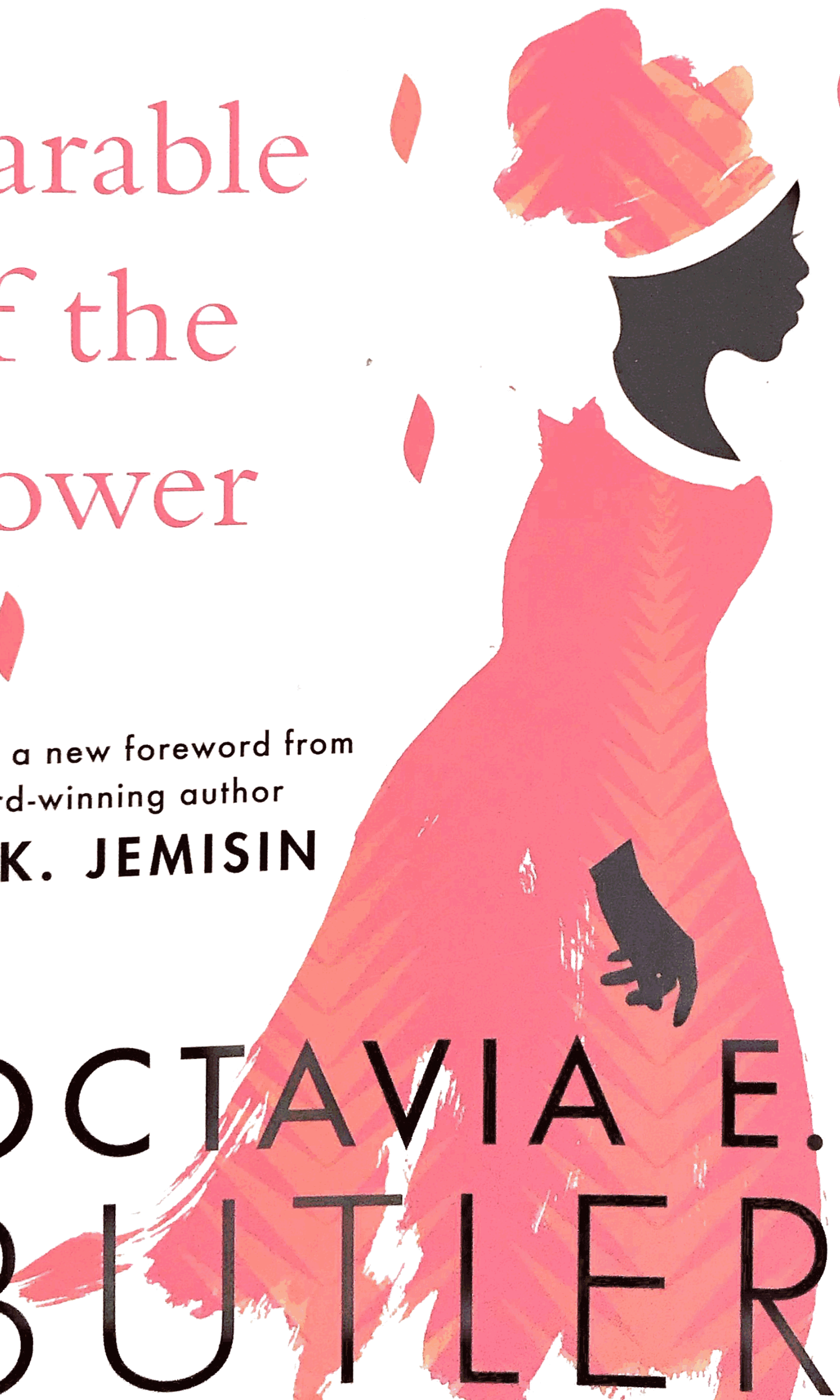


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EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

by Lauren Oya Olamina

1

**All that you touch
You Change.**

**All that you Change
Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth
Is Change.**

**God
Is Change.**

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

SATURDAY, JULY 20, 2024

I had my recurring dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father's daughter.

Today is our birthday—my fifteenth and my father's fifty-fifth. Tomorrow, I'll try to please him—him and the community and God. So last night, I dreamed a reminder that it's all a lie. I think I need to write about the dream because this particular lie bothers me so much.

• • •

I'm learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I'm just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I've had many lessons, and I'm better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I'm still afraid. I can't quite control my directions yet.

I lean forward toward the doorway. It's a doorway like the one between my room and the hall. It seems to be a long way from me, but I lean toward it. Holding my body stiff and tense, I let go of whatever I'm grasping, whatever has kept me from rising or falling so far. And I lean into the air, straining upward, not moving upward, but not quite falling down either. Then I do begin to move, as though to slide on the air drifting a few feet above the floor, caught between terror and joy.

I drift toward the doorway. Cool, pale light glows from it. Then I slide a little to the right; and a little more. I can see that I'm going to miss the door and hit the wall beside it, but I can't stop or turn. I drift away from the door, away from the cool glow into another light.

The wall before me is burning. Fire has sprung from nowhere, has eaten in through the wall, has begun to reach toward me, reach for me. The fire spreads. I drift into it. It blazes up around me. I thrash and scramble and try to swim back out of it, grabbing handfuls of air and fire, kicking, burning! Darkness.

Perhaps I awake a little. I do sometimes when the fire swallows me. That's bad. When I wake up all the way, I can't get back to sleep. I try, but I've never been able to.

This time I don't wake up all the way. I fade into the second part of the dream—the part that's ordinary and real, the part that did happen years ago when I was little, though at the time it didn't seem to matter.

Darkness.

Darkness brightening.

Stars.

Stars casting their cool, pale, glinting light.

“We couldn’t see so many stars when I was little,” my stepmother says to me. She speaks in Spanish, her own first language. She stands still and small, looking up at the broad sweep of the Milky Way. She and I have gone out after dark to take the washing down from the clothesline. The day has been hot, as usual, and we both like the cool darkness of early night. There’s no moon, but we can see very well. The sky is full of stars.

The neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective. But my stepmother is there, and she isn’t afraid. I stay close to her. I’m seven years old.

I look up at the stars and the deep, black sky “Why couldn’t you see the stars?” I ask her. “Everyone can see them.” I speak in Spanish, too, as she’s taught me. It’s an intimacy somehow.

“City lights,” she says. “Lights, progress, growth, all those things we’re too hot and too poor to bother with anymore.” She pauses. “When I was your age, my mother told me that the stars—the few stars we could see—were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us. I believed her for almost a year.” My stepmother hands me an armload of my youngest brother’s diapers. I take them, walk back toward the house where she has left her big wicker laundry basket, and pile the diapers atop the rest of the clothes. The basket is full. I look to see that my stepmother is not watching me, then let myself fall backward onto the soft mound of stiff, clean clothes. For a moment, the fall is like floating.

I lie there, looking up at the stars. I pick out some of the constellations and name the stars that make them up. I’ve learned them from an astronomy book that belonged to my father’s mother.

I see the sudden light streak of a meteor flashing westward across the sky. I stare after it, hoping to see another. Then my stepmother calls me and I go back to her.

“There are city lights now,” I say to her. “They don’t hide the stars.”

She shakes her head. “There aren’t anywhere near as many as there were. Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be—and not that long ago.”

“I’d rather have the stars,” I say.

“The stars are free.” She shrugs. “I’d rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars.”

**A gift of God
May sear unready fingers.**

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

SUNDAY, JULY 21, 2024

At least three years ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church. I let my father baptize me in all three names of that God who isn't mine any more.

My God has another name.

We got up early this morning because we had to go across town to church. Most Sundays, Dad holds church services in our front rooms. He's a Baptist minister, and even though not all of the people who live within our neighborhood walls are Baptists, those who feel the need to go to church are glad to come to us. That way they don't have to risk going outside where things are so dangerous and crazy. It's bad enough that some people—my father for one—have to go out to work at least once a week. None of us goes out to school any more. Adults get nervous about kids going outside.

But today was special. For today, my father made arrangements

with another minister—a friend of his who still had a real church building with a real baptistery.

Dad once had a church just a few blocks outside our wall. He began it before there were so many walls. But after it had been slept in by the homeless, robbed, and vandalized several times, someone poured gasoline in and around it and burned it down. Seven of the homeless people sleeping inside on that last night burned with it.

But somehow, Dad's friend Reverend Robinson has managed to keep his church from being destroyed. We rode our bikes to it this morning—me, two of my brothers, four other neighborhood kids who were ready to be baptized, plus my father and some other neighborhood adults riding shotgun. All the adults were armed. That's the rule. Go out in a bunch, and go armed.

The alternative was to be baptized in the bathtub at home. That would have been cheaper and safer and fine with me. I said so, but no one paid attention to me. To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things. They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back.

Yeah.

To us kids—most of us—the trip was just an adventure, an excuse to go outside the wall. We would be baptized out of duty or as a kind of insurance, but most of us aren't that much concerned with religion. I am, but then I have a different religion.

"Why take chances," Silvia Dunn said to me a few days ago. "Maybe there's something to all this religion stuff." Her parents thought there was, so she was with us.

My brother Keith who was also with us didn't share any of my beliefs. He just didn't care. Dad wanted him to be baptized, so what the hell. There wasn't much that Keith did care about. He

liked to hang out with his friends and pretend to be grown up, dodge work and dodge school and dodge church. He's only twelve, the oldest of my three brothers. I don't like him much, but he's my stepmother's favorite. Three smart sons and one dumb one, and it's the dumb one she loves best.

Keith looked around more than anyone as we rode. His ambition, if you could call it that, is to get out of the neighborhood and go to Los Angeles. He's never too clear about what he'll do there. He just wants to go to the big city and make big money. According to my father, the big city is a carcass covered with too many maggots. I think he's right, though not all the maggots are in L.A. They're here, too.

But maggots tend not to be early-morning types. We rode past people stretched out, sleeping on the sidewalks, and a few just waking up, but they paid no attention to us. I saw at least three people who weren't going to wake up again, ever. One of them was headless. I caught myself looking around for the head. After that, I tried not to look around at all.

A woman, young, naked, and filthy stumbled along past us. I got a look at her slack expression and realized that she was dazed or drunk or something.

Maybe she had been raped so much that she was crazy. I'd heard stories of that happening. Or maybe she was just high on drugs. The boys in our group almost fell off their bikes, staring at her. What wonderful religious thoughts they would be having for a while.

The naked woman never looked at us. I glanced back after we'd passed her and saw that she had settled down in the weeds against someone else's neighborhood wall.

A lot of our ride was along one neighborhood wall after another; some a block long, some two blocks, some five. . . . Up toward the hills there were walled estates—one big house and a lot of shabby little dependencies where the servants lived. We didn't pass anything like that today. In fact we passed a couple of neighborhoods

so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash. Then there were the pitiful, unwalled residential areas. A lot of the houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted-in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children. Their kids were wide awake and watching us this morning. I feel sorry for the little ones, but the ones my age and older make me nervous. We ride down the middle of the cracked street, and the kids come out and stand along the curb to stare at us. They just stand and stare. I think if there were only one or two of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes, whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder? We could wind up like that naked woman, stumbling along, dazed, maybe hurt, sure to attract dangerous attention unless she could steal some clothing. I wish we could have given her something.

My stepmother says she and my father stopped to help an injured woman once, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from behind a wall and almost killed them.

And we're in Robledo—20 miles from Los Angeles, and, according to Dad, once a rich, green, unwalled little city that he had been eager to abandon when he was a young man. Like Keith, he had wanted to escape the dullness of Robledo for big city excitement. L.A. was better then—less lethal. He lived there for 21 years. Then in 2010, his parents were murdered and he inherited their house. Whoever killed them had robbed the house and smashed up the furniture, but they didn't torch anything. There was no neighborhood wall back then.

Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous.

Worse for me, they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs. . . . They carry untreated dis-

eases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves. As I rode, I tried not to look around at them, but I couldn't help seeing—collecting—some of their general misery.

I can take a lot of pain without falling apart. I've had to learn to do that. But it was hard, today, to keep peddling and keep up with the others when just about everyone I saw made me feel worse and worse.

My father glanced back at me every now and then. He tells me, "You can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it." He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about. The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't some magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's delusional. Even I admit that. My brother Keith used to pretend to be hurt just to trick me into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make me bleed. I was eleven then, and I still bled through the skin when I saw someone else bleeding. I couldn't help doing it, and I always worried that it would give me away to people outside the family.

I haven't shared bleeding with anyone since I was twelve and got my first period. What a relief that was. I just wish all the rest of it had gone away, too. Keith only tricked me into bleeding that once, and I beat the hell out of him for it. I didn't fight much when I was little because it hurt me so. I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I'd hit myself. So when I did decide that I had to fight, I set out to hurt the other kid more than kids usually hurt one another. I broke Michael Talcott's arm and Rubin Quintanilla's nose. I knocked out four of Silvia Dunn's teeth. They all earned what I did to them two or three times over. I got punished every time, and I resented it. It was double punishment, after all, and my father and stepmother knew it. But knowing didn't stop

them. I think they did it to satisfy the other kids' parents. But when I beat up Keith, I knew that Cory or Dad or both of them would punish me for it—my poor little brother, after all. So I had to see that my poor little brother paid in advance. What I did to him had to be worthwhile in spite of what they would do to me.

It was.

We both got it later from Dad—me for hurting a younger kid and Keith for risking putting “family business” into the street. Dad is big on privacy and “family business.” There’s a whole range of things we never even hint about outside the family. First among these is anything about my mother, my hyperempathy, and how the two are connected. To my father, the whole business is shameful. He’s a preacher and a professor and a dean. A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug damaged is not something he wants to boast about. Lucky for me. Being the most vulnerable person I know is damned sure not something I want to boast about.

I can’t do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what Dad thinks or wants or wishes. I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an “organic delusional syndrome.” Big shit. It hurts, that’s all I know. Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I’m crazy. I get a lot of grief that doesn’t belong to me, and that isn’t real. But it hurts.

I’m supposed to share pleasure *and* pain, but there isn’t much pleasure around these days. About the only pleasure I’ve found that I enjoy sharing is sex. I get the guy’s good feeling and my own. I almost wish I didn’t. I live in a tiny, walled fish-bowl cul-de-sac community, and I’m the preacher’s daughter. There’s a real limit to what I can do as far as sex goes.

Anyway, my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they’re going to stay scrambled. But I can do okay as long as other people don’t know about me. Inside our neighborhood walls I do fine. Our

rides today, though, were hell. Going and coming, they were all the worst things I've ever felt—shadows and ghosts, twists and jabs of unexpected pain.

If I don't look too long at old injuries, they don't hurt me too much. There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face. . . .

I must have seemed jumpy. I glanced around like a bird, not letting my gaze rest on anyone longer than it took me to see that they weren't coming in my direction or aiming anything at me.

Dad may have read something of what I was feeling in my expression. I try not to let my face show anything, but he's good at reading me. Sometimes people say I look grim or angry. Better to have them think that than know the truth. Better to have them think anything than let them know just how easy it is to hurt me.

Dad had insisted on fresh, clean, potable water for the baptism. He couldn't afford it, of course. Who could? That was the other reason for the four extra kids:

Silvia Dunn, Hector Quintanilla, Curtis Talcott, and Drew Balter, along with my brothers Keith and Marcus. The other kids' parents had helped with costs. They thought a proper baptism was important enough to spend some money and take some risks. I was the oldest by about two months. Curtis was next. As much as I hated being there, I hated even more that Curtis was there. I care about him more than I want to. I care what he thinks of me. I worry that I'll fall apart in public some day and he'll see. But not today.

By the time we reached the fortress-church, my jaw-muscles hurt from clinching and unclenching my teeth, and overall, I was exhausted.

There were only five or six dozen people at the service—

enough to fill up our front rooms at home and look like a big crowd. At the church, though, with its surrounding wall and its security bars and Lazor wire and its huge hollowness inside, and its armed guards, the crowd seemed a tiny scattering of people. That was all right. The last thing I wanted was a big audience to maybe trip me up with pain.

The baptism went just as planned. They sent us kids off to the bathrooms (“men’s,” “women’s,” “please do not put paper of any kind into toilets,” “water for washing in bucket at left. . . .”) to undress and put on white gowns. When we were ready, Curtis’s father took us to an anteroom where we could hear the preaching—from the first chapter of Saint John and the second chapter of The Acts—and wait our turns.

My turn came last. I assume that was my father’s idea. First the neighbor kids, then my brothers, then me. For reasons that don’t make a lot of sense to me, Dad thinks I need more humility. I think my particular biological humility—or humiliation—is more than enough.

What the hell? Someone had to be last. I just wish I could have been courageous enough to skip the thing altogether.

So, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. . . .”

Catholics get this stuff over with when they’re babies. I wish Baptists did. I almost wish I could believe it was important the way a lot of people seem to, the way my father seems to. Failing that, I wish I didn’t care.

But I do. The idea of God is much on my mind these days. I’ve been paying attention to what other people believe—whether they believe, and if so what kind of God they believe in. Keith says God is just the adults’ way of trying to scare you into doing what they want. He doesn’t say that around Dad, but he says it. He believes in what he sees, and no matter what’s in front of him, he doesn’t see much. I suppose Dad would say that about me if he

knew what I believe. Maybe he'd be right. But it wouldn't stop me from seeing what I see.

A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God. They believe in a kind of super-person. A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control of.

Some say God is a spirit, a force, an ultimate reality. Ask seven people what all of that means and you'll get seven different answers. So what is God? Just another name for whatever makes you feel special and protected?

There's a big, early-season storm blowing itself out in the Gulf of Mexico. It's bounced around the Gulf, killing people from Florida to Texas and down into Mexico. There are over 700 known dead so far. One hurricane. And how many people has it hurt? How many are going to starve later because of destroyed crops? That's nature. Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go and who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety. Where's safety for them anyway? Is it a sin against God to be poor? We're almost poor ourselves. There are fewer and fewer jobs among us, more of us being born, more kids growing up with nothing to look forward to. One way or another, we'll all be poor some day. The adults say things will get better, but they never have. How will God—my father's God—behave toward us when we're poor?

Is there a God? If there is, does he (she? it?) care about us? Deists like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson believed God was something that made us, then left us on our own.

"Misguided," Dad said when I asked him about Deists. "They should have had more faith in what their Bibles told them."

I wonder if the people on the Gulf Coast still have faith. People have had faith through horrible disasters before. I read a lot about that kind of thing. I read a lot period. My favorite book of

the Bible is Job. I think it says more about my father's God in particular and gods in general than anything else I've ever read.

In the book of Job, God says he made everything and he knows everything so no one has any right to question what he does with any of it. Okay. That works. That Old Testament God doesn't violate the way things are now. But that God sounds a lot like Zeus—a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers. Bang, bang! Seven toys fall dead. If they're yours, you make the rules. Who cares what the toys think. Wipe out a toy's family, then give it a brand new family. Toy children, like Job's children, are interchangeable.

Maybe God is a kind of big kid, playing with his toys. If he is, what difference does it make if 700 people get killed in a hurricane—or if seven kids go to church and get dipped in a big tank of expensive water?

But what if all that is wrong? What if God is something else altogether?

3

**We do not worship God.
We perceive and attend God.
We learn from God.
With forethought and work,
We shape God.
In the end, we yield to God.
We adapt and endure,
For we are Earthseed
And God is Change.**

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2024

One of the astronauts on the latest Mars mission has been killed. Something went wrong with her protective suit and the rest of her team couldn't get her back to the shelter in time to save her. People here in the neighborhood are saying she had no business going to Mars, anyway. All that money wasted on another crazy space trip when so many people here on earth can't afford water, food, or shelter.

The cost of water has gone up again. And I heard on the news today that more water peddlers are being killed. Peddlers sell

water to squatters and the street poor—and to people who've managed to hold on to their homes, but not to pay their utility bills. Peddlers are being found with their throats cut and their money and their handtrucks stolen. Dad says water now costs several times as much as gasoline. But, except for arsonists and the rich, most people have given up buying gasoline. No one I know uses a gas-powered car, truck, or cycle. Vehicles like that are rusting in driveways and being cannibalized for metal and plastic.

It's a lot harder to give up water.

Fashion helps. You're supposed to be dirty now. If you're clean, you make a target of yourself. People think you're showing off, trying to be better than they are. Among the younger kids, being clean is a great way to start a fight. Cory won't let us stay dirty here in the neighborhood, but we all have filthy clothes to wear outside the walls. Even inside, my brothers throw dirt on themselves as soon as they get away from the house. It's better than getting beaten up all the time.

Tonight the last big Window Wall television in the neighborhood went dark for good. We saw the dead astronaut with all of red, rocky Mars around her. We saw a dust-dry reservoir and three dead water peddlers with their dirty-blue armbands and their heads cut halfway off. And we saw whole blocks of boarded up buildings burning in Los Angeles. Of course, no one would waste water trying to put such fires out.

Then the Window went dark. The sound had flickered up and down for months, but the picture was always as promised—like looking through a vast, open window.

The Yannis family has made a business of having people in to look through their Window. Dad says that kind of unlicensed business isn't legal, but he let us go to watch sometimes because he didn't see any harm in it, and it helped the Yannis. A lot of small businesses are illegal, even though they don't hurt anyone,

and they keep a household or two alive. The Yannis Window is about as old as I am. It covers the long west wall of their living room. They must have had plenty of money back when they bought it. For the past couple of years, though, they've been charging admission—only letting in people from the neighborhood—and selling fruit, fruit juice, acorn bread, or walnuts. Whatever they had too much of in their garden, they found a way to sell. They showed movies from their library and let us watch news and whatever else was broadcast. They couldn't afford to subscribe to any of the new multisensory stuff, and their old Window couldn't have received most of it, anyway.

They have no reality vests, no touch-rings, and no headsets. Their setup was just a plain, thin-screened Window.

All we have left now are three small, ancient, murky little TV sets scattered around the neighborhood, a couple of computers used for work, and radios. Every household still has at least one working radio. A lot of our everyday news is from radio.

I wonder what Mrs. Yannis will do now. Her two sisters have moved in with her, and they're working so maybe it will be all right. One is a pharmacist and the other is a nurse. They don't earn much, but Mrs. Yannis owns the house free and clear. It was her parents' house.

All three sisters are widows and between them they have twelve kids, all younger than I am. Two years ago, Mr. Yannis, a dentist, was killed while riding his electric cycle home from the walled, guarded clinic where he worked. Mrs. Yannis says he was caught in a crossfire, hit from two directions, then shot once more at close range. His bike was stolen. The police investigated, collected their fee, and couldn't find a thing. People get killed like that all the time. Unless it happens in front of a police station, there are never any witnesses.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 3, 2024

The dead astronaut is going to be brought back to Earth. She wanted to be buried on Mars. She said that when she realized she was dying. She said Mars was the one thing she had wanted all her life, and now she would be part of it forever.

But the Secretary of Astronautics says no. He says her body might be a contaminant. Idiot.

Can he believe that any microorganism living in or on her body would have a prayer of surviving and going native in that cold, thin, lethal ghost of an atmosphere? Maybe he can. Secretaries of Astronautics don't have to know much about science. They have to know about politics. Theirs is the youngest Cabinet department, and already it's fighting for its life. Christopher Morpeth Donner, one of the men running for President this year, has promised to abolish it if he's elected. My father agrees with Donner.

"Bread and circuses," my father says when there's space news on the radio. "Politicians and big corporations get the bread, and we get the circuses."

"Space could be our future," I say. I believe that. As far as I'm concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us. It's hard to get anyone to see that, though, when there's so much suffering going on just outside our walls.

Dad just looks at me and shakes his head. "You don't understand," he says. "You don't have any idea what a criminal waste of time and money that so-called space program is." He's going to vote for Donner. He's the only person I know who's going to vote at all. Most people have given up on politicians. After all, politicians have been promising to return us to the glory, wealth, and order of the twentieth century ever since I can remember. That's what the space program is about these days, at least for politicians. Hey, we can run a space station, a station on the moon, and

soon, a colony on Mars. That proves we're still a great, forward-looking, powerful nation, right?

Yeah.

Well, we're barely a nation at all anymore, but I'm glad we're still in space. We have to be going some place other than down the toilet.

And I'm sorry that astronaut will be brought back from her own chosen heaven. Her name was Alicia Catalina Godinez Leal. She was a chemist. I intend to remember her. I think she can be a kind of model for me. She spent her life heading for Mars—preparing herself, becoming an astronaut, getting on a Mars crew, going to Mars, beginning to figure out how to terraform Mars, beginning to create sheltered places where people can live and work now. . . .

Mars is a rock—cold, empty, almost airless, dead. Yet it's heaven in a way. We can see it in the night sky, a whole other world, but too nearby, too close within the reach of the people who've made such a hell of life here on Earth.

MONDAY, AUGUST 12, 2024

Mrs. Sims shot herself today—or rather, she shot herself a few days ago, and Cory and Dad found her today. Cory went a little crazy for a while afterward.

Poor, sanctimonious, old Mrs. Sims. She used to sit in our front-room church every Sunday, large-print Bible in hand, and shout out her responses: “Yes, Lord!” “Hallelujah!” “Thank you, Jesus!” “Amen!” During the rest of the week she sewed, made baskets, took care of her garden, sold what she could from it, took care of pre-school children, and talked about everyone who wasn't as holy as she thought she was.

She was the only person I've ever known who lived alone. She had a whole big house to herself because she and the wife of her

only son hated each other. Her son and his family were poor, but they wouldn't live with her. Too bad.

Different people frightened her in some deep, hard, ugly way. She didn't like the Hsu family because they were Chinese and Hispanic, and the older Chinese generation is still Buddhist. She's lived a couple of doors up from them for longer than I've been alive, but they were still from Saturn as far as she was concerned.

"Idolaters," she would call them if none of them were around. At least she cared enough about neighborly relations to do her talking about them behind their backs. They brought her peaches and figs and a length of good cotton cloth last month when she was robbed.

That robbery was Mrs. Sims's first major tragedy. Three men climbed over the neighborhood wall, cutting through the strands of barbed wire and Lazor wire on top. Lazor wire is terrible stuff. It's so fine and sharp that it slices into the wings or feet of birds who either don't see it or see it and try to settle on it. People, though, can always find a way over, under, or through.

Everyone brought Mrs. Sims things after the robbery, in spite of the way she is. Was. Food, clothing, money. . . . We took up collections for her at church. The thieves had tied her up and left her—after one of them raped her. An old lady like that! They grabbed all her food, her jewelry that had once belonged to her mother, her clothes, and worse of all, her supply of cash. It turns out she kept that—all of it—in a blue plastic mixing bowl high up in her kitchen cabinet. Poor, crazy old lady. She came to my father, crying and carrying on after the robbery because now she couldn't buy the extra food she needed to supplement what she grew. She couldn't pay her utility bills or her upcoming property taxes. She would be thrown out of her house into the street! She would starve!

Dad told her over and over that the church would never let that happen, but she didn't believe him. She talked on and on about having to be a beggar now, while Dad and Cory tried to reassure

her. The funny thing is, she didn't like us either because Dad had gone and married "that Mexican woman Cory-ah-zan." It just isn't that hard to say "Corazon" if that's what you choose to call her. Most people just call her Cory or Mrs. Olamina.

Cory never let on that she was offended. She and Mrs. Sims were sugary sweet to one another. A little more hypocrisy to keep the peace.

Last week Mrs. Sims's son, his five kids, his wife, her brother, and her brother's three kids all died in a house fire—an arson fire. The son's house had been in an unwalled area north and east of us, closer to the foothills. It wasn't a bad area, but it was poor. Naked. One night someone torched the house. Maybe it was a vengeance fire set by some enemy of a family member or maybe some crazy just set it for fun. I've heard there's a new illegal drug that makes people want to set fires.

Anyway, no one knows who did it to the Sims/Boyer families. No one saw anything, of course.

And no one got out of the house. Odd, that. Eleven people, and no one got out.

So about three days ago, Mrs. Sims shot herself. Dad said he'd heard from the cops that it was about three days ago. That would have been just two days after she heard about her son's death. Dad went to see her this morning because she missed church yesterday. Cory forced herself to go along because she thought she should. I wish she hadn't. To me, dead bodies are disgusting. They stink, and if they're old enough, there are maggots. But what the hell? They're dead. They aren't suffering, and if you didn't like them when they were alive, why get so upset about their being dead? Cory gets upset. She jumps on me for sharing pain with the living, but she tries to share it with the dead.

I began writing this about Mrs. Sims because she killed herself. That's what's upset me. She believed, like Dad, that if you kill yourself, you go to hell and burn forever. She believed in a literal acceptance of everything in the Bible. Yet, when things got to be

too much for her, she decided to trade pain for eternal pain in the hereafter.

How could she do that?

Did she really believe in anything at all? Was it all hypocrisy?

Or maybe she just went crazy because her God was demanding too much of her. She was no Job. In real life, how many people are?

SATURDAY, AUGUST 17, 2024

I can't get Mrs. Sims out of my mind. Somehow, she and her suicide have gotten tangled up with the astronaut and her death and her expulsion from heaven. I need to write about what I believe. I need to begin to put together the scattered verses that I've been writing about God since I was twelve. Most of them aren't much good. They say what I need to say, but they don't say it very well. A few are the way they should be. They press on me, too, like the two deaths. I try to hide in all the work there is to do here for the household, for my father's church, and for the school Cory keeps to teach the neighborhood kids. The truth is, I don't care about any of those things, but they keep me busy and make me tired, and most of the time, I sleep without dreaming. And Dad beams when people tell him how smart and industrious I am.

I love him. He's the best person I know, and I care what he thinks. I wish I didn't, but I do.

For whatever it's worth, here's what I believe. It took me a lot of time to understand it, then a lot more time with a dictionary and a thesaurus to say it just right—just the way it has to be. In the past year, it's gone through twenty-five or thirty lumpy, incoherent rewrites. This is the right one, the true one. This is the one I keep coming back to:

*God is Power—
 Infinite,
 Irresistible,
 Inexorable,
 Indifferent.
 And yet, God is Pliable—
 Trickster,
 Teacher,
 Chaos,
 Clay.
 God exists to be shaped.
 God is Change.*

This is the literal truth.

God can't be resisted or stopped, but can be shaped and focused. This means God is not to be prayed to. Prayers only help the person doing the praying, and then, only if they strengthen and focus that person's resolve. If they're used that way, they can help us in our only real relationship with God. They help us to shape God and to accept and work with the shapes that God imposes on us. God is power, and in the end, God prevails.

But we can rig the game in our own favor if we understand that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without our forethought, with or without our intent.

That's what I know. That's some of it anyway. I'm not like Mrs. Sims. I'm not some kind of potential Job, long suffering, stiff necked, then, at last, either humble before an all-knowing almighty, or destroyed. My God doesn't love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is.

Maybe I'll be more like Alicia Leal, the astronaut. Like her, I believe in something that I think my dying, denying, backward-looking people need. I don't have all of it yet. I don't even know

how to pass on what I do have. I've got to learn to do that. It scares me how many things I've got to learn. How will I learn them?

Is any of this real?

Dangerous question. Sometimes I don't know the answer. I doubt myself. I doubt what I think I know. I try to forget about it. After all, if it's real, why doesn't anyone else know about it. Everyone knows that change is inevitable. From the second law of thermodynamics to Darwinian evolution, from Buddhism's insistence that nothing is permanent and all suffering results from our delusions of permanence to the third chapter of Ecclesiastes ("To everything there is a season. . . ."), change is part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom. But I don't believe we're dealing with all that that means. We haven't even begun to deal with it.

We give lip service to acceptance, as though acceptance were enough. Then we go on to create super-people—super-parents, super-kings and queens, super-cops—to be our gods and to look after us—to stand between us and God. Yet God has been here all along, shaping us and being shaped by us in no particular way or in too many ways at once like an amoeba—or like a cancer. Chaos.

Even so, why can't I do what others have done—ignore the obvious. Live a normal life. It's hard enough just to do that in this world.

But this thing (This idea? Philosophy? New religion?) won't let me alone, won't let me forget it, won't let me go. Maybe. . . . Maybe it's like my sharing: One more weirdness; one more crazy, deep-rooted delusion that I'm stuck with. I am stuck with it. And in time, I'll have to do something about it. In spite of what my father will say or do to me, in spite of the poisonous rottenness outside the wall where I might be exiled, I'll have to do something about it.

That reality scares me to death.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2024

President William Turner Smith lost yesterday's election. Christopher Charles Morpeth Donner is our new President—President-elect. So what are we in for? Donner has already said that as soon as possible after his inauguration next year, he'll begin to dismantle the “wasteful, pointless, unnecessary” moon and Mars programs. Near space programs dealing with communications and experimentation will be privatized—sold off.

Also, Donner has a plan for putting people back to work. He hopes to get laws changed, suspend “overly restrictive” minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws for those employers willing to take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board.

What's adequate, I wonder: A house or apartment? A room? A bed in a shared room? A barracks bed? Space on a floor? Space on the ground? And what about people with big families? Won't they be seen as bad investments? Won't it make much more sense for companies to hire single people, childless couples, or, at most, people with only one or two kids? I wonder.

And what about those suspended laws? Will it be legal to poison, mutilate, or infect people—as long as you provide them with food, water, and space to die?

Dad decided not to vote for Donner after all. He didn't vote for anyone. He said politicians turned his stomach.