

Patricia**Young**

THE GREAT FLU

A one-legged imp crashed into my bedroom, knocking out lights and kicking over chairs. A storm was building off the coast. Branches scraped against the house. I tried to sit up but a clove-scented wind took away my voice, my facial features, my badly hennaed hair. I begged the imp to build a fire to ward off the demons. He threw rocks at my head. I heard him say *spear*. I saw him stalking *deer*. His cow ears flapped horribly. My temperature kept spiking, I shook like a dishrag, spun like an orb. I'd been ill so long I didn't care that the angel trapped inside the mirror couldn't cool my fever. I cancelled my appointments, my husband, my longings, my life. It all tasted like dust.

SONG OF BIRTH AND DEATH

NEWBORN

Lying on an air mattress, I kick my legs in jerking motions. The river is parched. Aerodynamic wings descend like twirling helicopters. For generations my family has tilled this stony patch of land. Every few decades the well dries up and one of my ancestors drills a deeper one. Their bones were arbutus branches; their blood was lake water mixed with red dirt. Emerald leaves sway above me like massive hands. A warm wind swaddles my body. Vague forms pass back and forth, carrying bowls of steaming food. The one who kneels beside me has hair and eyes and is my sister. Open your mouth, she says. An alien cry leaves my body and sputters like a star.

UNBORN

For centuries I've been waiting to explode into a speck of human life. There have always been songs of birth and death, but now the kids are leaking granules of salt from their elbows and knees. They're refusing sex and signing petitions, filling the streets with their outrage and demands. No, they're saying, just no. A body can survive 120 Fahrenheit, but only for a few hours. Nothing can live on a dead planet, not even them. The last light hits the surrounding hills, rubbing them to such a polished gold the landscape looks false. Bicycles move silently through the city. The hum of internal combustion engines is already an unfamiliar sound.

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SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT

The retired grammar teacher emerges from his garden shed, carrying parts of an old wagon. For fifty years he's stored the wheels, chassis and steering handle, waiting for a free afternoon to reconstruct his childhood. Some men hold fast to the rules governing the composition of words. They throw nothing away. The grammar teacher's love of all things broken is as simple as a declarative sentence. Even his memories are syntax perfect: The boy is pulling his wagon down the cement ramp. The boy is building a raft out of driftwood and rope. The boy is pushing off with a big stick. At dusk his mother walks down to the beach and stands on shore, calling his name. Ten years ago she marvelled at how easily he acquired language, but at Saturday morning swimming lessons he sinks to the bottom of the pool. She strains her eyes. Across the strait lights flicker in Port Angeles. She considers her options: Her son is fighting against the riptide. Her son is being swept out to sea. Her son's baseball cap is blue.