



Split

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Abstract

The beginning of the 21st century comes off as familiar, the remake of a violent and divisive time in our history. Like we are all on a slippery, rapidly accelerating slide into increasing civil strife, neighbor against neighbor. Political, economic, and racial differences feel like they create extreme world views which cannot coexist, especially in the United States. As a Black man, the world feels increasingly anti-Black. How can we make alliances, build coalitions, or create unity, if we do not trust each other's intentions? For those of us who are believers in people, we have faith in a brighter day. I have utilized speculative fiction short stories to explore these issues. What if things got worse before they got better? What if the United States split apart, how would we rebuild and reorganize society? Speculative fiction can suggest some practices and visions of a possible future? My stories navigate a dystopian world, where characters reach toward a utopian reality. Speculative fiction can serve as practice, a trial to examine issues of division, alliance, and coalition, given the current, divisive historical moment. We have all had the conversation a thousand times: what is to be done with this world we live in? We can be better informed by utilizing the fictional exploration of real-world social challenges. This piece will serve as part of the unfinished conversation with my father, my friends, and those whom I would call allies.

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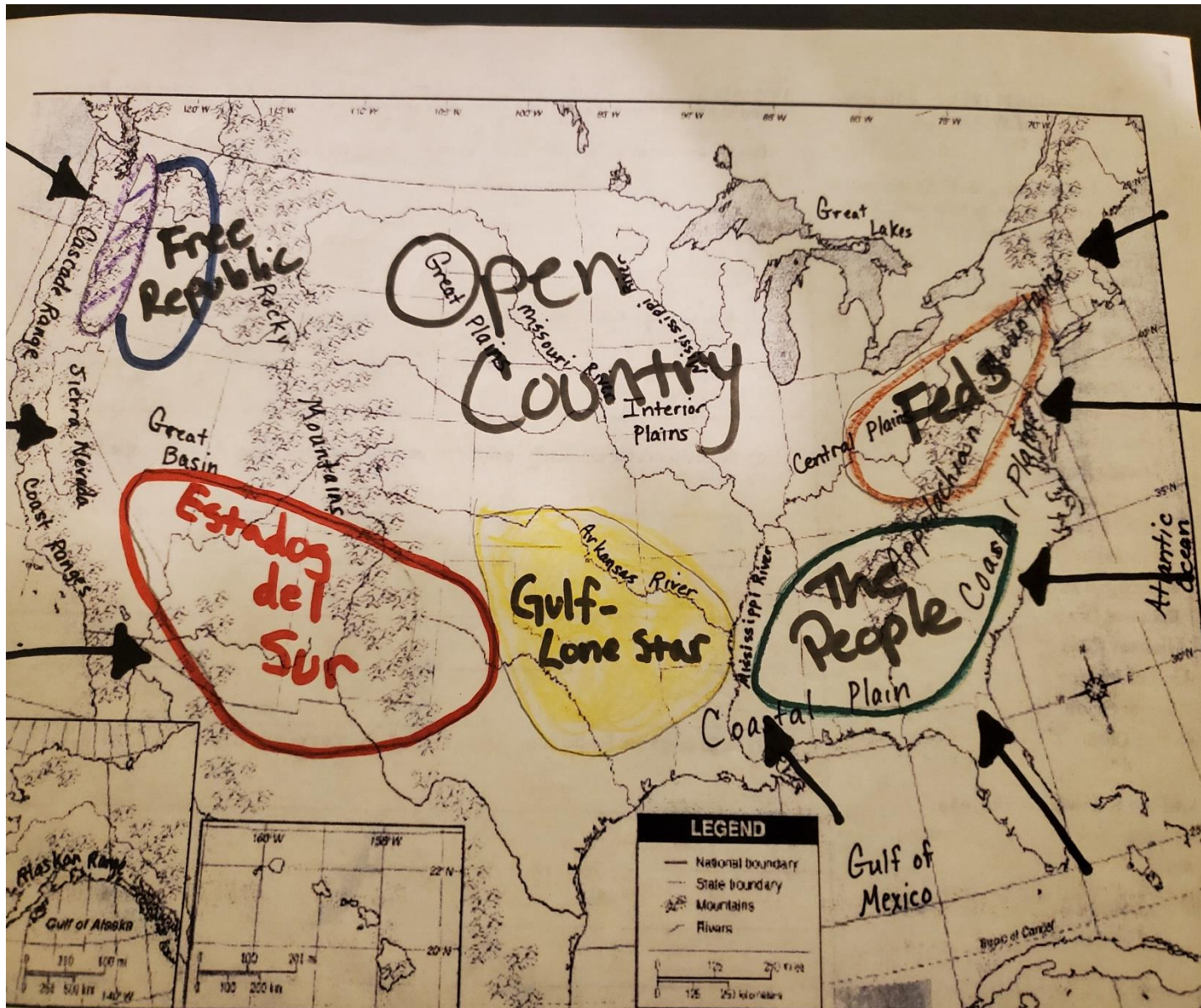
Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement pages are like trying to count the stars in the night sky. There is no way that I can do proper justice here to all the People who have gotten me to this point in life. We are all children of Mother Earth, the Universe, Jah, God, and so all thanks to the origin. My parents are activists and organizers beginning with the Civil Rights Movement and into the 21st century, and they are committed to the Struggle for justice for the People, no matter the setting or context. My amazingly powerful mother, Bonnie, who never stopped pushing and supporting, you are the energizer bunny in my life. To my father, Woodrow, gone home these past 4 years, I cannot begin to count the lessons that you continue to teach me and us. My son and daughter fill me with pride, love, and purpose. Purpose, the most important motivator a person can have, outside of love. I eagerly look forward to their continued growth. My imperfect family accepts me and all my imperfections. My dear love Tamika has held me down for the past decade, amid the worst pain I have ever felt. Beautifully strong, humble, and committed to serve as I am. Can't wait to be your husband. You allowed me the late nights to complete this first project. The Colemans in Cali & Texas give me reflection, context, and history. I draw strength and pride from roots in the what my Pop called "the Old Country". The Zovod/Cohen/Boylan tribes continue to treat me with love and give me excuses to travel. Both sides of my family have contributed equally to my humor and values. My Brothers, the homies, your importance in my life cannot be measured. We have been through so much together, struggled, won, and lost. Rest in Power Tommy, Peanut, Brod, & Big Rose, never forgotten. I

know y'all are chopping it up with my Pops, Uncle Van, & Uncle Jr. To my BOOST family, thank you for embracing me and each other and building the vision. Alexandra, Tony, Amber, Solita, Iris, Maureen, Del, Teresa, even David. All the Coaches, JCs, and students I have worked with for over 30 years on both coasts, thank you for your support and your trust. To all the Black, indigenous, immigrant, disaffected, oppressed people all around the world: we are the melaninated majority.

Introduction

The Split is a set of three short speculative fiction stories and a companion. The stories are set in a fictional United States where things have fallen apart. The US is divided into various groups or enclaves (see map), each with their own politics, culture, and goals. This is a world where the environment is so broken from human-made climate change that the soil is irradiated, the sky is inaccessible, and humans are largely nocturnal. Disease, starvation, and violence are realities for those trying to survive and rebuild. This will be a somewhat confusing world to be immersed into, but there will also be moments that you know. History repeats itself and so do we human beings. Each community must decide how it will grow, how it will deal with internal tension, and external threats. I'm using this fiction to explore relevant themes and as a way of safely having some dangerous conversations with people that I respect. Sometimes it is easier to discuss or debate difficult topics, using a fictional stand-in. My friends and I actively socialize and represent our worldviews, *safely*, by comparing reactions to movies, books, and (fixed) sporting events. I hope this sparks conversation and reasoning between us.



COMPANION

Hello dear reader! Thank you for spending time reading these short works of fiction. Time is a precious commodity, it is the one nonrenewable resource that we all have in finite supply. I am especially appreciative of your time, given the high-speed commodification and consumption of the 21st century. These days we want to be able to order it remotely and have it delivered instantly. Think of the absurdity of being *impatient* for a next day delivery, a sack of instant food at the next window, or the next binged episode to drop. I also thank you for your time and consideration in *reading* this work of fiction. Some of the most brilliant people I know, PhDs and geniuses (as defined in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*), boast proudly that they'll never own another paper book, never read fiction, or even just never read. I am hoping to leverage our relationship to slip in this exception.

I welcome you and (hopefully) them to this world of which I have barely drafted a sliver. My goal was to craft a world that was a stark possibility, an exaggerated possibility. I want to enter into a conversation with you, my family, my loved ones, those that I respect, those that are my closest homies, and those that are potential allies. I want this to be a jumping off point for some new and, in many cases, continuing conversations. We, you and I, and others have had those conversations. We have them in class while we are trying to learn, we have them while journeying to work, and we have them as we are trying to navigate this world and survive.

The question is never, "Is there a problem? Is there something wrong?" Even the most fervent American nationalist must acknowledge that things aren't right in this world, with our

nation as top dawg. The topic of those critically important conversations concern *what* is to be done about the state of the world. It is at this point that we, folks on the progressive side of most things, split with our neighbors. There exists an obvious chasm between political poles in this country and world. While it sometimes seems there has never been a greater division, as a student of history, I have to take a deep breath and remind us all of calmer moments in US history like slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Covid pandemic. All of these moments revealed deep fissures on “our” side of this imaginary political spectrum.

Frederick Douglass (my namesake) had to pressure Lincoln and the abolitionists to include freedom for all Black people as part of the goals for the Civil War¹, and there was disagreement as to whether we were ending the slave trade or slavery altogether. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. pushed back against fellow clergy trying to tell him to slow down in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, he in turn is seen as a moderate and accused of being a compromiser, by those of us in the camp of Macolm X. Not only did the pandemic reveal the deep racial disparities in healthcare, but it caused the death of our dear friend Roosevelt Long, and raised the deadly specter of American healthcare’s broken relationship with Black people.²

This work is not aimed at January 6th insurrectionists or Trump supporters, but rather to *this* half of the population. I am reaching out to *you* to discuss what *we* are going to do about

¹ Zinn, Howard pgs 184-185, 2003

² Hoffman, K., Trawalter, S., Axt, J., and M. Oliver. (2016). Found that a large number of medical students believe that Blacks have thicker skin, lower pain tolerance, higher fertility rates, and different sensory abilities than those of whites.

it. So, hopefully you will be intrigued by this created world. I tried to apply just the right amount of corniness, satire, and heavy handed opinion. Hopefully, when you experience this work, you will agree to the *possibilities*, the exaggerations of where we are here and now.

Speculative Fiction is similar to science fiction in that it departs from pure realism and can involve supernatural or futuristic elements. For me the distinction between the two forms of fiction is that speculative fiction is written with a stronger socio-political focus. In my mind, speculative fiction writers are more likely to be closet sociologists, political scientists, and/or historians. If you have had just one conversation with me, then you know that this is true about me. My speculative fiction all-stars include Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, Samuel R. Delaney, and Walter Mosley.

The barest glimpse of a world that I have created, the world of the Split, is influenced by the authors above and nonfiction authors as well. Many of the nonfiction authors that I was abruptly introduced to, were deeply affirming of a sense that I had internally, a suspicion, that the *world* hates Black people and sees us as subhuman.³ Not just in the slave days and the antebellum South. Not just colonial Belgium, modern France or the Nazis, but everybody, the whole modern world.⁴ This reality of an anti-Black world is one that most Black people have to navigate every day. The implicit violence in this anti-Black world is frequently, casually scoffed

³ Wilderson, Frank. 2021

⁴ Esscher, Annika, et al.(2014)

at, rationalized away, and minimized by liberals who are our purported allies.⁵ Anecdotally, we all see it, every day. We step over humanity to politely purchase our highly personalized \$6 latte. We ignore disparities in sentencing and the US prison population, poverty, and health outcomes.

Several courses at Duke have helped prepare me for this project.

Health in the African Diaspora, a health class I took here at Duke, a predominantly white institution(PWI), dripping in wealth, whose roots are in chattel slavery, confirmed my suspicion about the global nature of anti-Blackness. That class, led by the brilliant Dr. Charmaine Royal, was categorized simultaneously as African-African American Studies 660, Global Health 672, and Cultural Anthropology 660. My classmates were divided almost equally between young, predominantly political science/sociology students and aspiring and current healthcare professionals. I so appreciated the global nature of *Health in the African Diaspora*. Our professor, my classmates, and the authors we read were all international. I discovered that my perspective was considerably more domestic than I'd believed. While I always considered myself an international radical and Pan-Africanist, I was, and am still way too wrapped up in my Americanness. This course both challenged my worldview and reaffirmed my worldview. What it reaffirmed explicitly was that no matter where one travels in this big world, the darker your

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/05/politics/sanders/index.html>

skin the worse your health outcomes,⁶ the higher your family's infant mortality,⁷ and the shorter your loved ones' lifespan.⁸ These are statistical guarantees within the colonized space and even worsen within the colonizer's territory.⁹ I remember that Dr. Royal's first question, in that first class was, "What is the African Diaspora?" My response was, "Wherever there are Black folks." But of course this was my particular view on race and Blackness, based on my journey of identity. I was reminded about the interconnectedness of us all, internationally, that the same systems that seek to oppress me in Durham, Long Beach, or the Bay, are on the same violent mission against my Sisters and Brothers in Mali, Gaza, and Jamaica.

My assumptions around issues of identity, alliance, and race were again challenged in *Race, Adoption, and Foster Care* with Dean Rachael Murphey. I don't doubt that the world will continue to be racially and ethnically mixed, and even in my lifetime identity has become infinitely more fluid, and is constantly being redefined.

On a personal level, as a person who is Black and Jewish, issues of identity, racial alliance, and unity have always loomed large. What is the goal of a Madonna or a Sandra Bullock transracially/transnationally adopting? Is this the move of an ally? Why does it feel icky? Are they throwing one seastar back into the ocean to manage white guilt? Why did my

⁶ Esscher, Annika, et al. 2014

⁷ Nelson, D. B., Moniz, M. H., & Davis, M. M. (2018)

⁸ Oliveira, Ricardo Augusto Rabelo. 2020

⁹ Nazroo, James, et al. 2007

white mother, and the dozen or so I know, and many more in the '60's & '70's choose to have a mixed child? Is there a connection between the two phenomena?

I remember my Black father, a longtime Civil Rights activist, calling everyone, regardless of color, "Brother". My own Blackness in question, I wanted Black exclusivity. I still want to protect and sustain Blackness, but I also call a lot of people "Sister" and "Brother", it is now more about where they figure in the struggle for human rights. The one drop rule, the paper bag test, and light skin privilege still haunt us. But Black contains all colors and we are all shades and come from every corner of the earth. My son said to me, "If you go back far enough, everyone is Black". One cannot extract, contain, or deny one's complex identity for long, and attempts to smother or neglect one's identity can have traumatic and violent effects.¹⁰

Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's class, *The Social Analysis of Racism in Post-Civil Rights America*, challenged me to make sure that I could provide research to support my opinions. The material in Dr. Bonilla-Silva's class confirmed that neither the most modern technology,¹¹ nor the older idea of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps,¹² nor the resurgence of the older conservative concept, now a liberal-minded colorblind belief, that it is all about "economics"

¹⁰ Alexie, Sherman. 2013.

¹¹ Roberts, Dorothy E. 2011.

¹² Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton. 1993

not race,¹³ would free Blacks, Indigenous communities, and immigrant communities from the centuries-old conditions that we suffer under. Despite my efforts as an activist, educator, and father, my children and their children will likely struggle against anti-Blackness. Dr. Bonilla-Silva, much like my amazing undergrad professor, Professor. David Anthony at UC Santa Cruz, encouraged a kind of professional sarcasm.

I have also been blessed to be introduced to authors that hinted at the possibility of a world that is not inherently anti-Black. Powerful Sisters and Brothers like Denise Ferreira Da Silva, Kevin Quashie, Audra Simpson, and Sylvia Wynter allowed me to imagine that which no person on earth has ever seen, a world that is not anti-Black. I've described the search for the pro-Black world in class as akin to being in a pitch black room, blindfolded and trying to make your way out. We've never seen it! Moreover, it is so beyond our current historical reality, that even imagining it is revolutionary. I was introduced to these forward thinkers in Dr. Joseph Winters' class *Blackness, Social Death, and the Volatile Sacred*. I honestly didn't even understand the title of the class! The concepts and language being tossed around casually made me feel that I was way out of my depth. Even though I believe, and teach, that intelligence takes many forms, and that academic prowess is just one kind of smart, I was intimidated by the concepts and jargon on that first day of class. But I understood WEB DuBois and Octavia Butler, and I began to understand that we were all constructing meaning. Professor Winters was supportive and encouraged me to stay the course. He reminded me that

¹³Edwards, Harry, and William Julius Wilson. 1979

I knew more than I gave myself credit for, and that I had experiential knowledge that was useful, valid, and contributed to the course.

Later, In Dr. Anne-Maria Makulu and Dr. Christine Folch's two classes *Decolonizing Social Theory 801s & 802s*, I would have a second opportunity at some of these same authors in the context of cultural anthropology. Drs. Makulu and Folch convinced me that I did not have to understand everything we read instantly, and that deriving meaning was an ongoing process. They gave even more context, history, and theory behind progressive revolutionary practice. They both included their personal history with struggles for justice and these classes were an oasis in Duke for me.

Throughout my studies I have learned quite a bit from some brilliant and supportive people. My classmates and I were exposed to amazing content and given the opportunity to reason and research. One of the conclusions that I've come to agree with is that what is normal in our society and culture is anti-Blackness. Anti-Blackness is not just a side effect, it is **foundational** to the three-headed monster that is capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism. Therefore a world that is not anti-Black brings the promise of justice for all. Wasn't it the Civil Rights Movement for Black equality and justice that led moves by women, Native Americans, Chicanos, Asians, and the Gay and (eventually) the Lesbian communities? A wise woman told me once, "as the waters rise they converge", and if it is true that "a rising tide floats all boats", it is also true that we are all in the same boat here on Earth. We must find a way to unite despite a complex web of differences.

It was increasingly clear to me that I had to share some of these new connections and concepts, but I was at a loss on how to combine and synthesize all of these deep ideas into a paper or a conversation. What thesis encompasses all of this? I remember trying to have that conversation one afternoon in the early '90's. I was fresh out of undergrad at UC Santa Cruz, and flush with radical student activism and progressive African history. I tried to relate all of these understandings and new practices with my oldest friend and it was a disaster.

For him, it must have been like trying to take a sip from a fire hose. I made a mess of it by letting loose with an incomprehensible stream of consciousness, hoping my sincere passion would convey my meaning. My attempts at evolved unity were rejected and our relationship has never recovered.

Sometimes the way a message is packaged makes all the difference. The stories I have written are another attempt at that conversation, and many more like it. Conversations that have sometimes been fruitful, but more often fruitless, with multiple parties retreating to their (our) own echo chamber. It's safer to talk about sports or the weather.

It was with all these concepts and contradictions running through my mind that I sought to express my thoughts and lessons through story, one of the oldest ways to share.

My stories are about the "People", an enclave of Black, First Nations, Latino, and immigrant folk who have clung together with the purpose of rebuilding a decimated world, without repeating the mistakes of the past. They are like a modern maroon society, those Africans who successfully escaped chattel slavery in the new world and created their own

settlements. Maroons didn't just escape, they built up healthy and successful communities. They are an example of successful, constructive rebellion. They didn't teach me about maroons in the Los Angeles Unified School District.¹⁴

In Brazil, they are called *quilombos*, the greatest being *Quilombo dos Palmares*. Palmares resisted attempts at recapture and colonial invasion for almost 100 years, and developed its own political, social, religious, economic, and cultural systems.¹⁵

The People are the Cacique in South America and the Seminole in Florida, who freed enslaved Blacks and integrated us into their communities, to make a stronger "we". Imagine a Haiti unshackled by colonial economic violence, a more unified and focused post-apartheid South Africa, or a Cuba free from a strangling US blockade.. The People are evacuees from Atlanta, the Carolinas, a coastal deluge that has swallowed most of the east coast, and the collapse of most urban centers.¹⁶

As far as the rest of the mighty nations of Earth in my post-Split world, the chickens have come home to roost. Federal governments, especially those in more developed countries, have been ground down by the combination of a vengeful Mother Earth, finally fed up with

¹⁴ The importance of knowing about successful resistance cannot be understated.

¹⁵ Martins, Anna. 2023

¹⁶ See Known Enclaves Map

rampant human-made climate change, the resulting economic collapse, and the world's governments' inability to work in unity.

While the People have successfully created a safe zone, they are not alone on the North American continent in the post-Split world. Loose bands of rovers, cannibals, and human predators roam unclaimed territories. Worse, other enclaves have sprung up. Some covet the false comfort of the old world so much that they have recreated a sad caricature of our 21st century reality. Fervent nationalism, capitalism, and colonialism rise up, but there are also traces of the pre-colonial world that survive.

The People occupy what is left of the Southeast of the United States, and are pressed by both Northern and Western expansionism. The People believe that the world does not have to be shaped by attempts at Indigenous erasure, patriarchal cruelty, or "othering". The People have created a community that is supportive, joyous, and embracing of all our beautiful differences. Still, there are growing pains and internal tensions. External threats have their own timeline however. Sadly, the People must take up arms to defend their vision.

This post-Split world cannot be said to be a guaranteed future. It stands outside of time, suspended like Schrodinger's cat. Suspended because, just like stepping off of a cliff, it could happen/may happen/will happen/has happened at any moment.

While I have hopefully explained some of the "why" and some of the "what" that led me to creating the world of the Split and the People, the "how" is less straightforward. I have always been a storyteller and a jokester. Growing up I used the latter to avoid trouble on the

streets and playgrounds of LA, and as a mentor and educator I've used the former to impart life lessons, inspire, and de-escalate. Before graduate school I had never completed a written story! I've always been an avid reader, but one does not necessarily translate to the other. Writing these fiction pieces has been very much like building the plane while flying it.

My writing process is very nonlinear, stories never come to me in order. Often a scene or a conversation pops into my head almost fully fleshed: the setting, the characters along with their intentions, even snatches of dialogue. From there I typically build out, with more emphasis on the beginning, rather than on where the story will land. *Underbelly* was that way with the smokeless fire and the ravine. More often, I will read an article, watch a video, or witness in real time something fairly common that is so perverse as to be a caricature. The real world is ridiculously cruel, crude, and stupid.

The last few US presidencies have been a treasure trove for stand-up comedians. Have you listened to the US Congress recently? The United States is committed to funding an apartheid Israeli government as it bombs hospitals, schools, and refugee camps. In 2020, \$3.8 billion,¹⁷ that's a billion with a "b", almost all in military aid, was awarded to Israel. Liberal "allies" like Bernie Sanders refuse to even call for a *ceasefire*.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Black children suffer at home in the US. The foolishness of late would be humorous if it wasn't so deadly; the chicanery of the machinery, the homicidal bureaucracy of colonialism that persists today. Some

¹⁷ Horton, Jake. 2021

¹⁸ Gannon, Casey. 2023

of us believe that as long as we just keep going forward, that technology and education will save everyone. *Tank* was inspired by the modernist's move to toss out religion and spirituality, while worshiping technological science's bells and whistles. Some have unquestioning faith in democracy's unattained promises of equality, and passive support of the status quo as a kind of colorblind Social Darwinism.¹⁹ Sometimes it feels that we are in a parody, a satirical artist's rendering of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

I have employed satirical realism, history, and political science to set the stage of the post-Split world. The Split is a series of events that has finally let loose the thinly tied strings that were/are keeping this country, the "United" States of *AmeriKKKa*. This doesn't take a huge leap of faith given the current political climate in this country and the 50 or so ongoing wars and conflicts, some dating back before I was born, in this world. So, the post-Split world is one that is the direct result of divisive and racialized politics, human made climate change, global conflict, and misused technology. The post-Split world is one of racialized enclaves rebuilding in separate corners of the former US. Each claims several former US states as their territory and there is much conflict and contention. But within that conflicting world there are glimmers of a more peaceful and unified possibility.

These stories are intended to convey messages and trigger questions, investigations, and dialogue. Stylistically, this means I've made choices about how to design and describe this

¹⁹ "...popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the weak were diminished and their [cultures](#) delimited while the strong grew in power and cultural influence over the weak. Social Darwinists held that the life of humans in society was a struggle for existence ruled by "[survival of the fittest](#)," a phrase proposed by the British philosopher and scientist [Herbert Spencer](#). - Britannica

world that will leave some readers confused. You will notice extensive use of characters' names. Names and the act of naming is one of those "universal" phenomena attributable to every human culture.²⁰ For indigenous communities, this is doubly so. On the continent where humanity has existed the longest (Africa), names have significant socio-cultural importance, reflected by commonly employed proverbs.²¹

Among the Yoruba of south-western Nigeria, a country that is the seed of ancestry for many of us Blacks in the US, they say '*Oruko rere san ju Wura ati Fadaka*'.²² Farther north and west, the Akan of Ghana, make the name-body connection with, '*ne din ne ne honam se*',²³ the Swahili of East Africa feel one's name is intertwined with one's spiritual self, a Waswahili's proverb claims, '*Wewe na jina lako*'.²⁴ Finally, in South Africa, the Basotho emphasize the social power of naming, '*bitso lebe keseromo*'.²⁵ I have made the decision to leave out most references to skin color and gender. There are no gendered pronouns like he and she in these stories. Recent changes in humans' pronoun choices has challenged my consciousness, people I respect and care for use nonbinary or plural pronouns. Younger folks have regarded my views on race as things of the past. I wondered what a world where such distinctions are less

²⁰ Abdulganiy, Olatunji, et al. 2015

²¹ Ibid.

²² "A good name is better than silver and gold." - Abdulganiy, Olatunji, et al. 2015

²³ "Their name befits their body." - Ibid.

²⁴ "You are what your name has made you". - Ibid

²⁵ "A bad name is ominous. - Ibid

necessary, when identity is less centered on shade & gender. In every instance, I've used names that are personal, cultural, and historical, all of them have meaning for me.

I look forward to your feedback, with the understanding that not everything will be apparent on the first read through and that some confusion is purposeful by me. What did you experience? Could you identify with any of the characters or their struggles? Were any of them familiar? Did you have moments of frustration and moments of encouragement? Did you discover scary lessons for us to learn or topics for us to continue to dialogue about?

This world is prime for individual character spin-offs, and in fact there are characters who did not survive the cutting room floor. I've also imagined several stories of folks struggling through Split to get to the post-Split world. My hope is that this is entertaining and thought provoking and maybe a little challenging.

The essay I wrote for admission into Duke was titled "If we make Peace with our enemies, then what for our allies?" This is a question I will wrestle with for the rest of my time on *this* earth. I look forward to wrestling with you.

Underbelly

The coolness of the breeze that caressed Hattie's cheek, threatened autumn's cold. The pitiful nonnative grass at eye level, planted decades ago by some aesthetically-minded landscaper, was somehow still holding on. Despite the increasingly brackish water table, fueled by the salty invasion of Gulf waters up into the Mississippi River, there were spots of arable land east of her banks. The Singh's ranch, lying between what had been called the town of Monroe and the once great port of Shreveport, Louisiana, was a fruitful example of folks' drive to survive. Shreveport had only a token population and had been renamed Belly because of the way it pushed out into the Red 'Dead' River. These days it was all contested land, frontier land.

Peering over the ridge, Hattie took in the ranch and mentally compared it to the hand drawn sketch that she'd committed to memory. Seventy-two hours ago, the Singh's youngest, Han something-or-other, had been able to slip out unnoticed & sound the alarm. Thankfully the Ancestors had taught the Singhs to have an emergency plan and escape route. Thankfully they used that spiritual guidance to enforce the disciplined practice of that emergency plan. The sketch, though clearly scrawled by a child's hand, was meticulously detailed. Given what the eight-year-old had witnessed befall the Singh family, the fact that the little one had brought them to this moment, was a testament to their familial resilience.

Footsteps that went *almost* unheard arrived at the base of the ridge that served as The People's forward-most observation point. The quietness of the footsteps was quite impressive, given the size of the body attached to them. The old axiom about a book and its cover flashed

through Hattie's mind, as an almost inaudible exhalation signaled that the sizable body had eased itself prone. The resulting belly crawl was in complete silence. Hattie listened for the tell-tale labored breathing, further grunts, or curses as thorns claimed their due, but only caught the afternoon breeze moving the stubborn leaves as they tried to hang on. Only the early morning darkness could see the approving smile dance across the taut, angular face.

Those new to sneak craft often made the mistake of utilizing a 'stage whisper,' which the human ear and brain pick out much more easily. In a soft but normal voice, that rode under the ambient sound of the night, Hattie asked gently,

"What do your artist's eyes tell you?"

Rose had moved to bring a significant head level with Hattie's, paused and surveyed the ranch one more time. It was a rectangularly shaped kilometer on a sloping hill, with the main buildings on a high plateau. The Singh family grew sesame, aloe, and hemp, with some indoor vertical hydroponics as well, guava and strawberry in particular. They were successful enough to apprentice on a few spare hands. In an impossibly soft baritone, Rose replied,

"Their bird's nest is on high ground, but has no cover and the watch light is too close, giving night blindness to that youngster on guardian angel duty. The inner shed has been torched, probably the last stand, but the main house is intact and reusable."

Rose paused, partially to consider this next part of the battlefield analysis and partly because of the weight of the words.

“The little one, Hanuman, said they killed both daddies and one mommy, plus an aunt. Right now, these Corporate scumbags are relatively relaxed after their brutality, they’ve glutted themselves. Still, they are at “Posse” level: 15 cadets, 3 scouts, a converter-pastor, and the Deputy that we were told to expect. Poor little Hanuman said that their family was overwhelmed as they were waking at dusk.”

“Yup, that’s what I got,” Hattie replied evenly and simply.

No words could contain the horror that had been visited on this humble ranch. Hattie heaved an exhausted sigh, so much cruelty, so much greed, so much violence. The violence that seemed to repeat endlessly in this long life, and yet simultaneously snowball, developing new horrors to outdo the old. Rape, murder, and fire would not disappear from the earth before Hattie’s transition from it.

Without any signal between them, they both slid back away from the edge. They slithered silently down to the base of the ridge. Tulaney waited to relieve them from spy duty, and Hattie took the proffered hand and stood up. Even though it was expected, an electric shock ran up from Hattie’s left heel to hip. It was as if an invisible island duppy with a knife of pure fire stabbed deep into Hattie’s left side. Hattie smiled through gritted teeth, this pain could not be hidden. Pain was that old friend, that constant companion, that torturous sidekick that would only abandon Hattie in the final transition from this old world. That transition was increasingly on Hattie’s mind. Every afternoon seemed to reveal increasing inflexibility, sensory

degeneration, and that damn duppy stabs deeper each time. Gravity was unforgiving, and the weight of life had been grinding Hattie down for some time.

Rose's shoulder, forever steady, was just low enough to be a perfect crutch. Hattie nodded a silent thanks to Tualney, then ambled the two clicks back to base camp at an even pace. A left, a right, another left, and Rose was nodding where Buggy's eldest, Nesta, *must* be in the sparse tree cover above.

The dark camp was in a small clearing surrounded by the thickest trunks in this tired copse of trees. To the untrained eye it was empty, save two small holes in the ground. The firepit was dug deep enough to hide any glow and the 2nd hole allowed for easy ventilation, and most importantly, *no smoke*. When Hattie entered the clearing a dozen bodies materialized from the pitiful remains of forest. They were The People and they were excellent at sneak craft.

They were a people all connected: lovers, friends, family, teammates one and all. Hattie had been a doula, assisting the medic in the birthing chamber for Nesta, Horacio, Tulaney, and a few more. Four Voices took up position around the smokeless fire. They had each been chosen, in some cases pushed, to speak for their part of the People. Within the People were "Nations" that had specific affiliations. Everyone 14 and over selected an individual to be their Voice, that person could be recalled at any time, maintaining more consistent political representation and participation.

Hattie represented Rose, the 'baby' Onawa, and fierce Pole. Each of the other 3 Voices present were similarly backed by their loved ones. Hattie reflected on how four fours was a strong number, easily factorable and sizable enough. Four of the eight Nations of the People were represented around this smokeless fire.

Father Pastor spoke for The Redeemers, who were the most populous of the Eight, and largely comprised evacuees from the fall of Atlanta. Father's home congregation had seen the fall of Atlanta coming and had quickly galvanized the congregation, unified with dozens of others, then successfully evacuated thousands by way of Bankhead. Father Pastor frowned at the nickname "Black Moses", but that did not stop folks from using it. Nevertheless, the Redeemers were leaking members to other nations as Black Moses' 'old ways' were increasingly seen as restrictive and impractical.

Ras Buggy of the Sankofas was the staunchest ally of Hattie's Daughters of the Sun nation, but would never be an automatic "yes". The Sankofas included the growing New Rasta Tribe, the Garifuna, Geechee, Seminole, and Pan-Africanists. There were ideological disagreements between the Daughters and the Sankofas centering around some romanticization of traditional indigenous culture without, in the Daughters' opinions, enough critique of the resulting patriarchy.

The newly appointed Ximena, barely two weeks in the position after the assassination of dear Rigoberta, rounded out the quad. Ximena's nation was Las Jóvenes, who had formed up

with the Urban Schoolies and Gente Atlantica. Ximena was a reluctant leader, but had an undeniable soul and sympathy.

Conspicuously absent were the Folks-Folks, who had solidified their status in the Council of 8, and were the chief beneficiaries of the Redeemers' dwindling numbers. The Folks-Folks were made up of mostly small town country folks from the west and north of the People's territory. They minded this part of the People's territory closest to the Mississippi River, this was their homeland.

Everyone took a long, slow, unifying breath. Inhale for a four count, hold for a four count, and exhale for a four count. Ground and center. The People's practices were explicitly designed to promote and grow those who had been historically kept in the back, those who spoke last or not at all. The People's tradition was for the youngest to speak, to honor the newest thoughts and voices first.

"I thought that the Folks-Folks would be here before us all," the Father said, out of turn, "Where is Watson?"

This brought an emotional shift in the assembly. No one cursed, yelled, or growled. Father Pastor had inadvertently revealed the root of the dwindling influence of the Redeemers' leadership. Black Moses was used to the older, more hierarchical process that the Redeemers used internally. It was these top down, elder first, quasi-military, colonial holdovers that prophesied a change in leadership for the Redeemers.

“We let the youngest speak first,” corrected the slightly younger Ras Buggy, “Black Moses, you know that no person rules here, and we *honor* our youth here, we do not overlook them.”

“Pahtna,” Pole whispered by- way-of punctuation.

Pole was known to be an amazing engineer, mechanic, and brew master. Many an opponent had underestimated that slim frame, and those kind eyes, and learned too late about those powerful hands and that hair trigger temper.

“My apologies,” Father aka Black Moses said, “This journey has taxed me mightily, my nerves are frayed at the prospect of the upcoming violence. I defer.”

“What are your thoughts young blood?” Pole asked, making room for Ximena, while glaring pointedly at the Redeemers.

Ximena’s brown cheeks bloomed red. A furtive glance around the fire, followed by a quick clearing of the throat. Ximena’s grandfather would have frowned at the leadership position Ximena had earned, abuelo would’ve frowned deeper at the company that Ximena kept, especially the *‘mayates’*.

“The Father is correct that we are outnumbered,” Ximena conceded graciously, saving face for Black Moses, “The Texans probably have many guns and professional full-time soldiers. They are entrenched with posted guards, food, and hostages.”

Father grunted agreement and, along with Sheila of the Redeemers, nodded. They saw Ximena as young, timid, and unsure. Black Moses' mighty voice often swayed those of less will to suddenly agree with a position or opinion. However, they mistook kindness for weakness.

"However, the People have the Love. Love for the Land, Water, Sky, and for all the People," Ximena intoned. "This advantages us by making the most of our collective wisdom, talent, and power. The Corporates seek to colonize, exploit, and extract. They seek to steal from those with the least and give it to those with the most. Their model is illogical and unsustainable. Watson and the Folks-Folks say that the strategy of the Zulu Bull will lead us to victory and I trust our skinny, swift, and wise cousin. This is their land."

"Love", echoed Onawa bumping shoulders with Hattie.

"Committed Hearts," agreed Ras Buggy.

"This Love gives us passion, clarity, and strength. We want peace for All." Onawa the Conscience reminded all.

"Peace be upon us," came from behind Father .

"And," Ximena continued, reclaiming the floor, "We have the element of surprise, we are smart every day, and we have *La Mujer Feroz*."

Ximena stressed this last advantage and offered up Hattie with both hands.

"Ayyy," testified Rose, "Rather be with you, than agin ya!"

Hattie's head dipped in modesty and both hands were raised in a forestalling gesture.

"Queen and goddess," added Nesta, back from guard duty.

"Mother, Sister-Sister, and Aunty to us all," said Wei from Father's left.

Shaking a smooth skinned head, left half braided and half fro in haste, Hattie at first tried to deny the accolades. After a moment, Hattie fought back tears and steeped hands to show thanks and reciprocate the love. This show of unity and confidence in Hattie, their strategy, and the People themselves was infinitely more inclusive, more meaningful, and more representative than any vote or poll.

Even in the midst of this feel good session, there was dissent. The People strive for consensus, but that did not come easily, 90% is not 100%. Black Moses' strong will would not yet concede. In the 20th century the Pastor would have been celebrated as an "A-type" personality. The rugged individualistic alpha was favored in western business, politics, and culture. It was a communication style that weaponized fear. The world's history had revealed this to be a personality that favored conquering.

"They *do* have metal guns and armor. We will be forced to kill and die." Pastor looked hard at the youngest: Nesta, Horacio, Ximena, but even the Pastor wouldn't lock eyes with Onawa,

The desperate attempt to rattle the conviction of the group never had a chance and folded when Hattie's grandchild said in a little voice,

“We will offer mercy and grace to all who ask for it with a clear heart. We may lose a loved one tonight based on our choices. That is why we don’t enter into violence casually, nor do we glorify it like the Pre-Splitters,” Onawa did not typically speak many words in a crowd, so these stabbed home and effectively ended the contention.

Cadet Dennis shivered in the crow’s nest, and peered from under straight black overgrown bangs and over the edge of the crow’s nest. The first two times that Julie and Tim’s patrol circuit took them under Dennis they waved and giggled derisively. They had all laughed at Dennis’ fear earlier that evening. Deputy Bowie had asked if Dennis thought that there were gorillas in the mist. The derogatory term never made sense to Dennis, who was the child of a world where gorillas were extinct.

Dennis reminisced about 4th grade at the Sherman Discipline and Work Center. That blond kid, Dillion spinning tales of African monsters like gorillas and giraffes. Dennis was on edge, feeling isolated seven meters up in a barrel, and farther east than ever before. As evening waned, sleep called, and no one came to relieve Dennis, twice he’d had to relieve himself over the side of the watchtower. Dennis had felt the lash enough to know better than to abandon a post assigned.

The comforting dark began to lighten, increasing the weight of Dennis’ eyelids. The night continued to lighten and warn of the coming heat, sun, and radiation. Just as Dennis was nodding out, the sound of the crackling and dancing flame snapped Dennis’ head up. Dennis jumped up instinctively to call out to, whom? Julie & Tim? To sound the alarm? It was the last

conscious act of the evening for Dennis, as suddenly the sky and stars were wheeling, and Dennis was falling, falling down and darkness returned.

Dennis had that feeling of a deep nap, the kind that holds you even as you try to wake. The body creates a cocoon of warmth, making even the cold ground comfortable. Dennis started awake for the second time at the sound of soft voices not speaking English. The remnants of the posse: the five youngest cadets, one scout and the deputy all lay in the same dirt inside the twice burned stable.

The conversation was low but passionate. The short, light skinned dread was motioning emphatically while talking to a darker older baldhead, and a little brown Hispanica. Suddenly the Deputy's voice sounded like a shot from Dennis' left,

"I've sent for reinforcements from the Belly, a fast action team is waiting at the Red Dead River. Give up now and I promise you mercy, with only a small sentence for insurrection. The children will be parceled out to good families. "

The Gulf-Lone Star Republic LLC was well known for its sentences, infamous for its mercy. Chain gangs, forced biohazard work crews, frontline conscription in the battle against the various bandits and raiders. There were rumors of detention camps along the southern border with Los Estados Unidos. These were part of a historical colonial practice of imprisoning parents and children, tearing loved ones apart in the most punitive manner possible.

Under cover of predawn, the People's force had snuck in their gophers. Pole led Tulaney, Rita, and Sheila who concealed themselves strategically, creating a crossfire. The controlled scrub brush fire has served as diversion, while Hattie, Onawa, Wei, and Yo-Yo snuck the hostages to safety. The Ras had nonlethally taken out the guards, including young Dennis. Hattie had loudly sued for peace, offering safe passage back to the Red Dead River. Corporate bullets were the response. Ten minutes later, Dennis, the other newbie cadets, one remaining scout (Bill?), and the Deputy found themselves tied up in string covered with some sort of sticky, tar-like stuff. The Deputy sat up, attempting to reclaim some of the authority of the last three days.

“Who is the Headman? Big Chief? Oongawah? Habla ingle?”

The infantile outburst was ignored by the People. Their tense politicking continued for a moment, until almost at once the People stopped their conversation, and looked east. Each of the People's reaction was particular, but whether it was an inclined dread-head, a set of folded arms, or a smile, they occurred as one. A soft, but completely audible voice came from out of the last of the safety and darkness of night,

“One moment Deputy John Eaquiel Bowie. My team needs a huddle, then we'll answer all of your questions and concerns.”

Aunt Hattie limped into view with Rose close behind. A crimson flower, evidence of a Corporate shell finding its mark, lay on Hattie's left shoulder. Deputy Bowie looked aghast as additional “tribal types” appeared out of nowhere. Hattie bowed to each of the People who

stepped out of the shadows and those already in view. Using a mix of several post-colonial patois, Hattie relayed the results of the action to free the Singh and repel the invasive Gulf Corporates.

This action was named *Umkhonto We Sizwe*, the tip of the spear. The Corporates, finding light to moderate resistance, had pushed east, headlong, only to find the horns of the Bull had surrounded them. The main objective was secured and the invaders had been routed, none save these few were left east of the Red Dead River. There were no celebrations, no cheers, little relief. They had a terse discussion about the options for those captured. Then, under a double overwatch, prayer mats came out, wailing commenced, and more than a few chillums were passed.

The two Corporate citizens and their cadets were shocked by the side-by-side display of paganism and mixed monotheism. During that forty minutes of mourning (?), there were members of the People who incorporated several religio-cultural practices. Here a youngster breathed smoke with one, then worked beads with another. The multitude of spiritual practices, performed side-by-side by the People, in harmony was shocking to the citizens of the Gulf-Lone Star Republic.

As a tall, slim, and scruffy Guerrilla stood over them stiffly, Deputy Bowie, the scout, Julie, and Tim all bowed their heads and murmured protective hymns. Dennis and the other two cadets, who had been categorized as mulatto in their home Texas-Gulf, had strong ambivalent feelings of disgust and desire.

Rose and grandbaby Onawa helped Hattie to a chair to face the seven captured Gulf-Lonestar Corporates soldiers.

“We have half an hour before the sun crests,” Hattie began, indicating the Driskill Mountains, rising in the distance.

“There will be no cavalry, Deputy Bowie. We have captured a pair of sheriffs and a half dozen deputies. We have sent all other soldiers either west across the Red Dead or to their ancestors.”

“You lie!” Deputy Bowie’s voice cracked for the first time in a quarter century. “There are ten contingents at the Belly, we hold all trails to this point. We have armor, vehicles, guns...”

“We MELTED your guns!” bellowed Rose’s deep deep voice.

That voice had been trained and practiced to fill the largest halls. Rose too was from this land. Rose too had lost everything and was a hero to the People. Hundreds of displaced youth knew Uncle Rose the Teacher, Coach, and protector. Scores knew Rose as the warrior-worker who never complained or shirked, for whose broad shoulders there was no load too heavy. A couple dozen had been adopted by Rose: mothers, children, homies. Just a scant few knew Rose the poet and stage actor, no audience had ever escaped a performance with dry eyes.

Having snatched the Deputy and all the soldiers back into reality, with the power of the voice, Rose warned, “We must now focus on what to do with y’all.”

Believing the Belly to be soft, The Gulf-Lone Star Republic LLC regular militia had pushed across the lifeless Red Dead River towards the brackish Mississippi. Encountering little resistance, the Corps spread their lines too thin and were promptly surrounded. The Folks-Folks, Rose’s people, had left a day earlier. They ran all day and all night, led by Bony Watts, the marathon runner and chef. Fighting in their own backyard gave the Folks-Folks a decided advantage, which they used to set up ambushes that encouraged retreat into greater ambushes. The Horns of the Bull.

“So now ya got smoke,” Ras Buggy punctuated his comment with an exhalation of ganja. Onawa rolled her eyes. In a soft gravelly voice directed at the would-be pillagers, Onawa said,

“Here’s the issue: For us, jails are obsolete, we do not believe in them. We do not torture. But, there must be an accounting. Revenge is real. How do we reclaim balance? Do you kill a baby python, knowing that if you do not it will surely come for you or your own day?”

Onawa was the reminder, the conscience.

“We could trade them for some of ours that have been captured,” Father opined, having had a middle child and cousin captured the year before.

“We can offer them a place with us. Show them love, feed them, teach them. They can join us,” chimed Ximena

“Ah Ximena,” Ras Buggy sighed, “I’ll give them a hand, but I’ll give it them with caution.” At the visible stiffening of the young cadets, Ras Buggy explained, “We nah gon slaughter y’all, that's vexation of spirit.”

“Hanuman’s family seeks redemption, a balancing of the scales,” reported Pole fingering the captured projectile weapon.

“Let us ask them,” Onawa said, looking at Hattie, “Let’s trust our discernment. They can choose to join us, with caution, they can choose exile to the middle-contested lands, or they can choose...”

“We cannot release a *Deputy* given what they’ve seen and done here,” reasoned Black Moses, “I am a believer in mercy, but we must kill a baby python. Nat taught us that”

“Very well,” Hattie said to the People, then to the Corporates, “Do you understand? You must each choose your fate. You may join us and submit to our scrutiny. If you are true you will be accepted as one of us, 100%, but if you prove false, you forfeit the right to choose. Otherwise you can choose exile, we’ll ask Rose to escort you to our northernmost border with a week’s supplies.”

“We’ll not join your heathen, idolatrous, orgy cult!” Deputy Bowie shrieked, spittle flying, “Not one of us! And if you traffic us north, we’ll go through Cherokee to get back to Texas. We’ll see you in a week right here!” Foam had gathered at the corners of the Deputy’s busted mouth.

“You misunderstand, Deputy. Unfortunately, we cannot offer these options to *you*, Hattie said coolly, “You will have to come back to Birmingham to be debriefed. We promise that we will not torture you, but we *will* administer some very potent organics.”

“I will kill one of your sweet babies the first chance I get, and kill myself before I give you any information,” the Deputy promised, first indicating Onawa, then staring hard into Hattie’s eyes.

Hattie turned wordlessly to face the People, left eyebrow up, questioning. Hands flew up, most in a fist, a few with the pointed finger extended. Hattie nodded to the People assembled. Wei and Pole, ever stern faced, marched over to their POWs and pulled the Deputy bodily up. Pole untied the intricate knot in the help rope, and used a lemony smelling salve to dissolve the pitch made from tree sap. They then both stood back.

“The Ras spoke true, the People do not torture and we don’t slaughter, but we are but fish in the sea, we cannot help but to get wet,” Hattie explained, looking at the Deputy, but speaking for the remaining prisoners, who still had a future.

Deputy Bowie did two quick neck cracks, then smiled, the smile of a predator who had come across a wounded animal. Aunt Hattie did not smile back, but took a deep breath and bent sore knees. Deputy Bowie launched nearly two meters of well-muscled, professional soldier at the single mom, Coach, writer, and occasional warrior who was some decades past prime. The Deputy was also 20 years Hattie’s junior and that allowed the closing of the distance between the two leaders.

Hattie easily slipped the open field tackle, despite having an injured shoulder. As the Deputy whooshed past where Hattie had been seconds before, Hattie's boot met the well-fed seat of the Deputy. Bowie landed face first into the smoky ruins of what had been a barn wall. Enraged and embarrassed by the blow, the Deputy's hands found a sharp piece of charred wood. Wheeling about with the makeshift weapon, the Deputy missed the subtle wave off that Hattie gave Pole, but Dennis saw it.

Deputy Bowie spent the last minute of life swinging an ironically incriminating piece of evidence of the past few days of terror at the Singh-Alvarado ranch like a pirate with a cutlass.

Hattie ducked under the clubbing swing and delivered a quick, one-legged mule kick to the left knee of the lunging Deputy. There was pop that sounded exactly like a teflon balloon popping, a reference that only Hattie could make. The Deputy howled as the left knee cap was permanently repositioned. The Deputy dropped the chunk of wood and Hattie danced into arm's length and delivered a neat knife hand strike to the Deputy's exposed esophagus. Deputy John Ezequiel Bowie died as the sun began to crest over Driskill Mountain, Louisiana, mouth agape, still not completely sure what had gone wrong. The eldest son of a Texas senator favored to ascend to the presidency one day, died far from home.

The scout and one cadet elected exile, Dennis and three others chose to join the People, though the newcomers found the People fearsome to behold. No one else present on that day would become a victim of the violence that organizes their world.

Tank

Angelo came awake softly, with the dream smell of the loaves baked two days before lingering. Blinking the sleep away, Angelo began the internal and eternal debate about getting up. One side of the brain argues for staying in the bedding and warm cocoon that the human body creates each night. Slowly, inexorably, the practical side emerged victorious. For the three hundred and forty-fourth day, and the thirty-eighth year, Angelo accepted the fate of all bakers: rising before a civilized hour, labor until sun up, and a quiet resolve to accept the burns to come. Angelo shifted carefully in the homespun hammock to that left shoulder that still complained about a rock-climbing misstep twenty years ago. Through bleary eyes, Angelo caught sight of Lecumi sitting alertly in the adjacent tree. Angelo was used to only sleeping 4-5 hours a night, but Lecumi seemed to never sleep.

Lecumi was quietly munching on pemmican, which got Angelo's not insignificant belly rumbling. The dried mix of smoked flounder, berries, and acorn bread was lightly sweetened with black walnut syrup. The flounder had been sacrificed to Lecumi's rod & reel, the berries and syrup were from the community garden, and the bread was baked by Angelo's own mom, who was widely acknowledged to be a far superior baker. They were all sick of it at this point, but they couldn't risk hunting squirrel or muskrat due to the risk of contamination sickness.

Lecumi heard (rustling of the few leaves on the branch? the branch itself complaining? The hammock's hemp fibers?) and saw Angelo awaken using peripheral vision. Lecumi gave Angelo a *saludo de persona*, then directed Angelo's gaze down the slim trunk to Octavia, who

was on watch. Octavia's tall strong frame and constantly moving head could give the illusion of a paranoid lumbering person. Many foes had underestimated Octavia and were felled by the athletic martial prowess, Angelo had taken an involuntary nap in that embrace during a sparring session. Many readers had been similarly gripped by Octavia's writing and there was an avid and growing fan base across every nation within the People's territory. Octavia's face morphed from stoic to knowing grin, meeting both of their gazes and demonstrably touching right pointer finger to left wrist, while wordlessly mouthing "It's time".

After breakfast the trio broke their elevated camp, considered their detailed map and reviewed their route and ultimate plan. So much had been sacrificed for them to make it this far. Angelo's family had been believers of climate change and so had gotten out of Charleston just in time, while Lecumi's family had barely made it out of Wilmington. The shoals and outer banks finally gave in to the sea. Lecumi's parents said they watched the USS North Carolina getting tossed like a baby's toy, then Lecumi chanted,

*Fools done upset the old river, made it carry slave ships,
and fed it dead bruthas, now its belly full and it's about to
flood somethin...*

Angelo was no Rose or Octavia when it came to poetry, and no Ras Buggy or Harriet when it came to history, so only barely understood the reference.

The trio responsible for Operation Get Out took some valuable moments to focus their faith and will, each in their own way and finally together. Angelo worked prayer beads and chanted for peace and change. Lecumi meditated on the ancestors, their efforts, their sacrifice, and their dedication. Octavia took a sip of homemade rum and shared some with the small figure of wood, animal hair, and iron nails. After a time, just after sundown, they hugged it out and pledged their unity to one another. They promised each other that these would not be their last words together.

Silently, they continued north through what had been the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia. To the east lay the marsh islands that were all that was left of the DMV. The invading Atlantic had spared neither Baltimore, Philadelphia, nor the Big Apple to the north. The same force that had made them hugely profitable port cities, was the source of their eventual ruin. The former capital of the most powerful and ruthless nation of the 20th & 21st centuries, had reverted to a swampy lagoon once those vengeful waves had receded. Richmond had been flooding for a decade before some local “king” detonated something snatched from the abandoned naval base, eradiating the Commonwealth’s capitol for the foreseeable future. The Powhatan’s “Shallow Rapids” had forcibly reverted the port city, and water ruled its streets.

The inside of the federals’ wagon had been converted into a cage. There were no seats, but a series of o-rings were steel bolted into the reinforced plastic floor. Lecumi’s zip ties ran from wrist to waist to o-ring and finally to ankles. Thus impaired and restrained one could not easily brace for the initial bumpy “road” that the caravan was plodding along, which led to the

Federal Road, according to the People's scouts. Lecumi rattled the o-ring, testing the steel bolts; plastic and metal. Even the wagon ran on re-petrolized plastic. The cage in the back of the wagon was windowless, and the addition of the terrorist hood over Lecumi's head prevented any visual input and provided some sensory deprivation for all the other senses.

Angelo, Lecumi, and Octavia all utilized the Quiet; the inner silence, the focused undistracted, meditative, inaccessible place. The rumbling of the wagons, the weeping of those in zip tie shackles, and their own fear was replaced by the Quiet. Like the long extinct hippopotamus, the People had learned to be semi-conscious, but still function. The surface mind continued to record using muffled senses. Physiologically, each of their blood pressures evened out, they bounced along with the bumps in the road like a seasoned rider, and their bodies remembered to take long measured breaths, oxygen being so important. Ground and center, continue to measure. Far away, Lecumi reflected on how being restrained and hooded also muddled one's sense of time and space.

Five hours passed before the caravan slowed for the first time. From inside the reinforced plastic tomb on wheels, Lecumi could hear that they were being verbally challenged at a Federal security checkpoint. These were some of the expansionist forward operating bases that the Feds had set up, the People had scouted them well. An amplified voice issued an official sounding query with no trace of friendliness or recognition. The Sergeant, who was riding shotgun, bellowed a superlative-laced response in a deep brogue. There was a second, less aggressive interrogative, closer and non-amplified. This time the driver answered in the

affirmative which seemed to satisfy the checkpoint guards enough so that the long sluggish caravan, filled with involuntary passengers could continue down the road.

That first morning, just before dawn, the caravan came to a grinding halt. What followed was a well-rehearsed, regimented process where human cattle get moved through necessary biological activities. It was a process that the whole caravan would repeat each of the next few days. The process was always the same: While half the guards began to set camp for the day's rest, the other half disembarked the human cattle. Usually, Sergeant Shotgun, the driver, and four of the remaining guards unshackled each imprisoned person in turn. They would then be nudged to and through the gate at the rear of the cage and down the few steps down and off of the back of the wagon. The process was repeated in each wagon in turn.

On that first evening, even before the first plastic shackles were loosened, Sergeant Shotgun lifted up a bullhorn and in that same accent that several of the guards shared, announced:

"You are all detainees of the Mid-North Atlantic Federal Commonwealth Coalition Government. You are innocent until proven guilty. You have the right, by law, to remain silent about the accusations of either illegal immigration, vagrancy, or terrorism [pointed glance at Lecumi] leveled against you. Anything you say, will be used against you during processing and *terminal verdict.*"

Though the words were spoken politely enough, they were also completely absent of any human inflection. In each wagon there was a wave of fearful, confused murmur, with a few frightful souls calling out.

“Seigneur, aide-nous!”

“Herre, hjälp oss!”

“Боже мой!”

Their cries for divine intervention, for *refuge*, were met with:

“That means shut up!”

“Don’t you eyeball me!”

“Move along.”

“Not my problem.”

“Wait until processing in Pittsburgh.”

These last words were not as business-like, but they meant *business* and would on occasion, and quite performatively be accompanied by the business end of a truncheon. Only a few guards seemed to actually enjoy beating people. The first few moments after the Sergeant’s speech saw the majority of the trip’s brutality. Most of the violence was the result of miscommunication and a lack of translation, creating the resulting shockwave of protests and confusion. Directly across from Lecumi were a pair that looked like regular and snack sized

versions of each other, dressed in similar hijab and abaya. They huddled together, as much restraints would allow.

“Madha qala?” asked the older, quietly through trembling lips.

“La 'aelam ya 'abi, laqad tama alhadith bisureat kabira,” the little one whispered back, head shaking quickly.

Lecumi winced and wished that she'd put more than two years into language study. In a normal voice, and with a terrible accent Lecumi said,

“Yajib ealayna 'an nahtajizi, yaetaqidun 'anana jamiean 'ashkhas sayiyuwna.”

“Shukra, shukra, yerhmek Allah.”

The nearest guard, who was overseeing the unshackling, paused, reached over and yanked down and away on the zip ties binding Lecumi away and down, a practiced technique which exerts stress on the joints of the wrist and shoulder, and vertebrae of the lumbar. Lecumi grunted in pain.

“Shut it or I'll shut it for you!” This time the tone was threatening.

“Mamnue altakaluma.” Lecumi defiantly translated, getting a truncheon jabbed into the ribs as payment. Lecumi stumbled towards the waning dark and impending daylight.

“Watch your step there,” the driver said, with a similar lilt as the Sergeant's, catching Lecumi mid-stumble. The driver was a bit smaller and stouter than Lecumi, hair in a bob.

Lecumi returned a silent smile by way of thanks, and decided that these were definitely Irish accents. All the guards were dressed in khaki one-piece jumpsuits with various insignia, utility belts, and steel toed combat boots. The jack-booted guards were largely distant, uncommunicative, and they all employed the same firm, if polite, grips.

The Imprisoned people were watered and allowed a bathroom break after they dug a latrine. All 60 imprisoned persons worked in utter silence under close armed guard. Then a well-engineered system of rebar poles with concrete blocks at each end were used to hobble everyone. Between this significant dedication of metal and the deadly dawn, there would be no escape attempts. Blackout tarps provided UV protection, gray water and protein bars were the menu for supper. The wagons were revealed to be colored red, white, and blue, with a stylized 3-pointed star, in a circle, surrounded by a wreath on each hood.

Lecumi spied a battered and bruised Octavia in the next tent that first day. Octavia the Observant had been trying to make eye contact for five minutes. Lecumi signed an interrogative and Octavia reported no permanent damage, except a busted knuckle on the offhand. A toothy grin told the tale of the first guard to lay hands on Octavia, who was built tall, broad, and strong. Years of farm work and writing had made tough hands, Lecumi had had the displeasure of sparring with Octavia several times.

They confirmed with each other that they were each still in possession of their surprise packages. Lecumi continued debriefing with Octavia, and though the guards scowled, they were trapped by their own bureaucratic rules: “no talking”. As the imprisoned and guards not

on duty began to settle down to a fitful days' sleep, Lecumi bided her time. Eventually, the Driver, strolled over to Lecumi, and asked,

“What was that there? Some kind of code?” the Driver asked in an almost casual way. Lakshmi recognized that this was a friendly interrogation, Lecumi was well versed in the “Good guard - bad guard” technique. The Driver was attempting to get familiar with Lecumi, with the hope of establishing a rapport and eventually getting Lecumi to let slip details of the People and possibly to co-opt Lecumi’s team.

“Where I’m from we all study several languages so that we can communicate and share with as many people as possible. Octavia and I were just using sign language. Would you like to learn some?”

For the next several hours the Driver, Gerry, and Lecumi practiced the sign language alphabet, exchanged rudimentary messages with Octavia in the next tent, and discussed football/soccer, which they both played. Octavia watched them like a peregrine, without appearing to do so. The Sergeant was more conspicuous, revealing their conspiracy to get information from Lecumi. Clearly, Lecumi had been chosen as the physically smallest of the People’s hands, the most approachable, and apparently the likeliest candidate for manipulation. Little did they know that Lecumi was a master of conversational aikido, any attempt at manipulation or conversion was sure to backfire.

Day two was the twin of Day one of travel in most ways. The same stiff, impersonal procedures, always cloaked in the most professional language, all there to stave off some

future technicality endemic to their system. The significant event was the caravan's arrival to the Federal Road. The Road was the former US Highway 79, which had been cleared all the way to the new capital of pre-Split cars. The long-abandoned petrol/diesel hunks rendered virtually every major highway and freeway impassable, except for foot traffic. The Federal Road was a notable exception.

The transition to the Road sped up the pace of travel, eased the nerves of the guards, and ended the danger of falling for those locked into the cage at the rear of the wagons.

After about two hours, surely under 50 clicks, and the caravan reached the first of the Federal bridges. These bridges had been a massive post-Split, post-Wave undertaking with thousands of forced laborers working off sentences, tons of recycled materials, and some solid engineering. Lecumi had successfully petitioned Gerry to remove the unnecessary hoods, since there were no windows in the wagon anyway. The Sergeant, staying in character, acquiesced amid grumblings about procedure and the threat of demerits. It was then that the first muffled sounds of significant traffic reached Lecumi's ears.

There was nothing as big as the motorized wagons in the military caravan. Foot traffic steadily increased, there were pulled hand trucks, and pedi carts. There was frequent and inventive cursing when the caravan had to slow down. The turret gunner seemed to take delight in the Sergeant's consternation and called out encouragement.

For Lecumi the Listener, these were all data points fed relentlessly into the algorithm for which she had trained the last 3 summers.

On the second morning, Lecumi and Gerry, who revealed the surname Adams, continued their conversation. They shared their stories of climate forced migration, hunger, and loss. Both had witnessed needless death, horrendous abuse, and the rise of localized fiefdoms. When the UK fell, Gerry, several of the guards, and the Sergeant, named Ian Paisley, escaped on one of the last ferries out of North Ireland. They were all picked up by the drones patrolling the north Atlantic, eventually winding up in the employ of the Federals.

“How does that work?” Lecumi asked mildly.

All the People had learned about e-credits, salary, and the pre-Split concept of **paying** for every resource humans needed to live. Among the People, such practices were seen as unsustainable and inherently oppressive.

“I’ll give you the straight *craic*, the salary gets me food, clean water, and an interior room for me and the *babber*.”

Gerry shared this bit of harmless information.

“Babber? You have a child?”

Gerry nodded, bobbed hair bouncing,

“How beautiful! What a blessing!”

Lecumi knew enough not to ask any more about family, there had been so much loss, that adoption, single parent families, and blended families were the norm.

“Yes, my little Willow acts a right *moran*, but is also my light.”

“You must always worry for Willow’s future and safety.”

“Constantly, I might make Sergeant in five years, but that’s as far as immigrants can advance in the Fed, and Ian is not faring much better than we.”

On the final day of travel pedestrian traffic forced the caravan to a complete stop several times before they arrived at the outskirts of the big island, Pittsburgh. After 3 days through some tough country, the driving team was at the end of their patience. As the lead wagon came to “long-ass 5th Ave”, Gerry banked hard to the right, apparently against the traffic indicator. There was the “whoop” of a siren and the caravan stopped again.

A cop, with a New England accent, stopped the caravan to issue Gerry a citation. There was some heated back and forth between Sergeant Paisley and the copper, derogatory terms like “Miggie” and “Patty” were tossed around before the caravan resumed the last bit of its journey.

“Watch out Gerry, they’ll slap the Kiddie-Kuffs on ya!” the top side gunner joked.

Moments later the caravan pulled up to Ross and 5th Ave, to the old jail, the modern one over on 2nd Ave having been overrun and burned down at the beginning of the Split. There were no operating prisons within the borders of the former United States of Amerikkka, they had ultimately proved to be obsolete given their cost, location, and size. In addition, every able body was needed for the never-ending physical labor of the post-Split world.

The unshackling ritual occurred for the last time on the wagon, and though jail wasn't to be looked forward to, everyone was glad the journey was over. Processing was long and drawn out. First physical information was extracted: each detainee was photographed, fingerprinted, and DNA swabbed. Next, each detained human being was gendered, numbered, and categorized as either illegal alien, unlawful vagrant, or suspected terrorist. Each detainee of the Mid-North Atlantic Federal Commonwealth was then entered into a database. An average of three hours later, each was deposited in holding cells based on assumed gender and category of offense. This found Lecumi & Octavia on the northwest side of the jail and Angelo on the southeast side.

The humans being treated like long-extinct cattle would be housed here until the slow machine of the Federal courts could process each individual. The newly incarcerated joined the 50 or so existing prisoners, more than doubling the numbers in the jail. The imprisoned were jammed into overcrowded and ancient cells, each with a brand new, abuse proof screen that ran 24 hours a day, with no off button. The television and the cell's window facing 5th street provided contrasting yet useful intel for the first hands of the People to ever effectively infiltrate the Feds capital.

In Pittsburgh, aka "The Pitts", omnivision was ubiquitous in every household and public building, including jail. The screen in each cell ran all night and day. Advertisements were filmed against a green screen and promoted everything from prepackaged food, {*MEGAMEAT! Why eat dirty seafood? MEGAMEAT now better and safer than the real thing!*} to mental health medication {*pop a Happy-Do and forget that annoying Dude!*}. With no way to shut it off or

shut it up, it played havoc with everyone's sense of time. The soothing nocturnal existence that most humans in North America had converted to, that was necessitated by increased UV radiation, was sent into disarray. Sleep deprivation increased the surreal experience of incarceration.

The only saving grace of jail in Pittsburgh were the fellow detainees, especially the chance to meet its most disaffected residents. The Pitts was as close to the old-world metropolis as existed now and its society was economically stratified. By offering to share and listen sincerely with guards, new detainees, and incarcerated residents, the hands of the People were able to learn the political-cultural landscape of Mid-North Atlantic Federal Commonwealth.

Gerry, for example, revealed a harrowing tale of escaping the growing starvation in western Europe, only to be caught by a Federal patrol and pressed into guard service. Other refugees confirmed some of the worst news internationally: after *something* had exploded under the France-Switzerland border, shortly after solar flares had delivered a fatal electromagnetic pulse to the earth, mainland Europe descended into chaos, and the UK fared no better apparently.

The leader of a "criminal smuggling ring", who was really a pirate farmer, named Roscoe, spoke of living in the "Bottoms" where Blacks and immigrants were perpetually in debt and hustling to stay fed. *{Gooooood Morning Commonwealth!!! We are headed towards making this nation GREAT again!!!}*"

Each made outlandish claims and equated conforming with happiness *{We love our child more than anything, that's why we get her FED brand 'Stay Thrilled Pills'!}*. There were frequent admonishments to be vigilant against internal and external threats *{Remember: YOU can keep us safe from TERRORISM within and without!! If you see something say something!}*. The message was that life in the Fed was superior to life in the 'wild'. It attempted to convince the viewer that things were not as bad as they seemed to the aforementioned Kiddie Kuffs *(now with localized tracking)*. Most of them showed impossibly perfect, impossibly white nuclear families. The smiles on the ads were so strained they appeared menacing. created an oppressive air of false happiness and unachievable perfection, that psychologically weighed down the populace of Pittsburgh. *{Coming up next: What the Government Has Done for You! Notice: This is a mandatory viewing event with a 500 credit fine for failing to watch}*

Octavia perched near the wired glass window that looked out on the drab main thoroughfare of Pittsburgh. Octavia the Observant used a bit of the Quiet to absorb everything in sight and record it for later sharing and analysis. A slightly unfocused gaze made greater use of peripheral vision and allowed the brain to take in more data. *{Facing a long sentence? Debt got you down? Why not donate a kidney, you only need one!}* In shocking contrast to the world portrayed on the television, the overall vibe of the Feds' capital was reflected by the gray of the pre-Split concrete. Most tree cover and shrubbery had long since been chopped and burned. There was no evidence of small gardens, at least partially confirming the rumors of forced labor agricultural plantations in the north.

Most Pittsburghians walked in a way that signaled that they were rushed and felt unsafe in the open. While most wore plain homespun without any of the People's paint, shell, or bead work, some wore bright, immaculate fits. Most of them did not appear terribly healthy. Many of the pedestrians appeared underfed and there were frequent signs of untreated injuries and illness like crude crutches, arm slings, and persistent coughs. There was visible evidence of preventable health maladies: obesity, poor dental hygiene, and open sores were fairly common. There was also a complete absence of music, song, or laughter.

The hands of the People were stunned by life in the Mid-North Atlantic Federal Commonwealth territory. Despite the ongoing solar flares creating near constant EMPs, they had working video screens with IR sensors, localized broadcasting, and actual show production! But behind the thin veneer of technological sophistication was the face of the day-to-day suffering of its average citizens, they had prioritized an entertainment sector, enough to run 24 hours a day, but children went hungry and sick.

A small window in the cell door allowed Angelo to see Octavia's signing, and Lecumi translated for Octavia, who asked their cellmates,

"Are you happy here? Is this the life you want for your children?"

Do you believe that in time, that you will have justice? Do you believe that as living beings we can grow by going *backwards*?

It turns out that the detainees were remarkably quick to agree to the idea of a jailbreak. Some residents of the Bottoms sought to return there, some immigrants chose to strike out on their own, but some of both groups accepted a place among the People.

The armored vehicle set up just inside the Pitt Isle fortifications was a relic model from the final Indo-Pak Wars, but was still in completely working order. The original Arjun's design specs go back to the 1970's,²⁶ but the Arjun Mark 108 was the penultimate of mid-21st century Indian ingenuity. Reversing earlier tonnage trends, it displaced a mere 31 tons, but its 150mm main cannon was more powerful than any known weapon left on the continent. Composed of predominantly reinforced plasticore, it contained elements of layered ceramic as well, and not an insignificant amount of steel.

"Here's where we separate," Rosco grunted. "Even if we get past the Lion, and past the walls, that gun could hit us even if we sprinted for an hour."

Bald heads seemed to maximize the effect of a furrowed brow, even now with the dimness of mid-dusk. Gerry visibly tensed next to Octavia.

"What's the plan?" Gerry fumbled through finger spelling. "I've trusted you this far, and I can't go back now."

²⁶ This was a real tank that took 10 years to build, after the Indo-Pakistani War, and was still trash! India was aided by GERMANY, the NETHERLANDS, and ISRAEL!?!? What political machinations happened to get these former ENEMIES to collaborate on heavy armor, a quarter century after WWII!? - militaryfactory.com

Gerry had thought back to those first polite conversations on the road with Lecumi, the Captain's plan to use Gerry's growing infatuation with Lecumi to gain intelligence about their biggest rival to the south. But it was Lecumi, during late morning conversations, who spoke to Gerry's disaffection with life as is. Lakshmi who taught about company towns from over a century ago, the poverty that was a necessity for a society like the old US, like the Federal system that Gerry had grown up in. Everyone was always one pay ticket away from the streets, which were periodically "cleaned", which led to a conscripted labor pool. Most citizens that were sentenced never stayed out; recidivism was in the 90th percentile.

Octavia, Gerry, and Rosco slipped closer to the armored Lion by sliding from emerging shadow to abandoned doorway. Octavia pulled out the formerly keistered satchel, pointed at her own eyes then down to the satchel. Gerry & Rosco allowed their gaze to be led to the satchel, glittering in the failing light. The liquid inside had a weird viscosity and slid and shimmered as Octavia wiggled fingers beneath. Rosco never one to hide skepticism, raised an eyebrow and smoothly signed,

"What does half a liter of shiny stuff do against that monster? I told you that it stays fully staffed at all times," Rosco signed and spoke at the same time, both furiously. Rosco started thinking about that Plan B: slipping away with Keisha, a week in underground tunnels of a bygone era, then what? What about Shorty, Malik, and Antonia? What about the whole hood?

"Mercury?" Gerry signed?

The People were never luddites, science and technology are just tools, useful in their time, but too easily weaponized. Though the Arjun was a potent, mixed material heavy carriage main battle tank, it was not impregnable. Just like the cell locks of the old city jail, the over reliance on metal and plastic would be its death this night.

“G-a-l-l-i-u-m,” Octavia slowly and deliberately finger spelled, “It is the enemy of metal.”

This ironic bit of metallurgy represented the strategic mind of Aunt Harriet, the smelting efforts of Father Richard, and the chemistry knowledge of dear Angelo. Gallium is a metallic cousin of mercury and while it is liquid at room temperature it is not harmful to handle. Gallium replaced mercury in late twentieth century thermometers. In some metals, including the steel reinforced aluminum of most modern arsenals, gallium induced liquid metal embrittlement. It transformed metal’s material strength to that of old paper, brittle, while still being safe to handle with the naked hand.

Octavia dropped into a prone position and slowly belly crawled towards the Arjun Mark 108. It was true that the Arjun 108 was a vast improvement over the original design plagued model, which had been a combined effort of former enemies the Netherlands, Germany, and Israel. Still the war pigs had engineered in a weakness that had taken out many chargers and power cords: a misplaced faith in plastic and metal coupling. Octavia was able to slide right up the Arjun, because who guards a piece of heavy mobile armor artillery? The collar of the Arjun connected the hull that housed the driver to the turret that housed the gunner, loader, and commander, and it was just such a mismatch of materials. Octavia crawled up on the hull, as

Gerry & Rosco watched in abject horror. Octavia emptied the contents of the satchel, the gallium, onto the exposed metal.

Returning to the pair standing in the empty apartment's doorway, Octavia gave the universal thumbs up.

“Call up the others, we’re leaving.”

44 souls slipped past the Arjun that early evening, as most Pitt Isle folks were just awakening. A belated series of alarms began to sound, first at the north gate, where Octavia had worked chemical magic, then at each of the other three gates in succession. Infrared telescopic sights in towers revealed the escaping former imprisoned free people. This being almost unprecedented, guards were slow to respond.

The order was given down the zipline of command and the massive Arjun Mark 108 at the north gate of the capital of Pittsburgh barked to life. Its powerful engine, which had been converted to diesel, rumbled like thunder and the populace scattered. The tank commander gave the order to turn the turret, with its 150mm of overkill in the direction of the people fleeing on foot. As the turret began to swivel there was a terrible shrieking rending sound.

Impossibly, the turret fell off the top of the hull of the Arjun Mark 108. It toppled to the ground, blocking the gate and crushing the three soldiers within. Like the sound of breaking glass, the sound was painful to some and thrilling to others. No one who heard it that day would ever forget it. Across the powerful northern capitol of Pittsburgh, this scene was

repeated three more times as the last four functioning tanks in North America were permanently and irreparably destroyed by an amount of liquid that would have fit into a big soda bottle in bygone eras. Octavia swore that they'd be back for that database one day...

Contested

Every journey consists of distance, time, manner, and purpose. We prioritize one over the other depending on the nature of the journey. In the hectic rush of a beginning of the work week morning, time seems to be our biggest enemy, while distance, manner and purpose are predetermined. In these moments time bends and distorts: boiling an egg takes *forever*, while your last minutes in bed fly by. If you are near a navigable river, then you can paddle and sail, other than that your manner was walking. Imagine cars that moved 10-20 times the speed of a trot? Airplanes were even faster, imagine a sky full of them? What could have been their purpose, all those people in all those cars and airplanes, all on journeys?

It was the distance that Mbata ruminated on the evening that they were ambushed and Pole was shot. The distance was killing Mbata's motivation to rise and greet the evening. Everyone is familiar with that early laziness, laying in the cozy bedroll, the aftertaste of a dream that you cannot quite recapture. Over a month on the dusty road, and Mbata missed home. Snarky love from cousin Chels, who was more sibling than cousin. Love bloomed in Mbata's heart thinking of Chels who was raising two teens alone while becoming an amazing physician! Mbata missed the familiarity of home, the comfort of one's own stuff, and bed! Mbata was tired of all the dirt! Dirt in boots, dirt in dreads, and dirt baths that insured dirt everywhere!

Mbata's covers were pulled up tight against the cool of the end of day on the open fields just west of Wichita. Mbata sat up slowly, checking for each of the members of the People's hand. Nesta was still asleep, naturally, as no sunlight had ever found Nesta as long as

anyone could remember. Pole was a way off, watching over them all, strung bow in hand. The cool breeze made the stubby brown grass roll like a river current.

“Ewww! You got eye boogers!” yelled Big Chris, sporting a huge grin.

“Yeah, well you got gopher teeth,” Mbata snapped.

Mbata was known for a quick comeback. Big Chris remained unfazed, in fact that forever smile widened, and there was a noticeable twinkle in Big Chris’ eyes.

Behind them, Nesta came awake with a chuckle, yawned, and began a series of stretches. Nesta was not a morning person either, but was more matter-of-fact about the need to get prepared, plus it was Nesta’s turn to prepare the meal, and Nesta could cook.

“Noise discipline.”

Pole used a voice that was soft, so as not to rise above the breeze, but somehow still grouchy.

Pole was the only one who had traveled this far west. The story that Mbata had heard was that Pole had escaped California before the Big Rattle in the Bay. Pole had left with a band of friends and family, but Pole alone had survived the raiders, Coyotes, and cannibals of the middle states.

A shiver ran through Mbata’s body, despite still being partially wrapped in the bedroll. Mbata was fierce, but also hated violence. Mbata took a moment to find the inner Quiet.

Breathe in for four, hold for four, release for four. Mbata breathed in the courage of their ancestors and breathed out fear and pity.

They had been blessed so far, dodging two Gulf-Tex patrols in succession. A week later they had surprised and driven off a small group of nomadic bandits, who had been foolish enough to barbecue out in open country. It was a wonder that any of the bandits survived. Their successful action against the bandits had netted them some prepackaged Gulf-Tex meals and a nice spear that Big Chris now carried.

“I’m just curious,” Mbata began as Mbata was known to do.

Stumbling over to where Ximena, the 5th member of the People’s hand on this mission, was packing up. Ximena let out a small patient sigh. Mbata had cornered each of them in turn on this long trip with abstract ideological questions. There was no escaping them.

“What makes them bandits? Why come we shun them, when the Feds and Texans kill them? The same Feds and Texans who call us terrorists! Wouldn’t they be potential candidates for coalition with the People?”

Ximena, who was now moving to relieve Pole, smiled and gave a ‘follow me’ head nod. Ximena was an “old soul” and always ready to listen and share wisdom. Talking things over with Ximena always felt like a warm hug, and Ximena was an excellent choice for leadership. Ximena had recently been chosen as a Voice for one of the Eight Nations of the People. In passing Pole growled,

“They choose to raid the barn instead of grow the corn,” Pole didn’t waste words.

“While I agree with Pole that they are purely extractive from our point of view,” began Ximena, “I would add that they are trying to survive as we all are. Their roots are the country folks from this area and north European refugees. They deserve some grace, as we all do. They love their children as we do. To your point, Mbata, they are foes of those who would recreate the colonial project, and could be allies.”

“So why are we not reaching out to them on this diplomatic Mission?” Mbata reasoned, “You always say, ‘To rebuild, it will take us All!’”

“That’s true,” conceded Ximena, “My concern is that they appear to have no real community. Would we have to approach hundreds of individual bands? We don’t have that capacity. The travel time alone...”

“Eh, but among the People are certainly those that love logistics,” chimed in Big Chris, warming to Mbata’s logic.

“Okay,” Ximena was moved by the sincere desire for unity and peace, “Let’s resolve to make contact and share with the next folks we meet.”

The five friends shared a meal of wild strawberry, dried fish, yuca, and nuts that Nesta had prepared after putting out their smokeless fire. Pole had cautioned against small game hunting or local fishing until they had gotten farther west. Pole had reminded them about the

sick pits. The sick pits were decayed nuclear weapon sites and bio-hazardous waste dumps that had created invisible fields of radiation, kilometers in circumference.

“We’ll have to swing back south for the next few clicks to avoid a sick pit,” the circle of friends nodded grimly, Nesta groaned. They all understood that this would bring them closer to the Gulf-Lone Star LLC territory. The Texans had active projectile-armed patrols the perimeters of their self-determined borders. The Texans were known for shooting, then yelling freeze. They left the wounded where they fell and conscripted the young and able-bodied into chain gangs and work crews.

Once known as Bloody Kansas, this territory had competitive claimants. Pole had them on a routine of camping where there was cover well before the dangerous daybreak, and rotating guardian angel duty.

“Let’s break camp,” Pole concluded as the day’s light receded.

Without another word they each went about the process of erasing any evidence of their passing: footprints, smokeless fire, even matted down underbrush. The People sought to avoid potential skirmishes, and finally make contact with the people of the southwestern states, many more kilometers to the south and west.

“The sun beemin’ down between the leaves,” Mbata sang softly.

“Grazing in the grass is a gas, baby can you dig it?” Big Chris & Nesta

replied in harmony.

“And birds dartin’ in and out of the trees,” Mbata called.

“Grazing in the grass is a gas, can you dig it?” Big Chris & Nesta

crooned by way of response again.

Together they almost finished the line.

“Everything is so clear you can see it. Everything is so real you can...”

Their rendition of the classic was cut short abruptly, by Pole’s quick chopping hand.

Pole bent at the leg, and everyone followed suit. Pole eased the longbow from its back sheath and slowly nocked an arrow, slid from its quiver. Big Chris swung the business end of a spear around as Mbata, Nesta, and Ximena’s loosed machetes from scabbards.

Soundlessly and without warning, Pole’s left leg, just below the buttocks, sprouted the end of an arrow with unfamiliar fletching. For a fraction of a second no one so much as drew breath, it had happened impossibly fast. Even Pole took a second to react to the pain. Grunting, Pole drew the bowstring back to ear, and formed up, back-to-back with everyone. Twin arrows, siblings of the first, landed with a ‘thunk’ at Mbata & Ximena’ feet. A final warning arrow stuck into the haft of Big Chris’ spear, right near Nesta’s braided head.

“We are on a peaceful tour, *hí3oobéí*,” Pole called out to the hidden warriors, “we don't eat people.”

The entreaty was met with a round of disembodied derisive chuckles and childish

squealing noises.

“No long pig for ya, huh?”

“The other other white meat!”

“Do you know any Pawnee, Kiowa, or Osage?” the mocking

tones floated out of the formerly comforting darkness.

At a signal from Pole, all of the People eased the grips on their weapons. Four young Indigs materialized out of the cool night. They were painted, dressed in homespun, and carried a combination of old-world ballistics and modern equipment. Each of them held their weapons down but ready, their expressions ranged from grim to bemused.

“You're pretty quiet for some Easterners,” the last mocking voice from before came from a blond, no more than 20 summers, who was tall and lanky, but also well fed, “You were wise not to disrespect our land by raising a trail of smoke in our territory.”

Pole nodded and slowly, replaced bow to back sheathe and arrow to quiver.

Keeping eye contact with the young hunter, Pole motioned Ximena over, and slid down to the right uninjured side. Ximena grasped the protruding arrow shaft with both hands, and at Pole's quick nod, snapped the wooden shaft, leaving the arrowhead in place in Pole's leg. Pole's face barely registered the pain of the sudden movement and continued to meet the gaze of the owner of that arrow.

“A little Arapaho,” Pole’s face remained unflinching, and, “Nice shooting.”

“Humph, those rat-eaters? They don’t normally leave witnesses,” the youngster’s tone turned admiring, “You must be a tough old vulture. Sorry for the leg, but if you had hunted or made smoke, I woulda aimed higher.”

“Been called worse and shot worse,” Pole replied matter of factly.

Ximena expertly applied a bandage around the arrowhead in Pole’s leg.

The trek back to the Indig’s hunting camp took them and the People two hours in the wrong direction, north. The Indigs had offered to break bread and this was an offer that could not be politely declined. In the post-Split world when a stranger offered you food, you took it. There had been 18 in the hunting party that captured Mbata, Ximena, Big Chris, and Pole, good thing that they had come in peace. The Indig’s created a travois at the command of Stoa, the leader of the hunting band. In the Indig culture as in the People’s, leadership was a gift given based on accomplishments and heart.

They carried Pole, with little effort, promising to cut out the arrowhead at camp. Sparrow, a small willowy thing, offered a poultice to stave off infection. Pole grunted a thanks, and Ximena amplified the thanks and chatted with Sparrow about frontier surgery.

Several of the hunting party were in their teens and they flocked around Big Chris who, well over two meters tall, was used to the attention and reveled in it. By the time that they arrived at camp Sparrow and Ximena had sworn sisterhood, Mbata had taught a small

contingent the words and harmony to *Grazin' In The Grass* (Can you dig it baby?), and Big Chris had secured an audience who swore that this was the funniest person that they had ever met.

The hunting camp was a bustling encampment of at least 100, and not just hunter/warriors, but families. Small game was being cleaned, stripped down, and prepared in a pot of eternal stew, along with river catch. Clothing was being spun on a collapsible loom, small skins and hides were being processed, then knitted together. Youngsters were continuing lessons on cultural songs and hunting craft.

At Pole's request they paused to watch a game, where one youngster sat in a circle blindfolded. A dozen peers attempted to sneak up and count coup on the blindfolded warrior-to-be. Every few minutes a dried leaf would crunch or a pebble would roll, giving away the position of the sneaker. In a flash the blindfolded youngster would point in the direction of the offending opponent, forcing them to go back to the outermost part of the circle to start over. Pole made a mental note to steal this "game" for sneak craft training among the People.

"We've gotta try that!" Nesta exclaimed, grinning with no sense of subtlety.

"It's called Ninja," explained Sparrow, who was known to be so nimble as to be *legendary* at Ninja.

Stoat led the group deeper into the center of camp. Pole privately wondered how Stoat perceived them, as tourists, prisoners or guests. They approached a small nondescript

campfire. Mbata was surprised at the white skin and pale hair that the campfire revealed. Two slightly older looking Indigs sat at the fire like they had been waiting on the newcomers' arrival.

Alexie and Thrasher were identical twins, and like most grown identical twins they were complete opposites in terms of style. Alexie wore a more traditional dress with long beaded hair, while Thrasher was bald and wore combat ready camo gear. The People knew of two spirit folks, but had never met twin two spirits!

Alexie welcomed them warmly and produced a small pouch made of animal hide and a bone pipe. The pipe was loaded with some pleasantly fragrant ganja. Alexie took a deep draw, then passed to Thrasher, who looked like they were still unsure of the visitors. Pole took a polite pull, Ximena and Mbata abstained, on religious and health grounds respectively. Stoot and Big Chris on the other hand seemed to compete for who could take the biggest lung full of smoke. Several coughing fits later, a sumptuous meal was shared.

Seeing the visitor's hesitation, Alexie promised that the food was rad-free, and took a bite by way of proof. Sparrow went a step further by showing the visitors a bowl of fungus.

"This fungus eats rads," Sparrow gasped around barely held in chuckles, "Some students from around your neck of the woods, Durham²⁷, supposedly sent it into the sky. They thought that it would help with *space travel!*"

²⁷ ABC11 Raleigh-Durham, 30 Jan. 2019

Mbata, Big Chris, and Nesta joined the younger First Nations in a round of giggles over the idea of space travel. Not quite a century prior, humans' abuse of the planet had rendered the water, earth, and air poisonous, this was well known. What was less remembered was the growing turbulence of the early 21st century skies that first grounded all commercial air travel, then military travel, including drones, and finally severely limiting space travel. The final end to any hopes of escaping the Earth that we made ended in 2043, when a chain reaction of uncontrolled satellites crashed into each other creating a dense field of orbiting debris. The so-called Kessler Syndrome²⁸ meant that humans were planet-locked for the foreseeable future.

Neither Pole and Ximena nor Alexie and Thrasher laughed with the growing crowd.

It had been many days since the People on this diplomatic journey had eaten their fill of home cooking and slept in relative safety. The evening's discussion had been candid and wide ranging. The Indig's or First Nations as they called themselves, were an amalgamation of surviving Midwest nations. They had banded together in a loose confederation, though some ancient animosities persisted. Alexie, Thrasher, and Stoat were able to provide invaluable intel on the shifting territories, their ongoing conflict with the Texans, the roaming bandits called Vikes, and their cousins' battles with the Feds in the northern islands. The First Nations had concluded that whites smelled like wet dogs, despite many of them clearly being of mostly European ancestry. The war with the Texans had been a particularly cruel and bloody business. Alexie candidly admitted to participating in torture of captured Texan officers, spies, and

²⁸ This is a real astronomical theory!

collaborators. Thrasher was quick to point out that what they did was justified given the atrocities that they had suffered. The People were hard pressed to deny the First Nation's rage, the People had not escaped the Texans' techniques.

"Guard your own souls" was Ximena's advice. "What we do for any reason irreparably stains our souls."

There was passionate discussion on the topic, with Mbata pointing out that forgiveness is for the forgiver first and foremost. In a small voice, Sparrow told the tragic tale of the Texans' raid on their homestead. Only the fleet and nimble Sparrow had been able to take flight and escape.

The First Nations appeared to be flourishing in the post-Split more than others. They controlled a large swathe of the middle lands, had mapped out most of the sick pits, and their use of the radiation consuming fungus had allowed them to clear some small lakes and tributaries of harmful filth. They had cultivated clean hunting areas for small game and ground birds. The First Nations had done away with patriarchal remnants of colonial times and had confronted internal forms of divisive discrimination: color prejudice, western homophobia, and tribal roll politics. Stoa's family was an example of the modern values of embrace that permeated the First Nations.

After that first night, the First Nations and the People were headed towards a coalition. They had committed to advocating for an alliance within their respective communities, providing safe passage, and outlines of resource sharing. The People were able to refresh their

supplies, Pole gifted the longbow to Alexie, who shared a powerful sling and instructions.

Thrasher, Sparrow, and a small contingent guided the People's contingent safely out of their territory and brought them to just north of the Southern States territory.

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