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OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

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A Conversation with Octavia E. Butler

2024



PRODIGY IS, AT ITS essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING
by Lauren Oya Olamina

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**All that you touch
You Change.**

**All that you Change
Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth
Is Change.**

**God
Is Change.**

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

SATURDAY, JULY 20, 2024

I HAD MY RECURRING dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father’s daughter.

Today is our birthday—my fifteenth and my father’s fifty-fifth. Tomorrow, I’ll try to please him—him and the community and God. So last night, I dreamed a reminder that it’s all a lie. I think I need to write about the dream because this particular lie bothers me so much.

I’m learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I’m just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a

very subtle image, but a persistent one. I've had many lessons, and I'm better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I'm still afraid. I can't quite control my directions yet.

I lean forward toward the doorway. It's a doorway like the one between my room and the hall. It seems to be a long way from me, but I lean toward it. Holding my body stiff and tense, I let go of whatever I'm grasping, whatever has kept me from rising or falling so far. And I lean into the air, straining upward, not moving upward, but not quite falling down either. Then I do begin to move, as though to slide on the air drifting a few feet above the floor, caught between terror and joy.

I drift toward the doorway. Cool, pale light glows from it. Then I slide a little to the right; and a little more. I can see that I'm going to miss the door and hit the wall beside it, but I can't stop or turn. I drift away from the door, away from the cool glow into another light.

The wall before me is burning. Fire has sprung from nowhere, has eaten in through the wall, has begun to reach toward me, reach for me. The fire spreads. I drift into it. It blazes up around me. I thrash and scramble and try to swim back out of it, grabbing handfuls of air and fire, kicking, burning! Darkness.

Perhaps I awake a little. I do sometimes when the fire swallows me. That's bad. When I wake up all the way, I can't get back to sleep. I try, but I've never been able to.

This time I don't wake up all the way. I fade into the second part of the dream—the part that's ordinary and real, the part that did happen years ago when I was little, though at the time it didn't seem to matter.

Darkness.

Darkness brightening.

Stars.

Stars casting their cool, pale, glinting light.

"We couldn't see so many stars when I was little," my stepmother says to me. She speaks in Spanish, her own first language. She stands still and small, looking up at the broad sweep of the Milky Way. She and I have gone out after dark to take the washing down from the clothesline. The day has been hot, as usual, and we both like the cool darkness of early night. There's no moon, but we can see very well. The sky is full of stars.

The neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective. But my stepmother is there, and she isn't afraid. I stay close to her. I'm seven years old.

I look up at the stars and the deep, black sky. "Why couldn't you see the stars?" I ask her. "Everyone can see them." I speak in Spanish, too, as she's taught me. It's an intimacy somehow.

"City lights," she says. "Lights, progress, growth, all those things we're too hot and too poor to bother with anymore." She pauses. "When I was your age, my mother told me that the stars—the few stars we could see—were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us. I believed her for almost a year." My stepmother hands me an armload of my youngest brother's diapers. I take them, walk back toward the house where she has left her big wicker laundry basket, and pile the diapers atop the rest of the clothes. The basket is full. I look to see that my stepmother is not watching me, then let myself fall backward onto the soft mound of stiff, clean clothes. For a moment, the fall is like floating.

I lie there, looking up at the stars. I pick out some of the constellations and name the stars that make them up. I've learned them from an astronomy book that belonged to my father's mother.

I see the sudden light streak of a meteor flashing westward across the sky. I stare after it, hoping to see another. Then my stepmother calls me and I go back to her.

"There are city lights now," I say to her. "They don't hide the stars."

She shakes her head. "There aren't anywhere near as many as there were. Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be—and not that long ago."

"I'd rather have the stars," I say.

"The stars are free." She shrugs. "I'd rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars."