

Transcendent Kingdom

TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM

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YAA GYASI

Author of *Homecoming*

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TRANSCENDENT
KINGDOM

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The voice is strong For Tina
It will burn out like shining stars that fall

VERBA MANUS SUPPLEMENT
"The Country"

Nothing comes into the universe
and nothing leaves it

STARKEN GLEDE
"The Country"

1911

FIRST VOLUME OF THE SERIES

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There is a great deal of material in this volume which
is of interest to the general public and to the
student of the history of the United States.

The history of the United States is a story of
growth and development.

The first volume of the series is devoted to the
early years of the Republic.

The second volume of the series is devoted to the
middle years of the Republic.

The third volume of the series is devoted to the
later years of the Republic.

The fourth volume of the series is devoted to the
present day.

The fifth volume of the series is devoted to the
future.

The sixth volume of the series is devoted to the
conclusion.

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS,
"God's Grandeur"

Nothing comes into the universe
and nothing leaves it.

SHARON OLDS,
"The Borders"

The world is draped with the presence of God
It will burn out, like a flame from a torch.

GERARD MANLY HOPKINS
"God's Garden"

Nothing comes into the universe
and nothing leaves it.

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
"The Builders"

Transcendent Kingdom

When I first read the book, I was struck by the way it
took me back to a place of deep, quiet reflection. The
world around me felt like a vast, open field, and the
language of the book was a kind of map, a guide to a
new way of seeing things. I had never before seen the
world in this way, and it felt like I had found a new
world. The first time I read the book, I was struck by
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It will burn out, like a flame from a torch.

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Toward the middle of my first year of graduate school, Raymond and I started seeing each other more seriously. I couldn't get enough of him. He smelled like vetiver and musk and the jojoba oil he put in his hair. Hours after I'd left him, I would find traces of those scents on my fingers, my neck, my breasts, all those places where we had brushed up against each other, touched. After our first night in bed together, I'd learned that Raymond's father was a preacher at an African Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia, and I'd laughed. "So that's why I like you," I said. "You're the son of a preacher man."

"You like me, huh?" he said with that deep voice, that sly grin, as he moved toward me so that we could begin again.

It was my first real relationship, and I was so smitten that I felt like I was a living lily of the valley, a rose of Sharon. *Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.* My friend Bethany and I used to read passages from Song of Solomon to each other, crouched beneath the pale blue pews in the empty sanctuary of the First Assemblies

of God. It felt illicit to read about all of that flesh—breasts like fawns, necks like ivory towers—in the pages of this holy book. It was an incongruous thrill, to feel that flush of desire well up between my legs as Bethany and I giggled through those verses. *Where is all of this pleasure coming from?* I'd think, my voice getting huskier and huskier with each chapter. Raymond was the closest I'd come to recapturing that feeling, the pleasure as well as the sense of forbiddenness. The fact that he wanted to be with me at all made me feel like I was getting away with some con.

He lived on campus, in an Escondido Village low-rise, and pretty soon I was spending most of my time there. He liked to cook these sumptuous meals, five-hour braises with homemade bread and salads of shaved radishes and fennel. He'd invite all of his colleagues from Modern Thought and Literature, and they would have intense, detailed conversations about things I had never heard of. I'd nod and smile at the mentions of the use of allegory in Ben Okri's *Stars of the New Curfew* or generational trauma among diasporic communities.

Afterward, I would wash the dishes the way my mother taught me, turning off the water as I soaped down the pots and pans, trying to get rid of the elaborate mess Raymond's cooking always left behind.

"You're so quiet," he said, coming up behind me to wrap his arms around my waist, to kiss my neck.

"I haven't read any of the books y'all were talking about."

He turned me around to face him, grinned. I almost never let a "y'all" slip from my lips, and when I did Raymond seemed to savor it like a drop of honey on his tongue. That word used sparingly, thoughtlessly, was the only

remaining evidence of my Alabama years. I'd spent a decade carefully burying everything else.

"Talk about your own work, then. Let us know how the mice are doing. I just want them to get to know you a little better. I want everyone to see what I see," he said.

What did he see? I wondered. I'd usually bat him away so that I could finish washing the dishes.

That year was the beginning of my final thesis experiment. I put the mice in a behavioral testing chamber, a clear-walled structure with a lever and a metal tube. I trained the mice to seek reward. When they pressed the lever, Ensure would flood into the tube. Pretty soon they were pressing the lever as often as possible, drinking up their reward with abandon. Once they'd gotten the hang of this, I changed the conditions. When the mice pressed the lever, sometimes they got Ensure, but sometimes they got a mild foot-shock instead.

The foot-shock was randomized, so there was no pattern for them to figure out. The mice just had to decide if they wanted to keep pressing the lever, keep risking that shock in the pursuit of pleasure. Some of the mice stopped pressing the lever right away. After a shock or two, they did the mouse equivalent of throwing up their hands and never went near the lever again. Some of the mice stopped, but it took time. They liked the Ensure enough to keep holding out hope that the shocks would stop. When they realized they wouldn't, those mice, reluctantly, gave up. Then there was the final group of mice, the ones who never stopped. Day after day, shock after shock, they pressed the lever.

My parents started fighting every day. They fought about money, how there was never enough. They fought about time, about displays of affection, about the minivan, about the height of the grass in the lawn, about Scripture. *But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*

The Chin Chin Man hadn't just left his father and his mother; he'd left his country as well, and he wouldn't let my mother forget it.

"In my country, neighbors will greet you instead of turning their heads away like they don't know you."

"In my country, you can eat food fresh from the ground. Corn, hard on its cob, not soft like the spirits of these people."

"In my country, there is no word for half-sibling, step-sibling, aunt, or uncle. There is only sister, brother, mother, father. We are not divided."

"In my country, people may not have money, but they have happiness in abundance. In abundance. No one in America is enjoying."

These mini-lectures on Ghana were delivered to the three of us with increasing frequency. My mother would gently remind my father that Ghana was her country too, our country. She nodded and agreed. *America is a difficult place, but look at what we've been able to build here. Sometimes Nana would come into my room and pretend to be him. "In my country, we do not eat the red M&M's,"* he'd say, throwing the red M&M's at me.

It was hard for Nana and me to see America the way

our father saw it. Nana couldn't remember Ghana, and I had never been. Southeast Huntsville, northern Alabama, was all we knew, the physical location of our entire conscious lives. Were there places in the world where neighbors would have greeted us instead of turning away? Places where my classmates wouldn't have made fun of my name—called me charcoal, called me monkey, called me worse? I couldn't imagine it. I couldn't let myself imagine it, because if I did, if I saw it—that other world—I would have wanted to go.

It should have been obvious to us. We should have seen it coming, but we didn't see what we didn't want to see.

"I'm going home to visit my brother," the Chin Chin Man said, and then he never came back.

In those first few weeks, he called every once in a while. "I wish you could see how brilliant the sun is here, Nana. Do you remember? Do you remember it?" Nana ran home from school every Tuesday in order to make their 3:30 telephone calls.

"When are you coming back?" Nana asked.

"Soon, soon, soon."

If my mother knew that soon, soon, soon was a lie, she didn't let on. I suppose if it was a lie, it was one she wanted to believe. She spent most of her mornings on the phone with him, speaking in hushed tones as I prattled on to my favorite doll. I was four, oblivious to the lurch my father had left us in and to the deep pain my mother must have been feeling.

If I've thought of my mother as callous, and many times I have, then it is important to remind myself what a callus is: the hardened tissue that forms over a wound. And what a wound my father leaving was. On those phone calls with the

Chin Chin Man, my mother was always so tender, drawing from a wellspring of patience that I never would have had if I were in her shoes. To think of the situation now still makes me furious. That this man, my father, went back to Ghana in such a cowardly way, leaving his two children and wife alone to navigate a difficult country, a punishing state. That he let us, let her, believe that he might return.

My mother never spoke an ill word about him. Not once. Even after soon, soon, soon turned into maybe, turned into never.

"I hate him," Nana said years later, after the Chin Chin Man had canceled yet another visit.

"You don't," my mother said. "He hasn't come back because he is ashamed, but it doesn't mean he doesn't care about you. And how could you hate him when he cares so much? He cares about you, he cares about me and Gifty. He cares about Ghana. How could you hate a man like that?"

The mice who can't stop pushing the lever, even after being shocked dozens of times, are, neurologically, the ones who are most interesting to me. By the time my mother came to stay with me in California, my team and I were in the process of identifying which neurons were firing or not firing whenever the mice decided to press the lever despite knowing the risks. We were trying to use blue light to get the mice to stop pressing the lever, to "turn on," so to speak, the neurons that weren't functioning properly in warning those mice away from risk.

I talked about the lever experiment at the next dinner party that Raymond threw. He'd made cassoulet, rich with

pork and duck and lamb, glistening with oil and so delicious and sinful that everyone in the room let out audible sighs after their first bites.

“So it’s a question of restraint,” one colleague, Tanya, said. “Like how I can’t restrain myself from eating more of this cassoulet, even though I know my waistline isn’t going to be happy about it.”

Everyone laughed as Tanya rubbed her stomach like Winnie-the-Pooh upon finding a pot of honey.

“Well, yes,” I said. “But it’s a bit more complicated than that. Like even the idea of a ‘you’ that can restrain ‘yourself’ doesn’t quite get at it. The brain chemistry of these mice has changed to the point where they aren’t really in control of what they can or can’t control. They aren’t ‘themselves.’”

They all nodded vigorously, as though I’d said something extremely profound, and then one of them mentioned King Lear. *We are not ourselves when nature, being oppressed, commands the mind to suffer with the body.* I hadn’t read Shakespeare since high school, but I nodded along with them, pretending for Raymond’s sake to be interested in the conversation. After they left that night, all those dishes in their wake, I could tell that he was happy to see me finally opening up to his friends. I wanted to be happy too, but I felt like I was lying somehow. Whenever I listened to his friends speak about issues like prison reform, climate change, the opioid epidemic, in the simultaneously intelligent but utterly vacuous way of people who think it’s important simply to weigh in, to have an opinion, I would bristle. I would think, *What is the point of all this talk? What problems do we solve by identifying problems, circling them?*

I said my goodbyes and then I rushed home and threw up and I never could eat that dish again.

When I was still in elementary school, my children’s church pastor told us that sin was defined as anything you think, say, or do that goes against God. She pulled out these two puppets that looked like little monsters and had them demonstrate sin. The purple monster would hit the green monster, and our pastor would say, “Hey, hitting is a sin.” The green monster would wait until the purple monster’s back was turned and then steal a Hershey’s Kiss from the purple monster’s hand. Everyone thought this move was hilarious, so hilarious that our pastor had to remind us that it was sinful to steal.

I was a good, pious child, committed to not sinning, and the definition that our pastor gave confounded me. It was easy enough to not do anything wrong or say anything wrong. But to not think sinfully? To not think about lying or stealing or hitting your brother when he comes into your room intent on torturing you, was that even possible? Do we have control over our thoughts?

When I was a child this was a religious question, a question of whether it was possible to live a sinless life, but it is