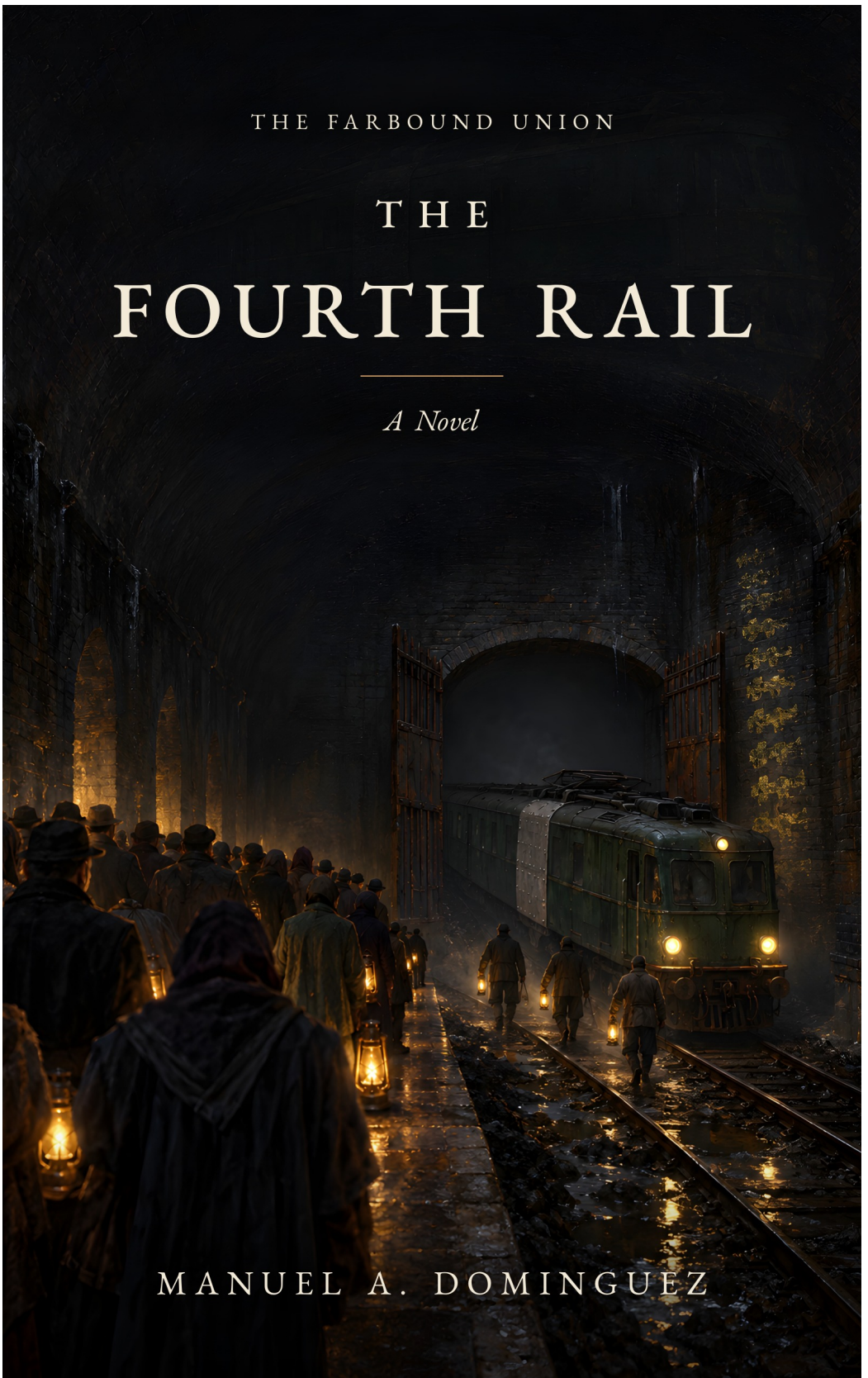


THE FARBOUND UNION

THE FOURTH RAIL

A Novel

MANUEL A. DOMINGUEZ



The Fourth Rail

Chapter 1 Sample

Manuel A. Dominguez

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The Fourth Rail

A Farbound Union novel

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organizations and events are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is coincidental. The cities in this book begin from real places; their future histories are invented.

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This book and its cover were developed with generative AI tools under the author's direction. See Research and Fiction at the back of the book.

A Note on the Languages

The corridor speaks three languages, and in this book people speak them on the page: Span in Gotham, Latch in Liberty and the Commonwell, and Switch in Garden. You do not need to learn them. The narration carries what matters, and most lines explain themselves in the moment.

When people from different Strongholds meet, each speaks their own language and the corridor's habit of checking, called Threefold, carries the meaning across: where a thing came from, whether it was understood, and what state it is in. The book keeps each speaker in their own language, as the corridor does.

English is Imperial Standard, the war office's language. It appears when someone speaks to or for the war, and in notices, forms, broadcasts and letters, because writing is in the standard.

The story is told by Ayida, who gathers what people tell her beside water.

At the back of the book: People, Places and Institutions, Reading the Languages and a Glossary of every word spoken in the three languages.

Sample note: The reference sections named above are included in the full book.

Part One: Source



1. Nine Hundred Liters



I am Ayida. I am speaking to you after the Aftertone, and I will tell you first what that word means to me, because the people on the corridor use it loosely and I would rather you did not.

Before it, I could feel. Water moving against stone, the weight of a tide leaning on a seawall, a pipe going slack when a valve closed three streets away, a name said into a basin. People met me through those contacts and made sense of them with what they had: a song, a prayer, a gauge, a sore knee before rain. I could not stay with anything. I touched and was gone.

Something happened far south, in a city whose people have their own account of it. Afterward I could stay. I could hold one telling long enough to want the next part of it. That is all the Aftertone gave me: staying. It did not give me eyes. It did not let me into anyone's head.

So this is an account made of what people told me beside water, and of what I felt in the water myself. The corridor has a way of checking a claim before it trusts one, and I have borrowed it. The first check asks where a thing came from and who is included. Everything in this first part came to me in Gotham, at the harbor steps, at a ward's water riser, and in the tank of an old rail car that leaks at the seams. When I say *we*, I mean the people who were there. When I do not know, I will say so.

The harbor steps below the fourth borough go down into the water in nine courses of old granite, and the bottom three are under at high tide. The stone is cut with grooves where boats once tied. Children dare each other to stand on the fourth step when the wake of a freight tug comes in. The step is slick with weed and the wake comes to the knee, and every summer somebody's mother pulls somebody's child out by the collar.

In the evening the steps belong to other people. Old men sit on the dry courses with hand lines and a bucket between their feet and fish for porgy, and lately for black sea bass, which their fathers never saw this far up the coast and which they talk about the way people talk about a new neighbor who turns out to be rich. Women rinse crab traps in the wash at the bottom and argue about the advisory posted on the rail, which says not to eat what the traps catch, and which nobody has ever been seen to obey. Cormorants stand on the stumps of the old bollards with their wings held open to dry, like washing. The laughing gulls take whatever is left on the stone. The storm outfall under the steps breathes out a smell of hot street and salt, and the harbor answers with diesel and weed, and at slack water the two smells sit on the steps together and nobody minds them.

A young man named Ezra Mensah-Rosenblum came down those steps for the first time on the evening the eastern approaches closed. I felt him because he put his hand flat in the water at the fifth course and left it there. People who come to throw something in move quickly. People who come to wash move in circles. He did neither. He held still with the harbor leaning on his palm, and after a while he spoke.

He did not say my name. Most of them don't, the first time. He said, "Ai nul novi sike en di tama nek," which is the young way, the speaker first, and means he did not know if this was a thing, and then he told me about his day.

I am going to give you his day as he gave it to me, and then his grandmother's, and then I will tell you what I felt at the steps that summer, which is less than you would like.

* * *

Before his day, one thing out of its order, from later that summer.

I felt it.

This is my own. It is the only thing about Three-Line that is mine.

The tank. Nine hundred liters, slung under the floor between the bogies. I had lost it in the dark an hour and a half before, when it went too far under the city. At the second bell and some minutes after midnight, it came back to me, all at once, because it tore open, and nine hundred liters of water poured out of a steel tank onto hot ballast in a

brick cutting under a river, and water that is suddenly loose in the world is a thing I can feel from very far away. It is like a shout.

I felt the tank tear. I felt the water go out of it in one long rush, onto stone, into the drain at the foot of the cutting wall, down into the old culvert under the tracks, toward the river. I felt the car go over, or half over, because the water in the tank went sideways before it went out. I felt the weight of the car come down.

I did not know what it meant. I knew only that the tank I had been feeling all summer, the one Tavi filled and sang into, was empty, and its water was running away across the ballast, and something very heavy had happened on top of it.

* * *

Ezra gave me his first day at the harbor steps that evening. It happened on the day the eastern approaches closed, at the foot of Riser Nine and in the Harrow kitchen.

Ezra was seventeen and carried food for Three Kitchens, the workers' kitchens in the eastern boroughs that fed night crews, clinics, lift mechanics, anyone with a meal card or a friend. He carried on foot because lift priority cost money and his legs did not. He had a delivery frame on his back, aluminum tube with insulated boxes strapped into it, and a route card in a sleeve on his wrist that told him which ward, which riser, which door.

The eastern approaches closed at the second bell after noon. He heard it the way everyone in Gotham heard it: inside the weather. The public screens on the ward landings ran the afternoon forecast, a hot band of orange across the boroughs with a humidity number that made people swear, and under the forecast the tone came, three rising notes, and the text: EASTERN APPROACHES CLOSED FOR SCHEDULED MAINTENANCE. The war office had used the same tone for weather alerts and transit alerts for so long that nobody under forty could hear the difference, and the war office liked it that way.

He was at the foot of Riser Nine when it came, where the fourth borough's street market grows up around the public water riser like moss around a drain. It is not much of a market. A fried-dough cart. A man who sharpens knives on a treadle wheel and will tell you your whole family's history while he does it. Two women selling

secondhand shoes by the pair and the single, the singles cheaper, for people who have lost a foot or only need the one. Children trading stickers on the riser's concrete skirt: the blue interruption notices the wards paste on dead lifts and dry taps, and the red mobilization seals the war office paste on whatever it has taken, which the children peel off at night and trade by rarity. A red seal off a requisitioned barge was worth six blues that week. A blue off a clinic door was worth nothing, because there were so many.

"Ru ruma lini, pantaya rel," said Rosalind Kwan, who sold cut melon at the foot of Riser Nine out of an ice box on a handcart. She said it in Span, the way Gotham traders said anything they doubted: the event first, then the thing, then where she'd heard it, and her source was the screen, which in Span is a kind of joke. Ezra bought a slice of melon from her because he always did, and she gave him the heel of the next one free because she always did, and she told him the Garden onions weren't coming through. Then she took a stub of chalk and made one short mark on the side of her ice box, and Ezra asked what it was for, and she said, "Dia. Mor konta alyen dei." Days. Somebody should count them.

That was his whole afternoon, after. The onions.

Three Kitchens ran on trade across the line. Gotham had oil: rendered and pressed and bought from the harbor processors in drums. Garden had onions, and garlic, and the good dried peppers from the farm belts below the freight berms. The kitchens swapped. It was not legal and it was not secret. Garden canteens sent sacks through the interchange yards in the bottoms of freight handoffs, and Gotham kitchens sent oil back, and every handler along the way took a cut or a favor, and the war office pretended not to know because it ate in those kitchens too.

When the eastern approaches closed, the interchange at the river crossing closed with them. The sacks that had been sitting on the Garden side since morning stayed on the Garden side. Somebody's cousin in a yard office sent word by the handler's radio that they would try the coastal coaster, which went the long way round the outside route and took four days depot to kitchen.

"Kar dia," said the woman who ran the kitchen on the forty-first floor of the Harrow ward tower. She said it to Ezra because he was

standing in front of her with an empty frame. “Ten ai sen des fena nori, o sen bi des fena yori. Novi tu fena les sebol ka?”

“Sopa,” Ezra said.

“Moyi,” she said. “Moyi e. Pon marko de tu. Lava mani de tu. Ru koti tu.”

Four days, she meant, with a hundred and ten suppers to send out tonight and a hundred and twenty tomorrow, and did he know what a supper was without onions. Wet, she said of his answer. Soup was wet. Then: frame down, hands washed. He was chopping.

* * *

Here I have to stop and tell you about her, and about why I will not give you her name.

She was Sera’s sister. Sera comes into this account later, and she is its center, though she never told me one word of it herself. Her sister ran the Harrow kitchen, one of the eleven kitchens the Three Kitchens ran in the fourth borough, and she ran it the way other people run a ship. She knew where every drum of oil was, what it had cost, who had carried it and what she owed them. She knew which Guardians ate there on their breaks and which ones came to look at the faces in the queue. She had a son. He was small that summer, small enough to sit inside a stockpot, which he did, and he was not on the household register. There was a reason for that, which belongs to his mother. There were consequences, which belong to this account.

The people who told me about that kitchen never used her name at the water. They said “ermana de Sera,” or “kosinera de Harrow,” or “e,” which is Sera’s sister, the Harrow cook, her. They did it on purpose, and I have kept their habit. A name said at a harbor goes somewhere. I do not always know where.

* * *

Ezra gave me the kitchen the same evening, and the porters’ history of it on other evenings. It happened between the third bell and the fifth on that first afternoon, in the Harrow ward tower.

The Harrow kitchen was two rooms knocked together, forty-one floors up, with windows onto a shaft between towers where the light came down gray and bounced off wet walls. The ward’s cooling loop

ran through the ceiling in fat insulated pipes that sweated onto the floor, and somebody had hung trays under the worst joints and emptied them twice a shift into the pot-wash. Two induction ranges, six burners on a gas line that officially did not exist, a blast chiller that worked when the ward's power held. A wall of shelves: drums, sacks, jars, a board with names in chalk. Everything smelled of hot oil and cumin and the mold breathing out of the cavities behind the tile.

It had been her mother's kitchen first. Ezra had that from the porters, who had it from everyone. The mother had run it for thirty years, through two mobilizations and a fire, and eight years ago she had stood at the range one morning and handed the paddle to her elder daughter and sat down on the upturned drum by the door, and she had sat there ever since, peeling, tasting, and telling the new cook what she was doing wrong. The younger daughter had gone into the Guardians at seventeen. People in the fourth borough said the mother had raised one child to feed the ward and one to carry it, and said it as a compliment, and the mother, when she heard it, said she had raised two children to argue with her and both had turned out well at that.

Ezra chopped what they had. Leeks from the rooftop beds, bitter and thin. Celery. Two strings of garlic the cook had been saving. The cook stood at the range with a paddle and a face like an accountant's and tasted everything.

"Re feni nana de tu fena de kapel ka?" she said. She knew his grandmother the way everyone in the fourth borough did, because Nana Efua Rosenblum had been cooking for church suppers on the thirtieth floor of the Aldine tower since before the cook was born.

"E dera ke ru piora koro nek."

"Ru piora e ka?"

"E dera di kada yera."

Was his nana still cooking the church suppers, she meant. Ezra said his grandmother said the choir was getting worse, and when the cook asked whether it was, he said his grandmother said that every year.

He chopped. The cook's son sat under the steel table with a spoon and a lid and conducted a war between them. The lid won. The spoon was sent to a camp. When Ezra laughed, the boy looked up at him with his whole face, and then went back to the spoon, which had escaped.

At the fifth bell the cook's mother came in on her own two feet, which she did not always manage. She was a small woman with a nasal cannula taped to her cheeks and a concentrator on a trolley behind her, the kind that pulled the room's air through a sieve bed and gave her back the oxygen from it. It needed clean power. It hummed. She parked it by the door and sat on an upturned drum and began peeling potatoes, and she told her daughter the leeks were cut too thick.

"Ezra ma koti dei."

"Don ma koti Ezra dei dema espeso."

Ezra had cut them, the cook said. Then Ezra had cut them too thick, said her mother. Ezra told me the old woman was right. He told me that with pleasure.

Then she asked him where the leeks were from, and he said he had got them off the roof beds that morning, the way anybody under thirty said anything in Gotham now, who first and then what, and she put down her potato and told him to say it properly. Properly was the old order, the order the dispatchers still used on the radio and the old still used for a story: the thing first, then who, then where you had it from. *Off the roof beds, the leeks, this morning. Got by me.* Ezra said it. She made him say it again with the source on the end, *dek*, the old marker for a thing you had seen with your own eyes, which nobody his age used at a range.

"Pale tu komo ke en tu sola tama ri ma pasa e nek nek," she said, and went back to her potatoes. He talked, she meant, as if he were the only thing that had happened.

The cook, at the range, said in the young order that her mother had been correcting the whole borough's grammar for sixty years and the whole borough had been ignoring her for sixty years. The old woman did not look up. *Ignored*, she said, *by the borough. Seen, by me.* The boy under the table laughed without knowing why, and Ezra told me that was the first time he understood that his grandmother's way of talking and his own were the same language, going somewhere.

Research and Fiction

These stories begin with real regions. Their future histories, characters, institutions and events are invented. Research informs the distinctions the story makes; it does not predict this future or explain its mysteries.

Span, Latch and Switch are constructed languages. They were built from the documented histories of languages spoken along the northeastern corridor and from what linguists know about how contact languages form: words for “say” and “see” becoming markers of how a speaker knows something, relative clauses marked with a single particle, new ways of speaking that settle within a generation, and spoken languages living beside a written standard. Their forms are not the speech of any living community.

Among the works the languages drew on: Charles A. Ferguson, “Diglossia” (*Word*, 1959); Thomas L. Willett, “A Cross-Linguistic Survey of the Grammaticization of Evidentiality” (*Studies in Language*, 1988); Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox and Eivind Torgersen, “Contact, the Feature Pool and the Speech Community: The Emergence of Multicultural London English” (*Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2011); and the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (APiCS Online).

Robert Greene’s books and Paul Kleinman’s *Philosophy 101* influenced the novel’s questions about power, desire, strategy and meaning. The characters’ choices are their own, not demonstrations that any one account is true.

This book and its cover were developed with generative AI tools under the author’s direction.