

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Virgin of Flames

Chris Abani

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Benediction

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About the Book

For Black, a mural artist in East L.A., the city's tumbledown landscape is his canvas. Residing in a ramshackle apartment above 'The Ugly Store', he lives for his art and obsesses over Sweet Girl, the transvestite stripper who serves as his muse. Black navigates life alongside the Los Angeles River, 'iridescent in its concrete sleeve', enlisting his friends - Iggy, the beautiful tattoo artist who has beguiled Hollywood's elite, and Bomboy, a wealthy Rwandan butcher - as he confronts his past and struggles to find his place in the world.

About the Author

Chris Abani is the author of *Becoming Abigail* and *GraceLand* which won the Hemingway/PEN prize and was a finalist for the IMPAC Dublin Award. He was born in Nigeria and has lived in London, New York and Los Angeles. He teaches at the University of California, Riverside.

ALSO BY CHRIS ABANI

Novels

Masters of the Board

GraceLand

Novella

Becoming Abigail

poetry

Kalakuta Republic

Daphne's Lot

Dog Woman

Hands Washing Water

For
Mark, Charles and Gregory
Athos, Porthos and Aramis
also
Harold Pinter and Musa Farhi

CHRIS ABANI

The Virgin of
Flames

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

There are singular people who appear like metaphors somewhere further out than we do, beckoned, not driven, invented by belief, author and hero of a dream by which our own courage and cunning are tested and tried; so that we may wonder all over again what is veritable and inevitable and possible and what it is to become whoever we may be.

—Diane Arbus
Harper's Bazaar

THE ANNUNCIATION

I want to prove that Los Angeles is a practical joke
played
on us by superior beings on a humorous planet.

—Bob Kaufman
Unholy Missions

THIS IS THE religion of cities.

The sacraments: iridescent in its concrete sleeve, the Los Angeles River losing faith with every inch traveled. A child riding a bicycle against the backdrop of desolate lots and leaning chain-link fences, while in the distance, a cluster of high-rises, like the spires of old Cathedrals, trace a jagged line against the sky, ever the uneven heart of prayer. The inevitable broken fire hydrant surrounded by an explosion of half-naked squealing children bearing witness to the blessed coolness of water. World-weary tenements and houses contemplating a more decadent past, looking undecided, as if they would up and leave for a better part of the city at any moment. A human silhouette on a park bench reading a book. Junkies hustling the afternoon. And out of sight, yet present nonetheless, the tired bounce of heat-deflated basketballs against soft tar. And a dog. Old, ancient even. And curious.

two

WHITE.

Black sat before the mirror applying paste to his face. Face paint really, but it was thick like wallpaper paste. Too thick maybe, but when he was mixing it, he thought it would take that much to cover his complexion. It would also help the mask to harden with a sheen he could paint over: rouge cheeks, blue eye shadow, and really black eyelashes. But for now, he had to get the right shade of white. There were three cups of the stuff in a row in front of him in varying degrees of brilliance. He studied his face from several angles, imagining in that pause Miss Havisham sitting in front of a mottled wedding cake in a mottled wedding dress, both of which were the color of the paste on his face, an aging ivory that recalled the musty smell of empire in decline, a sad color really. Whose empire he had no idea. Probably something he had seen in a movie. He wiped it off, suddenly filled with an inexplicable overwhelming melancholy. The thought of Miss Havisham depressed him, made him think of being caught forever in the moment of desire, in the eternity of the bacchanal unable to consume or be consumed by it.

“Fucking sad,” he muttered at his reflection. “Jesus!”

He picked up the second cup and applied the contents slowly to the left side of his face, marveling in a childlike manner at the way mirrors reversed the world. On the wall next to the mirror, a letter-size color sketch of the Virgin of

Guadalupe on black paper gazed at him. It was a close-up of her face, which was a brilliant white, the color he was trying to match. It was pinched into sorrow by red cheeks and a wash of blue for her shawl. He wanted to paint a mural of her. To capture all the bittersweet emotion of being the Mother of God. Since he was broke he couldn't afford to hire any models, which was why he was sitting in front of the mirror trying on face paint. He intended to dress up as her and use himself as a model, painting a more detailed cartoon from his reflection. That would be the study he would transfer onto any wall he could find to use as a canvas. But whatever difficulty getting the face paint right posed paled in comparison to getting the rest of the costume together. For her robe, he had appropriated his landlord's wedding dress from the cleaners across the street. While trying out the dress, which was several sizes too small and which he had to adjust at his sewing machine, he thought that the contrast of his dark hands and feet against the white of the dress and his face made for an interesting play.

While he waited for the contents of cup two to dry, he turned to look at the wedding dress hanging from a hook on the door like a ghost, all of its ectoplasmic sadness oozing everywhere. Having acquired the dress, he had bought a blonde wig for his hair, though it was hard to tell what color Mary's hair had been. In all the pictures a shawl covered her head. But since Jesus was painted with blonde hair, he figured it made sense. He didn't want to admit that there was the element of subversion in this choice, that somewhere in the back of his mind he actually thought of her more like Marlene Dietrich. Whatever he decided to do with the hair, he hadn't solved the problem of the blue shawl. Should be easy enough, he thought. Turning back to the mirror, he smiled, the paste pulling his lips into a grimace. This is the right shade, he wanted to yell, but was afraid of cracking the still drying surface.

Without trying the contents of the third cup, he painted rouge cheeks onto the hardening mask of his face, and blue eye paint in a shadow around the eyes. Finishing, he leaned back. He looked beautiful, he thought, thinking at the same time how odd it was that he would think that. But then so many odd things had been happening since he took on this project, not least of which was the fact that Angel Gabriel, sometimes in the shape of a fifteen-foot-tall man with wings, sometimes as a pigeon, had taken to stalking him.

Leaning against the wall of the room that he used as an easel was a rug of rice paper. Unsnapping the elastic binding, he laid it out on the floor in a crinkled eight-foot spread. He sat on the stool by the workbench and lit a cigarette and studied the paper. This was how it always began for him. Almost imperceptibly, but with a snap of the wrist that could only be deliberate, Black sent a small ember spiraling into the air. It landed on the paper, and he sighed happily as it made a small hole with a charred black lip. This too was part of his ritual. Finishing the cigarette and stubbing it out in the bowl of bone-black pigment on the worktable, he got up and circled the paper the way Ali would circle the ring to psyche out his opponents. Finally he stopped and lay down backward, the paper crackling under him as it moved to allow his weight to spread out into the weave. With his eyes closed he made a paper angel, then rolled about on the paper, making sure that his body touched every inch of it. He believed that this way, his body was one with the paper and that when he painted he could conceptualize very accurately the dimensions needed. He made all his models do it. Again, it was ritual. Getting up, he dragged the paper over to the wall and stuck it there with masking tape. Now to paint, he thought.

His cell phone rang.

Bomboy wanted to meet.

He would pay for lunch.

“Lunch? I am about to work. Can’t come out to play.”

"I need help. What will it take?"

"I need rent money, puto."

"I'll give you two hundred bucks for your time."

"I'll be there soon."

Black paused by the door. He didn't want to clean his face until he was sure he could duplicate the shade of white. Fuck it, he thought, pushing a pair of sunglasses on as if they would somehow detract from the grotesque carnival of his face, I am an artist.

He pulled up in front of Bomboy's building, an apartment block Bomboy said used to be the Langley Hotel, on Normandie and Eighth, and which still had, on the roof, an old penthouse where Cary Grant had lived. This whole area, just one block east of Wilshire and heading downtown, used to be the best of Los Angeles in the twenties and thirties, Bomboy bragged.

The penthouse was in dire need of renovation, and was inhabited mainly by pigeons, but it was all there: tennis court (its chain-link ball stop leaning drunkenly into the Santa Anas), an empty swimming pool and the four-bedroom penthouse. Black rang Bomboy on his cell.

"I'm here."

"Come up to the roof, man."

"Why? I'm hungry. Come on down, cuño."

"Come on up. I have some good weed."

Black sighed and headed in.

"The blood of Jesus!" Bomboy said when he saw Black's face. "What's that shit?"

Black shrugged. "Project I'm doing. Couldn't afford a model."

"Project of what?"

"Virgin Mary."

Bomboy laughed. "You look more like the undead in a Japanese horror movie," he said.

Black ignored him and taking the proffered spliff, he took a hit. On the roof, lounging back, legs dangling over

the empty pool, they smoked pot and watched planes fill the sky.

“Where is my money, puto?” Black asked finally.

Bomboy shook his head and counted out the two hundred dollars.

“As promised. I thought we were friends, Black, where is the trust, eh?”

“In God we trust. So what’s up?” Black asked, stuffing the two hundred dollars into his back pocket.

“Oh, nothing much. It’s just that I need to buy some fake papers. I want to travel back home soon. To celebrate the peace.”

“Home?”

“Yeah, Rwanda. I miss it.”

“Fake papers?”

“You know, on Alvarado.”

“Well, if you know where to get them, why do you need me?”

“To speak Spanish. Those guys don’t speak English.”

“How long have you lived here and still don’t speak Spanish?”

“Speak any African languages?”

“Whatever, chingado.”

“That’s rich chingado to you.”

“Still a chingado.”

They smoked some more.

“Say, Black, what are your plans exactly?” Bomboy asked after a while, lighting up again.

“Plans?”

“You know, for life. I mean you are a grown man, not getting any younger, no offense, and yet you are still leeching off of your friends.”

“You invite me over to insult me?”

“No, not insult,” Bomboy said. “But you know we Africans are very ambitious and progressive. I’m just thinking of you.”

“So ambitious you’re working in a butcher shop, güey.”
Bomboy laughed.

“You are vexed. I am sorry, but I don’t work in a butcher shop. You know I own that abattoir. Because of me, five people have jobs. I also live in a nice place and drive a Lexus, so don’t even compare yourself with me.”

What Black couldn’t voice because the pot was making it hard to concentrate, but which filled the air around him with the thickness of smoke, was his fear of simply disappearing like the planes overhead, into the endless sky, forgotten by some distant watcher on a roof somewhere.

“Well, I guess you are a better killer than me.”

“Oh, is that supposed to hurt me? You may be older than me, Black, but you are still a small boy. I found myself in an unfortunate position and I did what was necessary to survive. You on the other hand, you my friend, are becoming a joke.”

Black was silent. He looked out at the empty pool. The last time he was here, a young man had been lying at the bottom, gun drawn, body riddled with bullet holes, his blood vainly trying to fill the concrete hollow. He and Bomboy still smoked their bong by the body that day, knowing it would take the police a couple of days to get to the dead banger. Nobody knew who shot him, or why. Nobody cared. Only the pigeons, and Cary’s ghost, and they weren’t talking. There were a lot of ghosts around the old parts of Los Angeles, same as in any city. It was just that in Los Angeles, the neon lights and the new buildings distracted one’s vision. But Black knew if he looked closely, they would be there, crowding in, singing, begging, crying and dying all over again, every night.

“Feed me, shithead,” he said, getting up.

Bomboy struggled up.

“You are going like that?” Bomboy pointed to Black’s face.

“I came here like this.”

“Please wipe your face,” Bomboy said, passing Black a handkerchief, indicating the white makeup.

Black shook his head, refusing the handkerchief.

“It’s okay, I’ve got wipes in the car,” Bomboy said hopefully.

Black just smiled and shook his head. They headed for Langers. On Seventh and Alvarado, the deli was a favorite. They both ordered the pastrami sandwich and waited impatiently for the food to arrive, doing their best to ignore the stares Black’s face was getting. It certainly had a few of the waitresses talking, and the head chef even came out from the kitchen to see this character.

“Shooting a movie?” he asked. “ ’Cause nobody told me. If you’re shooting a movie in here, we’ve gotta be paid.”

“No movie, sir, my friend is an artist and this is just an idea he is playing with,” Bomboy said. “We just came in for some lunch.”

“Can’t he speak for himself?” the head chef asked.

Bomboy shrugged.

“He’s a mime.”

The head chef sniffed.

“Well, in that case he can’t complain.”

Laughing, he returned to the kitchen.

“Why do I embarrass you, darling?” Black said. “Mime?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“You could say that I am your girlfriend.”

“That’s not funny, my friend. That is just preposterous.”

The food came and they ate fast and noisily, without talking, appetites fueled by the pot. Finishing, Black wiped his mouth and said:

“Now, pay up and let’s go.”

“Okay, but you’re still taking me to Alvarado. Like I said, I need to buy some new papers. You know, license, green card.”

“How many identities have you had, man? How many lives have you got?”

“Nine.”

“Okay, but *ándale*, hermano.”

Bomboy put down the toothpick he had been using to root around inside his mouth. He picked up the bill and examined it for a minute.

“Sure,” he said, getting to his feet and heading for the cashier.

At the intersection where most of the deals for fake IDs in Los Angeles were made, Black walked up to a man leaning against the wall of the 7-Eleven. Speaking rapidly in Spanish, Black gestured toward Bomboy. Nodding, the man asked for a photograph. Black turned to Bomboy and interpreted. Bomboy handed over the photograph. Then the man pulled an inked stamp pad from his pocket. It looked like a prop from the set of an archaic post office, like the one from his childhood memories, where tired and bored-looking workers inked heavy brass seals before slamming them down wearily on brown envelopes.

“What’s that for?” Bomboy asked.

“Fingerprints,” Black replied. “For the green card.”

“But it’s a fake. The moment they scan it, it will come up fake. Why doesn’t he use his fingerprints? It won’t make any difference.”

“Does he look like the kind of guy who would do that? It’s just to make the ID look real. Come on, *’mano*.”

The man with the stamp pad stood patiently through this conversation. With a cough, he flipped the lid open and held it flush with his body, out of sight to anyone more than a couple of feet from him.

“Come on, you’re making me nervous, *pendejo*. This place is crawling with undercover cops. Let’s do this and go,” Black said, looking around.

“Looking like that in this neighborhood, I think the police are the least of your worries,” Bomboy said, extending his hand. The man grabbed it roughly, pressing the right thumb deep into the ink. Releasing Bomboy’s

hand, he pocketed the stamp pad in one fluid motion and produced a piece of photographic paper in its place. He pushed Bomboy's thumb onto it firmly, and then let go.

"Fifty dollars," the man said.

"Pay him," Black said.

"How do I know he'll come back?"

"Okay. Pay me later," the man said, clearly not in the mood to argue and indicating for the first time that he understood English. "Come back in twenty minutes." He melted away so fast that the only proof that he had even been there was Bomboy's inky thumb.

"Now what?"

Black was smiling. It was nice to see the usually confident Bomboy so out of his element.

"Now we wait in that McDonald's over there. Drink a cup of coffee slowly and come back in twenty minutes."

They crossed the street and while Black fetched the coffee, Bomboy made his way to a table at the back. He yanked a handful of tissue from the dispenser on the table and tried to wipe the ink off his thumb. Black returned with two coffees. The hot bite on his tongue caused Bomboy to wince.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Hot coffee."

"All the *bad* things you have seen and a little hot coffee has got you acting like a pendejo."

Bomboy mumbled something under his breath. From the window, they could see that the guy they had spoken to had returned to his spot, leaning against the wall of the 7-Eleven.

"Our guy is back. Let's go," Bomboy said, getting up.

As they were about to cross the street to the 7-Eleven's parking lot, a quarter on the sidewalk caught Black's attention. It was brand new and shining. Was it a good luck omen? He considered it thoughtfully.

“Hey, what’s the delay?” Bomboy asked, foot poised over the edge of the curb.

Black ignored him and bent down for the money. As he straightened up, he saw several police cars pull into the 7-Eleven’s parking lot. He and Bomboy stood on the sidewalk across the street and watched all the loitering men, including the one with Bomboy’s green card, being arrested.

“Shit. LAPD,” Bomboy said. “Shit, fucking shit! And that guy has my picture and fingerprint on a fake green card.”

“It could have been worse,” Black said, staring at his reflection in the window of a car parked near them. The blue lights from the cop cars, also reflected, flashed across the white sea of his face.

“You’re right. It’s good to have someone to watch over you.”

“Yes,” Black said, his voice dull, glancing about for Gabriel. “Someone to watch over me.”

YELLOW.

Not canary but vibrant nonetheless, Black's dilapidated Volkswagen bus. Nicknamed the Blackmobile, it was his home away from home, cluttered as it was with books, dog food, clothes and a sleeping bag. The windscreen was steamed up. At night, winter in Los Angeles was like winter everywhere else, except for snow of course. But with temperature drops between ten and thirty degrees as day fell to night, it was still cold. He shivered and thought at least the rain isn't too bad yet. Before he turned the key in the ignition, he reached out and touched the bobble-head Alsatian on the dash. Black loved dogs but had a long and complicated history with them, somewhat shamanic and somewhat desperate. He dropped his hand from the plastic toy and turned the key. The engine coughed a few times and then, as it banged into life, Black leaned his head back and howled. There was something decidedly feral about him.

As he waited a few minutes for the engine to heat up, he lit a cigarette and reached into the glove compartment. He pulled out Randy Newman's *Land of Dreams* on eight-track, and selected "I Want You to Hurt Like I Do." It reminded him of his mother. Fuck, he thought, fuck it all, as he pushed harder than necessary against the accelerator, ignoring the looks from the patrons outside The Ugly Store,

tearing off in a squeal of tires, the old van shaking from the effort.

He followed the flood bed of the Los Angeles River, but instead of fingers of water fanning into a delicate delta, this flood bed was scarred and then zippered over with railway lines. Only the slight levee running by the road proved there had been a river here once. Black's journey, from the Pasadena of his early childhood to the East Los Angeles of the rest of his life, seemed guided by this river and its ghosts. He cut through downtown, to San Pedro Street and then across to the 10 West, heading for Santa Monica. A circuitous trip, but less traffic: in Los Angeles, to go the long way round was sometimes the shortest path between two points. It was a quantum thing.

When he got to Santa Monica, he parked in the pier lot. He got out of the van and stood awhile staring through the space between the slats into the water below. He spat carefully, aim perfect. Turning, he headed for the beach. He never bothered locking his van. There was nothing to steal from it.

It couldn't be more than a few minutes past nine and the boardwalk was crowded, though the sounds grew fainter as he made his way down the sand. In the floodlit parking lot to the left, teenagers made out in cars with open doors, pumping out loud music. Some, in groups, like gaggles of half-naked geese, lounged on top of parked cars, or on the floor passing joints or drinks. Parked at the edge of the lot was a police car, content to watch for now. The homeless spread along the sand in the dark like an infestation of ants, Black thought. He knew they came here to escape the dangers of downtown LA. He changed his mind. They didn't look like an ant infestation, more like melancholic whales beached so long they had shrunk to dark forms half their original size and had forgotten how to swim. Something in him wanted to minister to them, to save them. He could do that. He did it for dogs already, so why not people? He

knew all about being lost. All of his own melancholy was wrapped up in this desire. He remembered the time he bought an on-line reverend-hood from the NewWineChurchofGod.com.

It had been simple enough. He downloaded the six-page church theology, charged the fifty dollars administration fee to his credit card, clicked the OK button, and waited for the dialog box that would announce his ordination, as promised, in gaudy gold letters. But his laptop had difficulty downloading the Flash document. Something to do with Active X Controls, the error message informed him. He liked the sound of that. Active X Controls. It sounded liturgical.

Irritated, he had stared at the white dialog box with the red X in the corner. It stared back, like a blind cornea with red stigmata. The vocal section of the document was unaffected, though, and a strangled robotic voice that reminded him of Hal from *2001: A Space Odyssey* said: "Congratulations you have been ordained a pastor at The NewWine Church of God ..."

In the ghostly glow of the notebook's LCD screen, it had almost been possible to believe that it was the voice of God. After that everything else had seemed rather anticlimatic: the gold-trimmed certificate in its imitation rosewood frame, the complimentary CLERGY car sticker and the dog collar.

He turned away from the homeless; they didn't need him. He glanced at the luminous dial of his watch; it was nearly ten. He looked up and saw a woman standing at the edge of the water. She was graying, with a gentle face and a dignified air. She seemed unaware that little tongues of surf were licking at the legs of her business suit, wrapping themselves around the leather briefcase in the sand next to her, gently moving it further out to sea with each surge. Her sadness seemed absolute. He was riveted, as though she and he were the last people left on earth. He wasn't

attracted to her, but to her absolute aloneness; this was what had drawn him to Sweet Girl. He wanted to approach her, this stranger on the beach. He wanted to save her. He knew he could do it. He could make up the rituals.

“Good evening,” he would say, holding out his hand.

The woman would smile and take his hand in a shy shake.

“This way,” he would say, leading her closer to the water’s edge. With his heel, he would draw a square and in its middle, a circle, both in the sand. He would ask her to take off her top and kneel in the circle as he stood before her. He would reach down to the sand, pick up fistfuls and pour them over her head. The soft light would be reflected by the silicone and it would look like she was being showered in glitter. He would say: *This is our body. The one true home. Feel the fall of it. Feel the wind carry it. This is the ancient way. Do this in memory of us. Don’t forget.*

Then, dusting off his hands, he would bend her head, first back then forward. Washing it gently with the salty water of the ocean, fetched in his cupped hands, with the tenderness of a woman washing a child in a long-ago gathering of shadows. *This is water, he would say. This is mother. The path. Taste the salt of it. Feel the flow. This is the ancient way. This is dread. This is freedom. Do this in memory of us. Don’t forget.*

Then pulling her to her feet he would point her to the water and say: “Go,” pressing pennies into one palm, cowries into the other. “Go, throw the money in the sea, one palm for the new coin, one for the old, pay for your sins. Then place something precious to you on the sea’s lip, set it free on the water of life, set your heart free, this is the ancient way.”

Instead, he approached her, this stranger he wanted to pull back from the edge of that dark body heaving in the night, and said: “I think your briefcase is getting wet.” But she didn’t hear him. Without another word, he climbed