

OCTAVIA'S BROOD:

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES FROM SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

edited by
Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown

foreword by
Sheree Renée Thomas



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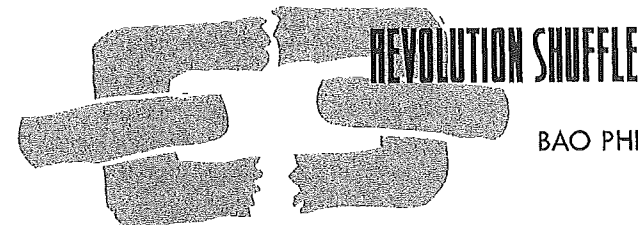
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AK Press
674-A 23rd Street
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www.akpress.org
akpress@akpress.org
510.208.1700

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

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



SHE GOT TO THE TOP OF THE HIGH HILL FIRST. SHE SAT IN THE GRASS, dropping her pack down beside her, and drummed her fingers on the machine pistol holstered at her hip. As he caught up and stood beside her, she looked up, cocking her head, and flashed a crooked grin. The moon was out, lighting wispy bare clouds in the sky. "Old man hair clouds," she quipped.

After a moment of silence, she asked him, "What do you miss right now?"

This game again. "A messy plate of nachos," he said with a sigh. "You?"

"Phở," she replied, pronouncing it the way only a Vietnamese American whose best language skills revolved around a menu could. He heard it the way a Vietnamese American who understood Vietnamese best when it was coming from his parents would. He smiled. Phở was always her answer.

"How about that lady with the shack out by that camp," he asked softly, craning his neck, peering up at stars. "You remember, that camp just outside the remains of Kansas City?"

She let out a dismissive puff of air through her lips. "Dingy beef water and spaghetti noodles do not a phở make, buddy," she laughed. "You of all people should feel me on that one."

"Certainly wasn't as good as my mom's, that's for sure," he deadpanned.

She laughed loud and sudden, her smile cornering deep into her cheeks. They were about the same height and roughly the same age, so most assumed that they were brother and sister, though they could

not look any more different. While both had black hair, hers cascaded down her back, a river in the dark. His was ragged and short like a burnt field. Her small long eyes slanted, like two dark swans, beaks dipping in to kiss above her nose. His eyes were deep, difficult. She was beautiful, magnetic, even if she did not want to be. His appearance was forgettable at best; for better or worse, he was always the background.

In the distance, the rough silhouettes of nine giant metal pistons rose into the night sky, temporarily blotting out their view of the moon and stars. The hydraulic arms lifting the pistons repetitively jackknifed and then stretched with a low bellowing groan. The drums of steel hung suspended in the air for a moment like the hammers of gods poised to strike, then dropped dully to the earth, thumping the ground, the noise and impact felt and heard for miles. Though they were used to tremors from the machinery, the two companions started slightly and looked down the hill at the prison camp surrounding the gigantic ground-shaking devices.

The dim light emanating from the interior complexes barely illuminated the pacing guards and nesting snipers on top of the tall walls. The guards' heads constantly turned on their necks as the guards vigilantly watched the two populations, one on either side of the barbed wire and thick concrete. On one side were the throngs of shuffling zombies attracted by the sound of the giant pistons, groaning listlessly against the slanting thick concrete base of the wall. And inside the work camp were the Asian Americans and Arabs forcibly interned there. Officially, the incarcerated were doing a service for their country by maintaining the rhythmic dance of the giant pistons, keeping them fueled, repairing them, as the sound and impact of the giant tamping devices lured the shambling hungry masses. Less officially, the smell of the inmate's flesh, tantalizingly out of reach of the zombies on the other side of the wall, kept the undead there, fresh meat outside of the lion's cage.

Zombies. Brown people. On any given day, the armed guards were prepared to shoot either.

He looked over and saw that she had closed her eyes and leaned her head slightly back. She smiled softly, every breath full and deep. She felt the night air on her, pretending she was somewhere else, in some other time. She often did this before she did something reckless. Her

hope was that, if she died, her soul would travel to the last beautiful place she imagined.

He never asked her what her soul's place looked like; it was none of his business.

She opened her eyes and sighed, then smiled at him. She pulled off her boots, took a moment to curl her toes in the grass.

"I see you chose red," he remarked, looking at her toenails. It was one of the small things she did to feel normal. Her tiny way to hang on to what used to be, before the world around her went to shit.

She nodded, smiling. "I did them myself this time," she said, looking down at the grass between her toes.

"You didn't let me do it?" he asked dryly. "You took a job away from a fellow Vietnamese person."

She smirked and reached into her bag. She sat, cross-legged in the grass, and began to load bullets into spare magazines for her AK-47. He noticed one or two zombies at the bottom of the hill, slowly shambling in their direction, lured away from the thumping pistons of the tamping machines and smell of mass-incarcerated human flesh. Without taking his eyes from them he rolled his G36 carbine off his shoulder and twirled the silencer onto the muzzle, silently berating himself for not having done that earlier.

"Bad television," she said suddenly with a nod, biting her lip slightly. "I miss bad television."

He readied his rifle and looked through its scope for the wandering zombies. "I miss reading trashy magazines at the dentist's office," he said.

The zombie that was ambling closest to them was wearing a dirty trucker's cap. He put Trucker Cap Zombie in his crosshairs.

"Think they caught a whiff of us?" she asked, not looking up, still clacking bullets into a mag.

"Shouldn't have," he answered. "We're downwind."

She nodded. Her eyes darted up and tracked Trucker Cap, watching it shamble. Her fingers didn't miss a beat, still loading bullets.

The zombies did not seem to head deliberately toward the two of them, but he kept his scope on them, just in case. She looked over at him and contemplated him quietly. Her best friend. They had only known each other five months.

Five months in this new America seemed like an eternity.

"You sure you want to go down there with me?" she asked quietly.

He did not take his sights from the walking dead, nor did he reply.

She gave a resigned smile in his general direction, shrugged her shoulders, and reached for another empty magazine. She watched her own fingers as they plucked the long pointy 7.62mm cartridges from her pack and methodically stabbed them down into the clip.

"One of these days, I'm going to get both of us killed," she quipped.

"Better than being locked up in a prison camp like a fucking sardine," he answered softly.

When the epidemic hit America, everyone had a theory about who started it. Seventy percent of the American population eventually turned zombie, and those that didn't had to blame someone. Because many of the people who were taken by the wasting disease happened to be white, God was not a viable culprit. The field was wide open for the survivors in America to pick a suspect, a villain, an origin for this nameless evil. And so the government classified it as a terrorist act, without evidence, without even an idea of what caused it. And the American people duly picked the enemy to be vilified—China, North Korea, and the nebulous ever-shifting region known as the Middle East.

After what was left of the U.S. government and civilization regrouped on the East Coast, they started to construct the giant devices that shook the earth. They built fortified complexes in the middle of America to house the machinery. The noise and the force of the giant pistons drew the throngs of zombies to the isolated machines away from the coasts, giving the majority of survivors precious time to regroup. However, the complexes needed humans to operate and maintain the giant machines, a job no one wanted. It was like living under house arrest in a log cabin continuously surrounded by rabid wolves.

Eventually some enterprising politician suggested that surviving Americans of Asian and Arab descent be interned as laborers in these camps, an idea that caught on as quickly as the plague itself. *For their own protection*, the politicians insisted. Hordes of survivors had formed lynch mobs after the disease was classified as a terrorist act, attacking and brutalizing yellow and brown people. There were not enough police to protect them, not enough infrastructure left to respond to this racialized violence—or so the politicians said. Instead

they argued that it would be in the best interest of the "targeted communities" to be guarded in these work camps away from the other survivors. No one explained how herding up Asian and Arab Americans based on the color of their skin, seizing their property, and then forcibly incarcerating them without trial in work camps could be in their best interest. But then again, history had shown conclusively that the American public didn't need a complicated explanation as much as they needed a clear enemy to blame.

Tragic times do not beg for complexity. After the emergency legislation was passed, police and military, deputized armed civilians, and new private military contractors began rounding up and transporting Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and any person in that particular color spectrum into their new work camps. It didn't matter if a person actually had ancestry from North Korea, China, or the Middle East. It became all too apparent that was not the point. There were Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, Chicanos, and Black people thrown into the camps for protesting, for daring to raise their voices in opposition, for choosing the wrong side. Close enough. And thus people learned not to speak out against the camps. In the wake of disaster, America became even less subtle.

Less than two years ago, the camps like the one below them were not even finished. Now this one sat thumping and belching smoke, crawling with the undead outside and the living entombed within.

She finished loading her last spare clip and dropped her hands down to the grass, looking down at the internment complex, listening to the pistons groan as they began their upward arc into the night sky.

She remembered those early days. One man and his battered, dirty driver's license. He had struggled against the officers at first, desperate and terrified. One of his wild swings hit a police officer on the side of the head, making the cop's cap fall off his sweaty blond hair. Seeing the cop enraged, the man wept, dropped to his knees, pulled out his wallet. He held up his ID like a shield. He apologized, crying, saying he was scared, he had a family. He swore he was Indian, not Arab. She was sure they believed him. They shot him anyway. His driver's license flipped face down into the dirt next to his body.

"You know, even if we succeed, some of them aren't going to want to come with us," he murmured, finally letting his rifle rest against his

shoulder as Trucker Cáp shambled off in another random direction away from them.

"I know," she replied, pulling on her boots and standing up slowly.

"You're getting three square meals a day and you're living in a camp protected from zombies by the U.S. military," he sighed.

"Armed private militarized contractors," she corrected him, cocking an eyebrow at him. They both knew how dismal life was in the camps. The cramped, stifled quarters. The lousy food. Sixteen-hour shifts. How everything smelled like oil and hot metal. The flat screen mounted on the wall in the cafeteria would sometimes broadcast a message from out east, declaring how important their work maintaining the pistons was. As if they had a choice—the shadows of men with guns, always, long on the floor. How hard it was to sleep with the constant drone of zombies hungry for you, how you could almost feel the tips of their rotting fingers digging into your flesh at all times. How turning down the sexual advances of a guard could get you thrown off the wall. How easy they made it to betray one another even in there.

Try as she might, she couldn't blame the prisoners. She had met a couple of activists who could not understand why the incarcerated were so, to their eyes, submissive. Obedient. But she knew that the truth was complicated. If not the camps, where could they go?

A week ago, many miles from where they stood, they had sat at a campfire splitting a cup of instant ramen with some strips of beef jerky thrown in. White trash phở, they called it. This was when she told him her plan. The light of the fire flickered high in the canopy of trees above as she watched him carefully to see his reaction.

"For the ones that follow us, where do we take them?" he asked quietly. "Alaska?"

She laughed at the mention of the largest American territory completely free of the epidemic, because it had had the good fortune of being far enough away when the epidemic hit to shore up its defenses before it got to them.

"We'd have better odds of creating a time machine and going back to try to prevent all this from happening."

"Hawai'i?" he asked.

"No way they'd let us in. We're like dogs with rabies to them."

He paused. Before he could continue, she shook her head, looking

into the distance with a slight smile as if she was trying to visualize a place for them in the world. "East Coast, no way. They might be the most racially mixed region left, but a group of Asians and Arabs walking out of the middle? They'd shoot us before we'd get within sight of that ridiculous wall of theirs—or ship us back to one of these prison camps. I don't want to get into that fight between Mexico and the new nation-state of Texas in the South. Southwest is New Aztlan and the other united Native folks, they've got their hands full shoring up against raiders and zombies." She paused for a moment. "Maybe they'd let in one or two of us. But an entire group of Asian and Arab refugees recently busted out of a federal labor camp? They'd probably get threatened with drone bombing for agreeing to help any of us."

She chuckled and shook her head sadly, biting her lip, her eyes distant as she continued. "And the North, where all the white hunters and survivalists have dug in? Deer have got a better chance of going into those woods and surviving than we do."

"Don't mess with Wisconsin," he quipped. He waited for a moment, then asked, "How about back to the homeland? Somewhere in Asia?"

She laughed, long and hard.

He turned his head back to see she had been watching him silently, contemplating him. She often did not have to hear words to know what a person was thinking—intuition was her gift.

"No, buddy," she winked. "It's right in the middle of the box for our people, or nothing."

The middle of America, infested with zombies. Ruled by small warlords and thug fiefdoms, many of them made up of the remains of the Minutemen and other batshit-crazy racist militias. The most dangerous place in the world. The place no one wanted to be.

"And it's just one camp," he said.

"The first one," she corrected with a slight nod and a smile.

He looked over at her, shaking his head slowly in bemused disbelief. As the days got more grim, she somehow grew stronger, as if she lived to be the opposite of the dim future that seemed all but certain.

He turned to look back down at the camp, pondering their chances. "How many more camps are there just like that one? We can't save everyone."

"Doesn't mean we can't try," she countered. She waited a moment, crossing her arms in front of her in the slightly chill night air, before reminding him, "You don't have to go with me."

"You wouldn't be much of a leader if you didn't have at least one follower," he smirked, and she laughed her unbreakable laugh, shaking her head. Her smile broke clear across her face—her smile had become his horizon. But he did not say this out loud.

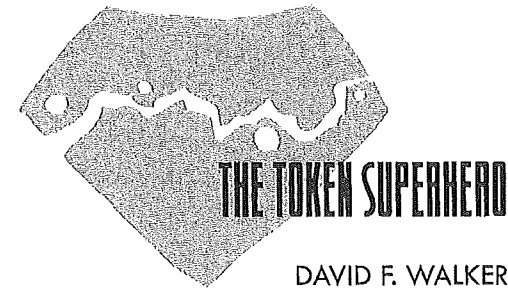
He turned and looked her solemnly in the eyes. "Is it too much to ask for a happy ending?"

She smiled sadly. "I don't think there are any happy endings left."

After a moment, she said, "I miss hotel rooms. I used to love to travel, you know? Before all of this. Sure, hotel rooms were never yours. But I loved that you came back to a place that wasn't yours, and someone made the bed for you." She shook her head, then smiled her radiant, breathtakingly beautiful smile for him. It got even wider when she saw his rare, small smile finally break across his face, a hair-line fracture on an egg.

She put a hand on his shoulder, and they stood in silence for a moment, the giant pistons' blocky silhouettes swallowing them from the moon's light, their bodies becoming one with shadow before thumping down to the earth once again.

Then they strode down the hill together, rifles in hand, straight for the prison camp. Toward a war that just might turn into something like a revolution.



ALONZO RAMEY WAS BORN TO BE A SUPERHERO. AT THE TIME OF HIS birth, he tested positive for Kurtzberg-24 Syndrome, the genetic anomaly responsible for giving superpowers to people. All babies with K-24 were identified and monitored, with cautious eyes keeping track of the powers that developed. The vast majority of K-24 kids developed a power set that usually included superhuman strength, endurance, speed, and bulletproof skin—the "Standards" is what such powers were called by the doctors and experts who tracked such things. Some of the kids developed unique powers—anything from pyro-telekinesis to the ability to breathe underwater. Alonzo's parents prayed that his powers would be limited to the Standards. With the Standards, there was always the chance of having a life that could at least pass for being normal. The more unusual the powers, however, the more difficult life could become. With some powers, there simply wasn't any chance of leading a normal life. Everyone knew about the Flamer, who could make fire but couldn't control it. The Flamer had to walk around in a specially designed suit to keep from burning everything and everyone around him whenever fire would randomly shoot from his body. And then there was Elasticene, who could stretch her body like it was made out of rubber, but it took days to return to its original shape.

"Them white folks ain't gonna take too kindly to a colored boy with superpowers," said Kelvin Ramey, Alonzo's father.

Kelvin had grown up in rural Mississippi, back when being black meant a second-class life. Alonzo was born into a better world, after the marching and the demonstrations and the water hoses and the police dogs, but his father remembered it all, and he worried for his