

“THE MOST CELEBRATED SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY WRITER OF HER GENERATION.”

—**THE NEW YORK TIMES**

**N. K. JEMISIN**

Text: *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?*



N(ora). K. Jemisin is a New York Times bestselling author of speculative fiction short stories and novels, who lives and writes in Brooklyn, NY. In 2018, she became the first author to win three Best Novel Hugos in a row. She has also won a Nebula Award, two Locus Awards, and is a recipient of the MacArthur “Genius” Fellowship.

She is an emeritus member of the Altered Fluid writing group. In addition to writing, she has been a counseling psychologist and educator, a hiker and biker, and a political/feminist/anti-racist blogger. Although she no longer pens the New York Times Book Review science fiction and fantasy column called “Otherworldly” (which she covered for 3 years), her reviews can still be found online.

(From nkjemisin.com)

**Assignment:**

- 1. Read and take notes on the introduction to *HOW LONG ‘TIL BLACK FUTURE MONTH?* by N.K. Jemisin.**
- 2. Look up unfamiliar vocab/allusions. (next page)**
- 3. Read and annotate the three short stories. Look for major themes, motifs, stylistic features, etc.**

## Vocabulary

<p>“The Ones Who Stay and Fight”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Polyglots pg. 3</li><li>2. Mica-flecked pg. 3</li><li>3. Tamarind pg. 4</li><li>4. Itinerant pg. 4</li><li>5. Pragmatic pg. 5</li><li>6. Paradox pg. 5</li><li>7. Homage pg. 5</li><li>8. Gethen pg. 7</li><li>9. Benighted pg. 7</li><li>10. Anathema pg. 9</li><li>11. Pike pg. 10</li><li>12. Venerated pg. 11</li></ol>	<p>“The City Born Great”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Existential crisis pg. 16</li><li>2. Florid pg. 16</li><li>3. Favela pg. 19</li><li>4. Neil deGrasse Tyson pg. 20</li><li>5. Harbingers pg. 22</li><li>6. Heisman pg. 25</li><li>7. Tumid pg. 27</li><li>8. Ralph Ellison pg. 29</li><li>9. Iota pg. 29</li><li>10. Lo que pasa, pasa. pg. 30</li><li>11. Firmament pg. 30</li><li>12. Squamous pg. 30</li><li>13. Eldritch pg. 30</li><li>14. Fugue pg. 31</li><li>15. Genteel pg. 32</li></ol>	<p>“Red Dirt Witch”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Commissary pg. 34</li><li>2. Wont pg. 37</li><li>3. Sundry pg. 37</li><li>4. Cloying pg. 40</li><li>5. Miasma pg. 40</li><li>6. Fastidiously pg. 40</li><li>7. Crinoline pg. 41</li><li>8. Nought pg. 43</li><li>9. Palsy pg. 44</li><li>10. Humility pg. 50</li><li>11. Fallow pg. 51</li><li>12. Kudzu pg. 51</li><li>13. Obelisks pg. 53</li><li>14. Downtrodden pg. 54</li><li>15. Cronies pg. 55</li><li>16. Freedom Rides pg. 56</li></ol>
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How long 'Til Black  
Future Month? by N.K.  
Jemisin

## Introduction

Once upon a time, I didn't think I could write short stories. The time was 2002. I'd just turned thirty and had my first "midlife" crisis. (Yeah, I know.) I was living in Boston, where it was cold and hard to make friends and nobody put seasoning on anything. I'd just ended a lackluster relationship, and I was in student loan debt up to my eyeballs, like pretty much everybody else in my generation. In an attempt to resolve frustration with the state of my life, I finally decided to see whether my lifelong writing hobby could be turned into a side hustle worth maybe a few hundred dollars. If I could make that much (or even just one hundred a year!), I might be able to cover some of my utility bills or something. Then I could get out of debt in twelve or thirteen years, instead of fifteen.

I wasn't expecting more than that, for reasons beyond pessimism. At the time, it was clear that the speculative genres had stagnated to a dangerous degree. Science fiction *claimed* to be the fiction of the future, but it still mostly celebrated the faces and voices and stories of the past. In a few more years there would come the Slushbomb, an attempt by women writers to improve one of the most sexist bastions among the Big Three; the Great Cultural Appropriation Debates of DOOM; and Racefail, a thousand-blog storm of fan-nish protest against institutional and individual racism within the

genre. These things collectively would open a bit more room within the genre for people who weren't cishet white guys—just in time for the release of my first published novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. But back in 2002 there was none of that. In 2002, I knew that as a black woman drawn to science fiction and fantasy, I had almost no chance of getting my work published, noticed by reviewers, or accepted by a readership that seemed to want nothing more than endless variations on medieval Europe and American colonization. And while I could've sharted out my own variation on medieval Europe or American colonization—and probably should have, if I wanted to pay off my loans faster—that just didn't interest me. I wanted to do something new.

Established writers advised me to attend one of the Clarions or Odyssey, but I couldn't; the day job only allowed me two weeks of vacation time. Instead, I borrowed six hundred dollars from my father and attended Viable Paradise, a one-week workshop out on Martha's Vineyard. Since a week isn't really enough time to substantively improve attendees' writing, VP focused on other stuff—like how to make it in the business of fiction. I learned tons about getting an agent, the publication process, and how to survive as a writer; it was exactly what I needed at that stage of my career. And there I was given one more really good piece of advice: learn to write short stories.

This was the only VP advice that I balked at, because it sounded completely nonsensical to me. I'd read some short stories over the years, and enjoyed a few, but never felt the urge to write any. I knew enough to argue that short stories were a completely different art form from novels, so shouldn't I spend my limited free time refining the thing I wanted to do, rather than learning this other thing that honestly seemed kind of boring? Also, I knew that the pay rate

for short stories was abysmal; this was in the days when the SFWA-acceptable rate for pro-level markets was only three cents per word. Remember, one of my goals was utility-bill money. Short stories, assuming I sold any, wouldn't even cover the cooking gas.

But the instructors at VP\* made a compelling case. The argument that finally convinced me was simply this: learning to write short fiction would improve my longer fiction. I didn't know whether to believe this or not, but I decided to spend a year finding out. For that year, I subscribed to *F&SF* and the now-defunct *Realms of Fantasy*, read online markets like *Strange Horizons*, and joined a writing group. The project didn't go well at first. My first "short" story was a whopping 17,000 words and had no ending. But I got better. When I started submitting those stories to magazines, I got lots of rejections. My writing group helped me see that rejections are part of writing; we collected them, in fact, and tried to celebrate them along with the acceptances. Then I started getting acceptances—semipro markets at first, and then finally pro sales.

And along the way, I learned that short stories *were* good for my longer-form fiction. Writing short stories taught me about the quick hook and the deep character. Shorts gave me space to experiment with unusual plots and story forms—future tense, epistollic format, black characters—which otherwise I would've considered too risky for the lengthy investment of a novel. I started to *enjoy* writing short fiction, for itself and not just as novel practice. And of course, after all those rejections, my emotional skin grew thick as an elephant's.

But wait. Back up. Yeah, I said black characters. I had done those

\* At the time, Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Debra Doyle, James MacDonald, James Patrick Kelly, and Steven Gould.

before in novels I wrote as a teenager, which will never see daylight, but I'd never *submitted* anything with black characters. Remember how I described the industry circa 2002. Editors and publishers and agents talked a good game back then about being "open to all perspectives," as they vaguely termed it, but the proof wasn't in the pudding. To see the truth, all I had to do was open a magazine's table of contents, or a publisher's web page, to see how few female or "foreign" names were in the author list. When I sampled a particular publisher's novels or stories for research, I paid attention to how many—or how few—characters were described as something other than white. I still wrote black characters into my work because I couldn't stand excluding *myself* from my own damn fiction. But if the goal was to make money... well, like I said. I didn't expect much.

So I lack the words to tell you how powerful a moment it was for my first pro sale—"Cloude Dragon Skies," published in *Strange Horizons* in 2005—to be about a nappy-haired black woman trying to save humanity from its own folly.

*How Long 'til Black Future Month* takes its name from an essay that I wrote in 2013. (It's not in this collection since I haven't included any essays; you can find it on my website, nkjemisin.com.) It's a shameless paean to an Afrofuturist icon, the artist Janelle Monáe, but it's also a meditation on how hard it's been for me to love science fiction and fantasy as a black woman. How much I've had to fight my own internalized racism in addition to that radiating from the fiction and the business. How terrifying it's been to realize *no one thinks my people have a future*. And how gratifying to finally accept myself and begin spinning the futures I want to see.

The stories contained in this volume are more than just tales in themselves; they are also a chronicle of my development as a

writer and as an activist. On rereading my fiction to select pieces for this collection, I've been struck by how *hesitant* I once was to mention characters' races. I notice that many of my stories are about accepting differences and change... and very few are about fighting threats from elsewhere. I'm surprised to realize how often I write stories that are talking back at classics of the genre. "Walking Awake" is a response to Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, for example. "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" is a pastiche of and reaction to Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

If you're coming to these tales as someone who primarily knows me through my novels, you're going to see the early forms of plot elements or characters that later got refined in novels. Sometimes that's deliberate, since I write "proof of concept" stories in order to test-drive potential novel worlds. ("The Narcomanacer" and "Stone Hunger" are examples of this; so is "The Trojan Girl," but I decided not to write a novel in that world, instead finishing it up with "Valedictorian.") Sometimes the "re-versioning" is completely unconscious, and I don't realize I've trodden familiar ground until long after. The world of the Broken Earth trilogy wasn't my first time playing with geni locorum, for example—places with minds of their own. The concept appears in several of my stories, sometimes flavored with a dash of animism.

Anyway, things are better these days. I paid off my student loans with my first novel advance. As of this writing I live as a full-time writer in New York, where I have lots of friends and my fiction brings in considerably more than utility bill money. (Even at Con Ed rates.) Right now in 2018, the genre seems at least willing to have conversations about its flaws, though there's still a long way to go before any of those flaws are actually repaired. At least I see more "foreign" and femme names on book spines and in tables of contents these days.

I see readers demanding fiction featuring different voices, spoken by native tongues, and I see publishers scrambling to answer. And while the voices of dissent have grown as well—bigots trying to rewrite history and claim the future for themselves alone—they are in the severe minority. The rest of the world has administered some truly beautiful clapbacks to remind them of this.

Now I mentor up-and-coming writers of color wherever I find them . . . and there are so many to find. Now I am bolder, and angrier, and more joyful; none of these things contradict each other. Now I am the writer that short stories made me.

So come on. There's the future over there. Let's all go.



## The Ones Who Stay and Fight

It's the Day of Good Birds in the city of Um-Helat! The Day is a local custom, silly and random as so many local customs can be, and yet beautiful by the same token. It has little to do with birds—a fact about which locals cheerfully laugh, because that, too, is how local customs work. It is a day of fluttering and flight regardless, where pennants of brightly dyed silk plume forth from every window, and delicate drones of copperwire and featherglass—made for this day, and flown on no other!—waft and buzz on the wind. Even the monorail cars trail stylized flamingo feathers from their rooftops, although these are made of featherglass, too, since real flamingos do not fly at the speed of sound.

Um-Helat sits at the confluence of three rivers and an ocean. This places it within the migratory path of several species of butterfly and hummingbird as they travel north to south and back again. At the Day's dawning, the children of the city come forth, most wearing wings made for them by parents and kind old aunts. (Not all aunts are actually aunts, but in Um-Helat, anyone can earn auntie-hood. This is a city where numberless aspirations can be fulfilled.) Some wings are organza stitched onto school backpacks; some are quilted cotton stuffed with dried flowers and clipped to jacket shoulders. Some few have been carefully glued together from dozens of

butterflies' discarded wings—but only those butterflies that died naturally, of course. Thus adorned, children who can run through the streets do so, leaping off curbs and making whooshing sounds as they pretend to fly. Those who cannot run instead ride special drones, belted and barred and double-checked for safety, which gently bounce them into the air. It's only a few feet, though it feels like the height of the sky.

But this is no awkward dystopia, where all are forced to conform. Adults who refuse to give up their childhood joys wear wings, too, though theirs tend to be more abstractly constructed. (Some are invisible.) And those who follow faiths which forbid the emulation of beasts, or those who simply do not want wings, need not wear them. They are all honored for this choice, as much as the soarsers and flutterers themselves—for without contrasts, how does one appreciate the different forms that joy can take?

Oh, and there is *such* joy here, friend. Street vendors sell tiny custard-filled cakes shaped like jewel beetles, and people who've waited all year wolf them down while sucking air to cool their tongues. Artisans offer cleverly mechanized paper hummingbirds for passersby to throw; the best ones blur as they glide. As the afternoon of the Day grows long, Um-Helat's farmers arrive, invited as always to be honored alongside the city's merchants and technologists. By all three groups' efforts does the city prosper—but when aquifers and rivers dip too low, the farmers move to other lands and farm there, or change from corn-husking to rice-paddying and fishery-feeding. The management of soil and water and chemistry are intricate arts, as you know, but here they have been perfected. Here in Um-Helat there is no hunger: not among the people, and not for the migrating birds and butterflies when they dip down for a

taste of savory nectar. And so farmers are particularly celebrated on the Day of Good Birds.

The parade wends through the city, farmers ducking their gazes or laughing as their fellow citizens offer salute. Here is a portly woman, waving a hat of chicken feathers that someone has gifted her. There is a reedy man in a coverall, nervously plucking at the brooch he bears, carved and lacquered to look like a ladybug. He has made it himself, and hopes others will think it fine. They do!

And here! This woman, tall and strong and bare of arm, her sleek brown scalp dotted with implanted silver studs, wearing a fine uniform of stormcloud damask. See how she moves through the crowd, grinning with them, helping up a child who has fallen. She encourages their cheers and their delight, speaking to this person in one language and that person in another. (Um-Helat is a city of polyglots.) She reaches the front of the crowd and immediately spies the reedy man's ladybug, whereupon with delighted eyes and smile, she makes much of it. She points, and others see it, too, which makes the reedy man blush terribly. But there is only kindness and genuine pleasure in the smiles, and gradually the reedy man stands a little taller, walks with a wider stride. He has made his fellow citizens happier, and there is no finer virtue by the customs of this gentle, rich land.

The slanting afternoon sun stretches golden over the city, reflected light sparkling along its mica-flecked walls and laser-faceted embossings. A breeze blows up from the sea, tasting of brine and minerals, so fresh that a spontaneous cheer wafts along the crowded parade route. Young men by the waterfront, busily stirring great vats of spiced mussels and pans of rice and peas and shrimp, cook faster, for it is said in Um-Helat that the smell of the sea

wakes up the belly. Young women on streetcorners bring out sitars and synthesizers and big wooden drums, the better to get the crowd dancing the young men's way. When people stop, too hot or thirsty to continue, there are glasses of fresh tamarind-lime juice. Elders staff the shops that sell this, though they also give away the juice if a person is much in need. There are always souls needing drumbeats and tamarind, in Um-Helat.

Joyous! It is a steady joy that fills this city, easy to speak of—but ah, though I have tried, it is most difficult to describe accurately. I see the incredulity in your face! The difficulty lies partly in my lack of words, and partly in your lack of understanding, because you have never seen a place like Um-Helat, and because I am myself only an observer, not yet privileged to visit. Thus I must try harder to describe it so that you might embrace it, too.

How can I illuminate the people of Um-Helat? You have seen how they love their children, and how they honor honest, clever labor. You have perhaps noted their many elders, for I have mentioned them in passing. In Um-Helat, people live long and richly, with good health for as long as fate and choice and medicine permits. Every child knows opportunity; every parent has a life. There are some who go without housing, but they can have an apartment if they wish. Here where the spaces under bridges are swept daily and benches have light padding for comfort, they do not live badly. If these itinerant folk dwell also in delusions, they are kept from weapons or places that might do them harm; where they risk disease or injury, they are prevented—or cared for, if matters get out of hand. (We shall speak more of the caretakers soon.)

And so this is Um-Helat: a city whose inhabitants, simply, care

for one another. That is a city's purpose, they believe—not merely to generate revenue or energy or products, but to shelter and nurture the people who do these things.

What have I forgotten to mention? Oh, it is the thing that will seem most fantastic to you, friend: the variety! The citizens of Um-Helat are so many and so wildly different in appearance and origin and development. People in this land come from many others, and it shows in sheen of skin and kink of hair and plumpness of lip and hip. If one wanders the streets where the workers and artisans do their work, there are slightly more people with dark skin; if one strolls the corridors of the executive tower, there are a few extra done in pale. There is history rather than malice in this, and it is still being actively, intentionally corrected—because the people of Um-Helat are not naive believers in good intentions as the solution to all ills. No, there are no worshippers of mere tolerance here, nor desperate grovelers for that grudging pittance of respect which is *diversity*. Um-Helaitians are learned enough to understand what must be done to make the world better, and pragmatic enough to actually enact it.

Does that seem wrong to you? It should not. The trouble is that we have a bad habit, encouraged by those concealing ill intent, of insisting that people already suffering should be afflicted with further, unnecessary pain. This is the paradox of tolerance, the treason of free speech: we hesitate to admit that some people are just fucking evil and need to be stopped.

This is Um-Helat, after all, and not that barbaric America. This is not Omelas, a tick of a city, fat and happy with its head buried in a tortured child. My accounting of Um-Helat is an homage, true, but there's nothing for you to fear, friend.



And so how does Um-Helat exist? How can such a city possibly survive, let alone thrive? Wealthy with no poor, advanced with no war, a beautiful place where all souls know themselves beautiful... It cannot be, you say. Utopia? How banal. It's a fairy tale, a thought exercise. Crabs in a barrel, dog-eat-dog, oppression Olympics—it would not last, you insist. It could never be in the first place. Racism is natural, so natural that we will call it "tribalism" to insinuate that everyone does it. Sexism is natural and homophobia is natural and religious intolerance is natural and greed is natural and cruelty is natural and savagery and fear and and... and. "Impossible!" you hiss, your fists slowly clenching at your sides. "How dare you. What have these people done to make you believe such lies? What are you doing to me, to suggest that it is possible? How dare you. *How dare you.*"

Oh, friend! I fear I have offended. My apologies.

Yet... how else can I convey Um-Helat to you, when even the thought of a happy, just society raises your ire so? Though I confess I am puzzled as to *why* you are so angry. It's almost as if you feel threatened by the very idea of equality. Almost as if some part of you needs to be angry. Needs unhappiness and injustice. But... do you?

Do you?

Do you believe, friend? Do you accept the Day of Good Birds, the city, the joy? No? Then let me tell you one more thing.

Remember the woman? So tall and brown, so handsome and bald, so loving in her honest pleasure, so fine in her stormcloud gray. She is one of many wearing the same garb, committed to the same purpose. Follow her, now, as she leaves behind the crowd and walks along the biofiber-paved side streets into the shadows. Beneath a skyscraper that floats a few meters off the ground—oh,

it is perfectly safe, Um-Helat has controlled gravity for generations now—she stops. There two others await: one gethen, one male, both clad in gray damask, too. They are also bald, their studded heads a-gleam. They greet each other warmly, with hugs where those are welcomed.

They are no one special. Just some of the many people who work to ensure the happiness and prosperity of their fellow citizens. Think of them as social workers if you like; their role is no different from that of social workers anywhere. Word has come of a troubling case, and this is *why* they gather: to discuss it, and make a difficult decision.

There are wonders far greater than a few floating skyscrapers in Um-Helat, you see, and one of these is the ability to bridge the distances between possibilities—what we would call universes. Any-one can do it, but almost no one tries. That is because, due to a quirk of spacetime, the only world that people in Um-Helat can reach is our own. And why would anyone from this glorious place want to come anywhere near our benighted hellscape?

Again you seem offended. Ah, friend! You have no right to be.

In any case, there's little danger of travel. Even Um-Helat has not successfully found a way to reduce the tremendous energy demands of macro-scale planar transversal. Only wave particles can move from our world to theirs, and back again. Only information. Who would bother? Ah, but you forget: This is a land where no one hungers, no one is left ill, no one lives in fear, and even war is almost forgotten. In such a place, buoyed by the luxury of safety and comfort, people may seek knowledge solely for knowledge's sake.

But some knowledge is dangerous.

Um-Helat has been a worse place, after all, in its past. Not all

of its peoples, so disparate in origin and custom and language, came together entirely by choice. The city had a different civilization once—one which might not have upset you so! (Poor thing. There, there.) Remnants of that time dot the land all around the city, ruined and enormous and half-broken. Here a bridge. There

a great truck, on its back a rusting, curve-sided thing that ancient peoples referred to by the exotic term *missile*. In the distance: the skeletal remains of another city, once just as vast as Um-Helat, but never so lovely. Works such as these encumber all the land, no more and no less venerable to the Um-Heladians than the rest of the landscape. Indeed, every young citizen must be reminded of these things upon coming of age, and told carefully curated stories of their nature and purpose. When the young citizens learn this, it is a shock almost incomprehensible, in that they literally lack the words to comprehend such things. The languages spoken in Um-Helat were once *our* languages, yes—for this world was once our world; it was not so much parallel as *the same*, back then. You might still recognize the languages, but what would puzzle you is how they speak... and how they don't. Oh, some of this will be familiar to you in concept at least, like terms for gender that mean neither he nor she, and the condemnation of words meant to slur and denigrate. And yet you will puzzle over the Um-Heladians' choice to retain descriptive terms for themselves like *kinley-haired* or *fat* or *deaf*. But these are just words, friend, don't you see? Without the attached contempt, such terms have no more meaning than if horses could proudly introduce themselves as palomino or miniature or hairy-footed. Difference was never the problem in and of itself—and Um-Heladians still have differences with each other, of opinion and otherwise. Of course they do! They're

people. But what shocks the young citizens of Um-Helat is the realization that, once, those differences of opinion involved differences in respect. That once, value was ascribed to some people, and not others. That once, humanity was acknowledged for some, and not others.

It's the Day of Good Birds in Um-Helat, where every soul matters, and even the idea that some might not is anathema.

This, then, is why the social workers of Um-Helat have come together: because someone has breached the barrier between worlds. A citizen of Um-Helat has listened, on equipment you would not recognize but which records minute quantum perturbations excited by signal wavelengths, to our radio. He has watched our television. He has followed our social media, played our videos, liked our selfies. We are remarkably primitive, compared to Um-Helat. Time flows the same in both worlds, but people there have not wasted themselves on crushing one another into submission, and this makes a remarkable difference. So anyone can do it—build a thing to traverse the worlds. Like building your own ham radio. Easy. Which is why there is an entire underground industry in Um-Helat—ah! crime! now you believe a little more—built around information gleaned from the strange alien world that is our own. Pamphlets are written and distributed. Art and whiskeys are traded. The forbidden is so seductive, is it not? Even here, where only things that cause harm to others are called evil. The information-gleaners know that what they do is wrong. They know this is what destroyed the old cities. And indeed, they are horrified at what they hear through the speakers, see on the screens. They begin to perceive that ours is a world where the notion that *some people are less important than others* has been allowed to take root, and

grow until it buckles and cracks the foundations of our humanity. "How could they?" the gleaners exclaim, of us. "Why would they do such things? How can they just leave those people to starve? Why do they not listen when that one complains of disrespect? What does it mean that these ones have been assaulted and no one, *no one*, cares? Who treats other people like *that*?" And yet, even amid their shock, they share the idea. The evil . . . spreads.

So the social workers of Um-Helat stand, talking now, over the body of a man. He is dead—early, unwilling, with a beautifully crafted pike jammed through his spine and heart. (The spine to make it painless. The heart to make it quick.) This is only one of the weapons carried by the social workers, and they prefer it because the pike is silent. Because there was no shot or ricochet, no crackle or sizzle, no scream, no one else will come to investigate. The disease has taken one poor victim, but it need not claim more. In this manner is the contagion contained . . . in a moment. In a moment.

Beside the man's body crouches a little girl. She's curly-haired, plump, blind, brown, tall for her age. Normally a boisterous child, she weeps now over her father's death, and her tears run hot with the injustice of it all. She heard him say, "I'm sorry." She heard the social workers show the only mercy possible. But she isn't old enough to have been warned of the consequences of breaking the law, or to understand that her father knew those consequences and accepted them—so to her, what has happened has no purpose or reason. It is a senseless, monstrous, and impossible thing, called murder.

"I'll get back at you," she says between sobs. "I'll make you die the way you made him die." This is an unthinkable thing to say.

Something is very wrong here. She snarls, "How dare you. How dare you."

The social workers exchange looks of concern. They are contaminated themselves, of course; it's permitted, and frankly unavoidable in their line of work. Impossible to dam a flood without getting wet. (There are measures in place. The studs on their scalps—well. In our own world, those who volunteered to work in leper colonies were once venerated, and imprisoned with them.) The social workers know, therefore, that for incomprehensible reasons, this girl's father has shared the poison knowledge of our world with her. An uncontaminated citizen of Um-Helat would have asked "Why?" after the initial shock and horror, because they would expect a reason. There would be a reason. But this girl has already decided that the social workers are less important than her father, and therefore the reason doesn't matter. She believes that the entire city is less important than one man's selfishness. Poor child. She is nearly sep-  
tic with the taint of our world.

Nearly. But then our social worker, the tall brown one who got a hundred strangers to smile at a handmade ladybug, crouches and takes the child's hand.

What? What surprises you? Did you think this would end with the cold-eyed slaughter of a child? There are other options—and this is Um-Helat, friend, where even a pitiful, diseased child matters. They will keep her in quarantine, and reach out to her for many days. If the girl accepts the hand, listens to them, they will try to explain why her father had to die. She's early for the knowledge, but something must be done, do you see? Then together they will bury him, with their own hands if they must, in the beautiful garden that they tend between caseloads. This garden

holds all the Um-Helarians who broke the law. Just because they have to die as deterrence doesn't mean they can't be honored for the sacrifice.

But there is only one treatment for this toxin once it gets into the blood: fighting it. Tooth and nail, spear and claw, up close and brutal; no quarter can be given, no parole, no debate. The child must grow, and learn, and become another social worker fighting an endless war against an idea... but she will live, and help others, and find meaning in that. If she takes the woman's hand.

Does this work for you, at last, friend? Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism? Are you better able to accept this postcolonial utopia now that you see its bloody teeth? Ah, but they did not choose this battle, the people of Um-Helat today; their ancestors did, when they spun lies and ignored conscience in order to profit from others' pain. Their greed became a philosophy, a religion, a series of nations, all built on blood. Um-Helar has chosen to be better. But it, too, must perform blood sacrifice to keep true evil at bay.

And now we come to you, my friend. My little soldier. See what I've done? So insidious, these little thoughts, going both ways along the quantum path. Now, perhaps, you will think of Um-Helat, and wish. Now you might finally be able to envision a world where people have learned to love, as they learned in our world to hate. Perhaps you will speak of Um-Helat to others, and spread the notion farther still, like joyous birds migrating on trade winds. *It's possible.* Everyone—even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable—can matter. Do you see how just the idea of this provokes utter rage in some? That is the infection defending itself... because if enough of us believe a thing is possible, then it becomes so.

And then? Who knows. War, maybe. The fire of fever and the

purging scourge. No one wants that, but is not the alternative to lie helpless, spotty and blistered and heaving, until we *all* die?

So don't walk away. The child needs you, too, don't you see? You also have to fight for her, now that you know she exists, or walking away is meaningless. Here, here is my hand. Take it. Please.

Good. Good.

Now. Let's get to work.

And from even farther, I hear something else: a dissonant, gathering growl. Or maybe those are the rumblers of police sirens? Nothing I like the sound of, either way. I leave.

"There's a way these things are supposed to work," says Paulo. He's smoking again, nasty bastard. I've never seen him eat. All he uses his mouth for is smoking, drinking coffee, and talking. Shame; it's a nice mouth otherwise.

We're sitting in a café. I'm sitting with him because he bought me breakfast. The people in the café are eyeballing him because he's something not-white by their standards, but they can't tell what. They're eyeballing me because I'm definitely black, and because the holes in my clothes aren't the fashionable kind. I don't stink, but these people can smell anybody without a trust fund from a mile away.

"Right," I say, biting into the egg sandwich and damn near wetting myself. Actual egg! Swiss cheese! It's so much better than that McDonald's shit.

Guy likes hearing himself talk. I like his accent; it's sort of nasal and sibilant, nothing like a Spanish speaker's. His eyes are huge, and I think, *I could get away with so much shit if I had permanent puppy eyes like that*. But he seems older than he looks—way, way older. There's only a tinge of gray at his temples, nice and distinguished, but he feels, like, a hundred.

He's also eyeballing me, and not in the way I'm used to. "Are you listening?" he asks. "This is important."

"Yeah," I say, and take another bite of my sandwich.

He sits forward. "I didn't believe it either, at first. Hong had to drag me to one of the sewers, down into the reeking dark, and show

## The City Born Great

I sing the city.

Fucking city. I stand on the rooftop of a building I don't live in and spread my arms and tighten my middle and yell nonsense rulations at the construction site that blocks my view. I'm really singing to the cityscape beyond. The city'll figure it out.

It's dawn. The damp of it makes my jeans feel slimy, or maybe that's 'cause they haven't been washed in weeks. Got change for a wash-and-dry, just not another pair of pants to wear till they're done. Maybe I'll spend it on more pants at the Goodwill down the street instead... but not yet. Not till I've finished going *AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA* (breath) *aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa* and listening to the syllable echo back at me from every nearby building face. In my head, there's an orchestra playing "Ode to Joy" with a Busta Rhymes backbeat. My voice is just tying it all together.

*Shut your fucking mouth!* someone yells, so I take a bow and exit the stage.

But with my hand on the knob of the rooftop door, I stop and turn back and frown and listen, 'cause for a moment I hear something both distant and intimate singing back at me, basso-deep. Sort of coy.

me the growing roots, the budding teeth. I'd been hearing breathing all my life. I thought everyone could." He pauses. "Have you heard it yet?"

"Heard what?" I ask, which is the wrong answer. It isn't that I'm not listening. I just don't give a shit.

He sighs. "Listen."

"I am listening!"

"No. I mean, listen, but not to me." He gets up, tosses a twenty onto the table—which isn't necessary, because he paid for the sandwich and the coffee at the counter, and this café doesn't do table service. "Meet me back here on Thursday."

I pick up the twenty, finger it, pocket it. Would've done him for the sandwich, or because I like his eyes, but whatever. "You got a place?"

He blinks, then actually looks annoyed. "Listen," he commands again, and leaves.

I sit there for as long as I can, making the sandwich last, sipping his leftover coffee, savoring the fantasy of being normal. I people-watch, judge other patrons' appearances; on the fly I make up a poem about being a rich white girl who notices a poor black boy in her coffee shop and has an existential crisis. I imagine Paulo being impressed by my sophistication and admiring me, instead of thinking I'm just some dumb street kid who doesn't listen. I visualize myself going back to a nice apartment with a soft bed, and a fridge stuffed full of food.

Then a cop comes in, fat florid guy buying hipster Joe for himself and his partner in the car, and his flat eyes skim the shop. I imagine mirrors around my head, a rotating cylinder of them that causes his gaze to bounce away. There's no real power in this—it's just something I do to try to make myself less afraid when the monsters

are near. For the first time, though, it sort of works: The cop looks around, but doesn't ping on the lone black face. Lucky. I escape.

I paint the city. Back when I was in school, there was an artist who came in on Fridays to give us free lessons in perspective and lighting and other shit that white people go to art school to learn. Except this guy had done that, and he was black. I'd never seen a black artist before. For a minute I thought I could maybe be one, too.

I can be, sometimes. Deep in the night, on a rooftop in Chinatown, with a spray can for each hand and a bucket of drywall paint that somebody left outside after doing up their living room in lilac, I move in scurrling, crablike swirls. The drywall stuff I can't use too much of; it'll start flaking off after a couple of rains. Spray paint's better for everything, but I like the contrast of the two textures—liquid black on rough lilac, red edging the black. I'm painting a hole. It's like a throat that doesn't start with a mouth or end in lungs; a thing that breathes and swallows endlessly, never filling. No one will see it except people in planes angling toward LaGuardia from the southwest, a few tourists who take helicopter tours, and NYPD aerial surveillance. I don't care what they see. It's not for them.

It's real late. I didn't have anywhere to sleep for the night, so this is what I'm doing to stay awake. If it wasn't the end of the month, I'd get on the subway, but the cops who haven't met their quota would fuck with me. Gotta be careful here; there's a lot of dumb-fuck Chinese kids west of Chrystie Street who wanna pretend to be a gang, protecting their territory, so I keep low. I'm skinny, dark; that helps, too. All I want to do is paint, man, because it's in me and I need to get it out. I need to open up this throat. I need to, I need to . . . yeah. Yeah.

There's a soft, strange sound as I lay down the last streak of

black. I pause and look around, confused for a moment—and then the throat sighs behind me. A big, heavy gust of moist air tickles the hairs on my skin. I'm not scared. This is why I did it, though I didn't realize that when I started. Not sure how I know now. But when I turn back, it's still just paint on a rooftop.

Paulo wasn't shirting me. Huh. Or maybe my mama was right, and I ain't never been right in the head.

I jump into the air and whoop for joy, and I don't even know why. I spend the next two days going all over the city, drawing breathing-holes everywhere, till my paint runs out.

I'm so tired on the day I meet Paulo again that I stumble and nearly fall through the café's plate-glass window. He catches my elbow and drags me over to a bench meant for customers. "You're hearing it," he says. He sounds pleased.

"I'm hearing coffee," I suggest, not bothering to stifle a yawn. A cop car rolls by. I'm not too tired to imagine myself as nothing, beneath notice, not even worth hearing for pleasure. It works again; they roll on.

Paulo ignores my suggestion. He sits down beside me and his gaze goes strange and unfocused for a moment. "Yes. The city is breathing easier," he says. "You're doing a good job, even without training."

"I try."

He looks amused. "I can't tell if you don't believe me, or if you just don't care."

I shrug. "I believe you." I also don't care, not much, because I'm hungry. My stomach growls. I've still got that twenty he gave me, but I'll take it to that church-plate sale I heard about over on

Prospect, get chicken and rice and greens and cornbread for less than the cost of a free-trade small-batch-roasted latte.

He glances down at my stomach when it growls. Huh. I pretend to stretch and scratch above my abs, making sure to pull up my shirt a little. The artist guy brought a model for us to draw once, and pointed to this little ridge of muscle above the hips called Apollo's Belt. Paulo's gaze goes right to it. *Come on, come on, fishy fishy. I need somewhere to sleep.*

Then his eyes narrow and focus on mine again. "I had forgotten," he says, in a faint wondering tone. "I almost... It's been so long. Once, though, I was a boy of the *favelas*."

"Not a lot of Mexican food in New York," I reply.

He blinks and looks amused again. Then he sobers. "This city will die," he says. He doesn't raise his voice, but he doesn't have to. I'm paying attention now. Food, living. These things have meaning to me. "If you do not learn the things I have to teach you. If you do not help. The time will come and you will fail, and this city will join Pompeii and Atlantis and a dozen others whose names no one remembers, even though hundreds of thousands of people died with them. Or perhaps there will be a stillbirth—the shell of the city surviving to possibly grow again in the future but its vital spark snuffed for now, like New Orleans—but that will still kill you, either way. You are the catalyst, whether of strength or destruction."

He's been talking like this since he showed up—places that never were, things that can't be, omens and portents. I figure it's bullshit because he's telling it to me, a kid whose own mama kicked him out and prays for him to die every day and probably hates me. God hates me. And I fucking hate God back, so why would he choose me for

anything? But that's really why I start paying attention: because of God. I don't have to believe in something for it to fuck up my life.

"Tell me what to do," I say.

Paulo nods, looking smug. "Thinks he's got my number. "Ah. You don't want to die."

I stand up, stretch, feel the streets around me grow longer and more pliable in the rising heat of day. (Is that really happening, or am I imagining it, or is it happening *and* I'm imagining that it's connected to me somehow?) "Fuck you. That ain't it."

"Then you don't even care about that." He makes it a question with the tone of his voice.

"Ain't about being alive." I'll starve to death someday, or freeze some winter night, or catch something that rots me away until the hospitals have to take me, even without money or an address. But I'll sing and paint and dance and fuck and cry the city before I'm done, because it's mine. It's fucking *mine*. That's why.

"It's about living," I finish. And then I turn to glare at him. He can kiss my ass if he doesn't understand. "Tell me what to do."

Something changes in Paulo's face. He's listening, now. To me. So he gets to his feet and leads me away for my first real lesson.

This is the lesson: Great cities are like any other living things, being born and maturing and wearying and dying in their turn.

Duh, right? Everyone who's visited a real city feels that, one way or another. All those rural people who hate cities are afraid of something legit; cities really are *different*. They make a weight on the world, a tear in the fabric of reality, like... like black holes, maybe. Yeah. (I go to museums sometimes. They're cool inside, and Neil deGrasse Tyson is hot.) As more and more people come in and deposit their strangeness and leave and get replaced by others, the

tear widens. Eventually it gets so deep that it forms a pocket, connected only by the thinnest thread of... something to... something. Whatever cities are made of.

But the separation starts a process, and in that pocket the many parts of the city begin to multiply and differentiate. Its sewers extend into places where there is no need for water. Its slums grow teeth; its art centers, claws. Ordinary things within it, traffic and construction and stuff like that, start to have a rhythm like a heartbeat, if you record their sounds and play them back fast. The city... quickens.

Not all cities make it this far. There used to be a couple of great cities on this continent, but that was before Columbus fucked the Indians' shit up, so we had to start over. New Orleans failed, like Paulo said, but it survived, and that's something. It can try again. Mexico City's well on its way. But New York is the first American city to reach this point.

The gestation can take twenty years or two hundred or two thousand, but eventually the time will come. The cord is cut and the city becomes a thing of its own, able to stand on wobbly legs and do... well, whatever the fuck a living, thinking entity shaped like a big-ass city wants to do.

And just as in any other part of nature, there are things lying in wait for this moment, hoping to chase down the sweet new life and swallow its guts while it screams.

That's why Paulo's here to teach me. That's why I can clear the city's breathing and stretch and massage its asphalt limbs. I'm the midwife, see.

I run the city. I run it every fucking day.

Paulo takes me home. It's just somebody's summer sublet in the Lower East Side, but it feels like a home. I use his shower and eat



some of the food in his fridge without asking, just to see what he'll do. He doesn't do shit except smoke a cigarette, I think to piss me off. I can hear sirens on the streets of the neighborhood—frequent, close. I wonder, for some reason, if they're looking for me. I don't say it aloud, but Paulo sees me twitching. He says, "The harbinger of the enemy will hide among the city's parasites. Beware of them."

He's always saying cryptic shit like this. Some of it makes sense, like when he speculates that maybe there's a *purpose* to all of it, some reason for the great cities and the process that makes them. What the enemy has been doing—attacking at the moment of vulnerability, crimes of opportunity—might just be the warm-up for something bigger. But Paulo's full of shit, too, like when he says I should consider meditation to better attune myself to the city's needs. Like I'mma get through this on white girl yoga.

"White girl yoga," Paulo says, nodding. "Indian man yoga. Stock broker racquetball and schoolboy handball, baller and merengue, union halls and SoHo galleries. You will embody a city of millions. You need not be them, but know that they are part of you."

I laugh. "Racquetball? That shit ain't no part of me, chico."

"The city chose you, out of all," Paulo says. "Their lives depend on you."

Maybe. But I'm still hungry and tired all the time, scared all the time, never safe. What good does it do to be valuable, if nobody values you?

He can tell I don't wanna talk anymore, so he gets up and goes to bed. I flop on the couch and I'm dead to the world. Dead.

*Dreaming*, dead dreaming, of a dark place beneath heavy cold waves where something stirs with a sitherly sound and uncoils and turns toward the mouth of the Hudson, where it empties into the

sea. Toward me. And I am too weak, too helpless, too immobilized by fear, to do anything but twitch beneath its predatory gaze.

Something comes from far to the south, somehow. (None of this is quite real. Everything rides along the thin tether that connects the city's reality to that of the world. The *effect* happens in the world, Paulo has said. The *cause* centers around me.) It moves between me, wherever I am, and the uncurling thing, wherever it is. An immensity protects me, just this once, just in this place—though from a great distance I feel others hemming and grumbling and raising themselves to readiness. Warning the enemy that it must adhere to the rules of engagement that have always governed this ancient battle. It's not allowed to come at me too soon.

My protector, in this unreal space of dream, is a sprawling jewel with filth-crustled facets, a thing that stinks of dark coffee and the bruised grass of a *futebol* pitch and traffic noise and familiar cigarette smoke. Its threat display of saber-shaped girders lasts for only a moment, but that is enough. The uncurling thing flinches back into its cold cave, resentfully. But it will be back. That, too, is tradition.

I wake with sunlight warming half my face. Just a dream? I stumble into the room where Paulo is sleeping. "São Paulo," I whisper, but he does not wake. I wiggle under his covers. When he wakes, he doesn't reach for me, but he doesn't push me away either. I let him know I'm grateful and give him a reason to let me back in later. The rest'll have to wait till I get condoms and he brushes his asshole mouth. After that, I use his shower again, put on the clothes I washed in his sink, and head out while he's still snoring.

Libraries are safe places. They're warm in the winter. Nobody cares if you stay all day as long as you're not eyeballing the kids' corner or trying to hit up porn on the computers. The one at Forty-second—the one with the lions—isn't that kind of library. It doesn't

lend out books. Still, it has a library's safety, so I sit in a corner and read everything within reach: municipal tax law, *Birds of the Hudson Valley*, *What to Expect When You're Expecting a City Baby: NYC Edition*. See, Paulo? I told you I was listening.

It gets to be late afternoon and I head outside. People cover the steps, laughing, charting, mugging with selfie sticks. There're cops in body armor over by the subway entrance, showing off their guns to the tourists so they'll feel safe from New York. I get a Polish sausage and eat it at the feet of one of the lions. Fortitude, not Patience. I know my strengths.

I'm full of meat and relaxed and thinking about stuff that ain't actually important—like how long Paulo will let me stay and whether I can use his address to apply for stuff—so I'm not watching the street. Until cold prickles skitter over my side. I know what it is before I react, but I'm careless again because I *turn to look*... Stupid, stupid, I fucking know better; cops down in Baltimore broke a man's spine for making eye contact. But as I spot these two on the corner opposite the library steps—short pale man and tall dark woman both in blue like black—I notice something that actually breaks my fear because it's so strange.

It's a bright, clear day, not a cloud in the sky. People walking past the cops leave short, stark afternoon shadows, barely there at all. But around these two, the shadows pool and curl as if they stand beneath their own private, roiling thundercloud. And as I watch, the shorter one begins to... *stretch*, sort of, his shape warping ever so slightly, until one eye is twice the circumference of the other. His right shoulder slowly develops a bulge that suggests a dislocated joint. His companion doesn't seem to notice.

Yoosooo, nope. I get up and start picking my way through the crowd on the steps. I'm doing that thing I do, trying to shunt off

their gaze—but it feels different this time. Sticky, sort of, threads of cheap-shit gum fucking up my mirrors. I feel them start following me, something immense and wrong shifting in my direction.

Even then I'm not sure—a lot of real cops drip and pulse sadism in the same way—but I ain't taking chances. My city is helpless, unborn as yet, and Paulo ain't here to protect me. I gotta look out for self, same as always.

I play casual till I reach the corner and book it, or try. Fucking tourists! They idle along the wrong side of the sidewalk, stopping to look at maps and take pictures of shit nobody else gives a fuck about. I'm so busy cussing them out in my head that I forget they can also be dangerous: Somebody yells and grabs my arm as I Heisman past, and I hear a man yell out, "He tried to take her purse!" as I wrench away. *Bitch, I ain't took shit*, I think, but it's too late. I see another tourist reaching for her phone to call 911. Every cop in the area will be gunning for every black male aged whatever now.

I gotta get out of the area.

Grand Central's right there, sweet subway promise, but I see three cops hanging out in the entrance, so I swerve right to take Forty-first. The crowds thin out past Lex, but where can I go? I sprint across Third despite the traffic; there are enough gaps. But I'm getting tired, 'cause I'm a scrawny dude who doesn't get enough to eat, not a track star.

I keep going, though, even through the burn in my side. I can feel those cops, the *harbingers of the enemy*, not far behind me. The ground shakes with their lumpen footfalls.

I hear a siren about a block away, closing. Shit, the UN's coming up; I don't need the Secret Service or whatever on me, too. I jag left through an alley and trip over a wooden pallet. Lucky again—a cop car rolls by the alley entrance just as I go down, and they don't see me. I stay down and try to catch my breath till I hear the car's engine

fading into the distance. Then, when I think it's safe, I push up. Look back, because the city is squirming around me, the concrete is jittering and heaving, everything from the bedrock to the rooftop bars is trying its damndest to tell me to go. Go. Go.

Crowding the alley behind me is... is... the shirt? I don't have words for it. Too many arms, too many legs, too many eyes, and all of them fixed on me. Somewhere in the mass I glimpse curls of dark hair and a scalp of pale blond, and I understand suddenly that these are—this is—my two cops. One real monstrosity. The walls of the alley crack as it oozes its way into the narrow space.

"Oh. Fuck. No," I gasp.

I claw my way to my feet and haul ass. A patrol car comes around the corner from Second Avenue and I don't see it in time to duck out of sight. The car's loudspeaker blares something unintelligible, probably *I'm gonna kill you*, and I'm actually amazed. Do they not see the thing behind me? Or do they just not give a shit because they can't shake it down for city revenue? Let them fucking shoot me. Better than whatever that thing will do.

I hook left onto Second Avenue. The cop car can't come after me against the traffic, but it's not like that'll stop some doubled-cop monster. Forty-fifth. Forty-seventh and my legs are molten granite. Fiftieth and I think I'm going to die. Heart attack far too young; poor kid, should've eaten more organic; should've taken it easy and not been so angry; the world can't hurt you if you just ignore everything that's wrong with it; well, not until it kills you anyway.

I cross the street and risk a look back and see something roll onto the sidewalk on at least eight legs, using three or four arms to push itself off a building as it careens a little... before coming straight after me again. It's the Mega Cop, and it's gaining. *Oh shit oh shit oh shit please no.*

Only one choice.

Swing right. Fifty-third, against the traffic. An old folks' home, a park, a promenade... fuck those. Pedestrian bridge? Fuck that. I head straight for the six lanes of utter batshitery and potholes that is FDR Drive, do not pass Go, do not try to cross on foot unless you want to be smeared halfway to Brooklyn. Beyond it? The East River, if I survive. I'm even freaked out enough to try swimming in that fucking sewage. But I'm probably gonna collapse in the third lane and get run over fifty times before anybody thinks to put on brakes.

Behind me, the Mega Cop utters a wet, tumid *hough*, like it's clearing its throat for swallowing. I go

over the barrier and through the grass into fucking hell I go one lane silver car two lanes horns horns horns three lanes SEMI WHAT'S A FUCKING SEMI DOING ON THE FDR IT'S TOO TALL YOU STUPID UPSTATE HICK screaming four lanes GREEN TAXI screaming Smart Car hahaha cute five lanes moving truck six lanes and the blue Lexus actually brushes up against my clothes as it blares past screaming screaming screaming

*screaming*

screaming metal and tires as reality stretches, and nothing stops for the Mega Cop; it does not belong here and the FDR is an artery, vital with the movement of nutrients and strength and attitude and adrenaline, the cars are white blood cells and the thing is an irritant, an infection, an invader to whom the city gives no consideration and no quarter

screaming, as the Mega Cop is torn to pieces by the semi and the taxi and the Lexus and even that adorable Smart Car, which actually swerves a little to run over an extra-wiggly piece. I collapse onto a square of grass, breathless, shaking, wheezing, and can only stare as a dozen limbs are crushed, two dozen eyes squashed flat,

a mouth that is mostly gums riven from jaw to palate. The pieces flicker like a monitor with an AV cable short, translucent to solid and back again—but FDR don't stop for shit except a presidential motorcade or a Knicks game, and this thing sure as hell ain't Carmelo Anthony. Pretty soon there's nothing left of it but half-real smears on the asphalt.

I'm alive. Oh, God.

I cry for a little while. Mama's boyfriend ain't here to slap me and say I'm not a man for it. Daddy would've said it was okay—tears mean you're alive—but Daddy's dead. And I'm alive.

With limbs burning and weak, I drag myself up, then fall again. Everything hurts: Is this that heart attack? I feel sick. Everything is shaking, blurring. Maybe it's a stroke. You don't have to be old for that to happen, do you? I stumble over to a garbage can and think about throwing up into it. There's an old guy lying on the bench—me in twenty years, if I make it that far. He opens one eye as I stand there gagging and purses his lips in a judgy way, like he could do better dry-heaves in his sleep.

He says, "It's time," and rolls over to put his back to me.

Time. Suddenly I have to move. Sick or not, exhausted or not, something is... pulling me. West, toward the city's center. I push away from the can and hug myself as I shiver and stumble toward the pedestrian bridge. As I walk over the lanes I previously ran across, I look down onto flickering fragments of the dead Mega Cop, now ground into the asphalt by a hundred car wheels. Some globules of it are still twitching, and I don't like that. Infection, intrusion. I want it gone.

We want it gone. Yes. It's time.

I blink and suddenly I'm in Central Park. How the fuck did I get here? Disoriented, I realize only as I see their black shoes that I'm

passing another pair of cops, but these two don't bother me. They should—skinny kid shivering like he's cold on a June day; even if all they do is drag me off somewhere to shove a plunger up my ass, they should *react* to me. Instead, it's like I'm not there. Miracles exist, Ralph Ellison was right, any NYPD you can walk away from, hallelujah.

The Lake. Bow Bridge: a place of transition. I stop here, stand here, and I know... everything.

Everything Paulo's told me: It's true. Somewhere beyond the city, the Enemy is awakening. It sent forth its harbingers and they have failed, but its taint is in the city now, spreading with every car that passes over every now-microscopic iota of the Mega Cop's substance, and this creates a foothold. The Enemy uses this anchor to drag itself up from the dark toward the world, toward the warmth and light, toward the defiance that is *me*, toward the burgeoning wholeness that is *my city*. This attack is not all of it, of course. What comes is only the smallest fraction of the Enemy's old, old evil—but that should be more than enough to slaughter one lowly, worn-out kid who doesn't even have a real city to protect him.

Not yet. It's time. *In time?* We'll see.

On Second, Sixth, and Eighth Avenues, my water breaks. Mains, I mean. Water mains. Terrible mess, gonna fuck up the evening commute. I shut my eyes and I am seeing what no one else sees. I am feeling the flex and rhythm of reality, the contractions of possibility. I reach out and grip the railing of the bridge before me and feel the steady, strong pulse that runs through it. *You're doing good, baby. Doing great.*

Something begins to shift. I grow bigger, encompassing. I feel myself upon the firmament, heavy as the foundations of a city. There are others here with me, looming, watching—my ancestors'

bones under Wall Street, my predecessors' blood ground into the benches of Christopher Park. No, *new* others, of my new people, heavy imprints upon the fabric of time and space. São Paulo squats nearest, its roots stretching all the way to the bones of dead Machu Picchu, watching sagely and twitching a little with the memory of its own relatively recent traumatic birth. Paris observes with distant disinterest, mildly offended that any city of our tasteless upstart land has managed this transition; Lagos exults to see a new fellow who knows the hustle, the hype, the fight. And more, many more, all of them watching, waiting to see if their numbers increase. Or not. If nothing else, they will bear witness that I, we, were great for one shining moment.

"We'll make it," I say, squeezing the railing and feeling the city contract. All over the city, people's ears pop, and they look around in confusion. "Just a little more. Come on." I'm scared, but there's no rushing this. *Lo que pasa, pasa*—damn, now that song is in my head, *in me* like the rest of New York. It's all here, just like Paulo said. There's no gap between me and the city anymore.

And as the firmament ripples, slides, tears, the Enemy writhes up from the deeps with a reality-bridging roar—

*But it is too late.* The tether is cut and we are here. We become! We stand, whole and hale and independent, and our legs don't even wobble. We got this. Don't sleep on the city that never sleeps, son, and don't fucking bring your squamous eldritch bullshit here.

I raise my arms and avenues leap. (It's real but it's not. The ground jolts and people think, *Huh, subway's really shaky today!*) I brace my feet and they are girders, anchors, bedrock. The beast of the deeps shrieks and I laugh, giddy with postpartum endorphins. *Bring it.* And when it comes at me, I hip-check it with the BOE, backhand it with Inwood Park, drop the South Bronx on it like

an elbow. (On the evening news that night, ten construction sites will report wrecking-ball collapses. City safety regulations are so lax, terrible, terrible.) The Enemy tries some kind of fucked-up wiggly shit—it's all tentacles—and I snarl and bite into it 'cause New Yorkers eat damn near as much sushi as Tokyo, mercury and all.

*Oh, now you're crying! Now you wanna run? Nah, son. You came to the wrong town.* I curb stomp it with the full might of Queens and something inside the beast breaks and bleeds iridescence all over creation. This is a shock, for it has not been truly hurt in centuries. It lashes back in a fury, faster than I can block, and from a place that most of the city cannot see, a skyscraper-long tentacle curls out of nowhere to smash into New York Harbor. I scream and fall, I can hear my ribs crack, and—no!—a major earthquake shakes Brooklyn for the first time in decades. The Williamsburg Bridge twists and snaps apart like kindling; the Manhattan groans and splinters, though thankfully it does not give way. I feel every death as if it is my own.

*Fucking kill you for that, bitch,* I'm not-thinking. The fury and grief have driven me into a vengeful fugue. The pain is nothing; this ain't my first rodeo. Through the groan of my ribs I drag myself upright and brace my legs in a pissing-off-the-platform stance. Then I shower the Enemy with a one-two punch of Long Island radiation and Gowanus toxic waste, which burn it like acid. It screams again in pain and disgust, but *Fuck you, you don't belong here, this city is mine, get out!* To drive this lesson home, I cut the bitch with LIRR traffic, long vicious honking lines; and to stretch out its pain, I salt these wounds with the memory of a bus ride to LaGuardia and back.

And just to add insult to injury? I backhand its ass with Hoboken,

raining the drunk rage of ten thousand dudebros down on it like the hammer of God. Port Authority makes it honorary New York, motherfucker; you just got Jerseyed.

The Enemy is as quintessential to nature as any city. We cannot be stopped from becoming, and the Enemy cannot be made to end. I hurt only a small part of it—but I know damn well I sent that part back broken. Good. Time ever comes for that final confrontation, it'll think twice about taking me on again.

Me. Us. Yes.

When I relax my hands and open my eyes to see Paulo striding along the bridge toward me with another goddamned cigarette between his lips, I fleetingly see him for what he is again: the sprawling thing from my dream, all sparkling spires and reeking slums and stolen rhythms made over with genteel cruelty. I know that he glimpses what I am, too, all the bright light and bluster of me. Maybe he's always seen it, but there is *admiration* in his gaze now, and I like it. He comes to help support me with his shoulder, and he says, "Congratulations," and I grin.

I live the city. It thrives and it is mine. I am its worthy avatar, and together? We will never be afraid again.

Fifty years later.

I sit in a car, watching the sunset from Mulholland Drive. The car is mine; I'm rich now. The city is not mine, but that's all right. The person is coming who will make it live and stand and thrive in the ancient way . . . or not. I know my duty, respect the traditions. Each city must emerge on its own or die trying. We elders merely guide, encourage. Stand witness.

There: a dip in the firmament near the Sunset Strip. I can feel the upwelling of loneliness in the soul I seek. Poor, empty baby. Won't

be long now, though. Soon—if she survives—she'll never be alone again.

I reach for my city, so far away, so inseverable from myself. Ready? I ask New York.

*Fuck yeah*, it answers, filthy and fierce.

We go forth to find this city's singer, and hopefully to hear the greatness of its birthing song.

## Red Dirt Witch

The way to tell the difference between dreams that were prophecy and dreams that were just wasted sleep was to wait and see if they came three times. Emmaline had her third dream about the White Lady on the coldest night ever recorded in Alabama history. This was actually *very* cold—ten degrees below zero, on a long dark January Sabbath when even the moon hid behind a veil of shadow.

Emmaline survived the cold the way poor people everywhere have done since the dawn of time: with a warm, energetic friend. Three patchwork quilts helped, too. The friend was Frank Heath, who was pretty damn spry for a man of fifty-five, though he claimed to be forty-five so maybe that helped. The quilts were Em's, and it also helped that one of them had dried flowers (Jack-in-the-pulpits) and a few nuggets of charcoal tucked under each patch of leftover cloth. That made for a standing invitation to warmth and the summertime, who were of course welcome to pay a visit and stay the night anytime they liked. Those *had* come a-calling to the children's beds, at least, for which Emmaline was grateful; the children slept soundly, snug and comfortable. That left Em and Frank free to conduct their own warmmaking with an easy conscience.

After that was done, Emmaline closed her eyes and found herself in the Commissary Market down on Dugan. Dusty southern

daylight, bright and fierce even in winter, shone slanting onto the street alongside the market, unimpeded by cars or carts—or people. Pratt City wasn't much of a city, being really just the Negro neighborhood of Birmingham, but it was a whole place, thriving and bustling in its way. Here, though, Emmaline had never seen the place so empty in her life. As if to spite the cold, the market's bins tumbled over with summer produce: watermelons and green tomatoes and peaches and more, along with a few early collards. That meant that whatever this dream meant to warn her of, it would come with the heat of the mid-months.

Out of habit, Em glanced at the sign above these last. Overpriced again; greedy bastards.

"Why, greed's a sin," said a soft, whispery voice all around her. "Be proper of you to punish 'em for it, wouldn't it?"

This was one of the spirits that she'd tamed over the years. They liked to test her, though, so it was always wise to be careful with 'em. "Supposin' I could," she said in reply. "But only the store manager, since the company too big to go after. And I can't say's I truly blame the manager, either, since he got children to feed same as me."

"Sin's sin, woman."

"And let she who is without sin cast the first stone," Em countered easily. "As you well know." Then she checked herself; no sense getting testy. Ill-wishing opened doors for ill winds to blow through—which was probably why the voice was trying to get her to do it.

The voice sighed a little in exasperation. It was colorless, genderless, barely a voice at all; that sigh whispered like wind through the stand of pines across the street. "Just tellin' you somebody comin'; cranky old biddy."

"Who, Jesus Christ? 'Bout time, His slow ass."

Whispery laughter. "Fine, then—there a White Lady a-comin', a

*fine* one, and she got something special in mind for you and yours. You ready?"

Em frowned to herself. The other two dreams had been more airy-fairy than this—just collections of symbols and hints of a threat, omens and portents. It seemed fate had finally gotten impatient enough to just say plain what she needed to hear.

"No, I ain't ready," Em said, with a sigh. "But ain't like that ever made no mind to some folk. Thank you for the warning."

More laughter, rising to become a gale, picking Emmaline up and spinning her about. The Market blurred into a whirlwind—but through it all, there were little ribbons that she could see edging into the tornado from elsewhere, whipping about in shining silken red. Truth was always there for the taking; if you only reached out to grasp it. Thing was, Em didn't *feel* like grasping it; she was tired, Lord have mercy. The world didn't change. If she just relaxed, the dream would let her back into sleep, like she wanted.

But... well. Best to be prepared, she supposed.

So Em stretched out a hand and laid hold of one of the ribbons. And suddenly the street that ran through the market was full of people. *Angry* people, most of 'em white and lining the road, and marching people, most of 'em black and in the middle of the road. The black ones' jaws were set, their chins high in a way that always meant trouble when white folks were around, because Lord, didn't they hate seeing pride. "Trouble, trouble," sang-song the voice—and before the marchers appeared a line of policemen with billy clubs in their hands and barking dogs at their sides. Emmaline's guts clenched for the blood that would almost surely be spilled. Pride! Was it worth all that blood? Yet when she opened her mouth to shout at the marchers for their foolishness, the whispery voice laughed again, and she spun again, the laughter chasing her out of dreams and up to reality.

Well, this was what she'd wanted, but she didn't much like it because reality was dark and painfully cold on her mouth and chin, which she'd stuck outside the covers to breathe. Her teeth were chattering. She reached back.

"Ain't time to get up," muttered Frank at her stirring, half-dreaming himself.

"You got Sunday to rest," said Emmaline. "You want to live 'til then, you get to work."

His low, rich laugh warned her more than his body ever could. "Yes ma'am," he said, and did as he was bid.

And because they had set to, Emmaline missed that her only girl-child, Pauline, got up and walked the hall for a while, disturbed by bad dreams of her own.

Since the spirits had given her a full season's warning, Em spent the time preparing for the White Lady's arrival. This meant she finished up as much business as possible in the days right after the dream. The cold passed quickly, as cold was wont to do in Alabama. And as soon as the weather was comfortable again, Emmaline set Pauline to grinding all the herbs she'd laid in since November, then had her boy Sample put her shingle out by the mailpost, where it read, **HERBS AND PRAYERS, FOR ALL AND SUNDRY**. This brought an immediate and eager stream of customers.

First there was Mr. Jake, who'd gotten into a spat with his cousin over Christmas dinner and had wished death on him, and now was regretting it because the cousin had come down with a wet cough. Emmaline told him to take the man some chittins made with sardine oil and extra garlic. Then she handed him a long braid of garlic heads, ten in all, from her own garden.

"*That* much garlic?" Jake had given her a look of pure affront; like



most men of Pratt City, he was proud of his cooking. "I look Eye-talian to you?"

"All right, let him die, then." This elicited a giggle from Pauline, who sat in on most of Em's appointments these days.

So, grumbling, Jake had bought the garlic from Emmaline and gone off to make his amends. People talked about Jake's stanky, awful chitlins 'til the day he died—but his cousin ate some of the peace offering, and he got better.

And there was Em's cousin Renee, who came by just to chat, and conveniently told Emmaline all the goings-on in and around Pratt City. There was trouble brewing, Renee said, *political* trouble; whispers in the church pews, meetings at the school gym, plans for a boycott or two or ten. Way up in Virginia, folks were suing the government about segregation in the schools. Em figured it wouldn't come to nothing, but all the white folks was up like angry bees over the notion of their precious children sitting next to Negro children, competing against Negro children, befriending Negro children. It was going to get ugly. Many evils came riding in on the tails of strife, though—so here, Emmaline suspected, would be their battleground.

Then there was Nadine Yates, a widow who like Emmaline had done what she had to do to keep herself and her children alive through the cold and not-so-cold days. Nadine was afraid she might be pregnant again. "I know it's a sin," she said in her quiet, dignified voice while Emmaline fixed her some tea. For this one, she'd sent Pauline off to the market with her brothers; Pauline was still just a girl, and some things were for grown women's ears only. "Still, if you could help me out, I'd be grateful."

"Sin's makin' a world where women got to choose between two children' eatin' and three children starvin'." Emmaline said, "and

you sure as hell didn't do that. You made sure he wasn't some fool who'll spread it all over, didn't you?"

"He got a wife and a good job, and he ain't stupid. Gave my boys new coats just last week."

A man who knew how to keep a woman-on-the-side properly. But then wouldn't it be simple enough for him to just take care of the new child, too? Emmaline frowned as a suspicion entered her mind. "He white?"

Nadine's nearer jaw flexed a little, and then she lifted her chin in fragile defensiveness. "He is."

Emmaline sighed, but then nodded toward the tea cooling in Nadine's hand. "Drink up, now. And it sound like he can afford a guinea-hen, to me."

So a few days later, after the tea had done its work, Nadine dropped by and handed Emmaline a nice fat guineafowl. It was a rooster, but Em didn't mind. She pot-roasted it with dried celery and a lot of rosemary from her garden, and the rind of an orange that Pauline had found on the road behind a market truck. Emmaline had smacked the girl for that, because even though "finding" wasn't "stealing," white folks didn't care much for making distinctions when it came to little colored girls. But Pauline—who was smart as a whip and Em's pride—had glared at her mother after the blow. "Momma, I followed the truck to a stop sign and offered to give it back. I knew that white man wouldn't want it 'cause I touched it, and he didn't! So there!"

Smart as a whip, but still just a child, and innocent yet of the world's worst ugliness. Emmaline could only sigh and thank God the truck driver hadn't been the kind who'd noticed how pretty Pauline was becoming. As an apology for the smack, she let Pauline have half the orange while the boys got only a quarter each.

Then she'd sat the girl down for a long talk about how the world worked.

And so it was, as the brief winter warmed toward briefer spring and began the long slow march into Southern summer. By the time the tomato plants flowered, Em was as ready as she could be.

"Oh, Miss Emmaline!" called a voice from outside. An instant later Jim and Sample, Emmaline's boys, ran into the kitchen.

"It's a red lady outside," Sample gushed.

"Well, go figure," Emmaline said. "Ain't like you ain't a quarter red yourself?" Her papa had been Black Creek, his hair uncut 'til death.

"Not *that* kinda red," said Sample, rolling his eyes enough to get a hard look from Emmaline. "She askin' for you."

"Is she, now?" Emma turned from the pantry and handed Sample a jar of peach preserves. "Open that for me and you can have some." Delighted to be treated like a man, Sample promptly sat down and began wrestling with the tight lid.

"I don't like this one," said Jim, and since Jim was her artist—none of the dreaming in him, but he saw things others didn't—Emmaline knew the time had come. She wiped her hands on a cloth and went out onto the porch to meet the White Lady.

She smelled the lady before she saw her: a thick waft of magnolia perfume, too cloying to be quite natural. Outside, the perfume wasn't as bad, diminished and blended in among the scents of Em's garden and the faint sulfurous miasma that was omnipresent in Pratt City on still days like this—that from the Village Creek, polluted as it was with nearly a century's worth of iron and steel manufacturing waste. The woman to whom the perfume belonged stood on the grassy patch in front of Em's house, fastidiously away from

the red dirt path that most people walked to reach her front porch. Why, this lady was just as pretty as a flower in a full-skirted dress of cotton print, yellow covered in white-and-green lilies. No crinoline, but nearly as old-fashioned, with layers separated by bunched taffeta and edged in lace. Around the heart-shaped bodice, her skin was white as pearl—so white that Em figured she'd have burned up in a minute if not for the enormous parasol positioned over her head. And here was why Sample had called her red: the confection of her hair, spun into an elegant chignon behind her head and topped with a crown of white flowers, was nearly as burgundy as good wine.

It was all Em could do not to feel inadequate, given that she wore only an old faded housedress, with her own hair done up in plaits and hidden away beneath a wrap. But she drew herself up anyway, and reminded herself that she needed no parasol to keep her skin fine; the sun did that itself, and black didn't crack beneath its blessing. Those were just surface things anyway. The White Lady was nearly *all* surface; that was the nature of her kind. That was how this meeting would go, then: an appearance of grace and gentility, covering the substance of battle.

"Why, I've come to see 'bout you, Miss Emmaline," the White Lady said, as if they were in the middle of a conversation and not the beginning. Her voice was light and sweet, as honeyed as her yellow eyes. "You know me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Em said, because she knew the children were watching and it wouldn't do for them, specially the boys, to think they could smart off to white ladies. Even if this one wasn't really a white lady. "Heard here and there you was coming."

"Did you, now?" She simpered, dimples flashing, and flicked at her skirts. As she did this, Em caught a glimpse of a figure behind her: a little black girl, couldn't have been more than seven, crouched

and holding the pole of the great big parasol over the woman's head. The little girl's feet were bare beneath the simple white shift she wore, and her eyes were still and empty.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you heard," the White Lady said, unfolding a little lace fan and fluttering it at herself. "Figured you'd have your ways. Could I trouble you for some tea or lemonade, though, Miss Emmaline? It's always almighty hot in this land. Not that that bothers your kind like it does mine."

"Mighty hot indeed," Emmaline agreed evenly. She nodded to Pauline, who stood beside her trembling a little. Even a half-trained girlchild knew power when she saw it. Pauline jumped, but went inside. "This land made its natural people brown for a reason, though, ma'am, long before either your'n or most of mine came along. Seems to me you could make yourself fit the land better—if you wanted, of course."

The woman extended one long, thin arm and ran her fingers up the pearly skin, looking almost bemused to find such flesh upon herself. "I *should*, I suppose, but you know there's more reward than price comes with this skin."

Em did indeed know. "Pauline's gone to fetch some tea for you, ma'am. No lemonade, I'm afraid; lemons cost too dear when you got three children and no husband, see."

"Ah, yes! About those children of yours."

As much as Emmaline thought she had braced herself, she still couldn't help tensing up when the White Lady's yellow eyes shifted to dance over the faces of Jim and Sample. Lord, but she should've guessed! America wasn't the Old Country; these days the White Folk didn't bother with silly tricks or living in mounds, and they didn't stay hidden, for why should they? But the one thing they still did, in spades here in this land of cheap flesh, was steal children.

And if they kept to children of a certain hue, why, the police didn't even ask after them. Emmaline set her jaw.

The woman's eyes lingered on Jim long enough to be worrying. Jim, smart one that he was, had gone still and quiet, looking down at his feet, knowing better than to meet any white woman's gaze. Sample was all a-bristle, not liking the way the woman was eyeballing his little brother; ah, damnation, Emmaline never should've picked for Sample's father a man who liked to fight. Boy was gonna get himself in trouble someday.

Em had a feeling, though, that this was a feint. Then Pauline came back onto the porch with a big sweating glass of iced tea... and sure enough, the White Lady's gaze landed on the girl with much more than greed for a cool drink.

Pauline stopped there, with her eyes narrowed, because like Emmaline, she knew what was beneath the surface. The woman laughed prettily at the look on the girl's face.

"*Trouble comin' tell*," the White Lady sang, still grinning. "*Trouble comin' fine! Nought to pay the price but sweet blood like fine wine.*" She had a beautiful voice—lilting and hymn-reverberant and high as birds flew. Hardly sounded human, in fact, which was fitting enough.

Em raised a hand in praise anyway, because beauty was meant to be acknowledged, and to deny it would just invite her further in. "Trouble always comin, ma'am," she replied to the song. "Some'a us, this world made of trouble. Not that you folk help."

"Aww, Miss Emmaline, don't be like that. Come on here, girl, with that tea. It's powerful hot."

Em glanced at Pauline; Pauline nodded once, tightly. Then she walked down the steps to the bottommost slat—no farther—and held forth the glass.

The White Lady sighed, throwing a look at Em. "Ought to raise your children to show some respect, Miss Emmaline."

"Lots of ways to show respect, ma'am."

The White Lady sniffed. Then she turned her head, and the little girl who'd been holding the parasol straightened and came around her. The parasol stayed where it was, holding itself up against the ground. As the child moved forward, Em's skin came all over goose bumps. Wasn't right, seeing a child who should've been lively so empty of life and magic. The little girl twitched a little while she walked, as if with a palsy, or as if jerked on strings. She stopped before Pauline and held her hands up, and Em didn't blame Pauline at all for her grimace as she pushed the glass into the child's hands.

"Whose was she?" Emmaline asked, as the little girl twitched and moved to bring the tea back to her mistress.

"Nobody who matters, Miss Em, don't you mind." The White Lady took the glass of tea, then smoothed a hand over the child's soft cap of hair with an almost fond smile. "Such a lovely girl, though, isn't she? Everybody says you folk can't be beautiful, but that's just not true. Where else would I be able to get this?" She preened, smoothing a hand over one unblemished, shining cheek.

"She had power," Pauline said then. Em started; she was used to Pauline keeping her mouth shut around white folks, like a good sensible girl should. But Pauline was still staring at the little girl in horror. Her expression hardened, though, from shock into disgust. "She had power, and you took it. Like a damn thief."

The White Lady's eyebrows looked to have climbed into her red hair for a moment. Emmaline was right there with her, shocked at Pauline's cheek. She snapped without thinking, "Pauline Elizabeth, shut your mouth before I shut it."

Pauline shut up, though Emmaline could see the resentful flex of

muscle along her jaw. But the White Lady let out a soft laugh, chilling them both into silence.

"Well! I can't say I think much of how you're raising your children, Miss Emmaline. Negro children never can sit still and be quiet, I suppose. Of course I took her power, girl; not like *she* could do anything with it. Now, I think I'm owed an apology, don't you?"

Damnation. Stiffly, Emmaline said, "I'm sorry for my daughter's foolishness, ma'am. I'll see to her when we're done talking."

"Oh, but that isn't enough, Miss Em." The White Lady tilted her head, long red lashes catching the light. "Honestly, how's she going to learn respect if you do all the apologizing for her?"

Pauline spoke tightly, with a darting glance at Emmaline for permission to speak. "I'm sorry, too, ma'am."

"Now, see? That wasn't so hard." The White Lady gestured with the tinkling glass of tea at Pauline, beaming. "But don't you think you owe me a bit more, after smarting off like that? Why, I'm *wounded*. You called me a thief! And even if I am, it's the principle of the thing." She stepped forward. "I think you should come with me for a while, and learn respect. Don't you?"

"No, ma'am," Emmaline snapped, before Pauline could dig herself further into trouble. "I don't think she owes you a thing beyond what you've had."

"Oh, now, be reasonable." The White Lady stepped forward once more, almost to the porch steps—but then she paused, her smile fading just a little. When she glanced off to the side, she spied the rosemary bush at last, growing scraggly in the summer heat. Growing, though, still, and by its growth weaving a bit of protection around the house. Beginning to frown, the woman glanced to the other side; there was plenty of sage, too, thriving in the heat unlike the rosemary.

Eyes widening, the woman finally turned about, spying at last the prize of Emmaline's yard: the sycamore fig. It grew in an arc over on the far side of the yard, because many years ago some neighborhood children had played on it and nearly broken its trunk. It had survived, though—through the heat, through the breaking, and through isolation, for it was nearly the only one of its kind in America. By the stories Emmaline's own mother had told of its planting, the seed-fig had been smuggled over from Africa herself, tucked into some poor soul's wound to keep it safe and living through the Middle Passage.

"Supposed to be rowan, thorn, and ash," said the White Lady. All at once she sounded sulky.

Emmaline lifted her chin. "That'd work, too," she said, "cause Lord knows I got some Scots Irish in me from my poor slave foremothers' travails. But this ain't the soil of Eire; red Alabama dirt roots different protectors. And you ain't the same as your'n back in the Old Country neither, not after all these years of drinking Negro blood, so rosemary, sage, and fig will do for you."

The White Lady let out a huffy little sound... but then she took a dainty step back. She started to raise the glass of tea, then paused, focusing sharply on it; her lip curled. Then she glared at Pauline.

"Just a little bit of acorn flour, ma'am," Pauline said, with such exaggerated innocence in her voice that Emmaline had to stifle a smile in spite of herself. "For flavor?"

"Rosemary, sage, and fig to bind," said the White Lady. It was clear now that she was furious, as she held the glass of tea out from herself and then dropped it. The tea spilled into the grass, and the glass split into three pieces. She drew in a deep breath, visibly mastering temper. "And *oak* to strike the blow. Well, Miss Emmaline, I'll grant you won this one, but it leaves us in a bit of

a fix. You can't keep yours safe everywhere, and I can't be chasing after 'em all damn day and night." She thought a moment. "How 'bout a deal?"

"Ain't enough water in the River Jordan," Emmaline snapped.

"Sure?" The White Lady's grin crept back, like a dog badly banished. "Safety and prosperity for the rest, if you give me but one?"

"I done told you *no*," Emmaline said. She was forgetting to pretend polite; well, Sample hadn't gotten it only from his father. "How many more times I got to—"

"What kind of safety?" asked Pauline.

"Lord, have mercy, I'mma have to kill this girl," Emmaline could not help muttering. But Pauline had set her jaw in that tight, stubborn way that meant she didn't care if she got a smack for it. She persisted: "How much prosperity?"

Oh, and if that didn't spread the White Lady's grin nearly from ear to ear. "Why, lots, sugar. Bless your heart!"

"Girl, shut your *mouth*," Emmaline snapped. But the White Lady held up a hand, and all at once Emmaline found herself unable to speak. Oh, Mercy! Em knew, then. Stupid, stupid girl.

"Pauline, don't!" blurted Jim, but the White Lady eyed him, too, and he was shut up as firmly as Emmaline herself. Sample just stared from one to the other of his siblings and from them to the White Lady, his hands flexing as if he wanted to hit somebody, but wasn't sure where to start.

"Children should be seen and not heard," said the White Lady, gesturing gracefully with her fan. "But *ladies* with that blood like wine, sweet and high and so fine, get some choices in the matter 'til it's taken from them. What say you, Miss Pauline?"

Pauline, to her credit, glanced at Emmaline again. Her belligerence had faded by now, and her small face was properly anxious and

afraid. Then, though, her jaw firmed, and she faced the White Lady squarely. "You said trouble was comin'."

"Oh, indeed?" The White Lady let her gaze drip left and right, syruping all over the boys. "So much trouble! Folks getting uppity from here to the Carolinas. De-seg-gregation! Non-discrim-ination! And don't you know them bullnecks will be hitting back fast, bearing y'all back into your place." She stopped her gaze on hotheaded Sample; Sample set his jaw. "Hitting back *hard*, I tell you, on boys who think to be called men."

Pauline caught her breath. Then, though, thank the Lord, she bit her bottom lip. "I want to speak to my mother."

There was a moment's long, pent pause. Then the White Lady flipped her fan back up into a blurring wave, dropping into a mocking curtsy. The servant child moved jerkily back behind her, taking hold of the parasol again. "Seeking counsel is wise, and within the rules besides," the White Lady admitted. "Not too much counsel, though, little miss. Some deals don't last long."

With that, she flounced off with the child in tow—though Emmaline noted that she skirted wide around the sycamore fig before passing behind a pine tree and vanishing.

The instant Emmaline could speak and move, she did, hurrying over to Pauline and slapping the tar out of the girl before she could speak. "Didn't I tell you about folks like that?" she demanded, pointing with a shaking hand after the White Lady. "Didn't I tell you they'll put a pretty orange in your hand and snatch it back with the hand attached?"

It had been happening more and more lately that Pauline defied her—but then, this was only proper, was it not? A girl coming into her womanhood, and her adult power, should speak her mind

sometimes. "I know, Momma," Pauline said, without a trace of apology. Her voice was so calm and strong and even that Emmaline blinked. "But I had dreams."

"Well, you should've told me! And you should've told me about the blood coming. I know how to make you safe for at least a bit of time, and—"

"You *can't* make me safe, Momma." Pauline said it so sharp, her gaze so hard, that Emmaline could only flinch back. "That's why you told me what to be scared of, ain't it? So I could make myself safe. And I know, 'cause you taught me, that it's a woman's job to fight for hers."

"That's a man's job," Jim said, scowling—though he, too, should've been quiet, cowed by the slap. Sample nodded fiercely. Emmaline groaned and put a hand in the air for strength, all of her children had forgotten how to mind, all at once.

"Decent folks' job, then," Pauline said back, with a little heat. "But Momma, I *saw* it in the dream. People marching! Big ol' red-neck bulls, standing up like men, holding dogs and billy clubs. Blood everywhere." Emmaline's skin went all a-prickle with remembered fear. Yet there was no fear in Pauline's face as she went on, her voice rising in excitement. "At the end of it, though, Momma, at the end... I saw white children and black children sitting by each other in school. It was yellow and brown and red children there, too! Black people at the front of a bus! Momma..." Pauline bit her lip, then leaned forward to whisper, though there was no one to hear but family. "I saw a *black man in a big white house*."

There were always black men in the big white houses of downtown Birmingham. Who else was going to tend their gardens or wash their cars? And yet... there was a fervor in Pauline's gaze that

warned Emmaline there was something more to her daughter's dreams.

Didn't matter, though. The world didn't change. And somebody had to protect her fool children from themselves.

Seething with pent-up anger and fear, Emmaline herded the children inside. She made them go to bed early, with no supper for smarting off, because they had to *learn*—Pauline especially. Wasn't no prosperity worth a girlchild's soul and what little innocence life allowed her. Wasn't no safety for black boys beyond what humility bought them, little as that was.

And while they slept, Emmaline burned sage, and she prayed to every ancestor of three continents who might listen, and then she set herself up in a chair before the door with her grandmother's old musket across her knees. She would stay up day and night, if she had to, for her children's sake.

After a few hours had passed in slow and taut silence, and the candles burned low, and the weight of drowsiness pressed on the back of her head like a blanket, Emmaline got up to keep herself awake. She peeked in the boys' room: They were snoring, curled up, though Jim had a half-eaten peach still in his hand, sneaked out from some hiding place or another against just such an occasion of their mother's wrath.

Pauline's room, though, was cold from the open window waiting sharp bitter wind over the girl's empty bed.

There would be only one place the girl could have gone: the Fairgrounds, in the shadow of Red Mountain.

Emmaline ran to Renee's house, since Renee had the only working phone on the street. There she called Frank, who came over

bringing his mule. The mule ran like it knew what was at stake, so fast and hard that Emmaline's bottom was raw long before she reached the place.

The Fairgrounds were only Fairgrounds once a year. The rest of the time it was just a fallow field, occasionally used for harness racing. Long ago, though, it had been the breaking ground of a plantation—the place where new slaves, freshly force-marched up from the port of Mobile, got branded and stripped of name and spirit before being sent into the fields. As Emmaline halted the mule and slid off its back, she felt all that old blood there in the ground, mixed with old tears and the red dirt beneath her feet. White Folk fed on that sort of magic. This would be a place of power for them.

As Em reached the top of the hill, she saw that Pauline stood beneath a pine that was being strangled by a carpet of kudzu. Before her stood the White Lady—shining even more now, her skin catching the moon's gleam in the way of her people, ears gone to points and mouth too wide and full of sharp fangs. They both turned as Emmaline thumped up, out of breath, her legs shaking from holding so tight to the mule's sides. Still, she moved to stand between them, in front of Pauline and facing the White Lady. "I ain't gon' let you!"

"Deal's done, Miss Emmaline," said the White Lady, looking amused. "Too late."

Emmaline turned to Pauline, shaking, horrified. Pauline, though, lifted her chin. "I saw it, Momma," she said. "One life for three. Trouble coming whether we want it or not, but if I go, you and the boys will get through it."

In a wordless fury, Emmaline flung herself at the White Lady. She did this without using her body, and the White Lady met her

without hers, taking her up and out and through and into dreaming. Thing was, dreaming wasn't a thing mortal folks did so well when they were awake, so Emmaline tumbled, helpless, lashing out ineffectually. And in the perverse way of her kind—who loved to lie, but liked it best of all when truth became their weapon—the White Lady showed Emmaline the future that Pauline had bought. She saw:

Markets full of melons and greens and peaches, all artificially fresh and reeking of chemicals in the dead of winter. Long elevated strips of road carving up Negro towns and neighborhoods all over the country. Gray, looming schools isolating bright black minds and breaking their spirits and funneling them into jails. Police, everywhere, killing and killing and killing. This? Emmaline fought nausea and despair, lest she strengthen her enemy—but it was nearly impossible not to feel something. Oh, Lord, her baby had given up her freedom for this?

And yet. All at once Emmaline was not alone in her tumbling. Pauline, new and raw and woman-strong, pushed at Emmaline, helping her straighten up. Then Pauline pointed, snatching more truth from the White Lady's dream than even she wanted show; the White Lady hissed into their minds like ice on a griddle. Pauline ignored this and said, "Look, Momma!"

And then Em saw the rest.

Marching black people, attacked by dogs. But still marching. Children—Sample!—struck by the blasts of fire hoses, the torrent peeling off clothes and tearing skin. Still marching. Joined by dozens, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands.

Still. Marching.

Before these marches, prayers and church-plate dinners. *Emmaline, sprinkling a little fire into the chicken and dumplings to warm the*

*marchers against the cold hose water to come. Young women refusing to be ordered out of their bus seats to go sit in the back. Emmaline braiding a donkey's stubbornness into their hair. Children holding their heads high through crowds of shouting, jeering white teenagers and adults. Emmaline trimming a few fgs from the sycamore to make jam, sweetening the children's mouths with the taste of heritage and survival.*

And so much more. Brown faces in space! Emmaline could only stare at the stars, and savor the impossible possibility. Brown men on the Supreme Court! Then she saw the white house that Pauline had mentioned. *The White House, nestled amid statues and obelisks and the mirror pools of Washington, D.C., a place of power in itself. She saw a man standing on its steps, brown as fig jam. And then a woman, black as molasses, her gaze hard and high and proud. And then another woman, and another brown man, and so many more, their frequency increasing with the spinning of the sun.*

Still marching. Never stopping, 'til freedom was won.

Pauline's single sacrifice could set all of it in motion. But—

"No!" Emmaline fought her way back toward wakefulness. "I can't—it can't be me who stays!" She didn't believe! She had taught her children to bow their heads, not lift them up high. "I'm not what they need!"

*You gon' be all they get, sugar,* said the White Lady into the dream, in a laughing whisper.

No. No, she damn well would not be.

The dream still spun around her. Emmaline set her jaw and plunged her hand into it, grabbing wildly this time, and pulling back... the jar of sycamore jam.

"Sin's sin," she snapped. The top of the jar was tight, but she



wrestled it off and plucked out a dripping, soft sycamore fig to brandish against the churning dark. "A deal's a deal. But one kind of prey the same as another to you lot, ain't it? You like children's beauty, but a woman's don't hurt you none. You like innocence, but you'll take foolishness. So here mine: *I can't believe the world will ever change.*"

"I can't hope. It ain't in me. Spent too long making it easier for people to live downtrodden. I know how to survive, but I ain't got the fight for change in me—not like my baby does. So take me, and leave her."

"No!" Pauline shouted, but Emmaline had enough control to drown her out with the sound of chanting, marching crowds.

The shape of the White Lady had blurred into the dream, but she was a sharp-toothed presence amid the swirl. *Take you both, child and fool, all mine.*

Emmaline grinned. "Greed's a sin." The dream cracked a little beneath good Christian truth, allowing Em to summon the whiff of burned sage. The White Lady flinched hard enough to slow the whirlwind of the dream, for the smell carried with it lamentations for stolen lands, stolen children, and the stolen lives of Em's Creek forbears. Emmaline set that in place opposite the jar of figs. "Your bargain was one for three, not two for two."

Images of marchers warped and twisted around them, the White House dissolving into the foxy face of the White Lady. "True enough," she said, conjuring up her fan again. "Still, I'd rather the child if you don't mind. Or even if you do."

Here Emmaline faltered. She had not dreamt of rosemary. Frantically she rifled through images, tossing away the fish she'd dreamt of before each of her children, shoving aside the green tomatoes and the collards of the market. Lord! Had she never once dreamt of baking chicken?

She had not. But then, through the tittering laughter of the White Lady and her cronies, Emmaline smelled a dream of pot-roasted guinea-rooster, with orange peel... and rosemary. That had been the first time Emmaline accorded her daughter the respect of a fellow woman—oh, and Pauline had been savoring that feeling, all this time! There was a bit of innocence attached to it, too, lost after Emmaline's explanation about white men's oranges: the perfect sweetening to lure in a hungry fey. And indeed, the White Lady paused, lifting her face a little and half-closing her eyes in pleasure at the toothsome aroma. But then she stiffened as she caught the rosemary's perfume.

"Rosemary, sage, and fig," said Pauline, in a tone of satisfaction. "Now let my Momma—"

"Take me," Emmaline said. *Commanded*, now, because she could. She had bound the White Lady by both the ancient rules of the Old Country and the newer rules of flesh and blood. The deal had been made, one innocent life for three lives protected and prosperous, but Emmaline had control over which life the White Folk got to keep, at least.

"Momma!" Pauline, her beautiful powerful Pauline, abruptly resolved out of the dream's swirl and turned to her. "Momma, you can't."

"Hush." Emmaline went to her, held her close, kissed her cornrowed head. "I done told you a million times that the world doesn't change—but I was wrong, and I'm sorry for that. You got a big fight ahead of you, but you can win it. And you're better suited for that fight than I'll ever be." She hugged the girl tight. "Be strong, baby. Tell your brothers the same. I know y'all are anyway."

Pauline clutched at her. "But Momma, I, you can't, I didn't want—"

The White Lady closed the dream around Emmaline, and whisked her away.

In the morning, Pauline woke up on the ground of the Fairgrounds wet with dew and weeping. Her brothers, who had come up to the Fairgrounds to find her, came quietly to her side to hold her tight.

Cousin Renee took the children in, of course, for blood was blood. She sent them one by one to Alabama State for their learning, so they were there when the Freedom Rides began. Naturally all three joined up. Through the dark times that followed, the foretold dogs and hoses and beatings—and the unforseen lynchings and assassinations and bombings—there were white folk aplenty doing evil... but no White Folk. The fey did not go again where they had been bested once, and in any case, their time was waning. The dirt of Alabama was red for many reasons, not the least of which that it was full of iron ore. Took a lot of power to overcome that much iron... and the times were changing such that not even black children could be stolen with impunity anymore.

The White Folk kept their promise, at least: Jim got his arm bitten by a dog during a protest, but it did not rear his throat out. Hard-headed Sample dated a white woman and only had to flee town; the men who meant to chain him up behind their truck and drag him to death did not catch him. Pauline got married, dreamt of fish, and made her own daughters to carry on the family legacy. After a few more years, she ran for city council and won, and nobody strung her up. Then she ran for mayor, and won that, too. All the while she turned a tidy profit from her sideline barbecue business. The greens had a little extra warmth in them that made everyone feel better toward each other, so she called them Freedom Greens, mostly as a joke.

But one year the black man Pauline had dreamt of in the White House passed through town, and he decided to come all the way to Pratt City to have some of Pauline's Famous Freedom Greens. Folks went wild. Somebody paid her to write a book about her life. Somebody optioned the film rights. Companies called and asked to franchise her recipe—but Pauline said no, instead hiring a small staff of Pratt City dwellers and leasing a commercial kitchen to fill all the thousands of orders for greens herself.

In every can, mind, there was a sprinkle of rosemary, sage, and a tiny dab of sycamore fig. Just to cut the bitterness.

And late one cold winter's night, Pauline dreamt again of the White Folk. She saw how lean and poorly they were looking these days, deprived of their easy prey, and as the hate of the world dwindled and left them hungry. But as she fought the urge to smile at their misfortune—for ill-wishing would only make them stronger—she caught a glimpse of a painfully familiar black face among their foxy whiteness, strong and proud and shining in its own way. A face that was smiling, and satisfied, and full of motherly pride.

So the world changed. And so Pauline woke up and went to hold her oldest granddaughter close, whispering to her of secrets and savory things and dreams yet to come—and of Great-Grammy Em, never to be forgotten, who would one day also be free.