

## ***A River Called Time***

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**1 May 2000**

Void. Hum.

Three hundred and sixty degrees' expansion, pervading known and unknown matter.

Breath.

Existence.

Him.

The first time he was struck by a spontaneous nebula, Markriss Denny was eight years old. Feet pushing hard on pedals, body leaning against handlebars, the wheels of the bike ahead glistening with sunlight. His attention was seized and for a moment he saw the heavens in that shimmering rotation. He couldn't take his eyes away. There was pain in the centre of his forehead. He was falling from his bike before he knew it.

He must have blacked out, because the next thing he was lying on the pavement, elbows and knees raw, the bike a resting animal a yard or so

from where he'd fallen. His friends stood over him. T'shari, Karis, Nesta. Markriss let them wrench him to his feet, limping back to his fallen metal steed, waving away their concern, their insistence he looked pale. Soon they rode in unison again, creaking gears and turning wheels a random symphony beneath them.

They stopped outside rusting gates propped open with fallen masonry. Flakes of orange made the once grand entrance look diseased. Grass and weeds stood as high as their waists. A slight breeze made the strands rustle like a whisper of ghosts. They sat on their bikes, staring at the blighted metal. Silent.

Nesta edged forwards, thin bicycle tyre nudging the gate. He rolled over crumbled stone, standing and stamping on the pedals to gain more power until he was over the obstruction, inside. They followed, one after another. Markriss, Karis, and T'shari, the skinniest child, always last, lifting his chin towards graffitied walls, brow arched, fearful.

The building was huge. Not compared to the Ark of course, though it towered above their heads, four storeys high. They rode through warped frames of wooden doors into the main entrance hall, craning their necks to look at the roof. Fallen glass left the dusty brown sky exposed. Their school picture books showed chandeliers and birds wheeling overhead, but the boys saw neither. They got used to being alone, speeding up and down once polished marble floors, performing wheelies and long skids, creating miniature desert storms. When they grew bored, they explored alone.

Markriss rode past closed ticket booths and parades of empty shops, to the platforms where sleek grand trains once stood. He left his bike against a marble bench and jumped onto the tracks, amongst long grass. Some of the weeds were long green strands that looked like wheat. He lay against cool steel, trying to imagine what it must have been like. The olden days. He closed his eyes.

The mute disc of sun hadn't moved by much when he woke. Markriss guessed he hadn't been sleeping long. He climbed back onto the platform, studying the multicoloured lines of the Dinium route map, wheeling his bike into the entrance hall. There was no one. He thought they might have left, panicked for a moment, and then heard voices. Relief made him sag against handlebars. He smiled and hummed a soft tune, wheeling his bike in that direction.

An open corridor, doors long ripped away or kicked down. Black-edged shadows. He paused, biting his lip. The rectangle of light at the opposite end was small, and far. Gloom seeped. Markriss called into the expanse. No answer. Partly, he was glad.

The far-away voices of his friends reached beyond dark. Spun-cotton wisps, distant. He made up his mind, rolling over broken glass and wood, careful, into the solid length of night. Daylight seemed consumed by that murky length of corridor. He saw nothing, his own physicality mythical; the only knowledge he existed came from the warmth of his handlebars beneath his fingers, his own harsh breath. The beat inside his chest, hot blood. The corridor smelt musty, damp and old. Markriss could taste the odour. He covered his mouth, pushing with one hand, which made the going even tougher; the floor beneath him, thick with dust. He repeatedly bumped his tyre against what felt like heavy blocks of concrete.

His bike wheel stuck. He pushed again. Still nothing. Again. No luck. He climbed aboard the pedals, resolving to do what Nesta had, stand up and push down hard.

There was a moment before he did this when Markriss had an inkling of what was to come. An image of himself and his friends, sprinting on bikes, screaming faces static. Metallic banging from a place he could not find, like a football smashing against a chain-link fence. A chuckling peal of laughter

somewhere beyond his peripheral vision. He felt the sound in his stomach, an ache.

He snapped back into the moment, back in the dark corridor, sniffing. Urine. His nose wrinkled. Gotta get out of there. He rose to his feet, smashing down with both feet.

The roar came from everywhere, echoing, bouncing from unseen walls. He was pushed violently, hitting something sodden yet hard, recovering to wrench the bike around and back the way he'd come, pedalling fast. He heard shuffling behind him, running footsteps and mused words like a foreign language, obvious curses. He sprinted towards the light, shooting into the entrance hall and screaming for his friends at the top of his lungs, surprised to see them rapid-pedalling away, until he saw the vagrants behind him. Grimy faces of shining tar, they stumbled and wheezed, trying to run even though their lungs wouldn't serve them, their clothes in tattered strips, clawing empty air like old viewscreen monsters. They chased the boys for yards before they gave up, legs faltering, hands on knees, shaking from rasping explosions of lengthy coughs. Markriss caught one last sight over his shoulder – the vagrants lying in dust, spotlighted by shards of light from the broken ceiling, shuddering as though undergoing a group fit.

He turned away, sprinting harder.

They directed their bikes towards the gates, T'shari, Karis, Markriss, cheeks and foreheads damp with effort, tendons thick in their arms.

Far from the Ark Station, almost two blocks away, they realised.

'I thought he was with you!' Markriss screamed over the handlebars. Karis trembled, sweat gluing baby corn-hair to his forehead.

'Don't shout at him, we all went off on our own!' T'shari's neck stretched taut, tendons protruding, a late entry to any argument, as was his way.

No one dared go back. They waited a heart-wrenching fifteen minutes before Nesta returned, shoulders hunched, riding slow.

'Ra . . .' Smiling when he saw their surprise, their worry. It angered Markriss, though he said nothing. 'You lot was scared, right? You shoulda hid. They got sickness. They can't hurt you.'

An ice cream truck a few blocks from the Ark Station, the young vendor leaning on his counter, tattooed and bored. A dig for change, excitement from Karis and T'shari, echoed in miniature by Markriss and Nesta. The joyful-bought whipped-cream cones, slow-melting vanilla; the sombre orange and lemon ice poles that bled sweet juice. They rolled their bikes towards a grass verge behind the truck, to a bench where they could sit.

'You lot never seen a sickie before, yeah?' Nesta licked at his ice pole, watching faces. 'My uncle had it. He died. Only took three months. I was there.'

T'shari, the only boy still mounted, rocked his bike back and forth, eyes cast at the pavement.

'My cousin had it. He died. I wasn't there. My parents wouldn't let me see him. He was old anyway.'

'My dad doesn't believe in sickness,' Karis piped up.

'So what d'you think killed them?' Nesta, leaping to his feet, waving the pole. Orange spatters flew. The youths backed off.

'Dunno . . .'

'Dunno . . .'

'Dunno . . .'

'Maybe cancer . . .' T'shari's offering, limp, useless.

'You don't catch cancer, so it can't be . . .'

Markriss, sitting higher on the verge, lost interest. He stared across the street at a broken building wedged between the One Tic store and a shop called Mama's Day that sold maternity wear. A sliver of storefront lit by red fluorescent lights placed above the awning to form letters, the letters creating words: TEMPLE OF SEBEK THE MEASURER. Twin symbols—three circles placed inside each other housing a small triangle—bookended the name. Men and women clothed in long white robes drifted in and out, holding thin black books to their chests. A sign was placed on the pavement, green chalk on blackboard, imploring passers-by to *'Find the Neter Within. Join us in worship: 11-3 / 6-10. All welcome.'*

His mother, Willow, called them Kushites, or Nubians like herself. Some noticed the ice cream truck and crossed the quiet road. Markriss didn't want to stare, though he was fascinated. A man, broad in his cheap suit, smiled as he bought a cone for his pebble-headed son. Markriss's lips twitched. He looked away, caught.

Willow didn't go to temple, though she had a shrine in her podroom. She believed in Neter, not religion. He wasn't quite sure how his mother separated the two, and never had the courage to ask. Markriss considered himself lucky that she didn't force him to pray twice daily, like his friends whose parents were Ila, Nandi, Yoruba, Abaluyia.

He lifted his head, searching beyond the ice cream truck, the temple and its followers. Above, the skyline undulated in a frosted brown haze, a broad smudge that stained the horizon.

## **Courtia Newland**

Courtia Newland has published eight works of fiction including his debut, *The Scholar*. His latest novel, *A River Called Time*, was published by Canongate in 2021. A forthcoming collection of speculative fiction stories, *Cosmogramma*, will also be published this year. Newland's short stories have appeared in many anthologies, and have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and included in *Best of British Short Stories 2017*. He has been awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. He was previously associate lecturer in creative writing at the University of Westminster and is completing a PhD in creative writing. As a screenwriter he has co-written two feature length films for the Steve McQueen BBC series *Small Axe*, of which *Lovers Rock* was jury selected for Cannes, and opened New York Film Fest 2020. *Small Axe* won the LA Critics Circle award 2020 for Best Picture. *Impact*, an original feature, and *The Future Isn't What It Used to Be*, a science fiction short, are currently in development with Film Four.

This is an extract from *A River Called Time* (Canongate Books, 2021). A recording can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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