

Bloodchild (Os hospedeiros)

Afterword (by Octavia Butler)

It amazes me that some people have seen “Bloodchild” as a story of slavery. It isn’t. It’s a number of other things, though. On one level, it’s a love story between two very different beings. On another, it’s a coming-of-age story in which a boy must absorb disturbing information and use it to make a decision that will affect the rest of his life.

On a third level, “Bloodchild” is my pregnant man story. I’ve always wanted to explore what it might be like for a man to be put into that most unlikely of all positions. Could I write a story in which a man chose to become pregnant *not* through some sort of misplaced competitiveness to prove that a man could do anything a woman could do, not because he was forced to, not even out of curiosity? I wanted to see whether I could write a dramatic story of a man becoming pregnant as an act of love—choosing pregnancy in spite of as well as because of surrounding difficulties.

Also, “Bloodchild” was my effort to ease an old fear of mine. I was going to travel to the Peruvian Amazon to do research for my Xenogenesis books (*Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*), and I worried about my possible reactions to some of the insect life of the area. In particular, I worried about the botfly—an insect with, what seemed to me then, horormovie habits. There was no shortage of botflies in the part of Peru that I intended to visit.

The botfly lays its eggs in wounds left by the bites of other insects. I found the idea of a maggot living and growing under my skin, eating my flesh as it grew, to be so intolerable, so terrifying that I didn’t know how I could stand it if it happened to me. To make matters worse, all that I heard and read advised botfly victims not to try to get rid of their maggot passengers until they got back home to the United States and were able to go to a doctor—or until the fly finished the larval part of its growth cycle, crawled out of its host, and flew away.

The problem was to do what would seem to be the normal thing, to squeeze out the maggot and throw it away, was to invite infection. The maggot becomes literally attached to its host and leaves part of itself behind, broken off, if it’s squeezed or cut out. Of course, the part left behind dies and rots, causing infection. Lovely.

When I have to deal with something that disturbs me as much as the botfly did, I write about it. I sort out my problems by writing about them. In a high school classroom on November 22, 1963, I remember grabbing a notebook and beginning to write my response to news of John Kennedy’s assassination. Whether I write journal pages, an essay, a short story, or weave my problems into a novel, I find the writing helps me get through the trouble and

get on with my life. Writing “Bloodchild” didn’t make me like botflies, but for a while, it made them seem more interesting than horrifying.

There’s one more thing I tried to do in “Bloodchild.” I tried to write a story about paying the rent—a story about an isolated colony of human beings on an inhabited, extrasolar world. At best, they would be a lifetime away from reinforcements. It wouldn’t be the British Empire in space, and it wouldn’t be *Star Trek*. Sooner or later, the humans would have to make some kind of accommodation with their um ... their hosts. Chances are this would be an unusual accommodation. Who knows what we humans have that others might be willing to take in trade for a livable space on a world not our own?

Speech Sounds (O dom da palavra)

Afterword (by Octavia Butler)

“Speech Sounds” was conceived in weariness, depression, and sorrow. I began the story feeling little hope or liking for the human species, but by the time I reached the end of it, my hope had come back. It always seems to do that. Here’s the story behind “Speech Sounds.”

In the early 1980s, a good friend of mine discovered that she was dying of multiple myeloma, an especially dangerous, painful form of cancer. I had lost elderly relatives and family friends to death before this, but I had never lost a personal friend. I had never watched a relatively young person die slowly and painfully of disease. It took my friend a year to die, and I got into the habit of visiting her every Saturday and taking along the latest chapter of the novel I was working on. This happened to be *Clay’s Ark*. With its story of disease and death, it was thoroughly inappropriate for the situation. But my friend had always read my novels. She insisted that she wanted to read this one as well. I suspect that neither of us believed she would live to read it in its completed form—although, of course, we didn’t talk about this.

I hated going to see her. She was a good person, I loved her, and I hated watching her die. Nevertheless, every Saturday I got on a bus—I don’t drive—and went to her hospital room or her apartment. She got thinner and frailer and querulous with pain. I got more depressed.

One Saturday, as I sat on a crowded, smelly bus, trying to keep people from stepping on my ingrown toenail and trying not to think of terrible things, I noticed trouble brewing just across from me. One man had decided he didn’t like the way another man was looking at him. Didn’t like it at all! It’s hard to know where to look when you’re wedged in place on a crowded bus.

The wedged-in man argued that he hadn't done anything wrong—which he hadn't. He inched toward the exit as though he meant to get himself out of a potentially bad situation. Then he turned and edged back into the argument. Maybe his own pride was involved. Why the hell should he be the one to run away?

This time the other guy decided that it was his girlfriend—sitting next to him—who was being looked at inappropriately. He attacked.

The fight was short and bloody. The rest of us—the other passengers—ducked and yelled and tried to avoid being hit. In the end, the attacker and his girlfriend pushed their way off the bus, fearful that the driver would call the police. And the guy with the pride sagged, dazed and bloody, looking around as though he wasn't sure what had happened.

I sat where I was, more depressed than ever, hating the whole hopeless, stupid business and wondering whether the human species would ever grow up enough to learn to communicate without using fists of one kind or another.

And the first line of a possible story came to me: "There was trouble aboard the Washington Boulevard bus."