

Instead of individual reading journals and entries, we're going to keep a collective reading journal on N.K. Jemisin's [How Long 'til Black Future Month](#). Review the table of contents for this short story collection below. Choose **three** (3) short stories. Make an entry for each of these stories - - make sure you sign your entry with your first name and initial of your last name.

Each entry should be around 250 words. In the entry, briefly explain the following: What do you like about this short story? What confuses you in the story or raises questions? Why would you recommend or not recommend this particular story to your comrades?

[This is a linked table of contents to make our document more easily navigable. **Don't add your entry to the table of contents.** Instead, just click on the link for a story and you will be delivered to the section for your short story.]

[The Ones Who Stay and Fight](#)

[It's strange to come across something so genuinely entertaining without internal conflict. A truly utopian story has often been said to be "boring" but I wouldn't call this boring at all. It's just nice. It gives me something to hope for. The truth is, it's easy for me to imagine things being worse, but the idea of a truly better world is hard to picture. I admire Jemisin for that ability. I want to believe that good things are possible. I want to be a part of the world she describes in Um-Helat. Even with the added brutality. And that brutality itself is not the conflict, but an afterthought. The only real conflict of the story is between the author and her audience. She demands to know why we believe a truly good world is impossible. Are we being "realistic" or are we hiding our laziness behind cynicism. The truth is, the conflict of the story is the story itself. The conflict is Jemison's mission to convince the reader to hope, when they've lived in our own world so long that hoping has become difficult, even in distant, hypothetical theories. We do not need evil the way the story of Omelas suggests, and Jemison will not accept such excuses. Even the addition of the death penalty is reluctant, and is thrown in the readers face as a sort of mockery. The line "Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism?" \(Jemison 12\) Is really more of a taunt than anything, and so too is the concession it describes. - Autumn G.H.](#)

[This was an interesting opposition to The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas. I like that she made that distinction clear right off the bat, and even alluded to it in the story itself. The science fiction "novum," or new thing that our normal everyday world doesn't yet have, of this section, is peace. At least, that's what I got out of the work. It is science fiction that people could live the way they do in Um-Helat— that there could be the existence of things like racism and sexism in a "natural" sense, and insult without malice. The idea of words existing without mal-intent is fascinating, and definitely science fiction. I was a little confused by this, as I am really by most of the short stories in this collection. The writing makes Bird Day feel like both a day, and an era. There is a paradox, a violence introduced to explain the peace. When that violence is explained, the science fiction aspect is weakened, because it parallels too closely with how our world really functions. The social workers are people who seem to understand the old way, the way we readers understand things to be, and had to be trained into keeping people on this new wave of equality. So what made it possible for the social workers to see things differently than everyone else? That little girl at the end cussing and screaming for her dead father, would other people not react that way to murder? I felt like this story was paced too quickly and was very](#)

convoluted. I was barely able to grasp what exactly it was trying to get across, other than this ideal utopia of equality and some of the things that would have to happen for it to exist. - Kyra S

The City Born Great

It isn't immediately obvious on reading this story that anything is different from our own world, but Jemison manages to avoid making that jarring by giving little hints from the start, with the narrator thinking there might be something singing back, just briefly. I was immediately drawn to the narrator's vivid sense of escapist fantasy and the internal contrast that this set with his practical, straightforward way of thinking and acting. I found the narrator's philosophy about life and death compelling. After all, things might be easier, a lot easier, for me, but everybody's gonna die eventually, and that's a reality that we all have to reckon with somehow. It was hard to tell how much of the city's life was a metaphor even in-universe, and how much was meant to be really happening around the narrator. Then again, maybe it was meant to be true in every universe in some sense, just a different perspective on reality. Humans are composed of many micro-organisms, and various people have theorized that systems and groups of people act as their own entities. Some of the visual and audible things the narrator experiences are of course, not something that could happen in the real world, so of course, there is at least some level of metaphor, but of course, it is still unclear if the narrator is hallucinating or just seeing things that others can't see. Then again, maybe that too is a matter of perspective. If all we can say exists is simply the agreed upon perception, then the narrator's perception could be considered an alternate but valid reality. Although different in exact imagery, the idea of the enemy contaminating the city, emanating at its core from "the Mega Cop" reminded me of the idea of "the machine" in One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest, especially given it's impossible-to-fully-defeat nature. - Autumn G.H.

This short story lost me a bit. I thought the world building was brilliant, I like the idea of a breathing and living city and I can see how in that way it's very similar to Annihilation and the breathing and alive-ness of the tower and of the environment as a whole. I was confused especially at the ending, I hated the flash forward of 50 years. It made no sense to do that. I felt like spending barely a page 50 years in the future accomplished nothing for the rest of the story. I wish the mega cop monster was explained more. I wish I understood why this boy was the heart and survivor of the city, and at one point, was he pregnant? Was the city pregnant? I think this short story might've been better as a novel where it had more room to be fleshed out. It felt incomplete to read. Is Sao Paulo the city taking up the form of a man? What is the relationship here? I'm sure there was really incredible work put into the idea of this story but it wasn't carried out in a way that was at all easy to follow or understand, and as with a lot of the other short stories in this collection, it read way too quickly. The concepts were things that I would've liked to grasp, they are interesting at their core, but really I walk away from that piece having no connection with the characters or relationship to the story at all. -Kyra S

Red Dirt Witch

L'Alchimista

This was a beautiful short story. The building of the world is done through the ingredients, the 5 senses work incredibly to bring the reader right into the center. I felt like this was a fable, or an old folktale. There were trials for Franca to work through and a great outcome at the end. I felt like this was the simplest ending out of most of the short stories, but quite possibly the best one.

It didn't need to be complex. The story was wholesome and intriguing and light. I could sense that there was darkness just outside the immediate story— the assistants she hated and a lonely life that was cause for her tursed and disgruntled attitude. The love, though not, at least not obviously, cliché or romantic, was palpable and alive. This man comes in and saves her from herself, with herself! Challenges her to show herself how good she can do, and then allows her to choose if she'd like to leave her mundane lifestyle behind for what she deserves and is capable of. I found that really spectacular. I like the small little fantasy details in the meals she cooks up, which are practically potions, but there's balance. There is realness and just a touch of fantasy. I really like science fiction, but the science fiction I read has far less balance between it, there's hardly any of my known and perceived reality included. I like that since so much of these stories in these collections are grounded in what I can recognize, there's no fight between the added novum or oddities that science fiction can bring in. - Kyra S.

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Cooking is a matter of art, even if you use alchemy. One day a beggar walks into the Inn where Franca works as a chef. He's been hearing around who's the best cook in Milano and after he tastes Franca's food, he challenges her to cook after his recipe. Alchemist tried to produce gold and a life elixir that would cure all diseases and prolong life, so there's no surprise the dish she makes out of his recipe works as a life elixir.

The beggar explains: "All things contain power, signora, and some have more power than most. Science has only recently discovered the truth, but certain professions in the world, like yours and mine, have known it for centuries. Who is to say plutonium is more powerful than, say, rice? One takes away a million lives, the other saves a hundred times as many." I really like the logic in this world.

Even this story is a bit of a fairytale. When you are kind to a beggar who has nothing to give, you get it back a hundred times as many. I liked that he became Franca's apprentice, and didn't say she could come and work for him. Franca gets to practice the profession she loves and now challenges her, in a top-notch kitchen in a citadel, with a two-floor apartment, an expense account and vacation whenever she wishes. It seems to be too good to be true and there's no obstacle in her path, nothing she has to overcome. Sure, she needs to cook out of strange ingredients, but that's no problem for her and she enjoys the challenge. There's no tension.

- Lisa Y

I was really excited to read this story at first because it was a piece set in New Orleans. But something didn't really sit right with me when I started it, like there was a lack of grounding that made it kind of hard to get settled into the world. I understand that the interaction between Jessaline and the guy from New York was to set up the issues of race and microaggression, but it didn't really feel realistic to me? There was a strange modern tone in how characters interacted with each other compared to the time period I was imagining, which is most likely the Antebellum period. I still liked it a bit since the plot was interesting, with Jessaline taking on this spy role with ulterior motives and building an alliance/relationship with Eugenie. But then the story fell apart to me with the romanticization of the Haitian Revolution and Louverture. So even though the Haitian Revolution succeeded in abolishing slavery Louverture kept the plantation system in place because he knew that the economy depended on inequality and sugar. Former slaves fell under a low and poor class in the "new" system while black Elites who either came

from wealth or already owned land formed the top of this system. Louverture also was incredibly anti-democratic, and declared himself governor general for life and established Haiti as a republic, so neither common black men or women could vote. I kind of wish they made the setting an Earth-like instead of using history in this way, because the Haitian Revolution wasn't a black and white event. Slavery was finally abolished but the country didn't instantly become a utopia for all people. -Adriana Hernandez

Cloud Dragon Skies

The Trojan Girl

The next short story I chose to read was "the Trojan Girl ", it so far did not stand out as my favorite, however there was interesting imagery and plot that contributed to the story's consumption. I enjoyed reading the fantasy world as code and the computer/tech aspect, but these details were hard for me to develop until later in the reading. I think this short excerpt has room to continue, in perhaps a longer story or a complete novel on its own, but as a short story i felt that i was left with too many questions until the end. The troup of robots/programs/machines trying to surpass or understand humanity is fairly common and once that longing was introduced it was much easier for me to follow the narrative. I didn't quite enjoy the confusion that first is introduced in trying to understand the created world of circuitry, but inevitably it was a new take on a resused storyline that seemed refreshing. I'm still left confused about the girl, if she is a Trojan Girl as the title describes then I would assume her to be some sort of trap for the wolves, yet they confidently say that she is not in the common sense a trap. It could be argued that by the end she has trapped the existing code into a state of elevated consciousness through her new programming, but i dont feel entirely satisfied by that response. In short, I dont think that I would advise this book due to the fact that there was really not a definitive lesson learned, or purpose of the characters. The resolution was not quite met.

Valedictorian

Remy C.

The Storyteller's Replacement

Remy C.

The Brides of Heaven

Remy C.

The Evaluators

The novel is set in our world, but it's the beginning of the 23rd century and humans are in contact with alien species. The story is told through transcripts and messages from the crews, so we get a second hand view. Yet, I don't feel distanced from what's happening (or, rather happened), it just intensifies the suspense. At a first glance, you'd think it only portrays our curiousness and fear of the unknown that exists far outside of our own galaxy. Not just aliens, but superpredators that could enslave or kill the entire human species and take over our planet. It has been done several times before, both in books and cinema, so it's not an odd conclusion. But the core of the story is human's greed. Not only have we overpopulated and over-consumed the earth, we're after the Manka's palladium and can't understand how they have succeeded

keeping their population down. On earth it has led to something even stricter than one-child legislation. What scares me isn't the aliens, it's the truth behind the story and its connection to our society. We're on the brink of overpopulation and I have friends that aren't going to have children as a way of trying to save the planet. It's an extreme way that's becoming more common, but not a way that suits all. You can tell that Aihua would want a child if it didn't burden earth. The superpredators' goal is to transform and install themselves into human society to control the growth by eating just enough people, as they did with the Manka's. For us, I hope it's enough to provide reproductive health services and birth control to all women (and men) who need it. To empower them to break out of poverty and norms. - Lisa Y

This story was a bit intense for me, in a more realistic sense it wasn't the aliens that were nerve wrecking, but the fact that the author focuses on how selfish humans can really be. This story connects to the idea that as our population progresses we could potentially see our "superiors" true intentions. For example, it's without question that those above us are hiding the "truth" from us. As the story progresses we learn that in order to "maintain" the human population humans are eaten. As I was reading I found myself thinking how I wouldn't be surprised if this was something the government was already planning. Perhaps, not exact, regardless this concept isn't new it's been around for quite a while. "Well, we have a problem with overpopulation and its effects: crowding, homelessness, starvation, worse" (204-205). Rather than finding humane solutions to this problem the people in power continue to discuss other ways to decrease the population. The quote mentioned previously is pretty eye opening because as a society this is currently a problem. In fact, this problem continues to deepen especially now that we are in a pandemic. We are dying and suffering because those in power care more about the money they're losing; their greed continuously shows. I am aware that in real time some societies are preventing parents from having a certain amount of children, and I couldn't help but ask: When are we next? Are we almost there? Because the way we are heading it sure seems that way. In a more personal sense, as I am getting older and am more aware with the greed that takes place I'm truly hesitant to even think of the idea of having a family. At times it's difficult to find happiness in a society where the people who make up this community are constantly ignored and are suffering.

-Heyzell R. (5. 7. 2020)

Walking Awake

This short story was very heartbreaking to me, but it was also very inspiring in a way. It reminded me a lot of Jordan Peele's movie Get Out, with the whole body transferring aspects of the story. I was also reminded a lot of colonization, especially of how the Master's felt that it was their duty to take over the bodies of humans. But as Enri stated, "Most parasites evolved to take over other animals" (224) which is exactly true with old colonial empires that forced the world to be what it is today. The Master's take over the bodies of humans with false promises and give humans no free will, such as what the Spanish did with Native American's or what the British did with African's. Sadie is a very strong character, she never lets her mental health inhibit her even though she is brought up believing that it does. And in fact, it is because of her bipolar disorder that she is able to see past the lies of the Master's and start fighting back. This story is a reminder that if we are not careful, especially the United States, then we too can end up in a situation like this story is in, metaphorically of course. Our own president is a white supremacist, and he is only getting a bigger following because of his blatant racism. What is to stop him or his cabinet from trying to take away our rights one day? Especially if most of the country becomes

like Sadie and actually starts fighting back. I would most definitely recommend this story to others, because I believe it really does issue a strong visual and warning for what can happen if we do not start waking up and fighting back now.-- Serafina S.

The Elevator Dancer

Stone Hunger

On the Banks of the River Lex

The Narcomancer

Henosis

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“The alarm clock buzzed at 7, right after reality rolled over.” The people in this story are individually trapped in a post-quantum proliferation life – time is repeatedly reset to a point before the apocalypse happens. They are isolated in their home and when the day has passed, everything is set back into how it was when it began. If Helen wrote a poem on a paper, it disappeared. She always has the same thing in her refrigerator, what a nightmare. Even more, there’s no way to physically meet someone else. All connections go through the internet, but what’s written there stays. It makes me think about today’s state, but even before the lockdown. People spend so much time on the internet, in the expanse of real-life experiences and meetings. It necessarily doesn’t need to be a bad thing, those encounters can enrich one’s life, but there should be a balance.

“The only people still alive across the proliferated realities were those whose ties to the world had been weak from the beginning.” There’s a speculation that when people make strong connections, for example finding a family member or falling in love, they disappear. When Helen finally publishes a poem online, a relationship with “SapphoJuice” begins, and ends with them collapsing from the proliferated realities. When you fall in love you spend more time in the “real” world and make “real” connections, even in this disconnected era. Or maybe, our shared thoughts and experiences only become real online where they stay forever. But the intimacy is restricted with the loss of touch and having the whole world to view you.

I really enjoy stories that make you reflect over the here-and-now, and where you can interpret different meanings or find something new in the second reading. It’s interesting to see how Jemisin accomplished such realistic worldbuilding without needing to tell what actually happened. - Lisa Y

Myriam Akbar

The You Train

Myriam Akbar

Non-Zero Probabilities

Remy C.

I found this short story particularly interesting because of all of the unique belief systems and the way they seem to contrast each other. Adele seems to believe in a cocktail of probability, superstition and religion, yet isn't able to commit to just one. We also see how one seems to affect the other in the way she doesn't want to completely disregard something that might help the negative chain of events. For example, when talking about the big organized prayer, she seems to believe that if it works, even just due to human thought waves, that she will be able to do things like ride the train again. This makes us think that she must believe in some higher power, but it's hard to tell which takes the lead. I also found it funny that at the beginning she claims to pray to her Christian God, but also uses the underwear she had her first orgasm in as protective gear. She also has sex with her neighbor and doesn't necessarily seem to deem it as something ungodly. In this short story and others, Jemisin seems to be fixated on "the End Times" or the end of the world. End Times are traditionally a biblical reference, but I feel as though she is somehow reflecting her opinion towards Trump being elected. She seems to emphasize how as a community people must come together to stop the world from turning the world to turmoil. Maybe that is her way of bringing attention to Trump ruining the world. In this particular short story she shows that people are doing anything they can to avoid the rapidly increasing tragedies. Again, maybe she is trying to foreshadow what might happen with Trump as our leader and that any religion or belief will be needed to get through his presidency. - Grace H.

Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters"

The Ones Who Stay and Fight

It's strange to come across something so genuinely entertaining without internal conflict. A truly utopian story has often been said to be "boring" but I wouldn't call this boring at all. It's just nice. It gives me something to hope for. The truth is, it's easy for me to imagine things being worse, but the idea of a truly better world is hard to picture. I admire Jemisin for that ability. I want to believe that good things are possible. I want to be a part of the world she describes in Um-Helat. Even with the added brutality. And that brutality itself is not the conflict, but an afterthought. The only real conflict of the story is between the author and her audience. She demands to know why we believe a truly good world is impossible. Are we being "realistic" or are we hiding our laziness behind cynicism. The truth is, the conflict of the story is the story itself. The conflict is Jemison's mission to convince the reader to *hope*, when they've lived in our own world so long that hoping has become difficult, even in distant, hypothetical theories. We do not *need* evil the way the story of Omelas suggests, and Jemison will not accept such excuses. Even the addition of the death penalty is reluctant, and is thrown in the readers face as a sort of mockery. The line "Does the possibility of harsh enforcement add enough realism?" (Jemison 12) is really more of a taunt than anything, and so too is the concession it describes. - Autumn G.H.

This was an interesting opposition to *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. I like that she made that distinction clear right off the bat, and even alluded to it in the story itself. The science fiction "novum," or new thing that our normal everyday world doesn't yet have, of this section, is peace. At least, that's what I got out of the work. It is science fiction that people could live the way they do in Um-Helat—that there could be the existence of things like racism and sexism in a "natural" sense, and insult without malice. The idea of words existing without mal-intent is fascinating, and definitely science fiction. I was a little confused by this, as I am really by most of the short stories in this collection. The writing makes *Bird Day* feel like both a day, and an era. There is a paradox, a violence introduced to explain the peace. When that violence is explained, the science fiction aspect is weakened, because it parallels too closely with how our world really functions. The social workers are people who seem to understand the old way, the way we readers understand things to be, and had to be trained into keeping people on this new wave of equality. So what made it possible for the social workers to see things differently than everyone else? That little girl at the end cussing and screaming for her dead father, would other people not react that way to murder? I felt like this story was paced too quickly and was very convoluted. I was barely able to grasp what exactly it was trying to get across, other than this ideal utopia of equality and some of the things that would have to happen for it to exist. - Kyra S

Marshall Ingerton

I really enjoyed the writing for this short story. It was a nice and promising set up for the rest of the collection. The voice was also interesting and almost came across like an advertisement,

like a salesman was trying to convince you to purchase a product or sign a contract. The images were vibrant and easy to see, like vignettes or old-style films pre-talkies. The only portion of the story that was unclear was the scene with the social workers. The narrator slowly trickled out what was happening in this scene so that it was kind of difficult to imagine it as it kept changing. At first it was a group of social workers, and then the man's body was introduced, and finally the man's daughter. The information isn't given consecutively which makes it a bit unclear and difficult to maintain the picture. Overall it was interesting and engaging to read. I don't know what Um-Helat is based off of or inspired by but I felt like I didn't need to know this in order to understand the message. I also liked how the sci-fi elements were introduced even though they weren't explained. The objectivity and lack of explanation kept the word interesting and concrete. The ending leaves you with wanting more but also provides a satisfying ending that wraps up the conclusion neatly. I would recommend this short story for a friend. I think there's a lot to learn from its writing style because it does so much well. It's inspired me in my own writing and showed me specific ways to use and utilize imagery to enhance story-telling.

The element that I found most enjoyable about this story was how conflicted it left me. One part of me felt the death of the man was unjust and the manner in which they were dealing with people who break the law seemed extreme. While the other half understood their extreme measures because peace and unity is not something that typical in almost any society. However, I think the thing that drew my attention most is imagining Um-Helat Utopia in our society especially in this time that we are currently living. It became very difficult to judge Um-Helat knowing the violence, racism, homophobia, sexism (ect.) that exists and thrives in our society. I found myself thinking of how different our society would be if all the people were cared for like they are in UM-Helat especially during this pandemic. Today we see people sleeping in parking lots in Las Vegas with thousands of hotel rooms vacant, families force to "reclaim" vacant house in order to take shelter in Los Angeles. Then my mind began to almost justify the murder of the man who had broken the law which made me feel really bad . -Erica S

Michael Dao

I liked how the short story was about a perfect utopia and the narrator was super patronizing. There was a disconnect from what the narrator was trying to convince you about the city of Um-Helat and what happened to the man and the child. To me, it was very obvious that there was going to be some kind of controversy or a catch to how and why Um-Helat could be so peaceful and perfect. Everything is perfect in their society because of how harshly crime is punished. I think it's scary and that the people may be living in a perfect society, but citizens that are more self-aware may notice how terrifying it is to be living in such a harsh society and everyone is perfect out of fear and not really because of their own good nature or virtues. The sci-fi that was sprinkled into the story was really weird. Personally, I think it took away from the story because I get really annoyed when writers try to do worldbuilding with fancy vocabulary

without getting into how or what something is just so they can invent something to put in their world to be cool and unique. Overall, I think I would recommend this story to my comrades because it is a short read and the writing is really descriptive and funny. I just did not like the random sci-fi. I would give this short story a nine out of ten.

What I found very intriguing about this story was the narrator's connection to the reader. A question I kept finding myself asking was who the intended audience might be (if any). In this story and generally the entire compilation, I wondered if I was the correct audience. I wondered if Jemisin was targeting a societal majority, minority, or both. It seemed for almost the first half of the narrative the subject of race was left out of this utopic environment, until we arrive to "the variety," which is the narrator's term for the diverse population in Um-Helat (5). However, there is still a separation of where certain people of different "origin and development" work in street markets rather than a large building ("the executive tower") (5). Just from the information on the diversity of citizens and the suggestion of their different placements in society, it's hard to consider Um-Helat as a utopia or a place only of peace. Since this fictional place seems to have some ties to a world/society like ours (despite the small reference to America), there is a history that the utopia tries to neglect. However, because there is a history that trickles into the present, they do have people that maintain the utopic environment. I thought it strange but interesting that social workers were something like the law or peacekeepers; this choice made the sci-fi more grounded in realism and relatable to our world (the real world) as it's something that seems very mundane and familiar. On the other hand, social workers as law enforcement built the idea that the only regulation Um-Helat needed was with community well-being; the utopia was built on encouraging (forcing) well-being to maintain peace within the city. Although short, the story was jam packed with speculative thoughts on a parallel world. I would recommend it to someone less interested in sci-fi but more so in social issues.

- Casey I.

Myriam Akbar

What stood out to me about this story is its form because it mimics "The Ones Who Walk.." by questioning the possibility of a utopia and asking the reader questions. There's many similarities between the two texts, such as the narrator not being able to describe the city and it being full of joy. Also, there's no hunger or violence. The author uses this form to illustrate a world where everyone reinforces civility and question whether it's even possible considering that violence, inequality, and intolerance is part of human nature. She even considers that some don't want to see change happen. Jemisi writes, "Everyone--even the poor, even the lazy, even the undesirable--can matter." This made me think about the ways in which humans judge each other and are quick to conclude that someone is not worth having equal rights and treatment.

Remy C.

This story intrigued me right away. Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" has always been one of my favorite short stories, and "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" challenges it directly, in the text itself. Where Le Guin offers utopia on the back of other's suffering, Jemisin states that no, it cannot be utopia (or anything resembling it, since the story itself rejects the "utopic" notion) if there is suffering. This is speculative fiction, but it addresses our current society more blatantly than most spec fic, by literally addressing the reader from our reality. Jemisin tells us that the parallel world of Um-Helat was just like us, but that it did not magically become a greater reality than our own. It takes constant, dedicated effort to fight oppression and injustice. We have to care enough to put in the work. Her tone is appropriately condescending to the narrator ("poor thing. There, there"), in a way that reminds me of a great deal of satire addressing "white fragility" around racism. Jemisin points out how easy it is to be infected by ideas of, not even necessarily hatred, but superiority, and how easy it is to start thinking of others as lesser on arbitrary grounds. Equally, Jemisin points out that just as people learn it (either in the "underground" or from their parents), this mentality can be unlearned. We see a child, and with the parallel to Le Guin, we have to wonder if the social workers will kill her too. Instead, the narrator shames us for thinking that, and tells us that they will try to rehabilitate her, to help her unlearn the toxic ways of thinking so she can be reintegrated into society. Like our reality, oppressive mentalities are learned, but if we dedicate ourselves, we can work to unlearn them too. If we care.

Jemisin calls the perfect world Um-Health. In this world, there is no racism, no class division, and everyone respects each other. A truly free world where people can live in peace with each other regardless of their skin color. Jemisin refers to our world in America, as "barbaric" in comparison to Um-Helat. As the narrator describes this world, it seems too good to be true and the narrator's "friend" becomes offended hearing about such an unrealistic place. Why would anyone be offended that this type of utopian world could exist? One can presume that a person would immediately want to move there and experience it for themselves, right? In this story, Jemisin creates this narrative around the idea that sometimes

fear lies in the unknown and maybe it is the reason that there really is no “perfect” world.

We discover that crime actually does exist in Um-Helat in what is called the “underground industry”. Just as we thought there was no crime or bad in this world, that was a lie. Gossip and forbidden writings are being dispensed down there, while the rest of Um-Helat live in a clueless bubble to the rest of the world. But there will always be someone who is curious and wants to seek knowledge of the unknown. Their solution to get rid of that problem is by cutting off the source; death. If one seeks out this forbidden knowledge, immediately they are killed before others learn about those hidden secrets. In our world we call this extreme and militant form of governing. Knowledge is power, but with that power comes danger. Such parallels exist in things as censorship of books and media. There is a fear involved in the danger of craving to learn more about what really happens in the outside world of one's own. Just as the saying “curiosity killed the cat” goes, in Um-Helat one's own curiosity will get you killed. The only way to stay alive is to play dumb and keep that knowledge to yourself. -Michael M

This chapter gives the picture of how a perfect utopian world like Um-Helat would be maintained, yet some of the traditions and struggles that are discussed by Jemisin in this first chapter are issues that can be seen in our world today. Jemisin does a good job of describing how such a perfect world runs, and the varying standards citizens are held to in this utopia, some standards in which our world would find rather challenging. However, in terms of similarities, there are a few. In Um-Helat, they celebrate “the Day of Good Birds”, which is seen as a time where citizens can appreciate and love everyone. This is similar to traditions we have in our world, like Thanksgiving and other holidays. Like Um-Helat, citizens can choose to participate and celebrate, or choose to not, there is no demand for participation. This chapter also talks about the “underground industry” of Um-Helat, which consists of social workers who are responsible for killing civilians who break the law, in efforts to control the “contagion” of evil throughout Um-Helat, which sounds much like the job of a police officer in our world. This act of murder, as some would call it, is purposeful in Um-Helat because it is an easy way to keep the evil out of their perfect utopian town, as do police officers in our towns. Um-Helat may believe that they are a perfect town, but the killing of people who are found guilty because of words spoken may prove otherwise to others. --Michaela I.

The City Born Great

It isn't immediately obvious on reading this story that anything is different from our own world, but Jemison manages to avoid making that jarring by giving little hints from the start, with the narrator thinking there might be something singing back, just briefly. I was immediately drawn to the narrator's vivid sense of escapist fantasy and the internal contrast that this set with his practical, straightforward way of thinking and acting. I found the narrator's philosophy about life and death compelling. After all, things might be easier, a lot easier, for me, but everybody's gonna die eventually, and that's a reality that we all have to reckon with somehow. It was hard to tell how much of the city's life was a metaphor even in-universe, and how much was meant to be really happening around the narrator. Then again, maybe it was meant to be true in every universe in some sense, just a different perspective on reality. Humans are composed of many micro-organisms, and various people have theorized that systems and groups of people act as their own entities. Some of the visual and audible things the narrator experiences are of course, not something that could happen in the real world, so of course, there is at least some level of metaphor, but of course, it is still unclear if the narrator is hallucinating or just seeing things that others can't see. Then again, maybe that too is a matter of perspective. If all we can say exists is simply the agreed upon perception, then the narrator's perception could be considered an alternate but valid reality. Although different in exact imagery, the idea of the enemy contaminating the city, emanating at its core from "the Mega Cop" reminded me of the idea of "the machine" in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, especially given it's impossible-to-fully-defeat nature. - Autumn G.H.

This short story lost me a bit. I thought the world building was brilliant, I like the idea of a breathing and living city and I can see how in that way it's very similar to *Annihilation* and the breathing and alive-ness of the tower and of the environment as a whole. I was confused especially at the ending, I hated the flash forward of 50 years. It made no sense to do that. I felt like spending barely a page 50 years in the future accomplished nothing for the rest of the story. I wish the mega cop monster was explained more. I wish I understood why this boy was the heart and survivor of the city, and at one point, was he pregnant? Was the city pregnant? I think this short story might've been better as a novel where it had more room to be fleshed out. It felt incomplete to read. Is Sao Paulo the city taking up the form of a man? What is the relationship here? I'm sure there was really incredible work put into the idea of this story but it wasn't carried out in a way that was at all easy to follow or understand, and as with a lot of the other short stories in this collection, it read way too quickly. The concepts were things that I would've liked to grasp, they are interesting at their core, but really I walk away from that piece having no connection with the characters or relationship to the story at all. -Kyra S

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I found some parts of this short story captivating while other parts slightly confusing. It seemed as though Jemison left a little too much information out and parts of the story needed more detail.

I was confused when it came to the part of the battle, because there was not enough context provided as to what exactly was happening and who was trying to destroy the city. If that portion of the story was still trying to show the battle between New York and the Police Department, I think it could've been beneficial to make it clearer. I did however, enjoy the temporary defeat of "the enemy" and the referencing to how police brutality is something that needs to be conquered. I also found it powerful how the narrator's thoughts when the police were around illustrate the extreme fear felt by so many black individuals when put in that same situation. At one point he explains the cop looking around but basically deciding not to pick on him and so he considers himself lucky. I think Jemisin including these thoughts in her short stories is so important because the reader is able to place themselves in the position of the oppressed. As far as the way the story ended, it was slightly frustrating because we don't understand what has changed in forty years, why the narrator is now rich, or why there is loneliness as a sudden new variable. I think the story left quite a bit of room for interpretation, which in some stories can be effective, but in this one it kind of bothered me. - Grace H

This short story was a wild ride from start to finish to say the least. I am unsure if magical realism would be the right category under which this story would fall, but I think that it definitely possesses some elements of it. A whirring blur of pacing and a very fragmented narrative voice makes the story very exciting, and it feels somewhat like watching a movie in which certain frames are missing. The commentary being made on police in New York, and more broadly the systems of power in place that oppress and brutalize peoples of color, gave the story an interesting element of depth. To portray these occurrences that happen all too often in reality in such an unreal way was fascinating to watch unfold. The story and the main character felt very fluid, it reminded me of the notion that water takes the shape of what it fills. At times I was uncertain of the main character's identity, and I am not entirely sure as to why they are depicted this way save for a few guesses. Perhaps the lack of a static character identity is meant to echo the "faceless" city of New York? The most defining character elements ascribed to the person is that they are an artist, one with an unquenchable thirst to paint. It was really interesting to see how the author talked about the city's history being built upon the backs of the lower working class, and in the final fight scene I think this sentiment was once more sprinkled into the narrative. Still not fully sure what to make of the story, but it was fun to read. - Brenden N.

Marshall Ingerton

In comparison to the first short story "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" I felt that the tone and voice was off. The pacing was also kind of funky in both sentence structure and plot. Sentences would either drag on or drop abruptly and the chase scene dragged on after the library lull. I was followed by another lull in the city and suddenly appearing in Central Park and then ended with a 50 year flash forward. The subject matter was so interesting but so boring at the same time

because it was executed poorly. The lack of consistency, which I assume is intentional because of the protagonist, disrupts the tension and energy. It raises the question of what even is this story in a way that isn't nearly done as well as the opening short story. It felt like a superhero origin story that we didn't really get to see play out because of the flash forward. There were so many interesting things it could have done like show this flash forward or even show more of the dynamic between the protagonist and Paulo. I wouldn't recommend this story, but not because I didn't like it. The short story was similar to things that I have liked, such as The Matrix with the Chosen One being able to finally see the blending of the fantastical and the real, but didn't do anything new with the idea. It was cliché and generic, down to the chase scene in New York somehow ending up going through Grand Central Station. It's an iconic image that would have worked if the story was more unique or stylized to stand on its own, and probably would have if it were longer and had more material to do so.

I enjoyed this story overall; I thought there were some great parts that were described beautifully and thoughtfully. There were many moments throughout; however, where I was lost. Certain parts in the story were hard for me to follow. The battle scene was muddled and didn't make any sense in terms of the story as a whole. I wasn't entirely sure as to who was fighting and what were they fighting for? Not enough information was provided for the reader to gain an accurate connection and understanding of what was going on. I feel as though this story could benefit from adding more details for certain scenes such as the battle; however, or possibly getting rid of some of them altogether. Overall, I enjoyed it and thought it was well-written. -- Scott K

While this story did confuse me a couple times I found it very interesting. What I enjoyed the most about the story was how vivid the storytelling was. At the very beginning of the story I had already guessed that the story was taking place in a big city like New York just with the description given. It began to get a little confusing once we are introduced to Pablo's character and he warns the main character that he is not "listening" to the city. I must admit I didn't fully understand the ending like Pablo was at the end of the story or what he represented or how the main character went from homeless to rich. However, I think the story's focus was more about how the city seems to be "alive". Also, I found it captivating how the author used different locations to almost replicate body parts that all together would form a person, or a creature in order to show it was alive. Even describing the cops as monsters and "infections" showed how everything in the city could double as something else. The author was able to compare the city to a living person by using similes all while being in the point of view of a black male. -Erica S

This story was kind of all over the place. I really liked the beginning, having the main character just stand up and sing out for the whole world, shows how daring and confident the character really is. In the beginning of this chapter the main character kept saying "I own this city" or "I run this city" which really left me confused and wondering why he keeps

thinking this. He says he's homeless to leave me to my speculation as why? We see the "battle" in this chapter with the city and the police department, reading through its hard to grasp onto the concept of what is actually going on. Is there a bigger meaning behind this or is it something that was missing? Sometimes I began to wonder if the main character in this story was just high on something that he took and he had a long trip. It did leave me confused on his transitions and how he got from one place to another. He was seeing things and how he traveled. Something that I caught onto was how the city was "alive" that seemed to be more of the focus within this story. Also in this story there was a lot of vivid imagery that you could really imagine throughout the story, it makes it easier to read when you can imagine your actually there. Maybe that's why it made it so confusing because imagining this whole thing just didn't make logical sense. But maybe that's something the author wanted in the first place? - Courtney Donahoe

Red Dirt Witch

To begin, I did very much enjoy the story *Red Dirt Witch*, not only did the story contain imagery and a source of magic, but also a narrative on the real events that occurred in the fight for civil rights. I like that there is really no male lead, the sons are both young and need guidance from their mother, and the friendly man from earlier in the story is not given a platform of impact within the story. I enjoyed the practicality of the magic that was mentioned as well, in use of sage and rosemary, as well as the power of dreams because these elements make the implication of the supernatural much easier to understand. I did gain some confusion in the distinction between white folks and White folks. The White lady was of course a member of the latter group because of her unnatural evil, however she was also compared to the Fae, and how fairy people have an aversion to iron. Hopefully we can discuss and gain more clarity on this distinction within the short story, or another reading will provide more context. I also found myself becoming slightly lost in the description of dreams, there was a lot of creative and vivid imagery but it was hard to acknowledge the purpose within the first read. Overall, I would highly recommend this short story because of the magical yet still very real subject matter. It provides a new unique perspective in regards to the kind of supernatural evil that oppressed and continues to threaten and oppress POC. Faith Cassidy S.

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"The way to tell the difference between dreams that were prophecy and dreams that were just wasted sleep was to wait and see if they came three times. Emmaline had her third dream about the White Lady ..." *Red Dirt Witch* jumps right into the story's core, how magic is used through

dreams and that there's an impending threat. The magic is a bit of a trickster, it can go both ways if you're not careful. It has an air of superstition, but it's a true fear. The spirits are listening and provoking you. You have to watch your words and impulses, what you (ill)wish for might just come true.

It's a familiar setting, in Alabama, some decades ago when black people fought for their rights and the man would defend the woman. In the future they are seeing, black people are sitting in the front of the bus, are on the supreme court and in the white house. Rosa Park and Barack Obama are on their way. In the end, Em's character arc is completed when she sacrifices herself and has changed her views: "I done told you a million times that the world doesn't change – but I was wrong, and I'm sorry for that. You got a big fight ahead of you, but you can win it." It makes you reflect on the sacrifices that have been made in our world for future generations of black people.

I would have appreciated it more if it hadn't been this obvious. You could assume the mother would sacrifice herself for her child and the White Lady is stereotypically the evil witch who abducts children, there's no depth in her. It's all black and white, no gray scale.

Jemisin doesn't overexplain how the magic works or her worldbuilding, just letting us know the right amount of information to receive the story. She plants seeds early in the story that she later comes back to, for example how Em uses the White Lady's greed to bond her, by then the reader already knows about her greed after she gazed after Pauline. It's an original idea to have Em conjuring the ingredients through her dreams. Like a true fairytale the number three is important, threefold dream, three children, three ingredients to bond. - Lisa Y

The Red Witch was an interesting read, I enjoyed the vivid descriptions throughout; it made the story more fascinating to read. This was a beautiful short story, I liked how it blended fairytales and real life to make a mash-up of both. I think that this is perhaps my favorite out of what I've read. I liked the concept of magic emoting through dreams, this was an interesting way of approaching a hard subject matter and making it easy to understand and thought provoking.

-- Scott K

I very much enjoyed reading "Red Dirt Witch", I thought it was an interesting twist for historical fiction. The setting being in Alabama is very fitting, especially since Alabama is the state where many Civil Rights movements began. For example, Alabama is where Rosa Parks did her public bus protest against segregation. Which of course kicked off many other Civil Rights movements, in not only Alabama but other states as well. The magic that is used within this story is incredible, especially with the use of the White Lady, who is clearly some type of supernatural being that steals black children for their blood. She is most likely an allegory for slave owners in general, because slave owners would quite literally kidnap black children. Not only that, but they in turn would try and drain the culture from their slaves, to take away their roots and ancestry to

make them into mindless servants like the little girl in the story. I also really enjoyed this story because it shows just how far a mother's sacrifice for her children will go. Emmaline sacrificed herself, her freedom, so that her own daughter could live. Not only did she sacrifice herself for her family, but she sacrificed herself so that the entire world could evolve from the racism she had grown up with. I would definitely recommend this story to others. If not for the entertaining magical qualities and the dream sequences, then for the heart-warming story of Emmanline's love for her children. -- **Serafina S.**

L'Alchimista

This was a beautiful short story. The building of the world is done through the ingredients, the 5 senses work incredibly to bring the reader right into the center. I felt like this was a fable, or an old folktale. There were trials for Franca to work through and a great outcome at the end. I felt like this was the simplest ending out of most of the short stories, but quite possibly the best one. It didn't need to be complex. The story was wholesome and intriguing and light. I could sense that there was darkness just outside the immediate story—the assistants she hated and a lonely life that was cause for her turtled and disgruntled attitude. The love, though not, at least not obviously, cliché or romantic, was palpable and alive. This man comes in and saves her from herself, with herself! Challenges her to show herself how good she can do, and then allows her to choose if she'd like to leave her mundane lifestyle behind for what she deserves and is capable of. I found that really spectacular. I like the small little fantasy details in the meals she cooks up, which are practically potions, but there's balance. There is realism and just a touch of fantasy. I really like science fiction, but the science fiction I read has far less balance between it, there's hardly any of my known and perceived reality included. I like that since so much of these stories in these collections are grounded in what I can recognize, there's no fight between the added novum or oddities that science fiction can bring in. - Kyra S.

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Cooking is a matter of art, even if you use alchemy. One day a beggar walks into the Inn where Franca works as a chef. He's been hearing around who's the best cook in Milano and after he tastes Franca's food, he challenges her to cook after his recipe. Alchemist tried to produce gold and a life elixir that would cure all diseases and prolong life, so there's no surprise the dish she makes out of his recipe works as a life elixir.

The beggar explains: "All things contain power, signora, and some have more power than most. Science has only recently discovered the truth, but certain professions in the world, like yours and mine, have known it for centuries. Who is to say plutonium is more powerful than, say, rice? One takes away a million lives, the other saves a hundred times as many." I really like the logic in this world.

Even this story is a bit of a fairytale. When you are kind to a beggar who has nothing to give, you get it back a hundred times as many. I liked that he became Franca's apprentice, and didn't say she could come and work for him. Franca gets to practice the profession she loves and now challenges her, in a top-notch kitchen in a citadel, with a two-floor apartment, an expense account and vacation whenever she wishes. It seems to be too good to be true and there's no obstacle in her path, nothing she has to overcome. Sure, she needs to cook out of strange ingredients, but that's no problem for her and she enjoys the challenge. There's no tension.

- Lisa Y

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I really enjoyed the lightheartedness of this particular short story. Unlike some of the other short stories, this one was very easy to follow and fun to read. It was nice to watch Franca go from being filled with so much anger, to being purely joyous and playful. I also liked how the short story employed the typical "don't judge a book by its cover" theme and turned a man who Franca had originally assumed to be a beggar into a man that gave her life a whole new trajectory. Another part of the story that I found sweet and innocent was that even while knowing the white truffles were worth 1500 Euro, Franca never considered selling them or profiting off of them in any way. She instead followed the recipe given to her and going against everything she knew as a chef, learned that cooking isn't necessarily only about taste. Her trust in the recipe from a complete stranger gave her new life literally and figuratively. I found the part about food reversing the effects of aging a fun twist. I especially liked this because when we think about why we eat certain foods, it isn't always simply for the taste. Sometimes we need to eat foods that we don't particularly like because of their nutritional benefits, so I thought this was a playful way to add a still conceivable type of magic. Overall, I found this short story quite enjoyable and thought it was a unique addition to her book as a whole. - Grace H.

This was a beautifully well-written story, much like *The Red Witch* in that it blended real moments with imaginary ones. The entirety of the story read more like a fairytale than anything else. There was beautiful and purposeful imagery that made the entirety of the story more enjoyable to read. I enjoyed the plot of the story and how magic was incorporated into that. The one issue that I had with the story; however, was the depth. In comparison to the other stories whose ending was more complex, it felt a little under-delivered on that front. -- Scott K

It may be early to say, but is my favorite story of the collection. First of all, the subject- food. Who doesn't like food? And it may be cliché to say, but I love food. My grandma was an excellent cook, my mother was an excellent cook, and I like to think of myself as a pretty darn good one as well. This story embodies so much of what makes cooking art. What is a *dash* of something? It's not an equation. It's a feeling, a sixth sense that develops over time from experimentation and failure and success (much like writing, as Jemisin notes in the intro). Franca is just like any artist who feels like her work has been passed over. It's no surprise, considering female artists have been getting the short end of the stick since time immemorial. You've heard of Kandinsky, but who is Klimt? But yet, just like fairy tales have a way of dissolving all conflict into a saccharine sweet conclusion, Franca is vindicated. The strange man who invites her to a challenge is the prince that sweeps Cinderella off her feet. But Jemisin is adept at taking those old tired tropes and twisting them in a new, invigorating way. I loved reading this story, in a way that goes beyond just enjoying the way the words are arranged on the paper. It felt good, comforting, in the same manner as I'm sure the stranger did when he walked in from that cold winter. The same way I felt when my grandma would feed me, as a small child spending the weekends with her. The same way I felt when my mom would feed me every single day until the moment I moved out (and even some days after) that. And while I can't say I experience that same feeling when I cook for myself, I can only hope the loved ones I cook for, can.

- Andrew K.

One aspect of this story I love is the little hints sprinkled throughout the story, especially the beginning, which inform the reader of the Italian environment. The title, the names, and food references make these perfect additions to establishing the environment early on. At one point, the author even drops "Milano" (pg.58) to help the reader envision a specific city. Another element I enjoy is the mellow pacing of this story. The young yet old man was bizarre, of course, but he gave me some real Devil from *Rick and Morty* energy, which is intriguing and makes me slightly forgiving of his witchy side hobbies. Franca is a cool lead character since she has this confident personality and a strangely natural talent with mystical ingredients. She won over my respect, despite her pretentious undertones. At first, the ending was surprising to me, since the man was early on described as beggarly then he ends up offering up four floors from some building in his citadel to Franca. However, he also became much younger from the frava cakes and there is magic involved, so really anything is possible. Most of the story, I would read something weird and just be like "I mean there's magic, so...sure". A natural question does come to mind when he casually offers "a substantial supply of lead" (pg.72), because who the hell keeps that much lead and where the hell is this lead. Also, I wonder why the man is never given a name, even though some guy named "Old Giovanni" (pg. 60) even gets thrown in there. Overall, the story is intriguing and surprisingly positive. I kept thinking Franca was going to have some malignant curse bestowed upon her by the end, but instead she got four floors of a citadel and maybe even a promising love affair with this magical dude! I would definitely recommend it to a friend, perhaps a friend interested in witchcraft and the cooking show, *Chopped*.

-Emma N.

This short story was about a woman named Franca, who worked at a restaurant and brought in a beggar to feed him a meal. With that meal, the beggar offered a “challenge”, as he called it, to compensate for the delicious meal he had. He had a recipe and ingredients with him, and gave them to Franca, who wanted to perfect the meal. I think that Jemisin was trying to emphasize the fact that people who are not as well off as others still have something to offer in this world. Franca didn't think much of the beggar at first, but found herself inviting him into the inn and offering him a meal, only for him to give her something much more valuable in return. In our world today, many people are not able to see that there is opportunity to learn from someone who may be perceived as a “beggar” like in this story. Franca gave to this man who had next to nothing to give, and received a life changing offer from this man. Overall, I think that Jemisin wrote this short story as more of a criticism towards our world, to allow readers to realize that many of us lack the ability to show kindness towards people who are homeless or appear to be struggling, like Franca did in this story. I felt that the underlying message Jemisin aimed to convey was to treat everyone with kindness and without discrimination, because you never know what they have to offer this world. --Michaela I.

I was interested in "La' Alchemista" because I was thinking about The Alchemist by Paul Coelho. The alchemist's role in that story was shrouded in mystery, he was just an aid to the main character in his journey towards his dreams. I liked the build up of this story and how the ending just falls away. It felt like the magic and alchemy in the story were nonchalant, or a given, just like in Coelho's story. The main character, Franca, was interesting and I found it amusing how stern and practical she was built up to be just to immediately yield to the requests of a stranger. The explanation of cooking and creating was vivid and a form of world building. Short stories in this style, (including Coelho's novel) have the form of Aesop's Fables or Silverstein's stories. I can't remember what it's called when stories conclude with an overall moral in mind. They're tools for teaching and revelation. I believe this story by Jemisin is ultimately a story of eternal youth, or that life doesn't end because you get old. Franca is stuck in a rut meandering about her past and wallowing in the pit she's created for herself until someone comes to her as a reminder that her life isn't over yet. The kindling of her passion has waned but was never extinguished. She was aware of her talents but stuck in a loop. The new challenges filled her with excitement to change her reality and any story that can inspire someone to open their eyes and make a move is one that fulfills a greater purpose and reveals the beauty of writing. Someone you've never met can say exactly what you need to hear. -Jessica A.

The Effluent Engine

I was really excited to read this story at first because it was a piece set in New Orleans. But something didn't really sit right with me when I started it, like there was a lack of grounding that made it kind of hard to get settled into the world. I understand that the interaction between Jessaline and the guy from New York was to set up the issues of race and microaggression, but it didn't really feel realistic to me? There was a strange modern tone in how characters interacted with each other compared to the time period I was imagining, which is most likely the Antebellum period. I still liked it a bit since the plot was interesting, with Jessaline taking on this spy role with ulterior motives and building an alliance/relationship with Eugenie. But then the story fell apart to me with the romanticization of the Haitian Revolution and Louverture. So even though the Haitian Revolution succeeded in abolishing slavery Louverture kept the plantation system in place because he knew that the economy depended on inequality and sugar. Former slaves fell under a low and poor class in the "new" system while black Elites who either came from wealth or already owned land formed the top of this system. Louverture also was incredibly anti-democratic, and declared himself governor general for life and established Haiti as a republic, so neither common black men or women could vote. I kind of wish they made the setting an Earth-like instead of using history in this way, because the Haitian Revolution wasn't a black and white event. Slavery was finally abolished but the country didn't instantly become a utopia for all people. *-Adriana Hernandez*

Cloud Dragon Skies

I enjoyed the matter-of-fact tone this story took with the sci-fi elements. Rather than making the story overly-scientific, calling the people from the settlements "sky-people" felt like something out of folklore, something grounded in a real cultural setting that happens to interact with these people enough to have words to describe them. The setting of the story itself, similarly, wasn't overly technological or scientific, and that made it feel realer, less like a daydream about being an important and powerful person that so much sci-fi can easily fall into, but more the experience of a person who felt relatable and real. The way a lot of stories, in any genre, are written, you might think that the only people who really exist in any meaningful way are the powerful ones, or the famous ones, or the experimenters, or the results of experiments set apart from the general population, etc. I liked seeing the world from the perspective of a genuinely normal girl. I found her to be extremely likeable beyond this as well, in her stubbornness, bravery, and strength. I related to her frustration at attempts to tame and control her.

I also appreciated how idiotic the condescending attitude of the sky-people was presented as, with the awkwardness of the line "I didn't think dragons were a part of your, er, cultural tradition" (Jemison 118).

The ending of the story was my ideal balance of bad and good. I don't like stories that end all good or all bad. I don't like the idea that the heroes live happily ever after once they've

saved the world, or that nothing is ever good again. Bad things happen. The survivors survive, and they find their own, limited, happiness.

I wondered when the exodus of the “sky-people” had occurred, relative to the narrator’s life. It seemed to have at least been long enough ago for cultural memories to fade given the differences between the two groups, and their lack of knowledge about one another, for example as on the earth the narrator said that “No man wants a wife so unwomanly.” (Jemison 119) but on the ring, it was clearly different. However there was still clearly a historical knowledge of how, and why this exodus had occurred. The earth-people’s acceptance of the sky pollution raised also the question of which group had the right to make decisions about the sky. The earth group are the people living there, but of course, within that group there were disagreements too, with the elders, wanting blue skies, and the younger generations wanting things to stay the same. Both groups, of course, share the doomed goal of protecting the earth.
-- Autumn G.H.

The imagery was very striking in this piece and I enjoyed reading it for this. I felt that it could have been longer though because much of the development was rushed. Though the world-building did start out strong. It reminded me of the far-future sections of *Cloud Atlas*, or at least what I remember from the film. I would have liked to stay in that world (both the planet and space colony) a bit longer to learn more about it, because it was so easy to get attached to it. The color of the sky was an interesting plot point and the imagery really pulled itself through on these sections. I guess it pulled through for some of the weaker sections of the story because of how strong it was. But I felt that there weren't really any "stakes" or tension. I didn't understand why the red sky was an issue for the scientists to forcibly change it. Maybe this was in a message of itself, outsiders altering the world against the wishes of the people, but I think the shortness and actions of the protagonist doesn't make this very clear because she is also an outsider. So the world isn't really left in a positive light because the protagonist flees to space with a man who she pretty much just met because she doesn't belong in her society. I think it would have been a more enjoyable romance if there was more time to develop their relationship. Like I understand that a fair bit of time passes and I'm supposed to fill in the blanks, but it would have been nice to read more. But I don't know if I'm really supposed to care for the world that's left behind, because the scientists never explain their motives and the protagonist becomes a part of her new world. - *Adriana Hernandez*

I found this story to be particularly aesthetic in terms of imagery. The descriptions of the “Cloud Dragons” among a red sky are hauntingly beautiful. The protagonist was strong, and intelligent, without having to sacrifice her femininity as many female protagonists are often forced to do in many novels or stories. I thought the love story between her and the young sky person was very interesting, especially because it is ultimately the cause for the destruction of Earth. I was confused by the cause of the red sky however, as well as the sky people. Was it because global warming got so bad here on Earth that a group of people actually did leave to go live in space? How come there were people who decided to stay on the polluted Earth instead of go into space? I would definitely recommend this story to others. It has a lot of elements that

you would want from a good short story. Also, the imagery is so breathtaking and complex that it would be hard to describe it to another person. I particularly enjoyed this story because of the whole global warming aspect. Especially the part where the protagonist says "We have learned nothing" (124) once the sky started turning blue. Because it is true, even in real life we have learned nothing from our mistakes or from the warnings of scientists. We know exactly how bad global warming is, and we were warned that in order to reverse it we would all have to work together and change our lifestyles a bit. Yet, there are still people who do not believe in it, and now the Co2 levels in the atmosphere are getting so bad that in a few years time it is going to be impossible for the Earth to sustain us anymore. And I thought this story really captured that.

--**Serafina S.**

Initially what pulled me toward this story was the intrigue of the title. The story did not fail to equate in intrigue either. I had similar thoughts as Serafina of this sci-fi world's history. The colors depicted in the story made it easy to imagine a world destroyed by climate change and overruled by nature, as well as a space colony that was sought after for a better chance of industrialized society. Strangely, the description of the sky-people encouraged thoughts of Ku Klux Klan members. Though their purpose and intent held nothing similar to the KKK, the description of the garbs sounded awfully similar to what KKK members would wear. I wondered if this was me intently looking for areas of sci-fi race issues due to the title of the compilation, or if this was a thought that Jemisin predicted, let alone intended. I found the entire story interesting and I would recommend it to someone for the sole intention of provoking conversation about the sky people and their clothing. I found the color descriptions of the sky very captivating. Confusing was the process of the missile being shot into the sky that would suddenly rid the atmosphere of pollutants and change the sky's color back to blue. The fact that the father of the main character didn't want the sky to change back to blue seemed like a grim portrayal of the selfishness that's involved in neglecting environments. The reason the sky is red and the positive effects of it going back to blue are completely disregarded by the father; similar to this scene is the neglect of environments for companies to profit.

- Casey I.

This chapter was the first one I chose to read out of the book, but I didn't fully understand it. From context I knew that this short story existed in some kind of post-apocalyptic hyper reality-- where a different life form (sky-people) come to aid in the paralleled "climate change"-like issues. After reading that Jemisin is referred to both an "Afrofuturist" and an environmentalist, I could definitely see the connection. When referring to the environmental state, this whole chapter seemed to be a jab at the climate change debate: references to years of pumping harsh chemicals into the atmosphere that created this new, red sky (feels almost like Jemisin is foreshadowing Earth's extreme future). Further, I found myself tying the shooting of a chemical missile to counter the red sky only for it to fail, causing thunderheads, trees, and boulders to fill the atmosphere; to the baseless and naive efforts human beings have done/ thought of to

combat climate change. As I didn't really care too much for the plot of this chapter since Jemisin didn't really elaborate or develop the characters too much, I did really enjoy the imagery and attention to detail within the story. I liked that even though I had no idea what this altered reality of Earth represented, I was still able to envision the gloomy red skies, the futuristic "little metal balls" that the sky-people descended/ ascended in, the life conditions of the Ring, etc.

--Michaela I.

This story touched me. All too often as humans, we look at things and ask ourselves "how can we make this better?". We refuse to accept anything 'as is', always striving to fiddle with this or that to make it more appealing. We interrupt natural processes to make our own lives more comfortable, literally in the form of dams and highways and figuratively in our incessant need to exploit whatever resources we find. The backdrop of this story is evident enough, the end product of our endless fiddling. It forces this world into a choice- forego your modern comforts and live on the Earth, or seek those on the Ring. But yet, even in the framing of the question we reveal a bias. Sure, those who live on Earth are without the things The Ring may deem vital, but how could they miss something they truly don't need? Maybe it's a cultural thing. Westerners are trapped in a loop where we are told what we don't have is what we need and we need to have it now. Those on this new Earth are seen as simple, because they lack that. But what they gain is an understanding that some things simply are. They exist, and that is final. It does not need to be changed, or improved. The main character embodies this attitude in her demeanor, refusing to change or "improve" to find a husband. There is beauty in the kind of nature that exists unchanged, with all its flaws. Just like the red sky or Nahautu- unnatural to some, but beautiful because it *is*.

Jemisin describes two different worlds between the "Sky-folk" that live on the ring and people living on Earth. Earth life has a more simple and eco-friendly, whereas the ring is scientifically advanced and constantly changing. Although sharing the same planet, this is a direct narrative parallel to our world existing with many cultures and their different ways of living. In the story, the sky-folk come down to Earth to study about changes in the sky and the atmosphere. The sky-folk and earthfolk do not usually work together even though they look just like normal people, sky-folk are not trustworthy. Nahautu and one of the younger sky-folk discuss their views on the world and try to understand each other's different way of

living. Nahautu describing clouds as dragons dancing in the sky shows she has an artistic mind to have such an imagination. While the sky-folk have more of a critical and logical mindset about reality. I can envision here that Jemisin is imagining the curiosity of those in the field of logic and science venturing to other places of the world whose societies are built with different priorities.

Upon providing a “solution” on how to fix the sky, most of the Earth folk don’t approve of this plan, especially the main character Nahautu’s father. These changes on the planet have happened for a reason and will stay that way even if that leads to a shorter life-span for them. Altering the future outcome of what mother nature has planned is not a solution. Finding natural solutions that are harmful to the environment is the only way to properly help the planet Earth. In our world right now, we consist of similar types of people and perspectives. Our issues of global warming are only getting worse. Mother nature has taken its course when it’s being abused and will release her wrath if we aren’t careful. If people use resources on earth, it has to be done properly and in an orderly fashion. Jemisin is highlighting extreme societies learning to coexist in order to learn more of the world they share to protect it. --Michael M

I enjoyed this story very much. I found the imagery used by the author to be very vivid, almost as if I was watching in a movie. The story itself reminded me of a post apocalyptic version of Romeo and Juliet as two people from completely different backgrounds fall in love. However, there were many aspects of the story that also reminded me of certain things. The sky people resembled settlers who feel like they know what's best for the people living on the ground. The story seems like a post apocalyptic future that takes place after a world has been devastated by global warming. Yet to recover from the devastation that was brought upon by global warming the people on the ground love their earth and believe that they should change it, instead change themselves to evolve with the earth. I found this very interesting because many times it feels like this future can't be that far from us if we don't learn to evolve in order to change the damage that has already been inflicted on the environment. Something that confused me about this story was what exactly happened at the end. I wasn't entirely sure what happened to the sky and why it happened. Nevertheless I really liked this story and I do think I would recommend it to others.
-Erica Solis

This was a brief albeit interesting love story that unfolds during a post-apocalyptic apocalypse so to speak. The imagery was beautifully constructed, but although it was conceptually striking it felt a little difficult to follow at times because of that very reason. I very much enjoyed the pacing of the story though, and its overall brevity. I think one of the best words I can think of to describe this story was “fleeting”. One of the most memorable ideas that came from the narrative for me was the notion of living simply, and to live in accordance with the changes of the world rather than change it ourselves. I feel as if this was the belief of many peoples before the many great advances in knowledge and technological innovations were made. The naturalistic conceptions within this brief story I feel resonate with Vandermeer's *Annihilation*. The notion of the natural world as being a greater force within the universe than humanity came to mind regarding the two texts' thematic parallels. I also could not help but think of the sky people as colonizers. The idea of colonizers coming to another's land believing that their systems of beliefs and values are superior, and enforcing them upon the native's of the land believing they are doing “good”. Although the story itself was short, it compacted a variety of themes into the telling of an odd futuristic love story. The relationship between the two central characters was also interesting to read about. The representation of the woman as being both physically superior to her counterpart while remaining in touch with ideas of femininity was well portrayed. Brenden N.

In this story I liked the Sci-Fi elements of this story. The plot was overall good and the ending is something that generally doesn't really happen with most stories. We didn't really see an ending that was more sufficed for either side. It was more realistic than the over dramatic ending that we usually see. I never really understood the meaning behind the “sky” people and why they needed to stay on earth. Even though I guess earth really can't do anything to them, maybe that's why they preferred to stay on earth than the other places they could go to. They also never really explained why they had to leave their domain, what made them come from up above and need to be on earth for so long? Were they watching over a certain place? Did something happen to them for them to leave? Maybe they were taking a vacation who knows. But in the end I did end up liking this story a lot more than the other ones that i did read just because the plot line ended up being realistic and you can understand it a little bit better than most. I know that a red sky was somewhat of the reason and its ties to the plot line but i wish they elaborated more on some details. There was a time period elapsed and that didn't make sense either.

-Courtney Donahoe

The Trojan Girl

The next short story I chose to read was "the Trojan Girl", it so far did not stand out as my favorite, however there was interesting imagery and plot that contributed to the story's consumption. I enjoyed reading the fantasy world as code and the computer/tech aspect, but these details were hard for me to develop until later in the reading. I think this short excerpt has room to continue, in perhaps a longer story or a complete novel on its own, but as a short story I felt that I was left with too many questions until the end. The trope of robots/programs/machines trying to surpass or understand humanity is fairly common and once that longing was introduced it was much easier for me to follow the narrative. I didn't quite enjoy the confusion that first is introduced in trying to understand the created world of circuitry, but inevitably it was a new take on a reused storyline that seemed refreshing. I'm still left confused about the girl, if she is a Trojan Girl as the title describes then I would assume her to be some sort of trap for the wolves, yet they confidently say that she is not in the common sense a trap. It could be argued that by the end she has trapped the existing code into a state of elevated consciousness through her new programming, but I don't feel entirely satisfied by that response. In short, I don't think that I would advise this book due to the fact that there was really not a definitive lesson learned, or purpose of the characters. The resolution was not quite met.

Faith Cassidy S.

Frankly, this story was tough for me to get through.

Valedictorian

Remy C.

I particularly liked "Valedictorian" for the subversion of the post-apocalyptic tropes. The story establishes early on that the people trapped inside the "Firewall" by inhuman forces are prisoners who lost a great war and are routinely "culled." However, we come to find out that this is a fallacy: the people are trapped because they were unwilling to accept living peacefully with the more advanced beings outside the walls, instead behaving aggressively towards anything they perceive as different (something the narrator Zinhle is a victim of). It turns the trope on its head and questions the apocalyptic war genre by positing that war would not be necessary if people could accept differences. I questioned at first what the significance with pregnancy was, and it took a bit of re-reading to understand that it was because pregnant women are not taken

by the people beyond the wall. I am very curious about the people on the other side of the wall, but the story stands without answering those questions. The mystery is part of the point. I absolutely would recommend this story to the rest of the class; it is a fantastic example of specific exploring intolerance. That the narrator continues to be herself, to strive for excellence, even against adversity (namely being assaulted by other characters and struggling with a system where no one else will try), is admirable. Additionally, as college students, I think we can appreciate the way that the story describes school and grades: all it measures is how well you can adapt to the system.

This piece was really interesting and I think it had very strong world building. I think that it helped that it touched on so many previous works, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* or *Wayward Pines* off of the top of my head, and there was a straight up "tell" section to explain the world. Usually I'm not a fan of this method and it's usually advised against, but I think it worked well to tell the story and was actually necessary. But I think the piece did a good job of introducing the weird and then later explaining why it's a normalized part of this world. As an example the protagonist's mother at the very beginning asks her if she would consider getting pregnant. For our real-world standards this isn't a normal part of it, but it's explained in the story that it could save the protagonist from the culling. I wish it were longer but I think I'm okay with the actual length of the piece. It was able to complete itself and I don't know if adding more (and still keeping it a short story) would really add anything to it. It is one of those short stories though that could easily be turned into a novel. But I also wonder why the protagonist is so hated. I know she (the protagonist and Lemuel) provides an explanation but it doesn't really make that much more sense. If the protagonist continues to excel then that means she would be the +1, and that someone else would be saved from the culling. I don't know how her success tied into the survivors needing to accept these other beings beyond the wall. *-Adriana Hernandez*

This reflection will go into a tangent, be prepared:

This story is fucking dope! I agree with Remi, I appreciate this deviation from the standard post-apocalyptic/ apocalyptic narrative; regardless of the fact that I think the ending appeared a bit rushed. It seems that in this world, Zinhle reflects the outliers in society who make others around her feel intimidated for her skepticism of normalcy-any discrepancies penetrating the rigid moral framework of society are faced with social ostracism and acts of aggression(which led to the war itself). This could be the case for racism towards races other than their own/derogatory terms towards nerds, the works. I instantly think of cases of social injustice done towards people of color—being different leads to fear that manifests in violent acts; the way that the western narrative is lackluster of the realities of White Americans fearing demographic change is why I think *Jemisin* is so successful in her Sci-Fi. These extremities-What people are willing to do to maintain what's always been. It is a fascinating part of our humanity. People will literally kill if that means keeping things the same(again with demographic change), even if it's at the expense of their humanity. I think of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, and general systematic oppression. This affects Zinhle to the point that she can't believe her own humanity doesn't acknowledge her as one of their own and is

undesired for being different. Although it's set in the near future, it's extremely indicative of the contemporary perpetuating cycles of violence towards and even within Black communities.

I was very caught off guard with the whole pregnancy thing like my classmates have all stated above, I think it's a significant moment in the narrative that sort of explores the extremities of this world. How a mother would rather have her dropout of school and have a bastard child, instead of supporting her even if that means death. Zinhle would rather be herself and LIVE rather than conform to merely EXIST. But this leads me to my next comparison-I think of the "Hillbillies" in The Hillbilly Elegy. The way they were content with their cyclical and intergenerational misery. The fact that they rather "spoil" their lives by giving up on themselves (like complaining about their poverty but not willing to get a job) and conforming to the biases that people attach to their race, socioeconomic status, etc.

THE ELDERS!!! I think it's important to focus on the reiteration of respecting the elders. For me, this represents the African essence of this story--the importance of treasuring/worshiping/protecting the sacredness of the elders even when that means biting your own tongue at opposing beliefs.

Also-in case anyone finds this interesting or is old enough to remember a program called reading rainbow, (also any Roots or TNG fans) pop-culture Icon LeVar Burton hosts a podcast where he narrates short fiction and he did "The Valedictorian" in February-if you get a chance check it out and check out the story it is definitely worth the read.

<https://omny.fm/shows/levar-burton-reads/valedictorian-by-n-k-jemisin>

-Stephanie G :).

The Storyteller's Replacement

The way the story is narrated to the reader as if they were in the world is almost jarringly immersive. That is to say, it's jarring, but not in a bad way. It's a pleasant surprise to see such an unusual narration technique. The narrator's claim of the word "freak" as a name was instantly likeable and I wanted to know more. As always, I was excited for any mention of dragons, my all time favorite mythical being. The brutality of the story made it clear right away that the king was not someone who I would sympathise with and I looked forward to the karmic retribution I predicted in his near future. The birth of all daughters was similarly something that I predicted, and that I waited for with more than a little smugness. Despite this smugness, I was relieved for the children when he wasn't as upset as I had thought he would be. I was glad that, for all his sexism, he didn't, for instance, disown, kill or otherwise seem to resent the girls very much. It also seemed an effective commentary on sexism in the sense that sexism isn't always so violently overt, though of course many of Parameter's actions fit that version of sexism too, sometimes it's just that slight preference; those little comments. The king's declaration that "women are creatures of great wantonness when

not guarded closely by family and husbands." (Jemisin 171) while obviously prejudiced, could even be considered to be less damaging than his question "what has she to be jealous of? She's beautiful enough, or I wouldn't have married her." (Jemisin 174), this question, posed to his daughters, while not overtly hateful in the way that the other comment is, displays his own ignorant belief that the only thing a woman could be jealous of is beauty. The hints that the daughters might be somehow supernatural or dangerous did not give me any dislike or fear of them. I found myself identifying strongly with them before I had much information about them at all. Their strangeness made them likeable. This, of course, somewhat changed at the daughter's scheming and malicious behavior towards the king's new wife. The king's false concern for the new wife was strange in that it served very little purpose, as he was powerful enough not to have need of such a display. There was no need for him to exclaim about her being a "poor thing" (Jemisin 174), only to discard her when she was no longer coherent due to the abuse he had put her through. This leads me to believe that King Parameter's performance of concern is chiefly for himself. He wants to believe that he is a caring person towards those with whom he cannot avoid. When he can brush them out of sight, and by extension out of mind, his kindness is no longer a concern because he can avoid his own guilt. It was actually when the narrator commented that I must have already predicted the ending of the story that I realized I could no longer guess where it was going at all, only that I didn't trust the daughters. The narrator's eventual come-ons to the reader at the end of the story were somehow more chilling than anything in the story itself. I couldn't help but suspect that the narrator was a dragon, planning on killing the reader. - Autumn G.H.

Jemison's sense of experimenting with different forms of literary techniques with different voices and narration hooks were very interesting. *The Storyteller's Replacement* is more of a fairytale of a king and dragon hunting and what makes it so compelling is its grasp of the underlining twist and tones of the narration that suggested in the lines of morality in leaders. As stated, "So many of our leaders are weak, and choose to take power from others rather than build strength in themselves". This king seeks the powers of a dragon to cure his impotence. So comedic I felt it to be a side quest on *Witcher* where you know there is a moral lesson brewing in its ending. The king fails to find a male dragon and instead kills a female mother dragon even though it is instructed to kill a male. This results in him having a bunch of daughters from numerous wives. These daughters are dyabolical in that they suggest to the king to have one of his wives have sex with twenty of his men and kill them after a boy is conceived. Wow, what a hilarious story and I am not even spoiling the heart of the narrative. Jemison breaks away as a conscious narrator who interacts directly with the reader. This conversation is a sense of finding a connection of breaking down the insecurities of a king as his power is revealed to being built upon others who were more fitted to be seen as strong. His daughters, even at a young age, were wise enough to come up with ideas and instructed him to do things due to his desperation for power. I would definitely recommend those who enjoy a narrative that speculates upon a commentary of humanity and the insecurities of those revered and in charge. I didn't want to speak further of the narrative as it has many moments of comedy and action moments that are entertaining and fun to read.----Michael M

This chapter was pretty interesting to me. First off, the role of the storyteller in this chapter was pretty unclear to me-- why couldn't the original storyteller make it to our fictional encounter? Why was the narrator trying to "entertain" us so much? I think these questions are what initially made me so interested in the story. The folk tale type of story began with the introduction of a feeble, insecure king, King Paramenter of Sosun. Paramenter began his quest to find a male dragon to kill for its heart-- that in consuming, would supposedly replenish his manhood. Instead, he ate the heart of a female dragon, resulting in the birth of his six daughters and the death of his wife and five concubines. The girls would go on to manipulate their father through his vanity to get what they wanted time and time again. First with the suggestion to impregnate his second wife via twenty different loyal guards-- resulting in the birth of his first son and the death of all of his best, most "suitable" guards. Then, with recruitment of the strongest men from each kingdom for the competition for one position of marrying all six sisters, resulting in the death of the rest of the candidates. Then, one night Paramenter wandered into his childrens' quarters, resulting in his own death. It seemed that everywhere his daughters went, death followed. It made me wonder why. The storyteller said, "not a dragon by blood but raised in their ways" (pg. 181). Did they have some kind of genetic tie to the dragons who were slaughtered and whose hearts were consumed by their father? Did their dragon blood represent the divine feminine, causing them to slaughter the patriarchal institution? This story definitely kept me thinking throughout the chapter and continue to make me think of other crazy conspiracies.

-- Michaela I.

Remy C.

The fairy tale format of this story makes the content especially intriguing. We know so little about the "real world" of the narrative, only the storyteller's story. The storyteller tells of a man who sought power, simply for the sake of his own (masculine) reputation. He literally and figuratively consumes the feminine (literally in eating the dragon's heart for his own gain, figuratively in the way he abuses women sexually throughout the story), without much thought as to anyone else's needs or desires. He loves his daughters only in that they are "better than average women" and only as they dote on him, which is very reflective of the "not like other girls" mentality that currently plagues our society, as if most women are vapid, thoughtless drones, and only a handful are capable of true, original thought - and that thought is only valid if it serves a man's desires. The story reflects a number of power structures, but masculine oppression in particular, and the way sexual violence and domination is used, not even so much to hurt women specifically as because male society literally does not see women as worth treating humanely. The story is a cautionary tale; the storyteller not only remarks about how "sad" it is that weak leaders steal power and hoard it, but in the story the king literally is consumed right back - the women he abused are mostly dead, but their descendants demand the power be returned to them, in just as violent a manner as it was taken. Violence begets violence, and it feels justified for the women/dragons to be angry after being hunted to near

extinction and used so horribly by humans/men. Although the storyteller's circumstances are unclear, this is doubled outside of the story: we know there is sexual contact happening between the listener and teller, and it's implied to be taking advantage of someone. The context, whether it's malicious, is up to the reader to decide.

Marshall Ingerton

I have mixed feelings about this short story. It was different with the setting and pace from many of the other short stories that I read so far but I feel like it doesn't really follow through with what it's trying to do. It was really interesting and I did like how different it was with the high-fantasy element. I think the voice shifting in and out of the fairy-tale mode is a bit disjointed because they didn't really sound cohesive for some reason. It was almost like they were two different sections with their own thing going on. I thought that the way the speaker interacted with the reader would have had more of a connection to the short story being told, but it's not really clear if there was or not. The breaks to the voice and the interactions with the reader seemed like they were important because of how the voice would break away and go off into food and pleasure, or at the end of the short story with tucking the reading away for the night with an almost sexual tone. Something overall felt missing, like there was a final piece that wasn't really there. Another thought I had was that the high-fantasy was crucial to the plot of the short story but somehow didn't heighten it, instead it was kind of like padding for an otherwise uninteresting short story. There was also a lot of "why"s that went unanswered and this probably added to that missing feeling. I would recommend reading it though since it was at least a fun read with a change of pace.

The story seems to be a traditional fairytale with a king, dragons, princesses and suitors but it's soon clear that Jemisin is more inspired by the Grimm brothers. The king has his wife gang raped so she'll get pregnant with a boy, the princess marries the one suitor who kills all the other ones, and the grandchildren, who are female dragons in disguise, eat the king so they can keep reproducing without being caught. It all begins with the king being infertile and in need of a dragon hearth to cure that. It has been a norm that you're not a man if you can't get a woman pregnant. It's a phallogocentric view, to be focused on or concerned with the phallus or penis as a symbol of male dominance. Since the king is infertile, he can't live up to this and instead tries to overachieve in other manly ways, such as fighting dragons (which also will help with his problem). "So many of our leaders are weak, and choose to take power from others rather than build strength in themselves." "The man" has created this world by himself and used the female body as a projection for his conceptions. Conceptions she has been forced to follow, sometimes without an afterthought. That's why the king so easily is willing to give his wife to his guards and no one says anything against it. Maybe we should follow Cixous way of *l'écriture féminine* for the best of all the genders. - Lisa Y

The fairy tale-like characteristics were what first drew me in while reading this story; we are quickly notified that a male dragon is important in this story. The reason is because the king is in need of a male dragon's heart in order to "cure" his problem. The narrator shares, "As it was rumored that male dragons could seed as many as a dozen females in a day..." (170). Instantly, we are informed of the king's weakness; infertility. As we progress shortly in the story I thoroughly enjoy how the author chooses to highlight this weakness that the king holds. The overall themes of power and desire often relate to the concepts of our society being overrun by masculinity, for example, throughout the text it is extremely clear that the king doesn't seem to have the most humane thinking/beliefs towards women. When the king fails to find a male dragon, without hesitation, he eats the heart of the mother dragon. "After all, women are creatures of great wantonness when not guarded closely by family and husbands" (170). The king clearly doesn't respect women; as we progress in the story the king has sex with his wife and other women proving that the men in the story view women as a source to solely fulfill their sexual desires. Instantly, this particular quote and the king's actions made me think about how women are physically and mentally mistreated for the comfort and benefits of men. Overall, although the fairy tale-like setting sparked my interest at first the progression of the story was a little difficult to read. But I do appreciate the author raising awareness that women are hardly ever respected.

-Heyzell R. (5.7.2020)

I don't know...I'm torn between liking and disliking the stylistic choices of Jemisin with this story. I appreciate the difference in narrative, but it kind of reminded me of *The Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's stylistic choices with storytelling-in other words I felt I was reading eurocentric storytelling instead of more african (while clearly the context is alluding to power struggles within oppressed communities-in this case the egotistical king who uses his power to murder the dragon for his impotence)folklore. Nonetheless, this is such an enticing narrative. I did have some questions about the origin of the Storytellers replacement, like many of my companeros(classmates) mentioned above-who is she? Why is she replacing the storyteller? Who is her audience? What is the purpose of this story, is it a moral tale? Is there any purpose to her storytelling? It might just be me but this is the only narrative that doesn't feel dystopian-I mean for a moment we sense an eerie tone from the narrator, but nothing extremely indicative of a time(maybe I just missed something). Although this narrative might not take place in the near-future or even presently though, it most certainly contains all the aspects of a broken earth. I think of selfish and narcissistic humans sacrificing the natural world for their uncontrollable human desires, until natural divinity, (the birth and creation of his daughters) divine justice comes into play. This story is yet another narrative about the destructive ways of humans-I definitely recommend it if you're into metastories.

-Stephanie Gonzalez :)

The way the narrator speaks directly to the reader at the beginning caught my attention in a fun way, and even reminded me of the Peddler from *Aladdin* until they became incredibly creepy at the end. Anyways, the story itself was even reminiscent of stories I have read in *One Thousand and One Nights*, which I enjoyed since I like old fairy tales and such. Another aspect I appreciate is the lesson of the story, if you will, which I found to be on the last page, when the

narrator explains, "So many of our leaders are weak, and choose to take power from others rather than build strength in themselves" (pg.181). Of course, in light of our class and our political climate in general, I thought of Trump, because he seems like a weak, senile man to me but tries to appear as strong by using any privilege or power he can reach. An even more timely example is his veto of the Iran war powers resolution, since it shows how much he dislikes any restraint of his power. Plus, with the dragons, mystical adventures, and a kingdom, the story becomes even more similar to a classic tale found in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The only question I have is why the daughters had to wait until their grandchildren were born to kill the father, King Paramenter, since I feel like they could've just killed their father once they married the brute man. Then, they maybe could have reigned as a strong unit of queens. Perhaps their country follows male primogeniture? However, England follows that and even they have had queens. Another question is how come the storyteller's replacement is getting all up in my space during the last page? So random and creepy. At first this was very sudden to me, but I found some creeper vibes when I reread the introduction after. Still, despite the "good night backrub" (pg.181), I would recommend this story to a friend, but not as a bedtime story.

-Emma N.

One of the most unsettling aspects of this story (besides the obvious abuse of women that occurs within the story) was definitely the narrative technique employed by Jemisin. I am reminded somewhat of the unreliable narrator trope that is often used in literature such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. My suspicions of the narrator being an unwanted presence were seemingly confirmed by the end of the story in which it felt like the fictional presence was inappropriately pursuing you as the reader. The story centralizes around that of an impotent king who uses his power to abuse the many women who have the misfortune of coming into his kingdom. Gender was most notably one of the main themes that prevailed throughout the story as the king seeks to fulfill performative roles of masculinity, but is ultimately usurped by his daughters. The tale told within the story seems to be mocking/satirizing the fairytale/fantasy trope in which women often are portrayed as helpless and in need of saving by a male leading figure. On this note I call to mind Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. These stories are often told with the intent of portraying some grand moral lesson, and I think personally the moral of this story is to not undervalue or abuse women within society. The king is granted his desire for suitable successors through his daughters that were bestowed upon him with the help of a female dragon's heart. Yet, his stupidity, greed, and general folly prevents him from acknowledging this, and he goes out in search of a male dragon heart to satisfy his own fragile notion of masculinity. This becomes his downfall, and the story reaches a satisfying end as he perishes. The one aspect of the story in which I am still unsure of is the narrative voice. It feels intrusive and unwanted almost, and I wonder what Jemisin is aiming to convey through this. I have some ideas, but am not entirely certain. It was an intriguing story.- Brenden N.

The Brides of Heaven

Remy C.

The “mystical pregnancy” genre is fascinating to me. I love it, in all versions of speculative fiction. The slow build up and reveal in “The Brides of Heaven” makes it particularly satisfying, and I do love the ethical questions it raises, namely in impregnating an entire community without their consent. It also serves as an interesting twist on the “planet of women” trope - in futuristic settings, this tends to be a group of white women, atheist or culturally Christian. By making this group Muslim, Jemisin changes much of the culture and tone of the piece (less “science above all” and more intermix with faith, storytelling, etc.). As always with this genre, the mechanics of a presumably alien pregnancy do raise questions. There is the question of biology (how can these presumably disparate organisms reproduce compatibly?) but because of the tone of the story I also have to question if this really is an alien lifeform, or if it’s a gift from God (or both?). And why do some characters (like Ayan) shun tradition, while others (like Dihya) allow it to completely dictate their life? I’d recommend this story unless narratives of pregnancy and consent issues make you squeamish (and even then I’d recommend it, just proceed with caution). The present/past storytelling format presents excellent suspense, and the exploration of religion, gender roles, and futurism vs. tradition makes it a compelling read. I wasn’t entirely a fan of the “sinful” depiction of queerness, but it was so minor that it didn’t detract much from my enjoyment.

“The Brides of Heaven” was absolutely gripping to me, especially the fact that there was such a slow progression of events before the climax of the story. The whole idea of a supernatural “pure” pregnancy has always been present throughout many religions. The Virgin Mary is praised for her pureness and birthing Christ in complete innocence. It is interesting to see it in this science fiction type form, because as a reader you are left with questions about what actually impregnated Dihya. Was it God as she claims? Or was it something completely different? Why did Dihya put whatever it was in the pool into the water supply? Was it out of self-righteous need, or is she actually crazy? I find it interesting that in the beginning Ayan is missing the children that were taken away from them, and how she was secretly wishing for there to be children again. But instead of being happy about Dihya’s mysterious pregnancy, she is horrified. It is almost one of those “be careful what you wish for” situations. Because who knows, perhaps all the women will become pregnant from this liquid. I would not say this was my favorite story to read, because of the intense religious attitudes and offhanded homophobia from Dihya. But I also did not hate it, because it was a very interesting read that had me on the edge of my seat. Especially the part of Dihya going off on her own to eventually find the pool. I would most likely recommend it to others who were interested in this type of supernatural pregnancy genre. -- **Serafina S.**

Although I'm not religious and don't know much about the different faiths, this chapter made me really think about how religion takes form in human life/ institutions. The title, "The Brides of Heaven" seemed to be a satirical shot at the religious extremists. Character, Dihya, seemed to think her version of "God" had impregnated her with His resurrected "messiah". Further, she was caught trying to sabotage the main water supply for her colony, with reasons related to her religious faith-- "But suicide is an anathema to God, and I will not sit and wait for extinction" (pg. 186). Jemison gave us some insight on the reality and hardships that Dihya faced in her life. Her young son died shortly after the male colony faced extinction, probably causing some crazy emotions to hit Dihya-- maybe prompting her mental illness? By then end of the chapter, we knew nothing of the fate of her colony or whether or not they would be affected by this. I felt that Dihya's character was Jemison's direct allusion to the mentally ill, religious extremists, and how society deals with these issues-- not very well. The allusion to law enforcement efforts that fail when it comes to those who suffer from mental issues-- not giving proper care when needed, etc. Even the untimely ending seemed to representative of the uncertainty and lack of hope for our own reality.

--Michaela I.

The amount of connections I made while reading this story is unreal. Like many others, I am not religious, at all. But the concepts of how religion and beliefs can take on numerous forms. One obvious connection I made was how Dihya somewhat "resembles" the virgin mary; they both are impregnated, but to be blunt the question WHO/WHAT impregnated them? At the end of the story I still questioned this. I found it difficult to refrain from questioning whether or not Dihya was mentally ill; as we know Dihya faces numerous hardships, one of them being the fact that she lost her son. This particular character also reminded me of this girl who was interviewed quite some time ago because she truly believed she was the "next virgin mary;" to be more specific she believed that the fetus would be christ, but was later proved wrong when an ultrasound was done on her. The ultrasound proved that she wasn't even pregnant, after watching the interview I, again, questioned if this person suffered from mental illness or if this was an actual belief. Overall, Dihya's story and the examples mentioned revolve around the notion of mental illness and how our society continues to be clueless and lack empathy when it comes to one's mental health. In the beginning of the story, Dihya's mentality was emphasized: "No one realized the extent of Dihya's madness until she was caught sabotaging the water supply" (183). I also thought about how our society seems to lack an understanding when it comes to other's standing when it comes to religion and beliefs.

-Heyzell R. (5. 7. 2020)

This story felt like the most different story I had read from this book. I found it very strange but an incredible concept. In many ways I sympathized with the character Dihya, I couldn't begin to imagine what it was like for her losing her child and then knowing that you might never have one again. Being forced to accept a future must have been difficult especially knowing that not only will you be the last generation but also will be forced to live it alone. This is also a reason that could have played a part in her going a little crazy. When she found the pool and was able to get pregnant it seemed like a positive thing. However, I never took in consideration all the other people that she had given that water to. Her actions made me believe that she either had gone

mad or she was selfish. One of the things that confused me about this story was whether or not she was actually pregnant. How did she know that the pool actually gave her a child? How could she trust the stories she had heard would actually work. Lastly, if she had to fully submerge in the pool in order to get pregnant how did she come to the conclusion that if the women drank it they would also get pregnant. -Erica S

This story was very fascinating in the way that it twisted religion and science fiction. It reminded me of the narrative story often told in Christianity and Catholicism, and of course the allusions to the garden of eden were very apparent. The story immediately reminded me of the virgin Mary, but I also was heavily reminded of Eve from the Genesis narrative. I thought it was quite wonderful how Jemisin crafted an entire story about birth without having a single male character present. I think one of the main themes within this story is that of fanaticism. One of the most interesting aspects of this story for me personally was that it made me question humanity's relationship to organized religion. In one sense, Dhiya was personally saved from her crushing grief over the loss of her child, but in another regard she also potentially poisoned an entire community. This piece is really provoking because you have to sit think about how religion influences our lives on both a micro and macro level. I feel like it really plays with the idea of extremism as well. In the story religion is used as a means to justify extreme acts of terror on the part of Dhiya, and I cannot help but think of how many people do this in real life. It is an extremely complex question being asked in such a short story, and I think that Jemisin does an exceedingly well job of framing it. Is religion beneficial or detrimental? Will Dhiya bring salvation to her society, or bring it to its end? - Brenden N.

"The Brides of Heaven" was a lot more confusing because it was a lot more science fiction. It felt like it could live in the world of Jeff Vandermeer. It emanates the creeping feeling of dread that comes when something just isn't right. Small pieces of information get revealed little by little so the situation is fully grasped and ready to be pondered at the end. In this world that is clinging to the reality that we are familiar with, the characters live in a future timeline where they try to colonize a different planet but all the men die in transit and the kids die one by one leaving the women to wait for the inevitable end. The most interesting part about this story is the culture of these women and how that factor interacts with their objectives. There's usually a tension between religion and science but in this story they use each other to coexist considering Dhiya is a xenobiologist. I'd say her theories originate from God which is why she carries herself the way she does. The language and the structure of the story show She is faithful: referring to her story as a "confession", her disdain when she sees Ayan not covering her head, relaxing when the priestess comes in. Dhiya is so faithful that the story almost makes her sound mad. And by the time we realized she crawled into a pool of suspicious liquid that impregnated her with an alien baby, the audience (me) is properly convinced that she went crazy after the death of her

son. I feel like I'm really missing a reference with the title of this story. This might just be a glass half empty/full scenario, like, if Dihya is the heroine or the villain depends on the reader. She either saved the colony because she believed in god or she murdered everyone by contaminating the water with alien babies. -Jessica A.

The Evaluators

The novel is set in our world, but it's the beginning of the 23rd century and humans are in contact with alien species. The story is told through transcripts and messages from the crews, so we get a second hand view. Yet, I don't feel distanced from what's happening (or, rather happened), it just intensifies the suspense. At a first glance, you'd think it only portrays our curiousness and fear of the unknown that exists far outside of our own galaxy. Not just aliens, but superpredators that could enslave or kill the entire human species and take over our planet. It has been done several times before, both in books and cinema, so it's not an odd conclusion. But the core of the story is human's greed. Not only have we overpopulated and over-consumed the earth, we're after the Manka's palladium and can't understand how they have succeeded keeping their population down. On earth it has led to something even stricter than one-child legislation. What scares me isn't the aliens, it's the truth behind the story and its connection to our society. We're on the brink of overpopulation and I have friends that aren't going to have children as a way of trying to save the planet. It's an extreme way that's becoming more common, but not a way that suits all. You can tell that Aihua would want a child if it didn't burden earth. The superpredators' goal is to transform and install themselves into human society to control the growth by eating just enough people, as they did with the Manka's. For us, I hope it's enough to provide reproductive health services and birth control to all women (and men) who need it. To empower them to break out of poverty and norms. - Lisa Y

This story was a bit intense for me, in a more realistic sense it wasn't the aliens that were nerve wrecking, but the fact that the author focuses on how selfish humans can really be. This story connects to the idea that as our population progresses we could potentially see our "superiors" true intentions. For example, it's without question that those above us are hiding the "truth" from us. As the story progresses we learn that in order to "maintain" the human population humans are eaten. As I was reading I found myself thinking how I wouldn't be surprised if this was something the government was already planning. Perhaps, not exact, regardless this concept isn't new it's been around for quite a while. "Well, we have a problem with overpopulation and its effects: crowding, homelessness, starvation, worse" (204-205). Rather than finding humane solutions to this problem the people in power continue to discuss other ways to decrease the population. The quote mentioned previously is pretty eye opening because as a society this is currently a problem. In fact, this problem continues to deepen especially now that we are in a pandemic. We are dying and suffering because those in power care more about the money they're losing; their greed continuously shows. I am aware that in real time some societies are preventing parents from having a certain amount of children, and I couldn't help but ask: When are we next? Are we almost there? Because the way we are heading it sure seems that way. In a more personal sense, as I am getting older and am more aware with the greed that takes place I'm truly hesitant to even think of the idea of having a family. At times it's difficult to find happiness in a society where the people who make up this community are constantly ignored and are suffering.

-Heyzell R. (5. 7. 2020)

Population control conspiracy, anyone? This story reminded me of just that-(all conspiracies really)the conspiracy theories going around about COVID-19 being a worldwide population control scam. “China and the U.S. are in cahoots to secretly kill off a large sum of the population, and what better way than a lethal virus?” Ah, how paranoia reaches extreme levels of overthinking! (Although to be honest, who knows what the fuck we should or shouldn’t believe anymore-not much comes as a surprise these days). I think these speculative sci-fi narratives really present us with the possibilities of the interconnections with our vast universe and the fascinating interaction’s created by humans between homosapien and other beings. I hella enjoyed the storyline and the interaction between the evaluators(superpredators) and evaluated(egotistical humans)-the intrigue, the desire to learn in order to almost improve the species.

I couldn’t help but acknowledge how well Jemisin executed this narrative, seeing as how it is a common horror trope-alien entity’s attempt to infiltrate the human race to improve it somehow (or destroy it hehe). I think of the cheesy yet super entertaining “Population 436” which had a similar rendering of population control (keeping the town at the mystical population of 436) but at the hands of humans, instead of superpredators. If you get a chance and are into so bad they’re good horror films, check it out.

Lack of character development was my only real issue with this short story. I understand that the formatting and structure of the narrative is intentional for the effect of reading a genuine transcript, but I had a problem empathizing with both the predators as well as the selfish humans they consume. Overall, this was an interesting read, not my favorite but an overall innovative idea and highly recommended for the experience, like Wall-e but more consumption of humans lol.

-Stephanie Gonzalez :)

Walking Awake

This short story was very heartbreaking to me, but it was also very inspiring in a way. It reminded me a lot of Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out*, with the whole body transferring aspects of the story. I was also reminded a lot of colonization, especially of how the Master's felt that it was their duty to take over the bodies of humans. But as Enri stated, "Most parasites evolved to take over other animals" (224) which is exactly true with old colonial empires that forced the world to be what it is today. The Master's take over the bodies of humans with false promises and give humans no free will, such as what the Spanish did with Native American's or what the British did with African's. Sadie is a very strong character, she never lets her mental health inhibit her even though she is brought up believing that it does. And in fact, it is because of her bipolar disorder that she is able to see past the lies of the Master's and start fighting back. This story is a reminder that if we are not careful, especially the United States, then we too can end up in a situation like this story is in, metaphorically of course. Our own president is a white supremacist, and he is only getting a bigger following because of his blatant racism. What is to stop him or his cabinet from trying to take away our rights one day? Especially if most of the country becomes like Sadie and actually starts fighting back. I would most definitely recommend this story to others, because I believe it really does issue a strong visual and warning for what can happen if we do not start waking up and fighting back now.-- **Serafina S.**

I found this short story extremely powerful and also moving. A few sentences in the story really stood out to me just because of how relevant they are in our world today as well as in many aspects of our personal lives. The exchange between Sadie and Enri "There is something you can do," he said. "Something we think will work. But it will be ... hard." She shook her head, fiercely. "It's hard now.",' was one of my favorite moments in the story because of how applicable the meaning behind these words are in everyday life. We are constantly choosing between the lesser of two pains in life, whether it's working hard to provide a better life, fighting for change, or something as small as delaying gratification, we are always making decisions that impact future events. The power in letting go of fear, and sacrificing oneself for the sake of future generations and freedom is truly incredible. This clearly speaks to standing up for what is right and not letting Trump revert America back to the racist beginning, while also showing that he is only as strong as we allow him to be. He only has the power if we submit to his racist ruling. I think that this is especially relevant in our current day because there is a clear correlation between Trump supporters and those being irresponsible about the coronavirus. This certain arrogance of thinking they will not be affected by the coronavirus so why should they

stay inside comes from Trump's attitude. Similar to a parasite feeding authority, a virus will take so many lives because of Trump's following. - Grace H.

A parasitic alien species raises humans in an anthroproduction facility to be hosts. That's what you believe, until the story twists around and says: "All the monsters were right here, no need to go looking for more in space." It tells you that humans have this monstrosity inside them, they are the ones who created the parasites. Sadie is a human working at the center as a caregiver, she's unfit to be a host because she is bipolar. The children are taught that the Masters are human's saviors and they are privileged to get chosen early to serve them, as 10/36. They are living a lie, which they believe completely. When you are brought up and fed with the same lie over and over, you don't contradict it. You can see it to some extent in our society as well, there are countries without freedom of speech where the government decides what the citizens get to know. They control the media, even foreign journalists. Enri says to Sadie: "It was all you knew to do, now you know better." How people blindly, or willingly, to the oppressors bidding. Sadie knew what she did was wrong, but she rather be on that end than being a host or disposed of. She's afraid of the dreams (she gets to know the truth of the Masters) that finally gets her to make "the right" decision, It's a story about enslavement and the fight for liberty, sometimes through bloodshed. - Lisa Y

This was such a sad story. It reminded me so much of the film *Get Out* or at least a version of it. I felt like this story could most definitely be a continuation of *Get Out* if protagonist Chris had lost, and the family was able to further their horrible experiments. Even when Sadie was in a dream talking to Enri it reminded me of the hypnosis scene in *Get Out* where Chris "sinks" in to the chair, the visuals of him in surrounded by darkness resembled that of the dream and the fact that they are dead but their consciousness is still alive is also something can be seen in the film. The story also had a lot of moments that resembled slavery. One of the most obvious one was the term "Master" that was used during the time of slavery, there was also the buying and selling of people who many times don't even have real names. These people were bought according to physical aspects which again is something that would be done as slave owners looked to buy people who were most fit and healthy. I thought it was a great story for its ability to show the reader a twisted future where people achieve immortality through the pain and suffering of others. Despite the body snatching I found this to be a narrative that happened and could still be happening today. To me this was a story about oppression and slavery. - Erica.S

Of the stories I have read so far I think that this has been one of my absolute favorites. The storytelling was compelling, and as the reader I felt that I had to know what happened next. The story itself takes on a wide range of themes: slavery, colonization, revolution, sacrifice, and freedom of will are just a few I could name. One of the most notable lines for me personally was as follows, “All you know is what they’ve told you, and they tell you so little. They think if we don’t know anything, they’ll be able to keep control- and they’re right” (229). I felt that this sentiment was so jarring to me because it carried with it such a significant message. The idea of knowledge being not only a source of power, but also one of the most vital components for instigating change/revolution in society. It made me think of the current systems in place in American society in which people are made to believe that what they have is adequate, and any attempt to better the overall condition of life would be seemingly fanatical to some. I think of healthcare especially in this regard, but I will try not to stray from the text too far in my commentary. One could also make parallels between the idea of humans as livestock/capital in a world ruled by parasitic overlords who feed off the working class with current systems of late-capitalism but I once again digress. I think that one of the reasons as to why this story is incredible is because the reader can take away from it a plethora of allegorical interpretations. To be able to write a piece so short in length and so perlocutionary is quite an astounding feat. Literature has often acted as a means to reflect society, and I feel this piece does an incredible job of doing so. - Brenden N.

The Elevator Dancer

Bewitching sci-fi about “love”, desires and the temptations-This story reminds me of a black mirror episode. I really enjoyed Jemisin’s portrayal of passion and resistance, as the proof of the dysfunctionality within this totalitarian system of government. While the narrator seems to be a rigid man who handles his shit, he can’t help but become mesmerized with the resistance of this mysterious elevator woman. The way she so eloquently moves without fear of them coming to get her, (I imagine a mighty and powerful marshall law)as if she doesn’t share his same internalized fears of his all-knowing government and god. Although in this story, although it doesn’t state verbatim, it feels as though the government and God are one in the same-viciously dictating his every move, infiltrating even his thoughts. His wife is chosen for him, home, job, what a fucking hellhole(although I think this is a big middle finger or at least commentary on those religious

institutions that also dictate who and how you're marriage should be carried out). Even his orgasms are mundane and tasteless. Despite this blind obedience before encountering the elevator woman, he becomes infatuated with her carelessness and that simultaneously creates skepticism in his mind. I love the way he himself becomes maddened by his desire to KNOW this woman who dares break the rules. He even mentions something about her being heaven-sent, she's an enigma and he can't understand how she is even real...is she? I don't know how much I like this part or what Jemisin's goal was in this instance but for me, it's like the typical evangelical cop out- a "religious" justification that the most high is on their side, meticulously calculating and conspiring in their favor, feeding their desires. If you haven't read it yet, do yourself a favor and enjoy it. It also helps that it's one of the shortest stories in the anthology-if you're a fan of feeling eerily happy after a sci-fi experience, check this shit out!

Stephanie G :)

Marshall Ingerton

This was a very short short story and I think the length did well to keep the flow of the story strong and the tension. Devoting more time to an internal monologue would have halted the action and maybe have lessened the plot twist. However since the pace was so quick it kept the reader moving along. The imagery wasn't overly present but was really strong with the dancing. I think that was all that was necessary since the protagonist became obsessed with this dancing woman. We can't "see" anything else since nothing else is capturing the protagonist's attention in such a way. And in comparison to "The City Born Great" I felt that the voice and tone were consistent. It also did a good job of establishing an alternative world and its rules in a clear way. I didn't question the protagonist's job, duties, or his world's social rules. I could easily accept it as is because it was relatively simple. Even the fast forward ending was done in a way that explained what was going on in a relatively short span of space. I would most likely recommend this short story as well because it's another neat and contained story.

I also thought of Black Mirror when reading this short story and found it very intriguing. I think showing a sort of futuristic and extremely strict world is always thought provoking in the sense that it makes you wonder if our society could or would ever get to that point. That being said, I would've liked to understand more behind why they were under constant surveillance and what caused their government to become so controlling. I also found the role of God in the story unique, because it seems like the government was trying to either brainwash society to believe in God and follow his law or maybe even play the role of God themselves by doing acts like assigning people to families. Something I found kind of ironic was that in this short story dancing is illegal and possibly supposed to be seen as ungodly, but there is a verse in the Bible

that clearly states that there is a time for everything under Heaven including a time to dance. This then made me wonder, in the world of this short story, what God they might worship or fear. Something I also noticed was that at one point the dancing girl's movements resemble those of a snake, which makes sense because snakes are historically demonic. This makes me question whether dancing had some deeper meaning or history that created "ungodly" behavior in that society. Lastly, I would've liked to know more about the camp that lured him in with the dancing girl and then brainwashed him into believing he was sinning. - Grace H.

This short story really threw me off guard, because at the beginning of it I assumed it was going to be a forbidden love story. However, as the story progressed we learned more and more about their totalitarian government and I began to root for the main character in hopes that he would be able to meet the dancing lady. However, I was slightly confused with the ending when he attempts to meet the dancing lady and she was no longer there. I wasn't sure the dancing lady was real or if it was a device utilized by the government to tempt the main character into breaking the law. Nevertheless, while the story is relatively short compared to the others I think it still conveys a lot. I would recommend this story to someone else mostly because I would love to hear not only what they thought of it but also what they thought the story meant. Erica S

This story was kind of otherworldly distant, the elevator made it a time possible but the apparent religious regime government adds the twist that each of the short stories in the collection contain. I didn't like the lack of depth of the story very much, or the shortness of the story due to the difficulty of causing real infliction. I do like the scenario that is created for the man watching the elevator, but there's not much more about his intentions or persons besides his peeping on the women. Although he does briefly describe his mediocre life and his underwhelming wife, and unsatisfying sex life there's no depth behind the character narrating. Even his brief stint at the rehabilitation church camp is glossed through. I did not like the description of the dancer either, I believe that in a world where dancing is apparently outlawed we would be given a more flowery description, and kind of get taken away. But it was lacking the verbiage and imagery to contain more excitement or transcendence. I don't believe that I would

recomend this story, because there was not necessarily anything to gain, the ending theoretical tree conversation was trying too hard to remain relevant or pass off a lesson. All in all the magic wasnt existent in this particular story for me.

Faith Cassidy S.

Jemisin's story revolves around the idea where everything happens for a reason and quite interesting how one significant moment in a day can drastically change a person's life. The main character lived his daily mundane and boring life of going to work then coming home to eat dinner with his wife, that's literally all he did. Upon seeing this mysterious woman dancing in an elevator, he was curious as to why she danced in the first place. Seemingly, she did it when she was alone but the woman had to have known there are security cameras there so someone would actually see her dance. I feel it was an interesting life changing moment to see how this was so exciting to this routined living man who possibly saw passion for living through a dancing person. She was so effortless carefree and he wanted to experience more of her and what she has to offer.

As he questions where his life is and wonder's what goes on in this other woman's life, he contemplates divorcing his wife. He doesn't even know or have talked to this elevator woman and he's already imagining being with her because maybe his life will be that much better. He constantly seeks her as he is working even to the point where he goes out searching for her and never finding her. Soon enough he remembers a sermon in church that "if a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around to hear it, it makes a sound if God wills". Whether that woman dancing in the elevator was real or not, it was a wake up call for this routine living man to break out of his shell and actually live life. Everyone has their own beliefs of their variations of what God is. As long as it changes one's own life for the better there's no harm in that. Sometimes society gets stuck in a trance with their everyday lives and sometimes all we need is some imagination to help us size the day! ---Michael M

The shortness of "The Elevator Dancer" makes it even more ominous than the fact that the woman in the story does not exist. It reminded me a lot of the *Twilight Zone*, I almost expected Rod Sterling to suddenly pop up and do the narration. It is incredible how much emotion a story without any dialect can cause. I felt extremely sad for the security guard, because he lives such a depressing life. It makes me wonder what reality he is exactly living in. He is assigned a wife, he notices with surprise that the woman dancing is obviously not afraid of anyone coming for her, so he must live under some type of Martial Law. If a woman is not married then she has to work, divorce is illegal, and the religious tones in this reality are extremely heavy. Jemisin is able to display the temptation of the unknown through the security guard, as well as our need to question authority. The security guard, who clearly knows all the rules and has clearly followed them all his life, is even broken by temptation. He starts questioning God, the government, and his entire way of life. Which is something that I applaud, because I think we should always be questioning the world we live in. It is like Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, if we refuse to leave the cave then we will never know the truth about what is on the outside. Which is also what I believe Jemisin is trying to communicate with this story. She is saying that we should not be taking the life we live that comfortably if something is not right about it. That if there is obviously something wrong, it is time to break the status quo and question it. The life that the security guard is living is clearly not right, and the woman in the elevator was really his brain tricking him to start questioning everything in his life which is why she never existed in the first place. I fully and completely recommend this story, if not for the theme of the story then for the eeriness of it. --
Serafina S.

This is probably one of my favorite pieces. It immediately reminded me of *The Handmaid's Tale* from the male perspective, I always remember that part where Offred briefly talks about the men who were too poor to really get wives and you kind of get a glimpse into how (poor) men were getting screwed over by the system too (not on the same scale as women though, regardless it wasn't all happy days for them either). I don't know why that part stuck with me from the book, but this piece strongly reminded me of that. And I was all for it, and just pretended it was kind of in that same world anyway. I think having that base knowledge of a similar world helped ground it and made it really easy to just get into the story. I also really liked the plot twist because it worked really well overall. It was still a bit weird because the elevator woman did interact with other people but I guess that can just be written off as something imagined as well. But I felt like the story didn't need to depend on the plot twist for it to work the way it did, and that the protagonist's paranoia was a really good focus. -*Adriana Hernandez*

As a fellow elevator dancer, I enjoyed how this story took a spin off of the humanistic act of dancing when no one is around. I have been choosing which three stories to read by looking at titles and the opening lines of each story. The title lured me in, and the opening line kept me interested. This opening line, "Shift change, changeshift", feels like an alarm clock waking the reader up to the story, although it works to set the scene of the security guard starting his shift.

Quickly, the story turned me into an involuntary witness to the formation of a weird, one-sided relationship between the dancer and the security guard. One cannot help but just want to see where this relationship goes. At times, I thought the security guard's little crush on the elevator dancer was cute. However, once he intertwined this crush with religious calling and other intense thoughts, I began to heavily dislike the security guard and the story overall. His understanding of God and religion troubled me to the very end of the story, especially when he states, "But that is a tree, not a woman, and God does not will a woman to dance" (pg.236). I feel like this thought it supposed to be important to me, but it just isn't. Instead, it feels absurd. I understand how the setting establishes dancing as a prohibited act, so this should be somewhat interesting as it shows how brainwashed this man is to think dancing as unnatural. Yet, it's very predictable within these circumstances. One aspect which confused me was whether the woman was real or not. As if, maybe, the woman is placed there as a test of "faith" for the security guards. Overall, I probably would not recommend this story, because I feel like it could have ended in a more creative way. Something like an elevator dancer revolution, man!

-Emma N.

The opening line of this story hooked me in with its rhythmic delivery. What a sentence! It's almost mechanical rhythm sets the tone for this story dealing with the monotony of a life without passion. I could not resist from thinking about Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* as I now reflect upon this extremely brief story. I feel that the nameless main character has come face to face with "the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering" that Camus speaks of in his text (Camus, 5). The dystopian undertone of this story also made me feel as if I was reading about the life of a background character in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* which I found to be an extremely comical thought. Although the man fails from meeting the mysterious elevator woman, one cannot but hold onto a glimmer of hope that the man will break free from the tyranny of a life without personal meaning. Who knew that all this man needed in life to erupt a cataclysmic break in ideology was his very own manic-pixie dream elevator woman! (That one was a bit of a mouthful). To lust, to pursue, to live for the sake of one's own desire might be deemed excessively selfish by some, but I think that the core message was important nonetheless. The core message, of which I have taken away from this story, is that one must create meaning in the world, just as one must decide if the tree in the forest makes a sound as it falls. -Brenden N.

For this story it was his temptations leading him to this lady. In this story you're "assigned" a wife and quite possibly your job. You're basically assigned a life, and in that life you're not allowed to do quite possibly anything. It seems as if you can't show emotions, dance, and it seems like you can't even talk. It reminds me of a dystopian society where you can't make certain choices regarding your life, everything is chosen for you. It reminds me of some books like *Divergent*, as well as *The Giver*. In these books they're basically "given" a life. More so in *The Giver*, than *Divergent*. But still in a way *Divergent* were only given certain choices in which "life" they wanted to live. This short story does remind me of this. So when he goes to confront this "elevator" lady and her dancing and she is not there. It makes him

start to think this in a way was a test by “god”. He starts to question his life somewhat when he starts watching this “elevator” lady and her dancing so when he goes to confront her and she’s not there, it makes him question himself and his faith. It makes you wonder why they can't make decisions in their life regarding who they get married and have emotions.

-Courtney Donahoe

Cuisine des Mémoires

Another story about food, I love it! An incredibly colorful concept, a restaurant serving memories as meals. Treating thoughts and feelings as nourishments for our brains just as food is for our bodies. Even more intriguing, a custom meal from a personal memory. Harold here is a healthy skeptic, and it’s easy to see why. But yet when the food is brought to his table, he is certain. Certain that this restaurant had accessed some part of his mind to craft this dinner and avail himself of the memory of his ex-lover.

It’s clear Jemisin believes food represents so much more than just sustenance. It represents love, youth, lust, desire, the meshing of spices and flavors together to create something new and exciting. Harold fondly remembers the moments he spent in gushing awe of his former wife’s passion, a passion that catalysed the one he felt for her. It was a binding agent, that brought two people together as one, like spices in a stew. But there is a pain tied to this passion, one that forced Angelina to choose and one that allows Harold to enjoy the beautiful moments only fleetingly, a meal caught in time.

It’s bittersweet, having to hold onto the painful memories along with the happy ones. There is no good without the bad. Just like a sumptuous dinner, we inhabit those moments for a fraction of our time on earth- though they populate our thoughts for a lifetime. But I don’t believe this is the point Jemisin is making. Memories, beautiful as they are, do not exist for us to revisit endlessly. Leftovers only satiate in the short term

This piece felt like it was trying to start in the middle of something but also like it was still the beginning of the story. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing, but it felt a little messy at the start. I think a lot of these pieces start to feel strong because they have similarities to some other popular piece, like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Handmaid's Tale*, *Misery*, and so on. So even though Jemisin is creating new worlds I think she also uses preexisting ones for some sort of grounding for her writing and for readers. This one in particular reminded me of *Black Mirror* a little (even though it's not too centered on technology, I think that focusing on human relationships is what triggers this), and *11.22.63*. I think the *11.22.63* influence is a little bit stronger with the stairwell that descends into the past. I also thought it was risky at first to put the story from the POV of Harold because he's kind of an unsympathetic asshole with how he treated the waiters/waitresses initially. I worked in retail too long to feel sympathetic for people like this, but I'm glad it (the attitude/interactions) shifted away from that fairly quickly. So I did

feel a bit more for him in the end and I was surprised by the living in the past/not getting stuck in it message. The only thing I really disliked was the font for the menu because it was stupid difficult to read. -*Adriana Hernandez*

This chapter tells an interesting story about a restaurant called Maison Laveau, that in a way “serves” memories to their guests. The food brought out is prepared exactly as in the memory the guest has referred to, and is essentially able to bring those memories back to the guest as they eat it. In my opinion, Jemisin wrote this chapter in efforts to show that food is much more than just sustenance for the body, it is meant to promote feelings within the eater. Harold was served a meal that brought back many of the feelings he had for his wife Angelina, and he wanted to feel more. He realizes he struggles with accepting what has happened between him and his wife, a struggle that many people in our world have as well. Jemisin is offering a new perspective to readers as she is emphasizing the importance of appreciating and acknowledging emotions as they come, and how the bad memories are to come along with the good ones. There are benefits to memories, as they can provoke joy in a person when revisited, but there are also memories that can trigger feelings of sadness. I think that Jemisin’s message in this chapter was that emotions are powerful, but are not meant to be relived and analyzed constantly. I believe that this idea pertains not only to the world in which Jemisin is writing about, but to our world as well, as humans deal with the ebb and flow of emotions in their daily life. --Michaela I.

Stone Hunger

Stone Hunger is one that kind of confuses you a little. She has some sort of power to make an earthquake happen, but of her kind she is seen as a “monster”. Like big earthquakes do, they tend to destroy cities. Which is what happens in this story, she’s looking for food and the only way to get into this “city” is by creating a distraction away from people overlooking the border. It seems that she doesn’t have a stable place to call home and is always traveling. She hasn’t eaten for 8 days but is still surviving. She gets caught trying to break into the border and meets a bunch of new and interesting people. Some of the interesting people that we come across in this story are people who have these sort of “powers” but as seen monsters. We meet this guy called “Stone” man or something of that phrase. He’s all stone and he eats stone to stay alive. In this city there’s a lot of people that have something of the same genetics as the main character. She can tell because she can “taste” them. Which is kind of weird. She also kills a character called the vinegar man. I’m guessing he can do monumental damage to cities. I never really understood the plot line and the reasoning behind everything that is kind of hard to grasp. All i really understood for this story is that she has powers and she is hungry and breaks into this city and ends up staying in this city.

-Courtney Donahoe

On the Banks of the River Lex

Of the three stories I read this week "On the Banks of the River Lex", was by far my favorite, the novel was distopian enough to be interesting, while not falling into the bloodthirsty new world model that is so often the norm after a crashed civilization. I enjoyed the overall tone of the story, in which Death and other bodiless attributes are personified, such as Sleep, and Rhyme. It seemed to be a note that yes things are hopeless as they can be, but for now things are still spinning. The octopuses still live in the aquarium, a whole new generation coming together after the sacrifices of those before them. The description of New York, and its descent into non existence was also very critical in adding a sense of realism to the story, that may have been lost if a new world was created, rather than just the physical plane of this world altered. I was slightly confused about the worshippers, theyre described as the ones strong enough to help those who need it, but why? And if they were there for the sole purpose of helping could they not be the ones to help the Rhythms relocate, or find further function in the new world? I also missed what the droplets of water were supposed to represent, dead says that if there is a miss, does this mean a young woman or that the physical drop just missed, I assume it couldn't involve living beings because the majority of life had ended, but perhaps I'm wrong. Overall I really enjoyed the story and would recommend it as a relaxing piece to read before bed, or when alone and in need of some quiet stimuli.

Faith Cassidy S

For as long as people have been able to write or tell stories, Death has always been a topic of interest. Death fascinates us because it is unknown and mysterious, and it scares us because humans cannot stand the thought of ever becoming obsolete. "On the Banks of the River Lex" is the second story where I have seen Death and other concepts, such as Sleep, be personified. The other story I read was from the 15th century play *Everyman*, where the protagonist "Everyman" is about to die and he has to come to terms with it before he can go with Death, who is another person. I enjoyed the way that Jemisin wrote Death to be, because here Death is not so frightening. In fact, you feel bad for Death because everyone else is afraid of "him" and all he wants to do is join in with the others. This story made me wonder many things,

particularly about the setting. Why is this taking place in New York City? What happened to human civilization? Why did Jemisin make a distinction between “Death” and “death” on page 289 when she wrote, “Yet he knew the truth: that death might exist in the absence of humankind, but not Death”? What did the droplets of water that Death was counting represent? I enjoyed the fact that Jemisin, just like with some of her other stories, combines African spiritual beliefs with Christianity. Here, she included two African deities who run a Starbucks where Death converses with an Angel. The other story I have seen Jemisin do this is “Red Dirt Witch”. It reminded me of the fact that every religion has similar beliefs or roots, whether it is of life and death, or of moral beliefs. Which I thought was very clever of Jemisin to point out, especially since in this story particularly the two different beliefs are living harmoniously. I would recommend this story one hundred percent despite the topic of Death. Because all in all, it is really not about the nature or unknowingness of Death, but rather the peace that comes after accepting that Death is a merely natural thing that we cannot control. --**Serafina S.**

My goodness, this one is so weird to me and I really struggle with just envisioning the story in my head. Even when I try to imagine the Devil, I just get Darth Maul instead! Apart from my imagination struggles, Jemisin creates a New York City in decline well by referring to local bridges there as starting “to warp and sag” (pg.281), and a large window in the MetLife building being a “rust-rimmed” (pg.280) tunnel for birds. With comical additions like a new Starbucks, the setting is given a feeling of initial decline as if the humans somewhat recently died off a couple years ago. When it comes to questions, I have many. Unfortunately, my biggest question is just what is the point of this story? To me, it came off as following the Devil on his mellow shenanigans throughout a deteriorating New York. The mother octopus sacrifice scene is rather emotional, yet I continue to struggle with Death’s place in this story. Is there a metaphorical purpose to Death roaming around and helping the remaining life left in the receding city? My biggest takeaway is the new Starbucks being opened in the midst of ruin, which I took to be a statement on how Americans will always consume even in a time of distress. Nevertheless, I continue to have issues with picturing this story in my mind every time I read it. I simply feel like I am missing something and it is hindering my understanding of the story. I would recommend this to a friend to get their own input and see how their own imagination interprets this work.

-Emma N.

The Narcomancer

To begin, I definitely misread the title to assume that this story was about death/resurrection magic. But after reading I am presently surprised by how much I enjoyed the story. The tone and

imagery gives the narration a feeling of a time that was or had been. Certainly not far from the Disney movie Atlantis, but also mixed with the respect of villages and lore, in other novels. I really enjoyed the interpretation of dream magic, and that true healing could only come through the subconscious in dreams. There was some it

graphic mentions of rape that the story didn't need, but served as a point to reinforce the need for healing of the narrator's point of affection. I also had some questions arise about the brigands, they seem to be grade A evil doers, so why would the temple not directly deal with them. There are also several mentions of child slavery/abuse so I don't really think a society worshipping the healing of the goddess would tolerate the selling of children. Overall I would recommend this story, the plot is very interesting and there's this internal struggle between the main two female characters where you kind of want an underdog victory, even if that victory is misogynistic. Also another good story built on the tenets of magic that are kind of common, so anyone who has studied or read into magic lore can get into what the characters are really saying.

Faith Cassidy's

This story had me using all of my brain power to concentrate on names of characters and places and all the titles. The reader is immediately thrown into a brand new and very complex world of some kind of magical religious order. It was longer than all the other stories I read which made it even easier to get invested and lost in the story. I started to grow an attachment to the characters. I also really like the writing style, the tone that she takes. Jemisin is insanely talented. It's like she can write anything from anywhere about anyone. The tone in this story was more succinct as she delved into Cet's perspective where life is simple for a man as devout as him. I thought it was interesting how this world is divided into a before and after the oath to the goddess. It seems like the only hardships that have come to Cet since his oath are the two women mentioned in the story. The death of the first woman and the struggle of her family were foreshadowing the changes coming to him. The goddess was walking Cet through every step of the way to his journey and it started with that family. He's introduced to Namsut and her situation as more of his emotions are unveiled in a process called the madness. Then Ginnem appears to give his advice, Cet catches the young necromancer and faces another premonition of his future. This all leads to his ultimate decision to create a life and pay the price. Overall, I liked the story because it delved into the complicated emotions that make up the process of finding love and purpose after years of numbness. I think Jemisin likes to write about how it's never too late. -Jessica A

Henosis

I'm not going to lie, I had to reread it a couple of times to understand (again, like in *Annihilation*) what the fuck was going on. Though I am a huge fan of the disjointed narrative, I eventually had to follow the chapters in numerical order to puzzle together the sequence of events. Had to see that I was effectively reading what I thought I was reading-and that the prize for being honored was in fact being dismembered and disbursed to the literary and academic communities. (wtf)

What a twisted and fucked up, "The Lottery"-esque short horror story. First off, I find the concept of "sacrificial" suicide if you can call it that- (not only encouraged but hell, even desired) perplexing. Could it be called sacrificial when it is essentially being done to preserve the literary genius (an artist at his peak) in their shining hour? I think of how this differs from the Lottery, a eurocentric narrative about the detriment of unquestioned and arbitrary tradition. How does Jemisin use her storytelling abilities in this story, how does the narrative intersect with race and how does it make a difference in this context? Would Janet have not been as empathetic with Harkim and offered what he desired, to cement his memory in the literary world and kill him? Would she have not tried to kidnap him if she wasn't resisting this barbaric award "ceremony" in the first place? I find the use of the word *ceremony* here very important too, as a lot of African ancestry is mentioned in this anthology, and a lot of indigenous tribes practiced human sacrifice as a homage/prayer to their Gods.

Regardless, this story begs the question-what the fuck could possibly be so important to you that it could be a justifiable exchange for your life?! A nonsensical tradition? Fame and notability? For religion? For science? When is it really justifiable? This is a great read, it is dragged on a little bit after the plot twist, but nonetheless, beautifully executed. I recommend it one hundo.

Stephanie G. :)

There is a lot to unpack for this short story. The fragmented re-arranged chapters leave so much unsaid and so much more to piece together. However, we get enough information as readers to

understand the basic premise of the fictional narrative. In some ways, the format of this novel reminded me of the same complexity that *The Power* had; a narrative within a narrative. Different here is the use of short story format; a fictional short story that appears to be a longer novel/book about a fictitious writer with fictional books, all within a short story compilation written by Jemisin. Quite an idea to wrap around your brain. I also appreciate the cynical, grim view of an artist. The writer went through a rollercoaster of thoughts and feelings before arriving at considering a psychotic fan's offer of killing them for posthumous fame. I question why this narrative is included in Jemisin's series of short stories. The only relevance/significance I can consider is to Jemisin's own occupation as a writer. This brings me to question if Jemisin has had similar fantasies about gathering greater fame in such a dark way. It may land as a strange connection, but I would recommend this short story to those who've read and enjoyed *The Power* just for the style alone.

- Casey I.

Reading this story has me confused as hell and reading it in the normal chapter way instead of all over the place sort of made it more better to understand. This story stood out more to me than most of the other interesting stories Jemisin wrote in this book. The writer went through a lot in these chapters that we were given and we came to the conclusion that there was some sort of "sacrificial" suicide going on. Which I go on to think.. Just why? Why why why? Also this kind of reminds me of *The Power* in a way. How there were many stories somehow intertwined within a story/narrative. The way that this whole story is set up is kind of mind blowing. How and why did she want to set up the story this way? Was there a purpose to executing the plot of the story or was it to throw off the reader? In a way I kind of find it complex to read it in such a way, I feel that she wants us to better understand the deeper rooted issue here that sometimes when you read a story it doesn't register all the way, so when she arranges the chapters in a complex order, it makes you want to put together the pieces and really understand why they were out of order. - Courtney Donahoe

Typically I am not a fan of the skipping around of chapters, or the random drop spot with no context, such as this story's beginning. I will stand by that point as one of my few criticisms of the story would have to be the skipping around of chapters, which felt unnecessary considering there were already so many other surprising plot points thrown in. I did like the overall macabre theme of the story and the weird chopping up of authors' twist, but I wasn't satisfied with the explanation of why they decide to murder the authors or chop them up for inspiration, the absorbing process just left some confusion. I liked the twist on the crazed fan, now kidnapping for protection rather than for the possibility of murder, but also, wouldn't a society that values the bodies of authors so much be more vigilant in protecting those bodies? I did not like jumping chapters so often, as it built this strange time loop that I had trouble grasping, and created a kind of fictional narrative timeline of the world within my own mind. And I didn't like the kind of

smooth tone of arrogance that the author was perceived to put forth. He was literally being kidnapped and had the nerve to think of his captor as a silly child. Overall in the context of this collection, I don't believe I would recommend this story, it was too short to really build emotional draw like the other stories.

Faith Cassidy Swanson

This was a really strange piece that again played with history, it made a bit more sense this time though I guess. I don't really understand the ritual in this world though and how Yukio Mishima plays into it. I don't think he's relatively well known, and from my own personal experience this is the second time I've ever heard about him or have been in a situation that he was brought up. It's just kind of funny to me that an award system based off of artistic legacy is centered on a figure that either isn't taught about very much or really mentioned. Or maybe he's more common knowledge than I thought. Either way, his ritual suicide after a failed coup attempt is really important to this literary community. I also thought the structure was really interesting for telling the story. It was harder than I thought it would be to read and I had to flip back a few times to see what the prior chapter was (in a way to restructure the story properly in my head). Starting in the middle like this did make it a bit more fun to read because it was like trying to solve a puzzle. The title for the piece, *Henosis*, is also of interest because it's supposed to mean oneness or unity. I don't think this is really in reference to what happens with the story but it might be tied to the structure of it. There are a lot of little details in this piece to figure out.

-Adriana Hernandez

The opening line of this story caught my eye. The classic, "But they're going to kill you" (pg.333), immediately starts a mystery within my head. Who is "they"? Why are "they" going to kill this guy? How would they kill him? Man, did I get more than I bargained for! This icon-obsessed world which rips their decorated writers apart like ravenous wolves is so wildly entertaining, because in a way, it speaks to today. I interpreted this story as a thriller based on fans who become so enamored by their idols to the point they expect too much from them, or maybe even fanatics who murder their idols, such as Yolanda Saldívar. Plus, the layout of the story was a clever twist. At first, I felt the story would be the same if left in chronological order, since the opening scene of chapter 1 is pretty enticing, too. However, if put in chronological order, I think the story would have too much of a clear direction, even with the chaotic circumstances of awarded writers being murdered soon after. One big question I still have is: why in the hell would Harkim be okay with the woman driving him around after all he went through? The only answers I thought of were that maybe he felt safe since he lost to Rasa anyways, or he was going to take the woman up on the offer of her gun. I would recommend this story to a friend, because it is amusing in a crazy, eerie way.

-Emma N.

I really liked this short story. I love the way the chapters are out of order, yet the structure is sound. I didn't really feel misplaced at all, even though I was reading the story in a way that it didn't happen. I found myself waiting for the science fiction aspect of it, and was really happy with the twist—the award

winner being killed and sold off. I think, metaphorically, that's really brilliant. That's kind of what fame is. The exploitation of people and the death of their souls and authenticity, to be cliché. I like the quickness of it, I mean, when reading short stories I feel like I'm looking for completeness over a short span. Some of her longer stories lose me immediately. I liked that I felt familiar enough with the characters without really knowing anything about them. I think it takes talent to leave out character and world building and still make something that feels final. The only part that was disorienting was the beginning, and not because of the actual formatting, but just because it was a little chaotic at first to situate myself as the reader with the problems of the intercom and a possible character being sick, I was dropped in somewhere out of nowhere. That feeling didn't linger though, which is good, because in other stories in her collection I stay lost throughout the whole thing. I like the subtle detail of the speech winner not upholding her side of the joke, that she'd say "the other got robbed," it added to the overall defeat felt through Harkim.

-Kyra S.

The first notable thing about "Henosis" is the structure. Mini chapters out of chronological order make me want to read them in chronological order. I cannot understand why Janet is even mentioned when the story is so short. I'm also not sure about how Vonnegut died, but I'm really hoping that the grave digger part is fiction. On the surface this story is about an author who gets kidnapped by a crazy fan who wants to prevent his murder, I think. Looking deeper it's about burning out or falling off after the peak of your career. I looked up "Mishima's famous tantou" and the award winner probably gets to die at the peak of their career before the suffering of being unheard or no longer listened to. I'm confused by the use of "short list" and "opus" I'm sensing acceptance (or maybe giving up) as a theme with Jemisin's stories. I also feel like I'm missing a lot of biblical reference. In "Henosis", Harkim just ends up going with the lady who kidnapped him. In "The Brides of Heaven", Dihya is fine with her Fate and in "L'Alchimista", Franca accepts the offer of the strange man and tags along with him. There's something about this science fiction that verges on magical realism. The reader is caught up in the thinking of the "real" world until a couple of lines confuse the entire situation and turn the world upside down. I only understand the concept of henosis as far as unity goes but the goal is unclear. Maybe in the context of the story it's used to mean the unification between Harkim and his end.

-Jessica A.

Too Many Yesterdays, Not Enough Tomorrows

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I love the title of this story because it feels like a cycle that I find myself caught in constantly other than that, this story filled me with tons and tons of dread. I'm not sure if it's my imagination or my anxiety that's way too strong when reading about world's or future outcomes like this. It's even worse when you have to keep reading to discover what the situation is and every new piece of information makes my stomach drop more and more. The story alternates from one person's perspective and her online chat room. There was some kind of giant apocalypse that

causes one day to be repeated over and over, but every person is completely alone in their pockets of the world, everything outside of their house is a void. The only way people connect is online through chat rooms and blogs where they speculate about the state of the world. The most interesting part about this story was how everyone attempts to adjust to the world instead of like most science fiction stories where an underdog character sets out to discover the truth and return the planet to normal. The protagonist, Helen, just exists until she makes a true connection. This world was created as a greater metaphor for the distance that has been created in the digital age. It also strangely reflects the times of covid we are in now, in the sense that people need people. People need love. The rates of loneliness and depression have been consistently increasing for years with the growth of the technological age. The screen provides us with a false sense of companionship. It gets harder to connect with people and we end up giving up falling into isolation. I think this metaphor was also backed up by the fact that Helen is black and living in japan. She feels isolated amongst the largest population of lonely people in the world. But once she makes a true connection and unveils herself to another they disappear and I can't help but feel like they return to the real world to begin their new lives. -Jessica A

“The alarm clock buzzed at 7, right after reality rolled over.” The people in this story are individually trapped in a post-quantum proliferation life – time is repeatedly reset to a point before the apocalypse happens. They are isolated in their home and when the day has passed, everything is set back into how it was when it began. If Helen wrote a poem on a paper, it disappeared. She always has the same thing in her refrigerator, what a nightmare. Even more, there’s no way to physically meet someone else. All connections go through the internet, but what’s written there stays. It makes me think about today’s state, but even before the lockdown. People spend so much time on the internet, in the expanse of real-life experiences and meetings. It necessarily doesn’t need to be a bad thing, those encounters can enrich one’s life, but there should be a balance.

“The only people still alive across the proliferated realities were those whose ties to the world had been weak from the beginning.” There’s a speculation that when people make strong connections, for example finding a family member or falling in love, they disappear. When Helen finally publishes a poem online, a relationship with “SapphoJuice” begins, and ends with them collapsing from the proliferated realities. When you fall in love you spend more time in the “real” world and make “real” connections, even in this disconnected era. Or maybe, our shared thoughts and experiences only become real online where they stay forever. But the intimacy is restricted with the loss of touch and having the whole world to view you.

I really enjoy stories that make you reflect over the here-and-now, and where you can interpret different meanings or find something new in the second reading. It’s interesting to see how Jemisin accomplished such realistic worldbuilding without needing to tell what actually happened. - Lisa Y

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I immediately jumped onto reading this story because of the title and if it follows the Afrofuturism theme when regarding the sense of time. As I read along, it felt as if it was an experience that started from a dream. The way Jemisin develops this narrative as a description of an experience as the morning rise was different and what intrigued my attention. I love the line “it was going to be another beautiful day in infinity” as it really captures a sense of routinely getting by a day. This dream is actually a moment of time that is constantly repeating.

Jemisin worldbuilding is through the sense of finding connection within technology and online blogging. The story is filled with trying to grasp around these blog posts and responses from others who share their common ideas. This blogster login is seemingly breaking in between the narrative of her waking up then becomes the narrative. It is like a clown character, talking nonsense but reminds me of how jesters work in Shakespeare. Although they seem to be a disruption and a comedic relief, they are characters to pay attention to as they know how to explain the wisdom of the story and this case, the power of human connection.

This story hits close to home as it reminds me of how we are dealing with the crisis through means of finding others online, whether it be Zoom classes or online gaming, we are seeing for "just enough connection to keep them sane". I would recommend this story as a challenge for those who enjoy the back and forth responses of dialog and how the narration of the exchanges are trying to craft a sense of small spaces of apocalyptic shifts that resulted in numerous universes and their interactions of an apocalyptic situation. ---Michael M

Myriam Akbar

This is one of my favorite stories of the selection because it involves sleep paralysis which is a subject I'm heavily interested in. The rapist figure haunting the narrator is a common experience in sleep paralysis which I actually experienced recently. The research I did led me to similar explanations and theories. I liked how the author writes that this figure changes from "sinister" to a "skinny, geeky teenager." This possibly demonstrates a much needed change in her life. Given the psychological explanation for the bad dreams from the second page indicate to me that this person has rescued her from her out-of-control state.

Remy C.

It seems for every three stories of Jemisin's I read, I get two hits and a miss. I wasn't a fan of this story because of the lesson it implies. "Too Many Yesterdays" is a story about people being trapped in their own individual pockets of time - micro universes that exist in a sort of limbo, where time is incomplete and loops at intervals, leaving the people trapped inside the universes in a state of eternal suspension. The only caveat is that *online* space is linear and constant; it's easier to reach out to group message systems, but even interpersonal communication is possible with some effort. Jemisin states, pretty bluntly, that the only reason these people exist in limbo (or at least, the only reason they haven't gotten out) is because they have no "real" connection to the outside world, only connection through online mediums. People are able to leave and (possibly?) go back to normal time/space by "real" emotional connection, implying that the care the characters show for their online friends who suddenly disappear isn't genuine connection, and that the only reason the narrator and Sapp get out is because they realize they have "actual love." While I can appreciate some caution about overuse of technology, it's deeply troubling to me, particularly in a COVID world, where in many cases

people can *only* connect in online mediums, that Jemisin wants to imply that my connections to people I know through the internet, people I genuinely care about, isn't "real" enough to matter. Are there people who hide on the internet, rather than interacting face-to-face? Absolutely. But those people would exist without the internet. There have always been recluses. And maybe I missed the point of the story, but to say that the internet can't be a source of genuine, valuable connection (because I really cannot see the difference between Sapp and Helen's connection and the more general ones we see in the group) rings incredibly hollow and condescending to me.

Even though the blog style writing of this story kind of confused me, I really loved this one, too. The post apocalyptic internet world being modern and so much like reddit is unique. It still has that genre defining eeriness and darkness, but it's light at the same time. I grew up with a lot of people that made their friends on the internet and I know how important those relationships can be/are for people that struggle in social situations. It's legitimate. I like the way all these people are saved from their apocalyptic doom through human connection. Kind of like what we're living now, interacting with our people through zoom. I love the concept of the genuine connection bringing people out of the alienating aloneness. There were some details that I was confused on, though not enough to ruin the story for me. I was just curious about the backstory, why was Helen in Japan? Sometimes, I got lost between the different usernames and the lingo used conversationally. What had caused the apocalypse, why did the rollovers happen? And why were people aware of the rollovers? Usually in scenarios where days are redone and repeated, people forget, and slowly come to realize their realities. I would've read a long novel on the premise used in this short. But that's true for most of this book. I really appreciate the depth that is brought to the text by Jemisin's background. Being that she's a woman of color, minor details like the shame of a biracial relationship in which her partner is a white man are very real, very heavy, and a lot more important to read than a lot of what I've been assigned.

-Kyra S.

The You Train

I enjoyed reading about the character's journey as she waits for the train going home from work. I also would take the train a lot and often reflect on the hardships affecting me and think of how I would express my own stories to friends and family later on. It was interesting to see how expressive the main character is as she talks about her daily life and all the stresses she goes through. Just like everyone else after a long day at work in order to get over it usually people talk it out. This girl does all the talking and never stops to ask her friend what troubles she has. She assumes her friend has a pretty perfect life with no complaints. It's interesting too because they seem to only talk on her way home from work, when she could just as easily call her friend on her days off to talk about stuff other than what stresses her out. I was happy to read that she finally realized it's not all sunshine and rainbows for her friend and in order to

be a good friend is to return the same attention she had received. I recommend this reading because there are a lot of people like this and they may or may not realize they do this. Not everyone may express their emotions out loud the way the character does and instead of assuming that other person is "okay", it's important to remember to listen for a change. -Michael M

Reading this story was kind of fun because it makes you feel like you're the other person on the line she is actually talking to. There's a main thing throughout this story about the train and how she takes it to go home. It's a staple and it's something that's consistent in her life. She's frequently seeing trains that were put out of order a long time ago, and I feel that she's not actually talking to someone on the other line. I feel that she's talking to someone that had passed away that she used to take the train with. My theory is that she keeps seeing these trains that used to exist because she keeps talking to her friend that's not really there. Maybe she is talking to the voicemail that the person used to have for their phone number. That's why we never see the response in the story to the main character because there is no one responding. Just like she said she was "hallucinating" the illusions that she was seeing trains that were not in service anymore. In the end of this story we see that the narrator comes to the conclusion that she's sorry for always talking her ear off during their conversations and that she's reminding her friend that she's always gonna be there for her. ANOTHER conclusion that I just had while writing this is that WHAT IF these are recorded voice messages they had together during their calls that the friend is listening back to after her friend had just passed? Crazy that could also be another possible theory. With stories like these there are so many possible scenarios that could possibly play out.- Courtney Donahoe

This story made me feel anxious. I was reminded of my own feelings about living in the city and Bart. The fact that I don't like riding trains is just the surface of it all. There are so many contributing reasons that I don't even realize but just reading this story filled me with fear. I can't even understand how I used to ride the train for four hours a day, to a school where I didn't know anybody, for a degree I had no assurance in. I'm filled with despair just thinking about it and thanking God on my hands and knees that I probably won't have to go back. I would still be doing that if it weren't for the shift in gears from this pandemic (I pray for the resolution of this course and give thanks for the unexpected blessings). All this being said I never want to do that again and I can understand the narrator of this story wholeheartedly. She ran away from home to live a life she thought she wanted but was met with the despair of unmet expectations. She was completely lost, hanging by a thread to her only line of support. The trains come and go. She keeps missing the ones she supposed to take. She keeps seeing new destinations and trains she never noticed before but she's too afraid to get on. She finally realized the pool of self pity she's swimming in and decided to take a new path to change herself. She realized that she was throwing all of her emotions onto her friend and begins on a new journey. To me this story is about inspiring yourself to be better, to be afraid but not let the fear consume you, to realize the only one with the power to decide your fate is yourself. I want to forget all of the fear and sadness the train reminds me of, but remembering it makes me eternally grateful for where I am now, and that's something I never want to forget. -Jessica A

Myriam Akbar

What stood out to me about this piece was how the author uses setting to demonstrate the narrator's feelings of stress and loneliness; for example, her not wanting to be alone at the train station at night. Not being able to afford to get a cab, she is forced to be in this position she doesn't like. The silence and waiting is a relatable experience because I take public transportation frequently. The setting embodies all the feelings and thoughts the narrator experiences and reflect on during the time spent waiting for the train. I think the form is unique but also makes it relatable because it's a letter from a friend, venting about all of the problems that are affecting her at the moment. The author's use of "girl" indicates that they have a close relationship and are able to share this kind of information with each other. I also think it was clever that the form is unorganized, demonstrating the scattered thoughts the narrator is having.

Marshall Ingerton

The conversational style was a hard read because there was a lack of imagery throughout the short story as well. I could kind of see but also not really the picture that the speaker was narrating. It's like one of those shorts you can see with a speaker at the forefront with a changing backdrop that follows what the speaker is saying. However, without that type of medium for this short story it was more of like odd ethereal dialogue that zips by. If it was more of a script-hybrid it could have been much easier to "see" but it was mostly a piece to be read, if that makes sense. Usually any type of action or movement can add energy or tension, but as it was a series of what I assume are phone conversations it felt kind of flat. It reminded me of slam poetry, or what I usually hear from a poetry slam where it can be much more of statements over a short story or picture. So in a sense I know what it is and what it's going for as an unconventional format, but it's not my personal favorite form. I think that this short story was also a very personal one, with a confessional tone, and that could also limit it in some ways. Unless this was your own friend, as in you have that type of friend, or you are that type of friend then this may be not so interesting to the readers. I don't think I would recommend it because of that, unless I knew that it would actually personally reach the person I would have to recommend it to.

I liked the uniqueness of this short story's one-sided dialogue and the sort of narcissism and fixation on such small details of the narrator's daily life. The narcissism is emphasized through the fact that even without the responses from the person on the receiving end of the call, the dialect is coherent and no parts feel missing. This story made me self-reflect and wonder whether I've ever neglected a friendship by only worrying about my own life and assuming theirs is going well. I think this short story also highlights how easy it is to get caught up in the stresses of your own daily routine and forget to make sure others are doing okay. One line from the story

I found interesting was when the narrator says “Too many people look into those empty tunnels and expect to see something where nothing is,” I feel that this is relevant in that people over analyze or expect too much out of others, but I wanted to understand a little more as to what the Jemisin was trying to get at with that quote. I think this short story, along with a few others could have really benefited from adding just slightly more context. I enjoy that they make you think and build your own perspective, but I feel like they could be a little more detailed to make them more understandable. This wasn't necessarily my favorite one of her short stories, but I did like that it made me reflect on my own life and experiences with friends. - Grace H.

This one was especially eerie for me to read. I loved it. First of all, I love New York City, I've spent a lot of time there and plan to go back and live there, and so I recognized all the (real) subway lines she was mentioning and it made me happy and nostalgic. I also love the personal touch. I completely get what she's saying. Sometimes I think that way about everything. The lights on the road, they're green for me one day, but red the next because they're playing with me. The trains having this haunting human feel to them really intrigued me. I like the way she kind of sounds like she's dead, or in a new kind of realm at the end. Just close your eyes and take a step forward and I'll be there! I also love that it's all a one sided phone call. I have to say, Jemisin has some of the most creative ways of coming at these stories. I love eavesdropping on phone calls so naturally this was super compelling for me. The loneliness and weirdness of the trains that didn't exist anymore appearing so often was tangible. The narrator was unhappy in her life— relationship, house, and job wise, and she was being given an escape over and over and over again. It kind of makes you question if the trains were even there, or if she was just slowly losing it. Because of the science fiction genre, it could really be either.

-Kyra S.

Right away when I read “Hey, girl. Yeah, I know; I'm sorry” (pg.354), I was able to envision myself overhearing someone on the phone. I like how the author accomplished this so quickly and effortlessly by probably just overhearing other people or maybe even noticing the process of her own phone calls. The little names for her friend, such as “girl” (pg.354) and “Ms.Thing” (pg.354), are so common yet add a certain relatability to the main character. To create the New York setting, she incorporates little geographical details, like the “B train” (pg.354) and “Columbus Circle” (pg.355). From this original New York City setting, the world or the main character begins to add new train lines, such as “the 9” (pg.355) and “the K” (pg.358). Since I do not know much about New York, I looked into their subway lines and I believe these train lines were made up for this story. It is apparent about the main character struggling to feel at home in the city, so I enjoy this take on her confusion with the railway system to display her struggle. On top of this, the central character commonly defends herself when it comes to her railway knowledge. The way she gets defensive over her city knowledge, yet feels “not meant for big city life” (pg.358), reminds me of someone moving to a big town and starting to resent the city for their own lack of making moves or connections while there. Cities are advantageous and full of opportunities, but only if someone is meeting people and hustling out there. The only question I have is whether the made up trains were actually there in this world or if the main character made them up. Either way, I found this use of adding train lines as a creative yet realistic way to

build up the world of this story. Furthermore, I appreciate how this piece approaches friendship over time. The reader witnesses a changing friendship due to life's inevitable progression, which is very poignant. I would definitely send this to a friend, then tell them how much I will always love them!

-Emma N.

Non-Zero Probabilities

Remy C.

This was my least favorite of the stories I read, but it's not bad. I enjoyed the playfulness of the narration, the exploration of how a significant event changes culture, and the detailed description of a New York neighborhood. The concept is fascinating: this is a world where balances of probability are malleable, and what specifically affects them is superstition. It turns the narrator from reading as paranoid to sensible in the span of three pages. However, this story raised a lot of questions for me. Firstly, I didn't understand the ending. Is she choosing to accept things as they are? I can't tell, and I'm not sure what the significance of the paper airplane is. Additionally, there are several references in the piece to a variety of cultures - the narrator herself is Irish and African, and Chinese culture is brought up multiple times - but many cultures have direct contradictions about what days/events/etc. constitute as lucky or unlucky. You can't imply that every superstition from every culture works, because some symbols bring good luck for some cultures and bad luck for others. I also don't understand the narrator's issues with her dating life. I don't think I'd specifically recommend or not recommend this piece. It's alright, and it's an interesting read, but I didn't really get anything out of it. The most I can say is that, given that we're currently living through a crisis right now, this might give some perspective to why some people are fighting it and some people are accepting the new normal

Marshall Ingerton

This short story was much more difficult to read compared to the rest of the book. A lot of the scenes were difficult to picture as the reader and I felt that Jemisin was probably able to see it much clearer in their own head than what was depicted on paper. I noticed this the most during the park scene where the cart was knocked over, so that some sort of sweet ice was going to hit the speaker in the face and knock her into oncoming bicyclists, and then the bicyclists disappear as a concern. I now think that the bicyclists might actually have not existed but was a potential issue that the speaker thought could happen next knowing how this luck system works. However, as the reader this isn't really clear at first and can be taken as "this is actually happening right now in the scene". It was another interesting premise but since the world wasn't really set up in a clear way it was hard to separate from how our own world works. It was a struggle to accept these world rules, or the rules that the speaker believes, to be true because it

was too easy to check against reality because it wasn't really its own place. I wouldn't go on to recommend this short story either

This particular narrative (and if I'm being honest the anthology in general) gives me Toni Morrison vibes. It highlighted afro-latinidad and cultural influences, a black woman dealing with traumatic romantic relationships etc.

I really liked this piece, it was actually one of my favorites from the anthology. The belief of superstition as an irrational coping mechanism for fear is fascinating, especially when written from the imagination of a Sci-Fi author who also happens to be a woman of color(which in my experience is very dope but also very rare and niche). I think the prominence of Adele's biculturality really influences her ideals> That's why it was so important for Jemisin to explicitly include her bathing in herbs, which are used in many indigenous communities as a form of healing or for protection. To emphasize her spiritual duality is extremely telling of her character because it demonstrates her multifaceted nature, it is both integral to her "protective armor" routine as well as her surviving connection to her ancestors and to her African identity(which is decolonial as fuck!). Not many eurocentric narratives would even acknowledge a Christian God and Yoruba deities in the same prayer and that is a pretty big deal on it's own. Adele acknowledges that praying to her Catholic God is equally as important as praying to her Orishas. I'd have to argue that the emphasis on religion/culture is imperative to the narrative, as it is indicative of the different variations of superstition(or beliefs in general)that can be generated in different ways, on different days, but that all ultimately seek to ward off ill and preventative protection from their fears. I do think there could have been more clarification on her actual ideologies at the end but I actually think I rather enjoyed the ambiguity of the ending. I find that each of us will interpret it differently depending on our very own biases with superstition and our cultural/religious/humane connection to it if any at all. I think I took the ending as her accepting the things she cannot control and in a way leaving it to her Orishas and putting herself at the disposal of the universe. It's a short one, and a fun little read-I recommend it.

Stephanie G. :)

I found this short story particularly interesting because of all of the unique belief systems and the way they seem to contrast each other. Adele seems to believe in a cocktail of probability, superstition and religion, yet isn't able to commit to just one. We also see how one seems to affect the other in the way she doesn't want to completely disregard something that might help the negative chain of events. For example, when talking about the big organized prayer, she seems to believe that if it works, even just due to human thought waves, that she will be able to do things like ride the train again. This makes us think that she must believe in some higher power, but it's hard to tell which takes the lead. I also found it funny that at the beginning she claims to pray to her Christian God, but also uses the underwear she had her first orgasm in as protective gear. She also has sex with her neighbor and doesn't necessarily seem to deem it as something ungodly. In this short story and others, Jemisin seems to be fixated on "the End Times" or the end of the world. End Times are traditionally a biblical reference, but I feel as though she is somehow reflecting her opinion towards Trump being elected. She seems to emphasize how as a community people must come together to stop the world from turning the world to turmoil. Maybe that is her way of bringing attention to Trump ruining the world. In this particular short story she shows that people are doing anything they can to avoid the rapidly increasing tragedies. Again, maybe she is trying to

foreshadow what might happen with Trump as our leader and that any religion or belief will be needed to get through his presidency. - Grace H.

Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters”

I haven't read much magical realism before, so I was excited to see the casual introduction of a “talking lizard” which quickly revealed itself to be a dragon, given its size and wings, not to mention the title of the story. The dialogue between Tookie and the “lizard” was grimly realistic about the cycle of poverty, intersecting with race, which was a striking contrast against the fantastical nature of the dragon. This discussion, which notes that circumstances make it impossible for Tookie to effectively leave his home, becomes much more grim in context of the storm's progression into the flood. With Tookie and some of his neighbors more or less trapped in their homes by their own enforced poverty, many avoidable deaths are likely caused, and effectively, amount to the murder of the most disenfranchised citizens, unable to flee, and even shot down by soldiers when they attempt to escape with their lives. This portrayal of class-based death, including both direct and indirect murder, provides a realistic exploration of systemic violence, once again standing out all the more against the inclusion of fantasy elements. The insidious creature that follows death even manifests this grim reality directly as one such fantasy element. The slight discomfort between the “lizard” and Tookie made for a fascinating dynamic, with Tookie offering the porch, unwilling to extend more to an “animal” which seemed somewhat reductive, given the “lizards” obvious mental capacity. This was especially interesting given Tookie's own experience with others thinking he “didn't look” smart and judging him based off of that preconception. In a way, he is repeating that cycle with the “lizard”. The “lizard”, on the other hand, seemed totally uninterested in the offer of the porch or the indoors, so even Tookie's concept of politeness failed to recognize what the “lizard” himself was comfortable or uncomfortable with, what the lizards definition of “good” or “bad” accommodations might be. Declining to share the porch was in a sense a rejection that defined the “lizard” as totally separate from Tookie. - Autumn G.H.