**W**e set out in the depth of night, having held ourselves still all evening. Hloorobnool was poor at stillness, being only in her fifties. But our minder was a new man; he likely thought she rocked and puffed and raised her trunk like that every sunset. We could all have reared up and trumpeted, no doubt, without alarming that one. But our suffering was close to the surface; better to keep it packed into a tight circle than to risk rampage and shooting by letting it show.

With the man gone to his rest, Booroondoonhooroboom set to work. She used her broken tusk on the gateposts, on the weak places where the hinges had been reset after Gorrlubnu’s madness. Pieces pattered to the ground as softly as impala dung. She worked and she sang, drawing the lullaby up around us. Before long we were all swaying in our night-stances, watching Booroondoon with our ears and our foreheads as well as our eyes.

And then she had done loosening.

‘Gooroloomboon,’ she said, and Gooroloom came forward. The two of them lifted aside the chained-together gates, and there between the gateposts was a marvellous space. We had not expected it, somehow – though had we not all said, and planned, and agreed? Ah, it is a difficult thing, the new, and none of us like it much. We swayed and regarded the open gate. We were accustomed at the most to circling these gardens, with an owda on our back full of tickling people, and our mahout on our head.

It took Booroondoon, our queen and mother, still singing very low, to move into the space, to show us that bodies such as ours *could* move from home into the dark beyond. And as soon as the dark threatened to take her, to curtain her from our sight, it became not possible for any of us to stay.

And so we moved, unweighted, from the gardens; Hmoorolubnu took my tail, as if that small thing would hold her steady in this storm of freedom. Zebu groaned at us behind their rails, and a goat on the stone hill lifted its head and gave brittle cry. But our bearing is the sort

that soothes others; we move with inevitability, as the stars do, as the moon swells and shrinks upon the sky. We brushed against the wooden gate-house as if it were a plaything we had tired of, and the other animals remained calm. Gooroloom tumbled it to sticks, and our feet crushed it to dust. Above the dark and swollen river of our rage, my delight in our badness hung briefly bright.

His name was something like Pippit. It was too short for our ears to catch, as all peeple’s are; twig-snaps and bird-cheeps, they finish before they properly start. But his smell was a lasting thing, and his hand. Pippit of all people could tell badness from goodness, as we could. He would know that this was our only choice, he who could still us with a word, whose slender murmuring soothed us when all other voices were pitched too high and madding, who slept fearless among our feet and rode us without spear or switch – whom we missed in a rage of missing, ever since he had been taken from us to somewhere in the dark out-world.

Gooroloomboon spoke through her forehead, wonderingly: ‘How our minds have become circle-shaped, from all our circling, squared from pacing that square! Once we were wild! But I fear I have no wildness anymore, Booroondoon; maybe wildness has died in my blood and my feet can move *only* in circle and square. What are we to do for water and for food, mother? And how are we to know where to find our sweet Pippit? And if he be in a place that requires badness to reach him, can we do such a thing, even in his name?’

Booroondoon, her graciousness, heard Gooroloom out. ‘Put away your fears,’ she said, even as she lullabied. ‘Fears are for little-hearts, or the lion-hunted. I have never been wild in my life, yet our Pippit’s track through this world is as clear to me as a stripe of water thrown across a dry riverbank. What you love this much, you can always find again.’

And our spirits, which had been poised to sink with Gooroloom’s worry, lifted as if Booroondoon’s words were buoyant water, as if her song were breeze and we were wafted feathers.

We walked out among peeple’s houses, that were like friends standing beside the path. With every sleeping house we passed, I was more wakeful; with every step I took that was not circle-path, or earth we had trodden as many times as there are stars, something else broke open in me. My mind seemed a great wonderland, largely unexplored, my body a vast possibility of movements, in any direction, all new. There would be food and water, good and bad – Gooroloom would smell them too, when she finished fretting. I wanted to lift my head and trumpet, but there was joy also in knowing I must not, in moving with my fellows through the sleeping town, making no sound but planting feet and rubbing skin and the breath of walking free.

We came to the town’s edge. Without pausing, Booroondoon continued on under the moon towards nothing, only parasol trees that cannot be eaten, only a line that had stars above it, dry shadows below. We followed, and the town smells fell behind. Hloorobn, ahead of me, lifted her trunk. I head-bunted her rump, to keep her quiet, and she grunted in low surprise. Then we settled to a strong pace after Booroondoon, rolling our yearning rage out onto the plain.

Several hours on, we were suddenly among the bones. Heightened as our senses were, we’d not anticipated these. And it is always difficult to move on from such places. Hloorobn, in particular, hung by the remains of her mother, our sister, Gorrlubnu, lifting and turning the bones, urging us to take and turn them also, tipping the great headbone with a thud and a puff of moon-slivered dust.

Booroondoon went among the bones telling the names once only, touching the heads and leaving us to turn the lesser bones. Then she waited beyond, facing our goal but in all other respects patient, allowing us our youth and rawness and powerful pain, though her own was long ago distilled into wisdom and grace.

We went on, our thoughts like weighted owdas slowing our steps.

We walked far that night. Booroondoon said we should go straight out, for an improbable distance that people would not follow.

‘And if they do?” said jittery Hloorobn. ‘If they surprise us?”

‘What can they do against so many Large?’ said Booroondoon. ‘Cannot herd if we will not listen. Can try, with their spear, but will have to spear us all to stop us.’

She meant that such a spearing was not likely. But then, their taking Pippit had not been likely, either, yet it happened. In this night of walking in the wild, nothing was certain as it used to be.

Towards dawn, we found water. There was no town behind us, no town ahead, only grassed plain, and rounded rocks like friends browsing. When we had drunk, we moved straight on, slower for a while to try the wild grass, pulled up sweet and still living. Booroondoon sang no longer, for we did not need to be led by that means now; we had seen our own courage and were rallied and moved and unstoppable.

So the day passed, and several others like it. There was a night and day of terrible thirst, born of the need to walk a straight line from our starting point. Then we came to a broad, clear river, and we swam it, and stood in the shallows on the far side, and the water was magnificent in our throats, a delight across our backs.

Late that day, when we had satisfied our thirst and settled the fears arising from it, Booroondoon said, ‘The place we want is not far now.’

We sensed it, a big, rubbishy restlessness far down-river, a swarming movement in the ground that made our feet unhappy.

‘We must go into the midst of that?’ said Gooroloom.

‘They will not bring him out to us,” said our wise mother.

We walked awhile on the thought.

Then, ‘I have it,’ said Booroondoon. ‘We will walk into the town as if he were led, so as to calm the little-hearts. We will go in a line, trunk to tail, and with care where the way is narrow. We must move slowly, for our Pippit’s smell may be easily lost among all the others, markets and meateries and skinworks and the like. But if we go graciously and let neither dogs nor people fright us – do you hear me, Hloorobn? – if we stay together in our line, we cannot be thwarted.’

‘As you say, mother and queen,’ we replied.

We decided we would go into the town just before day hurried out of night, when the smells and people-movements would be less. Until that hour we lurked at a distance, in a bad place – stenchful, with death-birds crowding sky and ground.

Their headwoman flapped o the top of the rubbish nearest us. ‘Any of youse sick?’ she skrarkled, eyeing us all.

Hloorobn rumbled too low for her to hear.

‘Anyone dropping a baby soon? Youse all look pretty big,’ said the bird hopefully.

Booroondoon swung up her trunk, and the bird staggered away: ‘Just asking, just asking!’

‘Disgusting,’ said Hloorobn.

‘Shudderable,’ Gooroloom agreed.

‘Take no notice,’ said Booroondoon. ‘We are Larger.’

There was nothing to eat in this place, so we began, in the night, to feel wretched, all bulk and no bone, our minds spinning like the moon on its wheel.

‘If only he were here,’ said Gooroloom, ‘if only we already had him! This venture frightens me, now it is near to finishing,’

It was good that she spoke, or my own fears would have bubbled up into my forehead and made themselves known. I could not keep Gorrlubnu out of my head, how after months of uncanny stillness, where Pippit soothed and Booroondoon leant and all of us huddled around her, she had slipped her mind as your foot slips a loose tether-loop, and gone crashing from our lives; how she burst the gates with her head and bent them underfoot; how, unthinkably, she left Booroondoon’s commands ignored upon the air. We stood voiceless and mindless, as people leaped and twinkled after her. At Booroondoon’s knee, tiny Pippit jolted as Gorrlubnu struck about her; he cried out when she roared. She swam away through the market. Fruits sagged out of their pyramids and broke on the ground; chicken cages tumbled and sprayed feathers.

The marketers came to the gate-opening, yabbering and shaking their fists at Pippit, but we had ears only for the receding commotion of our sister, Gorrlubnu, the drumbeat of her madness, and the lesser impacts and explosions around it. Until a single blunderbuss shot saved her from worse rampage, bringing all other sounds to stillness, so that across the town, through all its wreckage and outrage, we heard clearly the thunder-crash that was Gorrlubnu striking the ground; her lips shuddering on the breath thus crushed from her; the dry scrape of her feet dying in the dust.

*She has found the Forest Hills of legend*, breathed Booroondoonhooroboom, our queen. *She is pressing her forehead against the first browsing-tree.*

Only singing brought us through that hungry night amongst the refuse, a tether of rumbling song through the slowest part of the sun’s race round. Whenever my thoughts made me fall quiet, the singing strengthened into my hearing, and drew me in again.

‘Very well,’ said Booroondoon in the deepest hour. We all heard her; none of us was asleep.

We walked a nightmare road. The cold breeze blew people-rubbish and rattled rotten paper. Would we lose our nose for Pippit, amongst all this ordure? Booroondoon moved ever queenly ahead.

The town began gradually, with rubbish-pickers’ shelters, the children sleeping as if thrown down, bare on the bare ground. Then the wood-walled houses sidled up to the road, which widened and hardened, and finally, along the cleanest avenues, brick and stone palaces rose higher than ourselves, textured with carvings. And after days of golden grass, and trees nearly black in their thirst, here were green vines and hanging plants spilling all over the palace walls, their flowers set like jewels among their bright, water-fat leaves.

We came to a circle that seemed purpose-made for owda rides, within a ring of empty stalls. There we joined trunk to tail and became still, to listen and breathe, to arrive at the knowledge we needed.

And there Booroondoon said to us, at her lowest, at her farthest from peeple’s hearing. ‘He is close, very close.’ She listened further, then spoke softer, no more than a gentle buzzing in our heads. ‘And in sore distress.’

We took pains not to give voice, but anyone who knew us would have heard the trouble in our breathing, the creak of the strong will restraining our movement. Our rage squirmed and whimpered like a creature pinned underfoot, that must be kept from flight, but not be harmed.

‘We could break down the place,’ rumbled Hloorobn.

‘Hush!” we said.

‘It would crush Pippit within,’ Gooroloom remonstrated.

‘We could tear off the doors,’ Hloorobn whispered.

‘But remember those people that took him,’ I said, ‘with their bright spears. How quick to anger they were! He had real fear of them, so we should, too.’

‘There is a terrible smell on him,’ said Booroondoon. She tilted her head a certain way, and some of us dropped tail from trunk, and Hloorobn even shifted one foot that way, for the smell was among us for a moment, a flash of fear-sweat, a shaft of some worse thing.

‘We know that smell,’ said Hmoorolubnu. Booroondoon grunted and twitched her head. All around, trunk rasped on flank, seeking and giving help. ‘Our sister Gorrlubnu, remember?’

‘No one has forgotten Gorrlubnu,’ I hissed, from one of those moments when my tusks gleamed before my eyes, and my whole self seemed funnelled into them.

Others were at my sides, leaning.

‘Do you mean Pippit is mad?’ Gooroloom of the queen, and lifted her trunk and sniffed carefully.

‘Is dying,’ said Booroondoon. ‘Is moving towards death, sure as winter follows summer.’

‘He is ill? He is beaten?’ I said out of the deep woe that was like mud grasping us, sinking us down to death ourselves. I could not breathe to draw in the scent of him, my trouble was so great.

‘Neither of those. He seems whole in my body and strength. Only, that smell –‘ And again it was there, making me want to rear and run. ‘I cannot puzzle it.’

‘Can we find him?’ I said in quiet agony. ‘Is it safe to seek him?”

‘Let us go and see,’ said Booroondoon. She must have known we were all about to break bond and rush in all directions. She knew well that it is better to give a little, early on, than to lose all at the last.

We took our places and went in line through trade streets that smelled of paint and spices, shaved metal and wood. Booroondoon brought us among palaces, grimed and weary-feeling. Low in a brick wall there, she found a hole, barred like the one in our night-house. From this one poured the cold stinks of fear, some of them stale when our mothers’ mothers were birthed, and some fresh as just-pulled plains-glass, full of juice and colour.

Among them was Pippit’s fear – even I could smell it. ‘Little man, little man!’ I heard myself croon, ‘Day’s light, night’s peace, to what have they brought you?’ And we were all around the barred hole, our feet puddling in the fears, and we all spoke, mostly only in our heads, but some in our throats where peeple might hear us, danger or no, we were so pained and grieved.

Then, wonder of wonders, from within the hole came a tiny voice that we knew, calling our names, those chips of bird-cheep he gave us. And we could not help but answer, in our woe.

Gooroloom fluttered a breath into the hole, and there was an immediate ruckus of many peeple in there. Hloorobn grasped one of the window-bars and plucked it out like a twig, and all the peeple inside went silent. She plucked out the others bars, laying them neatly as she had once laid out logs in her forest work.

And as she pulled the last, peeple boiled out like ants, terrified peeple climbing over Gooroloom’s trunk, crawling among our legs, smelling all of filth and illness, but none of them was Pippit. And when they had finished weeping, still Pippit was weeping and calling us from within.

‘What is it?’ said Hloorobn. ‘Have they broken some part of him?’

We drew in our breath at the thought.

‘I told you, he is whole,’ said Booroondoon. ‘But he is deep inside this place. Perhaps there are more bars, between us and him; perhaps he is behind a gate too strong for peeple to breach.’

‘But *we* could breach it – ‘

‘Try, Hloorobn!’ I urged. ‘Get down on your knees and reach in!

She did so, while we all whispered help and surance, past her head, to Pippit inside.

‘There is nothing,’ Hloorobn rumbled in disgust. ‘Nothing but roof and air as far as I can reach. And there is no light. I can hear no chain – can you? – but their leg-tether may be of rope.’

‘Do peeple leg-tether *each other*?’ I asked astounded.

‘What else would keep him from us? Listen to him, poor nubbet – if he could be with us, he would.’ And indeed, I was fighting to listen to Hloorobn and not let my heart be stretched to breaking by the sound of Pippit’s weeping.

We murmured to him, and he called to us, until we were all nearly mad with not seeing him, with not taking him up and placing him as a crown on our heads, with not feeling the pat of his little paws on our faces, or the trill of his song, almost too high for us to hear, as he plied the soapy hardbroom on all our backs in turn. What joy we had had, commanded by a Pippit, who knew no fear of us but only love, who cared for us so closely and so well – it was hard to remember that he was not a Large like one of us, and could not hear our loving head-talk.

‘We must go,’ wept Booroondoon at last. ‘Dawn rushes towards us. We cannot reach him, and it will do him no good to hear us being spared our here.’

‘They would never,’ said Gooroloom. ‘They only spear mad ones, like Gorrl–‘

‘We must go. Somewhere we can think, where we are not flayed by our beloved’s sadness. If we stay here, we will fall to mindlessness with our pain, and do him no good.’

And so, suffering and weeping, we drew away.

‘Will he know we intend to come back?’ worried Hloorobn.

‘The child is so close to death, we are no more than a dream to him,’ soothed Gooroloom.

‘And perhaps we can be no more than that comforting dream,’ said Booroondoon. ‘Perhaps we must be content with that.’

By some route I did not see, through a daze of mourning, Booroondoon led us to a cleared part of town. The smell of dead ashes lingered in the place, so a fire must have brought the structures down, but now all the rubble was gone, and the soil beneath was combed flat.

We tried to gather ourselves, but could do little more than sweep our woe back and forth. Was our only choice to turn and follow our own tracks home, and live out our long lives under fearful spike men, stung by their beatings, nagged by their needling voices?

‘I would rather seek the Forest Hills,’ said Gooroloom. ‘What is a life without Pippit?’ And we mourned and sighed around her.

‘Come, we must put our minds to this,’ said Booroondoon. ‘We must stand in a line as if we were peeple-bid, and let schemes brew in our heads.’

But no sooner had we arranged ourselves than the town began to stir around us.

‘What is this?’ said Hloorobn. ‘People never rise so early.’

‘Not in such numbers,’ said Gooroloom. ‘Only marketers and street-sweepers come out before dawn.’

‘I do not like the feeling of it,’ said Booroondoon.

As soon as she said it, my bones felt a deep unease, as if they could slip unset somehow, as if we might fall to pieces inside our skins. ‘Nor I,’ I whispered.

Even before the first few muffled people passed us, all walking the same way, we could feel that the town’s quiet activity was bent like spring grass under a steady wind, an eagerness like river-water pulling. But instead of the sweetness of water, instead of the scents if bud and pollen and new leaf, this pulling breeze carried a low stink, a tang of chain-metal, a sour-sweet dreadfulness.

We stood close together as dawn came on, trying to find some other scent on the air to disperse the stink. ‘I wish you were home again,’ whispered Hloorobn. ‘Around thus tune, he would be stirring awake in the straw, our little man ,,, Do you remember when he first saw us, how the child ran to Booroondoon and flung his tiny arms about her leg?’

‘We must go,’ said Booroondoon, ‘for he sleeps not on straw but on stone, and someone is kicking him awake even as we try for courage among our memories.’ And she took a step after the passing people.

We joined on behind her, some silent, some wittering (‘To that death-place?’ ‘Oh please, my queen!’). We moved after her, deeply against our will, in our orderly line, through the main town. The people in flood around us were too intent upon the dreadfulness to realise we went uncommanded. They flowed past full of fear and excitement and relief, their faces always towards their destination.

The place was crowded, with an itch in the air; it was the stuff of bad dreams, to have to pick one’s way among such close-packed flimsies. But the platform at the centre, sweet with fresh-sawn wood, was empty, except for two men holding rattle-guns, which smelt not of death but of pride and show. What stank was the blade lying like a moon-sliver on the dark, raised box before them. Through all the crowd there was a craning and a yearning towards this weapon.

People had brought food baskets, seating, children. As day brightened further, parasols began to open and twirl throughout the crowd. A man close by was selling burnt-sugar. One boy carried a small white rat on his shoulder.

‘What breed of wrong-hearted festival is this?’ I asked it.

‘I don’t know, but the food is good.’

The crowd was such that we could only form a line. Booroondoon by the platform and the rest of us sheltering behind her from the full force of the blade’s stink. She rumbled a message: *Hold Hloorobn*, and I renewed my grasp on Hllorobn’s tail. We were trained to be serene among peeple; their chatter stirred habitual serenity from our bones. But they were not our peeple, and this was not our town, and we were hungry and thirsty and afraid.

A macao-bird shrieked from the far side of the square: “Here comes from the fun-man, to start off the fun!’

Up the wooden steps climbed a much-bedizened person, with a head-plume, and sparkles on his shoulders. He stood tall between the two guards and spread his arms. The crowd quieted, and the plume-man spoke, his high voice carrying to all corners and every crowded balcony of the square. As he spoke, the peeple grew quieter, and their tides of feeling changed from puzzlement, to disappointment, and finally to alarm and unsettlement.

The macao gave an idiot laugh. ‘No whippings today, folk! The monkeys have got out of their cage! The monkeys are running all over town, teasing the watchdogs and busting out the pantries!’ Peeple began to pack away belongings, and to edge away from the platform through the crowd. The plume-man made a swaying notion with his hands, and kept on speaking, but peeple leaked away, until there were perhaps only half their number remaining. Now we could all move up alongside Booroondoon, and Gooroloom ad I could press the excitable Hloorobn between us, flank to flank, and hold her steady.

‘Here comes the chopper!’ shrieked the macao with glee. ‘And the chppee! Say goodbye to your head, bad monkey!’

‘There,’ said Booroondoon. ‘At the great door.’

Raising my head above Hloorobn’s I saw a little one, all filthy, being stumbled towards us by two men, also in the sparkling uniforms. Peeple spat on him and squeaked at him as he came. An eddy of breeze brought us his dirt and distress, his being undone by fear, but beneath all that, the familiar fresh-straw smell of our mahout.

They pushed him up onto the wooden place; they thrust him to his knees there. And someone else had arrived. His close-suit, entirely blue-black, was like a slice of starless night. It covered his face, and stank. Peeple always move too quickly, but this happened in the taking of a single breath. No sooner had we seen him than the blue-black man was making the light flash from the blade, into all parts of the crowd. We were a row of confusions, locked in our mass, as self-less as boulders of the plain.

Then our little ragged one, our Pippit, lifted his head. His hair like dirty ribbons fell back from his face, and he saw us through his staring tear-filled eyes, and knew us.

His knowledge clanked closed upon us like the most welcome leg-iron. His mouth moved on the beloved sound of his command. All of us – in a vast sudden relief of having someone to obey, after our weeks of being chivvied by frightened peeple with sticks, after our days of wandering in the wilderness – all of us lowered our haunches and hoisted our heads and forelegs, to stand giant, to show our true height.

The peeple cleared around us like dust from a sharp blow of breath. Pippit commanded again, and I spoke back as he told me, as did my sisters and our mother our queen. The peeple ran farther away. We spoke with our entire hearts and our full bulk, and every arch and column shook with the noise.

Pippit’s voice singled out Booroondoon. The rest of us stood giant, proclaiming our hugeness, trumpeting our obedience and our love.

*Their eyes were all in a row*, says Booroondoon now, *like children peeping over our garden wall, the men’s who held him. The blade-man, he saw me coming; he knew what Pippit was commanding. It happened all so fast – he lifted his sword – he leaped, he was upon Pippit! – and what could I do?*

*Nothing but what you did*, we reassure her – although, when we saw her fling that blue-black rag out among the peeple, we knew it was a terrible thing she had been driven to.

*And then I could just push the other away. Them I did not injure, those ones, did I? They stepped back quietly; they had no swords, you see, and they had seen what I did to the first – so in hurting one I saved at least two –*

*Also, you had him –*

‘I have him!” she rumbled to us, and Pippit called us in his bird-voice, even as she swung him onto her head. We moved towards our accustomed order. But seeing Pippit so small and unprotected at our head, and knowing the peeple wished him dead, I pushed forward to precede Booroondoon, as I would have for no other reason, and others came up to shelter him from peeple who might leap up from the sides. Out of the square we went, while the peeple foamed and cried and parted to let us through, and fell back farther as we left the paved part of the town, as we left the housed part, until there were only a few wide-eyed rubbish-pickers’ tinies by the road to watch us pass, with our prize on our head, our live, sweet Pippit, chattering and laughing and greeting us by our bird-names over and over.

**W**hich is how we come to be here, on this long walk away from all we know. Since we left the road and the land began undulating, ‘Our Pippit could be leading us to the Forest Hills of legend,’ Hlooroobn says eagerly.

Booroondoon in her sadder moments says, ‘He may indeed be leading us into death, for I have never been this way before.’

‘And you have been near everywhere there is to be, our queen,’ says Gooroloom, ‘from the log-camp mountains, to the ports, to the road-making settlements all up and down.’

Says Booroondoon, ‘Yet I know nothing of this place, not its rocks or its creatures, nor how Pippit chooses the way among ten hundred sandhills all the same.’

‘Who knows? Who minds?’ says Hloorobn happily.

‘None of us, that’s sure,’ says Goorloloom.

And none of us does. For each evening our sweet Pippit brings us to water and good browsing, and each morning we wake to a spray of his hot little voice, to the blessing of his kisses and his touch as he walks among us. And he lifts us without spike and leads us without wrath. Singing, always singing, he moves us onward, into each brightening day.