NAIYER MASUD

Snake Catcher*

Turn away no more;
Why wilt thou turn away?
—WILLIAM BLAKE

Laṅg-o-lūk-o-čuftah-shakl-o-bē-adab Sū'ē ou mīghīžad ou-rā mīṭalab —Rumı, Maṣṇavī

Ι

"Snake catcher! snake catcher!"

The cry would echo in the stillness of the night. The caller was sometimes an old man, sometimes a youth, sometimes a woman, and sometimes a child, so one might assume these cries would be quite different, but to me they always sounded the same.

"Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

Whenever the cry rang out in the still night I was unable to figure out who the caller was. The call had the same quivering fear of death that spread across age and gender. I would be awakened from a deep sleep and know that a snake had bitten someone. A slight shudder would sweep through my body and I would want to go back to sleep and think of it as something I'd only heard in my dream. Just then I would feel the cold touch of two fingers on my neck and hear a faint "The cry's up" very close to my ear.

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This obliged me to get out of my bed. By then the cry would have moved closer, now mixed with other voices.

"Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

The sound of countless shuffling feet accompanied the cry; I would approach the door and open it, allowing in a small crowd of people. Some of them would be supporting a dying man. Sometimes one of them held a stick in his hand with a dead snake dangling from it. The sight made me shudder again. At that time, I had to deal with the crowd all by myself. I would make a space on the ground, and the dying man was laid out there. I would unroll a long—about the length of two men—narrow mat right beside him on which the uncoiled dead snake was then placed. I would grope around the dying man's body looking for the wound and, after I had found it, I would make him lie in such a way that the wound was accessible. I never asked how the snake had bitten him; still, some people went to great lengths relating the entire incident. They all spoke at once so I was never entirely able to hear about the actual incident. And besides, only a handful could describe it anyway. The one who had been through it all lay on the ground unconscious or simply mute with terror, so people spent more energy enlarging upon how they got the news and what they were doing at the time. As they continued talking they watched my usual routines, with their eyes roaming around searching for someone else the whole time.

Shortly afterward the Snake Catcher would appear before them and everyone would immediately become attentive to him, a whisper sweeping through the crowd from one end to the other.

"Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

For a while he would remain absolutely silent, paying attention to no one. The people would also remain quiet, allowing their gaze to rest on him. Then he always asked the same question, "What happened?"

In response, the people didn't speak all at once, as though they had silently struck a deal among themselves and now only one of them would start slowly and, using a minimum of words, tell him what had happened. But it seemed as though the Snake Catcher didn't hear a single thing the man said. His eyes were fixed on the snake lying stretched out on the mat with its hood often terribly crushed. He always looked at the snake wistfully, sometimes even giving the impression that he considered the snake his patient. These moments felt inordinately long. Only then did he take notice of the victim, and I also looked closely at the victim's face for the first time along with him.

The face would be covered with beads of sweat. Sometimes the victim would be completely unconscious, but, even so, something like colors seemed to flow quickly just underneath the skin. Sometimes he was conscious, but appeared terribly frightened. Sometime he seemed to be struck simultaneously by drowsiness and fear; I don't recall ever seeing fear and drowsiness together on anyone's face except that of a snakebite victim.

The victims could be of any age or gender, but the face of just about every victim invariably reflected a strange sense of his or her importance, as if being bitten by a snake was a personal achievement which no one else was capable of matching. I never saw despair on any victim's face, perhaps because once a victim had made it to the Snake Catcher alive he never died, and usually walked back on his own feet.

Now and then though, a victim went back as a corpse, but this happened only when he had already died en route to the Snake Catcher. The victim of a snakebite looks utterly dead when he dies; there's no need to even look at his face to confirm his death. Nevertheless the people who carry a victim can only be convinced of his death after they have brought him over to the Snake Catcher. Usually on such occasions I would know before the Snake Catcher's arrival that the victim was already dead. The skin of some victims had burst open. The people accompanying such victims didn't show much enthusiasm for talking about the incident before the Snake Catcher's arrival. They would just look at me intently trying to gauge the condition of the patient, but I tried not to let anything show on my face. The Snake Catcher would arrive. First he would look for the mat but it wouldn't be in its place because I never saw a dead victim brought in along with the snake that had killed him. Only after that would the Snake Catcher look closely at the victim and then at me, and I would know what he wanted. I would unroll another mat that stood in a corner and throw it over the victim. After a few moments of total silence the Snake Catcher would leave the scene. The people would then pick up the dead body. I would remove the mat from on top of the body, roll it up and return it to the corner, and they would walk out carrying the corpse with them. They would start out in perfect silence but the minute they stepped out the door the sound of someone wailing would surely be heard.

This happened rarely however. Usually a victim was rushed to the Snake Catcher before he had turned cold. In that event, the Snake Catcher wouldn't let him die, regardless of what kind of snake had bitten him. Whether the culprit accompanied its victim or not, the Snake Catcher would know with just one glance what kind of snake it had been.

In the first place, most victims had not been bitten by a poisonous snake, but their own fear pretty much did them in. Any plain, colored water would have sufficed to put them back on their feet. But the Snake Catcher would put them through a truly painful ordeal, sometimes scorching the spot that had been bitten and sometimes using sharp, pointed instruments to make incisions in the wound which he then filled with certain kinds of medicinal powders that made the victims start to scream and thrash about. However, on a sign from him, several people would grab the victim tightly and muffle his cries. Something resembling a riot continued for a while and during this time the Snake Catcher turned his attention back to the dead snake. Eventually a daze would sweep over the victim and the people would carry him away.

But for those actually bitten by a poisonous snake, the Snake Catcher had any number of treatments. These changed according to the type and kind of offending snake. He smeared the wounds of some victims with a certain kind of clay which he also diluted with water and made the person drink. On other wounds he applied the frothy juice from the freshly crushed green bark of some tree. On still others, he would suck out a fair amount of blood and then dribble a few drops of some medication, which I'm certain contained venom collected from some other kind of snake.

If, however, a victim had been bitten by a snake which was so venomous, or the venom from a snake had spread through his bloodstream to such an extent that no antidote would work, the Snake Catcher didn't even attempt to treat him with medicine. Instead, he took out his bezoar. The bezoar always performed uniformly and never failed.

I first observed the workings of the bezoar on myself—at least now it seems that I did.

2

I was running away from a dead girl. I didn't even know for certain whether she was really dead, still I was running away from her. I left my house far behind, then even my hometown. New settlements appeared; these, too, I left behind and now I was facing the jungle.

For some time already I had given up thinking altogether, but I stood there facing the jungle and spent a long time thinking. Right across from me was a corridor of trees and bushes that became darker up ahead, and I knew nothing about it. I was on a slight elevation and this jungle corridor was sloping downward. I had to make up my mind whether to enter it or

not. But before that, I had to make up my mind about the dead girl—whether she was actually dead or had merely appeared to be dead. And I had to decide this not on the basis of the events but strictly on the basis of my own inclination. I was caught in the worst dilemma. In fact, I was even having difficulty deciding what it was I wanted to decide in the first place. I spent an entire night thinking, but when it was morning I was still unsure whether I was running away from her because I thought she was alive or because I thought she was dead. I wished that what happened hadn't happened. While I was wishing for this, I fell asleep and dreamt that what had actually happened hadn't really happened at all. Because of this I started to fall asleep in my dream, and I woke up.

I stepped into the jungle immediately.

This was my first encounter with the jungle. Here, the atmosphere felt damp, and continued to get damper and damper as I moved forward. I was wading through old trees and withered vines. Small pathways had been opened between the crooked lines of trees but they were covered with a meshwork of countless roots, thick and thin, that jutted out from the earth making it difficult to relate the roots to their corresponding trees, although now and then I came upon a dead tree and some root in the meshwork snapped under my feet letting me know that it, in fact, belonged to that tree.

The jungle didn't frighten me. I only encountered a few animals. When they sensed my footsteps, the small ones darted into the bushes where they would stand staring at me with wide-eyed wonder, reminding me of shy children. I saw innocence and bewilderment in the eyes of all the jungle animals. I didn't encounter any that were ferocious.

For some distance I looked around at the jungle with interest. Then I was reminded of the curios neatly arranged in the outer reception room of my house. I couldn't remember exactly what those curios were so I tried hard to recall each and every one of them.

One was a tiger made of some kind of metal. It stood on its hind legs with its mouth wide open as though it were roaring. Its eyes were crafted from some precious stone and they had disappeared several generations before me. Yet the tiger's only importance lay in its missing eyes. Close by the tiger, but larger than it, was a horse molded from some reddish-brown material with a rider of the same material mounted on it. One of the rider's hands was poised in the manner of someone wielding a sword, but the hand was empty. The sword of that empty hand was sorely missed,

but an elder of the family used to say that the rider had, in fact, held a scale, not a sword, in that hand. In my own time, mostly due to my own carelessness, the upper half of the rider's body had also broken off and a clever artisan had been commissioned to put it back together. I remember that when the upper half came off, it revealed that the inside material was of a rather dark red color and it gave off a strange scent which conjured up memories of old things when it was inhaled. On the wall across from the tiger and the rider hung a crab fashioned from numerous tiny chips of animal horn. The pieces had been put together in such a way that the slightest touch made the entire crab wobble and appear as if it were crawling along the wall. I hated this crab; sometimes I even feared it. It was a specimen of a craft practiced by some lost tribe whose name I could never remember.

The curios in the reception room also included a miniature palace built from tiny stone bricks of different colors. It was a complete palace with arches, columns, turrets, etc. The turrets, especially, were exceedingly beautiful and guests often marveled at the delicate workmanship of their ornamental serratures. It used to be said about this palace that at some point in time there really was a full-scale likeness of it, the ruins of which could still be seen, and that the miniature had been made to serve as a model for the actual palace. But some elders said that it was when the actual palace was destroyed that its builder made this miniature to keep the memory of the other palace alive. Now and then this miniature even came up for discussion among the elders. They would speculate in increasingly novel ways about the possible reasons for the palace's destruction and about the age of its architect, without ever resolving whether the miniature was the model for or the memorial of its life-size likeness. But at least this much was certain: there used to be a full-scale palace, in every respect exactly like its miniature counterpart, which had crumbled and, for that reason, the miniature was now considered only a memorial.

I often stood in front of the miniature palace and stared at it for so long that it began to look like the real, life-size palace. Not only that, I even heard sounds of life filtering out of it. Then, abruptly, I would regain control of myself and the palace would shrink back down with a jolt. Later on, I resolved to build myself a real palace patterned after it. I even informed the elders and guests in the reception room about my resolve and solicited their opinion about the changes I was considering making.

However, the most prominent among the reception room's curios was a palanquin sitting on top of an octagonal table in the center of the room. The table had been built especially for it. Made from a variety of metals and woods, the palanquin had layer upon layer of curtains, fashioned out of extremely fine, colorful fabric, over its doors. These were drawn back by cords with large tassels revealing a space strewn with assorted cushions of various shapes. Tiny silver and gold vessels lay beside those cushions. I never could figure out the purpose for even one of them. Miniscule bells made of an exceptionally delicate metal hung from the palanquin's ceiling. These could often be heard tinkling softly, but only when the conversation in the reception room suddenly stopped. Then the tinkling of bells seemed to fill the entire room. The softness of the sound was another matter. It seemed as if the bells weren't tinkling softly somewhere nearby, but rather that they were echoes from bells ringing loudly somewhere quite far off.

The palanquin was the last curio to be added to the collection in the reception room—the only addition made after I'd reached the age of discernment and understanding and, from that point of view, it was also the first addition. Somebody who looked a bit wild had brought it and had also stayed on with us for a while to oversee its suitable placement in the reception room, including the construction of the octagonal table. He revealed nothing about the palanquin's antiquity. A few of the guests believed that it was several hundred years old, however some merchants asserted that it was, in fact, a specimen of the workmanship of the wild fellow himself and that it only appeared to be ancient. Still, no one doubted that if any one man had crafted this palanguin, he must have spent more or less his entire life doing it. At first the wild one was shown great hospitality, but later he was thrown out of our house in terrible disgrace, the reason for which I never discovered. In any case, the palanquin remained in its place on the octagonal table in the center of the reception room. Its greatest virtue—so it was claimed, though I had difficulty fathoming it—being that it drew all the other curios to itself, curios which before had seemed to scurry every which way. In the beginning, whenever the palanquin was mentioned in our house, the wild fellow was also invariably mentioned, but slowly all reference to him was dropped. The last time I heard him mentioned was when news arrived that a snake had bitten him.

At this point the thought that there could be snakes in the jungle occurred to me for the first time.

I was in a part of the jungle where green vines were spread out over the tree trunks and the ground. These vines had large, dark green leaves with light green protruding veins and they were so succulent that when they were bent they snapped in the middle, releasing jets of water. And, in fact, the atmosphere there was suffused with exceedingly fine sprays of water. In short, that area of the jungle was completely different from the places where the presence of snakes might be suspected. But it was precisely here that the thought of snakes occurred to me and I began to imagine their presence near every moving leaf, so much so that it became difficult for me to press ahead. I stood there surrounded by a sea of green vines. The movement of their leaves resembled the rise and fall of waves, and the objects below them, which seemed to be crawling toward me, made it difficult even to stand. I scanned the area for a clearing but there were green vines around me and it was impossible to tell where the terrain rose and fell beneath their large succulent leaves. That the terrain was uneven was beyond a doubt. I remembered how several times, as I trudged forward, I had been plunged up to my waist in leaves and, wading through these leaves with my hands, I had to climb up a slope. That is to say, the sensation of wading through the leaves was still fresh on my hands. At that moment I stood rooted to the ground, finding it difficult even to budge. Suddenly something stirred close to my feet and, without determining its direction, I moved. I stepped on something which was alive and which became even more alive. I felt a sort of prick on my foot. There was a movement in the leaves and a hood rose from beneath them. For a brief second I saw tiny eyes staring at me and then I heard what sounded like someone sighing nearby. Meanwhile, the hood dived under the leaves. The leaves swayed and I saw a long, slithering body retreat. The leaves churned violently and continued being churned up for some ways into the distance.

I felt that something warm had filled my ears. I started to wonder what it might be. Finally I shook my head; I realized a snake had bitten me. For a long time this thought attempted to become fixed in my mind in some way or other. I was feeling somewhat irritated. I already thought that there were snakes in that area and that I was within their striking range. This, perhaps, also gave me the strange belief that I was safe from them. My irritation arose precisely because this belief proved to be wrong. How did it happen that there actually was a snake where I had only suspected there might be one? But by then that warm thing in my ears had increased and I was once again overwhelmed by the thought that a snake

had bitten me. A strong desire to be at home took hold of me and I started to run.

I was running in the direction I had walked in earlier, quite oblivious to the fact that I was, in this way, heading farther away from my home. I had definitely concluded that the faster I ran the sooner I would reach home, and several times I, in fact, imagined that the twists and turns of the jungle were familiar pathways around my house. Soon enough I was exhausted. I felt that something was slowly tightening around my body. I stopped. I was feeling sleepy, but I didn't want to sleep. The absence of another human in this jungle began to weigh heavily on me. My body had begun to sway from drowsiness. At one point I saw something resembling a black wall rising up in front of me. When I tried to look at it closely, it disappeared. At the same time, I felt that black walls were rising up on either side of me. Within seconds the first wall in front also reappeared, and then all of them fused together. Black walls surrounded me on all sides. They were not only shrinking gradually, they were also becoming taller as a mysterious silence and darkness wafted out from them and spread everywhere.

In that spreading silence I heard a voice: "Where did it go?"

I don't know how but I understood that the question was about the snake and was directed at me.

Meanwhile the voice asked again, "What kind was it?"

I had no desire to respond to the question. It didn't even seem odd to me that I was trapped, as I was, within those black walls. Now, someone was feeling all over on my body. I heard another question: "Where did it bite you?"

I lay motionless, aware of someone's presence near me. Someone slowly lifted my eyelids and then let go. Someone tried, unsuccessfully, to hoist me up and carry me somewhere. A final wave of drowsiness swept over me, but, before sinking into the darkness, I heard a piercing scream right next to my ear: "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

That was the first, and also the last time that the residents of the hamlet heard the Snake Catcher call out his own name. What transpired next has been related to me so many times that I can describe it as an eyewitness. Why, there are times when I imagine that I did actually witness everything myself.

The Snake Catcher's scream shot out of the jungle and carried all the way to the hamlet where the residents immediately rushed out. Although

none of them was sure who had raised the cry, they all at least knew that a snake had bitten someone and that they had to carry the victim to the Snake Catcher. When they entered the mouth of the jungle, they found the Snake Catcher, his body scraped in several places, struggling to carry me on his back. The people from the hamlet quickly picked me up and ran back, just as they had come. The Snake Catcher kept abreast of them about half the way and then collapsed, so the people had to lug him too. They were terrified. When this procession entered the hamlet, a commotion swept across its entire length and, without anyone breathing a word, the news spread that a snake had bitten the Snake Catcher and that he had probably also died. However, when he came near his home the Snake Catcher started to walk on his feet. He opened the door himself and, by the time the people had stretched me out on the ground, he had already returned from the inner part of the house with the bezoar and the milk pot and was standing near my head. He searched for the wound over my entire body and pinched the two tiny holes located just above my left heel. He then took out the bezoar, which looked like a piece of some dark-colored stone. He touched the wound with it lightly. The wound pulled the stone toward it like a magnet and stuck to it—a clear signal that the snake's victim could still be saved. He started to pour milk from a small vessel over the wound, a drop at a time. A whisper swept through the crowd that still stood there dazed: "The bezoar is sucking the poison!"

The bezoar remained fastened to the wound for a short time and then came unstuck and fell down. Somebody informed someone else: "The poison has permeated the bezoar; it's fallen unconscious."

The Snake Catcher tossed the bezoar into the large milk pot. Another whisper went around: "Now it'll release the poison in the milk and refresh itself."

The Snake Catcher removed the bezoar from the pot and touched it against the wound once more. Again it became stuck there. Shortly afterward it came loose and fell unconscious, was again placed in the pot of milk, again removed and applied to the wound, and again it stuck to it. This routine was repeated several times and each time the whisper "Until it has sucked the poison out of every vein, it will go on sticking to the wound," was passed around. Finally, one time when the bezoar was removed from the milk and brought in contact with the wound, it didn't stick to it and rolled off. At that moment my body moved.

Only then did the hamlet's residents turn their attention to me: Who was I? What should be done with me? Before they started discussing the

matter, the Snake Catcher, without raising his head, said, "Leave him with me."

3

For several days I remained suspended in a state somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. The Snake Catcher visited me two or three times every day. He would stand beside my head looking at me intently. He also made me drink a certain extract several times. Finally one day he stood me on my feet and signaled me to follow him. I was thinking that I would have difficulty walking, but after taking a step I realized that I was my usual self. I didn't talk to the Snake Catcher however.

He made me go once around the entire hamlet. It was a small settlement and it looked more or less deserted to me at the time. When we came to the pathway leading out of the hamlet, he seized hold of my hand and started taking such giant strides that I almost had to run to keep up with him. Before long I began to breathe unevenly and started to sweat all over. He stopped after a while and started at my face for the longest time. We started moving again and soon found ourselves at the mouth of the jungle. Here the Snake Catcher again looked at me intently for a long time and then grabbed my hand and led me into the jungle.

The same sea of green vines was surging before me as I wondered how on earth I had managed to get right into the middle of it and, if I actually had, how had I then managed to get out of it at all. At the moment, plunging into the vines seemed an impossibility. Although it was a bit sparse right at that spot, the jungle became progressively denser in some of the patches up ahead. No matter which direction we turned in, I always saw someone or other there. It seemed that humans, rather than animals, inhabited this jungle.

All of these men were busy with some kind of work. I saw one old man digging whitish roots out of the crumbly soil. Two men stood under a very tall tree holding a sheet of cloth tautly between them and giving instructions to a third man at the top of the tree. Elsewhere, some men were gathering different kinds of leaves into big piles, and I saw still others collecting resins and saps from tree trunks. Now and then someone could be seen coming from the jungle's more distant areas holding cages with small wild animals and birds inside. With all these people fearlessly engrossed in their respective tasks, the jungle now appeared absolutely fascinating to me. Their concentration was also fascinating: it seemed as if

outside of their work they were oblivious to the presence of anyone else around them. But whenever the Snake Catcher passed one of them, the man would interrupt his work and resume it only after the Snake Catcher had moved on. They didn't look toward him, but when I passed by they smiled and shook their heads as if inquiring after me. They made signs to inform one another that I was there, then they looked at me and smiled. Several times I thought that I should smile back at them, but I continued to pass among them with the face and eyes of a dead man. This seemed to be quite appropriate and I rationalized that it was a consequence of my accompanying the Snake Catcher. Before long we had moved past these people.

We were now in the semi-dark areas of the jungle. Here, the Snake Catcher sat down on a thick root that jutted out of the ground and he signaled to me to sit down too. I did. He asked me, "Where were you coming from?"

I told him. With his thumbnail he kept scratching the bark of the tree whose root he was sitting on. I noticed that both of his thumbnails were unusually long and bluish. He kept gazing at the dark-green streaks that had begun to appear on the bark. He gazed at them for a long time. Then he rubbed his nail on his clothes to clean it off and asked me in a very soft voice, "What did you say your name was?"

I told him my name once more. The dust-colored scrapings from the bark had accumulated on the protruding root. He gathered them up and rolled them into a loose ball between his palms and then put the ball inside his clothing to save it. After that he asked the question I was now expecting: "Where were you headed?"

I remained silent. He said, "If you didn't set out with a specific destination in mind, then this hamlet is just as good as any, although snakes abound here."

"In the jungle?" I asked.

"In the hamlet too," he said. "Because the two are close together, or rather the people have made them one."

I tried to think. Meanwhile he said, "Nobody's trying to stop you. If you really want to move on ..."

"Let me think it over. I'll tell you later."

"No need to tell," he said very gently. Then his tone changed and a touch of melancholy appeared. "The scar from the wound on your foot is now completely gone. Soon you won't even remember ever having been bitten by a snake."

"I will remember," I said and repeated the sentence silently in my heart.

"Familiar words," he said in an unsteady voice, "I've heard them before."

After that he didn't say anything further for a long time. I thought perhaps he was waiting for me to say something, but I found myself at a loss to say anything at all. Then he himself spoke up, "At first I was having difficulty determining what kind of snake bit you. I was already very tired and, besides, there wasn't much time—this is the reason I resorted to the bezoar. Later I had to come out here in the jungle to look for *it*."

I sensed the presence of a familiar odor somewhere near. Sometime, long ago, I was definitely familiar with it. A kind of haze began to spread through my brain, but it was cleared up by the voice of the Snake Catcher. He was pulling out a bag from the folds of his clothing.

"This is the one that bit you," he said as he plunged his hand inside the bag and took out a writhing snake.

The snake had just started to coil itself around his hand when a cry was heard from somewhere in the distance, "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!" And several voices in our vicinity repeated that cry like an echo, "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

He stood up.

"They're calling," he said swinging his hand and throwing the snake into the distance. The snake twisted its body a few times in midair and then fell into a bush with a slight thump, causing a couple of birds to take wing.

I watched him going back taking brisk long strides, and he soon disappeared from my view.

The familiar scent wafted by again in a gentle wave and suddenly I realized that it was coming from the green scratch marks on the trunk. As I was being drawn toward those green streaks, I heard the sound of approaching feet. The Snake Catcher was standing near me. He bent forward a little and put his hand on my shoulder.

"As I mentioned, snakes abound here," he said. "But I'm here too," and then, walking even more quickly than before, he went back.

I was still feeling the pressure of his hand on my shoulder. It came to mind that the same familiar odor was also present on his palms, and this reminded me that the very same smell also emanated from the broken torso of the rider about whom it could not be decided whether he had held a scale or a sword in his hand.

I don't remember well now how I started to help the Snake Catcher in his work. When I occasionally took a stroll through the hamlet, the residents treated me graciously, but much of their conversation focused on the Snake Catcher. They had no idea what he did in his spare time; they also didn't know, but were quite eager to find out, what he talked about with me, because, outside of inquiring about the condition of victims of snakebites—and even that in the briefest of words—he never talked about anything more with them. So it didn't surprise me at all that these people displayed their curiosity about him to me, although they asked me less about him than they told me. The topic of these conversations invariably centered on when and how and whom he had saved from a snake's venom. They particularly pointed out to me the people—myself included—whom he had revived. In short, they told me about myself but they asked very little about me, not even my name. Rather, they themselves gave me a name in their local language which meant "Helper." Hearing this word repeated on several occasions it finally occurred to me that I did, in fact, help the Snake Catcher and perhaps I had been living in this hamlet longer than I realized.

I would go to the jungle with him and gather the materials for his medicinal concoctions. These included minerals, vegetation, animals—in fact, everything. Sometimes we collected different types of clays and stones, sometimes different varieties of fruits and flowers, and sometimes the barks, roots, fibers and resins of trees. Sometimes we went out for animals and birds, which I couldn't round up all by myself but which he could easily while I proceeded to catch them. On all these occasions he described to me the effects of each item in great detail. The effect always dealt exclusively with healing wounds, never with the treatment of snakebites. I was sure that he only used a few of these materials on the victims of snakebite, but which ones—that I could never figure out. He never revealed that to me either. The fact is, he never discussed the subject of snakes. But one day he suddenly started to talk about it.

That was on the hamlet's market-day. Buyers from outlying areas had come. The merchandise consisted of whatever the people from the hamlet had been able to gather from the jungle. I had just returned after browsing through the market quickly. No matter where I went, I heard the Snake Catcher being talked about. These out-of-town buyers were especially interested in hearing about him, though he always stayed away from the market and their desire to see the famous Snake Catcher of the hamlet, even if only for a fleeting moment, had remained unfulfilled until that

market-day. I had barely stepped inside when the cry rose from the direction of the market, "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

Before I knew it, the Snake Catcher was standing in front of me. He was agitated, and an excitement, a curiosity, such as I'd never seen before, was apparent on his face. His quick appearance following the cry was also something quite new to me. I started to clear a spot on the floor, but he stopped me. "No."

I looked at him. He said, "I have to go. A snake's been spotted somewhere."

I too then realized that this time the cry didn't have the quivering fear of death that always sent a shudder through my body. This situation was new to me and I was wondering whether he would ask me to accompany him. Just then the cry went up again, still about the same distance away as before, but more like a loud, collective cry, "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

I saw him dart off in the direction of the cry. I started out after him but he had soon outdistanced me and disappeared. The tumult was still increasing, but before I could reach the market it had subsided and eventually it faded away completely. As I walked further ahead I saw the dust in the market rising up so profusely that hardly anything could be seen there at all. I strained to hear the sounds, but silence, such as cannot be imagined on a market-day, had spread everywhere. I stopped short. I kept staring at the swirls of dust twisting and turning in the air. I was thinking of going back when I heard a very loud, solitary voice rise from the market, "Who didn't know that I only catch snakes?"

It was the same voice that I had heard rising near my head the day I was bitten by the snake, but that day it didn't have this quality of molten stones. And now it rang out even louder than before, "Who didn't know?"

Perhaps something was said in response. The Snake Catcher's solitary voice was heard again, "If it's a python, it's a python; if it's a snake, it's a snake."

Beyond the clouds of dust I saw his trembling image. His hands were spread wide and he said in a voice that betrayed no emotion, "This is not the land of pythons. I've left that far behind."

His image froze for a second and then trembled again. Suddenly he came very close to me. The skin of his face was taut and his eyes had become very large. But he didn't see me. Perhaps I wasn't even visible to him. He was walking very fast. I moved out of his way and when he passed by me, I felt a chill flowing from his body. Even after thinking a

long time I wasn't any wiser so I just stepped into the dust-enveloped market.

The market was in a state of turmoil. No customers could be seen. When I scanned the area I spotted them quite some distance away standing quietly in a group near their carts. The local people had gathered into small groups of their own and they were talking in whispers. The minute they saw me they darted toward me and started talking all at the same time. For me, everything they said at first added up to just this: the Snake Catcher was angry and could I think of a way to appease him. "Python" or "snake" didn't even once figure in what was said, although the foolishness of someone was mentioned over and over. After a while they became quiet waiting for a response from me. Perhaps my silence spoke for itself and I was invited to listen to the whole story. A man, famous throughout the hamlet for his cheerful disposition, was chosen for the job. Drawing on totally unnecessary details, he began telling, in a perfectly serious tone, how the market had been set up and the order in which the customers had made their appearance. In the middle of his narration someone suggested that the incident should be recounted in the presence of the customers. A couple of people rushed over to them and, after talking with them, came back with the suggestion that everyone should move to where they and their carts were stationed. And so, avoiding the piles of merchandise we went over to them. Now I looked at the customers from up close.

Their faces reflected the usual weariness that comes from an idle and uninteresting period waiting for something. These out-of-towners—dissimilar in their clothing and temperaments, but nonetheless similar in their circumstances—had perhaps adopted this air of disinterest by mutual agreement. They looked at me indifferently and paid absolutely no attention to the narrator, which, however, didn't affect his engrossment in the least. Almost as soon as he got there, he resumed: how a customer coming from some distant place had encountered a python along the way which had not quite swallowed its victim yet and was beginning to slow down in its effort to do so while people stood all around it. The customer somehow prevailed upon these people to load the reptile onto his cart, taking every precaution so that it wouldn't escape. When he arrived at the market and the subject of the Snake Catcher came up, he or one of his companions told the people there about the python. As a result, a veritable crowd immediately formed around his cart. Everyone

was eager to see the python. The customer who had suddenly become the focus of everyone's attention opened, just slightly, the part of the cart that held the python. Everyone now saw the python slide out in one swift motion, fully alert and active. Soon it was slithering about in the market. Some people thought it even attacked them. Chaos erupted everywhere. The residents of the hamlet were hell-bent on destroying the python, while the customers who had come to shop at the market wanted to recapture it alive. This led to some unpleasantness, in the middle of which somebody mentioned the Snake Catcher and the cry went up. Meanwhile, the escaped python had wandered into that section of the market where small animals and birds were sold. By the time the Snake Catcher arrived it had already grabbed one of the animals in its mouth and people were surrounding it. For a while nobody even noticed that the Snake Catcher had arrived. Finally they looked at him, only to find him a different man, a completely different man. Never before had anyone seen him in such an angry state. He paid absolutely no attention to the python and went away still quite angry.

This account was rather long-winded, abounding in the names of commodities and individuals. Whenever the narrator mentioned a certain product, he found it necessary to also point to its mound in the market indicating who it belonged to as well as who wanted to buy it. And whenever he mentioned the name of one of the hamlet's residents, he not only asked that individual to show himself to me, he also gave me a brief introduction to him. I recognized some of these individuals as snakebite victims. In any case, the narrative ended. Now several people started to talk at once again. All of them were afraid that the Snake Catcher would abandon the hamlet and they hoped I would talk him out of it. Each one feared that the Snake Catcher was particularly angry with him individually and took pains to point out that the suggestion to summon the Snake Catcher hadn't originated with him; some even claimed they had opposed the idea. The customers, however, were silent. But when I started to leave, a heavy hand grabbed onto my shoulder. I turned around to look. He was perhaps the oldest among the customers and he didn't see well. He drew me close to himself and said, "We've been duly informed that a python is a python. But do ask him this: those whom a snake has devoured alive, doesn't that snake count as a python for them?"

And then, straining his eyes, he stared at me for the longest time as though he expected me to answer.

"And don't forget to tell him that if he is indispensable for the hamlet, so are we," he was saying. "If it was ever necessary to decide which of us is more indispensable," he hesitated, and it struck me that his voice wasn't consistent with his appearance at all.

"Should he so desire, you may also tell him my name," he said, letting go of my shoulder, but he didn't reveal his name to me.

As I trekked back, the residents of the hamlet accompanied me for some distance, but now they were talking among themselves, caught up in misgivings which eluded me. However, their conversation did reveal, but only vaguely, that the Snake Catcher didn't like the presence of the customers in the hamlet, nor they his. And yet they also definitely affirmed that neither the customers nor the Snake Catcher had actually expressed this displeasure openly.

I found the Snake Catcher sitting on the same mat that was used to cover the dead bodies of snake victims. When he saw me he moved over a bit to clear a place, and, after a slight hesitation, I also sat down on the same mat. He was rubbing his long, bluish thumbnails on his clothes, and he was silent. There was a faint rustling sound coming from the rubbing. After a while it seemed to me that the sound was coming from somewhere far away. Then it started to draw nearer, quickly gaining in intensity. Then it appeared to be coming from outside. It turned dark for a minute and I promptly got up. The sound grew progressively fainter and receded into the distance. I looked outside. The ground was wet and drops of water were falling from the leaves, but the sky was absolutely clear.

"Sit," he was saying. "This sort of rain does fall here occasionally." I sat down.

"Where were you?"

I gave him a brief account of what had transpired at the market, but I skipped the conversation with the old customer and the thoughts expressed by the local residents afterward.

"They consider a python and a snake the same thing," he mumbled, as if complaining, "although they haven't seen either one. To them both are slithering creatures, one larger than the other. They know next to nothing about the difference in poisons." He looked at me and fell silent. My own silence didn't seem to be a proper response to his tone and I asked, "Doesn't the difference in poisons result from the difference in snakes."

"A snake is one that has poison. The rest are merely colorful insects. Then again, a snake is a snake only as long as it can make use of its poison. That's why a dead snake is no longer a snake."

"But poisonous snakes come in different varieties ...?"

"It's poison that has varieties, not snakes."

"How about the snake ... the merely colorful insect, whose victim dies from fright ...?"

"For such a person it is a snake, though in reality ..." he stopped, resuming after a pause, "Why, you do have a way with words. I don't know why ... but this word 'variety' ... it applies to those who die from fright, not to those slithering creatures; and to those that slither this is the most poisonous variety of human. That's why you see me treat people of this variety the way I do."

I recalled the cries and the desperate ranting and raving of some victims brought to the Snake Catcher and I asked, "For the sake of those colorful insects?"

"For the sake of both ... but ..." he said quite amiably, "didn't you like what I said about the colorful insects? All right, just for your sake, I'll grant that there are two types of snakes: one from whose bite a man dies legitimately; and a second from whose bite a man dies illegitimately."

But this, in effect, amounted to two kinds of men, didn't it?—I thought, and perhaps he was also thinking the same thing, though neither of us said a word.

He remained silent for a long time. During this interval, he looked at his nails closely once, he ran his hand back and forth over the mat for a while, and then he said, "The place where I lived before I came here really had an overabundance of pythons. Because of my fascination with all things that kill, I would wander around observing pythons, always anxious to see one catch its prey. And I did see that sight many times, indeed, so many times that I began to understand the nature of the relationship a python has with its victim. I assume you know that every creature that hunts has a relationship with its prey."

I didn't know; all the same I shook my head yes.

"Like any hunter ... like any hunting animal, a python seeks out prey only when it's hungry. It lies in wait, coiled around a tree. Sometimes it waits in a high place, sometimes very close to the ground, and sometimes, disappointed in one place, it moves on to another, waiting, waiting. Finally, a victim chances by and the python appears as though it isn't aware of the approaching prey.

"Suddenly, however, it springs, and it can be seen coiling around the victim. The victim writhes too, aware, almost immediately, that he's facing death, and he struggles harder to break free of the coils. But they increase and tighten around him. It's a fierce but quiet battle that sometimes goes on for a very long time. Eventually the intensity subsides. The thought of facing death, which before augmented the victim's will to survive, now weakens it. When this point is reached the python begins to devour its prey. But its eyes don't shine with victory." He slowly closed his palms. "I've always looked closely into the eyes of both and have always found only a desolate stillness there, as if they're consciously avoiding each other. Behind that stillness their half-closed eyes sometimes show resignation, sometimes a peculiar embarrassment, and sometimes just weariness, as if they're merely fulfilling a responsibility, their hearts aren't in it. That's why sometimes—perhaps this is just a fancy on my part—I feel ..." He stopped. He reflected for a very long time, but he didn't finish.

"Why did you abandon the land of pythons?" I finally asked, but perhaps he didn't hear.

"Until his very last breath the victim struggles to break free from the python's coils, even though in the end the struggle is nothing more than merely carrying out the formality of living. It's a terribly revolting sight. But once caught by a python, the victim knows, from start to finish, that he's facing death, and why. He can feel the physical presence of the python until his last gasp, and the python can feel its victim's presence even long after that. For both of them it's a game played out in the open. And a game that's played out in the open ..." He stopped again and didn't finish. It seemed as if he had suddenly become aware of my presence, and he asked, "When the snake's poison was spreading through your body and you were nearing death, where was the snake itself at that time?"

"I don't know."

"It must have been somewhere quite far from you, and it's possible that it had meanwhile encountered something that took its mind off of you completely. You had perhaps seen it, so you were fleeing; but it's also possible that you hadn't seen it at all, and only thought that a small thorn had pricked your foot. At most you would have bent down and rubbed on the spot gently. Before long you would have forgotten that a thorn had ever pricked your foot. God knows how far you might have walked before the poison started spreading through your body, and you would have been at a loss to understand what was happening to you. It wouldn't

even have occurred to you that the prick you had felt on your foot sometime somewhere was actually the thing that was killing you. You wouldn't have known whose prey you had become, and your hunter would have been no wiser than you. Why, for that matter, it's not even necessary that there should be a hunter. It's entirely possible that your hunter had already perished before you. But for you what difference would it have made whether it was alive or dead, near or far, because a snake doesn't play its game out in the open. Only a python does."

I mentioned the remark made by the old customer that, for a small animal, weren't a snake and a python alike.

"Yes," he said, "market customers think up such questions all too frequently, although they know that a snake is not like a python where humans are concerned, and a python is not a snake for anyone. They can't even begin to understand what a tremendous difference there is between the two."

I was reflecting on the difference when he asked, "Have you seen a python before today?"

When he found out that I hadn't before, or even today, he shifted a bit and I felt somewhat uneasy. Once again our conversation was heading toward a question. I was hoping the subject of our conversation would change somehow. For a moment I considered asking him about the cloud that had rained suddenly and then drifted away, but he himself threw a question at me, "What did they tell you about the python?"

I had to tell him that I hadn't asked them about it at all. I sensed that his gaze was fixed on me. There was silence for quite awhile. Finally he said, "Well all right, if you don't want me to, I won't ask you anything about yourself."

Afterwards he talked for a long time about different snake poisons and their effects, but it seemed as if he was trying to refresh his own memory. Suddenly there was the sound of approaching feet and he gave a start.

Three strangers appeared.

One of them said, "We came here since you couldn't be found there."

The Snake Catcher stood up. "Oh, it's already so late in the evening!" he said with amazement.

The men kept looking over at me. Finally, one of them pointed at me and said, "In front of him?"

"No," he said. "Come." And making them go ahead of himself he ushered them into the inner area of the house.

They weren't residents of the hamlet, and they also definitely looked quite different from the customers I'd seen in the market. Still there was something about them, and it didn't take me long to conclude that they too were customers.

4

That very night, just before the crack of dawn, the cry went up and an unconscious man was brought in along with a dead snake. The people who accompanied him said that they had heard him scream but by the time they reached him he was already unconscious. They found the snake not far from him. They also said that the man had been bitten by a snake once before. They were discussing the details of the first episode when the Snake Catcher appeared in front of them.

"What happened?" he asked, bending over the unconscious man. He then examined the snake closely before leaning over the man one more time. He kept looking at the two by turns for quite some time. Finally, he withdrew to one side and said in a voice without any expression, "Take him away."

Perhaps this was an entirely unexpected situation for them. As they were consulting among themselves with their eyes, the Snake Catcher's somewhat loud voice was heard saying, "What did he tell you?"

I told him that the men had found him unconscious and that they had only heard him scream.

"He hasn't been bitten by a snake," he said, and left. The people who had brought the unconscious man had just started to say something when the man's condition took a turn for the worse and they rushed toward him.

Just then, off in the distance, the cry rose again: "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

The companions of the unconscious man picked him up and went out of the house. Shortly thereafter another group came in. It included a few people from the earlier group and it also brought an unconscious man, whose condition apparently didn't look good. I was given no details this time around. Instead, everyone remained silent, even when the Snake Catcher came and questioned them. Perhaps they were having difficulty deciding who should speak. But by now the Snake Catcher had already bent over the unconscious man. One of the group, who seemed very rest-

less, came forward and stood close to the Snake Catcher. "Snake-bite—wouldn't you say?" he asked, practically begging.

Looking at the dead snake stretched out on the mat the Snake Catcher shook his head affirmatively.

I noticed, for the first time, how a current of relief and joy washed over the entire group accompanying the snake's victim, even before the treatment had begun.

"Milk!" the Snake Catcher said, and some people dashed out. They had all guessed that the treatment would be done with the bezoar but their hope of watching the treatment was not satisfied because, after the milk had been brought in, the Snake Catcher had all of them step out.

The wound couldn't be found. The Snake Catcher himself made a wound on the victim's body. The bezoar even stuck to that. While I was dribbling milk over it, I heard him say, "I don't know what it is, perhaps no one does: is it something created by the ancients or by nature, like a stone or vegetation, or is it some kind of living thing?"

"Living thing?" I asked. At the same moment the bezoar tumbled down, unconscious.

"This unconsciousness," he said, "or perhaps temporary death—isn't it proof enough of its being a living thing? And then again, what proof is there that it isn't?"

He retrieved the bezoar from the milk pot and placed it on the wound.

"You'll be amazed to know," he said, "that I fear the snake more than anything."

I was amazed indeed. And I made it known that I was.

"But there are times when I fear the bezoar even more."

Just then the victim's body stirred and the Snake Catcher fixed his attention on him.

By the time the victim left, walking on his own feet, it had become sunny. Placing the bezoar between his palms and rubbing it slowly the Snake Catcher said, "It plays its game out in the open, but no one is able to understand it. Isn't that something to fear?"

"Perhaps," I said, "but if ..."

"And it's the killer of poison, which makes me absolutely sure that in some way or other it is itself lethal. But how? I have in my possession a thing that kills, but I don't know how it kills. That's why I fear it, and when fear is mixed with the thought that maybe this thing is alive ..."

I was feeling drowsy, but it was a strange kind of drowsiness. I had the feeling that I was becoming hollow and that if I fell asleep my body would simply disappear. I wanted him to go on talking so that I wouldn't fall asleep, but I was only able to hear one more sentence. "In exactly this same way, I also begin to fear myself sometimes."

Then I saw him dash toward me.

5

Up to now I haven't been able to figure out how much time I spent among those dim shadows. In the beginning I sensed nothing except the sounds of softly approaching feet. Later, along with those sounds, I could feel the sensation of hands touching me. Sometimes those hands fed me some liquid which immediately filled my nostrils with an odor resembling acrid smoke. I felt that there was a black curtain drawn in front of me all the time. Finally one day faint ripples began to appear on the curtain, gradually changing into murky shadows. At first these shadows were incomprehensible to me, but then they began to assume whatever form I wished, and it became something of a sport for me. Outside of these changing forms, which were entirely dependent on me for their existence, I nurtured absolutely no curiosity about anything else, and whatever came in contact with my senses seemed entirely natural to me, something that had been happening forever. Voices asked me questions, which didn't need to be understood to be answered. At times I even started answering when no question was asked and I supposed that I was, in this way, discharging myself of some major obligation. I was contented with my life in every way.

Once, though, I suddenly began feeling an aversion for my speech, and I fell silent in mid-sentence. Somebody asked me a question which I didn't understand. After that I mostly slept or dreamed. One of my dreams was that a snake had bitten me in a jungle in the midst of green vines. I was carried over to the Snake Catcher's and he was saying that I had not been bitten by a snake, but the people were imploring him, trying somehow to make him say that I had indeed been bitten by one. They moved forward toward him and drew back repeatedly, and their back and forth movements shook my body and interrupted my sleep.

The Snake Catcher was looking at me bent over. Finding me watching him, he retreated several steps, went to one side and stood there. I looked at him again and he came back over to me.

"It doesn't displease you to look at me—does it?" he asked.

I was lying on a pile of cushions. Some vessels, whose purpose I didn't understand, lay near me. There were large doors all around and each had several curtains of some exceedingly fine fabric hanging over it. The Snake Catcher pulled back the curtains of a door. The strong light that poured through the open door appeared very strange and unpleasant to me. But I didn't close my eyes. I was expecting to see something but didn't have a clue what it might be. Whatever was on the outside wasn't visible to me. The Snake Catcher drew the curtains together and I shut my eyes. I heard his voice. He was telling somebody, "Today I'll take him with me."

When my eyes opened next, the Snake Catcher was standing in front of me holding a light.

"Let's go," he said.

Several hands stood me up and I went out supported by those hands. Since the light was falling directly on my eyes, I was unable to see anyone. I was put on a seat in a carriage. When it moved, there was no one with me. Not even the light was with me. I drifted in and out of sleep the whole way. Finally the carriage stopped and I saw the Snake Catcher holding the light. He helped me get down. I could see his house up ahead.

"Try to walk on your own," he said. Taking slow steps I went through the door. Just then he said something and I turned around to look. The lights in the houses of the hamlet could be seen. The Snake Catcher had drawn near me. He no longer held the light in his hand and three murky shadows were getting on the carriage.

"Come in," I heard him say.

For several days I didn't step outside. Perhaps I didn't feel like it, or perhaps I imagined that the Snake Catcher didn't want me to. I had also dreamed up several vague explanations why he wanted it that way, but I don't remember what they were now. The fact is that, in the first place, during this time I saw very little of him. My memory was becoming keener now and I could recall everything in detail, though I had little success remembering things in the order they occurred. For instance, the incident of my being bitten by the snake seemed to me to have occurred after the Snake Catcher had grabbed the snake and tossed it away in the

jungle. Inevitably I turned my attention to the medicinal ingredients the Snake Catcher collected from the jungle. I noticed there hadn't been any increase in their volume since his last trip when I accompanied him. I picked up each and every substance, and everything he had told me about it started to surface in my memory. I also found the substance he had scraped from the bark of the tree which emitted its familiar odor. The Snake Catcher had mentioned several of its effects, but here my memory faltered. Try as hard as I might, I couldn't remember a single one of those effects; why, when I strained my memory harder, I even forgot that it was a scraping of tree bark. This recurred several times. Then it began to happen that the minute I saw the scraping, or even so much as thought of it, its odor wafted into my nose, making it well-nigh impossible for me to stay inside the house.

On one such occasion I heard the noise of children, or a sound somewhat like rain coming down somewhere far off. I went out and started to walk in the direction of the sound. Noticing greenish clumps shifting this way and that up ahead in the distance, I went near them and saw that they were large-leafed vines being dragged around by small children who looked very excited by this game. Some children would jump into the vines and get dragged along with them for some distance, thrashing their arms and legs about as though they were playing in water and leaving behind them trails of broken bits of leaves. When they saw me their excitement increased and they started to shout, "Snake Catcher! Snake Catcher!"

For a while I didn't hear their voices. I saw people rushing down the roads on their way from the jungle. Within minutes a crowd formed around the children. Then suddenly everything became very quiet and I heard the Snake Catcher's voice behind me, "You shouldn't remain out-of-doors too long."

After he was gone, the children tried to resume playing with the vines but their elders stopped them and started to drag them away.

Then I noticed that, for the first time ever, they had returned from the jungle empty-handed.

6

I continued sleeping well into the next day. I was awakened by the sound of soft footsteps. Two men from the hamlet were standing beside my bed near my head. One of them who was well known for his cheerful disposi-

tion asked me, in a serious tone of voice, how I was doing, and then he said, "You've changed a lot during this time, Helper. We all wanted to see you. We had the chance yesterday, but the cry ..." he suddenly became despondent. "But perhaps you had come out on account of the cry."

I told them that I had come out because of the noise of the children and it was they who had raised the cry when they saw me.

"If only you could tell him that ..." he became despondent once again. "How can it be, Helper, that children would not do what their elders do?"

His companion reminded him of something; hesitation began to show on his face. I said, "Yesterday when I saw you all returning empty-handed from the jungle ..."

"We knew it would sadden you," he said, his natural cheerfulness slowly returning. "Helper, we only want to see you." He pointed outside. "They've all gathered out there. We know you shouldn't stay out-of-doors for long."

"And besides, you've just woken up," his companion added.

I got out of bed. It was the time when the local residents went out to the jungle. I found them assembled on the road. They gazed at me in wistful silence for the longest time, until I couldn't hold back any longer.

"It's all very hazy in my mind," I said. "All the same, ask what you have to ..."

They drew close to me. Now they all started asking me questions. None of these questions indicated that they wanted me to answer it; the balance of their questions seemed not to even be directed toward me. Someone would ask a question, several others would reject it and ask questions of their own which were rejected in turn by still others. Pretty soon I guessed that their questions were actually directed toward one another and that they were having difficulty deciding what questions I could conceivably answer. Such weariness was etched on their faces and such despair oozed from their words that the thought that I was not one of them began to weigh heavily on me. Soon, though, I found myself inundated by questions that had somehow penetrated my hearing clearly. Was this the first time I was bitten by a snake? Had I been bitten two times or only the second time? Why did I choose to come to the hamlet via the jungle? Was I really sorry to see them return from the jungle empty-handed? Why then is the jungle being chopped down?

"Why then is the jungle being chopped down?" I repeated this last question.

"We had never thought about it," an old man said. "It has always provided sustenance for us, but now it is *we* who are chopping it down." He looked at his hands in despair.

"Are you chopping down the jungle?" I said.

"We have to do something, Helper. It may not be what we want, but others commission us to do it. And to tell you the truth, even now the jungle is sustaining our lives. But for how long?"

"This is a good hamlet, Helper," said another, even older, man. "Of course it has too many snakes. But then, it also has the Snake Catcher."

After that they turned toward the jungle. Only the old man remained, standing with his head bent low. I drew near him and put my hand on his shoulder. He lifted his head and looked at me with his gloomy eyes saying, "This hamlet used to be a good one, Helper."

Then he went to catch up with the rest of his companions.

"I would like to know," I said.

"I know you've been asked many questions," the Snake Catcher said. "But they themselves don't know whether or not you can answer those questions. Since you're a stranger they think you might know what they don't. It isn't a good thing to be a stranger, Helper." He used my name for the first time. "Or perhaps it is. And then again maybe not."

"I'd like to know," I repeated.

"You couldn't figure anything out from their questions?"

I only repeated to him the questions that I had heard clearly. He listened with his head bowed. After a while he lifted it. "Are you sure these questions were asked in that order?"

I was speechless. Actually, except for the last question about why the jungle was being chopped down, I didn't remember the order of the questions.

He looked at me intently. Several times his eyes were focused down on me and then raised up. Then he put his hand on mine and said in a very soft, low voice, "No? Don't try to remember; otherwise you'll be overwhelmed. What is first and what is last, forgetting that makes a huge difference, Helper. And this difference will correspond to the differences in the manner of forgetting."

"I'm having difficulty remembering the order of the questions."

"Try to forget it now. Be glad that you only encountered questions." He got up and began to pace. "Suppose the questions had also accompanied answers, some of which might have themselves been in the form of

questions, and you had been unable to determine which answer went with which question, and which question came after which answer or question, and which question followed it, and every time ..." he choked on his words.

Is he crying? I wondered and looked at him, but his eyes were dry and his voice had cleared.

"...and every time, when you tried to remember but weren't sure, you would have regretted remembering even as much as you did," he said, and it was quite apparent that he was trying to remember something but was unsure about it.

"When I said that I'd like to know," I explained, "I meant ..."

"And what surprised me the most was that you wanted to know. You've changed quite a bit during this time, Helper."

"I was thinking of the people of the hamlet."

"They are a fine people," he said, and then his eyes also became gloomy and he said the same thing, "This used to be a good hamlet, Helper."

He got up to go. I came and stood in front of him.

"Why is the jungle being chopped down?" I asked.

"Really, you've changed a lot," he said with a tinge of regret. "Even so, you're a stranger, and here, in this matter, it isn't a bad thing to be a stranger. Anyway, Helper, I myself wanted to tell you something. It's not that I want to inform you about things; that's not my job." He made a low, grunting sound, and seeing him in this condition, at the time, I was reminded of trapped animals.

"When I said that I'd like to know ..."

"Look, Helper," he signaled me to sit down as he did so himself and said, "you know, everyone has to do something or other, and whoever does something must unavoidably deal with buyers. Even if he has nothing to sell, he still has to. A buyer looks for profit and only watches out for his own gain. Right? But what's even worse, if he sees only his gain but doesn't see the other's loss, he begins to have doubts about his own gain. And there are many buyers like this who only measure their gain by the loss of the other. No ..." He stopped me even before I could open my mouth. "Don't say that it's not like that. It is. You perhaps doubt it. Sometimes I think about you. You don't have to deal with buyers nor are you a buyer yourself ... Have you ever thought why you are like this?"

"I will now."

"Because you're a stranger. You were offended when I called you 'stranger,'—but the fact is: you are a stranger, pure and simple. And as I

said, this is not a bad thing, Helper. This is not something to take offense at."

"I wasn't offended," I said with perfect equanimity.

"Stranger," he mumbled. "This is why you felt the need to understand, even though you had been told that we have come into the midst of buyers."

"Didn't you have dealings with them before?"

"We did. But at that time the buyers used to come to us. Now that we've gone to them ..." His words were drowned in a grunt, and once again I thought of trapped animals.

Suddenly it seemed as if he'd heard something. He got up, grabbed my hand and led me out of the house. He scanned the area, as if he was trying to determine the direction. I strained my ears. Just then a quivering animal sound was heard some distance away. Still holding onto my hand he walked in that direction but stopped after just a few steps. His eyes were riveted in the direction of the sound. It seemed as if he had become oblivious of my presence, but he said, "Actually, what I wanted to tell you, Helper, was that every buyer goes to great lengths to prevent people from understanding his operations. And he considers this necessary for his own gain as well as for the other's loss. So now don't ever say that you want to understand, because I myself don't understand." After that he started to move briskly in the direction of the sound.

We didn't have to go far. Coming to a mound of earth he halted. He let go of my hand and went halfway around it. He was now facing me from the other side. He gestured for me to back away and I had just barely done so when a snake quickly slithered out from behind. I hadn't yet noticed it when the Snake Catcher thrust himself between me and the snake. I had the feeling that he had gotten there by going right through the heap. The snake reared up but the Snake Catcher again stood in his way. The snake twisted to one side, the Snake Catcher again placed himself in its way. The snake's slithering track and the Catcher's footprints were both being formed on the soft, dry earth without a sound. Once again the snake turned around. But the Snake Catcher was again in front of him. There was a brief pause and then the snake lifted its head and spread out its hood. Turning to one side the Snake Catcher moved forward. The snake gyrated, pointing its hood toward him. The Snake Catcher spun lightly and advanced toward it. The snake's hood was again facing him. But now the Snake Catcher continued to move straight toward him. The snake's hood was swinging right and left and its tail was slowly flapping on the ground. The Snake Catcher had reached the snake.

Suddenly one of his knees touched the ground, his hand moved forward, a bit of dust flew up, and the snake could be seen wrapped around his arm all the way up to his shoulder. Its deflated hood was held tightly in the Snake Catcher's fist.

Holding the snake this way he came over to me.

"How does it look?" he asked.

I discerned an awesome beauty in both of them; although, compared to the Snake Catcher, the snake looked like something brought into existence just recently.

"It hasn't bitten you—has it?" I asked, realizing myself how absurd my question was.

The Snake Catcher pressed against the snake's hood with his thumb and its mouth popped open. He lifted it up a bit higher to look. He was saying something to it under his breath which I couldn't hear clearly, but I did guess from it that the snake was a female.

"All the poison ever seen," he said, staring into the snake's eyes. Then he turned toward me. "Everyone has to do some work or other, Helper, and my work is with poisons."

Lately more snakes had started to appear in the hamlet. At least once a day a call went up. By now, I too had begun to understand the differences in this call so I didn't have to make any preparations when I heard it. The Snake Catcher would emerge from the inner part of the house and go out. He would return shortly and I would try not to look at him. He himself paid no attention to me. Sometimes he wasn't at home when the cry was raised and he could be seen rushing from the direction of the jungle or from some other direction. But after he had caught the snake he made straight for home. He usually stayed inside the house, or perhaps his house had another door that led to the outside. At any rate, other than catching an occasional glimpse of him, I hadn't had a conversation with him since the day he had caught the snake in my presence.

One day, though, I noticed that he came near me again and again. He would stare at me for some time and then go back in. Once, while this was going on, a cry was even raised, and when he returned from outside he lingered near me for a long time. Without looking at him, I just waited for him to speak, but he didn't say a word. A sound, like someone repeatedly opening and closing his palm, came from his hand periodically. One time I even thought that he was saying something, but it was barely audible. Finally, I looked toward him. As I had suspected, he was

looking at me, but his face betrayed nothing. The snake wrapped around his arm was alternately tightening and loosening its coils. I started to say something, but checked myself. With his hand bent over, the Snake Catcher was now gazing at the snake. He turned around and came back, tripping slightly along the way.

By evening another cry went up. I had fallen asleep and was awakened by the cry. There was a silence everywhere. I stayed awake for some time and then, thinking that the cry had occurred in my dream, I was about to go back to sleep when I heard footsteps outside the house. Shortly afterward a small crowd of people came inside. I sat up startled. A dead snake was dangling from a stick which the man at the front of the crowd was holding in his hand. I tried hard but couldn't remember whether this time the cry had contained the quivering fear of death or not. I cleared a space on the ground and spread the thin mat over it. The crowd looked at me in silence. Then the man at the front moved forward. He tossed the snake, along with the stick, onto the mat and turned toward me saying, "We had to kill it."

After that they all went away in complete silence. The snake lay on the mat haphazardly.

I noticed a slight movement in it, despite the fact that its hood was badly crushed. The snake was exactly the same kind I had seen the Snake Catcher capture in my presence.

After lying awake for quite a while I went back to sleep.

Halfway through the night I woke up. I felt the sensation of two cold fingers on my neck. I sat up in bed. The Snake Catcher was standing in front of me. Then he sat down nearby. As before he remained silent.

"I didn't hear the cry," I said.

"There wasn't a cry," he said.

I looked around. The dead snake lay on the mat as haphazardly as before, though the direction of its hood had changed slightly. I looked toward the Snake Catcher.

"This time I am informing you, Helper," his cold hand clutched mine. "The bezoar has disappeared."

"God knows," he said.

He remained absolutely speechless for quite a while. I got out of bed and stood up. "I'll look for it."

He motioned for me to sit down, and placing his hand on my shoulder he said to me very gently, "Such things don't disappear in order to be found again."

"Even so, perhaps ..."

"It won't help to worry," he said. "It's a loss, surely; but worrying won't help."

He said it as though it was I, not he, who had sustained the loss and he was trying to console me. His manner was so genuine that for a while I really began to think of myself as deserving his sympathy. Soon, however, I regained my ability to consider the reality of it.

"The bezoar was only needed occasionally," I said.

"Yes, occasionally," he said. "It was the last resort, and it never failed."

"But you have many other remedies; you rarely made use of the bezoar."

"I understand, Helper," he said, "but you don't. It was the last remedy, and it never failed because it could take care of every poison. Of course there's no shortage of remedies, but it, and it alone, could neutralize certain poisons. I will have to fear those poisons from now on, in fact, I'll have to fear all poisons because it was the last alternative as an antidote for every poison."

But he didn't look frightened, rather, at the time, I thought his peaceful face appeared to be something one ought to fear.

"I'm not afraid, Helper," he said in a low voice. "But since its disappearance I'm seeing all this."

Afterwards a slight stupor came over him. Certainly he was seeing something at that moment. I extended my hand toward him. His half-opened eyes were riveted on me. My hand stopped midway and I began to see in his eyes everything that he, perhaps, was himself seeing: I see the Snake Catcher arrive at a place where a snake has been spotted. Many people are gathered together there. They make way for him the moment they see him, but the snake, instead of fleeing at his sight, coils up and spreads out its hood. The Snake Catcher moves toward it, slowly, cautiously. Suddenly the snake snaps, bites him, and flees. The people kill it and a crowd forms around the Snake Catcher. Next I see a crowd entering the house clamoring loudly. The condition of the unconscious man with them appears critical. Everyone looks terribly worried. The Snake

Catcher comes forward. He looks at the victim and then stands there silently. The victim's condition grows progressively worse. The people continue looking at the Snake Catcher and then they start beseeching him; they only want him to say that it was, indeed, a snake that bit the man. But the Snake Catcher continues standing silently until the victim dies. The people pick the man up and go out, and the sound of weeping can be heard from outside. Just then another crowd files in. But as soon as they see the Snake Catcher they retreat quickly, move forward again, and then draw back again. Everyone's gaze is fixed on the Snake Catcher. There is only a raging silence in his half-open eyes and he is looking straight ahead. Then he began to slump over.

I tried to raise him up, but he did it himself and then he sat with his eyes opened fully.

"As it is, the hamlet was dying out on its own anyway, Helper," he said. "This is yet another factor in its demise. I came here from the land of pythons and started to work with poisons." He remained silent for quite a while with his eyes fixed on the dead snake.

Shortly before daybreak he stood up. I tried to give him some support but he shrank back a little. Twice he repeated the name of my city and looked at me. Then he drew near me and said, "Feel like going back home?"

I didn't reply. He turned around to leave, but after taking a few steps he came back. From the mat he picked up the stick that had held the dead snake and peered at it in silence for a long time. Then he said, "Don't tell anybody, Helper, but I'm certain that I've forgotten all the cures for treating snakebites."

When I looked up, he was already gone.

I stayed awake watching the sun rise and its rays grow stronger. I heard the sounds of the hamlet coming to life and of people setting out for the jungle. But all this time my ears were trained on the sounds that were coming from the inner part of the house. These were faint and of different kinds: of picking up something and putting it down, of patting, of dirt falling on dirt, of pushing something carefully from one place to another, and also a sound that was intermittent but persistent and incredibly soft but with a brutal force lurking behind it. I couldn't figure it out at all. But I didn't want to hear it now. I was wondering what I should do if it continued. Just then it stopped. So far I hadn't heard the Snake Catcher's voice and I was waiting for it. But it was absolutely quiet

inside the house. I waited for a long time; the silence didn't let up. I felt as if the Snake Catcher's voice was some heady intoxication which I needed desperately, and I waited for this feeling to subside.

After waiting an appropriate amount of time I stepped into the inner part of the house.

Up until then I hadn't seen this part of the house. Here I found an assortment of bags, baskets, and objects resembling cages hanging from the walls or stored on high wooden shelves. There was also an assortment of small containers in different shapes, whose purpose escaped me, and, separate from them, lay a collection of small and large milk vessels. Several sticks, bent in a particular way, stood in a corner, and an empty bed lay near them. Some of the ingredients for medicines, most of which were stored in the section of the house where I lived, were lying in disorder under a shelf. I immediately returned to my living quarters and picked up, from the ingredients stored there, the ball of tree bark that emitted the familiar odor. As I was sniffing the ball, my gaze fell on the thin mat that was spread out on the ground. The dead snake was still lying there and had started to decompose. I didn't touch either the mat or the snake. Instead, I picked up the other mat which stood rolled up in the corner. Throughout this whole time the feeling that I was rendering great assistance to the Snake Catcher overwhelmed me.

I went into the interior of the house a second time and glanced again at the objects I had noticed on my first visit. I hadn't missed a single item. Now I began to look more closely at objects I had seen on earlier occasions.

On the floor snakes were scattered everywhere. They didn't move even though a few small animals frisked about in their midst. Whenever the animals brushed past a snake, it stirred slightly. The snakes were of different sizes, and some of them were really very beautiful. Here and there a snake had turned over and the neatly drawn lines on its white or yellowish belly were clearly visible. Each lay in its place in such a way that there could be no doubt that it was dead.

The hood on every one of the snakes was badly crushed, and none of them had any eyes left, though the mouths on some did seem to be open. The rest of their bodies were completely unscathed, except for a few whose tails also appeared to have been flattened. Had their eyes survived, I wondered, what kind of expression would they have shown? I immediately felt very bad about thinking such a thing and now I directed my

attention to the place I had looked almost as soon as I had entered the inner part of the house. I moved toward it, stepping in the empty spaces between the snakes.

The Snake Catcher was lying on the floor near the bed. One of his hands was stretched out in front of him and the other was grabbing onto the bed's cushion in such a way that half of it had slid down. I gently restored it to its earlier condition and the Snake Catcher's hand came to rest on the floor.

His face was under his outstretched hand so I couldn't see it. I started to say something but stopped. I was still holding the rolled up mat in my hand. I unrolled it and threw it over his body. Then I returned to my part of the house.

Seeing the snake lying alone on the thin mat, it occurred to me how unusual it was that no cry had gone up that day. At the time, I couldn't even remember when I had heard the last cry, although I could remember each of the earlier ones complete with its particular details. I continued thinking until a thick darkness spread all around, and I stepped out into that darkness.

I came upon traces of human habitation for some distance. Finally, the hamlet was left far behind. \Box

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon