

Down in the face of God

by Tim J. Lord

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Characters

- ORA: the only girl in her 20s anywhere in town, the gods come to her nightly.
- PEN: 17, about to be 18, cursed beyond hope, the last member of his family
- ANNA: 16, a girl looking for freedom from her family's dominance.
- MAY: 15, devout, ready for Judgment Day, Anna's goodie two shoes little sister.
- HAM: 17, jock-ish, cocksure, and handsome, Anna & May's cousin.
- INO: 15, totally in love with Ham, but always stuck following behind.
- D: 17, about to be 18, a wanderer, a kid on the road, looking for an answer.
- GAVI: 17, from the town but an outsider, trying to carry on.

Note

ORA is sometimes possessed by the god who loves her more than all the others. At these times she takes on a different quality, a menacing one. These moments are designated as "ORA WITH THE GOD ON HER."

Setting

Various sites around Thebes, a small town in Southern Illinois on the banks of the Mississippi River. It is a meeting place between east and west, north and south.

Time

The present

*The hammer clicks in place
The world's gonna pay
Right down in the face of God and his saints
Claim your soul's not for sale
I'm a dyin' breed who still believes
Haunted by American dreams*

—Neko Case

DAY 1

Scene 1.

ORA is alone, on the rail bridge, grey clouds and wind, but the world is still, only her words resound. None of her visions are visible to us.

PEN is visible down by the river. He holds a small book, stuffed to overflowing with scraps of paper and pictures.

ORA

The sky was very blue, and the water also, there were bluebells growing and blue jays in the tree above. And I can hear the wind rustling through the trees, I can hear my sisters praying nearby, in the distance there is the sound of a train, its whistle, it's traveling east toward the River, out of the unknown West, the tracks follow the river before they turn east, tracks across the river, the tracks are hot iron hot from the summer sun and pine tar wood railroad ties—ties because they tie the iron to the earth? Or ties because they tie the rails together?

There is the sound of wind rustling through the grass, I can hear my sisters praying nearby, there is the sound of a train, its whistle, it's traveling from west to east—my older sister told me you could tell a train was approaching by feeling the vibration in the tracks and I wanted to know what this felt like so I left my sisters behind, my mother, and I found the tracks, I felt the tracks—

Lights shift. PEN is standing beside ORA. He wasn't expecting to see her here.

They look at each other a while.

ORA

You've known a lot of death 'round here.

PEN

Yeah.

ORA

There's more comin'.

PEN

So? There always is.

ORA

But not like this.

PEN

...I'll keep an eye out.

ORA
You won't be ready for it.

Lights shift. ORA is alone on the bridge.

ORA
The tracks are hot-iron-hot and I can't let go even though I see the train approaching. I feel that there is something before and after the train I want to feel that all the way through from first to last. I know that I can't do this and survive, but I feel I can. I want to, I must feel the train as it passes through me, as I pass through it—

*A shift.
D is standing before ORA on a road on the edge of town. He has a large backpack with him.*

ORA
You took the train?

D
The road. I came in from the road.

ORA
Trains and barges. That's what we've got in these parts. The rails and the river. They're the only ways out.

Scene 2.

D is with PEN & ANNA. They're in an abandoned lot down near the river. The bridge visible in the distance. They drink cheap beer and smoke cigarettes.

ORA is in the background. She practices walking on her hands.

PEN
We're Cardinals fans down here.

D
Fuck that, I like the Cubs.

PEN
This is Cardinals country.

D
But the Cubs are actually in the same state. You should root for them.

PEN
St. Louis is closer. Missouri is closer.

D
Fuck that.

PEN
It's right fuckin' there. You can see Missouri. It's right there.
Where the fuck is Chicago?

ANNA
Where is Chicago? You've been there?

D
Where I grew up.

ANNA
Where is it?

D
It's north.

ANNA
North... How far?

D
You can be there in six hours.

PEN
If you have a car.

D
Well, yeah.

PEN
If you have a car, you can be in St. Louis in two hours—

ANNA
Do you have a car?

D
No. Not anymore.

ANNA
Why not?

D
I lost it.

ANNA
You can't lose a car.

D
It died.

PEN
Died.

D
Cars die. It was an old car. It died.

PEN
Of course it did.

D
What's that mean—?

PEN (taking a sip of beer)
Gods, that's good. How much did you bring?

D
Whole case. And a few other treats.

ANNA
Our savior—

D
What do you mean "of course it did?"

PEN
Well...how did the car die?

D
Just did. It stopped working, I started walking. That's how I ended up here.

ANNA
Shit.

D
What?

ANNA
You've got it too.

D
Got what?
(silence)
Got what?
(silence)
What do I got?

PEN
Curse.

D
Fuck you.

PEN
Have another beer.

ANNA tosses him one.

PEN
Nobody just comes to Thebes. Curse brings all outsiders.
That means you're cursed—

D
Seriously, my car just broke down, and once I've got it fixed, I'll go.

ANNA
Curse kills our families—

PEN
We all die, Anna. We fill our part, then we don't.

D
What the fuck're you talking about?

ANNA
We're the ones left

PEN
You're one of us now; Gods have made it so—
Too bad you didn't bring two cases of beer...

D
I didn't do anything to get cursed for.

PEN
So your parents—

D
Never knew my dad. And my mom... She died when I was a baby.

ANNA
You're an orphan too.

PEN
We all have to pay for our sins.

D
For how long?

PEN
Until the sin is paid for.

D
How long does that take?

ANNA
Who fuckin' knows.

PEN
I don't know anybody who's debt-free.

D
...Well, I'm not cursed. I'll stay as long as I want to.
I'll leave when I want to.

PEN
"Don't try; you'll die." Says so in the Big Book.

ANNA
During the war, the ones who fled... their bodies washed up on the river bank or got
dragged into town by wolves—

PEN
Ain't no wolves in Southern Illinois. Just wild dogs.

ANNA
Look like wolves—

D
I only pay *my* debts. And, right now, I don't owe nobody nothin'.

PEN
Gods decide what's a curse and what isn't.

D
Well, I'm stronger than they are. Their curses don't bother me. And if they don't
like that, well, fuck 'em.

*PEN & ANNA are both taken aback at this,
make religious gestures, chant a prayer silently.*

ANNA
Don't say that again.

PEN
You talk like that and... and—

ORA (appearing suddenly nearby)
The Hammer will fall.

PEN
Shit!

ANNA
Fuck, Ora, don't do that.

ORA
Either you're cursed or you are the curse.
Only the River knows.

D
What?

ORA
You showed up; the Flood followed.

D
River's not flooded.

ORA
Don't be too surprised if there's an earthquake too.

D
Whatever.

ANNA
He's right, Ora.

ORA
Suit yourself, bitch.

D
Even if the river floods, how is that my fault?

ORA
Only the River will tell.

MAY runs in, stops when she sees D.

MAY
... Who's he?

D
Daniel. But just call me, “D,” everyone does.
(silence)
I prefer it—

ANNA
He’s an orphan, May. Just like us—

MAY
Whatever. You have to come now, Anna. Teo...

ANNA
No...

ANNA runs off.
MAY lingers, looking at D.

MAY (to PEN)
You too, Pen.
We’ll deal with...D later.

A flash of lightning, a clap of thunder.

Scene 3.

The other kids begin to gather.

ANNA & MAY each carry a long pole

HAM is hauling a body wrapped up in cloths.

INO follows behind, trying to help him.

When they reach the river bank, the body is dropped unceremoniously beside it.

At the river.

PEN

Teo left us. Curse took him as it promised it'd take all the faithful in these days. But Teo was strong and faithful. It was his time and he went as he was called. So we don't cry for him; we rejoice with him. And because the Flood is soon to take us all, take the whole world, we don't put him under. We give him straight back to the river.

So, everyone... You can, uh...you know, say your last words in a last silence with our friend and brother Teo.

They all take a moment of silence. Eventually, PEN & HAM catch each other's eye. They each take an end of the body, get it swinging, and let it fly into the river. ANNA & MAY use the poles to push the body even further out into the current, and soon the body is floating away.

PEN

Ok. Let's say it...

ALL

The earth is mud. We are mud. Made by Godhands out of mud.

Exalted by your Love, transformed. Made from mud into Holy Waters.

PEN

The flood came and covered us. We forgot You, cursed You.

Stagnant waters drowned us, kept us from Your grace.

You came again. Your breath raised us up, gave us holy waters

Filled us with the waters of the sacred river.

You give us everything; we are nothing without

Your water, Your breath.

ALL

We are lifted by You, through You, with You.

But we turned away from, turned eyes to

The earth, the mud, the world's waste.

Forgive your people. Have mercy. Raise us up again.

We reject the mud. We give what we are to you.

What is yours is yours again. We reject this waste;

We submit. This breath is Yours, this holy water.

Take back. Take us back.

PEN

And when the Flood returns, when we are taken under,
Lift us up again to dwell on Mountaintops
Beside You.

Scene 4.

GAVI is there, using a hoe to break up the earth in an overgrown vegetable garden. There are a few patches that have already been cleared, complete with ridges where seeds have been sewn. Despite the work she's doing she's tightly wound, prim: too many heavy clothes, hair bound tightly.

GAVI doesn't notice D until he speaks.

D
Hey there!

GAVI
Oh!

D
Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you.

GAVI
Just startled me. I was workin'. On my garden.

D
Yeah.

GAVI
Parents were farmers. So I'm...
Who are you?

D
Just a kid, like you. Just wandering through.

GAVI
No one just wanders through.

D
What're you planting?

GAVI
Don't know.

D
Ok.

GAVI
Seeds weren't labeled. Just planting. My parents were farmers—

D
You said—

GAVI
I left the town, so... So the others, they'll forget me when I'm gone. But if I can get

GAVI (cont'd)

these to grow...then I'll have left somethin' behind. They'll know I was here and remember me.

D

Who?

GAVI

Them who's on the Mountaintops, waitin' for us to come home. Ain't you a believer?

D

...Yeah. Just got my own way, I guess.
You know anything about someone named Teo?

GAVI

Did he die?

D

...Maybe?

GAVI

It was his time. And the war and all between him and his brother. Would explain the wailing I heard. They give him to the River?

D

I was asked to leave.

GAVI

You should. You should keep going.

D

Thebes seems like a harmless-enough kinda town.

GAVI

It's the beginning. And the end. The Gods love this place dearest so it's the most cursed patch of earth anywhere. If you can get out, you should.

D

This is *that* Thebes.

(GAVI nods.)

Well, I'll consider that.

(He starts to go.)

Good luck with your garden—

GAVI

No good. Nothin' grows here anymore.

D

But this is good river bottom soil—

GAVI

From the beginning. The ancient floods laid it down to bless this place.

D
And lookit how dark and rich that soil is now.
Well? Come here. Lookit.

She kneels down beside him, he puts the soil into her hands. Something electric. She changes but doesn't yet know how to express the change.

D
You give it just a little time and you'll have all kinds of vegetables—

D notices how GAVI is looking at him. He stands up, moves away.

D
Well, I should press on.
Thanks for the info. And good luck with your garden.

D exits.

GAVI
He's come at last.