

# NINE BAR BLUES

Stories from an Ancient Future



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"These stories just might save us all."  
—Sam J. Miller, winner 2017 Nebula Award

## 1. ANCESTRIES

In the beginning were the ancestors, gods of earth who breathed the air and walked in flesh. Their backs were straight and their temples tall. We carved the ancestors from the scented wood, before the fire and the poison water took them, too. We rubbed ebony-stained oil on their braided hair and placed them on the altars with the first harvest, the nuts and the fresh fruit. None would eat before the ancestors were fed, for it was through their blood and toil we emerged from the dark sea to be.

But that was then, and this is now, and we are another tale.

It begins as all stories must, with an ending. My story begins when my world ended, the day my sister shoved me into the ancestors' altar. That morning, one sun before Oma Day, my bare heels slipped in bright gold and orange paste. Sorcadia blossoms lay flattened, their juicy red centers already drying on the ground. The air in my lungs disappeared. Struggling to breathe, I pressed my palm over the spoiled flowers, as if I could hide the damage. Before Yera could cover her smile, the younger children came.

"Fele, Fele," they cried and backed away, "the ancient ones will claim you!" Their voices were filled with derision but their eyes held something else, something close to fear.

"Claim her?" Yera threw her head back, the fishtail braid snaking down the hollow of her back, a dark slick eel. "She is not worthy," she said to the children, and turned her eyes on them. They scattered like chickens. Shrill laughter made the sorcadia plants dance. A dark witness, the fat purple vines and shoots twisted and undulated above me. I bowed my head. Even the plants took part in my shame.

"And I don't need you, shadow," Yera said, turning to me, her face a brighter, crooked reflection of my own. "You are just a spare." A spare.

Only a few breaths older than me, Yera, my twin, has hated me since before birth.

Our oma says even in the womb, my sister fought me, that our mother's labors were so long because Yera held me fast, her tiny fingers clasped around my throat, as if to stop the breath I had yet to take. The origin of her disdain is a mystery, a blessing unrevealed. All I know is that when I was born, Yera gave me a kick before she was pushed out of our mother's womb, a kick so strong it left an impression, a mark, like a bright shining star in the middle of my chest.

This star, the symbol of my mother's love and my sister's hate, is another way my story ended.

I am told that I refused to follow, that I lay inside my mother, after her waters spilled, after my sister abandoned me, gasping like a small fish, gasping for breath. That in her delirium my mother sang to me, calling, begging me to make the journey on, that she made promises to the old gods, to the ancestors who once walked our land, to those of the deep, promises that a mother should never make.

"You were the bebe one, head so shiny, slick like a ripe green seed," our oma would say.

"Ripe," Yera echoed, her voice sweet for Oma, sweet as the sorcadia tree's fruit, but her mouth was crooked, slanting at me. Yera had as many faces as the ancestors that once walked our land, but none she hated more than me.

While I slept, Yera took the spines our oma collected from the popper fish and sharpened them, pushed the spines deep into the star in my chest. I'd wake to scream, but the paralysis would take hold, and I would lie in my pallet, seeing, knowing, feeling but unable to fight or defend.

When we were lardah, and I had done something to displease her—rise awake, breathe, talk, stand—Yera would dig her nails into my right shoulder and hiss in my ear. "Shadow, spare. Thief of life. You are the reason we have no mother." It was my sister's favorite way to steal my joy.

And then, when she saw my face cloud, as the sky before rain, she would take me into her arms and stroke me. "There, my sister, my second, my own broken one," she would coo. "When I descend, you can have mother's comb, and put it in your own hair. Remember me," she would whisper in my ear, her breath soft and warm as any lover. "Remember me," and then she would stick her tongue inside my ear and pinch me until I screamed.

Our oma tried to protect me, but her loyalty was like the suwa wind, inconstant, mercurial. Oma only saw what she wanted. Older age and even older love made her forget the rest.

"Come!" I could hear the drumbeat echo of her clapping hands.

"Yera, Fele," she sang, her tongue adding more syllables to our names, Yera, Fele, the words for her and two. The high pitch meant it was time to braid Oma's hair. The multiversal loops meant she wanted the complex spiral pattern. Three hours of labor, if my hands did not cramp first, maybe less if Yera was feeling industrious.

With our oma calling us back home, I wiped my palms on the inside of my thighs, and ignored the stares. My sister did not reach back to help me. A crowd had gathered, pointing but silent. No words were needed here. The lines in their faces said it all. I trudged behind Yera's tall, straight back, my eyes focused on the fishtail's tip.

"They should have buried you with the afterbirth."



When we reached the courtyard, my basket empty, Yera's full as she intended, we found our oma resting in her battered rocker in the yard. She had untied the wrap from her head. Her edges spiked around her full moon forehead, black tendrils reaching for the sun. She smiled as Yera palmed and bit my lip. No words were needed here. As usual, our oma had eyes that did not see. She waved away my half empty basket, cast her eyes sadly away from the fresh bloody marks on my shoulder, and pointed to her scalp instead.

"Fele, I am feeling festive today, bold." She stared at a group of baji yellow-tailed birds pecking at the crushed roots and dried leaves scattered on the ground. They too would be burned and offered tomorrow night, at Yera's descension. And we would feast on the fruits of the land, as my sister descended into the sea.

"I need a style fitting for one who is an oma of a goddess. My beauty."

"A queen!" Yera cried, returning from our bafa. She flicked the fishtail and raised her palms to the sky. "An ancestress, joining the deep."

Yera had been joining the deep since we were small girls. She never let me forget it.

"Come, Fele," she said, "You take the left," as if I did not know. Yera held the carved wooden comb of our mother like a machete, her gaze as sharp and deadly. Her eyes dared me to argue. She knew that I would not. Together we stood like sentinels, each flanking oma's side. The creamy gel from the fragrant sorcadian butter glistened on the backs of our hands. I placed a small bowl of the blue-shelled sea snails, an ointment said to grow hair thick and wild as the deepest weed of the sea. Yera gently parted our oma's scalp, careful not to dig the wooden teeth in. Before I latched to braid my own hair, Yera had tortured me as a child, digging the teeth into the tender flesh of my scalp. Now her fingers moved in a blur, making the part in one deft move. A dollop of gel dripped onto her wrists. She looked as if she wore blue-stained bracelets—or chains.

I gathered our oma's thick roots, streaked with white and the ashen gray she refused to dye, saying she had earned every strand of it.

"This is a special time, an auspicious occasion. It is not every year that Oma Day falls on the Night of Descension. The moon will fill the sky and light our world as bright as in the day of the gods."

I massaged scented oils into the fine roots of her scalp, brushed my fingertips along the nape of her neck. I loved to comb our oma's hair. The strands felt like silk from the spider tree, cotton from the prickly bushes. Oma said in the time before, our ancestors used to have enough fire to light the sky, that it burned all morning, evening, and the night, from a power they once called electricity. I love how that name feels inside my head—e-lec-tri-city. It sounds like one of our oma's healing spells, the prayers she sends up with incense and flame.

Once when Yera and I were very small, we ran too far inside the ancestors' old walled temples. Before we were forbidden, we used to scavenge there. We climbed atop the dusty, rusted carcasses of metal beasts. They ducked under rebar, concrete giants jutting from the earth, skippad over faded signage. We scuttled through the scraps of the metal yard at the edge of green, where the land took back what the old gods had claimed. I claimed something, too, my reflection in the temple called Family Dollar, a toy that looked like me. Her hair was braided in my same simple box pattern, the eyes were black and glossy. I tried to hide my find from Yera, but she could see contentment on my face. So I ran. I ran to the broken, tumble down buildings with blown-out windows that looked like great gaping mouths. I ran into the mouth of darkness, clutching my doll but when I closed my eyes, searching for the light, Yera was waiting on the other side.

That is when I knew I could never escape her. My sister is always with me.



Before the Descension, our people once lived in a land of great sweeping black and green fields, land filled with thick-limbed, tall trees and flowing rivers of cool waters, some sweet and clear, others dark as the rich, black soil. Our oma says when our ancestors could no longer live on the land, when the poisons had reached the bottom of every man, woman, and child's cup, they journeyed on foot and walked back into the sea, back to the place of the old gods, the deep ones.

But before they left, they lifted their hands and made a promise.

That if the land could someday heal from its long scars, the wounds that people inflicted, that they would return again. In the meanwhile, one among us, one strong and true, must willingly descend into the depths to join the ancestors. This one, our people's first true harvest, will know from the signs and symbols, the transformations that only come from the blessing of the ancestors, when the stars in the sky above align themselves just so. Yera is that first harvest. She has wanted this honor her whole life. And from her birth, the signs were clear. Her lungs have grown wrong. Her limbs straight and tall, she does not bend and curve like the rest of us. My sister has the old gods' favor and when Oma Day ends and the Descension is complete, she will join the waters, and rule them as she once ruled the waters of our mother's womb, she will enter them and be reborn as an ancestress.



The ceremony has not yet begun and I am already tired. I am tired, because I spend much of my time and energy devoted to breathing. For me, to live each day is to be inconspicuous, an exercise of will, mind over my broken body's matter. I must imagine a future with every breath, consciously exhaling, expelling the poison because my brain thinks I need more air, and signals my body to produce light, even though my lungs are weak and filled with the ash of the old gods. Unable to filter the poison quickly, my body panics and it thinks I am dying. My knees lock, and I pull them up to my chest and hold myself, gasping for breath like our oma said I did, waiting in my mother's womb.

Oma gives me herbs. She grinds them up, mortar and pestle in her conch shell, and mixes them in my food. When I was smaller, she made me rewrite the ingredients daily, a song she hummed to lull me asleep. But as I grew, the herbs worked less and less, and my sister did things to them, things that made me finally give them up. I have given so much to her these years.

And I have created many different ways to breathe.

I breathe through my tongue, letting the pink buds taste the songs in the air. I breathe through the fine hairs on the ridge of my curved back and my arms, the misshapen ones she calls claws. I breathe through the dark pores of my skin. And when I am alone, and out of my oma's earshot, out of my wretched sister's reach, I breathe through my mouth, unfiltered and free. My fingers searching the most hidden, soft parts of myself and I am *light air star shine, light air star shine, light—*



In the suns before Oma Day, I spent a lot of time sleeping. My breathing tends to be easier if I sleep well, and so I slept. My lungs are filled with poison which means there's no space for the light, the good clean air. I have many different ways to expel the poison, and meanwhile my body goes into panic because my mind thinks I'm dying, so between controlling the exhalation, telling my mind that I am not dying, inhaling our oma's herbs through her conch shell, I am exhausted since I do this many times a day. And then there is Yera. Always my sister, Yera. I must watch for her. I know my sister's movements more than I know myself.



This night, on the eve of Oma Day, which is to say, the eve of my sister's descension, I can feel Yera smile, even in the dark. It is that way with sisters. As a child I did not fear the night. How could I? My sister's voice filled it. Outside, the baji birds gathered in the high tops of our oma's trees. Their wings sounded like the great wind whistling through what was left of the ancestors' stone wall towers. They chattered and squawked in waves as hypnotic as the ocean itself, their excitement mirroring our own. And I too was excited, my mind filled with questions and a few hopes I dared not even share with myself. Would I still exist without my sister? Can there be one without two?

As more stars add their light to the darkness, I turn in my bed, over and over again like the gold beetles burrowing in our oma's soil. I turned, my mind restless while Yera slept the sleep of the ages. For me, sleep never comes. So I sit in the dark, braiding and unbraiding my hair and wait for the day to come, when my world would end again or perhaps when it might begin.



The past few days I've been aware that braiding makes me short of breath, and I realized that I am very, very tired. Last night I was going through my patterns, braiding and unbraiding them in my head, overhand and underhand, when I remembered what the elder had once said to our oma. That she had done a lot in her life, that she, already an honored mother, had raised felanga on her own, and it was all right if she rested now. And I thought that maybe that was true for me, the resting part, which is perhaps why today I feel changed.



"Hurry, child. Hunger is on me."

Our oma calls but even she is too nervous to eat. Her hair is a wonder, a sculpture that rises from her head like two great entwined serpents holding our world together. My scalp is sore. My hands still ache in the center of my palms and I am concentrating harder now to breathe. I rub the palm flesh of my left hand, massaging the pain in a slow ring of circles.

Yera has not joined us yet. She refused my offer to help braid her hair. "You think I want your broken hand in my head? You know your hands don't work," she said. I remember only once receiving praise from her for my handiwork. I had struggled long, my fingers cramped, my temple pulsing. I braided her hair into a series of intricate loops, twisting off her shining scalp like lush sorcadia blooms. Yera did not speak her praise. Vocal with anger, she was silent with approval. Impressed, Yera tapped her upper teeth with her thumb. Oma, big-spirited as she was big-legged, ran to me. She lifted my aching hands high into the air as if the old gods could see them. Now dressed in nothing more than a wrap, her full breasts exposed, nipples like dark moons, her mouth is all teeth and venom. "You have always been jealous of me."

"Jealous?" I say and turn the word over in my mouth. It is sour and I don't like its taste. I spit it out like a rotten sorcadian seed.

She turns, her thick brows high on her smooth, shining forehead. "Oh, so you speak now. Your tongue has found its roots on the day of my descension?"

Inside, my spirit folds on itself. It turns over and over again and gasps for air, but outside, I hold firm. "Why should I feel jealous? You are my sister and I am yours. Your glory is my glory."

I wait. Her eyes study me coolly, narrow into bright slits. The scabs on my shoulder feel tight and itchy. After a moment, she turns again, her hands a fine blur atop her head. She signals assent with a flick of her wrist. Braiding and braiding, overhand, underhand, the pattern is intricate. I have never seen Yera so shiny.

I take a strip of brightly stained cloth and hand it to her. She weaves it expertly into the starfish pattern. Concentric circles dot the crown of her head. Each branch of her dark, thick hair is adorned with a sorcadian blossom. We have not even reached the water and she already looks like an ancestor.

"Supreme," I whisper. But no words are needed here. I pick up the bowl of sea snail ointment and dip my fingertips into the glistening blue gel. My stained fingers trail the air lightly.

"Mother's comb," Yera says and bows her head. "You may have mother's comb. I won't be needing it anymore."

I smile, something close to pleasure, something close to pain. My fingertips feel soft and warm on her neck. They tingle and then they go numb.

Yera's mouth gapes open and closed, like a bebe, a flat shiny fish. Her pink tongue blossoms, starfish as a sorcadian center. Red lines spiral out from her pupils, crimson starfish.

"Sister, spare me," I say. "Love is not a word that fits in your mouth."



The sorcadia tree is said to save souls. Its branches helped provide shelter and firewood. Its fruit, healing sustenance. Its juicy blossoms with their juicy centers help feed and please the old gods. To have a belly full and an eye full of sweet color is not the worst life. As I leave our Oma's house, the wind rustles and the sorcadia in Oma's yard groans as if it is a witness. I gaze at the sorcadia whose branches reach for me as if to pull me back into the house. Even the trees know my crimes.



Silver stretches over the surface of the sand. Water mingles with moonlight, and from a distance it looks like an incomplete rainbow. Our oma says this is a special moon, the color of blood, a sign from the ancestors. The moon is the ultimate symbol of transformation. She pulls on the waters and she pulls on wombs. When we look at it we are seeing all of the sunrises and sunsets across our world, every beginning and every ending all at once. This idea comforts me as spot our oma in the distance. I follow the silver light, my feet sinking in the sand as I join the solemn crowd waiting at the beach.

There are no words here, only sound. The rhythmic exhalations, inhalations of our people's singing fill the air, their overtones a great buzzing hum deep enough to rend the sky. Before I can stop myself, I am humming with them. The sound rises from a pit in my belly and vibrates from the back of my throat. It tumbles out of my dry mouth to join the others around me. Beneath my soles the earth rumbles. That night my people sang as if the whole earth would open up beneath us. We sang as if the future rested in our throats. The songs pull me out of myself. I am inside and out all at once. As my sister walks to stand at the edge of the waters, I feel as if I might fly away, as if every breath I had ever taken is lifting me up now.

A strong descension assures that straight-backed, strong limbed children will be born from our mothers' wombs, that green, grasping roots will rise from the dead husks of trees to seed a future. The others dance around this vision. When one descends, all are born. When one returns, all return. Each bloodline lives and with it, their memory, and we are received by our kin.

Music rises from the waves, echoes out across the sand, a keening. The elders raise their voices, the sound of their prayers join. I walk past them, my hair a tight interlocked monument to skill, to pain. The same children who laughed in my face and taunted me are silent now. Only the wind, the elders' voices, and the sound of the waters rise up ahead to greet me. The entire village watches.

Oma waits with her back to me, in the carved wooden chair they have carried out to face the waters. When I stand beside her, her fingertips brush the marks on my shoulder. Her touch stings. The wounds have not all scabbed over yet. She turns and clasps my hands, her eyes searching for answers hidden in my face.

"Fele, why, why do you such things?"

Our oma's unseeing eyes search but I can find no answer that would please her.

"Yera," I begin but her tsk, the sharp air sucking between her teeth, cuts me off.

"No," she says, shaking her head, "not Yera. You, Fele, it is you."



They think I don't hear them, here under the water, that I don't know what they are doing, from here in the sea. But I do.

I wanted Yera to fight back, to curse me, to make me forget even the sound of my own name. I am unaccustomed to this Yera. This silent, still one.

"Fele!" they call. "She has always been touched." "I told her oma, but she refused to listen." "One head here with the living, the other with the dead." "Should have never named her. To tell a child she killed her sister, her mother. What a terrible curse."

They whisper harsh words sharp enough to cut through bone. But no words are needed here. I have withstood assault all these years, since before birth. This last attack is borne away by the ocean's tears. They say my Yera does not exist. That she died when our mother bore us, that I should have died, too. But that was then and this is now and we are another tale.



It does not matter if she is on land or that I am in the sea.

We are sisters. We share the same sky.

Though some spells, when the moon is high and the tide is low, and my body flinches, panics because it thinks it is dying, I journey inland, to where the ancestors once walked in flesh, the ones we carved into wood. I journey inward and I can smell the scent of sorcadians in bloom, the pungent scent of overripe fruit, and feel my sister's fingers pressed around my throat, daring me to breathe.

Tiny bebe dart and nibble around my brow. They swim around the circles in my hair and sing me songs of new suns here in the blueblack waters. Now I am the straight and the curved, our past and our future. Here in the water, I dwell with the ancient ones, in the space where all our lives begin, and my story ends as all stories must, a new beginning.



Thank you for reading this excerpt from  
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