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Publication Date

2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

The Spinning Wheel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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September 2012

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University of California, Riverside

I am dead.

I died a nigga a long time ago.

Before you were born, before your mother was born, 'fore your grandmother.

I was seventeen.

Still am I reckon. And everyone that was there that night is dead now too so it don't matter that I was a nigga.

Or a slave.

What matters is I had a daughter, who had daughters, and they had theirs. Family I coulda saved a whole lot of trouble by tellin 'em the secrets I know.

You see, there are some stories that mothers never tell their daughters—secret stories. Stories that would prove a mother was once young, done thangs with men she could never tell, in ways she could never tell, and places she could never. Private stories where love, any semblance of love, would lead a person like me to the place I was that night in 1848 when I died a nigga.

For two days and two nights we been running.

Me, and the child inside me.

Pain is trying to get me to stop, make me push away the pain but I won't push.

My pretty yellow dress is stained red and brown now. Not by the blood of the man I killed like they think. It's mine.

The dark of night's been hiding my running for a while, muffling the sounds of my chest gushing in and out from my own hard breaths. Every few steps, the blue light of the moon sneaks past the treetops and strokes my face, urging me on--the only mercy I get in these hot Alabama woods. The Devil's coming and I have to keep moving, for her, for me. But the pain's burning so bad now, I can't hardly do nothing but fall against this old tree, hands slip-sliding down its trunk, stinging.

"Please, baby. Please stay. They want to kill us. Stay inside, I keep us safe."

Barking from the hunting dogs is shooting across the air, bumping around inside me. They musta smelt me on the branches that brushed across me and snapped under my feet. I have to move faster, run like Sister once told me to.

I beg my belly, "Hold on to me. It ain't time."

But this baby got a plan. Her head's at my opening spot, burning hot, ripping my hips wide apart, carving a way out.

"No baby. Please don't come. Please don't!"

I hold in my screams and bow-over hard in the dirt, knees first. A man's voice shouts, "This way! She's up this way."

I want to live.

Want this baby to live.

But she's betraying me. Every muscle in my body's slamming shut so I push. She's tearing through me. I push. I don't want to, but I push, screaming mute deep inside myself, pushing so hard but hollering so low they cain't hear me.

A wave of warm pours out of me, carrying my joy and deep sorrow. Before God and this oak tree, she come. And she don't cry. I guess she want us to live, too. Want me to teach her things, keep her from the pain I been through. I move her into the triangle of moonlight that sets my arm aglow. She see me and I see in her the good part of love.

The weight of 'em push me over—these dogs, clawing and biting at my back. But the pain ain't gonna make me give her up to 'em. I got to protect her, get up, keep running.

I feel my legs, so I bend 'em. Feel 'em firm on the ground, so I push up. I hold her close with one arm and pull up with the other. I can make it. I tell myself again how to run, counting my steps—one two, one two, one two.

A flash of light. A loud pop.

Nothin.

My last thought is to not fall on my baby.

“Whew, hew! I got that bitch,” my spirit hear Ray say. He throw-up his skinny arms like he won something.

“Yeah, y’all!” Henry yell back, tripping his short stubby body into Ray’s path. Ray step right through me, make me see what’s left of me—a hazy mist of what was—arms and legs, a face and the shape of the body that was mine.

“Two damn days and too many damn miles,” Ray say.

“Yeah, y’all!” Henry say again, like he don’t know no other words, smacking on that nasty pine needle with slobber drying sticky and white. The smell of his sick breath rises from it, turning clean pine to outhouse shit. Even his lazy eye is jumping back and forth and cross and center. He say, “Ray, what her name again?”

“Reba or some shit like that...just another of Cynthia's whores.”

Naomi. My name’s Naomi.

“Murdering bitch wasn’t gon’ get me, too,” Henry say. “This October heat mighta done it, but sure as hell, not that bitch. Gave us a run for our money, though. Bet she part Indian.”

“Injuns ain't no match for no pure blood American! Whew hew! I can't wait to see the look on Bobby Lee's face when he see her. He gon' be happier than a two-peckered billy goat.”

They were so proud of what they done to me. Proud they kilt me, proud I weren't nothin but a whore.

Ray squishes his eyes together, searches back and forth, lost, like he don't know where he laid me out. Henry comes up behind him, wiping his fat hands down the front of his stained shirt. A jagged piece of fingernail, packed black with food, catches on his clothes. He bite the nail off and spit it.

A new voice races desperate through the dark. “Call off the dogs! Call off the damn dogs!” Bobby Lee say.

Them dogs was tugging my baby from my me, trying to rip her away from under my arm but I helt her tight, made sure of it before I went. It grab her by the belly and pull. I try to jump on him with my mist of a new body, try to get him away but fall right through 'em both.

For the first time, she cry.

Her voice is so beautiful but so scared. It anchors inside me, makes me scramble to save her, searching for anything I could touch.

No use.

Bobby Lee dives on that dog, hammers his fists down on it, shaking my baby free. When he pick her up, I get a good look at him. He was never like the others, cleaner than he should be and good-looking cept for his right eye, all scarred, nearly closed.

“What the hell ya doing, Bobby Lee,” Ray yell. “Set that nigger baby down and let the dogs get a go. It don’t need to grow up like the momma. Murdering white peoples.”

But Bobby Lee don’t listen. He pull his knife, cut the cord and tie it up then carry her to a nearby bush where more moonlight is. I follow him over, got to stay close, find a way to protect her.

One handed he drags his shirt off and over his head, switching my baby back and forth from arm to arm as he does. He wraps his shirt around her, whispers, “You all better now. You gon’ be alright.” With his muddy hands, he wipes away the blood and white mess from her face, shouts to the others, “It’s a girl!”

The sound of whimpering sends Ray to his dog. “What the hell you do to my damn dog, Bobby Lee! Good boy. You done good. Bobby Lee, you didn’t have to hurt ‘im.” He throws his hands up, angry and waiting for a word back from Bobby Lee. When one don’t come, he pulls his gun from on his waist and walks back toward my baby, say under his breath, “Put that bastard out its misery.”

At the crunch of Ray's coming steps, Bobby Lee puts his hand 'side his own gun til laughter, bursting from Henry turns Ray around and back to my body to go see what the fuss is. When he get to it, he see Henry hovering over them dogs eating the afterbirth from tween my legs. "You like that, nigger?" Henry say. "I'm sure you used ta having dogs in y'r privates."

I don't care he laugh at me, though. I only care that Bobby Lee don't leave my baby. He lay her on a bush, re-wrap her in his shirt as Ray come back his way. Bobby Lee yells over his shoulder, "She got blonde hair!"

"Still a nigger," Ray say and fire his gun at my baby. Almost hit her this time.

Bobby Lee tackles him. "What the hell you doin, Ray?"

"Get off me, Bobby Lee! I wasn't gon' shoot you."

"Can't you see that's a baby! What the hell's the matter wit' cha?" Bobby Lee looks back at her. "And I think it's a white baby."

"White baby! The nigger Momma's laying dead right there. That baby came outta her. Might be a half-breed nigger, but it's still a nigger."

Henry joins 'em, wiping the junk from the corners of his mouth. "What cha'll doing down ner? Bobby Lee, you gotta see dees dogs in her cooch."

"That ain't your baby, Bobby Lee," Ray say. "Yours is dead. Two years now. So let that nigra one go."

Bobby Lee gets up quick, scoops my baby up and takes her with him. His breathing is slow and long, the air stuttering out his nose. In a raspy voice, he say, “I know it ain’t mine. I heard some slave traders down in Tallasse was looking for negro babies, is all. They just a quarter-mile up the road. Might be worth something. They buy and sell all time of night.”

“How much you think they give us for it?” Ray say, brushing hisself off.

“Least fifty. You and Henry gon’ wrap up that gal. Get our reward for her. I’ll go see about this one.”

“Ah, naw! I’m goin wit you,” Henry say. “You trying to keep the money all to yaself. We posed to split everything. Bitch and baby.”

Ray say to Henry, “You didn’t even know there was gon’ be a baby to split til now.”

“You telling me there ain’t one? Huh, Ray?” Ray don’t say nothing. “Well den, fair’s fair and I’m going wit ‘im.”

“Take Henry,” Ray tell Bobby Lee. “Besides, I don’t like the way you been cuddling up to that thang.”

Bobby Lee walks away, shaking his head, waving his arms, “I don’t need him slowing me down. He mess around and make it die before we get our money.”

Ray grabs Bobby Lee, holds him still, stopping him.

Bobby Lee look Ray straight in the eye, say, “We family, Ray? You know I wouldn’t cheat you.”

After a breath, Ray let him go. “Come on, Henry,” he say. “Help me wrap-up this whore. Bobby Lee, you don’t cept less than forty-five.”

“I want forty-five, too,” Henry say. “Y’all ain’t gon’ cheat me.”

“We cain’t all get forty-five,” Ray say. “Math don’t work that way.”

That night, Bobby Lee didn’t get back til nearly four hours later.

Ray and Henry were already sleep and crouched on the side of the road next to my body. Ray woke up, yelled, “What the hell took you so long?”

“Couldn’t find nowhere to sell that baby,” Bobby Lee said. “So I tossed it in a field. Coons and critters will have her by morning.”

Ray threw up his hands. “You threw the baby out!”

“I knew it!” Henry said. “You just trying to keep the money.”

“Show me where you left the baby then,” Ray said.

“I said that it’s dead and I ain’t got the money. Check my pockets. Go’n check ‘um.” He took off his shoes, his undershirt, stumbled out his trousers and spun around. “You show me where I put the money?”

Ray looked over Bobby Lee careful and Bobby Lee threw his trousers at 'im, pushed his body toward Ray, "Gon, check me, Ray!" Ray pushed back.

"Alright! Fine," Ray said. "Least we got one nigger. Time we got home."

"Aw, y'all," Henry say. "We shoul da let the dogs get a go."

CHAPTER 2: THE OTHER SIDE

Time don't pass here.

Not like I'd expect it to.

There ain't no markers, no signs that this day's changed from one day to the next. An endless day is what death is. The illusion of life.

I was brung here the night I died. Was chasing after a man for no reason I know. He was carrying a bundle—somebody's baby—when I saw that light arc across the sky like a shooting star. It rested on the road just ahead of me, sunk down into the shrubs there, small and white like a hidden egg and set the shrubs on fire, but didn't burn it. Its rays grew taller and wider behind that bush, its white shadow casting itself on me, blinding me, rolling along the ground like flattened wave water. It touched my toes, their tips, climbed up my ankles, to my knees. Its warmth was like summer and I couldn't move. Didn't want to. For the first time ever, I felt safe. This water climbed up and around my waist, fitting me snug like a man's arms wrapped around me—a lover's hug—and it didn't frighten me.

We shot to the sky together, flying without wings, the living world below frozen, yet alive like a perfect painted picture you cain't step in. And in that picture was the past and it was being peeled away like undressing. The final piece of it, a blouse, over my

head. Gone. It was the first time I knew I couldn't remember my name. And it didn't matter.

The sweet-dirty smell of rain met us when we got to this other side. The *other* being nowhere but somewhere. I grabbed his hands and pinned 'em against me with my elbows. "Don't let me go," I told him.

We followed a river. Its speed stripped the water long ways, dark blue and white. Mud brown and green mountains rose on each side of us like tortoise shells, lumbering, joined at the ends by a wooden bridge. The bridge reaching from one mountain to the other, fastened together in the middle like two tortoises were kissing.

The river divided the land into unequal pieces there and the water became clear. The jagged rocks far below the surface were easy to see like coins in a glass box. We swung right toward the largest half where a gust of wind met us and pushed us higher and away from the green of the ground. The river thinned into a blue line like closed lips and the trees surrounding the field shrank to dark green circles. I tried to remember where I was from. Tried again to remember my name.

When we moved downwards again, the trees blossomed and the river smiled wide. A white paddleboat steamer swept up the middle of it and shaped the water behind it into a brush stroke.

On the green field below us, powder like ground pepper tumbled across it as if blown. When we got closer, the powder wasn't powder at all but people. Lots of people. Children and animals and grown folk, people without a hardened form but shaped like who they must have been. Souls. Dead bodied, souls. Some of 'em playing games in the field and throwing balls, a good time, others picnicking like they ain't even dead. What was wrong with them?

I kicked my legs, bucking that man that tricked me and brung me here but we kept coasting to the far corner of the field where dozens of souls sat cross-legged and stone-faced around this patch of dirt, chanting and reaching up to the sky. I clinched onto that man holding me, tighter when we slowed. He cradled me. Held me above the others. Their hands swarmed around us both, grasping, but passing through, like trying to hold on to sunlight. Before I could see the man's face, he let me go and I became one of the others, reaching up to nothing. "Don't leave me here," I said but it was no use.

So now I sit collapsed and cross-legged like the others, swaying my arms. I ain't meant to be dead. So I'm waiting like the others do. For another man to come bringing somebody else. He'll see the mistake that was made and take me back. If I just hold on, I know he will.

Some souls here say that life flashes in front of your eyes before you die. But not always.

Not for me.

I didn't have not one flash before I went. You don't always get to see your first birthday again, the boy or girl you first fell in love with, the day your sister told you she was getting married. The friends you knew.

No. Not before you go.

The others here say that hell is reliving the flashes. Reliving your old life while you're dead. From here, it's more than just seeing it, it's taking part in the memory as if it were real again and happening right now. When you're in the flash, you don't even realize that what you're seeing is from a time already gone. "It's real enough," you say. And it feels like you got all the time in the world when your old life keeps repeating itself and repeating itself and repeating itself in flashes. Those shivers you felt on warm days were you—in two places at once. So powerful they are. Ask the people who survive near death. Ask 'em how the flashes change everything.

Or nothing.

I guess the most important parts of life ain't measured by years or days or minutes anyway but by moments. Moments that come to me here in flashes. Flash—five years old

and there I am, me my sister, learning me how to tumble. Flash—six years old and there I am, the same tumble loosing me my first tooth.

The “hell” part to me ain’t the flashes where the good memories are. It’s going back again and again to the bad memories and not being able to make a damn bit of difference.

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FLASH: SEVEN YEARS OLD

Faunsdale, Alabama 1838

The knockin's always there behind the wall in Momma's room. I call it Momma's music. My sister Hazel calls it, "Momma's stale tune." Hazel's the closest thing I have to a good daddy so she never beat me for misbehaving, never leaves me long, and never tries to touch me the wrong way. She keeps me safe in this world, keeps me safe from the knockin.

We sit in the back room of our dark two-room shack, huddled under a blanket together. She's trying to drown out Momma's song, her hand cupped over my ear, fogging it up with her whispering, telling me we gon' play a game called, "Let's see who can fall asleep the fastest." But after ten minutes of trying even the late of midnight cain't shake my eyelids free like the thumping do the dust so now me and Hazel gon' play a new game. It's called "Who can be the quietest the longest."

We always quiet, though. We got to be so Massa don't remember we here. Hazel say Massa might forget about her, like he did me, since I was born early and he ain't sure I come at all. The whisky keeps him guessing and asking every year. He come out to the yard each fall to hand out our yearly portions and he'll mumble his question about me

under his breath and to the air like he ain't really asking. Hazel say he'll scratch his head, squint his eyes, rub his belly and mumble some words about a baby from a while back, too unsure to make his words clear but hoping somebody pick up on 'em anyway and cure his memory, tell on me. But nobody do. My Momma's worth protecting, I think, so everybody look at him walleyed til he leave the question alone.

Me and Hazel go out late at night or at dusk when Massa's gone to town, or ain't coming back for days. We was wrong twice. Had to run back fast. The fear made me faster than Hazel. Faster than Massa, too. Thank the good Lord.

And thank Him it's safe in the dusk. Dusk is where the magic is. Where you can hide things in the orange-pink of a loosing day. Even the white glint off the green waters of Moss Lake gets blended-gone. Even me. It's why Hazel takes me out in it, hand-holding, running me through the short patch of woods to flat green fields where gray shadows form four feet above the ground, mouth height, and buzz. We race the light through 'em. Netted clouds of gnats they are. They spread away when we run through 'em then close behind us, recaptured. I spit out the slow ones.

Hazel say I get my speed from my daddy. I hate that we ain't got the same one, though. Her daddy was the nigga before Boss. Mine was a tenant farmer that Massa tried to sell a bad piece of land to. "Before you know it," Massa woulda told him, "you'll have your own slaves, too"—the same way he promised every poor white fool renting land

from him. Probably made the offer on one of his celebration nights when he would spend the money he didn't have and invite the whole town, make Momma and two others dress up and smile.

I tell peoples my daddy was a Indian like the ones I seen around here. Hazel keep my hair braided long down my back to prove it. We lie cause family's more important than truth and ain't no point in reminding Momma.

The knockin's getting louder so Hazel say she gon' whisper my favorite story in my ear. "And when the Prince came, he gave her a kiss to remember him by." Thas how she always try to finish my story.

"Ugh! Not a kiss Hazel, nasty! Tell it right."

Hazel's gon' be full-grown soon. She turned eleven her last birthday. I picked the same day for my birthday so I be just like Hazel even though she come four winters before me. Momma said when Hazel was born, she could hardly push her out on the account that Hazel was fat. But that ain't why Massa couldn't sell her like I first reckoned. He sell big fat babies all the time. Even the ones with big heads. Hazel say it's cause money come hard for white folk too like it did when Massa lost most everything he had. That was the year I was born. Hazel say he sold off most of the slaves that lived here with us and said he was gon' buy some new ones but they never come. So we got a two-room cabin on our own. Me and Hazel stay in this back room where cain't nobody see us.

We sleep together on the feather-stuffed mat inside the bed box and keep a wood barrel turn upside down next to us. We use it for a table most times but if Massa seem like he gon' come back this way, Hazel cover me with it and put our piss pot on top so he don't get tempted to wonder.

Hazel's smart. She know everything. Even thangs Momma don't know.

"A'right, A'right," Hazel say. "When the Prince come...he give her a tickle like this!" She grabs my foot and rumbles her fingers around. I laugh so hard my mouth git stuck open and fill up with air so cain't no words, no sound, nothin come out and I cain't breath.

"Pleeessee! Stop, Hazel, stop."

"Sssh!" she say and look over her shoulder toward the back wall listening for Momma's music through the wall. It's still playing. A soft knock. A louder one.

She pinch my big toe, tug it out like she gon' crack it. I hate that. She whisper, "Say, I smell like stinky cheese."

"You smell like stinky cheese," I whisper, giggling.

"No, say, Naomi smells like stinky cheese."

I catch the sound of my laugh in my hands.

Hazel's making shadows on the wall now. I ain't got a dog but Hazel make me one. She use both hands to put a shadow of me on the wall, too, and make the legs walk. It don't look like me but I like it though.

Hazel say she put everything she love on that wall cause it block out the bad. That's why she mark on it for everyone that's gone. She up to five scratches now, all of 'em baby girls. Most of 'em came between us, all but one. That one come and go last summer but I don't miss her though. There ain't enough room for a baby and ain't enough warm when cold winds blow through.

Massa tol Momma that he give her a better life than the others on the row and say he can keep a good eye on us where we is. He's particular about everything—how they hang clothes on the line to dry and how Miss Dean spin the cotton and stitch the clothes. He make a rule that Hazel got to keep her candle burning on the nights he come so he won't mistake her for a rat or a coon and shoot her. So she never forget. The candle she got burning now is brighter than ever.

Massa brung that black man with him tonight, too. The one who started the knockin. I can feel him thumping Momma through the wall. Thunk, Thunk, Thunk, Thunk.

It sets a pace in my chest like a drummer ‘bout to lead a marching band. When I close my eyes, I imagine I see ‘em, black boys, dressed in raggedy clothes, holding fourth hand instruments, ready to please the crowd. They start:

Thunk, beat, thunk, beat, thunk, beat.

They marching on clouds of kicked up dust with Momma leading ‘em on—

Thunk, beat, thunk, beat, thunk, beat.

Momma’s wooden bed’s squeaking, adding a note—

Thunk, beat, squeak. Thunk, beat, squeak.

Faster. Then slower. Then, just the right pace—

Knockin’s stopped. That means Momma’s through.

Me and Hazel tiptoe fast to the split in the wall. She always beat me to it cause she don’t never want me to see Momma after the knockin. She say it’s private. But I want the light from the other room to slide over my face too so I cheat and step back a little, just behind her.

I can see Momma sitting on the edge of the bed wit no clothes on. That black man that was on top of her don’t have no clothes neither, just walking ‘cross the room like he ain’t got no care in the world even though he black like us.

He make the light disappear when he pass us. I whisper, “He done, Hazel?”

Massa Hilden's in there, too, standing in the corner watching. He don't never wear the jacket to that poo poo brown suit. His whole body's swole up in the material, making it cinch tight around his waist like a blouse. A gap in his shirt spreads open where the button's gone. It mouths silent words when his gut moves from breathing. The hair on his belly is poking through the gap, thick and coarse and tangled like a pile of wadded thread, brown and white. It loops and criss-crosses over his shiny, pink, belly fat. Cain't see his silly shoes, though. They make me laugh cause they long and skinny and ugly like dead banana peels. I imagine one day the top of him is gon' topple over his planted feet and his ashy dry legs gon' snap at the ankles and I'm gon' yell, "Timber!"

On the back of his trousers, a lump sticks out above his butt where he keeps his pistol. Its off-white handle the color of new teeth is showing just above his waist and keeps everybody in order, even white peoples. He always got it on him and get downright dangerous when he's drinking. Killed a white man a few years back. He tells people it was a accident but Hazel say he meant to. He shoot at a lot of people. Even my real daddy. It's why Hazel knows my daddy was fast. Massa said my daddy wasted his time, wouldn't sign the papers to buy that land, coulda sold it to somebody else so he shot at 'im. Missed cause my daddy was quick as a striking snake. He called the law on Massa. Didn't nothing happen, though. Except Massa had to pay him to go away.

Hazel say that Massa do what he mean to do. Drunk is his excuse. He like it that way. It keeps his neighbors guessing and keep folks from stealing from him.

“Naomi, get back! You gon’ mess around and get us all killed,” Hazel whisper.

“I just want to see his shoes, thas all.”

“Shhh...” she say, waving me away.

I ease back a little, say, “They leavin? Momma ready for us now?”

I hear Massa. “I need males. Nine months of waiting needs to pay off bigger for me. These girls ain’t pulling in nothing. No more girls, you hear me? Else they gon’ end up like you.”

“Yes’sa, Massa Hilden,” Momma say. “God gon’ bless me wit a boy this time.”

“And how’s Hazel?” he say. Hazel slides away from the wall slow like she don’t want to hear. She come toward me and I step aside, pretend I ain’t interested in getting in front of her to see Massa’s long baby feet.

“She should be of age now,” he say.

“No suh, no suh,” Momma say in a hurry. “She’s just a baby.”

“You just make sure it’s a boy this time.”

“Yes’sa, Massa Hilden. Yes’sa.”

I tiptoe around Hazel fast so she cain’t catch me before I get to the wall but she don’t race me this time. I smash my face in front of the opening in the middle of the wall.

Cain't see nothin. I get on my knees and look through the bottom hole. All I see is Momma sad and Massa gone. I roll off the wall, sit on my butt, cross my arms, mad cause I didn't get to see his funny shoes.

Hazel's on the other side of the room now, sitting close to the candlelight, flipping through the pages of her Bible. Massa's momma gave it to Hazel and two cousins before she died. Said it would keep every one of us from being a heathen. Hazel the only one she taught to read it, though. Just the first page. The rest she figure on her own.

"In the beginning," Hazel say with tears seeping through her lashes, "God created the heavens..." Her voice cracks from the tears caught in her throat. The free ones roll down her face and drip on her page. She looks at me, whispers, "You see that poker near the fire where Momma is?"

I turn back 'round on my knees to see through the hole again. "The one you found?" I say.

"That's it. You see the end? It's sharp. I grind it myself. It's strong now. It's ready."

"Ready for what, Hazel?"

The door slams shut in the other room and I jump up. "Come on, Hazel! Momma's ready for us!"

Hazel reach out to stop me even though she ain't close enough to get me. I stop anyway. "But I want to see her, Hazel."

"Not now."

"I want to see her."

"Not now, Naomi!"

I stomp my foot, spit out my bottom lip and twist up my arms.

"Momma needs more time," she say. "Not like before. She gotta try harder, make a baby. A boy baby for Massa Hilden. Get the most money."

"I know she wanna see us."

"Naomi, look...what Momma's doing...what he make her do. Changes women. Makes 'em different."

"Somethin's wrong wit Momma?"

Hazel sighs the way she do when we daydreaming on the porch at night, outside but still trapped. Them nights when she's telling me about her North. "North," she say, "is a place where we could belong to ourselves and to the people we choose, in love, and kindness, and in the sharing of God's good things."

"Let's go North," I tell Hazel to make her happy again. "Let's find the star. Take Momma and go that way."

"Ain't just a direction," she say. "Ain't that easy." She slaps the spot next to her,

tell me come sit down and I do. She unbraid my hair, say, “North is more than a guide in the night sky. It’s scribble to those who cain't read it. Could mean south or east or west, just the same.”

“That’s why I got you,” I tell her.

She’s my guide, my light in darkness, one of them stars that like a handful of little moons were shrunk to pebbles then flung to the heavens where they sat.

“Then I’ll teach you,” she say. “That part’s easy cause them stars are always there. It’s just that we spend half our days and most our nights sleeping on 'em. Foolish, really. Or maybe it’s just what we need. Night. It’s when we need their light most—in our darkest hours.” *Always look up, Hazel tell me. See it. Listen. There's a message in 'em.* But I don't hear nothin.

She wraps her arms around me, says, “One day, we gon’ go to Boston where it’s safe. We gon’ wear the pretty dresses Momma made us and drink sweet tea all day long.”

/4 THE OTHER SIDE

The hardest part about going through a flash of my life is coming back to dead. I've had three flashes since I been sitting in this spot. Age five, age six and seven. Been marking the day with 'em and with the number of new dead come. I count three hundred and twenty-five. They come one at a time and steady. Most of 'em as confused as I was and most of 'em get themselves moving right into the field with the others without staying here. No regrets.

But me, I keep trying to remember something I forgot in the living world and don't know if it's a regret or a lost shoe. But something I reckon is important. Cain't walk through life one-shoed.

I just barely remember my name. Naomi. It's what my sister called me and what I have to keep repeating to myself so I don't forget again.

I'm still hopeful that one of these bringers of new dead will take me back, but so far, nobody's that's come has gone back. What I still got hope. The only joy here is that music trumpeting from the river behind me. Nobody's been turning around to see where it's coming from not til after the last dead come—a three year old. Me and the blonde girl sitting next to me, watched her go into that field and play. Now, me and this blonde girl turn every time somebody come just to see where they end up. A picnic. A ball game.

She looks my age, this blonde. Sixteen. Seventeen. We're watching the river together this time. Another paddleboat steamer is gliding up. It stops for a moment across the river then sails into the bright light at the end where the water and sky blend together.

While we were watching, another soul got delivered. Now another. The others stand up reaching for 'em like flowers to sunshine but me and the girl don't this time. We watch behind us, to the river, where the boats come. Another big wheel is rolling over the water like a side-lying drum, scooping and spilling a shower over its flat steps. A handful of people are standing on the deck of that steamer waving pretty kerchiefs and dancing to the music. I want to feel it closer.

A purple ball, speckled with gold, tumbles my way, skipping as it bumps along the path toward me. It curves in the grass near the indent of my backside and settles in the groove. I pick up the ball and stand with it in my hands, drop kick it blindly into the field, toward the crowd of folks there. Though the ball is sailing high above the ground, there's no chance it'll hit the dirt without a head under it first. About thirty of 'em gather quick to the place the ball might end up—all of the heads trying to time it perfect. When it gets near low enough, the group of 'em leap to the sky. Cain't tell whose head it hit first but the purple is flying back into play. The ball hits the ground and a brown-haired boy, maybe eight, is the first to get his foot against it.

“Over here!” an old Cherokee man yells, his arms held out to balance himself, his knees bent, his body wide and ready. His careless knuckles graze the white woman next to him, maybe twenty-five, as she nudges the small girl we first followed, only three or four, out of the way.

An urging inside me sends me out to the field with ‘em. And as if it expected me, the ball rolls my way, right in front of me. I tag it with the side of my foot and run along with it in long strides (I didn’t know I could do that). I keep chasing the ball further and further out into the field where the others are. Together, we sway this way and that way, feeling safe in our numbers. I can stay happy this way forever.

/5

FLASH: FIFTEEN YEARS OLD

Since me and Hazel had our birthday four months ago and I turned fifteen, I started to notice things. Like how every spring the musty smell of grass and dew warmed by the sun clogs my nose and makes me sneeze. And how the cotton fields throw small balls of cotton in the air and twirl ‘em round in the wind. The boys trample ‘em under their feet and the girls make doll babies wit ‘em. Sometimes, I imagine the cotton pieces are alive cause of how they chase me if they get too close before I start to move.

I notice how Mama Dean always sits in the same place in the middle of the quad next to that spinning wheel, talking to it. She looks young even though her gray hair say she old. Her skin is still smooth and charcoal black—a color that only God could paint and make look right.

I been sitting with her for hours today, studying how she moves with that machine, holding firm to that cotton, pacing it through its big wooden wheel as it zips and creaks around. From far away, the wheel looks like it’s tacked in the sky on nothin. From here, though, I can see its two wooden hands reaching up from the bench, pinning the wheel between ‘em, coaxing the cotton from Mama Dean’s man sized hands. It slips

through her fingers like webs sliding out of spiders. “Would you like to try, Naomi?” she say.

“No, Mama Dean...all I do is tangle it right up.”

“Yer mama started off tanglin thangs like you. Then she come to be the best. Could spin da mos beautiful textures for you and yer sisters’ dresses.”

I look over at Momma sitting and rocking on the porch all blank-faced and quiet, the same place Hazel put her this morning. It’s hard to imagine her moving any other way or doing anything else. My mind ain’t like Hazel’s. She remember thangs from when she was two years old. I might have a pocketful of memories from before eight. That was about the time Momma stopped talking all together, the same time Hazel put the sixth and seventh marks on the wall—twin girls.

Hazel say pain’s got a way of etching memories into people’s minds, even a child’s, and holds its place there for a lifetime. She say her memories keep her guilty, blame her for not doing the thangs that only grown folks woulda known to do. She say she’s aged into her bad memories, helpless as the day she got ‘em cause she still cain’t fix nothin.

Last year, Hazel smashed my fingers in the door, nearly closed it all the way shut. I remember everything since then. Momma still rocks from morning til whenever Hazel

feeds her, puts her on the pot to piss, or brings her inside. So I say to Mama Dean, “I don't remember her dresses.”

“Sho you rememba,” she say. “Fore you was born, yer momma made you da mos pretty dresses. Had to wait to put ‘em on you cause you wouldn’t come out. Ten months pregnant she was ‘fore you finally let her go. Hung on her side til you was three years ole and yer momma never let you go then, neither. Not til you was ready.” She stops spinning. “We mus remember who we are for each other. We was all somebody's baby once. Had a world of hope in front of us. Yer momma, she a good woman.”

“Naomi! Naomi!” I hear from behind me. Hazel’s flying out of the woods, calling me and grinning, and calling again. I get up and smile, too, cause I know she got something good to say. Trailing behind her is her skinny, big-eyed beau, James. They holding hands even though he ain’t supposed to be here. They been sneaking through the woods together since last summer, going to secret meetings. I followed her one night and saw her meet eight negroes from the plantation down river where James come from. All of ‘em was boys except the piss yellow green-eyed girls and Hazel. They sat around the fire, real close and quiet, talking private. Hazel started off the group praying, reading the Bible and that was alright, I guess. But after then, they got to talking crazy, talking bout running North. All but Hazel was House Negroes. *What they got to run for? What they got to lose? They live in the big house, get treated good. Now they trying to trade a easy*

life and a kind master to starve to death and get killed. Freedom, they said. North, they said. I keep my freedom in my mind.

The more I listened to Hazel, though, I could see her being fooled. Nodding her head and saying her *um hum's and thas right's*. I knew she didn't mean none of it. The only reason she go to them meetings is cause a James. He's sweet.

The night I followed 'em, I watched how he was wit' her. The way he reached out for her hand, hardly touched her. He musta saw in her what I saw, too--her *shy* turning her hardened brick body to something looser. Frail. Like crumbled rock. No...sand. Like she was made of drying, wet, sand and any brush could crumble her away. So when he was there with her, he didn't clamp down on her hand; he was gentle-like, skipped his fingertips along the back of her hand then around to her palm and through her fingers before settling into the spaces. She didn't break apart. Only her gritty edges tumbled away and changed her. One day, I want to be changed, too.

"Tell me, Hazel! Tell me," I say just as she get to me.

"We gettin married!" she say.

We both scream and hug and Mama Dean claps her hands then holds 'em to her mouth. I say, "You gon' have to practice me now, Mama Dean. We goin to a weddin!"

I grab James and do a twirl and a jig wit him, let him go and I do another dance on my own. Hazel puts her hands on my shoulders, trying to hold me in place. "Naomi?"

“I’m just warmin up, Hazel!”

“Naomi?” she say, pressing down harder on me. “We goin’ North. We gon’ run.”

My stomach drops out me.

My feet stop directly.

All I can think about is Berry and Francis who made it as far as the creek then didn’t. “Run?” I say.

“They talkin bout war, Naomi. War to free us. The time to be a slave is over.”

I start fixing Hazel’s hair real fast and put it how she like it so she forget about running.

“We all goin together. You and Momma comin, too.”

I want her to stop talking about war or leaving so I bend my arms in her face to get her hair good. It’s a accident that I’m smashing my arm in her mouth so she cain’t talk, but her mused mouth keeps moving anyway. “Me and James gon’ be like Abraham and Sarah in the Bible,” she say.

“You want your hair up or down?” I say. “It’s pretty up.”

“You hear what I said, Naomi?”

“It’s your wedding, Hazel. I’m gon’ make you the prettiest bride ever was. Yep, up it is.”

She untangles herself from behind my arms and yells to Momma on the porch.

“Momma! Me and James gon’ ask permission. We gettin married!”

Momma don’t move.

She never do.

/6 THE OTHER SIDE

I hear the boat, before I see it—water pouring, steam puffing and that music. That music that calls me, and now, familiar voices onboard calling out to me. I stop playing ball with the others, yell to the boat, “Somebody call me?”

I run to the sidelines of the field, shout again, “Did somebody call me?” Only the music plays. I want that music.

That boat.

There’s something good on there.

I hurry along to the water’s edge, find the blonde girl there. How she get here? She must have felt the goodness on that boat, too. She say, “We need to look for a dock or a landing to get on that boat.” We try but we cain’t find one.

Ain’t none.

The boat passes us by.

I sit down on the soft trim grass along the shoreline, kick my feet in the water and wait for the next boat to come. But the girl don’t want to wait. She turns around and joins the ball games in the field behind us and don’t come back. I’m gon’ sit here, though.

Wait.

A new boat is churning by. I leap to my feet and hop up and down, wave my hands, let the captain see me but the boat coasts right past.

When the next boat come, I jump and down again. When the next one come, I don't. Or when the next one after that do. I don't want to get on no more. Ain't no way or no use. I'll lay here in this perfect cut grass, pick at the tiny yellow flowers. Put one in my hair.

A new soul stands next to me. That Cherokee. I look up at him and see him excited like I was about that boat, jumping. *He's wasting his time.* He don't stop there, though. He wades out into the water chasing that boats' spinning wheel, gets washed back to this bank. He try again while I watch. The next time, I don't. I lay down with my flower. Sleep. Wake-up. There he go again. Fool. This time, he's swimming upstream first. He catches the side of the new boat, it drags him along. Damn. He washes back again. *How many times he gon' try that. He got to know by now he cain't swim across.*

After three more missed boats, Mista Cherokee climbs out the water and joins the folks in the field again. The animals that's here chase him playfully as he go.

I sit cross-legged looking across the river. On the other side is a wall of trees. I can see through 'em a little bit. Darkness and a fog of what looks like other souls move

behind there, following the rivers' path to the end. I blow them one of my pretty flowers. It floats toward the river and disappears. I think I might have a picnic.

Here comes another boat splashing water and making music. My feet tap. Strange that I could feel it again. *Did I hear my name?* I stand up and look toward its deck, yell, "Somebody call me?"

No answer.

I cain't see nobody I know, no face I recognize. This boat's moving slower than the others. *Maybe it's gon' stop for me.* I jump up and down, say, "Hey! Wait!"

It passes me by again, stops across the river at the end of that line of souls. The souls at the front are getting on-board. They cheer. *What are they cheering for?* The boat's wheel churns again, taking its passengers into the light.

"Wait!" I yell over and over again. I'm gonna run after it this time. I run toward the end of the river on my side. Ain't no way across.

The bridge! I remember that bridge. There's a way.

I sprint up the riverside to where I remember it. It's here. Looks a hundred feet high. I grab its rope railing and stare up the thousand steps leading to the top. *I cain't get up there.* I step back, let go of the rail. I'm gon' find my way back to where I was sitting near the water. I think I'll have that picnic, after all.

The cheering from the other side starts again, urging me to go back to them steps. I run up ‘em, clearing ten, twenty, at a time. The bridge planks thud hollow under my feet, its ropes slip hot through my hands as if I had flesh. When I get to the other side of the bridge, there are no steps down, just a steep slide of shiny, smooth stone. *There ain't no coming back.*

The sound of new cheering makes my legs buckle and I let go of the ropes, gliding down that cool smooth rock, letting it sweep under me. The patch of grass at the bottom is like soft pillows and I roll into it. *This is where I belong.*

/7

FLASH: FIFTEEN AND A HALF

The rain's been slapping the ground all day, soaking through the house, making our floors mud.

Hazel put a fire on to keep us warm. I like to watch it burn yellow and orange and see-through—a halo of colors birthing light through the ruins like the rainbow after the flood. It reminds me that God's still here.

I been getting better at my reading since it's been getting dark early. Hazel's been practicing me for hours today. But ever since Hazel said, "Use the only part of your backside wit some meat on it," I tilted onto my thighs and this oak chair don't hurt so much no more. If I was big and healthy like Hazel, I could sit any ole kinda way but as it is, I got to sit crooked.

The boys especially like her healthy. Say she got big bosoms. Heard one of 'em say they hung like two big oranges in a scarf. You'd think they could see right through her clothes the way they stare at her chest so. She keeps her arms crossed when she outside so cain't nobody see 'em. Peoples think she got a bad attitude because of it. Truth is, the only thing she ever hated was her big tits. I wouldn't mind if I had 'em even

though she say they sweat underneath. I'd wipe 'em dry all day long if it meant I could have some but as it is, I ain't even got a bump yet.

Hazel promised that my fat's gon' come after I get my period. I ain't told her it come last month cause I'm gon' surprise her. Just wake up one morning wit a big fat butt and big tits and Hazel gon' say, "Why you wearin my britches?" And I'm gon' say, "My ass too big for mine." Then we both gon' laugh.

But today, I got just one fat leg.

Yesterday, a wasp stung me on it when I was popping berries from that ole mulberry bush next to the pigpen. It hurt so bad and I cried so loud til I seen my leg getting big. By the time I got home, it was swolled-up like a air blown pig gut. I ran back to that ole bush and spent the rest of the night swatting at it so that wasp come back and get the other one. He didn't come back though. Now, I got just one pretty leg. I been sitting wit it half off the chair, swinging it around so Hazel can see. But she ain't said nothin, yet.

Momma's been pacing the room since she got back from the church gathering this morning. She stopped at the window shutters to brush the dust off and started scraping 'em with her fingernails. Thas how she keep busy sometimes.

Me and Hazel keep to our reading, taking turns. It's Hazel's turn now. "Yay tho I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

"Hazel?" I say. "God like art?"

"What? No, *art* means are. You are with me."

"Well, why they talk like that? Thy and tho?"

"That's just how God talk. Let me finish."

"A'right."

"Thou preparest a table..."

"Hazel?"

"What."

"You think God understands us then? We don't talk like that."

"He understands all different kind a talk."

"What about Momma? She don't talk. He understand her too?"

"I imagine he do. Now let me finish then you can read."

I be quiet.

She starts slow this time like she think I'm gon' say something but I'm just gon' listen this time.

She say, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

“Hazel? What that mean?”

“God’s always wit chu. Even when you don't think He is. When your enemies are all around you.” She pushes the Bible to me. “Here, now you read.”

Her voice trails to quiet and a strange hush blankets the room but not cause of Hazel’s not talking. Even the rain outside stopped beating and Momma stopped scratching. It’s like the quiet after the lightening and before the thunder. Hazel turns ‘round to the door, then back to me--maybe she hear the quiet, too.

After a second, she taps the Bible for me to read.

A loud knock at the door stops me, scares me. I don’t know who that knock belongs to cause it’s hard and slow and nobody’s supposed to be out after dusk on a Sunday.

Hazel listens to the door like she’s using her whole body to hear it, turns toward it but don’t get up.

Momma starts brushing the shutters again.

“Hazel?” I whisper.

She puts her hand over my mouth. When the knock starts again, she gets up quickly but I don’t want her to answer. She go to the shutters, peaks through the split and dashes back to me, whispering, “It's Massa Hilden. Go in the other room wit Momma.”

She snatches the Bible and pitches it under the table. I run quiet across the floor, grab Momma's hand on the way and we slide through my bedroom door, I turn over my hiding barrel to get under it but I don't go. I leave it ready and swing back to the door to listen, crack it open to see.

Massa walk in before Hazel get back to the door.

"Massa Hilden?" Hazel say. "We wasn't expectin you. Momma came down wit a spell this mornin, been sick all over the place."

He strolls to the middle of the room carrying silence with him. He stops next to the table, brushes the arms of his brown suit jacket—first time I seen him in it—and straightens the cuffs while he looks around. He takes a cigar out his pants pocket, lights it, sucks on it in short spurts like a baby on a teet, gets it going. His eyes draw to the floor when he do. He moseys over to the Bible there, picks it up, throws it on the table, flips through its pages.

Hazel stands watching him from next to the opened front door. I reckon she hope he blow out.

Massa closes the Bible, walks his fat fingers across the tabletop then around to the backside of the table, next to the fire pit. He picks up the poker, stabs the wood, ash sizzles and logs thud. Hazel don't know what to say over his quiet. Finally she say, "I'm

sorry we not so tidy this Sunday evenin. Momma's been fightin a bad sickness and I don't want you to catch it."

"Darlin. I'm not here to see your momma. I'm here to see you."

"Me, suh?"

He pokes the fire, its sharp end sticking in the log this time. He shakes it til the log falls off. "It's been quite a few years now. No boys from your momma, just the girls. Got a pretty penny for 'em but I still need my boys, they bring in the real money. You understand that don't you, Hazel? Finances." His eyes slide toward her.

I open my door a little more so I can see better. *Hazel's right about me, I never can wait.*

He say, "I need someone to take your momma's place. A strong woman." He raises his hand, waves at the opened front door. "You don't mind if my friend, Boss, come in, do you, Hazel?"

That black man come in. *I know him.* He the same one who lay on top of Momma.

Massa keeps poking at the fire as Boss come in. When Boss closes the door, Hazel steps back slowly to the center of the wall and Boss set his eyes on her, slithering into the space between she and Massa. All three of 'em are to the left me and Momma. She side-steps right, away from us, but there ain't nowhere to go but into Boss or fly.

Massa buries the orange tip of his cigar in our table, say, “Now then, Hazel. Let's see what you can do.”

Boss takes a step toward her and she creeps back around the wall, nearing our door, her back to us. She looks over her shoulder, straight into my eyes and stops, turns herself right into ‘im. He grabs her by her arms and she starts breathing fast like a mouse caught in a jar. Boss pulls her into the middle of the room and Massa meets ‘em there. He snatches the back of her hair so her face shoots to the ceiling.

I don't want to cry for her.

I scoot back along the wall, squat down to my old peeking hole and frame my hands around it. I mash my cheek to the wood and air streams through the space, watering my eye. My tears are cold before they fall. I wipe ‘em away making the sight of Hazel across the room, clear.

Boss is pressing his front against her while she's smashed against the wall next to the fire. She shuts her eyes and turns her head to the side. A soft wisp of hair falls and soaks into the sweat on her face. Boss brings a dark finger to it, sweeps her hair away to kiss her cheek.

Just then, she rears up, sending her knee between Boss's legs, escaping back along the wall on the other side of the fire. Boss grabs her waist, lifts her up, her legs and

arms keep running like she still on the ground. Faster, she go. Her wild swinging sends ‘em both back against the wall. Her foot slides in the fire.

I wish I never looked through this hole.

Hot tears like oil pour down my face while Momma stands in the doors’ gap looking out toward Hazel. The firelight flickers on Momma’s face from the front room, blinking shadows of Hazel and Boss on her chest.

I get up, go to Momma, whisper, “Momma, you want me to tell you a story?”

Her eyelids flutter.

“I can tell you my favorite one. It’s about a Prince. I cain’t tell it good as Hazel, though.”

I hear Massa in the other room. “Hold still, girl.”

Their thin shadows from the other room are on Momma’s face—two lines down ‘em like they were drawn from ash—one line Hazel’s shadow, the other, Boss’. The two lines come together on Momma’s face to form one, making Momma’s skin turn gray. Her eyes, though. They come alive.

Momma pushes me over, bursts through the door. “Choose me!” she yell to Massa. “What chu want me to do? I do it.”

“It’s too late, Letti,” Massa say, letting go of Hazel.

Momma say, "I'll give you a boy this time! I'll be good. I could do it this time. God gon' bless me wit a boy. Please, Massa, please!" She throw herself down and wraps her arms around Massa's leg, hugging him like she love him. He kick her off.

"Momma!" I yell, stumbling in the room.

"No!" Hazel say.

"Hot damn!" Massa say. "Where have they had you hidin, darlin?"

"I'm ready," Hazel say. "I'm ready."

Massa come close to me, his nose bright red, whisky is steaming from his pores. He touch my cheek with his damp yellow fingers. "You growing up nice. Yeah, nice and tender."

"Leave 'er lone!" Hazel say.

"Don't worry," Massa say. "I won't bite her." He grins at me like I'm valuable.

I hold still, hear the buzz of that strange silence again. Broken by footsteps trotting up our porch outside. A knock at our door follows. This time, quick and eager.

Nobody moves.

"Get it," Massa tell Hazel.

She don't go.

"Girl!" he say.

This time Hazel go. She open the door slowly.

James, Hazel's fiancé, stands there with a hand full of freshly picked wild flowers. He pushes 'em to Hazel, smiling. "These are for you. I picked 'em special."

From where I stood behind her, I could see a tear fall from her chin to her chest. She shakes her head slow toward James, trying to make it so Massa cain't see.

James looks confused. "Hazel? Those joyful tears?"

"Don't leave the boy waitin'," Massa say and push the door open all the way. He puts his arm around Hazel. "Take the flowers, girl."

Hazel reach for 'em.

"Where's your manners?" Hilden say. "Come on in, boy." James comes in and his eyes search the room in a hurry. He stands across the room alone and small looking. "What brings you my way on a beautiful evening like tonight?" Massa say. "Oh...the flowers. That's real nice."

James bows his head meekly and folds his hands in front of him so he ain't a threat. His Sunday shirt hangs past his knuckles. James say, "We was gon' ask permission, suh."

"You was gon' ask permission."

"Yes'sa. Got permission from Massa Brown and..."

"I look like Massa Brown?"

"Naw, suh," James say. "If you just have a word wit Massa Brown, suh."

Massa relights his cigar, puffs it slow, patting the top and bottom of it with both lips. He say, "Seems to me I got a fox in my hen house, Boss. A fox messin round with what's mine. What I clothe, feed and provide shelter. Screwin 'em before me. What you think about that, Boss?"

Boss shakes his head. "Very disrespectful, suh."

"How you punish somethin like that?" Boss lifts his shoulders. Massa pulls his cigar out of his lips slow but makes a quick jerk of his hand. Before I know where to, a loud CRACK! Hazel and Momma throw themselves to the floor. The wall explodes a hole of blossoming splinters. Shards of wood fly in my face and prick the front of my neck, chest. The sound crashes in my ears. I cup 'em to stop the ringing but a smell like burnt hair and wood sweeps the air and stings my nose. Everything sits still now except for Massa's gun making its smoke dance.

James ain't moved.

His eyes are wide open with a hole in his forehead.

A line of blood slides down like sweat.

He falls to the floor.

I scream!

Momma yell, "Oh Jesus, Jesus! Oh Jesus, Jesus!" rocking herself on the floor.

Hazel's hands draw to her mouth and tears cover her eyes in a instant. Frozen.
The way Momma use to be.

“Shit!” Massa say. “See what you made me do!” he say to Boss. “You short-poured the lead again. Made the bullet split. I told you to re-melt the whole damn thing together. You can't patch a bullet!” He puts his hands behind his head. “Fuck me. You know what that's gon' cost me, Boss? Do ya? I was just gonna scare 'im.”

Massa rams his pistol back down his pants, its pearly white handle flashes us from under his brown jacket. He follow the bullet's path to the wall, touching the impact. “See, Boss? It shoulda missed and gon' clean through here.”

“Yes, suh, Massa, suh.”

Massa blow out hard, washes his hands over his face. “You made me kill that fox.”

Hazel won't move her eyes from James. Tears drip steady from her chin while Momma cry, “Jesus, Jesus.”

My hands stay on my ears, afraid to move, afraid to let the sound out and make all this true.

“Now, where were we?” Massa say. “Yes, Hazel...”

Massa get bothered by Hazel gazing at James. “Boss, get that fox outta here.”
Boss pick him up, but he cain’t get a good hold on him. He folds James’ limp arms across his chest to make ‘em stay put, carries him to the door.

I ain’t letting go my ears.

Momma’s knees creak back and forth on the floor.

“Where were we?” Massa say again.

He notice me, staggers toward me. The invisible wall that keeps space between us pushes me back toward the fire, forces me to the side of the table, forces my hands from the side of my ears. I hold the table.

The pain of what Massa just done rushes to me, red-blooded. My neck’s getting hot, my hands is sweating. Hazel cries are out loud now. She runs over to Boss, pulls at his arm. “Please, let him alone,” she beg.

Massa say, “Gon’ get ‘im outside. It’s gettin late.”

My chest is on fire with memories of Boss on Momma and what Hazel tol me about that poker. I see it next me, pressing me to take it.

Boss opens the door.

I spin around and grab that poker, launch it deep inside Massa’s belly before my mind tell me no. Massa’s jaw drops, his eyes bulge, he begs me to stop but I ain’t gon’ stop. I push it through him, my hands slide down the pole, his blood squeezes out warm

around my fists. Boss drops James, throws himself at me trying to beat me loose, but I cling to that poker, shake it in. Boss rams his fist in me—Wham! To my arm. Wham! To my head. My face go numb.

He cripples my hand and I let go that poker, my legs tangled in his. He falls with me over the table to the floor. Hazel's Bible slides across the mud to the fire pit.

I dig my heels in the ground, scooting back away from Boss but he keep chasing. He grabs my legs, pulls me into him but with all my might I sidekick him up through his nose, my heel cracks its bridge, his head flies back, the snap shakes through my shin. I see bone split, him grabbing his face, choking, blood pouring through his hands, his eyes watering closed.

He stops coming.

I push across the floor, behind Hazel. She's hunched over James trying to fix him.

Boss rolls up to a sit across from us, trying to get on his feet, trying to see. I move away from Hazel and James so Boss come and only get me. He starts crawling on his hands and knees, half-blind, his squinty reddened eyes drill through me, his blood's raining to the floor. *I don't wanna fight no more.*

Momma jumps on top of him. She got the poker now, one end in her hand, the other in Boss' back, digging it in.

“Momma!” I yell.

She look at me, satisfied, protecting me and Hazel. Make me remember I love her.

A second shot races around the room. I throw myself to the floor but Hazel and Momma don't this time. The blast echoes from everywhere. I look at Momma to see if she know where it come from. "Momma?" She don't let her eyes fall from mine when blood spreads from the middle of her dress. "Momma!" I yell as she falls over.

Massa sits perched on his knees, holding that pistol. The weight of it flops his hand sideways where he falls, too.

Momma is still. I scoot across the floor to rouse her but she ain't moving at all. Only the wind of her last breath do. Then the rattle of Massa's. The wet on Momma's dress makes my hand red. "Momma's dead! Hazel! Momma's dead!"

Hazel won't look away from James. She's holding his hand. I can hear her talking to him, praying. I wait long enough and say, "Hazel, what we gon' do?"

"Amen," she say and stands up, looks at me in my eyes, strong as always. She see Momma and her knees buckle. She stand straight again, say, calmly, "I want you to go, Naomi. Far as you can. Go where cain't nobody find you."

"Where I'm gon' go, Hazel? I can't leave you and Momma."

She nods and goes over to the fire pit, pulling her smoldering Bible out the fire. She presses it on her dress to stop it smoking.

"Momma's dead, Hazel!" I say, shaking.

She come to me, hug me, makes me feel safe, but it cain't stop my crying.

“Naomi, listen. Listen! You gotta go outta here. You gotta go North, you hear me? Ain't nothin here for you.” She presses her Bible against my chest. I hold it tight.

“I don't know where that is!”

“Follow the star like I showed you. Go only in the night.” Boss starts moaning from the floor. I cain't do this no more. Hazel go over to him, stomps the poker in and he shuts up. She heaves it out and tears her clothes with it; slices into her own flesh, along her ribs, til she bleed. She brings it to me and puts it in my hand, bloody. “You gon' need to protect y'self.”

“Hazel?” I say.

“You gon' need food.” She get the stale rolls from next to the oven and shoves 'em down my blouse. “You water yourself in the stream.”

“But Hazel...”

“People gon' come lookin, Naomi. Come lookin for all us. Ain't nobody certain you was ever here.” She peels off Massa's dark brown jacket, rolling his fat doughy body from side to side when she do.

“Hazel, please!”

She puts his jacket around my shoulders. “We was all attacked,” she say. “I got to be here to tell 'em.”

“I cain’t make without you.”

She pulls open the front door. “Go, Naomi.”

I creep to it, wiping my tears. “Hazel? Please.”

“Go!” she yell.

She grabs the back of my head, kiss my cheek before she push me out the door. I hurry out, looking up to the starless, clouded sky, running through the dark, holding Massa’s jacket high above my head.

“Don't look back, Naomi. You hear me! Don't you look back!”

Maybe Hazel will put a mark on the wall for me, too.

/8 THE OTHER SIDE

We stand in hundreds of rows, ten to a line, like trout across a stream, side-by-side, shoulder to shoulder, huddled together and inching forward along this pathway—a wide tunnel formed by trees. The mesh of branches arched above us forms a ceiling so tightly wound that it looks like night in here, the tiny spaces, stars.

I fell backwards when I first come and saw all these people. Thousands of souls waiting in front of me. This cain't be, I told myself before I watched what was supposed to be my boat sail on without me. Gone.

Through the wall of trees to the right of us, I can still see. Not clearly cause it's hidden behind the branches and the tree trunks but there's a few small gaps between the trees just big enough to let me put together the whole picture in my mind.

Another boat is churning by on the river. Cause of all the trees, the boat seem like it disappear, appear again then disappear, appear, again and again, all the way down the line.

To the left of me, beyond the crisscrossed wall of branches, is the living world we left behind. I know it's so cause somebody ahead said, "Alabama." The name sounds so familiar. Maybe that's just cause it's nighttime over there, too. Full moonlight's setting everything aglow.

Those Alabama trees feel cruel to me and I don't know why. I cain't remember much of that life. Almost forgot my name again. Naomi.

I look back through the trees to the living world again and it holds my attention and not just because of the light. I know this place. The way God shaped these trees. So unique they all are like markers without a hanging sign. I've seen it before. Somewhere. But this ain't my home. I'd feel that I think. Something about this Alabama, though. I was running through here for something. Something important.

I died here!

I remember that spot. This one. My body was laid out just two miles from here. *Is this still the same night?* Gunpowder is still in the air. *This is that night.* The smell of burnt clings to the mist of my new body and to that old world, too, leaving the taste in my mouth bitter. And now, there ain't nothing I can do about it.

A black boy fidgets next to me. About my age, maybe a little older—eighteen or nineteen. He's scratching his arms. His whole body is puckered and scarred and shriveled but he smiling big as the circus. He look at me and I turn my head away from him, pretend I'm watching what I can see of the river.

He say, "We almos' there! Can you believe it!"

I pretend I don't hear him.

“We close now. The sufferings over,” he say, and bounce up and down.

I keep watching the river.

“We goin home!”

“Home?” I say.

“Yes, m’am. Fixin to get on that boat. Go to Glory.” He scratch a pockmark on his neck then smile. “I cain’t wait to see Big Ma and Granddaddy and my sister and....”

“How you know?” I say.

“Big Ma went the year before I did, that’s how.”

“And what? She told you from dead?” I say laughing. Lord knows I ain’t talked to nobody.

“When you been sick long as I was, bad as I was, your peoples come back and help you get ready.” He stares at the bullet hole in my chin. “Look like your life’s been took.”

I rub the spot. Don’t want to remember how it happened.

“I’m sorry,” he say.

I don’t say nothing.

I rise up on my tiptoes, try to see as far as I can ahead. More souls lumber forward, sway as they do.

“All these people...” I say. “It’s gon’ take forever to get on that boat. I don’t see why we got to wait at all. We should be like those already on.”

“It takes time to burn this old life away,” he say, scratching the marks on his arms. “Those folks on the boat was mostly perfect before they passed on. I still have scars.”

“Scars? That’s it? That’s why we in this line? Who cares what we look like?”

“Not what we look like,” he say. “The spirit remembers pain and hurt. Can even take it with you to the next life. Don’t you want to leave this behind?”

I look through the trees to Alabama, but don’t answer.

He say, “We all got things we need to leave behind. Forgive ourselves for what we done. Didn’t do. Some of the ones in this line won’t make the boat cause they keep holding on to the pain of that life.”

“What happens to them ones that don’t make it?”

“Don’t rightly know,” he say. “Some folks get sent back to do life again.”

“We already doing that.”

“For good,” he say.

“Hell if I do! I know how it end.” I break out of line, go backwards up the line, away from him.

“There ain’t a way back,” he say.

“I got over here. I could get back across the river.”

The crowd of souls push me by the weight of their numbers. I find myself rolled back into place again, next to the boy. “Well, I ain’t never goin back to my old life,” I tell him. “Hurtful enough the first time.”

“You can change things, you know,” he say. “When you’re there. In one of the flashes. If you listen and hold still from the noise of living. You can change things. In that quiet, you can hear the voice of you and the you’s that came before.”

“Buuuullshit!” an old woman behind us say, adding more voice to her “u”. “All of that is buuuu-ull shit, if I ever heard it. How the hell you know?” She move closer to the boy next to me. “You don’t know shit. Where have you been that we haven’t? Nowhere, that’s where. So anything you got to say is guessing. And even if it were true, who wants to live life slow and quiet. Sure as hell ain’t me. No, sir. That’s misery, that’s what it is.”

When she come around in front of us, walking backwards, I can smell her scented of herbs and burnt paper. She say, “I listened when I was alive—to shamans and witch doctors. And I was a rich woman because of it. But money can’t buy you life, can it? I tried. Tried everything. Even Chinese medicine. Never trust an American doctor.” She coughs and her voice becomes raspy. “My children forced him on me, said I need proper care, and look at me now. Fifty-nine years old. The prime of my life. Not even a pearl

earing with me now. I would have spent my fortune to stay alive rather than give a half-dime to my ungrateful and hateful children.”

I look at the boy but he don't say nothing.

“And now you say we may have to live that old life again and again, forever? And on top of that, shut up in case we can hear ourselves. I say, buuu-ull shit!”

The boy don't want a fight. She see that fact and leaves him alone, goes back behind us to her own place in line. Down the path, souls are pushing onward cause another boat is coming. But a few of those at the front of the line that's supposed to get on next, don't wait no more. They wander out the line as if they forgot what they were there for. They keep ahead where a black tunnel is then disappear. Only howling come out now. *I'm afraid.*

I ask the pocked boy, “What's your name?”

“Eli,” he smiling. “Don't have a last name.”

“Eli, with no owner,” I say. “You scared?”

“Don't worry,” he say to me, smiling with gums and teeth, and flared nostrils. “I got a good feeling about you. We both gon' be celebratin in the Great Beyond soon.”

A boat stops at the mouth of the river. Eli bounces up and down, clapping his hands. His scars are disappearing in front of my sight. He say, “You hear that? Feel that? Like a poundin in your chest?”

I listen and hear the music. Feel it in me. I know that feeling. It feels like love.
The excitement of it sends me bouncing like he do.

I run my fingertips over the hole in my chin. I feel it closed and only slightly dented. His shriveled body begins to plump like dried-out butter beans soaked in water. As we move forward, his skin softens and smoothes. I jump higher.

Our row of souls narrow to just a few wide making me feel closer to our old living world on the left. We shuffle along side it and wind through it like a tunnel inside the nighttime, Alabama woods. The night of Alabama and the darkness of our tunnel come together like we're walking straight through the living—its trees and bushes and even animals without them noticing. We coming up on a three hundred pound boar now. The height of him is at my waist but I ain't scared. I kick through his bear-like face, his body and snout like a pig and his two yellow fangs sprouting up from his bottom jaw like a V. He don't even notice me. Don't notice none of us. He keeps eating his acorn, his pecans and a rat.

Further along the road, a deer rushes toward us, spooks when he gets near, surprises us all when he scatters backwards through the woods. Eli say, "Deer are sensitive."

Our line stops moving.

Pin pricks of moonlight streak from one side of our dark pathway to the other, drawing hazy strands of light we can move through. It reflects off of our misty gray shadows like candlelight against fog. But it can't pass through us. I raise a palm in front of a fleck of light, stopping it from reaching the other side of our path.

It's funny that I can catch the light without trying to.

I keep my palm up, letting the speck of light shine there. I move my hand toward the tree line where the light came from. It grows into a large pale blue circle on my palm, like a flat moon. It suddenly disappears.

"What happened to the moonlight?" I say to Eli.

"Ain't moonlight," he say. "It's threads of light. Love. Sewn into all of us. Connects us to each other. Even when we dead."

"Ain't too well sewn," I say. "I put it out easy."

"It's there," he say.

I look at my palm. *It ain't.*

"Just cause you cain't see it, don't mean it's gone. Cain't put out someone else's love for another."

I back up, let the fleck find my palm again, try to close my hand around it.

"Cain't have it for yourself, either," he say. The light fades over my knuckles.

I hop alongside the trees, fizzling out lit threads like wet fingers on a burning wick. One don't go out, though. I swat at it and it still don't go.

The stream of folks run again, pushing me along and I go with 'em. I look back one last time, forgetting why I am.

The old woman from behind us leans into me, the smell of herbs still steaming off of her. She whispers, "There's a way to live again. To make a new life possible."

"I know," I say. "I'm getting on the boat."

"I'm not talking about the boat. I'm talking about leaving now. Pass through that wall of branches and live again as you are. The boy didn't tell you everything."

"I don't want my old life back. I want a new one. One of goodness. Forever."

"You can live a new one there, too," she say pointing through the Alabama trees.

"I'll use your words," I say. "How would you know that? You've been in this line like me."

"Like I said. Money can't buy everything. But it can buy many things," she smiles. "I travelled the world in my day. I've talked to shamans and priests. Been to Rome and Africa. I know what we're capable of."

I don't trust her.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” she say. “It’s simple, really. All you have to do is step into a living body. Take it. Possess it. Make it your puppet. Use it to do what you want. To do all the things you never had a chance to do.”

“I wouldn’t take over somebody else’s life!” I say. “Take away their chance at livin. I had my chance.”

“They’d get a new chance, anyway,” she say. “After it’s over and they die with you in ‘em, they’d get another chance. I’m sure. Besides that, you don’t have to use them. You could just step inside someone and only be a passenger. A Watcher. I’d do it.”

“Then why don’t you?” I say, bothered she’s talking to me, bothered our line’s stopping again.

“Cause I don’t have a single thread that ties me there. My selfish children could never love anyone but themselves. You need someone on the other side of these walls that loves you. Someone over there still holding the other side of your thread of light, keeping that love alive, calling to you.”

Eli say, “Don’t listen to her. There’s no path back here once you go for good. You can’t die again. You’ll be lost. Like one of them spirits haunting a world full of strangers. Caught in some bad memory. Right now, you got a chance to make it.”

I look out through this wall that separates us from Alabama. *Is that my blood?* Right there, clear as day, my blood is on the broken branch. I gasp when pieces of that

memory find me here—I was shot and killed! Running. The reason I was running, I don't know. I cain't remember what I was carrying, either. Only thing I'm sure of is that that blood belongs to me.

Just ahead of me, at the front of our line, some folks are drifting away, wandering from our path like they lost or forgot what they were waiting on. Some of 'em already made it past the place where the boat comes. They disappear down that tunnel like them others. A howl of wind follows. They gone.

I put my hand up to a new light shining in our path. I follow it to the edge of the woods, see how far I can take it before the light goes out. I wonder if that light will remind me of what I was carrying. It goes out without giving a clue.

I find another. Got four flecks on my hand this time. I pretend to love whoever's on the other end of these, try to see if the lights will stay on for a lie, and walk toward the tree line. Eli say, "I wouldn't go messin around in there. Those threads don't belong to you."

He cain't know everything.

I point behind us, say, "Back there a light stayed on for me."

Another step toward the tree line and the flecks stay alight on my hand. I take my first step through the wall of trees, twisting my body through a jagged opening, its thorns and bark tearing my side, stinging me like I got flesh. The lights go out. I keep walking

straight ahead anyway, through the trees and in the dark, pulled there somehow. And somehow, finding myself back on the path, next to Eli.

He say, "Told you so."

"How long I been gone?" I say.

"Not even a blink of a eye."

I hold my hand up again, catch two flecks, muster all the feelings of love I got. I open my eyes and find myself dotted with flecks of light on my arms, my belly, my legs and all over. I walk back through the trees with all of 'em, find myself back on the path next to Eli a second time. Then a third. A merry-go-round in the dark.

The old woman say, "You're like me. No light. Can't get through there without your own light, some rope pulling you through, leading you."

"I don't want to go no way," I say, walking up our path. I wipe my hand down my front and feel my palms, my side, stinging then burnin from the gashes there. Everywhere those branches touched made more slices; bubbling up to blisters.

"It burns, don't it?" Eli say as our line starts moving again. "Those trees, their bark, their thorns, is the fabric that keeps us here. We're sewn on like buttons up a coat, followin its tracks home."

"Fabric or no fabric, it burns like hell."

"Naw, in hell you get ripped apart."

“So you say,” I tell him, mad cause he was right about following the lights.

Our line stops again. Eli grabs my arm, shrieking in joy, excited that we’re close now. I smile, too. Excited for both us.

As we file along the wall of trees, I don’t look through ‘em no more. I want to forget that old me, that body laying there about three miles back now. I don’t want to take the memory of it with me, ‘specially now that the bullet hole on my face disappeared. Still, there’s a stirring inside me. Excitement. But not from that boat. Maybe the music. Or love. Yes, something from that living world is what it is. That wouldn’t-go-out-light. It soothes me. Makes me smile. The more I think of it, the more I feel the stir.

Excitement come hard and sudden, this time. Too much. Like a labor pain. But I don’t know labor, do I? It’s a suddenness. Yanking. Crying through the trees. More crying. And crying. Not from sadness. *I swear it’s crying for me.*

My baby!

Her voice snags me. And I remember. Remember my promise to protect her. *My God!*

All of these souls are moving again but I cain’t. I stop alone in the stream of souls, turn around in place while others flow past me. They won’t move me this time. I stand still like a wedged rock.

After a while, the force of the others push me along, a little, Eli pulls me further by my arm. Only because I let him. The path is getting more and more narrow, now.

My baby's new cries force me to turn around again. I tell Eli, "I'm going back. I need to see her."

"Naomi?"

I pull away from him and elbow upstream past the others, got to get near her. If only I had a minute to say bye, to let her know I love her, too.

I keep pushing in the wrong direction, Eli say, "The boat's here. We here, Naomi!" I stop but I hold my place where I am, let the others wash around me. *I need to see her.*

I hold up my hand, let the lights find me. Too impatient, I rush straight in through the trees. *I'll find my light on the way in.* But when the bark touches my shoulder, it gashes me. I yank away.

My daughter cries.

I scoot along the path, get as close as I can get to the trees without touching, hold up my hands, let the lights settle there. I move with 'em, beyond the tree line, see which one stays on. They all go out. Relight.

She cries again. *I gotta reach her.*

I raise my hand, stick out my arms, my legs, focus on her love and go toward the tree line again.

Many lights come on. Off.

I rush further up the path, trying again and again, pounding out lights toward the tree line. None of 'em stay on for me.

Thirty and forty lights shine on me, drawn by the love I'm conjuring. Still none stay.

I just want to tell her I love her. Let her know I'm here.

I lift my palm again, find hundreds of flecks there, some joined together, and making dozens of hash marks like dried white grasses laying there. I close my eyes, focus on the love I left behind. Three lights shine on my hand and I push my palm toward 'em, toward the tree line slowly, balancing 'em. Don't want to scare 'em away. I breathe slowly to stop my hand from shaking, crouch down to a small opening left by the bend of branches.

Eli grabs my arm. "Don't do this," he say. "God don't mean it to be like this. You cain't listen to that woman. Cain't hold on to that world."

"Maybe He giving me a second chance. All I want to do is say goodbye to my baby. I'll be right back."

My lights glow brighter and make themselves into a taut thread stretching from my palm all the way through to where the living world start. With my other hand, I reach for a thread and feel it strong like wire.

“Naomi?” he say, grabbing my shoulder and trying to pull me back but I don’t let him this time. “We can make the boat,” he say.

“I need to see her,” I say plain-voiced. “I’m gonna tell her I love her. Let her know to never forget she’s loved.” I jerk myself away from him.

He steps back. “Alright,” he say. “But that string of light you followin won’t stay lit long cause you’re not here tethering it. If it go out, you won’t find your way back.”

“Then I’ll be quick.”

I take off through the woods, tugging myself hand over hand between the branches. The pieces that touch slice me as I go. I fall out of the wall of trees to the other side. Alabama. My lit threads fade from brightness behind me. Eli’s voice rushes through the trees. “Hurry!”

A burst of light sprays around him, more brilliant than stars. He smiles and laughs with tears running down his flawless and clear face. “It’s here,” he say. “I’m getting on, Naomi. It feels like love. It is love.”

“I can make it,” I say, running along the trees. “I’ll be back before it go.”

A scattering in the woods draws my sight to the darkness beyond the moonlight here. Footsteps, maybe the boars' or the deer is speeding my way.

Bobby Lee emerges from the darkness, running through the woods and carrying my baby. I hear her calling out for me.

I catch up to 'em and settle inside Bobby Lee's body, riding him as a passenger, meaning no harm. I won't stay here.

I force him to stop. To look at her. Her eyes are closed and bruised in the corners from being birthed. I make Bobby Lee lean over, to shape his lips and say, "Somebody loves you. I love you. Make this life matter." And he kisses her.

She opens her eyes.

Their gray color is like a cloud carrying needed rain. She cries and her voice patters so gently this time, weak, but speaking power to me.

I force Bobby Lee's mouth to shape new words, new sounds to say, "goodbye," but... I don't want to leave her.

Ever.

/9

TWO YEARS AFTER I DIED: 1850

Where do we start when we tell the stories of our loved ones? On the day they were born or the day they mattered?

Mattered to other people, did something worth talking about. I guess I could start with who begot who like the Bible do, but where somebody come from only matter to people who come from something and as it was she came from me. Me, and the men that would become her fathers.

See, my baby's real father wasn't the man who loved me. But if wishing could make it so, I'd have traded him for the man I shoulda loved—Charles. I would've made him the first daddy to her cause first means something. As it was, the man who got me pregnant was first. Or, maybe, first was Bobby Lee. He was the first to hold my baby with his hands, the first to feel her tiny bones wiggling 'round in a loose bag of see-through skin, first to listen to her soft breaths flutter.

Charles shoulda been all them.

He wasn't.

When I knew Charles, I never thought he'd be the kind of man who would make a good father. Not the kind of man I would've thought could raise a child. And no way on

his own. He never seemed like he needed nobody, especially a child. And his body never looked like it could care for one, neither. His hands was too big to care for little baby thangs, his face too beastly to call a comfort, his arms too strong to hold something gentle. I'd reckon he'd crush her reaching for sugar. And he was alone when I knew him. Alone is how I thought he always wanted it to be. Safe. Never having to wonder what it would be to give hisself to somebody.

But I was wrong.

Wrong, cause he chose my baby, Josephine. Wrong, cause he tried to choose me.

I wish he woulda smelled sweet to me like a man looking for love or seemed soft like a man who could love me silly and forgive me for the thangs he didn't know about me. I wish I woulda felt his sun on my cheeks, breathed in his cool air and noticed the difference, like stepping from the cool shade of the trees to the hot sun directly. I wish he woulda scorched goose bumps on my arms so I woulda thought of him regular.

But he was just Charles. Another man, not a miracle.

Momma used to say that when you meet the one God sent you, you'd recognize him cause we all got souls trapped in our bodies and our souls got memories of a better life before this one; memories that come to us in our dreams and in flashes when we awake, like Massa's puzzle pieces that don't fit no where.

I didn't remember Charles. I mighta loved him if I did. The way Josey did.

She saw through the deep folds on his baldhead, his squinted eyes, his always-chapped lips and managed to love the man I shoulda. A man that became like a mother to her. He'd shepherd his flock of one away from all the thangs that might hurt her like the lizard that might forget it didn't eat little girls or the June bug that would figure itself a booger and fly up her nose and rot. All of 'em were pressing dangers according to Charles.

For him, couldn't nobody care for her the right way, couldn't nobody do it as good as he could: couldn't feed her right, couldn't hold her right, couldn't watch her close enough.

Everyone was to blame if she caught cold, so up until she was three years old, he wrapped her up at night hisself and worked hard in the day to get back before them gossiping women let her fall in the stream. When he labored, he never looked no one in the eye, never gave nobody half-a-reason to whip him. Never spoke.

By the time Josey was five, everybody could see that his love and Josey were the same thang. The pair of 'em was as wrong as a dog nursing a kitten. And if he knew it, he never said and everybody else was scared to tell him. Even his Massa let him be. So at seven years old when Josey asked him if he was her mamma, Charles said, "Love is just love."

They would talk like that. Honest like. As if the world had no boundaries and the lush green of East Tallassee, Alabama, was all there was to it. It was the place that became the home to Josey. The place that became the home to me. Like a sister, Tallassee is. She's the one I have to trust with my life with—my baby Josey—ever since Bobby Lee arrived with her that night. Tallassee is this land. Not just of it. She is the dirt, the trees, the river, the hillsides. For Charles and Josey, the real world disappears here, beneath Tallassee's forests of perfectly placed vines. They flow through these woods like silken hair. Her green strands start at her forests' edges then climb up and over her treetops as if they were shoulders. They run along the ground where pink flowers sprout and get tucked behind her ear. Pretty.

Charles and Josey would walk along her creek—Stone Creek—far enough away from cotton fields and mills, and hands carrying whips. They could dream of a future here, even though other negroes are dreamless.

Stone Creek was just a man's skip wide but Josey couldn't make it across without Charles' carry. She was five years old the first time she saw the past there. She found red beads and broken brown pots pieces cause in the fall, beneath her purple and yellow leaves, Tallassee would let the past seep in by way of overflowed waters from the fast and wide Tallapoosa River. Her river would scoop buried things and rearranged them. Resurrected. Drag marks made of black sand and brown mud led to where old things

ended up—the storms' treasure, turning over and over again, lame, along the swampy banks. Charles would lower Josey over the water where she could reach down and pick 'em up, the back of her dress knotted in his fist.

“Creek Indians,” Charles told her. “Chased out.”

Josey wondered why they'd gone and left such pretty things. And before she could ask the question, Charles would answer her thought, “The Creek Indians lived here before the Spanish,” he told her and he told her how the French came, then the English, then the English again, the second time they came with a dream to build a new nation.

Men rode the Tallapoosa River almost three hundred miles from Georgia to Alabama. Their boats river slowed just above Tallassee at the dam built in Montgomery, just thirty miles up river. They came for the water's strength—the waterfalls. They could power mills with 'em, wet a town. They carved-up Tallassee like cuts of meat. Sold her with the promise that she was theirs.

The river now splits her in two, dividing east and west Tallassee. On the east, bluffs hold groves of magnolias and oak trees like a fistful of flowers and plantation houses. The west holds the mills.

Tallassee didn't say nothin when they split her up. Of course, she didn't. She's a piece of land. A mute spirit. Any voice she may have had went when the last Indian tribes

left. But you can feel her fury. Angry at how she was tricked—slow and steady. If it was quick, she mighta noticed what was being done to her.

These settlers weren't forceful, at first.

They were charming like. Whispering sweetness in her ear as they passed through. Coming back more and more regular. Mapping things. Told her they were drawing pretty pictures of her. It's how they do. Capture things on paper. The spirit, if they could learn from it. Capture music, if they could. But some things you just got to be there to see. It's why I thank God for making the spirit like running water in the hands. Even captured water will steam away. It's what the Creek Indians believed Tallassee was, a spirit, uncatchable, til she was caught.

Maps is how they did it.

These new Americans.

They separated east and west Tallassee on their papers, marking squiggly lines in the center-drawn-path that meant, "Tallapoosa River." And on the paper, two waterfalls—the power that would turn the water wheel and give life to the mill. A mill that first made cotton cloth. A mill that would last make bullets. Even the gray bedrock that the river tumbled over was drawn in, unmoving, proof you can't capture everything. In real life, the waterfalls splash on the green moss blanketing rocks. It shakes leaned-

over branches making their red berries bounce. But that didn't matter. And what don't matter, don't survive. Nothing survives its usefulness to white folks.

The Creek Indians were driven away (They had Africans and poor whites) and the waterfalls were made mules, and the rivers' rocks used to make stone buildings. Only gravel remained in the water, mostly unbothered. That. And unbothered were the animals they couldn't catch.

"The past always got a way of coming back," Charles told Josey, pointing at her beads. "And this land got a memory."

When a bridge went down over the Tallapoosa River. Tallassee would always start its happening the same way. She'd send the morning gusts first, high above the ground, rushing it through the treetops that covered the whole five-by-five mile forest like a God-made roof. Even when heavy rains came, hardly a drop got through.

The wind would rush like water above the town, uncatchable, bending trees south in its going direction. The limbs would lean, layering a thick cover of roof over the world of folks and things underneath, not disturbed.

I once watched a dried orange leaf hang from a branch by a single thread of shimmery web. While it stormed above, the leaf played in the calm space below, spinning, unaware of the darkening skies above, nudged only into rocking by a blue bird seeking shelter. By the noon hour, it had been plucked away, stolen like everything else

not rooted in the earth then shoved into the wind-made tunnel that made a pocket through her forest.

“This is a day of reckoning,” a white man said, standing on the wet cliff above another fallen bridge. Another said, “You can’t contain this landscape. Can’t beat her back. These vines are relentless growing in.”

But people must beat it back, and they do to live here. Those who been here long enough call Tallassee the green-skirted gypsy of the South. Full of illusions. She’d set clouds on her hilltops like floating pearls. Even on days when no weather would call for ‘em and no storms were on their way, she’d put just one cloud above a cluster of three or four oaks, making it look like the nesting jaybirds were smoking.

Good weather.

Fertile and stable ground, they’d say, while a torrent simmered beneath her “perfect-place-to-make-a-life, start a family” trick. The Creek Indians knew her better. A thousand years they respected her, the way Charles and Josey do.

Those men shouldn’t have cut her up. Shouldn’t have tried to own her. Define her. Not with their caught pictures, their maps. The Creek Indians wouldn’t do it until they were forced to. Their landmarks became borders. Their asking her permission to stay became demands. Their maps, their boundaries meant the end of the Indians world. It’s always how white men come to own things: “If you can define it, you can own it,” they

said. If you can define it, it can be fought for, killed for. A woman, a slave, a cow, dirt, an idea.” And it is what happened. Thousands lost their lives in the Creek Indian War. The Creek Nation fought the new United States of America. The un-shapeable spirit had been shaped into Tallassee’s pretty picture. And the lines of her cheekbones became battle lines. And it won’t be the last time. There’s a civil war coming.

“If you lucky,” Charles tell Josey as she pull a broken plate from the water.

“When the past comes to greet you, all it want to say is, *I remember you*, then smile from longing.”

/10

FLASH: CONYERS, GEORGIA

I don't know how long I ran or how long I been in this room. But I ain't scared.

The last thing I remember is Hazel telling me, "Run!", then running and walking. Then running again, all through the night from six in the night when Momma and James got killed til the next morning. I rested beside some stream, drank water, ate some stale bread Hazel gave me and when it ran out the end of the second day, I used Hazel's fire poker to kill again. But I prayed over that coon. Prayed over it with my Bible. Roasted it, ate it, slept til daylight, ran again. Three more days this way. Three more days with Hazel's voice in my head telling me don't stop. "Go north," she said. "North to freedom." So I kept on, under the cover of rain wet leaves and the gray skies patched between 'em. By night fall on the last day, I found that North star in the black sky but by then, I was too tired for it to matter. Had been climbing up and over and up and over, the back of my arms sore, my calfs burning to cinder. The rain had started again, was overflowing, making the ground a cold stream on the all that was left of me—bone. I was slipping over rocks, walking more than running, catching myself from falling. I tied big green leafs around my barefeet but still felt every grounded thistle like blade, stabbing. Couldn't see in the dark. Rain pelted my face over and over again that last night. The night I stumbled

into a road, soaking wet. A buggy was coming my way, its horses snorting, hooves pounding, and two lamp lights bouncing—they lit a sign on the road: *Conyers, Georgia*. Still south, I said to myself before I dodged off the road. *They didn't see me*.

Now, I don't know how I got in this room.

How I got in these dry clothes.

Or why I feel full. I didn't eat after that first night.

My eyes is swole shut and I cain't see. Puss and blood is squeezing around 'em, pushing my eyeballs out, slicing pain behind 'em. Whoever got me here put piles of sheets on top of me making it hard to move. The sheets bend and make a space under my neck between my chest and chin like a roof's peek, where hot is puffing out and blowing steam over my face.

A wet rag is sagging down from my fo'head to my mouth, almost dry from fever, rubbing the thin skin on my lips, raw. Shivers send my teeth chattering, filling my head wit clicks and clacks, slamming my sore jaws together. My ear holes are plugged, like they brimming wit water, muffling noises outside me.

My imaginings got me thinking that somebody's standing above me wit a knife, ready to cut me up cause he know I cain't move. For a hour, I been facing the spot where I think he is but he ain't killed me yet. And so what, I ain't afraid to die. I ain't got Hazel. Momma.

Throw-up's racing to my mouth bitter cause I'm thinking 'bout Momma. I
swallow it back down, breathe slow, keep it from coming again.

Lord, Hazel.

I wonder if she's still thinking 'bout me, wishing I was still with her. I know I
cain't go back cause of what I done and what Hazel told me to do but I still feel empty.

She's strong.

Not like me.

I deserve to pass away.

I'm gon' hold my breath, float away dead.

Still alive.

I wish God would go ahead and kill me now. He already made me deaf and blind
and my arms and legs cain't move. Killing me would be a mercy and a good punishment
for what I done. I reckon he must be leaving me to die slow.

One-half of my nose is stopped-up, the snot's drying hard around the edges but I
can still breathe. The scent of a woman is on me like lavender and sugar. Must be a negro
cause she clean. Somebody oughta tell her she wasting her time trying to save me cause
God mean for me to die here.

My eyelids is lighting up red so I reckon God's coming for me now. I peel 'em open, peek through to see God, but it ain't Him, just a window above me burning my eyes with light and dust.

I close 'em, don't deserve to see the light no how, gon' accept my punishment, stop getting better. Sleep.

I been up a long time today.

Tears for Momma and Hazel's keeping my eyes from burning.

The musk of tobacco smoke is in my hair stanking like stale fart and warm milk. Must be what yellowed the wallpaper, turned its tiny pink flowers brown. I been catching a corner of the paper wit my fingernail, flicking it up and down, give me something to do til I die.

I reckon I got in this room yesterday or the day before cause the moon outside the window ain't changed much since the last time I seen it. The round of it looks like Mama Dean's spinning wheel, hanging in the sky on nothin.

The clouds are stretched across the sky like ready-to-spin cotton, pulled apart, kneaded back together, its different little pieces tangled into one. Mama Dean once told

me, “We’re all like this spinning cotton. A God-made thang. Blended together the pieces of cotton are strong. Apart, the wind get ‘em, blow ‘em away, make ‘em dirty befo they get a chance to make somethin beautiful.” I reckon I’m like that cotton, blown-away dirty.

I can move a arm now. Can almos’ touch the bed next to me. I ain’t on a bed, though. It’s something hard and dressed like one, with a pillow under my head and these heavy covers. I reckon it’s a trunk cause I can feel a big latch on the side. It reminds me of the doorknocker Hazel made me. She said, “Ain’t all knockin bad.

My neck’s sore from my jaw ache but I can move my head, can see the pattern on my sheets—more yellow flowers. I cross my eyes to fix ‘em on the dry, gray stain below my chin. I take a big sniff of it but it don’t smell like nothin. It’s clean.

Across the room, a white chair stands in front of a vanity, a shawl wit red feathers hangs lazy down its middle. The vanity holds perfume bottles, two drankin glasses and a washbasin. Wax is sliding down a lit candlestick there, too. Its holder got a pattern etched in it like Hazel’s fire poker got. It brings my tears back cause I don’t know where I lost hers.

My head’s beating, pumping like blood’s trying to burst out of it, my nose is bleeding. Maybe God’s gon’ stop me getting better now and go ahead and kill me.

I’ll wait. Let Him take me peaceful.

The knocking sound woke me up but it ain't Momma and it ain't this trunk.

A white woman is on the bed in front of me doing what dogs in heat do.

There ain't a wall, nothin between us.

She's on all fours, looking at the ceiling, grunting. Her face is like a schoolteacher's but her act is like a savage. Her blonde hair is spiraled to her wrists and rocking back and forth. The naked man behind her is pushing his thang inside her, stroking fast, cupping her tits with his hands now, rubbing her nipples with his fingertips. It's making me shamed to see so I close my eyes.

The man say, "Is she watching us, Cynthia?"

"Frank, just finish."

"I'm just saying. If she was, it would be sorta nice."

"That, would be extra."

I decided today that God don't mean for me to die here. I reckon He want me to get my strength and find my way North. Else he wouldn't have showed me that white woman and that man last night.

I been resting my eyes all day, trying to hurry up and get better. I still cain't move my body 'cept for this one arm. I check my eyelids with my hand, feel 'em slouched over my eyeballs where the puss stretched out the skin. They too heavy to keep open. I feel the sunlight on my face. Let it heal me.

A gust like wind swooshes past me as the door across the room swings open. Men's voices follow it in. Their footsteps stop next to me and I pretend I'm dead.

"You sure she out of it?" one of 'em say. "I ain't had one of these black whores in years."

"You think Cynthia mind?" the other one say.

"She makin money, ain't she?"

They gon' try to hurt me.

The blood's pumping fast to my head now, my face is swelling, lips tight, eyelids rising, cain't open 'em if I wanted.

I hear Cynthia, "You think that black bitch is better than me? Hell, I'm good enough for the both of you's."

"That sho' looks nice, Cynthia," one say.

My blood keeps rising. Everything go black.

My body feels like another day passed.

I see that white woman, Cynthia, again. She's crying. A old white man is on top of her, stroking inside her. *I don't wanna see no mo'.*

I close my eyes, need to get my strength, get out of here.

Sleep.

This morning, Cynthia's humming a peaceful song and dancing nice with a little boy. He's barely tall as her armpit, standing on her shoes.

I ain't never seen hair so red.

Cynthia say, "I love you, Johnny."

I musta been sleeping good cause she changed my clothes and gave me a new pillow stuffed with mint.

The boy's gone.

A man's there in the boys' place, sitting on the corner of the bed with his back turned to me. His red neck looks like not-done meat with white lines creased deep and

jagged across it. His grayish hair is lined with a razors edge above his neck. I see him in the mirror smiling and when he laugh, his shoulders bounce up and down and when he ain't laughing, his teeth poke out his mouth like a egg half-way out a chicken. He covers his mouth with one hand to hide it, lets his buckteeth wet his palm. When he pulls his hand away, he stretches his lips over 'em to cover.

Cynthia slouches in her chair, painting her make-up on. Her silk gown clings to her curves, traces her thighs and crowns the points of her nipples. The man opens his mouth like he fixing to say something then only takes a deep breath, puts his head down.

Finally, he gets up and goes to her, puts his hands on her shoulders, squeezes. "I wanna take you away from here...Give you the good life."

She laughs out loud, throws a washrag in the basin, drags her red lipstick across her face. "And make a good woman outta me, Nate? Take me away from my kingdom?"

She smacks the wet rag between her legs and swishes it around her privates, stands up and sprays a burst of perfume there, too then slides her frilly britches over her hips. He puts his hands back on her shoulders. She say, "Stop messin around, I got a headache and another customer. Just pay me and go."

"I'm serious, Cyndi."

She clears the snot from her throat, hocks it in the rag and throws it back in the basin. She falls back in her chair and takes a fancy silver box off the table and pulls out a cigarette. “You still here?”

He grabs his hat from off the dresser, a bunch of yellow flowers that were under it show. She smile when she sees ‘em. “Flowers? You gettin soft, Nate. This is a first.”

“I know you like yella,” he say. “I could bring you flowers everyday. Be the man you want me to be.” He gets down on one knee, holds the flowers out to her. She lets him rubs her thigh. “I love you. You know that. I could look after you. You could stop what you’re doing and just be mine.” She look like she believe him. “Hell, I’d even look after your bastard son. Every boy needs a Daddy.”

She smile. But not from happiness. Lights her cigarette, sucks it started and blows the smoke over his flowers. “I’m allergic to little dicks and spare change. So like I said nice before, get the fuck out.”

His toothy smile gets lost and his fist full of flowers slam across her chin, her head snaps to the side, hair spreads across her face. Yellow petals twirl across the room. Blood rises from her split lip.

He say, “I...I try to do s-something nice for you. Look what you made me do.”

She don’t look at him.

“Just leave my money on the dresser, Nate,” she say, her voice crackling. She picks up a glass of water and drinks. Blood rushes in.

Nate leaves through the door, slams it shut. Makes me jump.

She puffs on her cigarette, eases down in her chair and lets her legs gap open like a man. The strap of her gown slides off her shoulders, flashing bruises on her back. Ones Nate didn’t give her. I ain’t never seen a white woman wit on-purpose bruises like that.

Between her puffs, she spits out bits of blood from her lip, sprinkling her gown with dots of red. She wipes her mouth with the back of her arm leaving streaks of blood. It makes me scared for her.

“Don't look at me like you better than me,” she say.

I close my eyes fast.

“I've been keeping these dogs off your ass for twelve days. And that's a nice ass. Hell, if you had a dick, I'd fuck you myself.”

I ain’t never heard a woman talk like that.

“So what brings you to Conyers, Georgia?”

I don’t answer.

“Then let’s start easy. What's your name?”

Still don’t.

“How about my name is, ‘Thank You For Saving My Black Ass.’ Yeah, that’s a good name.”

She puffs on her stick again, glares at me, throws her feet up on the bed, slides back in her chair.

“Albert found you in the woods thirteen nights ago. Thought you was a wild pig, grunting and groaning so. Nearly shot you dead. Felt sorry for you since you busted your head wide open. Caught yourself an infection. Nothin I’ve never seen before.”

Must be a nurse.

She exhales a line of smoke. “What was you doin out in them woods anyway? Ain't no town closer than forty miles...What? Was you runnin North?”

I don’t look at her.

“You people always tryin to run North like y’all ain’t niggas up there, too.”

I don’t want to talk.

She throws my Bible, spinning it toward me, I catch it with my strong hand.

“Only thing you had on you ‘sides this fire poker.” She picks it up from next to the mirror, smoke seeps from her nose. “No money, no papers. Like to have thrown you back.” She let go the smoke. “Where you from?”

It don’t matta. I cain’t never go back but when I get my strength, I’m gon’ leave here, too.

I press my Bible against my chest real hard, close my eyes real hard and start praying cause Hazel tol me that God understand me even if I cain't talk.

Cynthia watches. "Ain't gon' do you no good. God don't live here."

Suddenly, my ears pop open for the first time and sound rushes in, makes me sit up and pay attention. I can hear knockin all around me, behind these walls. I didn't hear it before, didn't feel it, smell it—the liquor, the perfume, sweat, reminding me of the times when Massa made Momma dress up and smile.

I know what knockin means.

What that smell mean.

What it means when you ain't got a choice. But here, they do it for money.

"This is my house," Cynthia say. "God don't own a half-cent in my dime." She blows a funnel of white in the air.

I push myself against the wall cause I know God put me in hell. She laughs at me with bloody teeth, the taste of it turns her round to the mirror. She leans into it, rolls her lip over and stares at the cut. She licks off what's left of the blood then pushes her cigarette back in. Her eyes in the mirrors' reflection stare at me. "So you a runaway?"

I don't say nothin.

"Hell, girl. We all slaves to somethin." She turns herself to me questioning.

I press myself straight against the wall, the furthest I could go without breaking through. She say, "I tell you what...runaway or not...You gon' need to earn your keep."

My body gets tight cause she gon' force me.

She reaches under her bed and throws a white sheet at me. A dress. "Here, you wear this." It's long and plain.

I ain't gon' be Momma for her. Momma died so Hazel didn't have to be her neither. *Where's my poker?*

She see me searching for it and in one move, she grabs the poker from against the wall

and shoves it far behind the dresser and relaxes back in her chair. She say, "That dress is the only thing I got decent. Wore it at my momma's funeral. It's clean. Mop and pail's in the closet down the hall. You gon' be cleaning-up after us."

I wasn't expecting her to say that.

"I might get used to you. Keep things interesting around here."

I nod. Grateful, I guess. Safe. For now. But I've seen how she treat these men. Her favorites. She the kind of woman who'll love you in her first breath and be bored sick of you before the next.

“And don't mistake my lettin you stay here for anything more than my good fortune of findin a slave for nothin. My pappy used to say, ‘everythang cost somethin.’ But you ain't gon’ cost me, is you?”

I shake my head, push myself up and shuffle my weak legs to the door. She grab my arm, almost pulls me down. “Law say, I should send you back where you come from. But I tell you what?... You run from me I kill ya on sight.”

/11

1855 – 7 YEARS AFTER I DIED

After you been a ghost for so long, you can't see the lights no more. Them ones that drew me back to the living. Threads thin as wires and Eli shouting, "Hurry!

For five years, I could still see 'em, could still hear him yelling that same word, his frantic concern, cause time don't pass there leaving everything caught in a moment. They just faded until they were gone one day. Like I suspect Eli did, too.

It's the blindness of distance.

How being too far from any good beginning makes the magic go. Makes you blind to what excited you in the first place. A new love, a new friendship, a new start gets old. All of it turning *same* if you let it. So, I don't see them lights no more. And I don't wonder if I can ever go back. Home is here now. Where I'm happy. With Josey.

Since day break, I been watching the sun shine on her. Watching it rise higher and higher over these acres of green like spilling lemonade rushing to the floor. Tipped over from heaven it pours off the edges of the white plantation house, seeping through trees and me before splashing down on the rows of chalky brown shacks. It soaks through all of Tallassee, Alabama and over the brown skins already busy in the fields, bent over like broken stems, picking and washing and cleaning, chanting a melody of low tones and

sopranos, a harmony set to the drums of palms, clapping. This is how I wait everyday. Up in the trees waiting for the cool lips of morning to kiss everything and start anew. This morning, the laughter of young children is erasing the echo of the bullet that took me seven years ago. But trees don't lie so the hole's still there. Black children run passed it, a group at a time, escaped from their fields, crunching leafs and swishing ground, blending earth and the past together. The wind of 'em pass by me, their shapes come in glimpses and blurs--two boys, three girls, four boys, two girls, all seven year olds, all slaves, but the feel of 'em is free.

And there's my Josey. Seven years grown and content despite everything cause God gives all children laughter. A time for happiness. To be joyful. A time before they learn who they are and what it mean to the world—a woman, a slave, black. And now, she's seven years old and what you've missed only matters to me most.

Not you.

Not yet.

“Nobody likes to listen intently about somebody else's' child,” Massa Hilden once told my momma about his sister's new baby. “Not unless it fucked up or it's dead.”

Maybe Massa's right. Not about the harm but the gist.

Josey talks in her head sometimes. If you could keep our secret, she pretends to be a boy sometimes, too. Once stood above the pissing pot, holding a short stick at her belly button, and just lets her bladder go. It got all down her leg and around her thigh, stopped herself mid-flow to clean up what girl's ain't supposed to do.

She did it cause she caught Henry doing the same up the oak tree in the middle of their tag game. Hardly noticed what he was up to til she went up to tag him and he near wet her feet in a arc of yellow. After then, she spent too much time thinking it over. The freedom of it all—pointing and shooting instead of finding a rock to sit on and pour over. Simple, really, was the difference: that being a woman would always mean she'd have to bend at the knees for the same relief.

She ain't a bad girl. Just different, is all.

She don't curse but she spit. Digs for bugs but not boogers—don't eat 'em, pick 'em, or wipe 'em down her shirt. She make knives and doll babies, wear trousers under her dress. Consider things most girls wouldn't. And certainly not at seven.

But today, she's all girl. Her singing voice loud and taunting as she chases her best friend, Ada Mae, out to the field, laughing. She sings as slow and as loud as she can, her voice squealing like a new pig at a symphony, painfully clear and off key. "Jeeee-sus loves me this I know, Ada Mae. For the Bible tells me sooo, Ada Mae."

Josey grins through the blonde strands streaming down her pale face and opens her mouth to start again just as Ada Mae escapes and twirls herself around a tree trunk. Her dress lags behind and gathers between her legs from speed but her half unbraided ponytail don't move much, her zigzagged hairs locked frozen. Ada Mae plucks the cotton from her ears and says, "Josey, please! Ain't enough cotton in da world to keep dat dyin dog noise out dees ears."

She used to could see me. Both of 'em.

Josey for the longest.

I used to always be down there with 'em, near Josey, just a step away in her daytimes and in her nights I'd be standing next her bed, watchful. Waiting. She called me her best friend, then. Imaginary. Til just before her sixth birthday she didn't no more.

Didn't see me.

Didn't hear me.

And just like that it was over. No reason why.

Growing up, maybe.

Fear. I guess I'd be scared, too, if I saw a ghost beside me. Not like now. I see 'em all the time passing through here lost or looking for someone new to care for. New, cause people die and move on, and most don't stay here. Or come back. So the spirits left behind, wander.

It ain't so bad here, though. Except that she forgot me. Ada Mae stopped paying me mind by the time she could talk a sentence. But not my Josey. My baby. “Why do people write on their mouths?” she asked me at three. “Cause Daddy said, ‘Read my lips...I said, no.’”

It was the last thing she told me. Last thing before her silence banished me to these trees where I stay, mostly, watching in the day and sitting in the corner at night, hoping she'll see me again like some people sometimes do. I call to her. *Josey? You hear me today?* She hasn't answered yet but I'm hopeful.

“Oh, no. Not again, Josey!” Ada Mae says, plunging her fingers in her ears. She scrambles to her feet and runs in place slip-sliding on slick purple leafs, stacked smooth. Josey throws her head back, closes her eyes, sings, “Jesus love you, Ada Mae, this I know.”

Ada Mae finally takes off in sprint and Josey chases til her laughter tumbles her over head first into a berry bush, laughing still. Josey picks some berries from where she lay, stuffs 'em in her mouth, singing, “Je-sus loves...”

“Tag!” A boy yells in the distance.

Josey sits up and peeks over the bush and to Ada Mae's new position behind a tree two spots over. She got her butt sticking out and Robert Graham closing in, running

from tree to tree searching for somebody new to tag. He veers off left heading away from them and deeper into the woods.

Josey creeps over to Ada Mae—always sneaking up on her—and listens to Ada Mae’s breaths coming out soft and quiet. Her eyeballs are shooting from side to side searching the woods and the slaves’ quarters that are ahead a patch.

“Tag!” Josey yells and squeezes Ada Mae’s side sending her into a leap. Josey’s gon’ burst laughing.

“Awe, Josey. You ain’t It. Robert’s It.”

“But I saw you hiding here so good, so quiet like a mouse. I had to come up and get you.”

Ada Mae smile and take it back. “Well, no more of that squealing or I’m gon’ hide on my own.”

“Awe, Ada Mae. We a team. You should know by now you cain’t make it without me.”

“Wit’out chu? How bout chu cain’t make it wit’out me?”

“And Jesus,” Josey interrupts. “Cain’t forget about Jesus. Know why? Cause...Jesus loves me...”

Ada Mae yanks Josey behind the tree. “Come back here ‘fore you make him find you.”

Josey whispers, "These are my woods. Cain't nobody find me here if I don't want 'em to. Cept for..." She pulls Ada Mae close and looks around cautious. "Cept for the Witch of the Woods."

"Witch'a da woods? Ain't no witch."

"That's why you always It, Ada Mae. You don't listen to the truth I tell you. See, she lives here, too. Waits for little negro girls and negro boys to be all alone. I hear her sometimes..."

"You hear her?"

"A voice in the wind," Josey say like she summoning dead but still smiling. "She tell me she want me to go to her."

"What she want you for?"

"Same as what she want all the negro children for..." Josey whisper. "To eat me up!"

"Eat us!"

"Maybe, could," Josey laugh. "'Least you safe. She'd need a big ole mouth to eat you."

"Well, she ain't gon' eat you neither," Ada Mae laugh, "You ain't a negro."

Josey stops laughing directly. She kicks a pile of ground mush and stomps out into the open.

“Where you goin?” Ada Mae whisper.

“I’m black just like you,” Josey say loud. “Just not so colored, thas all.”

“Fine, Josey, fine. Just get back behind this tree.”

Robert rises up behind Ada Mae. “Ada Mae!” Josey holler but he’s already smacked her arm, yelled, “Tag!”

“You It now, Ada Mae,” Josey say laughing and jogging backwards. “I tried to tell you. Truth.”

Dark bodies emerge from hiding places all over, peeling away from trees and bushes, moving in every direction. Josey’s white skin and blonde hair stands out in the fray.

Ada Mae tags another boy hiding in the mouth of a log, stumbles away, catching up to Josey. Together, they scream and run through a slew of trees until they fall off the edge of the woods out near the main road. They collapse under a blackberry bush, full-belly laughing and stuffing their faces with purple. Ada Mae say, “Do a Witch of da Woods really live in there?”

Josey smiles.

Ada Mae turns around cautiously and eats a couple more berries. The grass rustles behind her. “Who’s there?” Ada Mae say.

Josey coughs and shoves a berry in her mouth.

“Who’s there?” Josey say again.

No answer.

“Who’s there?” Josey repeat. “Show yourself,” she say, giggling.

When Ada Mae turns her back, Josey takes a fistful of berries and throws ‘em in the grass. They rustle and patter along the dirt.

“Who’s there?” Ada Mae say again.

Josey laughs out loud, catches it and takes on a serious face, pretending it was another cough.

“That was you!” Ada Mae say.

Josey gives into her laughter, wallowing around on the ground, holding her belly. She coughs. Takes a deep breath. Coughs again, this time breathing hard like she just finished a race.

“You always kiddin me,” Ada Mae say and crosses her arms.

“The look on your face...” Josey laughs again, quieter this time, takes another deep breath, coughs, swallows a few times. She exhales slow and talks quiet, smiling again. “You was so scared. Tell the truth...” She coughs. A whistle joins Josey’s breathing. *Her vapors*. She ain’t smiling no more. She takes another deep breath to recover. Another. Then another. She sits up on her knees and lifts her arms behind her head, the gap in her dress below the arm pit show the dog bite scars she got as a newborn.

“Did the witch do that?” Ada Mae say.

Josey nods and smiles brief. Her coughing sounding the way dog’s bark now.

“You a’right, Josey?”

Josey gasps for air and bends over on her hands and knees, panting.

Get help! I yell to Ada Mae but she don’t hear me.

“Need some water?” Ada Mae say. *Get help!* I say again. Josey grabs her chest, clawing at it to squeeze a bit of air. “Josephine?” Ada Mae pats Josey hard on the back. Her short whistles become a long and steady note. “The berries got you? You got the vapors again?”

Josey’s eyes water and redden with strain. She fixes ‘em on Ada Mae and they roll back before she collapses. “I’ll get Charles!” Ada Mae say, jumping up. But Josey grabs her leg.

In a raspy and hoarse voice, she say, “Stay. Please.”

Ada Mae sits down next to her and holds her, wipes the sweat from her blue brow. Josey whispers, “I’m a Negro, too. One day, I’m gon’ marry me a black man...dark as blue. We gon’ have beautiful brown babies. A family. Then there ain’t gon’ be no mistakin who I am.”

A whistle rides on her breath like a hoarse whisper. Another cough.

A whistle.

I'll try to get somebody!

/12

FLASH: SIXTEEN YEARS OLD

Last night marked the end of my first month with Cynthia and last night, I was leaving. Had my Bible, found Hazel's poker, and I could see the North Star bright as the devil.

I took off running in the dark and was gon' keep running cause I knew if Cynthia found me gone, she'd shoot me; shoot me same as care for me if it benefitted her. And she ain't the only threat. It's the customers here, too. They lurk in dark corners with the whites of their eyes mostly fixed in the shadows, only moving when I move. Their voices call to me in whispers, one at a time and all together, "Hey! Pss...Gal. Come 'ere." The hissing of it makes me nervous. I once made the mistake of turning toward the sound, saw a man and his trousers down, his bright white hand glowing in the dark, at the crotch, rubbing and tugging there. Men like him would stick their privates in the crack of dawn if Cynthia sold it.

So last night, I took off running in stole shoes following the North star, going to Boston where negroes belong to themselves. The wet grass lapped on my ankles, while the grit of the road rolled under my shoe soles. Albert's workshop glowed orange across the road, the furnace inside tracing every gap in the structure.

Only five steps into the grass and a sharp pain shot to my head and forced me to stop, jammed my eyes shut while blood shot out my nose in rhythm with my heartbeats. I pinched my nose shut and spit out what trickled in my mouth, staggered in one direction, then the other, tried to find my star in the sky and when I did, the pinpricks of light there were as bright as staring at the sun. It seared through my eyes, I swore touched my brain, burning. The world spun round and round: Albert's shop...black space...Albert's shop...black space. I fell to my knees. It was the last thing I remember.

I woke up and found myself back at this brothel, laid out on the front steps with Cynthia's foot in my ribs. "What's wrong wit'cha?" she said, shaking me awake. "Still cain't talk?" She kicked my shoes off. "Next time you choose whose shoes to steal, don't let it be Bernardette's. She got the foot fungus."

This morning, Cynthia woke up before daybreak shouting, "If you well enough to go outside in the middle of the damn night then you well enough to cook breakfast."

I got up. Felt my head hurting, touched the line of dried cracked blood between my nose and top lip. She said, "And I don't like the way you been taking certain liberties around this place. From now on, you keep to the side yard. And only in the day." So that's what I been doing since breakfast. Keeping to this patch of garden at the side of the

house. Can see all the rolling hills to the east of us and a mostly empty field across the road where a shed and Albert's workshop is. Those buildings and the outhouse that nobody use but him. The rest of this town is built going west where I can't see. We the last establishment on the east end and maybe that makes me double east cause I'm on the east side of town and the east side of the building. Can't see nothing but the road out front and what Albert's doing. At least he's got his own place to shit in private. Ours is for customers.

She used to let me walk all over this yard, far back as the barn where I could get my tools. Now she keep my tools upside the house. Won't even let me go to the shed across the road. She can see me good through her side window here, always make sure I'm working. I don't mind though. I love this garden. It gives me reason to come outside and breathe. Cain't let her know that, though.

I see her watching me now so I bend over the garden with my hand on my back, pretending it hurt. I touch my knees like they sore, hem and haw out loud so she can hear me miserable.

I can see her out the corner of my eye hanging in the window, watching me dig around in this dirt. I put my hand on my spine, lean back into it, give out a loud, "Oh!" then stretch backwards, then forwards, then back again. I turn my face away from the window so I can laugh without her seeing me, pull my smile down to a pitiful frown and

turn back toward the window, sad. I catch myself smiling again, got to turn away, wait a second, get my laughs out, then swing back to her with my frown on.

I guess I could wait to go north. Get better first. Besides, it ain't been all bad here. I cook sometimes and clean for all the nice ladies and Sam, too. Sam's the bartender. He's always clean even though he got hair on his face—a beard trimmed short and square around his mouth. He keep it closed most of the time—his mouth—only listening to customers who tell him the same stories he's heard a thousand times. Sam nods anyway, pretends it's new, lets 'em keep him company while he wipes the insides of glasses and along his countertops, ready to ask the next would-be talker, "What can I git cha?"

Cynthia likes Sam. Maybe that's why she don't mind me, don't wanna hear too much lip from nobody and I ain't talking.

My fingernails are nasty, got dirt under 'em from scraping next to these green onions, sweet potatoes and squash. Every time I try to wipe the dirt off the ones I picked, they tumble out my apron so I made a pocket for 'em. Tied the corners of my apron together. I grab my back. *Almost forgot I'm supposed to be in pain right now* and I look to the window. Cynthia laughing at somebody but ain't looking this way. She own this brothel. Said she bought it with family money. I ain't seen none of her family, though. Not even a husband. She told one of the girls that she too old for marrying, be thirty again next year. That don't keep men from asking. She's mostly pretty like my sister Hazel was

but Hazel was better. I wish she was here. She'd tell me she loves me, tell me she scared for me, tell me I shouldn't try to runaway again cause I almost died last night.

I hear Cynthia's voice loud behind the window. Her chair's scooting like a duck-honk across the floor. I grab my neck in case she see me happy and want to move me. I pull a face so she see my pain, sneak my eyes over to the window again.

She gone!

She ain't never left that window with me out here. I put my hand on my back, move back and forth searching that window again like a cripple. I hear the front doors swinging back and forth, her yelling to Sam in her deep voice, "I be back. I'm going to the apothecary for Bernadette."

Bernardette's a whore, too. But she can't stand no man touching her if she ain't had her medicine, the kind Cynthia make by mixing the coca leaves in a shot of whisky. Taste better than straight whisky, I guess. She been giving it to Bernardette since Bernardette came, Cynthia told Sam. Said Bernadette cain't live without it. It's the only thing that stops her from rubbing her arms and from being afraid of the dark and men and makes her *yes* come easier. "Ain't nobody gon' rape Bernardette," Cynthia said.

Sam come to my window. I see him watching me, nods to me cause he nice. Two new customers are walking to the front porch now, hollering and taking off their hats, their spangley legs and heels tapping up the steps. One of 'em yells, "I'm ret fer some

lovin and some drinkin.” Sam disappears to serve ‘em so I can stand straight up now. I check my garden, my apron filled with vegetables. A sweet potato and a onion almost roll out. I catch the onion, toss it back in and while it’s still in the air, the sweet potato rolls out, too. I catch it and throw it back in.

When I was a little girl, a man came to town throwing balls in the air. Called it jugglin. Me and Hazel practiced all night to be like that man, never could get it right. Today, I’m gon’ get it perfect for Hazel, use these vegetables and be like that man from the traveling show.

I check the window again, see Sam ain’t back. I announce to the tomatoes, “Ladies and Gentleman. Please gather round. The Great Naomi will wow your eyes and tingle your senses.”

I pretend to hear the vegetables clapping for me.

I clear my throat, tell ‘em, “Thank you. Thank you. Ready? Set? Up...up...up.”

Three thuds hit the ground.

“For my next trick...I will pick-up the pieces” and I bend over, laughing at myself.

A shadow casts itself over me and I freeze knowing if it was Cynthia, the shadow would have talked by now, and the liquor bottles wouldn’t be clinging inside if it was Sam.

Parts of the shadow set on the ground in front of me. I pray a verse, ain't ready for a man, ain't ready to die. I ball my fists, turn into the shadow...

Sleepy green eyes meet me—the ten-year-old boy that Cynthia dance with. Johnny, her son. He squats down beside me with his hands on his knees. Got painted clay marbles peeking between his knuckles like dry fish eyes. Sunlight floods his red hair and burst an orange halo around his head while joined-together freckles start a stripe of brown across the center of his face, exploding in specks of auburn and sticking to all the white skin I can see. Even his bare feet are singed.

I let go my fists.

He picks up my sweet potato, flashing three of his knuckles with picked-off scabs. He puts the vegetable in my hand.

I don't know what to say.

I hold my throat, show him I cain't talk, nod my head to thank him.

He rubs his puffy, tired, eyes. The bags underneath 'em are purple and black. He look like he ain't slept in days. When he's napping behind the bar, he shoots awake, probably reliving his daytimes in his nightmares.

I saw him attack a grown man once. I came in from tiling soil; started my day in darkness, came back in in the same. Found him waiting like a cowboy at high noon readying hisself for the draw. He was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the doorframe,

his painted clay marbles peeking through his fist of fingers. He caught me watching, his blue eyes finding my hazels. I smiled but he turned away from me, focused.

I disappeared behind Bernardette's door, gon' fold some clothes, mind my business, but too much starch made her blouse hard, its dry skin snagged on my palms' callus as it passed through hand. Started a run in its material. I meant to just grease my hands and start again, but when I went to the hallway, I saw the boy there again with balled fists and his momma's door just closing behind somebody.

I hid myself behind Bernadette's wood door, the steam of my breath reawakening its just-chopped smell. From there, I watched the boy watch a man through the crack of his momma's door, her noisemaking wasn't motherly.

Some music from the parlor spilled into the hall gifting joyful noise for the boy's sake.

But when Man finished his pleasure inside Johnny's momma, Man held her the way she hold Johnny when he's scared at night so when Man walked out, Johnny beat him around the waist with both fists, caught one in Man's crotch. Man twisted Johnny's arms behind him. Told Cynthia, control her son, said, have a nice day.

Happened so fast, Cynthia didn't do nothin.

Johnny lets men walk by now.

He watches ‘em go in her door one way, buckling their belts on the way out. They step over him in the doorway like he ain’t a boy wanting his momma.

We all hear her good reasons through our thin walls and empty hallways. She yell, she got bills to pay, his mouth to feed, clothes and shelter Johnny needs.

We only grumble. Go back to our hard days and hard nights. I tend to swollen and parched brown ankles—been on my feet all day—got to shut up these voices in my head telling me leave this place and go North. We all got worries. All of us just passerby’s. But Johnny, he’s tracking years, thinking of the future, wanting his momma’s touches, remembering the present as if it’s time already gone.

Sometimes, he’ll hang on her arm when a customer comes, wanting her to touch him, even if it’s to push him away.

Sometimes, he’ll kick and scream til she picks him up—a accident hug—before she sets him at the end of the hallway.

Sometimes, when she in the middle of her doing her business, he’ll walk in on her.

Stand next to her. Asking for water.

And on special days. When she finish. They dance. Dance, cause they both hurt. Dance, cause she saves her sinless moves for him. Dance, cause it makes a difference.

And now, this should-be innocent boy stands in front of me and I feel sorry. I know what it's like to wait behind walls the way he do, to listen to a mother's music. But I had Hazel. He ain't got nobody.

"You can have it if you want," I say, speaking for the first time since I got here. "The sweet potato."

He smiles.

"You don't go tellin nobody I got a voice, hear me?" He don't talk much no way, maybe a real mute. He laughs like a old man in hoarse shrills.

"What's funny?" I say. He holds his back and limps around, laughing. "I am too hurt," I say. "When I'm in this garden, I am." He laughs. "I am so, too."

He looks at me with a happy and fixed smile.

"Your momma know?" He shakes his head. "You sure she don't?"

And we both laugh out loud, Johnny, in his own way. And it feels good to us. It's the only thing we own.

/13

VAPORS

After the vapors got Josey this afternoon, Charles brought her here to the Graham House before he was sent home to wait. A blanket of warm air brought me here, too. It wrapped around me and blew me through the white double doors and along this mansions' downstairs corridors. It swept me along dustless wood floors, hand-carved finishings and sterling silver. I soared through a grand ballroom where papered walls and white mouldings, twisted me around and upside down to see better, and up to the ceiling where crystals hung.

I curved around a winding staircase, hugged its corners and settled in a darkened hallway where closed doors and useless pretty furniture lined the path. Ahead was the room where Josey was. I disappear through the closed door and let the sun-yellowed room surround me like a mist of color tinting everything.

Now, there's a stillness here. Quiet. Coming in, it struck me like deafness. The chaos, too. A statue of a angel balances on a white column in the corner of the room. Its base holds down the edge of a fancy rug colored a mess of orange and red and green patterns. Above the fireplace, a frame holds prisoner the likenesses of a sad white woman and sad white man dressed in black. Muted green curtains climb the heights of two

towering windows and between 'em is a redwood bed, its posts like the tall slender legs of a stallion on its back. Mosquito netting swoops down from where the hooves would be and hangs down to the floor.

A tapping near the window brings the sound back. Missus Annie Graham patters her foot below the hem of her blue satin gown. Light bounces off silver flakes sewn in her neckline and around her crossed arms spitting sparkle on her angry face. She looks broken. Old. Even though she ain't more than twenty-nine. "Bessie," she call to a dark-skinned field negro she trying to train to be light. Light, cause most housework's done by the raped—their offspring. Mixed-raced birthed out of broken wombs. "Bessie," Annie say again, this time with her voice raised and her hand near Bessie's neck. Bessie starts shaking. Maybe her memory make her do it, from some place she been before. It happen that way sometime. Specially with the new slaves come.

Annie say, "How many times must I tell you? Your collar needs to be pressed down. The ends are intended to remain straight throughout the day. Properly ironed and cared for. Not curled up in this fashion."

"Yes'm, Miss Annie," Bessie say, starting to cry.

"There is a particular way to do everything. A right way. Do you understand me?"

"Yes'm, Miss Annie."

"Why are you crying? Girl, why are you crying? Am I harsh in my instruction?"

Bessie puts her head down.

“When you do it right the first time, there’s never a need to cry. Never a regret. It’s either right or it’s wrong. The sooner you learn that, the better. And today, it’s what’s required of you if you are to remain in this household. Do you understand me?”

“Yes’m, Miss Annie,” Bessie say. Annie snaps a loose thread from the second buttonhole of Bessie’s blouse. “Everything must be in its right order.” Annie rubs the string in her fingers and lets it go so it floats down into Bessie’s open hand. “Discard it properly.”

“Yes’m.” Bessie cups the string in her hand like it’s a delicate egg.

“And I don’t mean for you to drop it along the way.”

“Yes’m, Miss Annie,” Bessie say and go out the door gingerly.

Next to the bed, water trickles into a basin as a light-skinned slave twists a wet rag in it. When the rag’s run dry, she slides the mosquito netting to the side. Josey lay on the other side of it, sleep. I rush toward her, hover over her. Her body seems drowned in covers, her head sunk in the pillow. Only the tip of her nose and her cracked pink lips show. She breathes lightly.

The slave girl slides her hands through me and lays a rag on Josey’s forehead. I reach to feel her temperature and pass through. *I’ll never get used to dead.*

A lanky old white man, a doctor, sits down on the bed next to us and lays his big head on Josey's chest, listening. He sits up and puts his fingertips on her ribcage, massaging around in little circles. He say, "It's not my intention to call to question your methods, Mrs. Graham, but I'd be remiss if I didn't say that it is highly irregular for this child to be in this house."

"We've known each other for some time, Doctor. Please. Call me, Annie."

"Annie, I understand your husband is away but..."

"Is her chest clear?" Annie say.

He lowers his head back down and listens just as Bessie comes back through the door carrying a cup of black coffee. "Place it there," Annie tells her, and Bessie sets it next to the basin. "Bessie was trained by Mrs. Durand herself. Her coffee would stand against all challengers in these parts. Tea, especially."

"Miss Annie?" Bessie say.

"Inherited her from my uncle's tea farm in Greenville."

"Miss Annie?"

"You will wait until you're spoken to!"

"Yes'm," Bessie say and folds her hanging hands just below her belly.

"In desperate need of training," Annie tells Doctor, "But she'll do for now."

"There's no need to waste your good coffee on this negro."

“She is my property, Doctor.”

“Annie, I urge you not to be so giving. If Richard were here...”

“Bessie, try to wake her,” Annie say. “Have her drink the coffee. It’ll loosen her chest. Help her vapors. ”

“M’am?” Bessie say. “Ada Mae’s just outside the door there. She axed to see the girl.”

Annie meets eyes with the doctor. Doctor stare back, fold his arms like he told her so. Ada Mae come in hesitant, her clothes still stained with berry juice and dirt. She stutter, “I...I wanted to see how Josey’s doin. She got the vapors when we was playin and...I ain’t too sure how it started. First we was playing. We was careful, I reckon it was dem berries or could be...”

“Do you think it's acceptable to come in my house dirty,” Annie say. “Like some naked African fresh off the boat. Some kind of vile creature,” she yell. “Answer me!”

“No-no, Miss Annie.”

“Then why have you insisted on bringing your filth in my house? Get out! And the next time you try to kill another one of my slaves, I'll have you and your Momma strung up like runaways. You hear me?”

“Yes’m,” Ada Mae say, trembling.

“Well go!”

The wind of Ada Mae's sprint makes the door yawn and Josey wake. Annie leans over the bed. "And you. If I have to spend another dime to treat your carelessness. I'll sell you off."

From the other side of the doorway, hands clap together, slow, cupped to make a sound louder. "Bravo," a man's voice follows before his muddy black boots stomp across the threshold shaking brown chunks on the floor. Annie's disgusted at the sight on her floor.

Newly growed to manhood, George is two feet taller than he was the last time I saw him but still small—the same size as Annie now. "Brilliant," he slurs, drunk. "Wonde'ful."

"Bessie, come clean this up," Annie say.

"Was that little performance for the doctor's sake or yours?" George say. "It was...quite amusing." He burps then mouths, "Excuse me" and covers his mouth dainty and polite-like, making hisself chuckle. He steps out of his boots, frontways, over the tongue of 'em, kicks 'em back into the hallway with his heels, staggers toward Annie in his stocking feet, swaying from side to side, got his clothes hanging off 'im.

"George, this isn't the time," Annie say.

He grabs her around the waist and lifts her up, grunting as he do. She stiffens in his skinny arms, her pretty puffed-dress crushed to a wilted flower. "That's enough," she says, shoving her forearms in his chest. He holds onto her anyway, pulls her closer.

"I can't show my sister how I'm happy I am to see her? Been back three days and you haven't even hugged my neck yet." He swishes his sweaty hair in her chest, laughing, while the sweet funk of sweat and alcohol stains her dress and rises off of both of 'em.

"I told you to stay out of the cordial," Annie say.

"Always telling me what to do," he say and drops her. He reaches in his coat pocket for a metal flask, undoes the lid and swallows a few gulps before teasing the flask under her nose. "It'll sweeten your disposition."

"Doctor, that'll be all," she say.

"Awe, come on now, Annie. It wasn't that long ago you'd be knocking down two, three, four of these on the cart ride home from church. Oops. Was that a secret, Lil Ms. Perfect? Nothing that Dr. Harv doesn't already know. In fact, your husband made him promise to keep an eye on your little 'habit.' Did you know that, Ms.P?"

"Doctor?" Annie say, clasping her hands in front of her. "Wouldn't you like to use the washroom? Down the hall. Last door on the right." At first he shakes his head, then nods in understanding. She waits for him to go and he do.

She's right to keep her distance from the doctor. I don't know if what George say is true but Doctor like to ask questions that ain't none of his business, find out things that ain't for treatment sake. This afternoon, he let hisself in the back door. Didn't knock until he was already inside, called softly, "Hello?"

Annie had just finished her routine when he did; the same one she do most days, in the same way, except for once.

Monday through Friday at the noon hour, she dismiss her house help then strolls along her hallways toward her grand entry, carrying a cool pitcher of water. She'll set her pitcher down on a oak cabinet near the front door and run her hand across the cabinets' wood frame, smearing that glass in the middle. There's a rifle caught on the other side of the glass, but that ain't what she's there for. Under the glass part is three drawers. The middle one is double deep drawer and it holds one of her secrets.

Before she open it, she always look over her shoulder first, check one last time before she'll slide it open. At first glance, it's just her Bible inside. Thas all. But beyond the Truth is the fake back of the drawer and a set of things she cain't part wit: a silver serving spoon, a drinking glass, sugar and a bottle like wine.

The serving spoon ain't like none I never seen before Annie. The handle of it ain't attached to the scoop part. In between the scoop part and the handle, is a flat rectangle, a

little smaller than a playing card. It has four rows of six slits going across it so that any runny thing poured on it, would drain right through.

Next to the spoon is a tiny velvet cloth that covers round rocks of sugar. And then, there's the drinking glass. It got a strange shape. A glass cup where, about half way down, it's pinched-in in the middle, thin like the waist of a woman. An hourglass. Except that below the pinch, the glass forms a bubble, just the right size to measure off a shot of liquor.

Also in the drawer, next to the drinking glass is what looks like a wine bottle but it ain't. It's a green bottle and on its neck is a round glass stamp, like a beeswax stamp to seal the back of a letter. It reads, "Pernod Fils," with two tiny stars on it. It mean absinthe, I know. She said it.

Annie will take 'em all out, one at a time, everyday, and set 'em on the ledge of the cabinet. She'll run her fingers over the bottle but won't open it. Strange cause what's left inside ain't much. Somebody must've drank it.

She'll lay the spoon across the mouth of the glass, with the rectangle in the middle, and put the lump of sugar on its grates then drip her water over the sugar til it fills the bubble. But she won't drink the absinthe in it.

When she finish, she'll smell the sugar water like it's scented and shoot it down her throat then put everything away; get it ready to do again tomorrow.

I only saw her almost drink the green juice once—three days ago when George came home. Instead of water, she poured the green liquor over the sugar and into the bubble then poured the cold water over that, turning the clear green into a creamy green color. She stood there holding it for at least ten minutes. Didn't drink it.

George strolls around the room, grinning, pretending to ponder the sad people on the wall, swallowing another gulp of his drink, say, "When's your husband supposed to be back?"

"Bessie, come and help fold these clothes," Annie say and reaches for her basket of folding.

"How I miss the goodies your husband used to bring home," George say. "One particular one comes to mind. Indeed, one of France's most remarkable treasures." He leans against the wall under the sad painting with a devilish grin. "The Green Fairy wouldn't happen to be living here with you, would she?"

"I haven't kept absinthe for quite some time, George. You know that."

"Shame. Can't even get a good, cheap version of Pernot from these damn moonshiners."

"Better then. It'll keep you from the madness."

"Hardly. It was a perfect bliss, wouldn't you agree, Ms. Perfect?"

“I only used it to help my writing. For clarity.”

“Clarity for you but for everybody else it’s madness. Funny how you can always excuse your own behavior.” He mocks, “I do it for writing. You degenerate ninnies do it for mere pleasure.”

Annie shoves a blouse into Bessie hand and takes a pair of bloomers for herself.

George twists his flask open again. “It is a deceptive little devil, isn’t it? Easy to have one too many.”

Annie folds a pair of britches, pauses to stare at ‘em as if they were strange in her hands. She clears her throat, says, “I heard about what happened in Montgomery.”

“Montgomery? Is that right? All I did was give the girl a toy.”

“The authorities said you were the last one to be seen with her.”

“Prove it,” he say, leaning back against the wall. He takes another drink. “You believe ‘em?”

“Doesn’t matter what I think. No one is asking anymore and that other girl, the Humphrey girl from up the road, moved away years ago.”

“That wasn’t true, neither. Children will say anything.”

“She was five years old, George!”

“More reason to lie. Play make believe. Children will say anything.” He pushes himself off the wall. “I’m beginning to believe you’d trust strangers before your own brother.”

“I never said I believed them.”

“Is that why you sent me away? Thought I’d hurt your baby girl?”

“That school was good for you. Besides, it wasn’t me who sent you.”

“You stop it either.”

“Speaking of him, where is your husband and that baby that wasn’t yours? Both gone. But I’m still here, Annie. Maybe you should have bet on me.”

“That school was to supposed to make you...”

“Distant?”

“Happy.”

“You used to hate that place as much as I did, Annie. When Father first sent me there, you used to say it kept us apart. Best friends, remember? Then you let your husband send me there again.”

“You were a child. Hurting yourself. Other people. You needed something we couldn’t give you. It helped you to mature.”

“You stopped writing...”

“To become a man.”

“Never an explanation why.”

She shakes a pair of trousers from the basket. “I’m happy you’re home now.”

His face reddens and his cheeks quiver. “Eight years, Annie! Three weeks it took for me to get the news that Mother and Father died.”

“It was the best thing for you.”

He grabs her arm and turns her around to him, rips the trousers from her grasp and looks at her disgusted. “What happened to you?”

She closes her eyes.

“Children have to grow up some time, George.” He lets her go. “That’s what they do.”

“I suppose I didn’t do that right either.”

The doctor knocks on the door, opening it at the same time as he knocks. George meanders toward the bed and falls back on it, takes a mouthful of his drink and squints from the burn.

Doctor comes up beside him and lays on Josey’s chest, listens. “Her vapors have gone.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Annie say.

He gathers his tools. “And, Annie? You should reconsider your position on the matter. These negroes have no place in the house like this.”

“Negroes?” George say, rolling over on his belly, looking up at Josey in the bed. “God damn, these niggers are looking more and more like us everyday. Pretty soon, we’ll all be coons.”

The doctor nods to Annie on his way out.

George rolls back round to Annie and laughs out loud. “Niggers in the guest beds, Annie?” He scoots to the top of the bed where Josey is and gets a closer look. “What in the hell will your husband say when he comes back from his trip?”

“What I do in my house is nobody’s business.”

“Is that right?” he says, laughing. “Well hell, if you like it, I love it. Long as you keep that shit out of my room.” He reaches his hand out to touch Josey but she squirms out of reach.

“George!” Annie say.

“Now look what you’ve done, Annie. You scared her.”

“Get up, Josey. Get dressed. And tell your father to keep a closer eye on you,” she say, throwing an unfolded blouse back in the basket. “Don’t you have work to do, George?”

“Yes. M’am!” he says saluting. He balances his flask on his lips for his last long drink as he sways up to a stand. He struts out with his head still tilted back, stops short of the door. “I suppose I was wrong about you, Annie. You ain’t perfect, afterall.”

/15

1860

The wind swishes through ancient treetops, spraying leaves from their perches, tumbling the gold ones to the ground. They roll along the cotton fields, tickling their grasses—a soft touch to the hard ting of Charles’ hammer, blacksmithing.

A dirt road runs between Charles’ shop and the green of the field where rows of negroes are, dark and bent over, reaching for the next burst of white on the cotton stalk. Their black faces and hands seem to sprout from muted clothing as they work the fields. Men in gray overalls and women in long gray dresses and headscarves. The children are dressed the same and their hands sting from pulling weeds. Their palms ain’t calloused like Josey’s. She’s always careless with her picking, even now, out there next to Ada Mae like a white watermelon seed among the black ones. Frail-looking and out of place.

She sings a made-up song and pulls without looking. Belts out another note, the longest that ever was and Ada Mae looks to the sky for God to have mercy. Just then, Josey grabs her belly, cringing then kneading the cramp away. *She’s come of age.*

“Thas what chu get,” Ada Mae say.

Josey smiles and rips three weeds from the ground, heaving ‘em in her bag, singing, “One-two-three, Ada Mae follow meeee.”

“Oh, Lawdy,” Ada Mae say.

Slavedriver Nelson stands in the dirt next to his steed with no hat on letting the sun beat down on his blood-orange face. He squints through the sunlight, his lashes shading his pale blue eyes, their color disappearing when the light hit ‘em directly. Possessed.

The full shadow of his towering horse gives his eyes their color back. He run his fingers through her mane like he’s petting a dog and rubbing up on it.

I float around ‘em both and get closer. How could a man love a horse and hate another man? Be the devil to negroes who ain’t done him wrong but at the same time search for respect from white peoples who treat him like a nigga for being poor.

The offbeat trot of another horse draws our attention, just a quarter mile up the road. I try to see who’s coming and accidentally walk through Nelson, give him the chills. His horse catches a glimpse of me stepping through and throws her head back, squealing, leaping sideways, eyes wide, brown centers buldging. She darts away. Nelson calls, “Maybelle!” Then he whistle but she gone. She stops near the paddock. Nelson goes to her, strokes her mane, draws hisself under her neck. “Nothin’s gon’ hurt you, girl. Nothin to be scared of.”

Up the road, I can see the rider coming closer. George bobbles on top of his horse looking lightweight and as small as a ten year old boy even though he been past

adulthood. His horse is picking up speed, running fast toward Nelson with George on top slumping this way and that way like he dead or sleep.

Nelson jump out the way, hold his arm up, yell, “Whoa!” His horse, Maybelle, neighs. George finally wakes up, pulls the reins late and his horse slows. They settle in front of Maybelle with George laughing. “You shoulda saw the look on your face. You thought I was going to run y’all over.”

“You had me there, Sir, Mr. Geroge. Didn’t know if you was well or sleep or…”

George’s eyes draw closed, falling asleep, the musk of alcohol rises from under his clothes. He jolts awake. “I had you, didn’t I? Know why I did it?”

“The drink, sir?”

“Not the drink,” George huff. “Are you saying I drink too much? Are you my sister now, boy?” He call him boy even though Nelson’s a old man. Still, Nelson don’t flinch at it.

“Naw. Sir, Mr. George.”

“Well then. I saw your horse running like it didn’t have no damn sense. Thought I’d do the same and make it funny. That’s funny ain’t it, boy?”

Nelson don’t laugh at first. Then suddenly he makes a hearty laugh then laugh too long. George wait for him to finish, say, “So what in the hell’s wrong with your horse, boy? She shy?”

“Not shy, sir.” Nelson grin. “She sometimes spook easy.”

“Then she must be put down at once,” George say.

“No, sir, Mr. George,” Nelson say in a hurry. “Wit all due respect, sir. Ain’t nothin wrong wit her. Just had her six months. Bought her wit my own money just after you left. First one I bought outright.”

“Got you again,” George say laughing. “But you need to keep an eye on her. She mess around and throw you both in the path of a carriage.”

“She gettin smarter, sir. She used to tense up at the same spots in the road. But we worked through it. We understand each other now. She trusts me.”

“Is that your woman or your horse, boy?”

“Just a good mare, sir. Thas all. Got to give any beast good trainin. Even these niggers here,” he say pointin to the field, changing the subject.

George follows Nelson’s direction and looks out to the field, spinning too fast. His drunk ass falls off the back of the horse. Nelson reach his hand out to him.

“Get away from me,” George say, brushing hisself off and pushing up to a stand. His knees give out again from drunk. Nelson catches him and helps him up against the bales of hay behind him.

George gags. Covers his mouth. Gags again like his tongue’s pushed all the way down his throat. He throws up, keeps throwing up, spraying warm mud made of runny

food, alcohol and dirt on his shoes. "That's what I get for eatin second," he slur, dry heaving now so Nelson gives him a cloth, a mug of fresh water.

George runs the rag around his face, sucks in a swallow of water before he swish it around and spit it. He catches his breath. "I bought my first horse when I was eight," George say. "A Saddlebred mare, died just before I got sent away the first time. Broke my heart." He reaches under his coat, pulls out a silver flask, puts it to his lips, shoots his head back. A gust of wind sweeps his eye and pushes a tear out on accident.

Nelson watches it roll down George's cheek. "I know how hard it is to lose one, sir. I can tell you bonded with her, let her get you on the inside, made the magic happen." Maybelle nudges Nelson with her nose, blows quick snorts. Nelson tugs her closer. "When I look at my Maybelle," Nelson say, "I know she could trample me at any second if she wanted, out muscle me, but on the road she let me control her every move. I'm her master. We understand each other. Me and Maybelle connected." A low tone rolls from Maybelle's belly. He trades her affection with a rub along her neck. "I love her more than I like most people."

"You are one sick bastard," George say. It wasn't the damn horse that broke me, it was getting sent away. And how in the hell could you love a god damn horse?"

Nelson backs away from Maybelle and say swiftly, "She just a challenge to me, sir. That's it. Just a horse."

“Damn right, just a horse,” George say. “Another parasite like these niggers living off us.” George gags, breathes slow, wipes the cold sweat from his forehead, smiles at Nelson. “You were worrying me for a second there, boy. Sounding like one of them fat women who sit at parties with dogs smashed in their titties calling it, baby. Can you imagine that, putting dogs where men and babies should be?”

Nelson makes hisself look busy, talking under his breathe, punishing hisself cause he shouldn't of said nothin in the first place.

George mimics the fat women in his memory, grabbing his own tits, pinching 'em together, holding his flask to his nipple like it's a baby, nursing. He laughs and stumbles around, wobbles his flask to his lips and turns it upside down. He get all the drink at the bottom. “It's the dog, see?” George say. “All these years of domestication, they've figured us out. They know how to put their heads on our laps, stare in our eyes and get to us. They know we stupid enough to think, finally, somebody loves me, somebody's loyal to me, when all they really want is free food, protection, to use you. That's like your horse there.”

Nelson grunts and turns away.

George bends down and picks up a small rock, hurls it at a squirrel in the road that was twitching to break a nut. When he misses, he throws his mug at it, too, tries to chase after the squirrel and sends it up a tree. George bends over gagging and breathing hard.

He looks over his shoulder at Nelson, laughing, say, “I reckon if that squirrel rubbed your leg, you’d move it in your house, too, get paintings of it, call it best friend.”

Nelson only mumbles under his breath, shimmies the saddle ‘round Maybelle. Don’t talk to her this time. He don’t stroke her either. Don’t show no care. He climbs up on her and just sits.

George shuffles hisself to the center of the road where he staggers back and forth and in a circle, looking for something out in the field. He say to Nelson, “Where’s that washed-out negro girl that’s supposed to be working?”

“You got a few that look like that, sir.”

“I mean, the one that looks like you.”

“Beg pardon?” Nelson say sharp. “Ain’t one drop of me, nigger.” Nelson puffs up his chest but George don’t pay him no mind, staggering in a circle again, working on keeping his head the right way ‘round.

Nelson calms hisself. “All of ‘em out there working, sir. None missin. I flog the stragglers.”

“The children?”

“I do my job, Boss. Don’t need no nigger setting his mind to mischief, five or fifty-five. Let one get away wit something, they all start making work for my whip.”

“I don’t know how you do it, my good man,” George say. He pats his clothes down, searching for his flask.

“Way I see it,” Nelson say, “I’m doin God’s work.”

“I suppose you Jesus now?” George say.

“Come again?”

Toward the back of the field, Josey stands up, wrestling with a weed. She bend over and uses both hands to pull it while George watches her, wipes his mouth as he does.

“Sir?” Nelson say.

George reaches back to his horse and unlatches a large cloth bag. It falls to the ground from inattention, tumbling white shirts and woolen trousers to the dirt. He say to Nelson with a new found perk in his tone, “I’m here to distribute the Negroes' clothes. Came from England on Monday’s shipment. Give ‘em each two shirts and a pair of trousers for the year.” George unlatches a pine hoop from the side of his horse. The hoops’ circle is about as wide as the middle of a barrel, but the wood is as thin as a strap. He unties it, along with a matching pine stick about the length of three middle fingers, lined one after the other. He starts to the field with ‘em.

“Sir?” Nelson call. “I wouldn’t go favorin none of ‘em. They get jealous, making more work for me.”

George keeps in Josey's direction, using the hoop as a walking stick. I get beside him, follow him in, then hurry ahead. Don't want no surprises.

When Josey see him, she crouches down next to Ada Mae. "George is comin."

"He back again?" Ada Mae whisper. "That's two summers in a row."

When George get to Ada Mae and Josey, both of 'em look busier than ever and act like they don't see him. George bends over and slaps his pine stick on Ada Mae's closed bag til the bag blossoms open and shows its brown, dying weeds.

"Massa George?" Ada Mae say. "We was workin so fast, we didn't see you come up."

"That's good work you doin there," he say to Ada Mae, pretending not to notice Josey. He dabs his throw-up rag on his fo'head, clearing the sweat. He talks to the air around Josey. "I got this here wheel. It's a game, see, called a rolling hoop." He taps the ground in front of Josey with it. "You push it with this stick, make it go."

Ada Mae stops and sits up but Josey keeps her eyes low, working and only say, "Yes, suh."

"I was looking for some good slave to reward for hard work. Any idea who deserves it?"

"No, suh," Josey say.

"Yes, suh," Ada Mae say.

“Nobody?” he say to Josey, nudging her with it.

When she don’t look up, he throw it down in front of her but Josey say, “Don’t think it be right for you to give it to me, suh. We all work hard for you.” She don’t pick it up.

George’s face flushes red. He springs over to the hoop and grabs it from the ground. “It wasn’t for you nohow,” he say.

“Yes’sa,” Josey say and keeps working quietly.

I try to step inside him, to tell him he should leave now but I cain’t. He ain’t like Bobby Lee. Easy. And even though I couldn’t get inside Siss, this is different. Like a wall around him keeping me out. So from outside him, I yell, “You got better thangs to do.”

“This is my thing to do. My business!” he say to nobody and keeps watching her, getting angrier, yells, “I own you!”

“Yes’sa,” she say and finally stops working.

He yanks her bag from her hand and drop-kicks it across the field, spilling weeds. But the kick of his leg snatches his other leg from under him and he lands flat on his back, moaning in the dirt. He rolls over, grabs his hoop before he hops up to a stand. He tosses the hoop to Ada Mae. “Good work, nigger,” and hobbles across the field to the road.

When he goes, Ada Mae say, “Look it, Josey. Look what I got.”

“I thought he was gon’ pass us,” Josey say, standing up. “Where’d my bag go?”

“See, Josey. It’s a game.” Ada Mae sets the hoops’ edge on the ground, balances it, then pushes it to a roll.

“Good thing he only here for the summer,” Josey say. “I don't like ‘im.”

“Cause he chose me? Gave me this gif’? Tol’ me I did good, not you?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It ain’t always gotta be you dat people choose.” Ada Mae squats down and lays her hoop on her knee, back to work. She reaches over to pull a weed and it slices her hand. She yelps and sucks the edge of her palm.

“Cain’t nothin good come from him favorin you, Ada Mae.” She lops a weed into Ada Mae’s bag. “Not all gifts is good gifts.”

Cotton castaways float up from Ada Mae’s bag and get pushed away by the moving silence of her breath.