

BLUE REMEMBERED EARTH

Alastair Reynolds



Copyright © Alastair Reynolds 2012

All rights reserved

The right of Alastair Reynolds to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Gollancz

An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA
An Hachette UK Company

This edition published in Great Britain
in 2012 by Gollancz

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 0 575 08830 6

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.alastairreynolds.com
www.orionbooks.co.uk

For Stephen Baxter and Paul McAuley: friends,
colleagues and keepers of the flame.

“And I am dumb to tell a weather’s wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.”

— Dylan Thomas

It is necessary to speak of beginnings. Understand one thing, though, above all else. Whatever brought us to this moment, this declaration, could never have had a single cause. If we have learned anything, it’s that life is never that simple, never that schematic.

You might say it was the moment when our grandmother set her mind to her last great deed. Or that it started when Ocular found something worthy of Arethusa’s attention, a smudge of puzzling detail on a planet circling another star, and Arethusa in turn felt honour bound to share that discovery with our grandmother.

Or that it was Hector and Lucas deciding that the family’s accounts could not tolerate a single loose end, no matter how inconsequential that detail might have looked at the time. Or the moment Geoffrey was called out of the sky, torn from his work with the elephants, drawn back to the household with the news that our grandmother was dead. Or his decision to confess everything to Sunday, and her choice that, rather than spurning her brother, she should take the path of forgiveness.

You might even say that it goes back to the moment in former Tanzania, a century and a half ago, when a baby named Eunice Akinya took her first raw breath. Or the moment that followed a heartbeat later, when she bellowed her first bawling cry, heralding a life of impatience. The world never moved quickly enough for our grandmother. She was always looking back over her shoulder, screaming at it to keep up, until the day it took her at her word.

Something made Eunice, though. She may have been born angry, but it was not until her mother cradled her under the stillness of a Serengeti night, beneath the cloudless spine of the Milky Way, that she began to grasp for what was forever out of reach.

All these stars, Eunice. All these tiny diamond lights. You can have them, if you want them badly enough. But first you must be patient, and then you must be wise.

And she was. So very patient and so very wise. But if her mother made Eunice, what shaped her mother? Soya was born two centuries ago, in a refugee camp, at a time when there were still famines and wars, droughts and genocides. What made her strong enough to gift this force of nature

to the world, this child who became our grandmother?

We didn't know it then, of course. If we considered her at all, it was mostly as a cold, forbidding figure none of us had ever touched or spoken to in person. Looking down on us from her cold Lunar orbit, isolated in her self-erected prison of metal and jungle, she seemed to belong to a different century. She had done great and glorious things – changed her world, left an indelible human mark on others – but those were deeds committed by a much younger woman, one with only a distant connection to our remote, peevish and disinterested grandmother. By the time we were born her brightest and best days were behind her.

So we thought.

PROLOGUE

Late May, after the long rains. The ground had borrowed moisture from the clouds; now the sky claimed its debt in endless hot, dry days. For the children, it was a relief. After weeks of bored confinement they were at last allowed to wander from the household, beyond the gardens and the outer walls, into the wild.

It was there that they came upon the death machine.

'I still can't hear anyone,' Geoffrey said.

Sunday sighed and placed a hand on her brother's shoulder. She was two years older than Geoffrey, and tall for her age. They stood on a rectangular rock, paces from the river that still ran fast and muddy.

'There,' she said. 'Surely you can hear him now?'

Geoffrey kept a firm grip on the wooden aeroplane he was carrying.

'I can't,' he said. He heard the river, the sighing of leaves in acacia trees, drowsy with the endless oven-like heat.

'He's in trouble,' Sunday said determinedly. 'We should find him, then tell Memphis.'

'Maybe we should tell Memphis first, then look for him.'

'And what if he drowns first?'

Geoffrey considered that unlikely. The waters had gone down compared to a week ago and the rains were petering out. Bilious clouds patrolled the horizon, thunder sometimes bellowed across the plains, but the sky was clear.

Besides, they had been this way many times. There were no homes here, no villages or towns. The trails they followed were trampled by elephants rather than people. And if by some chance Maasai were nearby, one of their boys would have known better than to get into difficulty.

'Could it be the things in your head?' Geoffrey asked.

'I'm used to them now.' Sunday hopped off the stone and pointed to the trees. 'I think it's coming from this way.' She started walking, then turned back to Geoffrey. 'You don't have to come, if you're scared.'

'I'm not scared.'

Watchful for hazards, they crossed drying ground and boggy marshland. They wore snake-proof boots and long snake-proof trousers, short-sleeved shirts and wide-brimmed hats. Despite the mud they'd splashed around in, and the undergrowth they'd struggled through, their clothes remained as bright and colourful as when they'd put them on back at the household. More than could be said for Geoffrey's mud-blotched arms, now crosshatched with fine, painful cuts from sharp-thorned bushes. Remembering a time when Memphis had praised him for not crying after tripping on the household's hard marble floor, he had made a point of not telling his cuff to make the pain go away.

Sunday pushed confidently forward into the acacia trees, Geoffrey struggling to keep up. They passed the rusted white stump of an old windmill.

'It's not far now,' Sunday called back, looking over her shoulder. The hat bounced jauntily against her back, secured by a drawstring around her neck. Geoffrey reached up to jam his own tighter, crunching it down on tight curls.

'We'll be safe, whatever happens,' he said, as much to convince himself as anything else. 'The Mechanism will be keeping an eye on us.'

He didn't know what was on the other side of the trees. They had been here before, many times, but that didn't mean they knew every bush, every rise and hollow of the landscape.

'Something's happened here!' Sunday called, just out of sight. 'The rain's washed this whole slope away, like an avalanche! There's something sticking out!'

'Be careful,' Geoffrey cried.

'It's some kind of machine,' she shouted back. 'I think the boy must be stuck inside.'

Geoffrey steeled himself and soldiered on. Trees fretted the sky with languidly moving branches, chips of kingfisher blue spangling through the gaps. Something slithered away under dry leaves a metre or two to his left. Thickening undergrowth clawed at his trousers, inflicting a rip. He stared in jaded wonderment as the two

edges of torn fabric sutured themselves back together.

'Here,' Sunday said. 'Come quickly, brother!'

He could see her now. They'd emerged at the edge of a bowl-shaped depression in the ground, hemmed in by dense stands of mixed trees. An arc of the bowl's interior had collapsed away, leaving a steep rain-washed slope.

Something poked through the tawny ground. It was metal and as big as an airpod.

Geoffrey glanced up at the sky again.

'What is it?' he asked, although he had a dreadful sense that he already knew. He had seen something like this in one of his books. He recognised it by its many small wheels, too many of them along the visible side for this to be a car or truck. And the tracks that the wheels fitted into, with their hinged metal plates, one after the other like the segments of a worm.

'You mean you don't know?' Sunday asked.

'It's a tank,' he said, suddenly remembering the word. And for all that he was frightened, for all that he wanted to be anywhere but here, there was something amazing about finding this thing, vomited up by the earth.

'What else could it be? The little boy must have got inside, and now he can't get out.'

'There's no door.'

'It must have moved,' Sunday said. 'That's why he can't get out – the door's covered up again.' She was on the edge of the slope now, still on grass, but working her way around the bowl to the top of the area where the land had given way. She crouched and steadied herself, fingertips to the ground. Her hat bobbed on her shoulders.

'How can you hear him, if he's inside?' Geoffrey asked. 'We're close now, and I still can't hear anything! It must be in your head, to do with the machines.'

'That's not how it works, brother. You don't just *hear* voices.' Sunday was on the upper parts of the mud slope now, facing the slipping earth, planting her fingers into the soil for traction, beginning to work her way down to the tank.

Seeing no other option, Geoffrey began to follow.

'We should call someone. They always say we shouldn't touch old stuff.'

'They say we shouldn't do lots of things,' Sunday said.

She continued her descent, slipping once then recovering, her

boots gouging impressive furrows in the exposed earth. Her hands were dirt-caked. As she looked down, twisting her head to peer over her right shoulder, her expression was one of intense tongue-biting concentration.

'This is not good,' Geoffrey said, starting down from the same point, following her hand- and foot-marks as best he could.

'We're here!' Sunday called suddenly, just before she planted a foot on the tank's sloping side. 'We've come to rescue you!'

'What's he saying?'

For the first time she appeared to take him seriously. 'You still can't hear him?'

'I'm not pretending, sister.'

'He says, "Come quickly, please. I need your help."'

A sensible question occurred to Geoffrey. 'In Swahili?'

'Yes,' Sunday said, but almost as quickly she added, 'I think. Why wouldn't he say it in Swahili?'

She had both feet on the tank now. She took a step to the right, placing her feet with a tightrope-walker's deliberation. Geoffrey aborted his descent, hardly daring to breathe in case he disturbed the slope and sent the tank, and the mud, and the two of them sliding to the bottom of the hole.

'Is he still saying it?'

'Yes,' Sunday said.

'He should have heard you by now, you're so close.'

Sunday spread both arms and lowered to her knees. She knuckled the tank's armour, once, twice. Geoffrey drew a steadying breath and resumed his anxious progress, still holding the wooden aeroplane in one hand, high over his head.

'He's not answering. Just saying the same thing.' Sunday reached up with one hand and drew her hat onto her head. 'I have a headache. It's too hot.' She tapped the tank again, harder now. 'Hello!'

'Look,' Geoffrey said.

Something odd was happening to the tank, where Sunday had tapped it. Ripples of colour raced away from that one spot: pinks and greens, blues and golds. The ripples vanished from sight, scurrying into the ground. They came back in blotches of solid colour, spreading like inkblots but not mixing together. The colours flickered and pulsed, then settled down into the same muddy red tones as the tank's surroundings.

'We should go now,' Geoffrey declared.

'We can't leave him.' All the same, Sunday stood up. Geoffrey stopped where he was, glad that his sister had finally seen sense. He made a gallant effort to lean into the slope, ready to offer his hand when she came back within reach.

But Sunday was behaving strangely now. 'This hurts,' she said in a slurred tone, and made to touch her forehead.

'Come up here,' he said. 'We should go home now.'

Sunday, still balanced on the tank's sloping flanks, looked at him. Her whole body was shaking with tiny but rapid movements. She was trying to say something.

'Sunday!'

She fell backwards, off the tank and down the slope. She hit the earth and rolled, all tangled limbs and bouncing hat. She came to rest at the bottom of the hole, where it was waterlogged, with her arms and legs spreadeagled, face-down in the mud.

For a long moment, all Geoffrey could do was stare. He wondered if she had broken any bones. Then, dimly, he realised that his sister might not be able to breathe.

He crept sideways, crossing the edge of the landslide and returning to where the ground was still firm and covered with grass and bushes. He had enough presence of mind to lift the cuff to his mouth and press the thick stud that allowed him to speak to the household.

'Please!'

Memphis answered quickly, his voice deep, resonant and slow: 'What is it, Geoffrey?'

Words tumbled out of him. 'Please, Memphis. Me and Sunday were out exploring and we found this hole in the ground, and the rains had made the earth slide down, and there was a tank sticking out.' He paused for breath. 'Sunday tried to help the boy inside. But then she got a headache and fell off the tank and now she's on the ground and I can't see her face.'

'Just a moment, Geoffrey.' Memphis sounded impossibly calm and unsurprised, as if this development was no more or less than he had anticipated for the day. 'Yes, I see where you are now. Go to your sister and turn her over so that she is lying on her side, not her face. But be very careful climbing down. I will be with you shortly.'

Something in Memphis's matter-of-fact response helped

Geoffrey feel less frightened. It felt like it took an age, but at last his boots were in the same waterlogged ground and he was able to squelch his way over to his sister.

She didn't have her face in water – it was pressed into a raised patch of dry earth, with her mouth and nose unobstructed – but she was still quivering. Suds of foam bubbled between her lips.

Something buzzed in the air above them and Geoffrey tugged up the brim of his hat. It was a whirring machine no larger than the tip of his thumb.

'I see you,' Memphis said, speaking from Geoffrey's cuff. 'Now do what I said. Turn your sister over. You will need to be very strong.'

Geoffrey knelt down. He didn't want to look at Sunday too closely, not when she was quivering and foaming.

'Be brave, Geoffrey. Your sister is having some kind of seizure. You must help her now.'

He set the wooden aeroplane down on the ground, not minding that the mud dirtied the red paintwork. He worked his hands under Sunday's body and tried to shift her. The violent quivering alarmed him.

'Use all your strength, Geoffrey. I cannot help you until I arrive.'

He groaned with exertion. Perhaps she jolted in such a way as to aid his efforts, but with a lurch she finally came free of the mud and was no longer face-down.

'Geoffrey, listen carefully. For whatever reason, there is a problem with Sunday's head, and her cuff does not appear to be responding correctly. You must tell it what to do. Are you listening?'

'Yes.'

'Two red buttons, one on either side. You must press them both at the same time.'

Their cuffs were similar, but his didn't have those two red buttons. They had only come after her tenth birthday, which meant they had something to do with the things the neuropractors had put into her head, the things he didn't have yet.

He lifted her arm, fighting to hold it still, and tried to get his thumb and forefinger around the cuff. It was hard. His hand wasn't big enough.

'What will happen, Memphis?'

'Nothing bad.'

The red buttons were much stiffer to press than the blue ones

on his cuff. After a moment of panic he realised that he would need to use both hands. Even then it was hard. At first, he must not have been pushing them firmly enough because nothing happened. But he tried again, applying all his strength, and with miraculous suddenness, Sunday's seizure stilled.

She was just lying there.

Geoffrey sat by her, waiting. She was breathing, he could see that. Her eyes were closed now, and although she was less animate than when she had been standing up on the tank and looking at him, he felt in some indefinable way that his sister had returned.

Laying a hand on her forehead, feeling the heat boiling off her skin, he turned his gaze to the sky.

Memphis arrived soon after. He hovered over the bowl, looking down from the airpod, then slid the craft sideways, back over the trees that ringed the depression. The airpod was so quiet that Geoffrey had to strain to hear the fading of its engine sound as it settled down out of view.

A minute or so later, Memphis appeared in person at the top of the slope. After no more than a moment's hesitation he came down the slope, half-skidding and half-running, flailing his arms to maintain balance. When he reached Sunday's side he touched a hand to her forehead, then examined the cuff.

Geoffrey studied his expression. 'Is she going to be all right?'

'I think so, Geoffrey. You did very well.' Memphis looked back at the tank, as if noticing it for the first time. 'How close did she get to it?'

'She was standing on it.'

'It's a bad machine,' Memphis explained. 'There was a war here once, one of the last in Africa.'

'Sunday said there was a little boy in the tank.'

Memphis lifted her from the ground, cradling her in his arms. 'Can you climb up the slope on your own, Geoffrey?'

'I think so.'

'We must get Sunday back to the household. She will be all right, but the sooner she is seen by a neuropractor, the better.'

Geoffrey scrambled ahead, determined to show that he could take care of himself. 'But what about the little boy?'

'He doesn't exist. There is nothing in that tank but more machines, some of which are very clever.'

'This isn't the first tank you've seen?'

'No,' Memphis said carefully. 'Not the first. But the last time I saw one of them moving, I was very small.' Looking back, Geoffrey caught Memphis's quick smile. Clearly he did not wish Geoffrey to have nightmares about killing machines stalking the Earth. 'They are gone now, except for a few left behind, buried in the earth like this one.'

They were on the slope now, climbing. 'How could it escape?'

Memphis paused for breath. It must have been hard, carrying Sunday and also having to keep his own balance. 'The artificer sensed the presence of Sunday's machines, the ones inside her head. It worked out how to talk to them, how to make Sunday think there was someone calling.'

The idea of a machine tricking his sister – tricking her well enough that she had nearly convinced Geoffrey as well – was enough to chill him even as he sweated uphill.

'What would have happened if she hadn't fallen?'

'The tank might have tried to persuade her to help it. Or it might have been trying to exploit some deeper vulnerability. Whatever it did, it caused your sister to go into seizure.'

'But the tank is very old, and Sunday's machines are very new. How could it trick them?'

'Very old things are sometimes cleverer than very new things. Or slyer, at least.' They were climbing steadily now, almost near the top of the slope. 'That is why they are forbidden, or at least very carefully controlled.'

Geoffrey looked back, feeling a weird combination of fear and pity for the half-entombed thing. 'What will happen to the tank?'

'It will be taken care of,' Memphis said gently. 'For now, it is your sister we must concern ourselves with.'

They'd attained level ground. A narrow trail wound through the trees. Geoffrey hadn't seen it when they had come through, but it must have been clearly visible from the air. They set off along it, to the airpod that was waiting out of sight.

'Will she be all right?'

'I doubt any great harm has been done. It was good that you were there, to put the machines into shutdown. Ah.' Without warning, Memphis had stopped.

Geoffrey halted at his side. 'Is it Sunday?'

'No,' the thin man said, still not raising his voice. 'It is Mephisto. He is ahead of us, on the trail. Do you see him?'

In the dusky shade of the trail, canopied by trees, a huge light-dappled form blocked their path. The elephant was scuffing its trunk back and forth in the dust. It had one tusk, the other snapped off. Something in its posture conveyed unmistakable belligerence, its forehead lowered like a battering ram.

'Mephisto is an old bull male,' Memphis said. 'He is very aggressive and territorial. I saw him from the air, but he appeared to be moving away from us. I was hoping we could avoid an encounter today.'

Geoffrey was puzzled and frightened. He'd seen plenty of elephants before, but never sensed this degree of wariness from his mentor.

'We could go around,' he said.

'Mephisto will not let us. He knows this area much better than we do, and he can move more quickly than us, especially with Sunday to carry.'

'Why doesn't he want us to pass?'

'There is something wrong in his head.' Memphis paused. 'Geoffrey, would you look away, please? I must do something that I would rather not.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Look away and close your eyes.'

Geoffrey did as he was told, for there was no mistaking the severity of that command. There was silence, broken only by the rustling of leaves. And then a soft, dusty thump, accompanied by a fusillade of dry cracks as branches and tree-trunks snapped.

'Hold on to my jacket and follow me,' Memphis said. 'But do not look until I have told you it is safe. Will you promise me this?'

'Yes,' Geoffrey said.

But he did not keep his word. As they passed into the cool of the trees, Memphis veered around an obstacle, drawing Geoffrey with him. He opened his eyes, squinting against dust still hovering in the air. Mephisto was on the ground, lying on his side. The bull's one visible eye was open, but devoid of life. The huge grey, elaborately wrinkled form was perfectly still, perfectly dead.

'Did you kill Mephisto?' Geoffrey asked when they had reached the airpod.

Memphis loaded Sunday into the rear passenger compartment, placing her gently onto the padded seat. He said nothing, not even when they were in the air, on their way back to the household.

Memphis knows, Geoffrey thought. Memphis knew Geoffrey had looked and nothing was ever going to be quite the same between them.

It was only later that he realised he had left the red wooden aeroplane down in the hole.