To the magician,
the spells our stories make,
the ways we shape the world.

First published in the United States by Make Me a World,
an imprint of Random House Children's Books,
a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York in 2019
First published in the UK in 2019
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London, WC1B 3DA

Typeset in Whitman
Book design by Stephanie Moss
Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY
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A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571– 35511–2

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AKWAEKE EMEZI

90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

FABER & FABER

CHAPTER 1

There shouldn't be any monsters left in Lucille.

The city used to have them, of course—what city didn't? They used to be everywhere, thick in the air and offices, in the streets and in people's own homes. They used to be the police and teachers and judges and even the mayor; yeah, the mayor used to be a monster. Lucille has a different mayor now. This mayor is an angel; the last couple of mayors have all been angels. Not like a from-heaven, not-quite-real type of angel but a from-behind-and-inside-and-in-front-of-the-revolution, therefore-very-real type of angel.

It was the angels who took apart the prisons and the police; who held councils prosecuting the former officers who'd shot children and murdered people, sentencing them to restitution and rehabilitation. Many people thought it wasn't enough; but the angels were only human, and it's hard to build a new world without making people angry. You try your best, you move with compassion, you think about the

big structures. No revolution is perfect. In the meantime, the angels banned firearms, not just because of the school shootings but also because of the kids who shot themselves and their families at home; the civilians who thought they could shoot people who didn't look like them, just because they got mad or scared or whatever, and nothing would happen to them because the old law liked them better than the dead. The angels took the laws and changed them, tore down those horrible statues of rich men who'd owned people and fought to keep owning people. The angels believed and the people agreed that there was a good amount of proper and deserved shame in history and some things were just never going to be things to be proud of.

Instead, they put up other monuments. Some were statues of the dead, mostly the children whose hashtags had been turned into battle cries during the revolution. Others were giant sculptures with thousands of names carved into them, because too many people had died and if you made statues of everyone, Lucille would be filled with stone figures and there'd be no room for the alive ones. The names were of people who died when the hurricanes hit and the monsters wouldn't evacuate the prisons or send aid, people who died when the monsters sent drones and bombs to their countries (because, as the angels pointed out, you shouldn't use a nation as a basis to choose which deaths you mourn; nations

aren't even real), people who died because the monsters took away their health care—names and names of people and people, countless letters recording that they had been.

The citizens of Lucille put dozens of white candles at the base of each monument, hung layers of marigold necklaces around the necks of the statues, and, when they walked past, would often fall silent for a moment and press a palm against the stone, soaking up the heat the sun had left in it, remembering the souls the stone was holding. They'd remember the marches and vigils, the shaky footage that was splashed everywhere of their deaths (a thing that wasn't allowed anymore, that gruesome dissemination of someone's child gasping in their final moments, bubbling air or blood or grief—the angels respected the dead and their loved ones). The people of Lucille would remember the temples that were bombed, the mosques, the acid attacks, the synagogues. Remembering was important.

Jam was born after the monsters, born and raised in Lucille, but like everyone else, she remembered. It was taught in school: how the monsters had maintained power for such a long time; how the angels had removed them, making Lucille what it is today. It wasn't like the angels wanted to be painted as heroes, but the teachers wanted the kids to *want* to be angels, you see? Angels could change the world, and Lucille was proof. Jam was fascinated by them, by the stories

the teachers told in history class. They briefly mentioned other angels, those who weren't human, but only to say that Lucille's angels had been named after these other ones. When Jam asked for more information, her teachers' eyes slid away. They mentioned religious books, but with reluctance, not wanting to influence the children. Religion had caused so many problems before the revolution, people were hesitant to talk about it now. "If you really want to know," one of the teachers added, taking pity on Jam's frustrated curiosity, "there's always the library."

Why can't they just tell me? Jam complained to her best friend, Redemption, as they left the school. Her hands were a blur as she signed, and Redemption smiled at her annoyance. It was the last day of classes before summer break, and while he was excited to do nothing for the next several weeks except train, Jam was—as always—on some hunt for information.

"You're giving yourself homework," he pointed out.

Aren't you curious? she replied. *Who the old angels were, if they weren't human?*

"If they were even real, you mean." Redemption adjusted the strap of his backpack. "You know that's what a lot of religion was, right? Just made-up things used to scare people so they could control us better."

Jam frowned. *Maybe,* she said, *but I still wanna know.*

Redemption threw an arm around her. "And you wouldn't be you if you didn't," he laughed. "I gotta go pick up the lil bro from his class and walk him home, but let me know what you find out, okay?"

Okay. She hugged him goodbye. *Give Moss a kiss for me.*

He scoffed. "I'll try, but that boy thinks he grown now."

Too grown for kisses??

"That's what *I* said." Redemption threw up his hands as he headed off. "Talk soon, love you!"

Love you! Jam waved goodbye and watched him break into a jog, his body moving with an easy grace, then she went to the library to look up pictures of angels.

The librarian was a tall, dark-skinned man who whizzed around the marble floors in his wheelchair. His name was Ube, and Jam had known him since she was a toddler pawing through picture books. She loved being in the library, the almost sacred silence you could find there, the way it felt like another home. Ube smiled at her when she walked in, and Jam took an index card from his counter, writing her question about angels down on it. She slid it over to Ube, and he grunted as he read it, nodding his head, then he wrote some reference numbers underneath her question and slid the card back to her. They didn't need to talk, which was perfect.

It took her fifteen minutes to find the old pictures, printed on thin, flaky paper and nestled between heavy book

covers. Even though Ube hadn't said she should, Jam considered pulling on the white gloves nestled in the reading desk drawers to use in looking through the books, they seemed that old. But they weren't in the protected section, so she figured it was fine to run her bare fingers over the smooth and fragile paper. The room she was in was quiet, with large windows vaulting up the walls and domed skylights pouring in late-afternoon sun. Jam sat for a few minutes with her fingers on the images, staring down, turning a page, and staring at the next one. They were strong and confusing pictures. Eventually she closed and stacked the books, then lugged them to the checkout counter.

Ube raised a thick black eyebrow at her. "All of these?" he asked. His voice sounded unreal, deep and velvet, something that should live only in a radio because it didn't make sense outside in normal air.

Jam nodded.

"You gotta be careful with them, you know? They're mad old."

She nodded again, and Ube looked at her for a moment, then smiled, shaking his head.

"You right, you a careful girl. Always seen it." He scanned the books as he spoke. "You treat the books gentle, like they flowers or something."

She blushed.

"Don't be shy about it, now. Books are important." He stamped them for her. "You need a bag, baby?"

Jam shook her head no.

"All right, now. Two weeks, remember?"

She hefted the books onto her hip, nodded, and left. They were a weight straining against her arm until she got home, and she took them straight upstairs to her mother's studio. Jam's mother had been born when there were monsters, and Jam's grandmother had come from the islands, a woman entirely too gentle for that time. It had hurt her too much to be alive then, hurt even more to give birth to Jam's mother, whose existence was the result of a monster's monstering. This grandmother had died soon after the birth, but not before naming Jam's mother Bitter. No one had argued with the dying woman.

Bitter knew her name was heavy, but she hadn't minded, because it was honest. That was something she'd taught Jam—that a lot of things were manageable as long as they were honest. You could see things clearly if they were honest; you could decide what to do next, because you knew exactly what you were dealing with. She never lied to Jam, always told her the truth, even if sometimes she couldn't make it as gentle as she would've wanted, for her daughter's

sake. But Jam trusted her mother for those brutal truths, and that's why home was the first place she brought the books with the angels in them.

Her mother was painting when Jam came in, so the studio was full of loud music, old-school grime this time, the energy thumping against the light and Stormzy's voice whipping around Bitter's flying braids. Jam put the books down on a table that wasn't too crowded and leaned her elbows on them, watching her mother's shoulder blades jerk and convulse as she moved on her hands and knees, a massive canvas stretched beneath her. Bitter was clutching a brush between her fingers, her joints locked in angles that looked painful, her eyes partially closed and her mouth slightly open. She always painted like this, half dancing in something of a trance, and she was always exhausted afterward. Jam didn't want to interrupt her.

Jam's father, Aloe, was the one who was good at getting through to his wife when she was working. It was something about his vibe, Jam thought, something about how attuned they were to each other. All Aloe had to do was be close enough to Bitter. He'd crouch a few feet away from the edge of her canvas and just wait, breathing as he always did, steady and calm. Jam had watched it many times—the way her mother's hands would slow down, the brushstrokes growing softer, shorter, and eventually how Bitter would stop

moving altogether, her shoulders settling like a bird landing and folding in its wings. Her long neck would curve back, raising her face, and she'd look straight at Aloe, and her smile would be like a whole new day starting.

Jam crawled under the table and curled up on a blanket that had been left there. It was getting harder to fit into these small spaces she liked to hide in; her arms and legs were getting longer from her growth spurts, and she was almost as tall as Bitter now. Her ankles flopped against the hardwood, and she bent her arms into a pillow under her head and slept, the bass from the music drumming into her bones through the floor. It felt like only a few minutes before her mother's hand drifted against her cheek.

"Jam-jam? Wake up, sweetness."

She blinked and Bitter's face came into focus, a piece at a time, the hard cheekbones, the bare eyebrows, the broad mouth pressed with a matte red. Her mother's teeth spread into view as she smiled at Jam, sharp and white. The music had stopped. "Welcome back, child," Bitter said. "Stand up?"

Jam took her mother's hand and pulled herself out, avoiding the edge of the table. She'd knocked her head against it too many times before.

"How long you been under there for?"

Jam shrugged and her mother brushed imaginary dirt off her hair. Bitter's face was smudged with a couple of different

white paints: a bright white that seemed holy; a duller, slightly yellowed ivory, as if a magical tusk had touched her forehead; a cream trailing dry and broken down her neck.

"Painting?" Jam asked. Bitter was one of the few people she voiced with.

"Come see." They walked over and Jam leaned forward to look at the painting. It was manywhite and thick and textured, paint climbing on itself as if it wanted to get away from the canvas, away from the floor underneath the canvas, even. There were raked gouges in it, next to delicate veined imprints, next to pieces of Bitter's palm. Something large and loud in the center of the painting had the hind legs of a goat, fur like grated bone, solid thighs, their surface thrusting toward the ceiling of the studio. Jam pointed at it and looked at her mother. Bitter held her chin, thoughtful.

"I'm not sure, you know. The thing just coming out the way it want so."

Its arms were long, even longer than Jam's. It didn't have a head yet. The smoke Bitter had painted around it was as dense as clouds, and Jam thought she could see it move, a jerky tendril here and there.

"Name?" she asked.

Bitter shrugged. "You could name something when you not sure what it is?" They stood and looked down together at the thing struggling out of smoke. "It's just waiting

sometimes," Bitter murmured. "Just waiting." Jam wasn't sure if she meant that she was waiting for the thing to show itself or if the thing itself was waiting for Bitter to be done making it. Maybe they were one and the same. She took her mother's hand and pulled her toward the angel books.

"Ah," said Bitter. "What you have there?" Jam flipped some of the books open to the pages where she'd tucked the glittered bookmarks Redemption gave her on her last birthday. She pushed the books out across the table so her mother could see the pictures in each of them.

They were supposed to be angels, but they were terrifying: eyes filled with licking flames even as they looked out from the page, armored faces that weren't faces, wings full of mouths, wheels of reddened eyes, four-headed forms that weren't even vaguely human. There was a butchered lion head bleeding somewhere in there. Bitter hummed and touched the pictures.

Jam looked up at her. "Angels?"

Bitter hummed some more and nodded.

Jam frowned. *But Lucille, the mayor and the council and everyone who came together to take away the monsters, those were angels, not these,* she signed.

Her mother ran her stained fingers across the books. "'Do not be afraid,'" she said.

Jam didn't understand, so she kept the frown on her face.

"That's the first thing angels does say, you know? Do not be afraid."

Jam looked down at the pictures. It seemed like a reasonable opening line, considering how horrific they looked. Her mother laughed at her expression.

"Exactly," she said. "We does think angels are white robes and harps and all kinds of pretty things, but chile!" She clicked her tongue. "Look at them. Good reason why they does strike fear into the heart."

Jam wondered—if real angels looked like this, then what did that mean for the angels in Lucille? Did it mean people didn't really know what they were talking about when they said angels in the first place? Angels weren't supposed to look like this. They were supposed to be good, and how could something good look like this?

She tapped on the pictures and looked up at her mother, worried, pitching her voice low. "Monsters," she whispered.

Bitter's eyebrows shot up. "You think so?" She hummed some more and turned a few of the pages. "Well, I suppose one could see how you could see that. Only if you don't know what a monster looks like, of course."

What does a monster look like? Jam asked.

Her mother focused on her, cupping her cheek in a chalky hand. "Monsters don't look like anything, doux-doux. That's the whole point. That's the whole problem."

Okay, Jam thought, fine. She wasn't worried about the monsters anyway; she was worried about Lucille's angels, because if they secretly looked like the pictures, then it was hard to imagine that they hadn't done, well, some pretty bad things.

Our angels, she signed, *the ones here. Are they good? Are they innocent?*

Angels had to be innocent, right? Wasn't that the whole point of them, to be good and innocent and righteous?

Bitter tilted her head, and something sad entered her eyes. "It not easy to get rid of monsters," she said. "The angels, they had to do things underhand, dark things." The sadness in her eyes deepened, and Jam took her hand, not understanding what pain was coming up but feeling its ripples in the air. "Hard things," her mother continued. "You can't sweet-talk a monster into anything else, when all it does want is monsterness. Good and innocent, they not the same thing; they don't wear the same face."

She came back to herself and studied Jam for a little bit, the sadness lifting from her eyes. "It's good to think about the angels like so," she said. "Critically, yes? Can't believe everything everyone tells you, even in school, it's good to question. But remember, is Lucille angels that organized we. And what did we learn from that?" Bitter squeezed Jam's hands. "Tell it to me."

Jam made a face.

"You don't have to voice it, you could sign it, ent?"

Jam sighed and freed her hands from her mother's so she could say the words, lifted from an old Gwendolyn Brooks poem, words the angels had used when they gave Lucille back to itself. A revolution cry.

We are each other's harvest. We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond.

"Yes, child. Angels aren't pretty pictures in old holy books, just like monsters aren't ugly pictures. It's all just people, doing hard things or doing bad things. But is all just people, our people."

Jam thought about that. So pictures could be wrong—wait, no. She'd seen too much of her mother's work to think *that* simply. Pictures could be flat-out lies, yes, but what she was really thinking was that pictures could be misleading. That made more sense, more trickster sense, showing your eyes one thing and tripping your feet in another direction. Like stories. And besides, she would trust anything her mother had to say about monsters. She knew about her grandfather, the monster that caught her grandmother. If there was anyone who knew what a monster was or was not, it would be Bitter, the daughter of one.

Her mother reached out and touched her chin. "Matter fix, doux-doux?"

Jam nodded shyly and smiled. Bitter leaned forward and kissed her forehead just as they heard the front door open.

"And look, your father home already."

True enough, Aloe's voice boomed through the house. "Where are my girls?" he shouted.

Bitter ruffled Jam's hair and stood up to gather and clean her brushes. "Studio, darling!" she yelled back, and they heard Aloe's feet crash up the stairs. Bitter often joked to Jam that her father moved like a functioning disaster, clumsy and charming and breaking at least one breakable thing a week. He was tall and broad, and he filled up the doorway for a heartbeat when he entered, his face splitting into a smile to see them. Jam always felt lucky when she stood in the path of her father's joy. He was shrugging off his jacket, and his chest was expansive under it—"I was built to be a local farmer back home on the continent," he always said, but he'd gone another way and ended up as a paramedic. He liked the adrenaline of saving people. He always wanted to protect them, make it better. It made him good at his job, better as a father. When Jam was a toddler, she'd refused to speak, which was why they'd taught her to sign instead. She used her hands and body and face for her words but saved her voice for the most important one—screamed out during her first and only temper tantrum, when she was three, when someone had complimented her for the thousandth

time by calling her "such a handsome little boy" and Jam had flung herself on the floor under her parents' shocked gazes, screaming her first word with explosive sureness.

"Girl! Girl! Girl!"

Bitter had stared before laughing. "All right, sweetness," she'd said, looking at the writhing child and thinking back on several arguments they'd had about Jam's clothes, when Jam would sign refusal over and over. "That explains that."

Aloe had shaken his head and picked his daughter up, locking her flailing limbs against his body. "Sorry, sorry," he'd murmured against her head. "Ewela iwe, eh? We didn't know." He'd patted her head until she calmed down, and then they took her home and Aloe started researching puberty blockers and the hormones she might need. Protecting his daughter was a life mission he remained dedicated to. When she was ten, Jam got an implant with the blockers, and it was a few years of vitamins and regular bone scans before she swapped it out at thirteen for a hormone implant, a tiny cylinder nestled in her upper arm, administering estrogen to her body. Jam watched her body change with delight, the way her hips widened, how her breasts were growing. She would poke at them, swiveling in the mirror to see them from every angle, running her hands down her new body. Bitter laughed, then taught her how

to do breast self-exams and talked to her about fertility options.

Jam was fifteen when she told Aloe she wanted surgery, and her father sat and wrapped his arms around her.

"You know you're still a girl whether you get surgery or not, right? No one gets to tell you anything different."

Jam had smiled at him, almost taller than he was. *I know, Dad.* She wanted it anyway, and Aloe always gave his daughter what she wanted. It wasn't like how it used to be, back when the world was different for girls like her. She didn't have to wait to be considered an adult for her wants around her body to be acted on; her parents understood how important it was for her well-being.

After the surgery, Bitter painted a portrait of Jam reclining on their porch swing and wrapped in a blanket, her eyes tired but happy, her feet dangling in shimmering air. Less than a year later, the painting hung next to the door of the studio, and now Aloe leaned his hand on its frame as he took off his socks.

"How are you, darling?" he asked Jam.

She shrugged and closed her eyes as he pulled her into a hug, kissing the top of her head.

"She asking about angels and monsters and things," Bitter called over her shoulder, her voice a blend of amusement and pride. "Look at the books she brought."

Aloe glanced down and whistled. “That’s very ugly.” Jam giggled as he flipped a page. “What are you asking about them?”

Bitter wiped her brushes on a rag. “She asking if those angels are monsters, if Lucille angels are good.”

“Ah, but we know how to handle any monsters we meet.” Aloe tapped the pages with his left index and middle fingers. “Whether on the page or in life.” He closed the books and stacked them carefully on top of each other before turning to Jam and holding her by the shoulders.

“We close them up, you hear? We lock them away.”

“Aloe, we’ve talked about this,” Bitter interjected. “Rehab centers not the same thing as prisons.”

Aloe ignored her, focusing on Jam. “There are no monsters in Lucille,” he said. He was radiating surety, wanting her to feel protected. Her father held more fear than her mother, Jam had always known this.

She raised her hands between them so he could see her sign, and he dropped his arms to give her space. *There are no* free *monsters in Lucille,* she corrected. She wanted to add *that we know of,* but she saw the fear pass through Aloe’s eyes, a ghost glimmering across a room, so she let her hands stop. A minor sadness crept into his face, and he buried it in a smile.

“Don’t grow up too quickly,” he said.

Jam nodded and stepped back into his chest to hug him. His arms were live branches, growing around her. "Forget the monsters," he whispered.

They went to look at Bitter's unfinished painting, and Aloe could feel the thickness of it the same way Jam had. "It feels as if it's pushing itself up," he said, his voice soft with awe. He scratched his arm, discomfort pooling around him. "Nna mehn, Bitter. Are you sure this one doesn't want to become real?"

Bitter scoffed. Jam could feel a mild frustration in her, that the painting wasn't clear, that it was hiding around corners from her. She could hear her mother's thought quite distinctly, colored with some snark: the painting would have to know what it was before it could become real. Bitter always had contempt for undefined things, but only when she wanted them to be something else. Jam stifled a smile. It was nice to see how these conversations went between her mother and the work, this coy dance, this sufferhead behavior, as Aloe would say. Who told you to pick such a demanding discipline? he liked to tease. I didn't want to be lazy like you, Bitter would tease back. Jam watched Aloe kiss her mother, then the three of them went downstairs to make dinner together. But Aloe's words to Jam floated around in the studio air even after they'd left.

Forget the monsters.

He hadn't meant anything strong by it. Just to comfort his daughter, prompted by an old fear, by echoes of memories of what people used to do to girls like her. But an echo of a memory is not the same as a memory, and a memory is not the same as a now, and anyway, he'd said it loud enough that the painting heard it. Also, the problem is, when you think you've been without monsters for so long, sometimes you forget what they look like, what they sound like, no matter how much remembering your education urges you to do. It's not the same when the monsters are gone. You're only remembering shadows of them, stories that seem to be limited to the pages or screens you read them from. Flat and dull things. So, yes, people forget. But forgetting is dangerous.

Forgetting is how the monsters come back.