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THE BOOK OF SOJOURNERS

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Set in the Bronx, NY, and rooted in a poetics drawn from the heartfelt oratures of the spirituals, work songs, field hollers, this opening chapter of *The Book of Sojourners* is an allegory that immerses us in a world strained by various ecological, health, and other crises, where we meet Safiya, a Black teenage girl, who yearns to escape her Aunt's strict religious household so she can find community members with whom she can freely be trans, and her brother Malcolm, who looks to conspiracy theories and stories about people who could fly rather than his Aunt's Christian beliefs to understand the day's vicissitudes, setting the stage for their epic journey into a struggle for self-elevation.

My name is Bl3ssing Oshun Ra (they/she), a nonbinary and disabled, transfeminine tomboy, poet, musician, educator. I am a lifelong creative, inspired by my mother's love for science and storytelling. My craft merges commentary on environmental racism and human health with themes drawn from African spiritual or speculative traditions, an aesthetic which I term "Blue-fi," (sci-fi steeped in the Blues).

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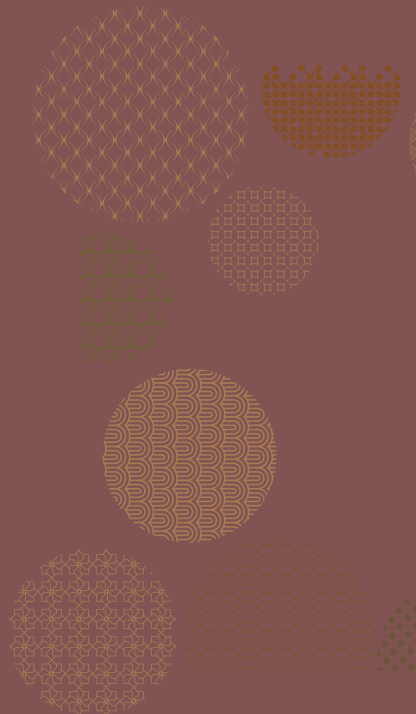
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The Book of Sojourners - **Bl3ssing Oshun Ra**

*They say the star people were scattered
by the serpent, ripped from the skies, and
made to forget they were beautiful.
The mother of the star people was
clothed in the sunlight and the moonlight.
Upon her head rested a crown of
flowers and in her eyes shone rainbows,
while at her feet stirred winds, and from her
hands sparked fire and lightning. When she
spoke, her voice was like thunder, and she
was given two wings from Creator,
so she could fly to the wilderness.*

*There, she was nurtured for a time,
away from the serpent, and she stretched
her wings to gather the star people
so they could come and take rest with her
in the shadows of the bush. So the
star people arose, and when they flew
there was a storm, and they waged a war
against the serpent, these star people.
And I come to tell you the story
of how I came to witness these things.*

You probably heard that the most segregated hour in this country was on a Sunday morning. Now what about the most united? Safiya figured that, at this point it was whenever folks gathered round a television or a phone, a tablet, whatever, breath held expectantly (though not with excitement), awaiting the latest weather report. And no, there was no consolation in convenings such as these; Safiya was never naive enough to say it was so. For, bonds formed around the apocalypse were not to be



celebrated so liberally.
Safiya knew that all too well,
with the way things had been going down
here at Aunt Tessa's house ever since
they all realized the world was ending.

The house was hot and Uncle Festus
kept getting up to toggle with the
fan, while Malcolm sat on the floor with
a bowl of noodles between his knees,
distracted by the phone in his hand.
And Poppa is on the couch, with the
remote in his hand, turning up the
volume on the tv. Aunt Tessa
had just come in from the kitchen, her
hands on her hips, her eyes glued to the
screen, wondering what new disaster
or other was on the way.

Safiya's back was turned to the
television, however, her
elbows against the windowsill, her
face pressed against the plexiglass plane,
her eyes cast upward, gazing at the
thin wisp clouds spread out like God had ripped
up pieces of cotton and scattered
them across the blue of heaven. And
a rainbow was spun through the sky: it
dipped daintily from above, so that
she knew right then that her wishes was
gon come true: good weather, finally.
And just in time for her birthday,
tomorrow too.

The newscaster confirmed this
—*Six days of sun, no rain or high heat
or humidity*— And Safiya
heard a sigh of relief from her Aunt,
Uncle, and Poppa, and also from
outside: the whole block, from the naked
rusty rims on the court, to the
patchy yellow-green grasses on the

curb, to, of course every person and pet on the street and in the Bronx, who could all now lay the weight on their heads, all the worry and the woes, down, at least for a moment: all exhaled.

Tessa smiled, and went on back to shelling eggs, for her prayers had been answered, and Poppa grunted and clapped as if he'd heard a good Word, and cried —*Thank God*— to indicate as such, and Uncle Festus, well Festus he just chuckled and said —*good, cuz we done had way too many floods. 'Nuff to put even Noah to shame.*—

Now Safiya turned away from the window abruptly, thinking this was the perfect chance to ask the one thing that had itched like fire in her heart and mind and on her lips the closer and closer it got to her birthday.

For she was turning thirteen, a big girl, a teenage girl, and she wanted nothing more than to be up out of this house for her big day. She was poised and eager to dig up the nice lil outfit she had had folded up in her dresser: some jeans she had cut without her Aunt knowing, and a shirt she had torn in secret as well. So she spoke —*Auntie, do this mean we can go outside, now?*— Safiya said. And she walked into the middle of the living room to where her little brother sat, who was still too engrossed in what he was watching on the phone to pay attention to his cue.

Tapping him on the shoulder quickly, she hoped Malcolm had not forgot what they both discussed earlier that morning: their plan to tag team Auntie and ask her to loosen her very strict precautions, at least this one time, for Safiya's big day. Malcolm was Tessa's favorite after all: the sweet nibbling, the calm nibbling; and Safiya figured that would be the key element for a finesse which could get them out from up under this roof for at least a few hours.

—Uh, yeah, Auntie— he said, nodding at his big sister. *—Weatherman said we have a whole six days in the clear—*

—And we don't even have to go outside, outside— Safiya added.

—We could just be on the roof with you, or Uncle, or Poppa— Malcolm said.

—Or all three— Safiya said just then.

The key would be to make sure their Aunt knew there was nothing to worry bout.

There was no other household that Safiya could think of where the kids were homeschooled and holed up indoors

into perpetuity. Try as

they might to break reason into their Aunt's mind, nothing got through to her.

Because whether the floods, the fires, the earthquakes and epidemics, the kidnappings, the riots, the wars, the

rumors of war, whatever, it was,

if it was to all stop right now, Tess had resolved to guard them anyway,

to the best of her ability.

Now Aunt Tessa slides into the living room, shutting off the cold water she was running in the kitchen sink. And with her unpainted toenails gently, silently, versing the floor, she looked to Malcolm, and her mind was on what life had become like ever since a few years ago when it became like the world fell apart, and she thought of the barricade set at the fire escape window, where she and Festus had drilled wooden panels into the wall to keep it secure from whatever might try to creep in, especially at night—*Anything can happen in these last and evil days, booby*—she answered, nodding at her nephew.

Malcolm's countenance dropped: it sank like an aired out balloon, slow, but no less pitiable. And as he shrank, a spring broke open Safiya's mouth. For one thing 'bout Safiya was: she couldn't stand things that did not make sense. And she was so done with her aunt talking like as if their every waking moment was a line straight out the book of Revelation! She was tired of all the Scriptures with which she had now been forced to become so intimate, and this being in the house for what felt like forever shit.

She wanted them old days: when they could go play in streets that flooded from hydrants and not from rain, and in a sun that did not beat at you, but rather caressed you, kissed you, rubbing its light into your forehead like a mama rubs on shea butter.

Those were times when the air shimmied;
did not spite you, and the roads shimmered
and they bounced with rhyme and not rancor,
for the world had not yet ended, and
so the street kids rapped about bud and
buddies and beta days, and
video games, and who was freaking
who or who was about to fight
who, and who had just passed, and who had
just had a baby, and who had
graduated or was bout to make it
big, blow up, or rise up.

Safiya missed that. She missed her friends.
She missed the schoolyard, even if she
used to hate school because the boys used
always come at her for acting —*gay*—
She missed the swings at the park, too,
and when her, and Malcolm, and their friends
would compete to see who could swing the
highest. Safiya used to always
win those games; none of the other kids
coulda beat her. She would point her heels
straight up like she was an arrow,
and just let the earth's core tug at her
from behind her belly button. That
was her trick, let the gravity ride
against you, as you feel a rush of blood flow
backward until, finally, she would
launch herself off the swing, in
victory, and land on her face in
the steamy pavement of the playground
floor, giggling.

And she missed Sasha. Her big cousin,
who used to stay with them. Sasha was
her most favoritest person in
the world. Sasha used to watch
Safiya and Malcolm back during
the before times, and everything used
to make sense with her. She kept it real

and straight with them, and didn't make them follow arbitrary rules. In fact, Sasha used to let them break the rules, let them question things, too.

—If you're with me, I give you permission to cuss— Sasha said one time. Of course Safiya and Malcolm hopped on that quick. It felt so good to loosen up the tongue and let out a few F-bombs. Safiya's personal favorite was the B-word, though, because of the way it was so versatile, and so fem. They used to actually have fun with Sasha. Then, other times, Sasha would talk to them about things: politics, mental health, family, science. Safiya used to tune out for most of those, but there was some things that got her attention, like when she learned the word *—cisgender—* from her. Sasha never preached at the two kids, only dropped tidbits of info and would encourage them to look it up.

That was why Safiya started to look into cloud formation, and how to predict weather from them, especially once everyone had to go inside. And she decides to bring that knowledge into the equation just now, in response to her Aunt *—how something supposed to happen if the literal meteorologist said it's not a statistical likelihood, and if you look in the sky, you could see cirrus clouds—* *—Man, who you think you talkin to?—* Poppa huffed from the couch, shaking the remote at Safiya as if he was a judge banging a gavel. Safiya's voice had twanged with some attitude there, and she was talkin smart.

—*It's just, y'all always tellin us the same thing*— Malcolm jumped in. —*Exactly*—
Safiya panted in agreement, her voice creaking with barely restrained exasperation.
—*Ooooookay*— Uncle Festus cooed, getting up to toggle with the fan.

—*Sounds like y'all a lil too hot.*—
He was projecting; as in, he was hot, and did not feel like hearing no arguments at this time because of it. There'd been way too many already. The fan whirled a lil harder after a few clicks, like a helicopter scratching by in the air. —*Perhaps I can step out today, grab a new one of these bad boys. Bring the kids along with me?*—
He asked his sister, hoping to defuse the bomb that was ticking between her and Safiya. His suggestion got Malcolm and Safiya squirming and Malcolm leapt to his feet. Malcolm almost knocked his bowl of noodles over. —*No!*— Tessa cried, her hand lurching forward as if she could have saved the microwaved ramen with jediforce or something.

—*Listen, we had this discussion last week, and the week before that, and the week before that. And the answer is still no*— —*I know, I'm just sayin*— Festus replied. —*Well, don't. Just say. Don't encourage them, specially not This One*— and Tessa flicked her eyes at Safiya. This One was her favorite imprecation. —*Y'all siddown now*— Poppa said. The kids did as they were told. Well, Malcolm did. Safiya lingered, only for a second.

She weighed the risks of demanding her freedom again. —*Uncle*— Safiya pleaded. She was not gonna let this go. —*Can you talk to her, or Poppa?*—

—*What Poppa gon do? I don't run this house. Your Auntie do and she know best.*— Poppa said. Festus pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders —*It's out of my hands, big dawg*— He said. —*It's bigger things than going outside anyhow*— Poppa continued. —*Yall still going?*— Tessa followed up from the kitchen. —*Nah, we good*— Festus said, tryna dead the conversation. Aunt Tessa continued, this time trying to sound softer —*Don't yall have yall phones?*—

We have one phone, Safiya thought. It was one device that she and Malcolm both shared, alternating days of use. And they couldn't even do much with it. Tessa monitored and regulated the content they could view because she wanted to limit the world's influence on their spirit.

—*These kids got a phone, and a home and food on they table, clothes on they backs, shoes on they feet*— Poppa said, and as he spoke, he tapped the remote against his thigh at the end of each phrase, and Tessania drummed a few holy amens after each one too, which pulled her into sermon mode again —*And you have the safety of three adults watching over you*— she said. —*With God over our heads*— Festus added flatly, resigned now from trying to get his sister to just drop it. —*Right*— Auntie agreed. She could not tell that her

brother was giving very yeah yeah
 for she did not know he was
 agnostic, and that as much as he
 had heard these things before, from her and
 from their moms before she died, he
 wasn't particularly sold on
 any of it. Safiya could tell
 though, for she and her uncle had talked
 about religion before, bout how
 neither of them were too into the
 Bible, not because they had
 anything against its contents or
 the God of which it spoke, but because
 of the way its biggest fans were so
 ardent about slicing at
 everyone with it. Safiya felt
 a laugh simmer and steam inside her
 belly, filling her cheeks with an
 evil warmth and mirth at the shade of
 Festus' words. For a moment, she
 considered trying one last time for
 her manumission but she figured
 she might get popped, so decided to
 just obey. Thus, she dug her tailbone
 into the slimy, beige colored tile,
 sitting criss-cross applesauce.

*—I can't understand why y'all always
 askin to go play anyway!—*

Tessa then said. Safiya sent a glower in her
 direction. Because why was Auntie
 even asking that?! Was the answer
 not obvious? Safiya was sick
 of Auntie's rants, Poppa's hoots, and the
 doomsaying especially, and just
 being bored overall with seeing
 the same thing and doing the same thing
 every single day, eat, homeschool, clean,
 wash, pray, watch the news, watch videos,
 argue, repeat, repeat, repeat. And
 for how long? Safiya didn't eem
 wanna admit it, that'd she'd been

keeping count, tracking every week, month,
 year now, since this all had started. And
 she'd grown every passing day to fear,
 with a dire and grave sense of dread,
 that it was possible she would have
 to live like this into the day she
 was legally allowed to step out
 on her own, since for Aunt Tessania
 this was an age of calamity,
 and its vicissitudes meant they should
 tarry at home for the day of the
 Lord. If only they could go back,
 return to them times when oldheads did
 not admonish the young ones for their
 desire to go outside! Back when
 things had been flipped around, because
 it used to be that outdoors was
 always where Auntinem wanted the
 kids to be, so much so that it was
 common for her and Poppa to
 complain —*y'all kids these days would rather
 watch television or play on them
 phones instead of going to the
 library or to the damn park!*—

At present, Tessa is still goin,
 which pissed Safiya off now —*We train
 up a child in the way he should go,
 the Bible says. These kids act like you
 not supposed to respect authority.
 Honor thy mother and thy father
 and thy days shall go well with thee. It's
 the first Scripture with a promise—*
 so Safiya rolls her eyes, because
 all Safiya heard from these words
 was a threat, and she felt the urge to
 say as much, for she had a mind to
 choose vengeance, but she swallowed her
 devils, and her pride, and her birthday
 dreams too, and instead decided it would be
 best to just avoid getting into
 trouble, and just excuse herself to

the one and only refuge she had
in their tight, one bedroom apartment:
the bathroom.

Once inside, she gazed into the
mirror. There was a scowl on her face.
She stared at her nose, her brows, her chin.
There was a pimple on her forehead.
And there was a split behind her eyes.

It was like Safiya had been diced
up, the closer it drew to her big
day: split into chunks that were held
together only by a very thin
thread. And that thread was about to fray.

And she was honestly scared of what
that could mean. Not in a morbid way
like if she was worried she might die
or something. No, it was moreso that
a part inside her that was starting
to demand its freedom, that had been
desiring its freedom long before
any of this even started,
she was afraid that part of her would
yield, give up, disappear, just vanish,
like a radio signal she had
worked so hard to tune into,
suddenly gone from her detection
no matter how much she turned the dial,
because of interference from not
necessarily the power in
the Name which her Aunt clung to so hard
but from the simple fact that turning
thirteen marked the start of puberty.

How had Sasha coped with it? she
wondered. For the two had always been
alot similar, to the point that
people used to think that Sasha was
her mom when she would pick Safiya
up from school, or take her to the
library, the store, pool, whatever.

But unlike Sasha, Safiya had the unfortunate displeasure of daily reminders about judgment against —*a wicked and perverse generation*— as Tessa called it, and its transgressing children, among whom Safiya had begun to count herself, on account of her own supposedly unhallowed desires.

And unlike Sasha, Safiya had never lifted a standard against her Aunt's tirades and tyranny; had not tried to stretch her wings out here (she never let the cat out the bag). Sasha used to argue, used to roar, and thunder against Tessa; but Safiya used to run back then. She would hide in the bathroom, and cut the water on, and squeeze cheap jabon into her palm, and count twenty seconds like they'd all learned to do so well that year, and whisper to herself some plea for mercy, because the floods were still happening, and mad people were getting sick, and losing their homes and jobs, and people thought there would be famine and pestilence too.

And Safiya had been scared, because while it had been fun to cuss when the adults were gone, it did not feel good to have to consider that maybe you were an abomination before God, and the literal reason the world was in such disarray. She wanted to be like Sasha, even before she watched Sasha come home that night with an earring on.

But —*Holiness is still right*— Aunt Tessa would declare, while Sasha would yell at her, and the aunt would either try to hit her or

exorcise her, two different kinds of
 laying on of hands, both within the
 realm of responsibility for
 her religion. And Poppa would tell
 them —*aight now, knock it off. Y'all gettin too loud*—
 but he also always sided with
 Auntie. And Festus, well Festus he
 did his best to intervene,
 encouraging them to —*leave it
 alone. We cannot change each other's
 minds so just drop it.*—

Because Festus just wanted peace
 and he could tell it wasn't headed
 there. He knew his sister: that her
 convictions were as firm as Sasha's,
 young Sasha, who was bold, and did not
 yield, which is a cultural taboo,
 in a Black household especially if
 —*me and my house shall serve the Lord.*—

He knew what Sasha not obeying
 the parent would lead to, and he loved
 Sasha, even in her new name and
 piercings and hairstyles. He ain't want her
 out in the streets, not in a time like
 this, as dangerous as it had
 become. And Safiya, silent, lived
 for her big cuz too: admired
 her tenacity, her fierceness, and
 crop tops, painted nails,
 and skirts, and wanted her to stick
 around, and keep being her lighthouse,
 even though she never let on to
 anyone about it. She was frightened yet
 intrigued, and started hyping Sasha up
 behind the scenes whenever she heard
 her clap back, and had hoped to one day
 get on her level, maybe even
 pull her aside and ask her hush hush
 if Sasha could help her do makeup
 —*for the first time.*—

Then one day, Sasha was no more.
Gone, like as if she'd been caught up in
her own kind of a rapture. There had
been no note or nothing, not even a
kiss goodbye in the night, a secret
whisper to Safiya at least, and
the lil one thought she at least deserved
that, because that was her big cuz. Her
inspiration. Gone, though, without a
trace, and Safiya ain't get the chance
to make herself known to her, and
talk hair and other stuff, and
probably would never be able
to. It could have been them both, she thought,
fighting Auntie together, and if
Sasha had been planning to dip
—*she should have just told me*—
Safiya mutters to herself,
making sure nobody hears her and
accuses her of backtalk.

Safiya realizes this is what's been
bothering her, as she stood on
the precipice of a birthday that
lay just under a day away: she
felt abandoned. Alone with her
feelings about herself, about her
newfound girlhood. And who would
Safiya even be able to
look up to now? She had no friends;
they could not have visitors and they
never went to anyone else's
house except blood family members;
and on her phone days she was not
allowed to video chat and stuff
because Tessa was of course stricter
on her than on Malcolm (smh).
Her Uncle was here, and he knew T,
but he couldn't really relate and
he was much older so certain things
he didn't get. And so Safiya
was feeling a tightness inside now:
because she was about to be trapped

not just in the house and in between prayers but in between vocal chords that would soon drop a few octaves, and a face that would soon start to sprout hair.

Now all these musings surge like a whirlwind up under Safiya, and so she flings open the bathroom door and storms into the living room.

She kicks the noodles over purposely, and she folds her arms, and walks right up in front of the television. She turned her back to it, and Safiya squared her shoulders. She locked her knees, and looked right at Poppa, who started telling her —*move, boy*— but Safiya shook her head, and to make sure that Aunt Tessania could hear, she did raise her voice, she did choose vengeance and violence, and to rouse the house, making sure she was clear

—*WHAT HAPPENED TO GOD GAVE US NOT THE SPIRIT OF FEAR?*—

Malcolm stared at his sister, eyes wide, mouth on the floor. Her voice had tackled its way toward them all. It brought Aunt

Tessania out the kitchen so fast (who had still been mumbling to herself about how —*children shall rise up against their parents, the Bible says*— when here come Safiya tryna counter-divide the Word, to thump it back at her). Auntie rolled up on Safiya —*what'd you say?*— —*Nah because doesn't the Bible tell you to have a spirit of love and a sound mind? What's sound about locking yourself and your whole family away like this?!*—

Festus rushed in between them, grabbing his sister. —*Tessa, chill*— He said.

—*Wait, cuz Im tryna figure out who this child talking to*— Tessa said. And Malcolm is skittering out the way because now his noodles got knocked over too, so there were two trails of juice slithering across the floor. Safiya ducked and dodged Auntie's arms, and nearly bumped into Malcolm who was trying to get the mop, and Poppa is asking everyone to sit down because he can't see the television, and Festus instructs Safiya to go sit in the room —*And don't you come out there til you learn how to mind yo' mouth. Always gotta be smart!*— Tessa growled after her. —*And since you know the Word o God so much, go 'head and read it while you in there too!*— Poppa finalized.

Safiya sighed through her nose behind the room door. She lunged at nothing in particular, balled her fists up, punching the air. Then, she wagged her head at the door, in the direction of the saints of the house who loved to tag team her so much. All of this was inaudible, as she did not want to have someone threatening to give her something to complain about. How tired she was with living here; her stomach practically boiled with frustration. She was tight, so tight yo if she could have yelled again she would.

There was a blow up bed on the floor, midnight blue in color, and Safiya sat on it gently, all grumpy and over it, over everything. The thought ran through her mind right then that maybe she should just pack her things and go. But then she thought

about Malcolm. He'd be here all alone. But then she considered: Hadn't Sasha left her? she might as well step too, right? But would she be happy with her life, and safe? able to move on past all the shit Tessa used to say to and about her and girls like her? Was Sasha currently happy, safe? And able to move on? Or was she gone out her mind like Safiya heard Aunt Tess say one time? What if Sasha was hurt? Would Safiya meet a similar fate if she crossed over to the other side of this here threshold?

Safiya hoped and prayed that wherever Sasha was, she could at least be free from any and all condemnation, and that she had found healing from the battle scars Tessa had inflicted upon her with the sword of her Biblically holy yet politically hateful spirit.

She looked at the Bible, which rested on a small dresser, mahogany, scratched up. The Book was nothing but worn leather and creases and highlights of green and yellow and blue that had accumulated across three generations in their bloodline, going back to the family matriarch, Beatrice Hubbard, Poppa's late wife, of South Carolina. The girl snatched the tome from the top of the dresser, but not because she was about to read it.

She was going for what lay under it: the phone. Malcolm must have powered it off and plugged it up to the charger while Safiya was in the bathroom. Safiya figured that while she was in the room, and Malcolm was out there, she may as well turn it on, lower the volume, and look for weird, funny or ratchet shit to giggle and gag at. She pressed the power button and watched as the light came on.

Not seconds after she did this, here come Malcolm opening the door, like as if he had sensed that she touched the device, talking about some —*ooo, Auntie said don't you touch that phone.*— He shut the door behind him though and walked over to Safiya. —*So? What you gon do? Snitch?*— Malcolm sighed and sat down on the bed beside her rolling his eyes. —*if you get in trouble you can't blame nobody but yourself.*— —*well that won't happen if you shut up, big mouth*— Her brother was such a goody two shoes sometimes, yo.

The phone finally loaded so that all the widgets for the different apps showed up. Malcolm tried to touch one —*wait hold on, lemme see something real quick before you do that*— he said. But Safiya pulled away, giggling. —*Nooo, noooo, bro we not watching none of those conspiracy theory videos you like watching*— —*What you talkin bout? It's not even conspiracies, you just closed minded*—

Safiya looked at him like he was goofy. —*Close minded? The other day you was watching some shit that was saying that during slavery it was niggas who could fly!*— Safiya started giggling then. —*Fly, my nigga? Bro you're wild*— Malcolm kissed his teeth. —*And you be over here believing white Man science stuff, talkin about dinosaurs was real, like*— —*Bro!*— Safiya hissed, her eyes wide. —*You telling me all them fossils is dragon bones? Dragons???* Bro. *You not makin no sense*— Safiya said, tapping her temple with her fingers emphatically. Mal, unlike her or Uncle Festus, was still a believer in God. He took seriously the morning and nighttime prayers their aunt made them do. Safiya assumed that that was what made her brother so naive about certain things, and while she did not fault him for it, she certainly wasn't gon let him start telling her that the moon landing was fake again, or that melanin gave Black people powers, or, better yet, that there was truth to some meme which said that Black people would get powers on December 21st because it was the darkest day of the year relative to the earth's distance from the sun.

Malcolm glared at her. —*What's the myth of the day, bruh?*— Safiya said. —*It's not a myth. There's gon be a meteor shower that opens up a portal for ancestor spirits and ghosts to cross over into this world*— Malcolm said. Safiya looked at him goofy, but tried to hold back her dubious facial expression. —*Okay*—

—*There's magic in the world, you just don't wanna believe it. You just wanna be self centered and mad all the time.*—
 Malcolm said. —*Aight, bro. First you gave tin foil hat, now you my shrink—*
 —*Im just saying, you act like she wasn't probably feeling how you feel right now before she left —*
 —*Who?— —You know who—* Malcolm said simply.

His eyes softened, connecting with hers. There was this odd kind of gaze in it, like when light penetrates murky waters and you can finally see fish swimming around beneath the surface. Safiya recognized this stare; it was the same exact one from when she first corrected him on pronouns. This was something about her brother she found comforting at times but extremely frustrating or upsetting at others. It was like he could read her down, and he never meant it in a callous or cruel way. It was genuine concern for sure. It was depth and sagacity.

Yet he underestimated a lot of shit. For, Malcolm was ten years old and a boy, as far as Safiya could tell. Which meant he was young when the first lockdowns had happened so all he really was used to was this bullshit; and that's on top of the fact that he didn't have a reason to feel choked up and chained up by the idea of having to wear short hair and boxers and the other stuff that boys are supposedly supposed to do. Safiya just shakes her head right now, though because none of this was stuff

she wanted to verbalize or
 discuss with her little brother.
 She got up, and went to the dresser
 drawer, pulling it open. She
 started to take out the outfit
 she had tucked away, the pair of jeans
 and the shirt that she had cut in the
 shadow of the night when her aunt was
 unawares.

—let's take some pictures— she said. Malcolm
 flipped over to the app so that he
 could do exactly what she said.
 Safiya pulled on the fresh cut jeans
 and then the shirt. She admired her
 handiwork, all the cuts in the side.
*—alright make me look nice now.
 Get all the right angles. I don't need
 to be looking hit. these for my
 Bday—* *—okay—* Malcolm says.
 Safiya turned around and saw that he
 already had the phone pointed up.

Lil bro knelt on the floor, started
 snapping a few flicks one after the
 other. Safiya switched into
 different poses, sometimes sticking out
 her tongue, sometimes throwing up peace signs
 or sets. *—yes now show me some face, show
 me some bawdy, too, honey—* Mal said.
 Safiya laughed *—what you know about
 face? What you know about bawdy?—*
—I was in school too I'm not that young—
—alright that's enough— Safiya said,
 afraid someone might come into the
 room right then. She hastened to take the
 jeans off and then the shirt, folded them
 up, and put them back in the drawer.

Then Safiya sat down on the blow-up bed next to her brother. She leaned her head against Malcolm's shoulders, who held the phone screen up so she could see what magic he worked on the camera. Malcolm lay his head against hers too and started to scroll through the pictures that he had just taken so that Safiya could judge which one she liked and which ones she did not. Most of them were good. One of them was elite.

—*Okay. Im stickin wit dis one*— Safiya said.
 —*Post it on our lil burner account?*— she added. —*No doubt*— Malcolm said, referring to a social media profile he made where all the adults in they family was blocked so they could not see the content. Mind you, right then, someone starts opening their room door!

Had Aunt Tessania heard them and their lil photoshoot? The siblings jumped up. Safiya immediately drew away from her brother and grabbed the Bible off the dresser. Malcolm leapt to the other side of the blow up bed, as if he'd been scrolling alone, while his sister propped the Holy Book up against her knees. And this happened mad fast, just in time for when the door opened. Uncle Festus, however, was who was standing in the frame, not Auntie. He had a look in his eyes that gave very y'all ain't slick and he turned his head behind him with a grin. —*Malcolm, go into the living room now*— Festus said, with his voice raised a lil. Malcolm got up and did as he was told. The bed creaked and squoaned under him.

Festus pats the boy's head as he leaves the room. Then, Uncle Festus closed the bedroom door and came on over to sit on the air bed next to his niece. He said not a word, just sat there.

Safiya looked up at Unc, using her finger to trace the jungle of a beard hanging daringly from his bony face, while the Bible sat open at her feet. She poked a finger through his beard, giggling. Festus chuckled and smiled at her. He inhaled, closed his eyes, and just laid back on the bed. —*What you reading?*— He asked.

Safiya groaned. —*Uncleeeee*— she replied, not eager to start talking bout the Bible. —*look, Tess told me to quiz you*— he said. —*why? Usually she does*—
—*I know. I told her she be bein too hard on you. She said she would think about it, the whole us going up on the roof thing, though.*—

—*You deadass?*— Safiya exclaimed, looking up into his face with sparks in her eyes. Had he gotten Auntie to change her mind or sumn? Festus jumped and made a facial expression asking her to watch her mouth and her volume. —*I don't know. It's not a guarantee though. But, even if, I'm willing to sneak you and your brother up there if we can pull that off on the low low*—
—*WHAT?!*— Safiya practically jumped off the bed. —*yoooo*— She could hardly contain herself now. Not her Uncle bringing back his bad boy days again for her!

She tried to lower her voice.
—How we supposed to finesse that?—
 Safiya said, and her mind was
 already starting some ideas.
—Lawdy, I shouldn't even have said
nothing cuz I know you. Hothead ass,
just like yo Moms was—
 Safiya grinned. She sat back down.
—You right.—
—Let's see what your Aunt says first
and we worry bout everything
else after that— Festus concluded.

Safiya was quiet. A warm feel
 kinda seeped into her forehead just then.
 If Safiya was accustomed
 to her aunt and Poppa coming
 for her about her mouth or how *—smart—*
 she was, or if she was used to Mal
 being his annoying lil naive
 yet perceptive self, she was
 equally used to Festus showing
 up to comfort her in some way. She
 really loved that about him. That's
 why she had outed herself to him
 first. Festus then laughed. *—My sister*
be wildin' I swear— Safiya
 giggled. *—thank you! Yo, was it always*
like that with her?— —Not really. I mean
Poppa took us to church but it was
always Nana who was religious.
Even then, she was calmer with it.
It's the time period got your Aunt
actin' up. Fear makes people do that.
You were right earlier— Festus said.

Safiya looked down at the
 Bible. Her eyes had to adjust to
 the font, and her brain had to switch to
 the Old English understanding for
 a minute. *—just give me the last three*
verses, ion need the whole thing.—
 Festus urged. Safiya read aloud

—He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.—

As she read, she couldn't help but wonder what it was exactly about these words that would have got her aunt going if she had been the one to read them out loud. She tried to imitate the cadence and tone that her Aunt or even Poppa would have used, something that was convicted and impassioned, that was melodious yet not, that was like poetry yet it wasn't; something that struck with power just from the shape of the sounds.

She remembered going to church back in the before times; the preachers used to have the same power in their throats and their breaths would whoop and huff with ice and they would stamp their feet, and behind you always heard a cue from the piano or the guitar, response by way of music and not words, but music that rang with the same power as the words that were spoken, until suddenly you heard an outcry boom like a cannon from the pews, and the Aunties and Grandmas jump first, and a few men follow after, like they been zapped one by one and they start to do this *—shout—* thing as they called it, although to Safiya's young mind all she could see was their tears. And it

used to scare her, especially when that spell overcame Sasha one time, who flailed in circles yelling —*ey! hallelujah!!!! hallelujah!!!!*— so loud, her voice was a drum of its own. Sasha was young young when that went down, and she was deep in the Word, and was sitting at the edge of her seat during the sermon, taking notes even, and it had made her mother so proud of the child she assumed was her only begotten son, once that holy ghost fell upon Sasha.

And the family had talked it up with joy and excitement and had been egging and nagging Safiya to follow suit and go with Sasha to the altar or the upper room. But, there was nothing to celebrate from Safiya's vantage point, even as everyone else clapped and slapped up oil onto people's foreheads and praised down, because again all she could see was pain: sobs that echoed like ghastly omens, tongues that shrilled like shrieks from the darkness; tears that dripped like blood and like floods.

Was this God? she wondered, and not in a theological sense, regarding the doctrinal rightness or wrongness of these charismatas, but rather —*why would God whip his kids?*— she had once asked aloud (and gotten reprimanded for blaspheming and making fun of the Spirit of God).

But, that's what it had looked like to her: people quaking and quickening under unseen whips and scorns, with all their devotion and emotion just pleas for mercy, not just in a

spiritual sense, but in a lived sense,
a visceral, haptical sense, a
sense that was felt in one's very bones,
in one's skin, one's teeth, one's very heart,
and mind and soul and muscles and
memories and groin. That's what
Safiya thought she was
witnessing, and she did not like it.

The idea of going to war with
herself scared her, especially since
she knew that she did not share their faith.
Which was why she was so glad when her
big cuz dropped the act and let it go,
because it had seemed that Sasha had
only undergone a Pentecost
out of desperation, because she
knew who she was, and had been trying
to wage spiritual warfare against
her own soul, of course to no avail,
because just as Jacob could not beat
the angel, Sasha could not beat hers.

It was when all got shut indoors, that
Sasha began sneaking out in the
night, worrying Aunt Tessa because
not only was she not masking up,
but coming back wearing on new things,
bringing both germs and godlessness home.
And now, this time, the baptism was
in something Safiya actually
wanted for herself; and rather than
the fam wanting for her to follow
Sasha into whatever this strange
immersion and transformation was,
she had been being told to avoid
that road. It was this that helped her to
understand why younger Sasha and
perhaps all the people she saw in
church back then had clung to the devout
option. For, in the same way that she
used to go hide from the fights and wash
her hands, she realized that her big cuz

Sasha used to try her best to be the Bride of the holy lamb back in those younger years because she wanted to feel like a clean woman for once.

And, in the same way Sasha had eventually succumbed to the strength of the divine within herself, and gained her new name, her soul name, her chosen name, Safiya had found that the righteous thing for herself would be something quite similar. So she rejected that government name which her mother had bestowed on her, and like the militants of old who traded their slave names for African names, she arose as someone called—*pure*—not in the sense Christians may have meant, but in a manner she knew for her.

She had googled the name too, looked it up. —*Safiya. It means untroubled, serene, pure, steady, calm*— It was hard to be those things up under this roof. It was constant strife for Safiya, ironic, since Tessa seemed to think this house was like the ark in the Deluge, a haven in the chaos. But, maybe that was exactly the problem: because two of every kind did not make sense for Safiya. It never did. And since when did lions belong in a ship? Which is to say, she knew, even before having the words to describe herself: she did not belong in here. She belonged out there. Safiya glanced at the barricaded fire escape. —*I'm not waiting on the Lord*— she then said.

—*Hmm?*— Festus mumbled. His hand was on his chest, which rose and fell so steadily you couldn't have been able to tell he was breathing if you aint watch close enough. Safiya looked at him, straight in the eyes. Then she got up and walked to the barricade, putting her hands on it. Something was stirring up inside her. It was like if fingers had seized upon her, and stretched her like a ball of rubber bands before relaxing the pressure. Only to then pull her in different directions once again. Repeatedly it was this, stretching and loosing, constricting and contracting, and she was feeling worn. Like she would pop, snap, break. She randomly thought about those science articles she had seen which said that the ecosystem would reach total collapse in ten years.

She started pulling on the panels, and her Uncle got up off the bed, trying to calm her. —*Safiya, chill*— Safiya pulled away from him and crossed over to the smaller window on the other side of the bedroom. —*Why did my generation have to get the judgement soon as we come out the womb?*— Safiya said to him

—*Judgment? This aint no judgement. Man is just reapin what he sowed. The Man, I should say*— Festus replied, tryna console. —*Thas real easy to say when you done had your chance at a life of sin for yourself. You had your teen years, Uncle. You got to go to school, have friends. The last time I was in school I was in the fifth grade!*— Safiya said.

Festus leaned forward, watching his niece closely, tryna absorb what she was saying. His face was warm, his eyes soft but not in the way Malcolm's would be, with its precision and deep knowing. It was just gentle, and nothing further. For, he had an inkling of where this was going. This wasn't like them other moments when she had vented to him before. Wasn't even like some regular I wanna go play outside type shit.

—*When you say a life of sin... You mean parties? Drinking? Drugs, sex, whatev*— —*No*— Safiya cut him off. Although these things were a curiosity, it was moreso about the option to experience them if she wanted. —*those things is fun, but those things was all we had*— Uncle continued. And so Safiya just shook her head and said —*And what do we have?*— Safiya was kind of teary eyed now, and she was mad about that, cuz she was not the type who liked to cry. There were some moments of silence, before Festus reached for her hand to pull her into an embrace.

—*Yall have beauty*— Festus grunted, the bass of his voice thrumbling into Safiya's body. —*Yall have a power, a mission, to create beauty out of yourselves, in the midst of all this fuckery. And that sound like hope to me. Sound like a future. You bein you. Sasha bein her, somewhere out there*— —*Somewhere out there*— Safiya muttered. She pulled away from her Uncle.

Suddenly, Malcolm's voice —*GUYS! GUYS LOOK!*
 From the kitchen Aunt Tessania yells
 —*Ay, what's all that hollering for,*
boy! —GUYS!— Malcolm continued —*COME SEE THIS!—*
 Uncle Festus jumped up off the bed,
 and Safiya broke away from the
 window. They both snatched open the door
 and rushed into the sala just as
 Aunt Tessa was doing the same thing.
 Malcolm is holding out the phone and
 his body is stiff and he looks
 terrified; Poppa is asking him
 repeatedly —*Boy, what's wrong witchu?*
What's wrong witchu, boy?— and all Malcolm keeps
 saying is —*Do yall see it?— —See what?—*
 Festus asked. —*The hashtag! The hashtag!— —Malcolm,*
booby, what are you
talking about? Huh?— Aunt Tessa says,
 taking the phone and holding it
 strangely, tryna inspect it. Uncle
 Festus has his hands on the boy's
 shoulders, trying to calm him.
 Meanwhile, Safiya doesn't know what
 to do. Auntie beckons her to come
 and hands the phone to her —*What is this?—*

Safiya froze. Had Malcolm posted the
 birthday pics?! She looked him in the eyes
 to make sure, but all she saw was fright.
 Safiya takes the phone, slowly and
 squints at the screen. It is jet black with
 some weird shape in the middle that is
 purple colored. It kinda
 reminded her of a snake, but it
 was wrapped around some kind of a pole.
 As she looked it over, Malcolm is
 still whimpering, and rocking and
 Uncle and Poppa and Auntie are
 still asking him questions and getting
 only scattered answers out of him.
 Underneath the emblem, Safiya
 noticed the hashtag he spoke of.
 —*#TheSerpentWillArise—*

There was something ominous about that. Safiya could see why Malcolm was so frightened. But she figured there was some logical explanation.

—Fess, go get the anointing oil—

Tessa urged. *—I think it was a creepypasta—* Safiya said.

That was her verdict. And there would be no prayer needed, she figured. But

—What's that?— The three adults asked. *—It's like urban legend, folklore, myth, but specifically made on the internet or social media. It's almost always scary stories, too—*

Safiya got the random feeling that maybe this had something to do with Sasha. She couldn't exactly name how, but she knew that she had been thinking about their cousin all day, and perhaps Malcolm had been as well. Maybe he had even tried to look her up, or looked up something that had to do with missing children, missing girls, and instead stumbled on hotep related mystical and pseudo-science, conspiracy type stuff that he usually liked to look up.

—It said... said his name was Stickman. Th-that he would... he would kidnap me—

Malcolm said. *—Aint nobody gon hurt you—* Poppa answered very firmly.

—Amen— Aunt Tessa said. *—The devil is a liar. I rebuke that. This why we keep yall right up under dis roof—* *—Was you talkin to someone?—*

Safiya asked. She was trying to find a way to steer the convo away from religion. *—What you mean?—*

Malcolm said. Festus was walking into the living room with the olive oil. *—Like, did someone say*

*that to you, like the kidnapping part
or was it something you just read
about or saw in a video?—*

Safiya continued. She looked at
the screen again. —*Okay we gon pray
real quick—* Aunt Tessa said. —*Pray?—*

Safiya asked
looking up. —*but, this isn't real—*
The last thing she wanted to do was
a long prayer over some bullshit
from on the internet! Malcolm!

—*Scripturally speaking the mind and the
eyes and the ears are the gateway to
the soul, child—* Tessa said, bringing faith
back into it. —*We wrestle not against flesh and blood
but principalities and
spiritual wickedness in high
places. This why I regulate
what yall engage in on this phone. Now
I'mma have to make sure I look
into this creeping pasta stuff.—*

—*Creepypasta—* Safiya
corrected, rolling her eyes. Here she
go. —*That—* Tessa said, warning the girl.
And with finality, with her hands
she called them all into a prayer
circle. Safiya paused for a
minute, looking again at the phone
screen. The purple sign and the black
background was gone.
Safiya scowled at her brother, and
her Aunt, from the depths of her soul.
She gave her hands over like Tess
demanded, but not without vowing
to herself that she definitely
needed to get up out of this house.
Not just for one day; she needed to
figure out how she was gon get out
of here for good. This shit was a dub!