Gena Child

Keita travelled down from his home in the far mountains to visit Kaba, an ungrateful, selfish, and cowardly boy Keita fostered out of pity for his mother, Salvation, a woman cast out of her village for the crime of feeding duck meat to her children. Everyone knew eating ducks caused children to dabble in magic; the district chief wisely cast the family adrift. Keita stayed with Salvation one night and exchanged his stories for a seat and a bowl of soup. Salvation sold cast-off American clothing at the small market in Senyei Township. The clothes carried her name on small tags, but also implied she commanded an army of soldiers and officers willing to do her bidding. In truth, she only had her three small children.

Keita met the youngest selling bread at Phebe Junction. Kaba looked strangely well-dressed for a bread-seller, in a clean, bright yellow Barcelona jersey. The ricebread only cost 5LD. Keita asked the boy for a piece and waited while he made a show of selecting a large slice and wrapping it in a piece of paper ripped from a pilfered copy of Tobias Smollett's 1755 translation of *Don Quixote,* originally criticized as "too stiff", hidden inside the large white plastic bucket on his head. Cheap margarine washed ink from the paper. Keita carefully avoided eating the words. Others took no notice and acted strangely once the words took root in their bloodstreams and grew. Their eyes turned black and seemed to face more inward than out. They walked into clearly visible objects. One man wandered into the road and barely missed a speeding truck rushing a load of wet rubber to the weighing station. Worse, the words spread

from person to person. They became crazed for books. The wandered into the library at Cuttington University, a place so haunted not even Charles Taylor's forced dared enter. Charles Taylor's forces used and abused Cuttington University during Liberia's long civil war. The soldiers – some children, some husked-out hulls where children once lived – tore rooftops into barricades and burnt what they didn't need. Except for the Library. A mystique grew around the Library until not even Taylor himself would enter the place. After the war, Ben would bully some of those former children into the library and cause nervous breakdowns among the more brutal. The refugees terrified them. War refugees- old men, women, children - huddled in the library during the war. They ate leather book covers and museum drumheads by boiling them in water, when they could get water, or by soaking them in piss. Those same crazed refugees still hid in the library six years after the war ended. Students called them *book-o*, crazy for books. Crazy by books.

"This is madness," the Head Librarian shouted, then quit. The Assistant Head Librarian called the Dean, who called the Provost, who called the University President, who called some friends in Monrovia, who got in touch with the right people at the Embassy and demanded they pressure the Ministry of Health to send an American at once. This is how Ben's predecessor arrived at Cuttington: a scrawny young woman named Susannah Hanford from Texas who heard of Liberia from a friend's mission trip. The friend taught yoga and smoked pot on the beach in Robertsport, but *Liberia is only the size of Tennessee* Susannah reasoned, *so it can't be too different.* She came to Liberia unprepared to meet the young man at Phebe Junction who barely avoided the speeding truck; his first attempt to joust her windmill succeeded. They married a week later in the Aladura Pentecostal Church while the word plague continued unabated.

Keita avoided the affliction by concentrating on his own troubles: a family at Phebe Hospital had given birth to a gena witch infant and fled in terror. The spirit world only sent such a severe punishment when the parents had ignored several warnings from their own ancestors. The gena tortured humans into obedience. Misshapen gena children emerged after a long and difficult pregnancy and began their work immediately. No man knew a cure for the gena, only the hope someone might bargain with it to leave after it exacted the punishment. But with the parents gone, no one could force the gena child back to the spirit world. Keita remembered dreadful tales of genii gone mad with power and freedom. The witch-child lived at Phebe Hospital next to Phebe Airstrip, the little town sprung up on the old UN airstrip after the relief planes stopped landing. He remembered this land differently. Far from the idyllic little villages of simple farmers and palm-wine tappers, central Liberia had turned into a hard place. The people who survived the war cut their bread with bitterness. Ugly roadside towns seemed to spring up overnight, complete with video clubs full of desolate young men and children selling pornography on the corners. Trash blew everywhere, carried along smoke from charcoal fires. Keita moved constantly in these new places, often named after the first person who bothered to spend the night. Swimming through the river of human traffic, he smelled old dirt on the slippers of a few, which led him away from pursuing the gena just yet and down a small road, past a locked well cap and into the dark forest, where a man laid down his rice sack to rest. Keita wondered momentarily if this fellow might be the infamous magician who only rented his body parts from others so he could appear human, but no, such nonsense happened elsewhere. At best, Keita believed, this man travelling alone through territory reserved for the disposal of suicides and evil spirits might lead him to the hiding place of the man and woman who had abandoned their infant. His logic was simple: they had nowhere else to go.

Keita imagined the young couple he had never met. The father – an unsuccessful rubber tapper – left school early when his teacher ordered every boy in school to fight for the local warlord. He did many things during the war, but avoided the worst fighting and eventually escaped to a refugee camp in Ghana. He lost an eye to river blindness but the milky blue eye increased his attractiveness to women. He drank too much. A machete scar ran down his back from his left shoulder into his buttock. His wife, the baby's mother, never fought in the war, and endured daily shaming from fierce female veterans who now controlled the best stalls at the local market. She evacuated as a small child and arrived at the same refugee camp. Someone taught her how to sew: Her calloused fingers made lappa dresses and school uniforms. She looks a bit like the famous American woman Oprah Winfrey. She has a weak heart from malaria. A Christian minister married them, but not in a church. After the birth, they asked for help. He called a wealthy uncle in Brussels. She asked a nurse to contact Medicins Sans Frontiers. The uncle refused to help. The doctor explained that her baby had a medical condition that required surgery and constant care. They heard his words but didn't believe. The husband grew angry and declared this calamity must be her fault. He ordered her to choose him or the baby. She refused. He slapped her. She cried. Keita saw the young couple arguing loudly in the damp, moldy maternity ward just a few feet away from a doctor operating on an infant without anesthetic. The child screamed and sobbed and somewhere in the woman's heart she wanted her child to scream like this child, wail, need her mother.

The gena slept, unnaturally quiet. Her scrawny limbs might grow strong with food and exercise, but nothing would cure her elongated head and tiny face. Under another guise, Keita once travelled to Paris and sold a young painter a broken mask. The painter shared the mask with

his friends and they all became obsessed with the physicality of Africa. The emulated the lines and colors of Africa without understanding emptiness: no spirit inhabited the mask, so nothing animated their copies. The father felt the same way: the infant body contained no spirit. He was correct, except not all spirits were human, and no spirit was weak.

The man retook his load and continued into the forest. The sun still hung high overhead but the air felt cool under the abandoned rubber trees. Keita had once been welcomed in every village he knew. Now he skulked in the forest like an evil spirit himself. He caused some of their misgivings, he admitted to himself. He travelled from town to town supposedly trading for old masks and artifacts Westerners liked to buy, like the young man in Paris. But he never actually bought anything from a villager. Keita came and ate, and told stories of the old days in Mali when the King ruled everything below the Sahara. People listened respectfully, but long vanished empires carried no water. Some said the war changed everything. Keita remembered the people before the war started. They argued over imagined slights and petty family feuds. Only stories about wealth held interest. They had grown coarse and forgotten how to love.

The man disappeared behind a small hill and Keita hesitated. The couple might hide behind the hill, or the magician might his confederates there. Or, Keita wondered, was the man a lure to get him away from the gena child so a true heartman could snatch the baby and use it for evil purposes. Many, many years ago, Keita watched powerful sorcerers covered in cloth made from red feathers perform dreadful rituals in a hidden chamber of the old palace. On the rare occasion a gena child came to the palace, Keita and the other griot stood witness while the sorcerers attempted to exorcize the demon. The child refused to cry. Instead, she sang the song of a flute. Her wondrous voice enchanted the enchanters until men in feather robes began hopping

around in rhythm. The younger men reverted to childhood: some even constructed tiny bows and hunted the red and green lizards the gena loved to eat. The gena enchanted the women working in the courtyard until their songs matched the insistent music in a ceaseless rhythm. The flute music crept into the ear of the King once all of his protectors fell powerless. He gaped. He drooled. He dropped his food. Many, many years later when the enchantment broke, the King ordered no one to ever sing any song again, nor make any sound in his presence, as the gena's music echoed in his mind for the rest of his days until the singing strangled his heart and he died.

While Keita stood frozen and attempted to avoid the quicksand of song, his foster son Kaba sold ricebread across the highway from Phebe Hospital, amid arguing taxi drivers, chattering monkeys, victims of his insidious word plague, and languid palm-wine drunkards. Everyone at Phebe Junction spoke of one thing: the gena child in the hospital across the road. The foreign doctors there had no experience with a gena. The parents would only increase their suffering by abandoning the child, but even the hard woman who ran the palm-wine barrel agreed they had no choice.

A tall American scholar waited foolishly in the sun on the benches outside of a roadside shop while his driver fixed a tire. The large Suakoko market usually had oranges: the man looked greedy. He swatted at flies. Sweat pooled down his back. He carried a large black backpack and his pocket bulged with money. Kaba wondered if the American had a wife, and if he'd like to meet his mother, and then the man looked at him and shouted "Bre." Kaba hurried over – foreigners might not know the right price of bread and pay extra. The American disappointed him by pulling a grubby 5LD note from his pocket. The money stank. Kaba selected a large chunk of country bread, which his sister had made with a combination of pounded rice, shortening, and a hint of ginger. Somehow it had the consistency of cornbread. Kaba reached

into his bag and tore a piece of paper from a book for a wrapper. The man winced at the damage to the text, but paid him and ate so quickly the words did not have time to melt. He unfolded the paper and read it. “A covenant of salt,” he murmured. “How strange.” His tall Mandingo driver pulled up with the fixed tire and the two men drove off.

Kaba Salvation put the heavy bucket on his head and walked quickly across the highway. People always needed food in the hospital, and besides, he might see the Gena. Kaba had grown quickly after the war. His mother Salvation had gone into the clothing business partly to supplement the family income after they left the village, and partly to keep up with her son’s fantastic growth. Childhood had almost ended. Soon he would pass through the Bush School and become a proper man, something Salvation insisted upon. Her children would not grow into rogues and scoundrels like so many young men and women she saw in Senyei Township. Salvation’s children would – must – turn into something. Kaba’s voice hardened when he started selling bread, but working at the Junction restored the piercing look he had as a baby. Salvation encouraged him to spend time with the palm-wine mistress, convinced her friend would turn Kaba into a man. Instead, Kaba charmed the old woman with his directness until she returned him to his mother saying only, “Wait.”

Kaba walked the hospital halls looking for the gena child everyone spoke about. Bodies lay stacked in long concrete hallways. The stench attracted vermin; Kaba had seen worse during the war. Past the corridor with the bodies he entered a lab run by a balding man so cowardly he let his niece eat trash rather than tell his sister she had lost her mind. Kaba had seen worse during the war. The man hid in a corner. Kaba moved into Emergency, where a sobbing group of tappers had just carried in a woman who fell from a tree. Her lappa had fallen partially off and Kaba could see between her legs. Kaba grew afraid, even though he had seen his mother naked

while she bathed and washed clothes in the river. He ran down another hallway past a ward of listless people lying on the dirty floor. The few in beds seemed worse off than the ones on the floor. Kaba Salvation hurried down another dark hall and entered a dimly lit room. A student nurse slept next to a small bed covered by a plastic dome. Kaba looked inside the dome and saw the gena child. She slept. Her head looked much longer than any normal child's. Her neck looked no wider than two of his fingers. If Kaba picked her up, the weight of her enormous head would break her own neck. She wore a tiny gown and socks made from soft cloth, perhaps made by her mother or a grandmother awaiting the birth. She took a large breath in her sleep. Her tiny chest rose and fell, and the child settled into sleep. Kaba wondered if this defenseless, sleeping baby could be the same child he heard about at Phebe Junction. She didn't climb onto him and rip his hair out. She didn't bite. Even if she did, Kaba only saw the starts of a few baby teeth in her open mouth. The gena child was just a baby. Kaba smiled and turned to leave, but then he heard a small soft sound, high-pitched, with a suggestion of a song remembered from a quiet moment during the war when young children had carved camwood sticks into flutes.

Keita breathed in deeply. The forest, the man, the sack on his head, the King, the flute music, the room of sorcerers and wizards and women in the courtyard and the insistent rhythm of heartbeats and rice blended into a seamlessnow that Keita sensed did not entirely exist. He unloosed himself. Keita stretched forward in time to the women pounding rice in the King's courtyard and felt the ancient sunlight, the crisp air, the metallic dust from the great forges, scribe's ink carelessly brushed onto his lover's dress, and the thrilling tang of power that emanated from the king. Keita stretched forward again and found the parents of the gena child hiding in a small cave just a few feet away. The husband discovered this place when he fought for the warlord; one of his army brothers carried a sack to help them in distress. The woman

wept bitterly. The husband sharpened his machete and wondered if his friend would kill them both as a favor. Keita straightened his back and felt the rough keel of a flying wooden ship catch his thin hair. Keita wandered through the ship. He drifted through a dank hold and listened to echoes of screaming Africans kept in darkness. He followed footprints in the wood to a map made from melted pigeon feathers and scars from old shackles. A group of flying people held the ship aloft from below, and the winds pushed it north. Keita looked again in the Captain's quarters and saw a map with their journeys plotted by an unseen hand. The Flying Africans had fled America in 1837. The *Yemaya* landed on them almost immediately and they could not dislodge themselves from her bulk. They followed the trade winds to Europe and skated across treetops in France and Spain before moving south to Africa. The wisest among them grew happy when they spotted the edge of the Sahara, and their gathered food held until they reached their home. But the ship refused to land, and nothing they did let them stay in their ancestral homeland. The winds rose again and the ship sailed towards America. The people had not gathered enough provisions for a return trip. They nearly starved before they arrived in America again, nested among the chinaberries and zipper peas just a few months after they had left. The flute music again. Their former owner had ceased looking for them, and even the friendly Choctaw never thought to look into the sky for their allies. Their leader fell into a deep depression and refused to speak or eat except for the occasional false prophecy. Their leader's wife asserted authority and organized the tribe into groups: some picked crops, others attempted to fish, a few tried to snag clothing hung out to dry with thin ropes woven from threads delivered by Capistrano swallows. The people grew angry, he could see, and afraid, and their leader, the failure, had no idea what happened. They cursed and scorned him but adored his wife. A group formed and accused him. Another faction claimed their predicament was a conspiracy designed

to rob them of their power. Some hailed the leader as a revolutionary hero. Some derided him as a colonialist puppet. The flute music again. One year, the ship sailed so low they touched summer corn with their toes. Another year, the tallest man in the tribe brushed against something soft and scratchy in his sleep. He awoke and found his feet covered in cotton. Bleary-eyed, he shouted, “We have drifted into Heaven!” Looking down from the ship it almost seemed so. They drifted across a vast plain covered in long rows of white cotton. The ship sank lower, permitting all but the shortest to believe for a moment they had somehow passed beyond the realm of flesh into the spirit. This was not so. They passed over a row of bent-backed slaves quickly picking cotton by hand. “Ah,” the tall man groaned. “We must toil even in Heaven. I don’t want to die.” His sentiment spread and the Flying Africans stopped dying. The decision became final; once made, the Flying Africans could not die, not through starvation or thirst, not poison, not disease, not for any reason Keita could see. Unfortunately, they also did not heal. An old woman with bunions kept her malformed toes every minute of their journey, although she admitted not walking for over a hundred years improved the pain somewhat. Old whipping scars and amputations grew comfortable and settled in. Pain became honor, and some of the people ranked their suffering over those who escaped with only cuts and bruises or a touch of gangrene as they sailed from field to field and port to port across the Atlantic, year after miserable year.

Keita saw a girl – Kollie – young, not quite matured, maybe 12 or so, just old enough to approach marriageable in the small villages, just old enough to get the last spurt of her height and thinness. Her little bird-breasts poked out of her dress. A red dress, satin, with lace fringe around the hem. This dress didn’t come from overseas donations sold by Salvation to the starving war refugees of Liberia. She looked weary, like dogs he’d heard of, or was it foxes? Foxes. Tired of fighting the river, sometimes they would just let the current carry them out to sea. In fact, the

Flying Africans had seen such a thing on one of their trips: a man drifting out to sea. He followed Sherman until the General declared that all these nigger slaves slowed his army and cut the pontoons at Ebenezer Creek. The man tried to swim across, then turned back halfway across only to witness the Confederates kill his mother and sister. He couldn't go forward. He couldn't go back. He gave up, and let the current take him downriver, past Savannah, out to the ocean. They'd seen him, waved, and even dropped fruit, but the *Yemaya*quickly sailed out of sight. But the girl, Kollie, young and not unattractive, in her red dress, not yet started on her journey of 7 live children and 12 births although she is already pregnant. She doesn't know. She thinks the cramps come from what the soldiers do to her. In exchange, she gets a sack of UN-stamped rice or a tub of cheap margarine labeled NOT FOR RESALE. Kollie sells rice and margarine at Suakoko Market on Friday. Market day. The old ladies at the market cut their teeth at Kollie but she doesn't care. Soldiers would never give them rice. She feels young and pretty. Her hips are slim and flat, her chest, unwrinkled. She wants to study to become a nurse, but she needs to save more to pay bribes. And no one at school had a red dress like Kollie, not even the other girls who go to the UN barracks at night. Kollie feels special. The old women tell tales of who was forced to do this and that in the camps, but none of their tears matter to Kollie. She turned seven when the war ended and all of it seems like ghost stories told by ghosts to ghosts. She skips a bit and sings softly to herself on the way home, past Cuttington Junction, when she sees the young breadseller in the Barcelona jersey run down the dusty red hill waving his arms. He is dark, and sweaty, and he may just be the most beautiful man Kollie has ever seen.

The flute again, insistent, seductive. The Flying Africans heard nothing; this melody enchanted Keita alone. His head swelled. Keita looked down and saw himself aboard the accursed *Yemaya* atop the Flying Africans. He saw Americans travelling the rough road from

Monrovia. Keita saw himself travelling down long forgotten roads to the treasuries of the old kingdom to retrieve small trinkets to sell, and he saw himself weep as he rehearsed fantastic lies to make the treasures appear worthless. Keita saw the gena child's mother prepare their final meal. He saw a young girl in a long red dress sell the tub of margarine she earned in the barracks of the UN compound. He saw his adopted son Kaba Salvation touch the gena child in Phebe Hospital, and through all of it he heard music, music, the soft subtle flute which destroyed the mighty kingdom. He could move as the King once did, into the realm of song and forever and ever away but acrid smoke drew him back to the tiny cave where he found the parents of the gena child dead, throats cut, black bodies crackling from the kerosene their friend carried through the forest.