

OCTAVIA'S BROOD:
SCIENCE FICTION STORIES FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

edited by
Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown

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AK Press

674-A 23rd Street
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www.akpress.org
akpress@akpress.org
510.208.1700

AK Press UK

P.O. Box 12766
Edinburgh EH8 9YE
www.akuk.com
ak@akedin.demon.co.uk
0131.555.5165

Institute for Anarchist Studies
www.anarchiststudies.org
anarchiststudies@gmail.com

To Octavia E. Butler, who serves as a north star for so many of us. She told us what would happen—"all that you touch you change"—and then she touched us, fearlessly, brave enough to change us. We dedicate this collection to her, coming out with our own fierce longing to have our writing change everyone and everything we touch.

beyond, the gulf widens perversely, making a mockery of freedom, justice, democracy, and even mercy. James Baldwin said that we are not born knowing what these concepts mean, that they are neither common nor well defined. If we "individuals must make an enormous effort to arrive at the respect for other people that these words imply," as he wrote, then our communities must make a sustained and concentrated effort to create societies that reflect that same sense of respect and meaning.³

The stories in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* represent a global quest for social transformation, for justice. They are about people from different backgrounds and worlds, expanding the notions of solidarity and community, redefining service, and exploring and rediscovering the human spirit in baffling times, under challenging circumstances. The writers collected here offer stories that explore a broad range of social justice issues, from urban gentrification, bioterrorism, racism, and militarism to motherhood, environmentalism, spiritual journeys, and psychological quests. Culled from artists who in their other lives work tirelessly as community activists, educators, and organizers, these stories invite, inspire, engage. If the purpose of a writer, as Toni Cade Bambara said, "is to make revolution irresistible," these writers, these stories represent.⁴ With incisive imagination and a spirited sense of wonder, the contributors bridge the gap between speculative fiction and social justice, boldly writing new voices and communities into the future.

A trickster, teacher, chaos, and clay, God, as described by Octavia E. Butler in her Parable novels, is change, and *Octavia's Brood* is an important resource in our journey toward positive cultural-and-institutional change. May it spawn new conversations in classrooms, inspire vigorous discussion in coffeehouses and book clubs, and create new organizing tools and "case studies" for strategizing in our community organizations.⁵

3 James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 156.

4 Toni Cade Bambara, interview with Kate Bonetti (Columbia, MO: American Audio Prose Library, 1982).

5 For more information, see *Octavia's Brood*, <http://www.octaviabrood.com/>.

INTRODUCTION

WALUDAH IMARISHA

WHENEVER WE TRY TO ENVISION A WORLD WITHOUT WAR, WITHOUT violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction. Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds—so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories? That is the premise behind the book you hold in your hands.

In the years we have been working on this book, many folks have asked us what science fiction could possibly have to do with social justice organizing. And every time, we have responded, "Everything. *Everything*." We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories. Using their everyday realities and experiences of changing the world, they can form the foundation for the fantastic and, we hope, build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.

We titled this collection in honor of Black science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler. Butler explored the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and—most important—hope. Her work has taught us so much about the principles of visionary fiction, inspiring us. The title plays on Butler's three novel collection, *Lilith's Brood*, which is about adaptation as a necessity for survival. Changes will occur that we cannot even begin to imagine, and the next generation will be both utterly familiar and wholly alien to their parents. We believe this is what it means to carry on Butler's legacy of writing visionary fiction.

"Visionary fiction" is a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power. Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is; for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.

This anthology of visionary fiction contains short stories from people who have dedicated their lives to making change. It also includes pieces from well-known science fiction writers Tananarive Due, Terry Bisson, LeVar Burton, and Kalamu ya Salaam, and from award-winning journalist and political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal (who writes here about *Star Wars* and imperialism).

The process for creating this anthology was unlike any either of us editors had been involved with before, one that was both very intensive and highly collaborative. We worked with contributors over the course of many rounds of edits to pull out the visionary aspects of their incredible stories, as well as to ensure that the writing and storytelling captivated and inspired. We appreciate immensely the countless hours each writer poured into this creation of love. And we both feel lucky beyond words that we had the support and advice of the incredible Sherre Renée Thomas, who edited the groundbreaking anthology *Dark Matter: 100 Years of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora*.

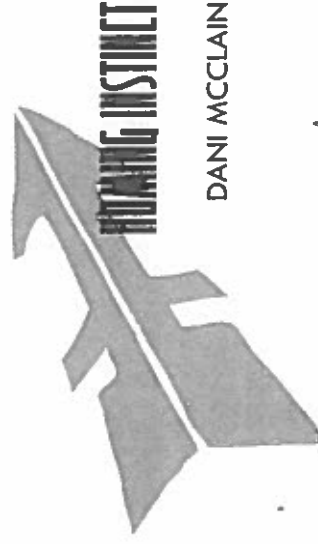
Many of the contributors to *Octavia's Brood* had never written fiction before, let alone science fiction. When we approached folks, most were hesitant to commit, feeling like they weren't qualified. But overwhelmingly, they all came back a few weeks later, enthusiastically, with incredible ideas and some with dozens of pages already written. Because all organizing is science fiction, we are dreaming new worlds every time we think about the changes we want to make in the world. The writers in this collection just needed a little space, and perhaps permission to immerse themselves fully in their visionary selves.

We especially wanted to make space for people whose identities are marginalized and oppressed within mainstream society. Art and

culture themselves are time-traveling, planes of existence where the past, present, and future shift seamlessly in and out. And for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors dreamed us up and then bent reality to create us. For Adrienne and myself, as two Black women, we think of our ancestors in chains dreaming about a day when their children's children's children would be free. They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being. We are responsible for interpreting their regrets and realizing their imaginings. We wish to continue the work of moving forward with their visionary legacy.

At a retreat for women writers in 1988, Octavia E. Butler said that she never wanted the title of being the solitary Black female sci-fi writer. She wanted to be one of *many* Black female sci-fi writers. She wanted to be one of thousands of folks writing themselves into the present and into the future. We believe in that right Butler claimed for each of us—the right to dream as ourselves, individually and collectively. But we also think it is a responsibility she handed down: are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of "the real" and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?

free, or what passed for free in those days, I don't know how it could have been otherwise. George Washington's grandson and a score of other Virginians had been killed, the soldier said. He had a chaw the size of a goiter and spat into the wagon straw, and I kept expecting Deihl to straighten him out, but he didn't. Coming past the end of the railroad bridge, we saw that the tracks had been spiked and two of the bridge pilings knocked over by a blast. The railroad workers were standing around looking either puzzled or disgusted, and one of them joined us for a ride across the wagon bridge into town. He'd been drinking freely. He spat into the hay too, and still Deihl said nothing. I remember watching him spit uncorrected and thinking: what's this world coming to? Sees Her was tossing his head and whickering, but Kate was steady. In the town the hotel and several other buildings were still smoldering. There was a wild, scary smoke smell: the smell all of us in Virginia were to come in the next few years to recognize as the smell of war. There was no fighting, but armed men were all over the streets looking fierce, bored, and uneasy at the same time. I felt my black face shining provocatively and would have not hidden it but damped its blackness down if I could. The railroad men and the soldier both said "Kansas Brown" was behind the raid, as if the name had deep significance. White folks made much of Brown, though I had never heard his name nor had any of the slaves until that day, when he became more famous among us than Moses at one stroke, and not as "Kansas" or "Osawatomie" Brown but as Shenandoah Brown. The railroad man told how the hotel had been torched and in the confusion Brown and his men had retreated across the Shenandoah into the Loudon Heights, which is what we called the Blue Ridge there. They had fast-firing breech-loading Sharps rifles. Once in the laurel thickets, who would follow them? "Not the Virginny mililishy," the soldier said, laughing. "They're at the tavern a-soaking their wounds in gov'mint whiskey." I will attempt no more dialect. The railroad man seemed to take the soldier's words for an insult and sulked and spat, wordless from there on. The soldier's cut was not altogether true, anyway, I found out later: four of the "Virginias" had been killed in the fighting before falling back, all upon one another. I felt a deep, harmonious excitement stealing over me, though I did not at the time truly understand the events or what they meant. Who did, Merican or n'African?



DANI MCCLAIN

"GREEDY" IS THE WORD THAT COMES TO MIND. AS THE ANNOUNCEment's meaning sunk in, I got greedy for the 70-degree days in the middle of February and the way sunlight bounces off the leaves of jade green succulents no matter what time of year. How the air—even in the middle of downtown Oakland—smells like flowers (yes, and weed and sometimes urine). The options always presenting themselves: look toward the hills and see yellows and browns and the promise of a place where the wind blows a little less; or look toward the bay and see it glistening like a sheet of light, dotted with sails and bits of sky.

I got greedy for things that likely wouldn't be around much longer anyway.

As I listened to Breslow speak, my mind wandered to the parties at the New Parish and, before that, Oasis, places where old Stevie Wonder jams and Chaka Khan remixes brought back memories of childhood. The Malcolm X Jazz Festival in East Oakland and the Ashby flea market, the same people always turning up at all the same places.

When EO 3735 came down, I got nostalgic for the things around me. It should have made the decision easy, but it didn't. Paloma, on the other hand, knew immediately.

"I'm staying here," she told me just moments after the press conference at which the executive order was announced. Because the situation was so dire, the president had said, everyone would have ninety days to reposition themselves. That was the word she had used: *reposition*.

"They couldn't even put it to a vote?" I said to Paloma, realizing that this would be the only conversation that mattered for the foreseeable future.

"Why? So the people who still believe all that snow proves the climate isn't changing can get on TV? If it had gone through Congress, we'd have to listen to their ignorant rants get equal time with the scientists and the people who won't let their fear override what's in plain sight."

We'd watched the speech together and talked it over from every angle we could think of once the president had answered her final question and walked offstage and away from the press corps.

"I'm glad Breslow just went ahead and said, 'Here's what's up: figure out where you want to be and get there. And quit all this jumping on planes, trains, and automobiles all the time like your presence is so desperately needed at this meeting and that conference and this family reunion and that weekend getaway.'"

Paloma was from Chicago but she knew her home was Oakland. It didn't feel so cut and dry to me.

• • •

I walked home thinking that if the Breslow administration were smart, it would hire Paloma to do a series of PSAs. For the print ads, it could just be her face, serious and resolute, eyes staring straight ahead. The caption in bold, block text would read, "COMMIT." For the online and broadcast versions, it could be her voice saying something like, "When you move"—and the phrase would hang in the air while you watched quick takes from footage of the latest disasters: a shot from the Outer Banks of North Carolina when they still existed, the wind whipping giant waves into the cottages and splintering their stilts to shreds—"you prove"—and now the stampede on the Venetian Causeway during the Miami Beach exodus—"that you don't get it." The now iconic images of people swimming in the streets of New Orleans would fill the screen as Paloma said, her voice heavy with disappointment and judgment, "You still don't get it."

Playing off of people's fear, their memories of the disasters no one even bothered calling "natural" anymore, was key here. The relationships between water and land, between humans and the weather, *had* changed dramatically. And, yes, it was long overdue for a political leader to demand that people stop living in the fantasy of the infinite.

But this change, this new emergency rule that mandated that people lock themselves into a location, was replacing the fantasy of the infinite with the fantasy that immobility would bring safety. The new lie around which people were to orient their lives was the possibility of buffering one's self from the chaos and destruction that had come to define the times.

The first questions at the press conference had, surprisingly, been the right ones:

What happens if people decide not to register their location in the database?

Aren't you creating the conditions for a black market in travel?

Won't the people who need food and shelter sell their mile allotments to people who can afford and want them?

Aren't you making mobility a luxury item?

And then came the expected ones:

Isn't travel expression? Isn't this a violation of the First Amendment?

Will the government take over the airlines, the high-speed trains? Will all transport be socialized?

Breslow had delivered her answers with a calm and diplomacy that made phrases explode in my mind like popcorn kernels in hot oil: "sex for sky miles," "roof-top heliports." I remembered reading about dog collars that sent a shock when the animal got too close to an invisible fence. What would be the logistics of this new boundary? In the absence of knowing, my mind ran wild: women would be selling their bodies to get a flight to a dying parent's bedside. The people who marched around in knee breeches and three-cornered hats screaming about the founders would pull their usual publicity stunts, protesting EO 3735 for all the wrong reasons. But would they resist? Would anyone? Why refuse to register and be shipped off to an up- or out-state federal penitentiary, the fate Breslow had said resisters would meet? By the time I got to my apartment, I'd decided that anyone who went that route was a fool. Why refuse if it meant having someone else choose home for you?

• • •

The next day, the administration announced its title for the mandate: Operation HOMES (Honoring Our Most Enduring Settings).

A secondary goal of this thing was to get people to move away from the coasts, the places the oceans reclaimed for themselves more and more each year. There would be financial incentives for people who chose to leave the Gulf Coast and parts of California and the Eastern seaboard. They would get "sky miles" (the government had jacked the phrase from the airlines) added to their allotments.

Commentators had already found a way to turn this into a political debate, as if various Republican and Democratic perspectives were relevant as people scrambled to make personal decisions. I took a break from following the commentators and the presentations and called my mom back east.

We danced around it for as long as we could, talking instead about what this pundit had said about the policy and what that news report had revealed about how it would be enforced. We touched on the high points from the coverage—the man who had broken down crying as he recounted that his wife had told him in no uncertain terms that she and the kids would be moving to Virginia to be close to her family and that he could do what he liked, the Wisconsinite who stood thigh-deep in snow declaring that she was a seventh-generation Badger and those goddamn Floridians better not flood her pristine state. Well, the news had bleeped out one word, but you could see it forming on her blue lips.

Finally my mother asked the obvious: "What do you think you'll do?"

She had always accepted my wanderlust. More than accepted, she'd financed it at the start and encouraged it once I wanted her blessings more than her money. And though it had meant we hadn't lived in the same state for more than a decade, she had settled into the rhythms: I would be home a week in the summer and a week at Christmas, and Mom would travel west so we could spend time together at Thanksgiving, and another week together in the spring. A month total. One out of twelve. That's what we had together. The new law capped all oil-dependent travel at twenty miles per month. So it would take either one of us ten years of sacrificing all other car or plane trips to save up the miles needed to close the distance between California and Ohio.

I knew she was thinking it, so I went ahead and said it: say I had a child. Say it happened this year. You would be able to meet your

grandchild when she or he was what, nine? And that's if I chose to make my birthplace my first destination. What if I wanted to go someplace else? Take the child to some part of the ocean that was warm and calm enough to swim in? Or to another country, to see how other people lived? When would we see each other again, and how would it feel when we finally did?

People in Washington weren't talking about this new law like it was a temporary measure. When it was discussed, there was never an expiration date attached. It was the new way. It was the new scaffolding for our lives.

"What do you think you'll do?" she asked.

I took a deep breath and fought the urge to hold it. "What would you like me to do?"

She chuckled. "I know better than that, missy. What do you want? Hasn't that always been what I told you to figure out first?"

"Yep. Sure has been." Now silence was heavy in the exchange. "I haven't figured it out yet. Yesterday I told myself I had a week to decide. So that's what I'm taking."

"Did you make your pros and cons lists?"

I laughed, thankful for the constancy of my mother's belief that logic and the length of one list measured against another could solve any problem the world threw at you.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm just starting them," I said, but of course I didn't plan to. I already knew everything that would go into a column making a case for staying in Oakland. The list would confirm my fears that I was an individualist to the bone, that I had turned into someone who placed personal comfort and loose camaraderie above the bonds of blood and going—instinctively, without the need to think it through—where family needs you and you know you need them.

If I couldn't be safe—and I couldn't, no one could—I should face the chaos shoulder to shoulder with the people whose love and care I'd been able to count on for decades, right? And I should pick the place where those people were concentrated, yes? The answers should have been obvious, and I'd always thought that when push came to shove, I'd know what to do. But they weren't and I didn't.

Some people were angry drunks or got sloppy and far too certain of their own wit or brilliance after too many glasses of wine. Paloma got spiritual. Or rather, a little liquor made her willing to talk about ideas she usually kept close to the vest, ideas that could easily be used against her by anyone looking to paint a picture of the Bay Area as home to a set of loopy, half-serious seekers who stayed high on positive thinking and law of attraction bromides.

We were at Tony's apartment, and I washed the dinner dishes and listened. The first sign was that Paloma had used the word "transformative" at least three times in a handful of sentences as she spoke to the group that had gathered to pretend their lives weren't about to radically change. Similar indicators followed. Paloma, who had been my bestie for more than a decade, first referenced "the universe" as the source of her strength in the midst of EO 3735 talk, then thanked "the most high" for keeping her grounded.

A petite, intense woman named Robin spoke. "You need to be thanking President Breslow. She's about to keep you grounded for real."

I smiled and looked away from the sink and toward the table where my friends sat.

"Go ahead, laugh," Paloma said, her face relaxed as she set down her wine glass. "Y'all know about that river flowing fast these days. It's so great and swift that some will be afraid. They will try to hold onto the shore. They'll feel like they are being torn apart, and they will suffer greatly." The lilt dropped from her voice as she said with a wink, "That's not you, is it Rob? 'Cause I don't want to be the one that has to come pry your hands off that shore, girl. I really don't."

Robin raised her eyebrows and shook her head slowly. "Nope. That's not me. I know the river has its destination. Now go ahead. Finish preaching, Reverend Doctor."

Tony jumped in instead, continuing the lines. "But we all know we must let go of the shore, push off toward the middle of the river, keep our eyes open, and our heads above the water."

I sat down at the table, drying my hands on the front of my jeans. "See who is there with us and celebrate," Tony added.

It was just something that had gotten shared around. A message attributed to the old holders of an even older wisdom in a place none

of us had ever been, somewhere in Arizona with a vowel-heavy name where Native people had decided to advise anyone who'd listen on how to live. It was very likely the Internet ramblings of some Berkeley hippie who honestly believed "Hopi elders" had asked him to communicate on their behalf. But Paloma had been taken by its pointed questions—"Where are you living? What are you doing? What are your relationships? Where is your water?"—the message's urgency and the way it seemed to point a path toward accepting and making sense of a nonsensical and ever-changing world. She had painted some of the words in black block letters on a huge canvas and decorated the remaining space with images of pregnant women, gardens in bloom, children dancing, and a pack of wolves howling together at the moon. When Paloma had mounted it on a wall in her living room, we all praised her artistry, but I admit I rolled my eyes a bit at the Earth Mama archetypes.

That night in Tony's kitchen, I realized the message had lodged itself in our minds, finding a place to settle amidst the cynicism, fear, and doubt.

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Later that night, I dreamed that the sky was red and the air smelled like burnt oranges—tangy and smoky in a way that made my mouth water and my eyes tear up. I knew I was on a long and likely futile walk eastward, with no maps or sense of direction other than the knowledge that I was walking away from the ocean and toward a place called Nevada, followed by a stretch called Utah, followed by an obstacle course called Colorado, followed by an expanse called Nebraska and on and on. I walked toward the hills and eventually through the Caldecott Tunnel, and after that I knew nothing other than that I was passing the towns where men had tested open carry laws in Starbucks, so bold in their love for the Second Amendment that they brandished their guns like shiny new toys. I looked up at the sky and knew that it was always some shade of red or orange now, everywhere. I knew that to the west, in the direction I had come from, redwoods were dying, toppling over on each other with loud, disastrous sounds like a chorus of whips cracking at once. And to the east, in the direction I

was headed, great lakes were drying into exaggerated puddles. I stood still and felt a cold prickling move like a wave through my body. I knew that feeling. It was my body accepting some hard truth before my mind was ready to. The sensation was there as I woke up, and with it a clear string of words echoing in my head: "not a place to live, but a way of living."

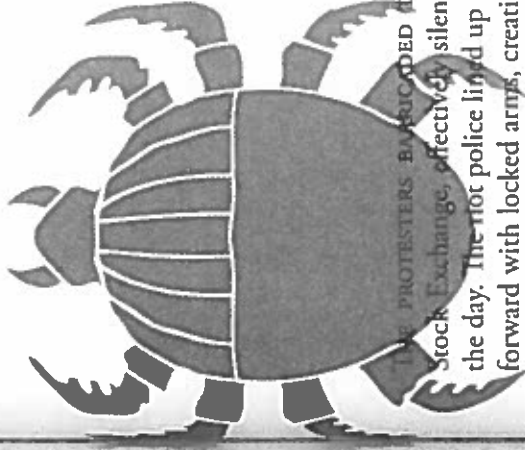
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My body traveled its normal paths the next day, but my attention was elsewhere. In the shower I wondered who I could trust. Paloma? My cousin whose libertarian leanings sometimes brought us to the same conclusions? Were there others whose minds had already landed here (there had to be), and, if so, how would I find them? How would we find each other, and what would we do once we did? Walking the blocks to the BART station I considered what I might need and how I could possibly prepare. I had my *idée fixe*—that phrase stuck in my head and pulled me forward. Toward what and how, I had no idea.

Without warning, my thoughts ran full speed into a wall of fear that left me paralyzed, nervous about having peeked through this door that was opening. Some part of my consciousness, deputized by the Breslow administration, kicked the door shut, admonished me for even thinking that path was a possibility. I muttered a silent apology to the watcher within and shrank back from the risk, the threat of punishment. And that's how I remained until I found myself that afternoon ostensibly typing an email to my boss but unconsciously straining to remember all I could about Fred Korematsu. Assata Shakur. Others who had hidden, escaped, run, resisted.

By the time I was home again that evening, I was clear. Sure, the law was right to urge people to think about where the land could actually sustain them. But geography was not destiny. Nowhere was safe and nothing was infinite, and to impose a law predicated on an outdated belief in stability was immoral. I would not obey an immoral law. Instead, I decided to let go of the shore, the nostalgia, the need for certainty. I thought of Tony, Robin, and the others, my family in Ohio, people I knew all over the country. Who among

them would refuse to register and what would they do once they did? When I pushed off toward the middle of the river—if I could keep my eyes open and my head above the water—who would I see there in the torrent?



KAFKA'S LAST LAUGH

VAGABOND

THE PROTESTERS BARRICADED THE ENTRANCE TO THE NEW YORK Stock Exchange, effectively silencing the opening bell of trading for the day. The riot police lined up in formation. The protesters stepped forward with locked arms, creating a front line of defense. More riot police marched in from the north on New Street with shields and batons. The protesters stood their ground, shouting their demands. Some of them shouted because the lack of a voice had been building in them, some because their patience had finally run out, some simply because they found that the sound from their throats converted fear into courage.

A white-shirted cop with a captain's hat barked orders through a megaphone in an attempt to disperse the crowd. "According to PATRIOT Act IV this action is not in compliance with the Representational Grievance Clause 7 Section 1, which states that it is illegal to have more than 123 protesters at any protest. It is also not in compliance with Representational Grievance Clause 8 Section 1, which states that all protests must have gathering permits from the state to take place. This action is also in violation of Representational Grievance Clause 9 Section 1, which states that all protest must take place within predetermined free speech assembly zones."

The protesters snarled and booed and threw empty water bottles at the captain and his bullhorn. In the thick of them, Resister Fernandez, a young Puerto Rican woman dressed in black, pushed her way to the front line, then scanned the area, looking for possible escape routes, but there was no way out. The police had them boxed in from the east on Nassau Street and the west on Broadway, and now cops

advanced from the south on New Street. The irony of having one's back up against Wall Street was not lost on her.

A heady cocktail of memory, pride, adrenaline, and conviction gave her a surge of courage when she realized that she had been a part of the last rebellion where protesters broke out of the "free speech assembly zones," two years earlier. It had been after the election of Jenna Bush in Dallas, the G16 protests of 2022. She had spent years searching—in meetings and collective houses, at radical bookstores and anarchist community spaces, in the streets at demonstrations—for a way to find the system's fatal flaw and exploit it. Resister wasn't sure that she was going to find it protesting here on Wall Street, the very epicenter of the capitalist technocracy, but she was frustrated and it felt good to be out in the street again going toe to toe.

The energy broke like a brick through a window. On the front line between protesters and police, Resister threw her shoulder into a police shield as she tried to get a better foothold. She managed to get a good stance, and she lunged forward. The cop lost his footing. She immediately pushed into his shield again. This time the cop went over on his ass, and she came down on top of him, the shield wedged between them.

Another cop wielding a baton yanked her off the shield and dragged her into more open ground. Two protesters broke out of the mass of bodies and snatched her left arm. For a moment, she felt like a rag doll being fought over by siblings. One protester let her go and reached around to shove the cop in the chest. When he toppled, Resister was able to break free, but she tripped on a protester who was sprawled on the ground. She scrambled to get up, but now the cop was on her. She looked up just in time to see his club rushing toward her face. Excruciating pain exploded behind her eyes, and everything went white and numb.

• • •

Unconsciousness was ripped away from her as cold water flooded down her throat. She gagged and choked, struggling for air. It was a hell of a way to wake up. Her interrogators had a talent for stopping just before you felt like your lungs were going to burst. They gave her a few minutes to compose herself, then pulled her hair back, and the

water came rushing in again. When they weren't pouring cold water into her mouth and nose, the exhaustion of fighting to breathe settled into her muscles, and her body went limp.

In her mind, she had it all figured out. Instead of using the adrenaline kick to breathe, she would use it to break her bonds and then bash their brains in. But her body would not cooperate with her thoughts. It was locked in an instinctual survival mode. The adrenaline only came with the water.

Resister's chin rested on her collarbone as she spit up water. She watched a shadow on the floor, without the strength to brace herself for the right hook heading for her jaw. She knew it would bring momentary oblivion, and at this point she welcomed that.

• • •

When she woke again she was in a hospital bed. Her head was bandaged, as were her ribs.

A man sat by the bed. When he saw that she was awake, he leaned in. She could smell the breath mint he had in his mouth, noticed his hair was thinning. He was probably in his early forties but his haggard face made him seem older. He looked like someone trying to juggle chainsaws.

"Good. You're awake. I'm your court-appointed public defender. I have a meeting in fifteen minutes, so I'll have to go through this quickly. If you have any questions please save them till the end."

He paused. Seeing that she had enough intelligence to remain silent, he nodded and continued. "You've been in the hospital for three days. Your trial would have been tomorrow but I took the plea deal they offered. I couldn't speak with you about it; the doctors said it was best for you to be sedated for a few days."

The lawyer glanced down at his watch. Resister could see the clock counting down in his eyes.

"I tried to move the trial to a date when you could be present, but the judge felt pressure, both politically and from the media, to wrap up as many of these Wall Street Riot trials as soon as he could.

"You were charged with 680 counts of seditious conspiracy to overthrow legitimate business interests; terrorism; and assault of six

police officers. I pleaded you down to a mandatory three-year sentence for aggravated organized protest."

Resister involuntarily sucked in a deep breath of air as the lawyer continued.

"Seeing as you were charged with 680 counts of seditious conspiracy to overthrow legitimate business interests and no one who has ever been charged with even just one has ever beat it, I took what they were offering." Defensiveness tinged the lawyer's tone.

She sat up, her head buzzing. She wanted to ask him something, but her mind was so sluggish she didn't know what it was.

She heard a thin electronic beeping. The lawyer hit a button on his watch and got up. "And that's time. I guess I didn't have time for questions. It's all here in the file. If you still have questions, I'll be back in a week. You can try and call this number," he said, handing her a business card, "though because of your charges, PATRIOT Act VII only allows a monitored phone call every two weeks. That's based on charges, not convictions. Take care and stay out of trouble."

She flipped throughout the trial transcript, read the charges written in Orwellian doublespeak. Everything felt surreal. She wondered if she was stuck in a nightmare. Her head throbbed and her vision blurred.

When she got to the report of the Wall Street protest, which was at least four times as long as the trial transcript, a strange feeling came over her. She wasn't sure what it was. It began deep within her bowels and rolled up into her throat. It began in short spasms just above her groin and moved up her diaphragm, into her chest, then rolled into her shoulders. It bubbled up into her throat uncontrollably, and finally it spilled from her lips as she erupted into laughter. She couldn't stop laughing, and she didn't want to. Lying in a hospital bed, looking at a mandatory three-year sentence after surviving a near death experience, she felt a freedom she had never even dared to imagine. The three other patients stared at her curiously, searching for a clue as to the source of her mirth. The laughter moved across the room, spreading like an airborne contagion. They too began to laugh.

Two nurses stuck their head into the room and were taken aback by the scene: four patients, bandaged and wrapped in flimsy hospital gowns, all laughing uncontrollably. The nurses looked around, searching for the catalyst, but they couldn't find any. After a few

moments standing in curious wonder, they began to smile—and then to laugh.

Resister threw her legal papers in the air, chortling as she watched gravity do its thing. A doctor entered the room, surveying the scene. He quickly called for orderlies, then grabbed a syringe filled with a sedative. He seemed to instinctively know that the virus began with Resister and commanded the orderlies to hold her down. For some reason, the doctor and the orderlies seemed immune to the laughter, as if they had been inoculated against it.

The orderlies grabbed her, and now, like a switch had been flipped, she was in a rage, flailing, screaming obscenities. They struggled to hold her. As quickly as the laughter and joy had come, it was drained from the room.

The doctor injected her and a few moments later her consciousness slipped away like the laughter.

• • •

Resister sat across from an intake officer on her first day at Sunny Day Prison, Incorporated.

"My name is Ms. Selas," the officer said coldly, overemphasizing the "Ms." "After a rigid and thorough psychological evaluation, you've been selected to be a part of a special program known as Corrective Retail Operation Confinement—CROC. You may have heard of this program being referred to as Prison Malls. It's a new initiative in prison reform partially funded by some of the largest retailers in the world—Walmart, Target, Bloomingdale's, Dillard's, Macy's, The Gap, Banana Republic, Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle—in partnership with psychologists, neuro-market researchers, criminologists, and penologists. The goal is to explore the link between prisoners and free-market capitalism."

Ms. Selas's contempt for Resister was almost like a third party in the room. "A recent study found prisoners such as yourself have no respect for capitalism, and that is the source of your criminal behavior. The best way to rehabilitate you and others like you is to develop a healthy respect for capitalism. In doing so, you'll channel all your desires and energies through capitalism. If you can learn to place the

proper value on your desires through capitalism and use it as a moral compass, you could be cured of your criminal tendencies.”

Not being one to let an opportunity to question authority pass her by, Resister asked, “What if I don’t want to participate in CROC? What if I just want to do straight time?”

“Your attorney didn’t tell you?” Ms. Selas tried to hide her smugness but failed.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, that’s right, you weren’t at your own trial. CROC is a part of your plea deal.” Ms. Selas didn’t even try to hide the self-satisfaction that comes with working on behalf of authoritarianism. “It’s three years of CROC or eight years straight time—co-ed of course.”

Resister sat in stunned silence.

Ms. Selas continued. “You’ll be paid a prison wage.”

“And what is that?”

“Fifty percent reduction of one-tenth of the federally set minimum wage, minus 360 percent of taxes paid by the median household.”

Resister’s head was spinning. “What does that actually mean?”

Ms. Selas pulled out a calculator, even though she knew the answer very well. “That averages 0.7 cents an hour.”

“What? Is that legal?”

“Of course. We have to offset the cost of extra security measures.”

“So no one has protested this?” Resister asked.

“Oh, there was a short-lived backlash by those who were employed by these retailers,” Ms. Selas said dismissively, “but since they were not unionized and lacked organizational skills, that resistance was drowned out rather quickly by retailers promising cheaper prices with the new ‘prison hire’ initiative.”

“Wait. You said I was psychologically evaluated and found to be a candidate for CROC? When did that happen?”

“During your trial.”

“But I wasn’t there.”

“You didn’t need to be. You were protesting against capitalism on Wall Street. It’s obvious you’re a perfect candidate for CROC.”

“But it was also a part of my lawyer’s plea deal? Which one was it?”

“Both.”

Resister wanted to argue but didn’t know where to begin. She was

lost, and the irony of it all sent her further down the rabbit hole.

Ms. Selas pushed a button on her desk, and two correction officers came in. One of them grabbed Resister’s arms. Resister was caught completely off guard when the other seized her jaw and held her head up.

Ms. Selas barely looked up from her tablet. “These officers are here to administer your daily dose of Contentina.”

They squirted a tingling aerosol blast into her nose.

“You think you could have warned me?” Resister yelled.

Ms. Selas ignored the question. “Contentina is a nano drug used to monitor and transmit information such as body temperature, eye dilation, adrenaline, oxygen intake, and heart rate. It works by attaching itself to the nervous system. It allows inmates to be tracked through GPS by Prison Mall security monitors with applications that run on mobile devices. I’m mandated by the Prisoners Rights Act of 2017 to inform you that Contentina will also transmit corrective electroshock signals to the nervous system if it’s deemed that your behavior is working against your rehabilitation.”

Ms. Selas’s tone was mechanical and routine. Clearly she had given this speech many times before. She was completely oblivious to the horror written on Resister’s face.

“It’s been designed and set to your height, weight, BMI, and blood type. You’re being assigned to serve out your work sentence at Galleria Prison Mall, at the Nordstrom perfume counter.”

Resister felt herself begin to float out of her own body. Was she a character in Kafka novel? A Terry Gilliam film? Could this really be her life? Ms. Selas prattled on, as Resister pulled so far back out of the situation that she felt she was watching herself in a movie. What did her comrade Beaumont call moments like this? Dialectic displacement. She had never really understood before what that was. But there was definitely a sense of dialectic displacement as she felt everything from some far-off place.

“I don’t like perfume” was all Resister could think to say.

“You’ll get used to it.”

• • •

During Resister's first week of working at the perfume counter, she complained to Prison Retail Management, requesting reassignment. The chief neuro-marketer officer at the Galleria felt that it would help in her capitalist rehabilitation for her to overcome her nausea at the smell of perfume. Resister had never been around so much perfume for so long, and it irritated her to no end, which was reflected in her customer service. Her exasperated attitude with customers led to a lot of coercive electroshock jolts to her nervous system. She felt a constant queasy uneasiness in her stomach, but she didn't know if it was from the perfume or the electroshock. She went to see the prison doctor, who conferred with the chief neuro-marketer. They concurred that what she was feeling was a physical side affect of her social rehabilitation.

Resister finally managed to find out how to make a formal complaint and filled out the paperwork, in quadruplicate, against the warden of the mall, asking officially for transfer to a different position. When she turned in the paperwork, she was told that it would be two weeks before her complaint would be heard.

Due to her continuous nausea, she had a complete lack of appetite. The upside of this was all the friendships she'd made by sharing her meager rations in the food court with the other retail prisoners.

"You know, there's a really simple solution to your problem," said Slinky as he grabbed her synthetic milk substitute and took a swig. Slinky had been arrested for making guerrilla political videos in the park without the proper permits. He'd already done more than two years.

"What's that?" she replied.

"Stop fighting it."

Resister just stared at him.

"Look," Slinky said, his words flavored with his father's Jamaican accent. "Just give in to the nausea. Allow it to affect you fully. You'll be reassigned in no time, I guarantee it."

The next day, Resister took Slinky's advice. She let the nausea take over and vomited three times before noon. She thought of those as practice runs; she was learning to gauge how long it took. The next time she made sure to vomit on a customer.

The perfume counter manager sent her back to the prison doctor immediately, and the prison doctor sent her back to her prison dorm

cell. The perfume counter manager then complained to Prison Retail Management, and the next day Resister was selling shoes.

Three weeks later, the judgment on her request for reassignment came in. She and the other retail prisoners on her shift were unwinding in the common area, like they did every night before lights out. One of the guards handed a sheet of paper to her as he walked by. At first, Resister was confused—she wasn't even sure what it was. As she read, she realized it was a denial for the request to be transferred she had put in five weeks ago, that was supposed to have been answered three weeks ago. It informed her that she had to stay in the perfume department and that there would be no possibility of reassignment for at least another year.

She looked down at the work nametag she had taken off a few minutes before, which, in addition her name, read "Shoe Department."

Suddenly Resister began to laugh. Realizing that she found absolute and absurd elation in the incompetence of the system, which gave her hope that there was a way out of all this, she laughed and laughed uncontrollably. The other prisoners asked her what was so funny, but she couldn't answer. The laughter made her knees weak and she fell to the floor. The other prisoners looked down at her, and smiles broke out on their faces—and then they too began laughing. A virus of joy spread across the common area of the prison dorm. Resister held up the mall warden's denial. One of the prisoners took it and read it out loud. Well, he started to, but one by one laughter took each of them until finally the prisoner reading collapsed mid-sentence, gufawing.

Through tears of laughter, Resister looked around and saw the others laughing, and she realized she'd found a way out. Laughter liberated them from the search for logic within the illogical. It validated for them what they had known all along—that the system was a joke. They laughed because the key to their freedom was always within them. The absurd simplicity of it all was just too much for them to contain, even if they didn't fully grasp it at the moment.

Prison dorm cell security forces were perplexed at the riot of laughter that had prisoners wriggling on the floor. They called in the prison doctor, a nano security biology officer, and the chief neuro-marketer. The nano security biology officer activated a fail-safe riot program

in the Contentina, but it seemed to have no effect. Endorphins produced by the laughter blocked Contentina's effect.

None of the prison staff knew what to do at that point. This only served as more fodder for the prisoners' howling. Out of sheer desperation, the guards dragged them one by one back to their cells. All the while the convicts laughed at the guards.

The warden called an emergency meeting of Prison Mall officials. There was a flaw in Contentina. Something needed to be done. If it got out that endorphins from laughter blocked the electroshock of Contentina, they would lose control of the prisoners.

An hour later, Resister sat on the cell floor, her back against the wall, still chuckling quietly to herself. She was already planning how to grow this resistance of hilarity beyond their cellblock, how to not only break herself out but as many of the other prisoners as she could. Then it struck her. She had removed herself from thought processes that kept her from imagining turning the world upside down. The more she thought about how warped and surreal the world had become, the more she found an absurd humor in its flaws.

Then the most dangerous thought rushed out of the depths of her subconscious: as long as you could find a way to laugh at the madness, they couldn't reach you. And if they couldn't reach you, then they couldn't beat you. This laughter at the absurdity of it all brought the mad reckless optimism every revolution needs. This wasn't just a threat to the prison. It was a threat to everything. Laughter was the means by which everything could change.



FUCK MY SNOOZE ALARM. FUCK SCHOOL. FUCK THE GUY DATING Delia Darlington. And fuck my life.

That's pretty much what I think every morning I wake up these days. You guessed it. I'm a jaded teenage manchild with a chip on my shoulder. The name's Sasha Sangare. That's the kind of name you end up with when you got a Russian mom and a Malian dad.

Who's Delia? We'll get to her later. It's a long story. You don't want to make me late for class, do you?

I'm a sophomore at the Institute, in case you didn't know. From the name you'd think it was a shining citadel on a hill. It's actually inside a terraformed dome on the desolate moon of Phobos orbiting Mars, nestled inside the Stickney Crater, spinning round and round above yet another planet for humanity to run into the ground.

The Institute was built by the AFIP (Armed Forces of the Inner Planets), which makes us all tools for the military, even though students don't classify as enlisted. I shouldn't complain, though. There are still kids starving, or forced to be slaves and soldiers, or who at least never got the chance to test into exclusive Martian high schools for kids too smart for their own good.

That's my excuse for being at the bottom of my class, by the way. My parents didn't like it either.

If it wasn't time for my nanomechanics class, I'd give you the campus tour. Just don't let the bright, sunny day fool you. It's a holographic sky projected on the inside of the dome. The cumulous clouds glitch every once in a while.

Anyway, Prof. Tsai is giving summations of final projects today.