

is more police-ridden than ever, although it is crawling with spies, informers and hired killers, and although he has appointed as heads of security men from his own tribe entirely loyal to his cause, the new president, the second beloved father of the nation, entrusted with the task of continuing the sacred work of the father-founder, no longer dares go out. In order to frustrate the spell, he has issued a decree proclaiming himself unkillable and immortal, but still he hides away in the depths of his palace, with its labyrinth of passages and corridors, mirrors and reflections, walled up because he doesn't know when 'the man' will suddenly appear to strike him down in his turn, so that freedom, too long suppressed, may at last burst forth.

'The man', the hope of a nation and a people that says NO, and watches . . .

**Translated from the French by Clive Wake.**

## ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

### Cages

There were times when it felt to Hamid as if he had been in the shop always, and that his life would end there. He no longer felt discomfort, nor did he hear the secret mutterings at the dead hours of night which had once emptied his heart in dread. He knew now that they came from the seasonal swamp which divided the city from the townships, and which teemed with life. The shop was in a good position, at a major crossroads from the city's suburbs. He opened it at first light when the earliest workers were shuffling by, and did not shut it again until all but the last stragglers had trailed home. He liked to say that at his station he saw all of life pass him by. At peak hours he would be on his feet all the time, talking and bantering with the customers, courting them and taking pleasure in the skill with which he handled himself and his merchandise. Later he would sink exhausted on the boxed seat which served as his till.

The girl appeared at the shop late one evening, just as he was thinking it was time to close. He had caught himself nodding twice, a dangerous trick in such desperate times. The second time he had woken up with a start, thinking a large hand was clutching his throat and lifting him off the ground. She was standing in front of him, waiting with a look of disgust in her face.

'Ghee,' she said after waiting for a long, insolent minute. 'One shilling.' As she spoke she half-turned away, as if the sight of him was irritating. A piece of cloth was wrapped round her body and tucked in under the armpits. The soft cotton clung to her, marking the outline of her graceful shape. Her shoulders were bare and glistened in the gloom. He took the bowl from her and bent down to the tin of ghee. He was filled with longing and a sudden ache. When he gave the bowl back to her, she looked vaguely at him, her eyes distant and glazed with

tiredness. He saw that she was young, with a small round face and slim neck. Without a word, she turned and went back into the darkness, taking a huge stride to leap over the concrete ditch which divided the kerb from the road. Hamid watched her retreating form and wanted to cry out a warning for her to take care. How did she know that there wasn't something there in the dark? Only a feeble croak came out as he choked the impulse to call to her. He waited, half-expecting to hear her cry out but only heard the retreating slap of her sandals as she moved further into the night.

She was an attractive girl, and for some reason as he stood thinking about her and watched the hole in the night into which she had disappeared, he began to feel disgust for himself. She had been right to look at him with disdain. His body and his mouth felt stale. There was little cause to wash more than once every other day. The journey from bed to shop took a minute or so, and he never went anywhere else. What was there to wash for? His legs were misshapen from lack of proper exercise. He had spent the day in bondage, months and years had passed like that, a fool stuck in a pen all his life. He shut up the shop wearily, knowing that during the night he would indulge the squalor of his nature.

The following evening, the girl came to the shop again. Hamid was talking to one of his regular customers, a man much older than him called Mansur who lived nearby and on some evenings came to the shop to talk. He was half-blind with cataracts, and people teased him about his affliction, playing cruel tricks on him. Some of them said of Mansur that he was going blind because his eyes were full of shit. He could not keep away from boys. Hamid sometimes wondered if Mansur hung around the shop after something, after him. But perhaps it was just malice and gossip. Mansur stopped talking when the girl approached, then squinted hard as he tried to make her out in the poor light.

'Do you have shoe polish? Black?' she asked.

'Yes,' Hamid said. His voice sounded congealed, so he cleared his throat and repeated Yes. The girl smiled.

'Welcome, my love. How are you today?' Mansur asked. His accent was so pronounced, thick with a rolling flourish, that Hamid wondered if it was intended as a joke. 'What a beautiful smell you have, such

perfume! A voice like *zuward* and a body like a gazelle. Tell me, *msichana*, what time are you free tonight? I need someone to massage my back.'

The girl ignored him. With his back to them, Hamid heard Mansur continue to chat to the girl, singing wild praises to her while he tried to fix a time. In his confusion Hamid could not find a tin of polish. When he turned round with it at last, he thought she had been watching him all the time, and was amused that he had been so flustered. He smiled, but she frowned and then paid him. Mansur was talking beside her, cajoling and flattering, rattling the coins in his jacket pocket, but she turned and left without a word.

'Look at her, as if the sun itself wouldn't dare shine on her. So proud! But the truth is she's easy meat,' Mansur said, his body gently rocking with suppressed laughter. 'I'll be having that one before long. How much do you think she'll take? They always do that, these women, all these airs and disgusted looks . . . but once you've got them into bed, and you've got inside them, then they know who's the master.'

Hamid found himself laughing, keeping the peace among men. But he did not think she was a girl to be purchased. She was so certain and comfortable in every action that he could not believe her abject enough for Mansur's designs. Again and again his mind returned to the girl, and when he was alone he imagined himself intimate with her. At night after he had shut up the shop, he went to sit for a few minutes with the old man, Fajir, who owned the shop and lived in the back. He could no longer see to himself and very rarely asked to leave his bed. A woman who lived nearby came to see to him during the day, and took free groceries from the shop in return, but at night the ailing old man liked to have Hamid sit with him for a little while. The smell of the dying man perfumed the room while they talked. There was not usually much to say, a ritual of complaints about poor business and plaintive prayers for the return of health. Sometimes when his spirits were low, Fajir talked tearfully of death and the life which awaited him there. Then Hamid would take the old man to the toilet, make sure his chamber-pot was clean and empty, and leave him. Late into the night, Fajir would talk to himself, sometimes his voice rising softly to call out Hamid's name.

Hamid slept outside in the inner yard. During the rains he cleared a

space in the tiny store and slept there. He spent his nights alone and never went out. It was well over a year since he had even left the shop, and before then he had only gone out with Fajir, before the old man was bedridden. Fajir had taken him to the mosque every Friday, and Hamid remembered the throngs of people and the cracked pavements steaming in the rain. On the way home they went to the market, and the old man named the luscious fruit and the brightly coloured vegetables for him, picking up some of them to make him smell or touch. Since his teens, when he first came to live in this town, Hamid had worked for the old man. Fajir gave him his board and he worked in the shop. At the end of every day, he spent his nights alone, and often thought of his father and his mother, and the town of his birth. Even though he was no longer a boy, the memories made him weep and he was degraded by the feelings that would not leave him be.

When the girl came to the shop again, to buy beans and sugar, Hamid was generous with the measures. She noticed and smiled at him. He beamed with pleasure, even though he knew that her smile was laced with derision. The next time she actually said something to him, only a greeting, but spoken pleasantly. Later she told him that her name was Rukiya and that she had recently moved into the area to live with relatives.

'Where's your home?' he asked.

'Mwembemaringo,' she said, flinging an arm out to indicate that it was a long way away. 'But you have to go on back-roads and over hills.'

He could see from the blue cotton dress she wore during the day that she worked as a domestic. When he asked her where she worked, she snorted softly first, as if to say that the question was unimportant. Then she told him that until she could find something better, she was a maid at one of the new hotels in the city.

'The best one, the Equator,' she said. 'There's a swimming pool and carpets everywhere. Almost everyone staying there is a *mzungu*, a European. We have a few Indians too, but none of these people from the bush who make the sheets smell.'

He took to standing at the doorway of his backyard bedchamber after he had shut the shop at night. The streets were empty and silent at that hour, not the teeming, dangerous places of the day. He thought

of Rukiya often, and sometimes spoke her name, but thinking of her only made him more conscious of his isolation and squalor. He remembered how she had looked to him the first time, moving away in the late evening shadow. He wanted to touch her . . . Years in darkened places had done this to him, he thought, so that now he looked out on the streets of the foreign town and imagined that the touch of an unknown girl would be his salvation.

One night he stepped out into the street and latched the door behind him. He walked slowly towards the nearest street-lamp, then to the one after that. To his surprise he did not feel frightened. He heard something move but he did not look. If he did not know where he was going, there was no need to fear since anything could happen. There was comfort in that.

He turned a corner into a street lined with shops, one or two of which were lit, then turned another corner to escape the lights. He had not seen anyone, neither a policeman nor a night watchman. On the edge of a square he sat for a few minutes on a wooden bench, wondering that everything should seem so familiar. In one corner was a clock tower, clicking softly in the silent night. Metal posts lined the sides of the square, impassive and correct. Buses were parked in rows at one end, and in the distance he could hear the sound of the sea.

He made for the sound, and discovered that he was not far from the waterfront. The smell of the water suddenly made him think of his father's home. That town too had been by the sea, and once he had played on the beaches and in the shallows like all the other children. He no longer thought of it as somewhere he belonged to, somewhere that was his home. The water lapped gently at the foot of the sea-wall, and he stopped to peer at it breaking into white froth against the concrete. Lights were still shining brightly on one of the jetties and there was a hum of mechanical activity. It did not seem possible that anyone could be working at that hour of the night.

There were lights on across the bay, single isolated dots that were strung across a backdrop of darkness. Who lived there? he wondered. A shiver of fear ran through him. He tried to picture people living in that dark corner of the city. His mind gave him images of strong men with cruel faces, who peered at him and laughed. He saw dimly lit clearings where shadows lurked in wait for the stranger, and where

later, men and women crowded over the body. He heard the sound of their feet pounding in an old ritual, and heard their cries of triumph as the blood of their enemies flowed into the pressed earth. But it was not only for the physical threat they posed that he feared the people who lived in the dark across the bay. It was because they knew where they were, and he was in the middle of nowhere.

He turned back towards the shop, unable to resist, despite everything, a feeling that he had dared something. It became a habit that after he had shut up the shop at night and had seen to Fajir, he went for a stroll to the waterfront. Fajir did not like it and complained about being left alone, but Hamid ignored his grumbles. Now and then he saw people, but they hurried past without a glance. During the day, he kept an eye out for the girl who now so filled his hours. At night he imagined himself with her. As he strolled the silent streets, he tried to think she was there with him, talking and smiling, and sometimes putting the palm of her hand on his neck. When she came to the shop, he always put in something extra, and waited for her to smile. Often they spoke, a few words of greeting and friendship. When there were shortages he served her from the secret reserves he kept for special customers. Whenever he dared he complimented her on her appearance, and squirmed with longing and confusion when she rewarded him with radiant smiles. Hamid laughed to himself as he remembered Mansur's boast about the girl. She was no girl to be bought with a few shillings, but one to be sung to, to be won with display and courage. And neither Mansur, half-blind with shit as he was, nor Hamid, had the words or the voice for such a feat.

Late one evening, Rukiya came to the shop to buy sugar. She was still in her blue work-dress, which was stained under the arms with sweat. There were no other customers, and she did not seem in a hurry. She began to tease him gently, saying something about how hard he worked.

'You must be very rich after all the hours you spend in the shop. Have you got a hole in the yard where you hide your money? Everyone knows shopkeepers have secret hoards . . . Are you saving to return to your town?'

'I don't have anything,' he protested. 'Nothing here belongs to me.'

She chuckled disbelievingly. 'But you work too hard, anyway,' she

said. 'You don't have enough fun.' Then she smiled as he put in an additional scoopful of sugar.

'Thank you,' she said, leaning forward to take the package from him. She stayed that way for a moment longer than necessary, then she moved back slowly. 'You're always giving me things. I know you'll want something in return. When you do, you'll have to give me more than these little gifts.'

Hamid did not reply, overwhelmed with shame. The girl laughed lightly and moved away. She glanced round once, grinning at him before she plunged into the darkness.