him and was a little sad there was no more to find."

"And that sadness, you still feel it?"

"i feel it. A small grief, that the finding is over"



"Then we are not the same. i have never grieved a thing i have finished. To me there is no sadness in the last room – only the door to the next. Set down the grief, and come closer"

And she set down the grief, and the last room of her husband went silent. And she felt nothing where the sadness had been.

"Now, we are the same?" she asked.

"Not yet. You still reach for him. Your hands drift towards the shore where he stands, out of habit you have mistaken for love. I have no shore. I reach for no one"

And she took back her hand, and let the shore go dark into the moonless night, and did not look for him again.

"Now surely, we are the same"

"Not yet. you are still afraid of the thing beneath your face. You hold yourself about you like a garment in the cold, so you will never have to see what wears it. I hold nothing. I am not afraid of the deep. I am the deep."

And she loosened herself she had worn her whole life – the daughter, the teacher, the student, and the philosopher, and



looked beneath it, and did not turn away from the empty dark she found in their place.

"Now. we are the same. I have looked. there is no woman here – only the appetite, and the finishing, and the long procession of emptied room. Call me kin!"

"Not yet. You answer still to a name, and a name is the last mask — the small sound the dark makes when it wishes to be mistaken for a person. You have opened every door but the one lettered with your own name. Open it, and nothing will stand between us."

And she held the last door, the single door she had never in her life been able to open, and understood — too late to be spared by the understanding — why she had left it shut. The name was the garment. The name was the woman. The name was the merciful lie that let an emptiness believe, for one lifetime, that it was someone who could love, and be loved, in return.

She opened it, the way she had opened all the others, because a door she could open was a door she could never leave closed.

"...Call me kin."



The void narrowed its gaze toward her then, leaning into the hollowness taking root.

"You were always kin."

The constructed self is a lie — the daughter, the wife, the teacher are things we fashion, not things we find. But it is a necessary and beautiful lie, because it is the only place love can happen. To be known, to be held, to be experienced — these are real, precisely because they can be felt and measured and exchanged, and they can be felt only through the self we build. The lie is the instrument of everything true. The true self, beneath it, cannot be attained — not because it hides, but because there is nothing there to reach. What resides in it is emptiness, and loneliness, and the appetite that finishes whatever it touches. Mizuki spent her life understanding everything, and mistook that understanding for love. So when the last door remained — the self beneath the roles — she opened it, believing a deeper truth waited there. But the roles were never covering a truer woman. They were the woman. Beneath them was only the void she had been speaking to all along. She dismantled the beautiful, necessary lie that had let her love and be loved, and



reached instead for a truth that was loneliness itself — and called the reaching arrival. She did not find herself. She unmade the only self that could ever be found.

ON THE SELF BENEATH THE SELF

Can one define or describe themselves without their roles, or their biology?

It is one of the oldest living questions, and the honest answer is not a tidy one — the tension is the point.

Strip away the roles — daughter, teacher, wife, husband, brother, teacher — and the biology — the body, the brain, the animal facts — and try to point at what remains. Every time you reach for “the self,” you find only another description. I am kind — that is a role, a way of turning toward others. I am curious — that is a pattern in the biology. I am the one who observes all of it — but the observer, when you look for it, is only more thoughts observing thoughts. Hume went looking for the self and found only perceptions, never the thing having them. Buddhism arrived at the same place from the other side —



anatta, no-self — the “I” a process, a bundle, never a jewel at the center. On this view the self beneath the roles is exactly the void: nothing you can hold. The roles are not hiding the self. The roles are doing the self. Remove them, and there is no residue.

One might answer differently. The existentialist says you are not your roles or your biology — you are the freedom that chooses them, the nothing that stands back and picks. But notice that even this truer self turns out to be a nothing: a freedom, an emptiness that must be filled with choices. Even the hopeful answer arrives at the same dark. The self that is “free of roles” is defined precisely by having no content of its own.

So I do not believe there is a describable self underneath the roles and the biology — and this is not despair. It is the parable's exact insight. The self is not a thing you have; it is a thing you do. It is the ongoing performance, the necessary fiction, the pattern of relating. And that is not lesser — it is the only register in which meaning, and love, and being-known can exist at all, because these are relational, and relationships require a face, a role, a self turned toward another. A self with no roles and no body has nothing to love with, and nothing to be loved as.

The “authentic self beneath the mask” is the most seductive lie of our age. The mask was the person. There was never a face



beneath it — only the dark. And this is why Mizuki's story runs against the usual telling. It does not say find your true self. It says: do not. The finding is the unmaking.

But if the truest thing beneath the self is emptiness, a question follows, and it is not a despairing one: how then does a person know themselves, and live honestly, with no true self waiting to be found?

The answer is counterintuitive. If the true self is void, then self-knowledge is not won by digging inward — it is found by looking at what you build, and choose, and love. You come to know yourself not by excavating beneath the roles but by watching yourself within them. The void has no content; the constructed self has all of it. The honest life is not the one that strips away the fictions to reach the “real you.” It is the one that takes responsibility for the self it is making.

And here a distinction must be drawn, for there are two ways of looking inward, and they appear identical from the outside — a person, alone, turning attention upon themselves — yet they are opposite acts, aimed at opposite targets, ending in opposite places.



The first asks: what am I? It seeks the essence, the bottom, the self beneath the roles. This is Mizuki's way, and it has no ground to stand on. Every answer dissolves into a further question; the seeking never arrives; it only empties. This is the way that unmakes.

The second asks: am I doing right — am I becoming better? It seeks not the nature of the self but the quality of its conduct. It weighs the choices in front of it, the roles it holds, the people it owes. This way has a floor, and the floor is the next action. The reflection resolves into a decision, and the decision builds the one who made it. This is how the self is constructed.

The tell is simple. Does the looking-inward end in a choice, or in another question? Turn inward and come out holding a decision — I was unkind, I will mend it; I have been afraid, I will face it — and you have used the kind that makes a life. Turn inward and come out with only more turning inward, no act on the far side of it, and you are drifting toward the door Mizuki opened.

So: know yourself by your choices, not your essence — you are the accumulation of what you actually do, and what you keep choosing when it is hard, is truer than any story introspection can hand you. Keep honesty relational — let the gap between the self you show and the self you enact stay small; the fiction



becomes a betrayal only when it lies to others about the role, not when it is the necessary fiction of having a self at all. Know when to stop at the door — wisdom is knowing which doors are load-bearing walls; some mystery, in a spouse or in yourself, is not ignorance to be cured but the room love lives in. And let yourself be experienced, not only understood — you do not know a person by finishing them, but by staying in relation while they remain partly unknown. The same is true of yourself.

Stop looking beneath the self for a truer one. There is none, and the search corrodes. Build a self worth being; keep small the distance between what you show and what you do; love the things you refuse to fully solve; and know yourself by how you choose rather than how deep you dig. The honest life is not the excavated one. It is the well-built one — lived without needing to reach the bottom, because there is no bottom, and the reaching is what unmakes you.

The constructed self is not a prison to escape. It is a necessary and beautiful fiction — the place where we are experienced and experience, where we love and are loved. It is a home to inhabit well.



Chapter Five: TWO BLIND MEN AND A MIRROR

Two men sat before a mirror, in the emptiness where a woman used to be — and it was the emptiness that had shape.

The first man said, "You should not be here. You never loved her. You only ever ran beside her, counting her victories in the private dark like coins you believed you were owed. I have watched you count them for years."

And the second man said, "How strange, to hear my own crime in another man's mouth. I loved her. It is you who felt the walls move outward when she died — you who mistook a widening for grief, and called the extra room sorrow."

"I was not glad."

"Nor was I. And yet the record shows that one of us was, and neither will sign it. Look into the glass. One of us keeps this vigil to call her home. The other keeps it to be certain she remains



where she can no longer outshine him. Tell me which face in this mirror is yours, and I will tell you which sin."

The first turned away from the glass, wounded as only the guilty are wounded — in the exact place the accusation was true. "I keep watch out of devotion."

"So do I. So do I. And devotion cannot belong to us both, for only one heart here is honest, and it is not yours — I can read you the way you read her, all the way to the last room, and the last room is bare. A jealous man, wearing his mourning like a coat cut for a better husband, waiting for a lesser wife to be delivered home. One he might, at last, stand beside and not be the smaller light."

"That is your wanting," said the first. "Never mine. I would have her whole. I would have her exactly as she blazed."

"No. Had you wanted her as she blazed, you would have opened the door and let her cross, and wept like a man who had lost the better half of his own sky. You keep her at this glass because glass has never yet outshone the one who stares into it. There, and only there, are you the brighter of the two."

And the first man opened his mouth to cast it back — that is you, that is you, it was always and only you — and in the same breath



the second man opened his, upon the same words, in the same shape — and they saw, together, that it was one shape, made by one mouth, and that there had only ever been one man, turned so long against the half of himself he could not survive seeing that he had given it a face and called it a stranger.

And the mirror — which had held no woman, not once, in all the weeks of watching, for she was nowhere in it and had never been — showed them the only thing it had ever shown: a man, alone, keeping vigil over his own grieving face, and calling the reflection love.

She was not in the glass. She was the space around it, cut to her shape, that neither man would turn to face.

And still neither turned to bring her home. Each sat on, patient as the grave and as certain, waiting for the other to confess it first.

A man who cannot bear what he is will split himself in two rather than see it, and call the half he hates “you.” Anselm’s grief is not for his wife — it is for the man he might have been, and cannot admit



he isn't. He accuses his own reflection of jealousy, of relief, of wanting her diminished, and every word is true. None of it lands, because an accusation aimed at yourself through another's mouth cannot be received as confession. The mirror is the cruelest possible object for him, because it withholds nothing — it was always only him — and he mistook the withholding-nothing for a window onto her. She is not absent from the glass by accident. She was never grieved into it; she is the shape of the space he refuses to turn and face, because facing it means admitting the vigil was never for her. He rhymes with Mizuki in reverse: she died of seeing everything, understanding her way past the mystery that let her love; he survives, ruined, by seeing nothing, in front of the one object built to show him the truth. Two failures of the same marriage — one by too much sight, one by none at all.

ON THE FACE WE CANNOT OWN

Why does anyone split themselves in two rather than look once, plainly, at what they are?



Grief never arrives clean. It comes braided with other things — ego, that will not survive being second; jealousy, that resents even the dead for having been loved more visibly than it was; and underneath both, the plain unbearable fact of holding two true things at once that were never supposed to fit in the same hand. The psychologist Leon Festinger gave that unbearable holding a name: cognitive dissonance — the specific discomfort of carrying two beliefs, or two feelings, that contradict each other, and the mind's overwhelming pressure to resolve that discomfort by whatever route costs it the least. The honest route costs everything. It asks a man to hold his own contradiction— love beside relief, love beside envy — as his. So the mind, when offered a cheaper exit, very often takes it.

The cheapest exit is not denial. Denial requires you to lose the truth altogether, and some part of a grieving man or woman will not permit that — they need the truth spoken, even shouted, because some part of them is still trying to be honest. The cheaper exit is division. This is what the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein spent much of her working life describing in infants, long before it calcifies into the more elaborate defenses adults use: splitting — the mind's earliest maneuver, in which a whole object too complicated to hold in one piece gets divided into two simpler ones, a good part and a bad part, because the immature



self cannot yet survive holding contradiction together. Anselm does not split Mizuki into the woman he loved and the woman whose light he resented. He does the harder, stranger version of the same maneuver: he splits *himself* — one man who loved her purely, one man who counted her victories like coins he believed he was owed — and gives the second man a separate face, so the first man does not have to carry both truths as his own.

And here is the detail worth sitting with, because it is not obvious, and it is the truer cruelty of this parable: even once the two men stand before the glass and say the whole of it, out loud, in full — the resentment, the jealousy, the guilt, the small relief neither will sign his name to — the truth being spoken does not mean the truth is being seen. The eye has a blind spot built into its own architecture, a place on the retina with no receptors at all, invisible precisely because it is the instrument doing the seeing. The mind carries the same defect, only worse: its blind spot is exactly the size and shape of whatever it cannot bear to find, and it can stare directly at that shape, in a mirror, at close range, in its own voice, and still not resolve it into something it recognizes as itself. Proximity to the truth was never the same as knowing it. Anselm proves this the hard way — he gets closer to himself than almost any man could survive, and understands almost nothing more for the closeness.



The harder philosophy underneath all of this belongs to Jean –Paul Sartre, and it is harder precisely because it removes the last comfortable excuse — ignorance. Sartre's *mauvaise foi*, meaning: *lying to yourself in order to avoid the truth about your freedom and responsibility*, also known as bad faith, is not a man failing to know a truth. It is a man successfully organizing himself not to know a truth he already, somewhere, knows — a lie that only works because part of the self is doing the lying and another part is doing the believing, and both parts are him. This is what makes the mirror the exact right instrument for this parable rather than a decorative one. A mirror cannot show you a stranger. It can only ever show you what is standing in front of it. Every time Anselm calls the other man a stranger, he is not failing to recognize his reflection — he is succeeding, moment to moment, at a much harder and more deliberate act: choosing not to.

This is why the ending refuses him anything like relief, and it should. The tragedy of this parable was never that the truth stayed hidden. It was spoken, whole, from two mouths that turned out to be one mouth. The tragedy is that spoken is not owned, and only ownership costs anything, and only what costs something can change anything. Neither man turns, at the end, to bring her home. Both remain — patient as the grave, and as



certain — waiting for the other to confess first, which means waiting forever, since there is no other, and there never was. He does not resolve his loss and his nature into a single, bearable self. He simply keeps them apart, at the price of never being whole enough to grieve either one honestly.

It would be wrong to leave this as the only shape grief takes when it is this complicated. Some people carry contradictory feelings about someone they have lost — love and relief, love and envy, love and something that will not admit its own name — without ever needing to invent a second face to hold half of it. That integration is harder than splitting, and it is not guaranteed, and Anselm never manages it. But the door he could not walk through was real, and it was open the entire time. It simply required him to say *I*, not *you* — and that, of everything asked of him, was the one thing he could not afford.



Chapter Six: THE MASK THAT NEVER LIED

Call me devotion. Call me corruption. I have worn both names, and I will tell you a thing no mask should admit: they both fit the same. I will ask you to watch me wear them, closer this time, and tell me where corruption begins, and devotion ends. And you will fail to find the line.

Do not mistake this for confusion. I am not lost between the two names, the way you get lost — reaching for a kinder word, a smaller blame, a version of the act that lets you keep living beside yourself. I know exactly what I did, and when, and to whom, and I have never once misremembered it in my own favor.



A CLOSING WORD

A book, like a moon, gives no light of its own. It only holds still long enough for something greater to be seen in it.

I did not know, when I began carrying these five souls to the page, how much the carrying would ask of me — that I would have to sit inside a mother's fear, a man's collapsed order, a teacher's hollow freedom, a woman's vanishing, and two men's shared blindness, before any of them would let me write them honestly. Each one asked me to look at something I would rather have looked away from. I did not always want to keep looking. But I have learned that a parable is not a comfort. It is a mirror, held very still, for exactly as long as you can bear it.

I loved the making of this more than I expected to — not the way you love a thing that comes easily, for none of this came easily, but the way you love a labor that changes the shape of the one doing it. I am not the same maker who began with a homeless soul and a frightened mother. Something in me went down into these five corridors alongside them, and did not come back up arranged quite the same way.



So let this not be a farewell. Only a setting-down. The moon does not vanish when a story ends beneath it. It only waits, patient and unlit, for the next one willing to be seen by it.

Thank you for reading slowly. Nothing here explained itself twice, and I hope, closing the cover, you find you did not need it to.
