My mother read me bedtime stories until I was six years old. It was a sneak attack on her part. As soon as I really got to like the stories, she said, "Here's the book. Now you read." She didn't know what she was setting us both up for.

-2-

"I think," my mother said to me one day when I was ten, "that everyone has something that they can do better than they can do anything else. It's up to them to find out what that something is."

We were in the kitchen by the stove. She was pressing my hair while I sat bent over someone's cast-off notebook, writing. I had decided to write down some of the stories I'd been telling myself over the years. When I didn't have stories to read, I learned to make them up. Now I was learning to write them down.

-3-

I was shy, afraid of most people, most situations. I didn't stop to ask myself how things could hurt me, or even whether they could hurt me. I was just afraid.

I crept into my first bookstore full of vague fears. I had managed to save about five dollars, mostly in change. It was 1957. Five dollars was a lot of money for a ten-year-old. The public library had been my second home since I was six, and I owned a number of hand-me-down books. But now I wanted a new book—one I had chosen, one I could keep.

"Can kids come in here?" I asked the woman at the cash register once I was inside. I meant could Black kids come in. My mother, born in rural Louisiana and raised amid strict racial segregation, had warned me that I might not be welcome everywhere, even in California.

The cashier glanced at me. "Of course you can come in," she said. Then, as though it were an afterthought, she smiled. I relaxed.

The first book I bought described the characteristics of different breeds of horses. The second described stars and planets, asteroids, moons and comets.

-4-

My aunt and I were in her kitchen, talking. She was cooking something that smelled good, and I was sitting at her

table, watching. Luxury. At home, my mother would have had me helping.

"I want to be a writer when I grow up," I said.

"Do you?" my aunt asked. "Well, that's nice, but you'll have to get a job, too."

"Writing will be my job," I said.

"You can write any time. It's a nice hobby. But you'll have to earn a living."

"As a writer."

"Don't be silly."

"I mean it."

"Honey . . . Negroes can't be writers."

"Why not?"

"They just can't."

"Yes, they can, too!"

I was most adamant when I didn't know what I was talking out. In all my thirteen years, I had never read a printed word that I knew to have been written by a Black person. My aunt was a grown woman. She knew more than I did. What if she were right?

-5-

Shyness is shit.

It isn't cute or feminine or appealing. It's torment, and it's shit.

I spent a lot of my childhood and adolescence staring at the ground. It's a wonder I didn't become a geologist. I

whispered. People were always saying, "Speak up! We can't hear you."

I memorized required reports and poems for school, then cried my way out of having to recite. Some teachers condemned me for not studying. Some forgave me for not being very bright. Only a few saw my shyness.

"She's so backward," some of my relatives said.

"She's so nice and quiet," tactful friends of my mother said.

I believed I was ugly and stupid, clumsy, and socially hopeless. I also thought that everyone would notice these faults if I drew attention to myself. I wanted to disappear. Instead, I grew to be six feet tall. Boys in particular seemed to assume that I had done this growing deliberately and that I should be ridiculed for it as often as possible.

I hid out in a big pink notebook—one that would hold a whole ream of paper. I made myself a universe in it. There I could be a magic horse, a Martian, a telepath. . . . There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these.

-6-

My mother did day work. She had a habit of bringing home any books her employers threw out. She had been permitted only three years of school. Then she had been put to work. Oldest daughter. She believed passionately in books and education. She wanted me to have what she had been denied.

She wasn't sure which books I might be able to use, so she brought whatever she found in the trash. I had books yellow with age, books without covers, books written in, crayoned in, spilled on, cut, torn, even partly burned. I stacked them in wooden crates and second-hand bookcases and read them when I was ready for them. Some were years too advanced for me when I got them, but I grew into them.

-7-

An obsession, according to my old Random House dictionary, is "the domination of one's thoughts or feelings by a persistent idea, image, desire, etc." Obsession can be a useful tool if it's positive obsession. Using it is like aiming carefully in archery.

I took archery in high school because it wasn't a team sport. I liked some of the team sports, but in archery you did well or badly according to your own efforts. No one else to blame. I wanted to see what I could do. I learned to aim high. Aim above the target. Aim just *there!* Relax. Let go. If you aimed right, you hit the bull's-eye. I saw positive obsession as a way of aiming yourself, your life, at your chosen target. Decide what you want. Aim high. Go for it.

I wanted to sell a story. Before I knew how to type, I wanted to sell a story.

I pecked my stories out two fingered on the Remington portable typewriter my mother had bought me. I had begged for it when I was ten, and she had bought it.

"You'll spoil that child!" one of her friends told her. "What does she need with a typewriter at her age? It will soon be sitting in the closet with dust on it. All that money wasted!"

I asked my science teacher, Mr. Pfaff, to type one of my stories for me—type it the way it was supposed to be with no holes erased into the paper and no strike-overs. He did. He even corrected my terrible spelling and punctuation. To this day I'm amazed and grateful.

-8-

I had no idea how to submit a story for publication. I blundered through unhelpful library books on writing. Then I found a discarded copy of *The Writer,* a magazine I had never heard of. That copy sent me back to the library to look for more, and for other writers' magazines to see what I could learn from them. In very little time I'd found out how to submit a story, and my story was in the mail. A few weeks later I got my first rejection slip.

When I was older, I decided that getting a rejection slip was like being told your child was ugly. You got mad and didn't believe a word of it. Besides, look at all the really ugly literary children out there in the world being published and doing fine!

-9-

I spent my teens and much of my twenties collecting printed rejections. Early on, my mother lost $61.20—a reading fee charged by a so-called agent to look at one of my unpublishable stories. No one had told us that agents weren't supposed to get any money up front, weren't supposed to be paid until they sold your work. Then they were to take ten percent of whatever the work earned. Ignorance is expensive. That $61.20 was more money back then than my mother paid for a month's rent.

-10-

I badgered friends and acquaintances into reading my work, and they seemed to like it. Teachers read it and said kindly, unhelpful things. But there were no creative writing classes at my high school, and no useful criticism. At college (in California at that time, junior college was almost free), I took classes taught by an elderly woman who wrote children's stories. She was polite about the science fiction and fantasy that I kept handing in, but she finally asked in exasperation, "Can't you write anything normal?"

A schoolwide contest was held. All submissions had to be made anonymously. My short story won first prize. I was an eighteen-year-old freshman, and I won in spite of competition from older, more experienced people. Beautiful. The $15.00 prize was the first money my writing earned me.

-11-

After college I did office work for a while, then factory and warehouse work. My size and strength were advantages in factories and warehouses. And no one expected me to smile and pretend I was having a good time.

I got up at two or three in the morning and wrote. Then I went to work. I hated it, and I have no gift for suffering in silence. I muttered and complained and quit jobs and found new ones and collected more rejection slips. One day in disgust I threw them all away. Why keep such useless, painful things?

-12-

There seems to be an unwritten rule, hurtful and at odds with the realities of American culture. It says you aren't supposed to wonder whether as a Black person, a Black woman, you really might be inferior—not quite bright enough, not quite quick enough, not quite good enough to do the things you want to do. Though, of course, you do wonder. You're

supposed to *know* you're as good as anyone. And if you don't know, you aren't supposed to admit it. If anyone near you admits it, you're supposed to reassure them quickly so they'll shut up. That sort of talk is embarrassing. Act tough and confident and don't talk about your doubts. If you never deal with them, you may never get rid of them, but no matter. Fake everyone out. Even yourself.

I couldn't fake myself out. I didn't talk much about my doubts. I wasn't fishing for hasty reassurances. But I did a lot of thinking—the same things over and over.

Who was I anyway? Why should anyone pay attention to what I had to say? Did I have anything to say? I was writing science fiction and fantasy, for God's sake. At that time nearly all professional science-fiction writers were white men. As much as I loved science fiction and fantasy, what was I doing?

Well, whatever it was, I couldn't stop. Positive obsession is about not being able to stop just because you're afraid and full of doubts. Positive obsession is dangerous. It's about not being able to stop at all.

-13-

I was twenty-three when, finally, I sold my first two short stories. I sold both to writer-editors who were teaching at Clarion, a science-fiction writers' workshop that I was attending. One story was eventually published. The other wasn't. I didn't sell another word for five years. Then, finally, I sold

my first novel. Thank God no one told me selling would take so long—not that I would have believed it. I've sold eight novels since then. Last Christmas, I paid off the mortgage on my mother's house.

-14-

So, then, I write science fiction and fantasy for a living. As far as I know I'm still the only Black woman who does this. When I began to do a little public speaking, one of the questions I heard most often was, "What good is science fiction to Black people?" I was usually asked this by a Black person. I gave bits and pieces of answers that didn't satisfy me and that probably didn't satisfy my questioners. I resented the question. Why should I have to justify my profession to anyone?

But the answer to that was obvious. There was exactly one other Black science-fiction writer working successfully when I sold my first novel: Samuel R. Delany, Jr. Now there are four of us. Delany, Steven Barnes, Charles R. Saunders, and me. So few. Why? Lack of interest? Lack of confidence? A young Black woman once said to me, "I always wanted to write science fiction, but I didn't think there were any Black women doing it." Doubts show themselves in all sorts of ways. But still I'm asked, what good is science fiction to Black people?

What good is any form of literature to Black people?

What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to

warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking—whoever "everyone" happens to be this year.

And what good is all this to Black people?

Afterword

This autobiographical article appeared originally in *Essence* magazine under the *Essence* title, "Birth of a Writer." I never liked the *Essence* title. My title was always "Positive Obsession."

I've often said that since my life was filled with reading, writing, and not much else, it was too dull to write about. I still feel that way. I'm glad I wrote this piece, but I didn't enjoy writing it. I have no doubt at all that the best and the most interesting part of me is my fiction.

Furor Scribendi