

Rememory

story by Walidah Imarisha

| USA |

Ayo stood on the edge of the community garden and scanned the gathering in

Cityheart. Nearby joyous shrieks poured forth from the park as the young ones played under the loving watchful gaze of today's caregivers. The wind teased the festively colored tents where elders and others who need it sat for the day's circle. Folks stood in pockets, chatting cheerfully before the start, belying the solemnity of the event. She saw so many familiar faces, folks she had grown up with in Freedelphia. There were new faces as well, recently arrived refugees, searching for a place to call home, or at least home for now. She knew everyone here though, even the new people. To participate in a justice circle, folks had to be here at least six months and join at least one community responsibility project. You had to show you were committed to the whole before you could determine what justice meant to it.

If I was a refugee, I might not do the requirements to participate, Ayo thought glumly. The justice circles had come to feel more burden than privilege to Ayo. The one two weeks ago had been particularly draining, lasting 20 hours. Ultimately the one who harmed and the who was harmed came to an agreement, as did the larger community, but the time and effort to get there... And the circles were happening with more frequency. When Ayo was younger, there might have been one or two a year. But the escalation of the war, the growing scarcity of resources, so many new folks coming in from UCF territories who had never experienced cooperative life before - it just felt like the work on all fronts was never ending. And unlike other areas of liberation service like growing food or childcare or peace keeping, you didn't rotate on and off. Everyone in the community participated in every justice circle, whether it was one a year or one a day.

Ayo shook her head. She didn't know how many more of these she had in her.

"Hello, beloved one," said a deep soft voice.

Ayo turned to see her mentor, Zaza, and the two embraced. Ayo had always loved hugging the much taller Zaza. It always felt like Ayo was being enveloped in protection.

Ayo immediately felt more grounded. It took Ayo back to her childhood, when she would study with Zaza every day. They had been paired because of Ayo's boisterous and quick-tempered nature. It was felt Zaza's steady calmness would teach Ayo as much as Zaza's knowledge of mathematics and gardening. And it worked. Even today, whenever Ayo became agitated, she closed her eyes and imagined she was next to Zaza in the community garden, the sun's warmth on her back. Out of the corner of her eye, Ayo used to watch Zaza, her long thick grey dreads coiled on top of her head, her aged strong hands tenderly placing new buds in the earth. That memory always centered Ayo.

"Have you talked to Essakai recently?," Zaza asked, bring Ayo back to the present.

The breeze ruffled Ayo's afro, playfully pulling at the curls, like her chibling Essakai, also called Kai by those who loved them, had done since they were young. Even though the two were chosen family, they both looked more alike than many who were blood-born. Same chestnut skin, same unruly hair, same mischievous smile, though Essakai deployed it much less often than Ayo. Two years older, Kai was always the scholar. As children, Essakai always wanted to know the whys of the world. It was not enough for Kai to know that something functioned, they had to know how and why. No wonder our four parents asked the cooperative to supply so many mentors for us, Ayo mused. Between Kai's endless questions and my tantrums, we were more of a handful than all our other siblings and chiblings combined.

"Yes," Ayo responded to Zaza's question. "They hope they can rotate out and be home by Abolition Day, because you know how Kai loves the celebrations." She reached out to lightly touch one of the tomatoes growing on the vine near her. Not ripe yet, but soon.

Zaza chuckled. “Yes, they have since they were little. You both did. Though you loved the Abolition Day re-enactments best and demanded to be part of them well before the Age of Choice, while Essakai mostly wanted to talk to the elders about what it was like to live then. They had read every text and seen every holo about it, and still so many questions.”

Ayo smiled at the memory, then sighed. “I hope they’ll be here this year. But you never know with the war.”

It had been almost a year since Ayo and Essakai had seen each other, since Kai had volunteered to fight in the people’s war against the UCF (always in her head, UCF stood for United Conferederacy of Fascism rather than what the remaining capitalist nations officially called themselves, the United Confederacy of Freedom). The two had been able to have several holo-calls, and on them Essakai shared some of what it was like on the front. They were supporting new liberated territories to form every day, but it was slow going and took far too great of a human and environmental toll. The Liberated Terrorities were ultimately winning, but even in winning, it cost so much.

Ayo looked around, taking in their community gathering space Cityheart, and the city surrounding it. Brightly painted row houses leaned into each other, touching shoulders to create a protective circle. The houses were old, some bearing damage from when this city was liberated, but well-cared for and obviously well-loved. Freedelphia was liberated before her birth and she struggled to imagine what life was like for Zaza and the other elders who had grown up here. She was always in awe of the strength and courage it took for them to rise up and start the Liberation, one of the first territories to do so. Facing down armies of police, military, and mercenaries. Well, she didn’t have to imagine because she had been to the Rememory, so she had felt it. She felt what they felt in her bones. She knew what it like to have fear screaming in your ears, to have uncertainty and doubt your continual companion. That was part of why they created the Rememory, so no generation to come would idealize or glorify the past into something untouchable.

Even so, having lived in the memories of those who came before, Ayo could not comprehend Essakai’s choice to fight in the liberation wars. She was constantly scared for Kai, scared for everyone fighting. Scared of what would happen to herself and her home and everything she

ever knew if they were to lose.

A doubt had sparked in her the day Essakai said they were volunteering. The doubt continued growing every day since, until it consumed her. She worried she was not strong enough to offer anything to this cause. She, who had always been the fiery one, the one who loved the Abolition Day re-enactments, the symbolic tearing down of the last prison by hand. She, who had stayed behind while her chibling, the gentle scholar, left to risk their life for freedom.

Murmuring from Cityheart grew louder, and caught Ayo's attention. Hannon entered the circle, surrounded by his family. She knew Hannon growing up. He had been a friend of Essakai's. Ayo had been shocked when she was told it was he who was center of today's justice circle. Hannon was so like Essakai, not as inquisitive, but quiet and gentle. Like Kai, Hannon volunteered to fight. But Hannon was injured and sent back. His injuries were severe enough that the healers focused on his body first, so unfortunately he had not been able to receive the Rememory soul healing others did when they first returned. Before Hannon began that treatment, he flew into a rage in the market one day and attacked someone, seemingly for no reason. Hannon was so far gone, the peacekeepers for that cycle had to stun him.

And now they were here as a community, to determine what was to be done with Hannon. Ayo's heart ached seeing the ways his head and shoulders slumped as he waited for the beginning of his justice circle. She felt certain this circle would reach an agreement; Hannon had already expressed deep remorse and said he would accept any judgment the community decided. But how long would it take to heal Hannon, Ayo wondered, if it was even possible? He must be healed, so he did not do this again, or turn this pain inward against himself. If he could not be healed, then what was to be done with him?

She hoped that the grounding would help him find his way back to himself. She was glad the justice circles always began with the grounding, where every person in the community shared a time they knew the one who harmed at their best, to remind that person they were more than the harm they had done. That it was always their choice. After the grounding, the community would bear witness to the one who was harmed. That

person could share any and everything they wanted to about this incident, and also about the larger society, the ways they had or had not been supported through this. Because we must always remember that justice is both relational and systemic, and we must always make better systems to honor and protect all the relationships, Ayo recited the words by heart. That was part of what made justice circles so exhausting though. There were commitments from the one who harmed, but also usually from many in the community. They were always in the process of reimagining how they did things. Ayo had been taught this was a wonderful opportunity to continually reinvent society, and she truly believed that.

Ayo sighed. But it also meant there was always more work to do. She felt exhausted just thinking about it. And seeing Hannon now made her terrified for Essakai. Before this, the fear that Kai would not come home alive consumed her. But now Ayo also feared who they would be if they did come back. What toll will fighting this liberation war have on them? What if she had to be part of a justice circle for her sweet scholar who came home so deeply hurt, it changed the core of who they are?

“Your face reflects the heaviness in your heart,” Zaza said softly. “Tell me about this.”

Ayo shook her head. Ayo didn’t want to tell her beloved mentor she wished to be anywhere but here. It felt cowardly when so many were giving so much more. And this was what abolition was. The elders fought to become responsible and accountable to and for one another. This was her birthright.

Zaza was the oldest person Ayo knew. There weren’t many left who had been there on the first Abolition Day, but Zaza had. She had been there to welcome home the returned family when the last prisons around Freedelphia closed. She had lived it all, and she had helped to build everything around them.

But while much had changed since the first Abolition Day, and things were unimaginably better, it still felt so heavy. All of the work to create these processes moved individuals and the community forward, but it didn’t magically solve everything. There was still so much more holding and healing to come, for this case, let alone all the other cases that would

follow.

“I wonder,” Ayo began slowly, almost guiltily. “I wonder if it was easier before. Before abolition. I know it wasn’t right or just,” she added hastily, “but it seems like it was a lot easier to just call someone to deal with things like this.

“You lived through it,” she said, her eyes sliding to finally meet Zaza’s. “Isn’t there some part of you that missing it being someone else’s responsibility and not yours?”

Zaza acknowledged the importance of the question by settling into it. After several moments, Zaza took Ayo’s hand in hers. Their skin color was almost the same. And because Zaza’s hand was so much larger than Ayo’s, it was like Ayo’s hand was taken in and became part of Zaza.

“I understand that inclination because sharing power means taking responsibility. But no, I would never go back to the way things were.”

Her eyes faded out, staring into the past. “Black folks and brown murdered in the street, stolen into graves or prisons. Parts of you broken so deeply inside they cut you and you bled for the rest of your life. All part of a system that stole your power, stole your history, stole your memories and told you that was what freedom was. But there were always those who knew that true freedom meant connection, and community. Liberation means nothing if it’s not collective.

“That’s why we created the Rememory, so that we wouldn’t forget, so that your generation that came, and the one after that, and after would remember.”

Zaza gestured across Waterway. Ayo knew from films that Waterway once was a wide street choked with cars. But then the elders dug deep, turning it into an aquaduct. They had dug all the way to the river, and Waterway filled with water, circling the heart of their community. Zaza’s gesture took in the Rememory which lived on the other side of Waterway. The building looked more like it had grown than been built. Its circular angles

created a feeling of the infinite, and the vines and flowers that crept up its walls served both to keep the inside cool as well as connected to the earth.

“That is why Cityheart and the Rememory are so close together, and why we hold justice circles here. There are other gathering places in Freedelphia we could go. But here we are connected to the Rememory, to the past which is not past, to the future which is now. We enact justice here knowing we do so under the watchful eyes of time.”

Ayo looked to the site, and wrapped her arms around herself, remembering her only visit to the Rememory. She was so immersed in the experience of the past, she almost drowned. It came during the Age of Choice, which was different for everyone. She entered at 11, while the more precocious Essakai went at 8. Ayo remembered pestering Kai to describe it when they came back but they had just shook their head. “I don’t know any words that can tell it to you.” Ayo hadn’t understood what they meant until she herself went.

Zaza squeezed Ayo’s hand gently. “Perhaps it is time for you to Remember again.”

Ayo nodded, took a deep breath, and then crossed one of the many stone bridges over Waterway. She looked down into the swirling waters as she passed. Zaza had told her this was part of ancient wisdom that they had re-Remembered in the time after the first Abolition Day. The Rememory needed the flowing river, the currents connecting them to all that was and is and will be. It was only when the Waterway was finished that the Rememory first breathed.

Ayo remembered Zaza telling her the Rememory had been named from a book called *Beloved* by the ancestor Toni Morrison.

Ayo walked to the heavy round doors. Written across them, really more grown into them than etched, was the phrase, “Freedom dreams don’t live in real time.” She ran her fingers over the words, then pulled both doors open and walked through. She plunged into darkness, a darkness both visual and physical. She felt the darkness press against her skin, calming and cool. It was just like the first time she entered, but also entirely new, because

she was also both same and new.

She reached down to remove her shoes as she had been told to do when she was a child. Beneath her feet felt like grass, which puzzled her the first time just as it did now - is it possible that there was grass growing here, in the absence of light?

She waited, trying to slow her breath and her mind. Her previous visit had almost overwhelmed her with sadness and pain. Her third parent suggested Ayo might have been too young when she went, and looking back, Ayo agreed. While others were ready at that age or earlier, she had not been. Of course at the time, Ayo rebelled and insisted on going. But living in the memories of her ancestors had been heavy and painful. She never come back, unlike others, including Essakai who made it an annual Abolition Day pilgrimage.

Pinpricks of light shone in the darkness, rising from the ground and flitting in loose formation through the air. They beckoned her forward, and she followed without hesitation, knowing her feet would find a safe path.

As she neared, most of the tiny lights floated away from her, but a few hung close, directly in her path. As she moved forward, she and they merged. An explosion of light split her consciousness. She existed here, and in multiplicity across history. The cacophony of pain filled every aspect of her. The moans of slave ships in her ears and the stench in her nose. Her blood pounded in her ears as she stared at the barrel of a gun, knowing this flashing red and blue would be the last thing she saw. Rope razored into her neck as hundreds of jeering white people pointed and laughed. The cold clawed her bones in a solitary confinement cell, the blindingly bright lights that were left on 24 hours a day burned into her mind. She choked on tear gas, lungs screaming for air, and saw through blurred eyes the advancing line of private military contractors. The one constant in all the lives were the cries for help and the screams.

She stumbled forward, falling down to one knee. Tears stained her cheeks and sobs wracked her chest. Her entire body trembled with the weight of so much generational trauma.

This was a million times worse than she remembered. She understood so clearly now Zaza's words, why they could never believe things were better in the past. But with all of this coursing through their veins, embedded in their genes, what hope did they have? How could they find peace when this is what they were made of?

Ayo turned her head back in the direction of the door. She knew she could just leave now. The Rememory was a choice, not a requirement.

The remaining lights flitted playfully in front of her, beckoning. Ayo didn't know what she needed, but she knew she needed something, and she didn't know where else she could get it. She thought of Essakai and her resolve strengthened.

She wiped her sleeve across her face, and pushed herself back to her feet. She stepped forward into the next light cluster.

Ayo braced herself for hurt and hopelessness to engulf her again. But instead there was floating, like the pull of a gentle river current. Whispers at the edge of her consciousness became louder. Thousands of voices spoke names. Some she knew as the martyrs of the Before Abolition times, murdered by agents of the state. So many she didn't know but she sensed they were old, names that were imagined lost for centuries.

"No one and nothing is every truly lost," Zaza had said often.

The names were on the current and they were the current and she was on the current and she was the current and she was the names and she said her name and it sounded like all of their names and still hers, and she reached out and touched the names and it felt like touching her own face.

Finally, this feeling of connection and completion receded, but it did not fade. It settled into her skin and became part of her.

Without hesitation, Ayo merged with the next step of lights in front of her.

Silence, a held breath of anticipation.

And then the words spoken from a multitude of voices across time: “We knew this day would come.”

And the explosion of lives into her mind. Again her consciousness was split between so many different realities. Around her hundreds of thousands surged forward, pushing back the rows of militarized police until they retreated entirely and there was only singing and dancing in the streets. The hammer in her hand drove the last nail into the house she had built for her wife and children, all of whom had been born into slavery, and now, here, at a home to call their own. The feeling of so many arms holding her on as she stepped through the gates of the prison that had eaten decades of her life.

Rapture infused every part of Ayo’s being, generations of Black joy filled her to the brim. Ayo realized she was dancing, a breathless carefree bodily manifestation. She hadn’t been aware of it before, but her body knew it was the right response.

Ayo had never felt anything like it. But she must have, since she went through this before. How could she have forgotten this? How could this have not changed her to her very core?

With a start, she realized she never completed the Rememory the first time. The first set of re-Remembering overwhelmed her, and she chose to go back. She had experienced only the trauma, never any of the generational exultation amplified and cultivated until it infused every cell in her being.

Rather than be sad at having missed out on this for years, Ayo smiled, full of gratitude to have received it now.

“Thank you,” she whispered. And then, because it didn’t seem enough, she shouted it.

“Thank you!”

She began chanting it while dancing.

“Thank you thank you thank you thank you thank you...”

There was a movement of the darkness, a contracting. Ayo felt the darkness embrace every part of her, and she raised her hands, threw her head back, and let out the most joyful noise she could manifest.

Ayo instinctively knew she had finished the journey. In front of her from the darkness blazed the words, “Freedom dreams live in you.” It was the door’s interior mirror inscription. She put out her hand and pushed.

Ayo emerged into the light, sun warm on her skin just like the ancestral joy she knew now lived within her.

Zaza stepped forward, and hugged her close, and that felt the same on her skin as the sun and the joy.

Zaza looked into Ayo’s eyes. “I know this is hard. We are in a period of transition, of upheaval. Times like these ask so much of us. It can feel like we will be broken under the weight of it. But this is why we have the Rememory. To remind ourselves that this moment is not unique, even though it will never come again.”

Zaza took Ayo’s hand. “Everything is temporary, except this,” she said, squeezing her hand.

Then Zaza let go and with one sweep of her hand encompassed the entire community gathered in front of them. “And this.”

Ayo, nodded, blinking back tears that felt like laughter. They walked arm and arm back to the circle. It parted organically like a flock of birds making space for returned wayward members.

“Let us begin,” the three justice facilitators murmured in unison.

And everyone present bowed their heads, and all began to hum in the same breath, as if from one throat.
