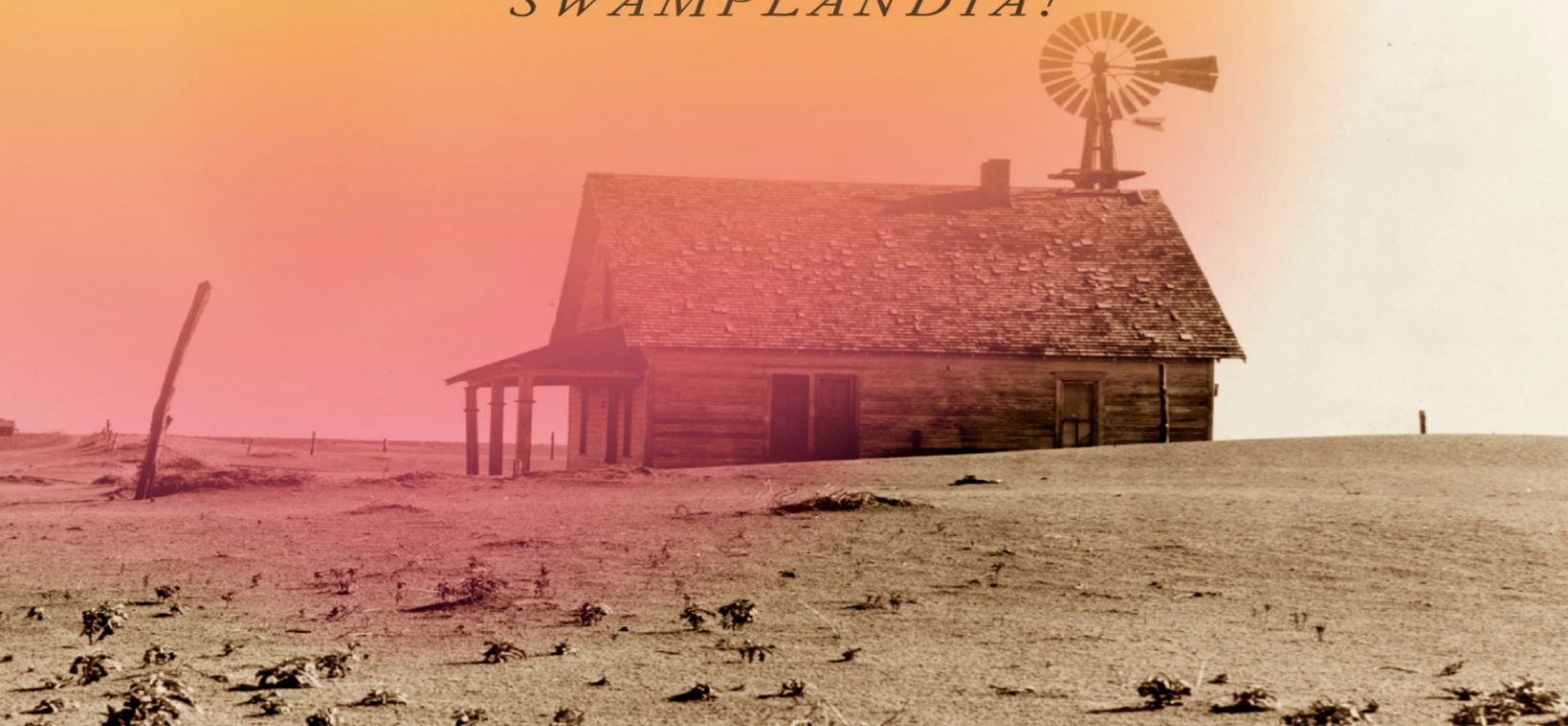
"Achingly gorgeous. . . . As profound as it is wonderfully strange."
—**LAUREN GROFF,** author of *The Vaster Wilds*

The ANTIDOTE

A NOVEL

KAREN RUSSELL

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
SWAMPLANDIA!



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The ANTIDOTE

Karen Russell

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Harp Oletsky

But I remember you before you became
a story. Sometimes, I feel a thorn in my foot

when there is no thorn. They tell me,
not unkindly, that I should imagine nothing here.

But I believe you are still alive.

—MARIE HOWE, From "Gretel, from a sudden clearing"

Prologue

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Harp Oletsky's First Memory

It is nowhere you chose to be, and yet here you are. Papa steers your shoulders into the heart of the jack drive. Hundreds of rabbits stare at you through the wire around the fence posts. It feels like looking into the mirror. They do not want to be in this story either. Men have been working since dawn to herd the wild jacks into this pen. The town has gathered to solve the problem of the rabbits, who chew through rangeland and cropland, who eat the golden wheat your papa turns into money. Worse than the locusts, says Papa. Every hide brings a penny bounty. So many turnipy sweating bodies and a festive feeling in the air like a penny rubbed between two fingers, like blood shocked into a socket. A smell that reminds you of the room where babies are born. When you try to turn and run away, Papa grabs you. There's Mr. O'Malley, Mr. Waldowko, Mr. Zalewski, Mrs. Haage. You can't remember any more names. A hundred jointed arms come swinging into the pen that is alive with jackrabbits, the place of no escape. Now there is only madness. Terror of cudgels, terror of ax handles and hammers, terror of being trampled. "Papa! Help! Stop!" Rabbits run over your feet. "Settle down, Harp—" Papa is angry. He pours your name over your head like scalding water. The rabbits are angry. The rabbits are crying and dying, the clubs coming down, down, down. "If you ain't gonna help, stay clear of us, boy—" You are six today. Your family will have a party after supper. The cake was cooling when you left for town. You feel sick thinking about it. Cherries come slopping out of the rabbits. Gray skins are splitting, slipping under bootheels and wooden bats. Papa shows you what to target: the skulls and the spines of the screaming jacks. It's the fastest way to stop their screaming. *There is another way,* a

voice cries out inside you. Smash it flat. You watch Papa click into his rhythm and begin to kill alongside the rest of the men.

You meet your baby sister's gaze through the fan of her clean fingers. Lada is sitting on your mother's lap. Three girls you know are watching from outside the fence. The girls are allowed to squeal and shield their faces. You wish you were a girl with them. Down, down, down come the clubs and the planks. Your stomach bulges and flattens. You are screaming with the rabbits. Your birthday wish is to get to the end of this sound. Quiet comes at last. The men's arms rest against their sides like tools in a shed. Women are hanging the dead jacks to dry by their long ears. Every twitching rabbit's foot has stilled. Inside of you, the screaming continues. It goes on and on and on. Papa finds you where you have hidden your eyes behind your hands, your tears inside your palms. "We can't let the jacks overrun the whole prairie. No one likes it, Son." This is a lie. Many had liked it. You shut your eyes along with the dead rabbits, because you did not want to see whose faces were smiling.

"Here," says Papa. "One is still living. You cannot be softhearted, Harp."

Your father puts the club in your hands. And after that, you are always afraid.

Section I

Collapse

The Prairie Witch

A person can lose everything in an instant. A fortune, a family, the sun. I've had to learn this lesson twice in my life. The first time it happened, I was a fifteen-year-old fugitive from the Home for Unwed Mothers. The second time, I was a prairie witch chained to my cot in a cinder-block jailhouse. "Your second home," the Sheriff liked to say. Officially, I do not exist in his West; nevertheless, it is a crime to pay me a visit.

On Black Sunday, before anybody knew to call it Black Sunday, I woke up in the jailhouse to a sound like a freight train tunneling through me. An earsplitting howl that seemed to shake the stone walls. My body trembled like a husk on the cot. My fingers clawed into the mattress. For those early moments in the dark I was nothing but the fear of floating off. What had happened to me while I slept? It felt as if a knife had scraped the marrow from my bones. Something vital inside me had liquefied and drained away, and in its place was this new weightlessness. Lightness and wrongness, a blanketing whiteness that ran up my spine and seeped out of my mouth. *Bankrupt* was the word that rose in my mind. At first, I did not recognize the voice crying out for help as my own. I clamped down on the sound, panicked—I could not afford to lose any more ballast. My numb limbs began to prickle with feeling, pins and needles stitching them back to my brain. It was not a happy reunion. Ten white toes sprouted like mushrooms on the edge of a filthy green blanket, waving to me from the outermost limit of what I could make out. A kerosene lantern in the hallway gave off a feeble emerald glow, beyond which the cell plunged into shadow. Not even the pain was mine. It came and went like the wind. Then it drilled through my skin and swallowed the world.

Or perhaps the black blizzard was already well under way when I woke up. Choking heat filled the jailhouse, along with lashing tails of dust. It occurred to me that I might be buried here before I could recollect who I was. Minutes and hours lost

all meaning for me; I balled up on the cot and prepared to be pulled apart by a cyclone. Eventually the winds began to weaken. Light cut a pathway across the turbulent sky—I watched a pale line brightening and widening through the small cell window. A greenish disc hung above the cloud wall, and it took me ages to recognize the sun. It was not midnight after all, but well past noon.

I began to remember more about the land beyond this cell, the edgeless prairie. The name of the town where I worked returned to me: Uz, Nebraska, southeast of the Sandhills and west of the Platte River. We were four years into the worst drought that any newcomer to the Great Plains had ever experienced. Other beings kept older diaries. Cored cottonwood trees told a millennial story written in wavy circles that no politician had cared to read. Congressmen train themselves to think in election cycles, not planetary ones. They see spiking market highs and lows, and forget how to read in circles. Uz had been having brownouts for months. Plagues of jaws and mandibles. Grasshoppers rattled down on the tractor cabs from hissing clouds. Thousands of jackrabbits fanned over the Plains, chewing through anything green. Winged indigo beetles blew in from God alone knew where, husks shaped like hourglasses that nobody on the High Plains had ever seen before 1931. Red sand from Oklahoma and black dirt from Kansas and dove gray earth from the eastern plains of Colorado formed a rolling ceiling of dust above Uz that flashed with heat lightning.

The Sheriff and his family lived in a two-story brick frame house facing the jail, parts and blueprint purchased from the Sears, Roebuck catalog. It sat on the free side of the property, five hundred yards beyond the bars of my two-foot-by-two-foot window. As the dust blew into my cell, outside things became less and less real. The Sheriff's house slimmed to a charcoal sketch. Erased, redrawn, and finally lost to sight. The sky was well and truly falling.

At last I forced myself to scream for help. It felt terrifying to release so much breath at once—the lightness rushed into my head. No one responded. How long had I been trapped here? The cell was seven feet by eight feet, and furnished with nothing but the cot and a tin bucket half-filled with the previous inmate's piss. Or my own, perhaps. It seemed I was the only prisoner left inside the jailhouse. But I was wrong about that. Something pounced lightly onto my chest, then launched up to the ledge of the cell window—a huge bristling cat, whose carroty fur seemed absurdly bright. Her

ears pitched forward, her claws tensing on the ledge. Her golden eyes regarded me serenely. Nothing called to the animal that I could hear. But a moment later, the cat slipped through the bars and jumped nimbly into the whirlwind.

Just as she leapt, I recognized her—the Sheriff's cat, a flatulent tabby who often slept on my chest during my stays in the jailhouse. The Sheriff, out of stupidity or laziness, called her nothing at all, not even Cat. A memory wailed awake inside me: the Sheriff had once drowned a litter of her kittens in a washbasin within earshot of my cell. Five infant voices flooded through me, clawing at the soft walls within the walls. Again I heard the splash as the bag went under. Displaced water had come trickling down the hall while their silence deepened to permanence. The Sheriff had caged the mother cat in a nearby closet, locking us both into impotent witness. Her angry cries had blended with her children's dissolving ones. The last voices in the world could not have sounded more forlorn.

A stupid man can still be a savant at torture. The Sheriff had squatted on his haunches in front of Cell 8, grinning through the bars at me as he poured fresh milk into a bowl for the dead kittens' mother. "What a racket, eh? You'll forget that nasty business in a snap. A powerful witch like you…"

My job returned to me before my name did. *Yes, I am the Antidote* I learned, and remembered. *I am a prairie witch*. A door swung open onto my life. Now I could picture my rented room in the boardinghouse. My poster facing the street from the third-floor window, hand-lettered for me by the calligrapher in Kinkaid gold: THE ANTIDOTE OF UZ! NOW ACCEPTING DEPOSITS. I advertised my banking services as a panacea for every ailment from heartburn to nightmares. Some of my customers, I recalled, had made up a little jingle about me, taking the lyrics from my poster:

"The Antidote to lovesickness! The Antidote to grief! The Antidote to gas pains! The Antidote to guilt! The Antidote to sleepless nights! The Antidote to sweaty palms! The Antidote to daydreaming! The Antidote to shame!"

Most everyone on the Great Plains knew about us, even those who denied our existence. The Vaults, some called us. The prairie witches. Now I remembered what I did to earn my bread—what I had been doing since I was a much younger woman. Absorbing and storing my customers' memories. Banking secrets for the townspeople of Uz. Sins and crimes, first and last times, nights of unspeakable horror and dewdrop

blue mornings—or who knew what my customers had transferred from their bodies into mine? These were only my guesses. I disappeared into a spacious blankness during my transfers. A prairie witch's body is a room for rent. A vault to store the things people cannot stand to know, or bear to forget.

Half the town of Uz banked with me, and even those who denounced me as a fraud and a blackmailer knew that I was open for business in Room 11. People came and paid me to store some portion of their lives. A memory that felt too heavy to carry into the future, or too precious for daily reminiscence. As they whispered their stories into my green earhorn, memories lifted out of their bodies and into mine. It was a painless exchange. Nothing my customers told me had ever disturbed me, because I was not awake to hear them. Cocooned in blue trance, I could dilate to absorb anything. I did not return to my waking mind until a transfer was completed. "I know as little about what I contain," I reassured my customers, "as a safety deposit box knows about its rocks. As a jar of pickling vinegar knows about its floating roots." *As an attic knows about its ghosts*. Their dead were alive inside me, patiently waiting to be recollected. The weight of these deposits refreighted me. After a transfer, I often felt a heavy ache in my rib cage or my pelvis—sometimes a swimmy brightness like goldfish circling my chest—and in this way I knew that our exchange had been a success. My new customers would smile sheepishly at me and say, "I wonder what I just told you, ma'am? It's gone clean out of my head!"

Now I understood why my body felt so frighteningly light, why the word *bankruptcy* kept running through my mind. Something had happened to me that I had not known to fear.

Fifteen years of deposits, somehow, had been siphoned from me while I slept. Drawn from my flesh, like vapor from a leaf. Where had they all gone? Out of my body and into the whirlwind? Were they still intact somewhere? Or had they dispersed with the dust? With each roomy breath, I learned more about the shape and the scale of what I'd lost. I rolled onto my side and pulled up my nightgown—a repurposed sackcloth from GROVER'S ORCHARDS, too short for a woman my height, printed with repeating sandy peaches that seemed to shrivel and ripen with each breath. I palpated my stomach with my fists, as if the thousands of secrets I'd housed might merely be misplaced.

To be clear, I hadn't forgotten these secrets, because I'd never known them in the first place. Or perhaps that's not entirely true. I knew them the way I knew you, my Son, before you were born. Nestled in my body, as pressure and weight. Memories are living things. When you house as many as I did, your bones begin to creak. Now I felt in danger of evaporating myself.

As it turned out, I was not alone. Farmers all over the Plains were losing their entire harvests at this very moment. Families hid in their cellars while the clouds grew fat with black earth. The sky became a growling belly. Uzians caught out in their fields when the darkness eclipsed the sun believed they'd gone blind.

Many of these same farmers and ranchers had also—unbeknownst to them—just lost huge tracts of the past. The days and the nights I'd held in reserve for them while they went about the business of living. My customers who had banked with me loyally since my arrival in Uz would soon learn about my crash—how could I prevent it? They'd come to make their withdrawals, and I'd have nothing to return to them. I had retained only a palmful of facts about my solitary life.

I have always kept scrupulous records. I could tell you who visited me on July 12 of 1927, and the duration of the visit. I could tell you to the penny how much money I made in Uz County between the years of 1920 and 1935. But what did it matter if I'd charged this client two dollars, and this one two hundred? None of the numbers I'd inked into my ledger had anything real to say about the vastness of what I'd just lost. It was spasms in my belly and the clawing grief.

Black Sunday, before the newspapermen named it and swept it into history, pulverized the region now known as the "Great Dust Bowl." Like so many of my neighbors, I woke to ruin. In the center of the storm, I believed that the worst had happened. But I was wrong about that. The dust had another lesson to teach me: so long as you're still drawing breath, there's always more to lose.

Home. *Home*. I tugged at the word until a world rose up. Chained to the cot, dirt inflaming my nostrils, I smiled in the dark. I believed I'd lost everything, but I hadn't after all. I remember You. Hope grew inside me then. Unstoppably, as You once grew. I pictured green leaves twining around my rib cage, tethering me to my memories of You. Your slippery, seven-pound body and your strong wail. Every kick and twist, I rehearsed in my mind. Even the ache of losing You, I welcomed home. It was the