



brown girl dreaming

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ALSO BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

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*Feathers*

*After Tupac and D Foster*

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WOODSON

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*This book is for my family— past, present and future.  
With love.*

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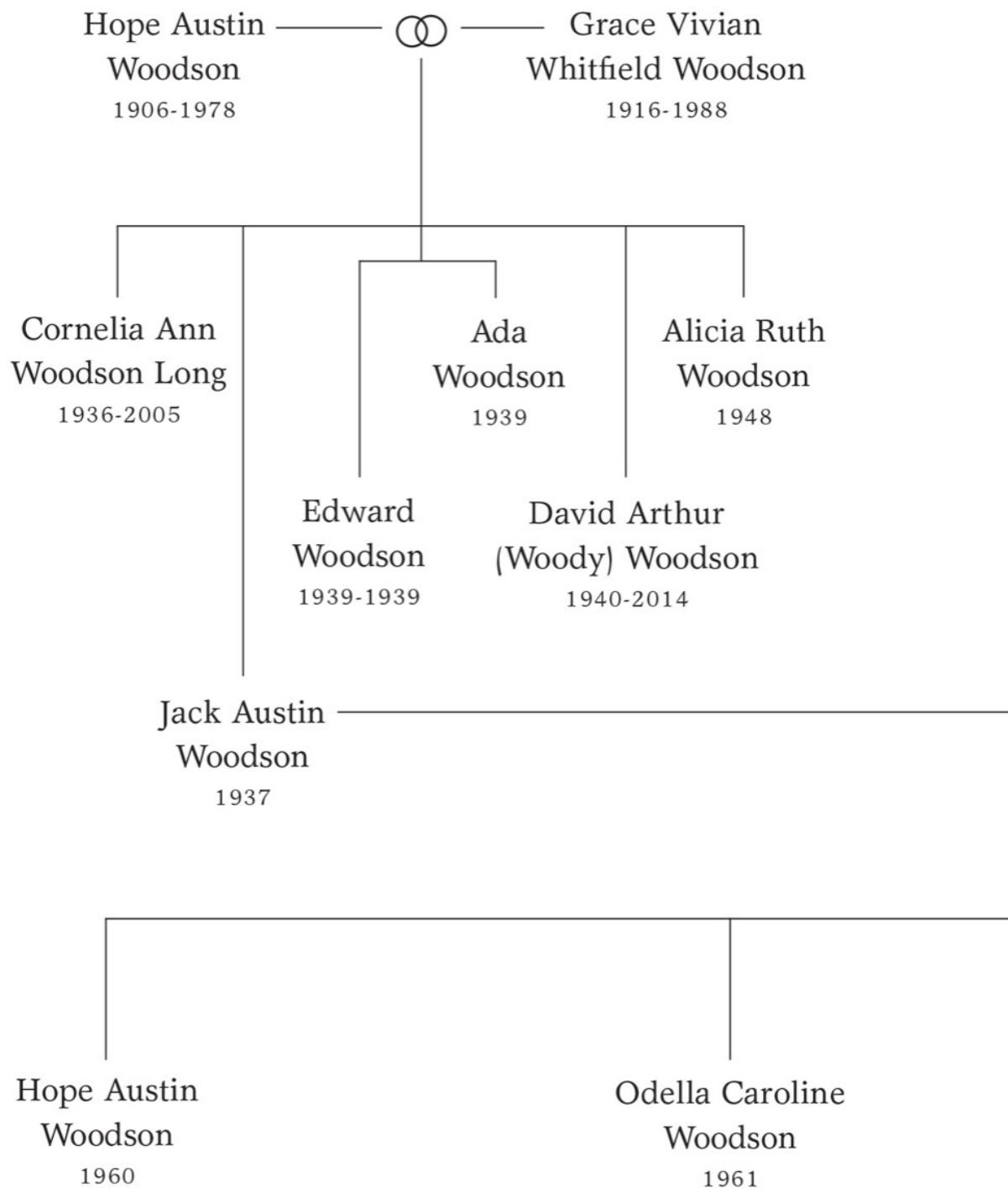
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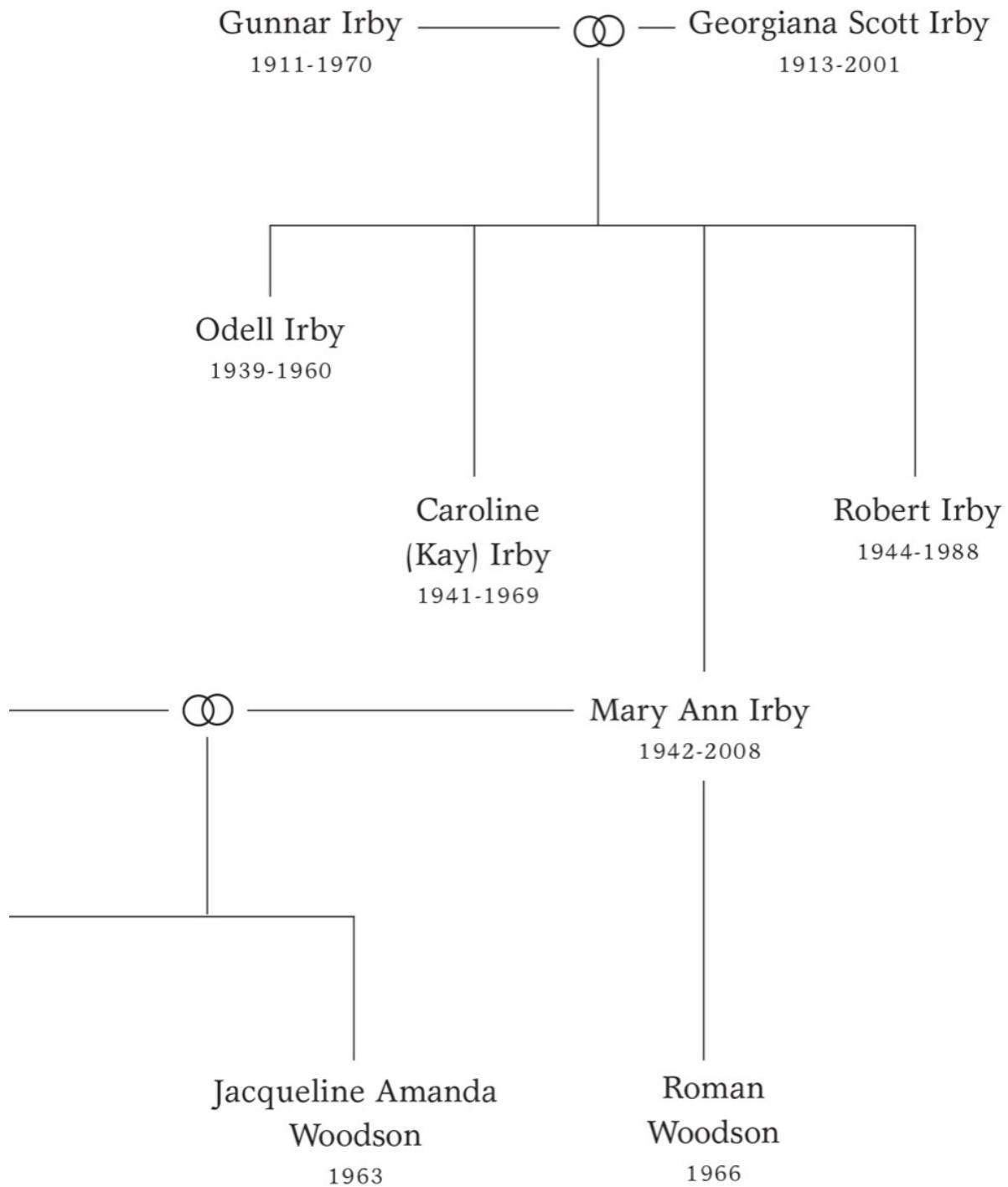


# WOODSON FAMILY TREE





# IRBY FAMILY TREE



Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

—Langston Hughes

P A R T I

i am born

**february 12, 1963**

I am born on a Tuesday at University Hospital  
Columbus, Ohio,  
USA—  
a country caught

between Black and White.

I am born not long from the time  
or far from the place  
where  
my great-great-grandparents  
worked the deep rich land  
unfree  
dawn till dusk  
unpaid  
drank cool water from scooped-out gourds  
looked up and followed  
the sky's mirrored constellation  
to freedom.

I am born as the South explodes,  
too many people too many years  
enslaved, then emancipated  
but not free, the people  
who look like me  
keep fighting  
and marching  
and getting killed  
so that today—  
February 12, 1963

and every day from this moment on,  
brown children like me can grow up  
free. Can grow up  
learning and voting and walking and riding  
wherever *we* want.

I am born in Ohio but  
the stories of South Carolina already run  
like rivers  
through my veins.

## **second daughter's second day on earth**

My birth certificate says: Female Negro  
Mother: Mary Anne Irby, 22, Negro  
Father: Jack Austin Woodson, 25, Negro

In Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr.  
is planning a march on Washington, where  
John F. Kennedy is president.  
In Harlem, Malcolm X is standing on a soapbox  
talking about a revolution.

*Outside the window of University Hospital,  
snow is slowly falling. So much already  
covers this vast Ohio ground.*

In Montgomery, only seven years have passed  
since Rosa Parks refused  
to give up  
her seat on a city bus.

*I am born brown-skinned, black-haired  
and wide-eyed.  
I am born Negro here and Colored there*

and somewhere else,  
the Freedom Singers have linked arms,  
their protests rising into song:  
*Deep in my heart, I do believe  
that we shall overcome someday.*

and somewhere else, James Baldwin  
is writing about injustice, each novel,  
each essay, changing the world.

*I do not yet know who I'll be  
what I'll say  
how I'll say it . . .*

Not even three years have passed since a brown girl  
named Ruby Bridges  
walked into an all-white school.  
Armed guards surrounded her while hundreds  
of white people spat and called her names.

She was six years old.

*I do not know if I'll be strong like Ruby.  
I do not know what the world will look like  
when I am finally able to walk, speak, write . . .  
Another Buckeye!  
the nurse says to my mother.  
Already, I am being named for this place.  
Ohio. The Buckeye State.  
My fingers curl into fists, automatically  
This is the way, my mother said,  
of every baby's hand.  
I do not know if these hands will become  
Malcolm's—raised and fisted  
or Martin's—open and asking  
or James's—curled around a pen.  
I do not know if these hands will be  
Rosa's  
or Ruby's  
gently gloved  
and fiercely folded  
calmly in a lap,  
on a desk,  
around a book,  
ready  
to change the world . . .*

# a girl named jack

*Good enough name for me, my father said  
the day I was born.*

*Don't see why  
she can't have it, too.*

But the women said no.  
My mother first.  
Then each aunt, pulling my pink blanket back  
patting the crop of thick curls  
tugging at my new toes  
touching my cheeks.

*We won't have a girl named Jack, my mother said.*

And my father's sisters whispered,  
*A boy named Jack was bad enough.*  
But only so my mother could hear.  
*Name a girl Jack, my father said,  
and she can't help but  
grow up strong.*  
*Raise her right, my father said,  
and she'll make that name her own.*

*Name a girl Jack  
and people will look at her twice, my father said.*

*For no good reason but to ask if her parents  
were crazy, my mother said.*

And back and forth it went until I was Jackie  
and my father left the hospital mad.

My mother said to my aunts,  
*Hand me that pen*, wrote  
*Jacqueline* where it asked for a name.  
Jacqueline, just in case  
someone thought to drop the *ie*.

Jacqueline, just in case  
I grew up and wanted something a little bit longer  
and further away from  
Jack.

# the woodsons of ohio

My father's family  
can trace their history back  
to Thomas Woodson of Chillicothe, said to be  
the first son  
of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings  
some say  
this isn't so but . . .

the Woodsons of Ohio know  
what the Woodsons coming before them  
left behind, in Bibles, in stories,  
in history coming down through time

so

ask any Woodson why  
you can't go down the Woodson line  
without  
finding  
doctors and lawyers and teachers  
athletes and scholars and people in government  
they'll say,  
*We had a head start.*  
They'll say,  
*Thomas Woodson expected the best of us.*  
They'll lean back, lace their fingers  
across their chests,  
smile a smile that's older than time, say,

*Well it all started back before Thomas Jefferson*

*Woodson of Chillicothe . . .*

and they'll begin to tell our long, long story.

# **the ghosts of the nelsonville house**

The Woodsons are one  
of the few Black families in this town, their house  
is big and white and sits  
on a hill.

Look up  
to see them  
through the high windows  
inside a kitchen filled with the light  
of a watery Nelsonville sun. In the parlor  
a fireplace burns warmth  
into the long Ohio winter.

Keep looking and it's spring again,  
the light's gold now, and dancing  
across the pine floors.

Once, there were so many children here  
running through this house  
up and down the stairs, hiding under beds  
and in trunks,  
sneaking into the kitchen for tiny pieces  
of icebox cake, cold fried chicken,  
thick slices of their mother's honey ham . . .

Once, my father was a baby here  
and then he was a boy . . .

But that was a long time ago.

In the photos my grandfather is taller than everybody  
and my grandmother just an inch smaller.

On the walls their children run through fields,  
play in pools,  
dance in teen-filled rooms, all of them

grown up and gone now—  
but wait!

Look closely:

There's Aunt Alicia, the baby girl,  
curls spiraling over her shoulders, her hands  
cupped around a bouquet of flowers. Only  
four years old in that picture, and already,  
a reader.

Beside Alicia another picture, my father, Jack,  
the oldest boy.  
Eight years old and mad about something  
or is it someone  
we cannot see?

In another picture, my uncle Woody,  
baby boy  
laughing and pointing  
the Nelsonville house behind him and maybe  
his brother at the end of his pointed finger.

My aunt Anne in her nurse's uniform,  
my aunt Ada in her university sweater  
*Buckeye to the bone . . .*

The children of Hope and Grace.

Look closely. There I am  
in the furrow of Jack's brow,  
in the slyness of Alicia's smile,  
in the bend of Grace's hand . . .

There I am . . .

Beginning.

# **it'll be scary sometimes**

My great-great-grandfather on my father's side  
was born free in Ohio,

1832.

Built his home and farmed his land,  
then dug for coal when the farming  
wasn't enough. Fought hard  
in the war. His name in stone now  
on the Civil War Memorial:

*William J. Woodson  
United States Colored Troops,  
Union, Company B 5th Regt.*

A long time dead but living still  
among the other soldiers  
on that monument in Washington, D.C.

His son was sent to Nelsonville  
lived with an aunt

William Woodson  
the only brown boy in an all-white school.

*You'll face this in your life someday,  
my mother will tell us  
over and over again.  
A moment when you walk into a room and*

*no one there is like you.*

*It'll be scary sometimes. But think of William Woodson  
and you'll be all right.*

## **football dreams**

No one was faster  
than my father on the football field.  
No one could keep him  
from crossing the line. Then  
touching down again.  
Coaches were watching the way he moved,  
his easy stride, his long arms reaching  
up, snatching the ball from its soft pocket  
of air.

My father dreamed football dreams,  
and woke to a scholarship  
at Ohio State University.  
Grown now  
living the big-city life  
in Columbus  
just sixty miles  
from Nelsonville  
and from there  
Interstate 70 could get you  
on your way west to Chicago  
Interstate 77 could take you south  
but my father said  
no colored Buckeye in his right mind  
would ever want to go there.

*From Columbus, my father said,  
you could go just about  
anywhere.*

## **other people's memory**

*You were born in the morning, Grandma Georgiana said.  
I remember the sound of the birds. Mean  
old blue jays squawking. They like to fight, you know.  
Don't mess with blue jays!  
I hear they can kill a cat if they get mad enough.*

*And then the phone was ringing.  
Through all that static and squawking, I heard  
your mama telling me you'd come.  
Another girl, I stood there thinking,  
so close to the first one.  
Just like your mama and Caroline. Not even  
a year between them and so close, you could hardly tell  
where one ended and the other started.  
And that's how I know you came in the morning.  
That's how I remember.*

*You came in the late afternoon, my mother said.  
Two days after I turned twenty-two.  
Your father was at work.  
Took a rush hour bus  
trying  
to get to you. But  
by the time he arrived,  
you were already here.  
He missed the moment, my mother said,  
but what else is new.*

*You're the one that was born near night,  
my father says.*

*When I saw you, I said, She's the unlucky one  
come out looking just like her daddy.  
He laughs. Right off the bat, I told your mama,  
We're gonna call this one after me.*

My time of birth wasn't listed  
on the certificate, then got lost again  
amid other people's bad memory.

## **no returns**

When my mother comes home  
from the hospital with me,  
my older brother takes one look  
inside the pink blanket, says,  
*Take her back. We already have one of those.*

Already three years old and still doesn't understand  
how something so tiny and new  
can't be returned.

## **how to listen #1**

Somewhere in my brain  
each laugh, tear and lullaby  
becomes *memory*.

## **uncle odell**

Six months before my big sister is born,  
my uncle Odell is hit by a car  
while home in South Carolina  
on leave from the Navy.

When the phone rang in the Nelsonville house,  
maybe my mother was out hanging laundry  
on the line or down in the kitchen  
speaking softly with her mother-in-law, Grace, missing  
her own mama back home.

Maybe the car was packed and ready for the drive  
back to Columbus—the place my father  
called the Big City—now *their* home.  
But every Saturday morning, they drove  
the hour to Nelsonville and stayed  
till Sunday night.

Maybe right before the phone rang, tomorrow  
was just another day.

But when the news of my uncle's dying  
traveled from the place he fell in South Carolina,  
to the cold March morning in Ohio,  
my mother looked out into a gray day  
that would change her forever.

*Your brother*

my mother heard her own mother say  
and then there was only a roaring in the air around her  
a new pain where once there wasn't pain  
a hollowness where only minutes before  
she had been whole.

# **good news**

Months before the bone-cold  
Buckeye winter settles over Ohio,  
the last September light brings

my older sister,

named  
Odella Caroline after my uncle Odell  
and my aunt Caroline.

In South Carolina, the phone rings.

As my mother's mother moves toward it,  
she closes her eyes,  
then opens them to look out over her yard.  
As she reaches for it,  
she watches the way the light slips through  
the heavy pine needles, dapples everything  
with sweet September light . . .

Her hand on the phone now, she lifts it  
praying silently  
for the good news  
the sweet chill of autumn  
is finally bringing her way.

# **my mother and grace**

It is the South that brings my mother  
and my father's mother, Grace,  
together.

Grace's family is from Greenville, too.  
So my mother  
is home to her, in a way her own kids  
can't understand.

*You know how those Woodsons are,* Grace says.  
*The Woodsons this and the North that*  
making Mama smile, remember  
that Grace, too, was someone else before. Remember  
that Grace, like my mother, wasn't always a Woodson.

They are *home* to each other, Grace  
to my mother is as familiar  
as the Greenville air.

Both know that southern way of talking  
without words, remember when  
the heat of summer  
could melt the mouth,  
so southerners stayed quiet  
looked out over the land,  
nodded at what seemed like nothing  
but that silent nod said everything  
anyone needed to hear.

Here in Ohio, my mother and Grace  
aren't afraid  
of too much air between words, are happy

just for another familiar body in the room.

But the few words in my mother's mouth  
become the *missing*  
after Odell dies—a different silence  
than either of them has ever known.

*I'm sorry about your brother*, Grace says.  
*Guess God needed him back and sent you a baby girl*.  
But both of them know  
the hole that is the missing isn't filled now.  
*Uhmm*, my mother says.  
*Bless the dead and the living*, Grace says.  
Then more silence  
both of them knowing  
there's nothing left to say.

# **each winter**

Each winter  
just as the first of the snow begins to fall,  
my mother goes home to South Carolina.

Sometimes,

my father goes with her but mostly,  
he doesn't.

So she gets on the bus alone.  
The first year with one,  
the second year with two,  
and finally with three children, Hope and Dell hugging  
each leg and me  
in her arms. Always  
there is a fight before she leaves.

Ohio

is where my father wants to be  
but to my mother  
Ohio will never be home,  
no matter  
how many plants she brings  
indoors each winter, singing softly to them,  
the lilt of her words a breath  
of warm air moving over each leaf.  
In return, they hold on to their color  
even as the snow begins to fall. A reminder  
of the deep green South. A promise

of life

somewhere.

# **journey**

*You can keep your South, my father says.  
The way they treated us down there,  
I got your mama out as quick as I could.  
Brought her right up here to Ohio.*

*Told her there's never gonna be a Woodson  
that sits in the back of the bus.  
Never gonna be a Woodson that has to  
Yes sir and No sir white people.  
Never gonna be a Woodson made to look down  
at the ground.*

*All you kids are stronger than that, my father says.  
All you Woodson kids deserve to be  
as good as you already are.*

*Yes sirree, Bob, my father says.  
You can keep your South Carolina.*

# greenville, south carolina, 1963

On the bus, my mother moves with us to the back.  
It is 1963  
in South Carolina.  
Too dangerous to sit closer to the front  
and dare the driver  
to make her move. Not with us. Not now.  
Me in her arms all of three months old. My sister  
and brother squeezed into the seat beside her. White  
shirt, tie, and my brother's head shaved clean.  
My sister's braids  
white ribboned.

*Sit up straight*, my mother says.  
She tells my brother to take his fingers  
out of his mouth.  
They do what is asked of them.  
Although they don't know why they have to.  
*This isn't Ohio*, my mother says,  
as though we understand.  
Her mouth a small lipsticked dash, her back  
sharp as a line. DO NOT CROSS!  
COLOREDS TO THE BACK!  
Step off the curb if a white person comes toward you  
don't look them in the eye. Yes sir. No sir.  
My apologies.  
Her eyes straight ahead, my mother  
is miles away from here.

Then her mouth softens, her hand moves gently  
over my brother's warm head. He is three years old,  
his wide eyes open to the world, his too-big ears

already listening. *We're as good as anybody,*  
my mother whispers.

*As good as anybody.*

# **home**

Soon . . .

We are near my other grandparents' house,  
    small red stone,  
immense yard surrounding it.

Hall Street.  
A front porch swing thirsty for oil.  
A pot of azaleas blooming.  
A pine tree.  
Red dirt wafting up  
around my mother's newly polished shoes.

*Welcome home*, my grandparents say.  
    Their warm brown  
arms around us. A white handkerchief,  
    embroidered with blue  
to wipe away my mother's tears. And me,  
the new baby, set deep  
inside this love.

## the cousins

It's my mother's birthday and the music  
is turned up loud.

Her cousins all around her—the way it was  
before she left.

The same cousins she played with as a girl.  
*Remember the time*, they ask,

*When we stole Miz Carter's peach pie off her windowsill,  
got stuck in that ditch down below Todd's house,  
climbed that fence and snuck into Greenville pool,  
weren't scared about getting arrested either, shoot!  
nobody telling us where we can and can't swim!*

And she laughs, remembering it all.

On the radio, Sam Cooke is singing  
“Twistin' the Night Away”:

*Let me tell you 'bout a place  
Somewhere up-a New York way*

The cousins have come from as far away as Spartanburg  
the boys dressed in skinny-legged pants,  
the girls in flowy skirts that swirl out, when they spin  
twisting the night away.  
Cousin Dorothy's fiancé, holding tight to her hand  
as they twist  
Cousin Sam dancing with Mama, ready to catch her  
if she falls, he says

and my mother remembers being a little girl,  
    looking down  
scared from a high-up tree  
and seeing her cousin there—waiting.

*Here they have a lot of fun  
Puttin' trouble on the run  
Twistin' the night away.*

*I knew you weren't staying up North, the cousins say.*

*You belong here with us.*

My mother throws her head back,  
    her newly pressed and curled hair gleaming  
her smile the same one she had  
    before she left for Columbus.

She's MaryAnn Irby again. Georgiana and Gunnar's  
youngest daughter.

She's home.

# **night bus**

My father arrives on a night bus, his hat in his hands.  
It is May now and the rain is coming down.

Later with the end of this rain  
will come the sweet smell of honeysuckle but for now,  
there is only the sky opening and my father's tears.  
*I'm sorry*, he whispers.

This fight is over for now.

Tomorrow, we will travel as a family  
back to Columbus, Ohio,  
Hope and Dell fighting for a place  
on my father's lap. Greenville  
with its separate ways growing small  
behind us.

For now, my parents stand hugging  
in the warm Carolina rain.

No past.

No future.

Just this perfect Now.

## **after greenville #1**

After the chicken is fried and wrapped in wax paper,  
tucked gently into cardboard shoe boxes  
and tied with string . . .

After the corn bread is cut into wedges, the peaches  
washed and dried . . .

After the sweet tea is poured into mason jars  
twisted tight  
and the deviled eggs are scooped back inside  
their egg-white beds  
slipped into porcelain bowls that are my mother's now,  
a gift  
her mother sends with her on the journey . . .

After the clothes are folded back into suitcases,  
the hair ribbons and shirts washed and ironed . . .

After my mother's lipstick is on and my father's  
scratchy beginnings of a beard are gone . . .

After our faces are coated  
with a thin layer of Vaseline gently wiped off again  
with a cool, wet cloth . . .

then it is time to say our good-byes,  
the small clutch of us children  
pressed against my grandmother's apron, her tears  
quickly blinked away . . .

After the night falls and it is safe  
for brown people to leave  
the South without getting stopped  
and sometimes beaten  
and always questioned:

*Are you one of those Freedom Riders?  
Are you one of those Civil Rights People?  
What gives you the right . . . ?*

We board the Greyhound bus, bound  
for Ohio.

# rivers

The Hocking River moves like a flowing arm away  
from the Ohio River  
runs through towns as though  
it's chasing its own freedom, the same way  
the Ohio runs north from Virginia until  
it's safely away  
from the South.

Each town the Hocking touches tells a story:  
Athens  
Coolville  
Lancaster  
Nelsonville,  
each  
waits for the Hocking water to wash through. Then

as though the river remembers where it belongs  
and what it belongs to,  
it circles back, joins up with  
the Ohio again  
as if to say,  
*I'm sorry.*  
as if to say,  
*I went away from here*  
*but now*  
*I'm home again.*

# **leaving columbus**

When my parents fight for the final time,  
my older brother is four,  
my sister is nearly three,  
and I have just celebrated my first birthday

without celebration.

There is only one photograph of them  
from their time together  
a wedding picture, torn from a local newspaper  
him in a suit and tie,  
her in a bride gown, beautiful  
although neither one  
is smiling.

Only one photograph.

Maybe the memory of Columbus was too much  
for my mother to save  
anymore.  
Maybe the memory of my mother  
was a painful stone inside my father's heart.

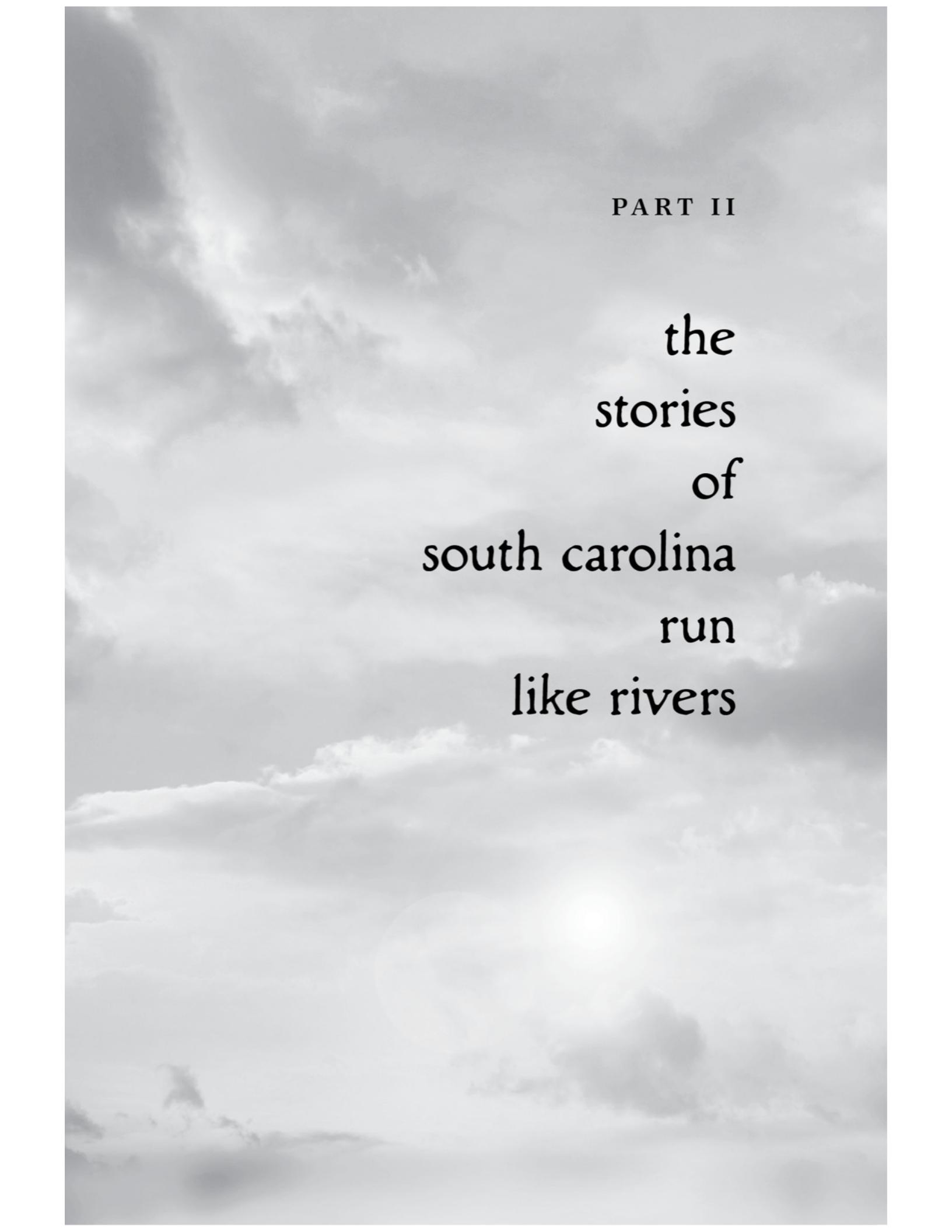
But what did it look like  
when she finally left him?

A woman nearly six feet tall, straight-backed  
and proud, heading down  
a cold Columbus street, two small children

beside her and a still-crawling baby  
in her arms.

My father, whose reddish-brown skin  
would later remind me  
of the red dirt of the South  
and all that was rich about it, standing  
in the yard, one hand  
on the black metal railing, the other lifting  
into a weak wave good-bye.

As though we were simply guests  
leaving Sunday supper.



PART II

the  
stories  
of  
south carolina  
run  
like rivers

## **our names**

In South Carolina, we become  
*The Grandchildren*  
*Gunnar's Three Little Ones*  
*Sister Irby's Grands*  
*MaryAnn's Babies*

And when we are called by our names  
my grandmother  
makes them all one  
HopeDellJackie  
but my grandfather  
takes his sweet time, saying each  
as if he has all day long

or a whole lifetime.

# **ohio behind us**

When we ask our mother how long we'll be here,  
sometimes she says *for a while* and sometimes  
she tells us not to ask anymore  
because she doesn't know how long we'll stay  
in the house where she grew up  
on the land she's always known.

When we ask, she tells us  
this is where she used to belong  
but her sister, Caroline, our aunt Kay, has moved  
to the North,  
her brother Odell is dead now,  
and her baby brother, Robert, says he's almost saved  
enough money to follow Caroline to New York City.

*Maybe I should go there, too, my mother says.  
Everyone else, she says,  
has a new place to be now.*

Everyone else  
has gone away.  
And now coming back home  
isn't really coming back home  
at all.

# the garden

Each spring  
the dark Nicholtown dirt is filled  
with the promise  
of what the earth can give back to you  
if you work the land  
plant the seeds  
pull the weeds.

My southern grandfather missed slavery  
by one generation. His grandfather  
had been owned.  
His father worked  
the land from dawn till dusk  
for the promise of cotton  
and a little pay.

So this is what he believes in  
your hands in the cool dirt  
until the earth gives back to you  
all that you've asked of it.

Sweet peas and collards,  
green peppers and cukes  
lettuce and melon,

berries and peaches and one day  
*when I'm able*, my grandfather says,  
*I'm gonna figure out how to grow myself a pecan tree.*

*God gives you what you need*, my grandmother says.

*Best not to ask for more than that.*

*Hmph*, my grandfather says. And goes back  
to working the land, pulling from it all we need

and more than that.

# **gunnar's children**

At dusk, just as the fireflies flicker on, my grandfather makes his way home.

We see him coming slow down the road,  
his silver lunch box bouncing  
soft against his leg. Now,  
as he gets closer, we hear him  
singing:

*“Where will the wedding supper be?  
Way down yonder in a hollow tree. Uh hmm . . .”*

*Good evening, Miz Clara. Evening, Miz Mae.  
How's that leg, Miz Bell?  
What you cooking, Auntie Charlotte, you thinking  
of making me something to eat?*  
His voice ringing down Hall Street, circling  
round the roads of Nicholtown  
and maybe out into the big, wide world . . .

Maybe all the way up in New York,  
Aunt Kay's hearing it,  
and thinking about coming on home . . .

Then he is close enough to run to—the three of us climbing him like a tree until he laughs out loud.

We call him Daddy.  
This is what our mother calls him.  
This is all we know now.

Our daddy seems taller than anyone else  
in all of Greenville.  
More handsome, too—  
His square jaw and light brown eyes  
so different from our own  
narrow-faced, dark-eyed selves. Still,  
his hand is warm and strong around my own  
as I skip beside him,  
the wind blowing up around us. He says,  
*Y'all are Gunnar's children.*  
*Just keep remembering that.*

*Just keep remembering . . .*

This is the way of Nicholtown evenings,  
Daddy  
coming home,

me  
jumping into his arms,  
the others  
circling around him  
all of us grinning  
all of us talking  
all of us loving him up.

## **at the end of the day**

There are white men working at the printing press  
beside Daddy, their fingers blackened  
with ink so that at the end of the day, palms up  
it's hard to tell who is white and who is not, still  
they call my grandfather Gunnar,  
even though he's a foreman  
and is supposed to be called  
Mr. Irby.

But he looks the white men in the eye  
sees the way so many of them can't understand  
a colored man  
telling them what they need to do.  
This is new. Too fast for them.  
The South is changing.

Sometimes they don't listen.  
Sometimes they walk away.  
At the end of the day, the newspaper is printed,  
the machines are shut down and each man  
punches a clock and leaves but

only Colored folks  
come home to Nicholtown.  
Here, you can't look right or left or up or down  
without seeing brown people.  
Colored Town. Brown Town. Even a few mean words  
to say where we live.

My grandmother tells us  
it's the way of the South. *Colored folks used to stay*

*where they were told that they belonged. But  
times are changing.  
And people are itching to go where they want.*

This evening, though,  
I am happy to belong  
to Nicholtown.

# daywork

There is daywork for colored women.  
In the mornings their dark bodies  
fill the crosstown buses,  
taking them away  
from Nicholtown  
to the other side  
of Greenville  
where the white people live.  
Our grandmother tells us this  
as she sets a small hat with a topaz pin on her head,  
pulls white gloves  
over her soft brown hands.  
Two days a week, she joins the women,  
taking on this second job now  
that there are four more mouths to feed  
and the money  
she gets from part-time teaching isn't enough  
anymore. *I'm not ashamed*, she says,  
*cleaning is what I know. I'm not ashamed,*  
*if it feeds my children.*

When she returns in the evening, her hands  
are ashen from washing other people's clothes,  
*Most often by hand,*  
her ankles swollen from standing all day  
making beds and sweeping floors,  
shaking dust from curtains,  
picking up after other people's children, cooking,  
the list  
goes on and on.  
*Don't any of you ever do daywork*, she warns us.

*I'm doing it now so you don't have to.  
And maybe all across Nicholtown, other children  
are hearing this, too.*

*Get the Epsom salts*, she says, leaning back  
into the soft brown chair, her eyes closing.  
When she isn't in it, Hope, Dell and I squeeze in  
side by side by side and still, there is space left  
for one more.

We fill a dishpan with warm water, pour  
the salts in, swirl it around and carefully  
carry it to her feet. We fight to see who will get  
to rub the swelling from my grandmother's ankles,  
the smile back onto her face,  
the stories back into the too-quiet room.

*You could have eaten off the floor by the time  
I left this one house today,*  
my grandmother begins, letting out a heavy sigh. *But  
let me tell you,*  
*when I first got there, you would have thought  
the Devil himself had come through . . .*

# **lullaby**

At night, every living thing competes  
for a chance to be heard.

The crickets  
and frogs call out.  
Sometimes, there's the soft  
*who-whoo* of an owl lost  
amid the pines.

Even the dogs won't rest until  
they've howled  
at the moon.

But the crickets always win, long after  
the frogs stop croaking  
and the owl has found its way home.  
Long after the dogs have lain down  
losing the battle against sleep,  
the crickets keep going  
as though they know their song  
is our lullaby.

# bible times

My grandmother keeps her Bible on a shelf  
beside her bed. When the day is over,  
she reads quietly to herself, and in the morning  
she'll tell us the stories,  
how Noah listened  
to God's word  
pulled two of each animal inside his ark, waited  
for the rains to come and floated safely  
as the sinners drowned.

It's morning now and we have floated safely  
through the Nicholtown night,  
our evening prayers

*Jehovah, please give us another day,*  
now answered.  
Biscuits warm and buttered stop halfway  
to our mouths. *How much rain did it take*  
*to destroy the sinners? What lies did they tell*  
*to die such a death? How loud was the rain*  
*when it came? How did Noah know*  
*that the cobra wouldn't bite, the bull*  
*wouldn't charge, the bee wouldn't sting?*

Our questions come fast but we want  
the stories more than we want the answers  
so when my grandmother says,  
*Hush, so I can tell it!*  
We do.  
Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven, and Jesus  
with the children surrounding him. Moses

on the mountain, fire burning words into stone.  
Even Salome intrigues us, her wish for a man's head  
on a platter—who could want this and live  
to tell the story of that wanting?

Autumn is coming.  
Outside, there's the sound of wind  
through the pine trees.  
But inside there are stories, there are biscuits  
and grits and eggs, the fire in the potbellied stove  
already filling the house with warmth.

Still we shiver at the thought of evil Salome,  
chew our biscuits slowly.  
We are safe here—miles and years away  
from Bible Times.

# **the reader**

When we can't find my sister, we know  
she is under the kitchen table, a book in her hand,  
a glass of milk and a small bowl of peanuts beside her.

We know we can call Odella's name out loud,  
slap the table hard with our hands,  
dance around it singing  
“She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain”  
so many times the song makes us sick  
and the circling makes us dizzy  
and still  
my sister will do nothing more  
than slowly turn the page.

# **the beginning**

I cannot write a word yet but at three,  
I now know the letter *J*  
love the way it curves into a hook  
that I carefully top with a straight hat  
the way my sister has taught me to do. Love  
the sound of the letter and the promise  
that one day this will be connected to a full name,

my own

that I will be able to write

by myself.

Without my sister's hand over mine,  
making it do what I cannot yet do.

How amazing these words are that slowly come to me.  
How wonderfully on and on they go.

*Will the words end*, I ask  
whenever I remember to.

*Nope*, my sister says, all of five years old now,  
and promising me  
infinity.

# hope

The South doesn't agree  
with my brother.

The heat sandpapers his skin.

*Don't scratch*, my grandmother warns. But he does  
and the skin grows raw beneath his fingers.

The pollen leaves him puffy eyed, his small breaths  
come quick, have too much sound around them.

He moves slow, sickly now where once  
he was strong.

And when his body isn't betraying him, Ohio does.  
The memories waking him in the night, the view  
from my father's shoulders, the wonder  
of the Nelsonville house, the air  
so easy to breathe . . .

*You can keep your South*, my father had said.

Now Hope stays mostly quiet  
unless asked to speak, his head bent  
inside the superhero comic books my grandfather  
brings home on Fridays. Hope searches for himself  
inside their pages. Leaves them  
dog-eared by Monday morning.

The South  
his mortal enemy.  
The South,  
his Kryptonite.

## the almost friends

There's the boy from up the road  
with the hole in his heart. Some afternoons  
he comes to sit in our yard and listen  
to our stories. Our aunt Kay, we tell him,  
lives in New York City and maybe we will, too,  
someday. And yes it's true, once  
we lived in Ohio, that's why  
we speak the way we do.  
We don't ask about the hole  
in his heart. Our grandmother warns us  
we know better than that.

There is Cora and her sisters, across the road.  
One word in my grandmother's mouth—*You stay away*  
*from Cora and her sisters*, their mother  
left the family, ran off  
with their church pastor.  
Cora and her sisters  
sometimes  
sit watching us.  
We watch them back not asking  
what it feels like not to have a mother because  
our grandmother warns us  
we know better than that.

There are three brothers who live down the road  
we know this only because  
our grandmother tells us. They live  
inside their dark house  
all summer, coming out

in the evening when their mother returns from work  
long after we've bathed and slipped into  
our summer pajamas, books curled into  
our arms.

These are our almost friends, the people  
we think about when we're tired of playing  
with each other.

But our grandmother says,  
*Three is plenty. Three is a team.*  
*Find something to do together.*  
And so over and over again,  
we do. Even though we want to ask her,  
*Why can't we play with them?* we don't.

We know better than that.

## **the right way to speak**

The first time my brother says *ain't* my mother  
pulls a branch from the willow tree growing down  
the hill at the edge  
of our backyard.

As she slips her closed hand over it,  
removing the leaves,  
my brother begins to cry  
because the branch is a switch now

no longer beautifully weeping at the bottom of the hill.  
It whirs as my mother whips it  
through the air and down  
against my brother's legs.

*You will never*, my mother says,  
*say ain't in this house.*

*You will never*  
*say ain't anywhere.*

Each switching is a warning to us  
our words are to remain  
crisp and clear.

We are never to say *huh?*  
*ain't* or *y'all*  
*git* or *gonna*.

Never *ma'am*—just *yes*, with eyes  
meeting eyes enough  
to show respect.

*Don't ever ma'am anyone!*  
The word too painful

a memory for my mother  
of not-so-long-ago  
southern subservient days . . .

The list of what not to say  
goes on and on . . .

*You are from the North*, our mother says.  
*You know the right way to speak.*

As the switch raises dark welts on my brother's legs  
Dell and I look on  
afraid to open our mouths. Fearing the South  
will slip out or  
into them.

# the candy lady

On Fridays, our grandfather takes us  
to the candy lady's house,  
even though our grandmother worries he's going  
to be the cause of our teeth rotting  
right out of our heads.

But my grandfather just laughs,  
makes us open our mouths  
to show the strong Irby teeth we've inherited  
from *his* side of the family.

The three of us stand there, our mouths open wide,  
strong white teeth inside,  
and my grandmother has to nod, has to say,  
*They're lucky* before sending us on our way.

The candy lady's small living room is filled  
with shelves and shelves of chocolate bars  
and gumdrops, Good & Plenty and Jujubes,  
Moon Pies and Necco Wafers,  
lollipops and long red licorice strings.  
So much candy that it's hard to choose  
until our grandfather says,  
*Get what you want but I'm getting myself some ice cream.*

Then the candy lady, who is gray-haired  
and never smiles, disappears  
into another room and returns a few minutes later  
with a wafer cone, pale yellow  
lemon-chiffon ice cream dripping from it.  
Outside, even this late in the afternoon,  
the sun is beating down  
and the idea of lemon-chiffon ice cream cooling us,  
even for a few minutes,

makes us all start saying at once—*Me, too, Daddy.*  
*Me, too, Daddy. Me, too.*

The walk home from the candy lady's house  
is a quiet one  
except for the sound of melting ice cream  
being slurped up  
fast, before it slides past our wrists,  
on down our arms and onto  
the hot, dry road.

## south carolina at war

*Because we have a right,* my grandfather tells us—  
we are sitting at his feet and the story tonight is

why people are marching all over the South—  
*to walk and sit and dream wherever we want.*

*First they brought us here.*  
*Then we worked for free. Then it was 1863,*  
*and we were supposed to be free but we weren't.*

*And that's why people are so mad.*

And it's true, we can't turn on the radio  
without hearing about the marching.

We can't go to downtown Greenville without  
seeing the teenagers walking into stores, sitting  
where brown people still aren't allowed to sit  
and getting carried out, their bodies limp,  
their faces calm.

*This is the way brown people have to fight,*  
my grandfather says.  
*You can't just put your fist up. You have to insist*  
*on something*  
*gently. Walk toward a thing*  
*slowly.*

*But be ready to die,  
my grandfather says,  
for what is right.*

*Be ready to die, my grandfather says,  
for everything you believe in.*

And none of us can imagine death  
but we try to imagine it anyway.

Even my mother joins the fight.  
When she thinks our grandmother  
isn't watching she sneaks out  
to meet the cousins downtown, but just as  
she's stepping through the door,  
her good dress and gloves on, my grandmother says,  
*Now don't go getting arrested.*

And Mama sounds like a little girl when she says,  
*I won't.*

*More than a hundred years, my grandfather says,  
and we're still fighting for the free life  
we're supposed to be living.*

So there's a war going on in South Carolina  
and even as we play  
and plant and preach and sleep, we are a part of it.

*Because you're colored, my grandfather says.  
And just as good and bright and beautiful and free  
as anybody.  
And nobody colored in the South is stopping,  
my grandfather says,  
until everybody knows what's true.*

# the training

When my mother's older cousin  
and best friend, Dorothy,  
comes with her children, they run off  
saying they can't understand  
the way Hope, Dell and I speak.  
*Y'all go too fast*, they say.  
*And the words get all pushed together.*  
They say they don't feel like playing  
with us little kids. So they leave us  
to walk the streets of Nicholtown when we can't  
leave the porch.  
We watch them go, hear  
Cousin Dorothy say, *Don't you knuckleheads  
get into trouble out there.*  
Then we stay close to Cousin Dorothy, make believe  
we're not listening when she knows we are.  
Laughing when she laughs, shaking our own heads  
when she shakes  
hers. *You know how you have to get those trainings,*  
she says, and our mother nods. *They  
won't let you sit at the counters  
without them. Have to know what to do  
when those people come at you.*  
She has a small space between her teeth  
like my mother's space, and Hope's and Dell's, too.  
She is tall and dark-skinned,  
beautiful and broad shouldered.  
She wears gloves and dark-colored dresses made for her  
by a seamstress in Charleston.

The trainings take place in the basements of churches

and the back rooms of stores,  
on long car trips and anywhere else where people can  
gather. They learn  
how to change the South without violence,  
how to not be moved  
by the evil actions of others, how to walk slowly but  
with deliberate steps.

How to sit at counters and be cursed at  
without cursing back, have food and drinks poured  
over them without standing up and hurting someone.  
Even the teenagers  
get trained to sit tall, not cry, swallow back fear.

*But Lord, Cousin Dorothy says. Everybody has a line.  
When I'm walking  
up to that lunch counter and taking my seat,  
I pray to God, don't let  
anybody spit on me. I can be Sweet Dorothy  
seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day  
as long as nobody crosses that line. Because if they do,  
this nonviolent movement*

*is over!*

# **the blanket**

The first time my mother goes to New York City  
it is only for a long-weekend visit,  
her kiss on our cheeks  
as much a promise as the excitement in her eyes.  
*I'll bring something back for each of you.*

It's Friday night and the weekend ahead  
is already calling us  
to the candy lady's house,  
my hand in Daddy's.  
*He doesn't know how to say no,*  
my grandmother complains.

But neither does she,  
dresses and socks and ribbons,  
our hair pressed and curled.  
She calls my sister and me her baby girls,  
smiles proudly when the women say how pretty we are.

So the first time my mother goes to New York City  
we don't know to be sad, the weight  
of our grandparents' love like a blanket  
with us beneath it,  
safe and warm.

## miss bell and the marchers

They look like regular people  
visiting our neighbor Miss Bell,  
foil-covered dishes held out in front of them  
as they arrive  
some in pairs,  
some alone,  
some just little kids  
holding their mothers' hands.

If you didn't know, you'd think it was just  
an evening gathering. Maybe church people  
heading into Miss Bell's house to talk  
about God. But when Miss Bell pulls her blinds  
closed, the people fill their dinner plates with food,  
their glasses with sweet tea and gather  
to talk about marching.

And even though Miss Bell works for a white lady  
who said *I will fire you in a minute if I ever see you  
on that line!*

Miss Bell knows that marching isn't the only thing  
she can do,  
knows that people fighting need full bellies to think  
and safe places to gather.  
She knows the white lady isn't the only one  
who's watching, listening, waiting,  
to end this fight. So she keeps the marchers'  
glasses filled, adds more corn bread  
and potato salad to their plates,  
stands in the kitchen ready to slice

lemon pound cake into generous pieces.

And in the morning, just before she pulls  
her uniform from the closet, she prays,  
*God, please give me and those people marching  
another day.*

*Amen.*

## **how to listen #2**

In the stores downtown  
we're always followed around  
just because we're brown.

# hair night

Saturday night smells of biscuits and burning hair.  
Supper done and my grandmother has transformed  
the kitchen into a beauty shop. Laid across the table  
is the hot comb, Dixie Peach hair grease,  
horsehair brush, parting stick  
and one girl at a time.

*Jackie first*, my sister says,  
our freshly washed hair damp  
and spiraling over towled shoulders  
and pale cotton nightgowns.  
She opens her book to the marked page,  
curls up in a chair pulled close  
to the wood-burning stove, bowl of peanuts in her lap.

The words  
in her books are so small, I have to squint  
to see the letters. *Hans Brinker or The Silver Skates*.  
*The House at Pooh Corner*. *Swiss Family Robinson*.

Thick books  
dog-eared from the handing down from neighbor  
to neighbor. My sister handles them gently,  
marks the pages with torn brown pieces  
of paper bag, wipes her hands before going  
beyond the hardbound covers.

*Read to me*, I say, my eyes and scalp already stinging  
from the tug of the brush through my hair.  
And while my grandmother sets the hot comb  
on the flame, heats it just enough to pull  
my tight curls straighter, my sister's voice  
wafts over the kitchen,  
past the smell of hair and oil and flame, settles  
like a hand on my shoulder and holds me there.

I want silver skates like Hans's, a place  
on a desert island. I have never seen the ocean  
but this, too, I can imagine—blue water pouring  
over red dirt.

As my sister reads, the pictures begin forming  
as though someone has turned on a television,  
lowered the sound,  
pulled it up close.

Grainy black-and-white pictures come slowly at me  
Deep. Infinite. Remembered

*On a bright December morning long ago . . .*

My sister's clear soft voice opens up the world to me.  
I lean in  
so hungry for it.

*Hold still now, my grandmother warns.*  
So I sit on my hands to keep my mind  
off my hurting head, and my whole body still.  
But the rest of me is already leaving,  
the rest of me is already gone.

# family names

*There's James, Joseph, Andrew, Geneva, Annie Mae,  
William, Lucinda, David, Talmudge,  
my grandmother says. All together,  
my mama gave birth to thirteen children.  
Our heads spin at the thought of that many brothers  
and sisters. Three died as babies, she says,  
but only a little of the spinning stops.*

*There's Levonia, Montague, Iellus, Hallique,  
Valie Mae, Virdie and Elora on my daddy's side.  
We can't help but laugh each time our daddy  
tells us the names of his brothers and sisters.  
His own name,  
Gunnar, sends us laughing all over again.  
*Gave their kids names  
that no master could ever take away.*  
*What about Bob or Joe? Hope wants to know.  
What about  
John or Michael? Or something real normal, like Hope?  
Hope is not normal, my sister says. Not for a boy. I think  
your name is a mistake. Maybe they meant  
to name you Virdie.**

*I'm the great Hope of the family, my brother says.  
Just like Grandpa Hope.  
Just like Hope the Dope, my sister says back.*

*Keep up the arguing, my grandfather says,  
I'll take you both down to city hall.  
People be happy to call you Talmudge and Valie Mae.*

# **american dream**

*Even when my girls were little, we'd go down there,  
my grandmother tells us. And people'd be marching.  
The marching didn't just start yesterday.  
Police with those dogs, scared everybody  
near to death. Just once  
I let my girls march.*

My grandmother leans back in her brown chair,  
her feet still in the Epsom salts water,  
her fingers tapping out  
some silent tune. She closes her eyes.  
*I let them and I prayed.*

*What's the thing, I ask her, that would make people  
want to live together?*

*People have to want it, that's all.*

We get quiet—maybe all of us are thinking about  
the ones who want it. And the ones who don't.

*We all have the same dream, my grandmother says.  
To live equal in a country that's supposed to be  
the land of the free.  
She lets out a long breath,  
deep remembering.*

*When your mother was little  
she wanted a dog. But I said no.*

*Quick as you can blink, I told her,  
a dog will turn on you.*

So my mother brought kittens home,  
soft and purring inside of empty boxes  
mewing and mewing until my grandmother  
fell in love. And let her keep them.

My grandmother tells us all this  
as we sit at her feet, each story like a photograph  
we can look right into, see our mother there  
marchers and dogs and kittens all blending  
and us now  
there in each moment  
beside her.

## the fabric store

Some Fridays, we walk to downtown Greenville where there are some clothing stores, some restaurants, a motel and the five-and-dime store but my grandmother won't take us into any of those places anymore.

Even the five-and-dime, which isn't segregated now but where a woman is paid, my grandmother says, to follow colored people around in case they try to steal something. We don't go into the restaurants because they always seat us near the kitchen.

When we go downtown, we go to the fabric store, where the white woman knows my grandmother from back in Anderson, asks,

*How's Gunnar doing and your girls in New York?*

She rolls fabric out for my grandmother to rub between her fingers.

They discuss drape and nap and where to cinch the waist on a skirt for a child.

At the fabric store, we are not Colored or Negro. We are not thieves or shameful or something to be hidden away.

At the fabric store, we're just people.

# **ghosts**

In downtown Greenville,  
they painted over the WHITE ONLY signs,  
except on the bathroom doors,  
they didn't use a lot of paint  
so you can still see the words, right there  
like a ghost standing in front  
still keeping you out.

# **the leavers**

We watch men leave Greenville  
in their one good suit, shoes  
spit shined.  
We watch women leave in Sunday clothes,  
hatted and lipsticked and white gloved.

We watch them catch buses in the evening,  
the black shadows of their backs  
the last we see of them.  
Others fill their cars with bags.  
Whole families disappearing into the night.  
People waving good-bye.

They say the City is a place where diamonds  
speckle the sidewalk. Money  
falls from the sky.  
They say a colored person can do well going there.  
All you need is the fare out of Greenville.  
All you need is to know somebody on the other side,  
waiting to cross you over.

Like the River Jordan

and then you're in Paradise.

# the beginning of the leaving

When my mother returns from New York  
she has a new plan—all of us are going  
to move there. We don't know  
anyplace else but Greenville now—New York  
is only the pictures she shows us  
in magazines and the two she has in her pocketbook  
of our aunt Kay. In one, there are two other people  
standing with her.

Bernie and Peaches, our mother tells us.

*We all used to be friends  
here in Nicholtown.*

*That's all the young kids used to talk about,  
our grandmother tells us,  
going to New York City.*

My mother smiles at us and says,  
*We'll be going to New York City.*  
*I just have to figure some things out first, that's all.*

*I don't know what I'd do without you all up under me,*  
my grandmother says and there's a sadness  
in her voice.  
*Don't know what I'd do,* she says again.  
Even sadder this time.

# as a child, i smelled the air

Mama takes her coffee out to the front porch  
sips it slow. Two steps down and her feet  
are covered in grass and dew.

*New York doesn't smell like this, she says.*

I follow her, the dew cool against my feet  
the soft hush of wind through leaves  
my mother and I  
alone together.

Her coffee is sweetened with condensed milk,  
her hair pulled back into a braid,  
her dark fingers circling her cup.  
If I ask, she will hold it to my lips,  
let me taste the bittersweet of it.

It's dawn and the birds have come alive, chasing  
each other from maple to pine and back  
to maple again. This is how time passes here.  
*The maple will be bare-branched come winter,*  
Mama says. *But the pines, they just keep on living.*

And the air is what I'll remember.  
Even once we move to New York.

*It always smelled like this, my mother says.*  
*Wet grass and pine.*

Like memory.

## **harvest time**

When Daddy's garden is ready  
it is filled with words that make me laugh  
when I say them—  
*pole beans and tomatoes, okra and corn*  
*sweet peas and sugar snaps,*  
*lettuce and squash.*

Who could have imagined

so much color that the ground disappears  
and we are left  
walking through an autumn's worth  
of crazy words  
that beneath the magic  
of my grandmother's hands

become

side dishes.

## **grown folks' stories**

Warm autumn night with the crickets crying  
the smell of pine coming soft on the wind  
and the women  
on the porch, quilts across their laps,  
Aunt Lucinda, Miss Bell and whatever neighbor  
has a *breath or two left* at the end of the day  
for *sitting and running our mouths.*

That's when we listen  
to the grown folks talking.  
Hope, Dell and me sitting quiet on the stairs.  
We know one word from us will bring a hush  
upon the women, my grandmother's finger suddenly  
pointing toward the house, her soft-spoken  
*I think it's time for you kids to go to bed* now ushering  
us into our room. So we are silent, our backs against  
posts and the back of the stairs, Hope's elbows  
on his knees, head down. Now is when we learn  
everything  
there is to know  
about the people down the road and  
in the daywork houses,  
about the Sisters at the Kingdom Hall  
and the faraway relatives we rarely see.

Long after the stories are told, I remember them,  
whisper them back to Hope  
and Dell late into the night:  
*She's the one who left Nicholtown in the daytime*  
*the one Grandmama says wasn't afraid*

*of anything.* Retelling each story.  
Making up what I didn't understand  
or missed when voices dropped too low, I talk  
until my sister and brother's soft breaths tell me  
they've fallen  
asleep.

Then I let the stories live  
inside my head, again and again  
until the real world fades back  
into cricket lullabies  
and my own dreams.

# tobacco

Summer is over, a kiss  
of chill in the southern air. We see the dim orange  
of my grandfather's cigarette, as he makes his way  
down the darkening road. Hear his evening greetings  
and the coughing that follows them.  
Not enough breath left now  
to sing so I sing for him, in my head  
where only I can hear.

*Where will the wedding supper be?  
Way down yonder in a hollow tree. Uh hmm . . .*

The old people used to say  
a pinch of dirt in the mouth  
can tell tobacco's story:  
what crops  
are ready for picking  
what needs to be left to grow.  
What soil is rich enough for planting  
and the patches of land that need  
a year of rest.

I do not know yet  
how sometimes the earth makes a promise  
it can never keep. Tobacco fields  
lay fallow, crops picked clean.  
My grandfather coughs again  
and the earth waits

for what and who it will get in return.

## **how to listen #3**

Middle of the night  
my grandfather is coughing  
me upright. Startled.

# **my mother leaving greenville**

It is late autumn now, the smell of wood burning,  
the potbellied stove like a warm soft hand  
in the center of my grandparents' living room,  
its black pipe  
stretching into the ceiling then disappearing.

So many years have passed since we last saw  
our father, his absence  
like a bubble in my older brother's life,  
that pops again and again  
into a whole lot of tiny bubbles  
of memory.

*You were just a baby, he says to me.  
You're so lucky you don't remember the fighting  
or anything.*

*It's like erasers came through her memory, my sister says.  
Erase. Erase. Erase.*

But now, my mother is leaving again.

This, I will remember.

# **halfway home #1**

*New York, my mother says.  
Soon, I'll find us a place there. Come back  
and bring you all home.*

She wants a place of her own that is not  
The Nelsonville House, The Columbus House,  
The Greenville House.  
Looking for her next place.  
Our next place.  
*Right now, our mother says,  
we're only halfway home.*

And I imagine her standing  
in the middle of a road, her arms out  
fingers pointing North and South.

I want to ask:  
Will there always be a road?  
Will there always be a bus?  
Will we always have to choose  
between home

and home?

# **my mother looks back on greenville**

After our dinner and bath,  
after our powdered and pajamaed bodies are tucked  
three across into bed,  
after *Winnie the Pooh* and kisses on our foreheads  
and longer-than-usual hugs,

my mother walks away from the house on Hall Street  
out into the growing night,  
down a long dusty road  
to where the Nicholtown bus  
takes her to the Greyhound station

then more dust

then she's gone.

New York ahead of her,  
her family behind, she moves  
to the back, her purse in her lap,  
the land  
pulling her gaze to the window once more.  
Before darkness  
covers it and for many hours, there are only shadows

and stars

and tears

and hope.

## **the last fireflies**

We know our days are counted here.  
Each evening we wait for the first light  
of the last fireflies, catch them in jars  
then let them go again. As though we understand  
their need for freedom.  
As though our silent prayers to stay in Greenville  
will be answered if  
we do what we know is right.

# **changes**

Now the evenings are quiet with my mother gone  
as though the night is listening  
to the way we are counting the days. We know  
even the feel of our grandmother's brush  
being pulled gently through our hair  
will fast become a memory. Those Saturday evenings  
at her kitchen table, the smell  
of Dixie Peach hair grease,  
the sizzle of the straightening comb,  
the hiss of the iron  
against damp, newly washed ribbons, all of this  
may happen again, but in another place.

We sit on our grandparents' porch,  
shivering already against the coming winter,  
and talk softly about Greenville summer,  
how when we come back,  
we'll do all the stuff we always did,  
hear the same stories,  
laugh at the same jokes, catch fireflies in the same  
mason jars, promise each other  
future summers that are as good as the past.  
But we know we are lying

coming home will be different now.

This place called Greenville  
this neighborhood called Nicholtown  
will change some

and so will each of us.

# **sterling high school, greenville**

While my mother is away in New York City,  
a fire sweeps through  
her old high school  
during a senior dance.

Smoke filled the crowded room  
and the music  
stopped  
and the students dancing  
stopped  
and the DJ told them  
to quickly leave the building.

The fire  
lasted all night  
and when it was over,  
my mother's high school had burned  
nearly to the ground.

My mother said it was because  
the students had been marching,  
and the marching  
made some white people in Greenville mad.

After the fire the students weren't allowed to go to  
the all-white high school.  
Instead they had to crowd in  
beside their younger sisters and brothers  
at the lower school.

In the photos from my mother's high school yearbook—  
*The Torch*, 1959,

my mother is smiling beside her cousin  
Dorothy Ann and on her other side,  
there is Jesse Jackson,  
who maybe was already dreaming of one day  
being the first brown man to run  
for president.

And not even  
the torching of their school  
could stop him or the marchers  
from changing the world.

# faith

After my mother leaves, my grandmother  
pulls us further  
into the religion she has always known.  
We become Jehovah's Witnesses  
like her.

After my mother leaves  
there is no one  
to say,  
*The children can choose their own faith  
when they're old enough.*  
*In my house,* my grandmother says,  
*you will do as I do.*

After my mother leaves,  
we wake in the middle of the night  
calling out for her.  
*Have faith,* my grandmother says  
pulling us to her in the darkness.

*Let the Bible,*  
my grandmother says,  
*become your sword and your shield.*

But we do not know yet  
who we are fighting  
and what we are fighting for.

## the stories cora tells

In the evening now  
Cora and her sisters come over to our porch.  
There are three of them  
and three of us but Hope  
moves away from the girls  
sits by himself  
out in the yard.

And even though my grandmother tells us  
not to play with them,  
she doesn't call us into the house anymore  
when she sees them walking down the road. Maybe  
her heart moves over a bit  
making room for them.

A colorful mushroom grows  
beneath the pine tree. Purple and gold and strange  
against the pine-needled ground.  
When I step on it,  
Cora and her sisters scream at me,  
*You just killed the Devil while he was sleeping!*  
*Sleeping in his own house.*  
Cora warns me  
the Devil will soon be alive again.  
She says, *He's going to come for you,*  
*late in the night while you're sleeping*  
*and the God y'all pray to won't be there protecting you.*

I cry as the sun sets, waiting.  
Cry until my grandmother comes out

shoos Cora and her sisters home  
holds me tight  
tells me they are lying.  
*That's just some crazy southern superstition,*  
my grandmother says.  
*Those girls must be a little simple not knowing*  
*a mushroom when they see one.*  
*Don't believe everything you hear, Jackie.*  
*Someday, you'll come to know*  
*when someone is telling the truth*  
*and when they're just making up stories.*

# hall street

In the early evening, just before the best light  
for hide-and-seek  
takes over the sky,  
it's Bible-study time. We watch  
from our places on the front porch, our cold hands  
cupped around hot chocolate  
half gone and sweetest at the bottom  
as the Brother and Sister  
from the Kingdom Hall make their way up our road.

*Pretty Monday evening,* the Brother  
from the Kingdom Hall says.  
*Thank Jehovah,* the Sister  
from the Kingdom Hall says back.  
We are silent, Brother Hope, Sister Dell and me.

None of us want to sit inside when the late autumn  
is calling to us  
and frogs are finally feeling brave enough  
to hop across our yard. We want  
anything but this. We want warm biscuits  
and tag and jacks on the porch,  
our too-long sweater sleeves  
getting in the way sometimes.

But we are Jehovah's Witnesses. Monday night  
is Bible-study time.

Somewhere else,  
my grandfather is

spending time with his brother Vertie.  
Maybe they are playing the harmonica and banjo,  
laughing and singing loud. Doing  
what's fun to do on a pretty Monday evening.

*Jehovah promises us everlasting life in the New World,*  
the Brother from the Kingdom Hall says  
and Brother Hope, Sister Dell and me are silent  
wanting only what's right outside.  
Wanting only this world.

## **soon**

When the phone rings in my grandmother's kitchen,  
we run from wherever we are,  
jumping from the front porch swing  
climbing out of the mud-filled ditch out back,  
running quick from the picked-clean garden—  
but

my brother, Hope, is the fastest, picking up the phone,  
pressing it hard  
against his ear as though my mother's voice  
just that much closer means my mother is  
closer to us. We jump around him:  
*Let me speak!* until my grandmother comes  
through the screen door  
puts down the basket of laundry, cold and dry  
from the line  
takes the phone from my brother,  
shushes us,  
shoos us,  
promises us

a moment with our mother soon.

## how i learn the days of the week

Monday night is Bible study with a Brother and Sister from the Kingdom Hall.

Tuesday night is Bible study at the Kingdom Hall.

Wednesday night is laundry night—the clothes blowing clean on the line above my grandfather's garden. When no one is looking, we run through the sheets, breathe in all the wonderful smells the air adds to them.

Thursday night is Ministry School. One day, we will grow up to preach God's word, take it out into the world and maybe we'll save some people.

Friday night, we're free as anything, Hope and Dell's bikes skidding along Hall Street, my knees bumping hard against the handlebars of my red three-wheeler. One more year maybe Dell's bike will be mine.

Saturday we're up early: *The Watchtower* and *Awake!* in our hands, we walk like sleepy soldiers through Nicholtown, ringing bells, knocking on doors, spreading the good news of something better coming. Sometimes, the people listen.

Sometimes, they slam their doors  
or don't open them at all. Or look sadly down at me  
ribboned and starched, my face clean and shining  
with oil, my words earnest as anything:

*Good morning, I'm Sister Jacqueline and I'm here  
to bring you some good news today.*

Sometimes they give me a dime but won't take  
my *Watchtower* and *Awake!*

Sunday it's *Watchtower* study at the Kingdom Hall,  
two hours  
of sitting and sitting and sitting.

Then Monday comes and the week starts  
all over again.

# **ribbons**

They are pale blue or pink or white.  
They are neatly ironed each Saturday night.  
Come Sunday morning, they are tied to the braids  
hanging down past our ears.

We wear ribbons every day except Saturday  
when we wash them by hand, Dell and I  
side by side at the kitchen sink,  
rubbing them with Ivory soap then rinsing them  
beneath cool water.  
Each of us  
dreaming of the day our grandmother says  
*You're too old for ribbons.*

But it feels like that day will never come.

When we hang them on the line to dry, we hope  
they'll blow away in the night breeze  
but they don't. Come morning, they're right  
where we left them  
gently moving in the cool air, eager to anchor us  
to childhood.

## **two gods. two worlds**

It's barely morning and we're already awake,  
my grandmother in the kitchen ironing  
our Sunday clothes.

I can hear Daddy coughing in his bed, a cough like  
he'll never catch his breath. The sound catches  
in my chest as I'm pulling my dress  
over my head. Hold my own breath  
until the coughing stops. Still,  
I hear him pad through the living room  
hear the squeak of the front screen door and  
know, he's made it to the porch swing,  
to smoke a cigarette.

My grandfather doesn't believe in a God  
that won't let him smoke  
or have a cold beer on a Friday night  
a God that tells us all  
the world is ending so that *Y'all walk through this world  
afraid as cats.*

*Your God is not my God,* he says.

His cough moves through the air  
back into our room where the light  
is almost blue, the white winter sun painting it.  
I wish the coughing would stop. I wish  
he would put on Sunday clothes,  
take my hand, walk with us  
down the road.

Jehovah's Witnesses believe  
that everyone who doesn't follow  
God's word will be destroyed in a great battle called  
Armageddon. And when the battle is done  
there will be a fresh new world  
a nicer more peaceful world.

But I want the world where my daddy is  
and don't know why  
anybody's God would make me  
have to choose.

## **what god knows**

We pray for my grandfather  
ask God to spare him even though  
he's a nonbeliever. We ask that Jehovah look  
into his heart, see  
the goodness there.

But my grandfather says he doesn't need our prayers.  
*I work hard*, he says. *I treat people like I want*  
*to be treated.*  
*God sees this. God knows.*

At the end of the day  
he lights a cigarette, unlaces  
his dusty brogans. Stretches his legs.  
*God sees my good*, he says.  
*Do all the preaching and praying you want*  
*but no need to do it for me.*

# new playmates

Beautiful brown dolls come from New York City,  
fancy stores my mother has walked  
into. She writes of elevators, train stations,  
buildings so high, they hurt  
the neck to see.

She writes of places with beautiful names  
Coney Island, Harlem, Brownsville, Bear Mountain.  
She tells us she's seen the ocean, how the water  
keeps going long after the eyes can't see it anymore  
promises a whole other country  
on the other side.

She tells us the toy stores are filled with dolls  
of every size and color  
there's a barbershop and a hair salon everywhere  
you look  
and a friend of Aunt Kay's saw Lena Horne  
just walking down the street.

But only the dolls are real to us.

Their black hair in stiff curls down  
over their shoulders,  
their pink dresses made of crinoline and satin.  
Their dark arms unbending.  
Still  
we hug their hard plastic close and imagine  
they're calling us Mama  
imagine they need us near.

Imagine the letters from our own mother—  
*Coming to get you soon*—  
are ones we're writing to them.  
*We will never leave you*, we whisper.  
They stare back at us,  
blank-eyed and beautiful  
silent and still.

## **down the road**

*Be careful when you play with him,  
my grandmother warns us about the boy  
with the hole in his heart.  
Don't make him run too fast. Or cry.*

When he taps on our back door, we come out  
sit quietly with him on the back stairs.  
He doesn't talk much, this boy with the hole  
in his heart  
but when he does, it's to ask us about our mother  
in New York City.

Is she afraid there?  
Did she ever meet a movie star?  
Do the buildings really  
go on and on?

*One day, he says—so soft, my brother, sister and I  
lean in to hear—I'm gonna go to New York City.  
Then he looks off, toward Cora's house down the road.*

*That's south, my sister says. New York's the other way.*

# god's promise

It is nearly Christmastime.  
On the radio, a man with a soft deep voice is singing  
telling us to have ourselves a merry little . . .

Nicholtown windows are filled with Christmas trees.  
Cora and her sisters brag about what they are getting,  
dolls and skates and swing sets. In the backyard  
our own swing set is silent—  
a thin layer of snow covering it.  
When we are made to stay inside on Sunday  
afternoons,  
Cora and her sisters descend upon it, take the swings  
up high,  
stick their tongues out at us  
as we stare from behind our glassed-in screen door.

*Let them play, for heaven's sake,* my grandmother says,  
when we complain about them tearing it apart.  
*Your hearts are bigger than that!*

But our hearts aren't bigger than that.  
Our hearts are tiny and mad.  
If our hearts were hands, they'd hit.  
If our hearts were feet, they'd surely kick somebody!

# **the other infinity**

*We are the chosen people, our grandmother tells us.  
Everything we do is a part  
of God's plan. Every breath you breathe is the gift God  
is giving you. Everything we own . . .*

*Daddy gave us the swings, my sister tells her. Not God.*

My grandmother's words come slowly meaning  
this lesson is an important one.

*With the money he earned by working at a job God  
gave him a body strong enough to work with.*

Outside, our swing set is empty finally,  
Cora and her sisters now gone.

Hope, Dell and I are silent.  
So much we don't yet understand.  
So much we don't yet believe.

But we know this:  
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday,  
Saturday and Sunday are reserved  
for God's work. We are put here to do it  
and we are expected to do it well.  
What is promised to us in return

is eternity.

*It's the same, my sister says,  
or maybe even better than  
infinity.*

The empty swing set reminds us of this—  
that what is bad won't be bad forever,  
and what is good can sometimes last  
a long, long time.

Even Cora and her sisters can only bother us  
for a little while before they get called home  
to supper.

## **sometimes, no words are needed**

Deep winter and the night air is cold. So still,  
it feels like the world goes on forever in the darkness  
until you look up and the earth stops  
in a ceiling of stars. My head against  
my grandfather's arm,  
a blanket around us as we sit on the front porch swing.  
Its whine like a song.

You don't need words  
on a night like this. Just the warmth  
of your grandfather's arm. Just the silent promise  
that the world as we know it  
will always be here.

# the letter

The letter comes on a Saturday morning,  
my sister opens it. My mother's handwriting  
is easy, my sister says. *She doesn't write in script.*  
*She writes so we can understand her.*

And then she reads my mother's letter slowly  
while Hope and I sit at the kitchen table,  
cheese grits near gone, scrambled eggs  
leaving yellow dots  
in our bowls. My grandmother's beloved biscuits  
forgotten.

*She's coming for us*, my sister says and reads the part  
where my mother tells her the plan.

*We're really leaving Greenville*, my sister says

and Hope sits up straighter  
and smiles. But then the smile is gone.

How can we have both places?

How can we leave  
all that we've known—

me on Daddy's lap in the early evening,  
listening to Hope and Dell tell stories  
about their lives at the small school  
a mile down the road.

I will be five one day and the Nicholtown school  
is a mystery  
I'm just about to solve.

And what about the fireflies and ditches?  
And what about the nights when  
we all climb into our grandparents' bed

and they move apart, making room for us  
in the middle.

And maybe that's when my sister reads the part  
I don't hear:  
a baby coming. Another one. A brother or sister.  
Still in her belly but coming soon.

*She's coming to get us*, my sister says again,  
looking around  
our big yellow kitchen. Then running her hand  
over the hardwood table  
as though she's already gone  
and trying to remember this.

## **one morning, late winter**

Then one morning my grandfather is too sick  
to walk the half mile to the bus  
that takes him to work.

He stays in bed for the whole day  
waking only to cough  
and cough  
and cough.

I walk slow around him  
fluffing his pillows,  
pressing cool cloths over his forehead  
telling him the stories that come to me  
again and again.

This I can do—find him another place to be  
when this world is choking him.

*Tell me a story,* he says.

And I do.

# **new york baby**

When my mother returns,  
I will no longer be her baby girl.  
I am sitting on my grandmother's lap  
when she tells me this,  
already so tall my legs dangle far down, the tips  
of my toes touching the porch mat. My head  
rests on her shoulder now where once,  
it came only to her collarbone. She smells the way  
she always does, of Pine-Sol and cotton,  
Dixie Peach hair grease and something  
warm and powdery.

I want to know whose baby girl I'll be  
when my mother's new baby comes, born where  
the sidewalks sparkle and me just a regular girl.

I didn't know how much I loved  
being everyone's baby girl  
until now when my life as baby girl  
is nearly over.

# leaving greenville

My mother arrives in the middle of the night,  
and sleepily, we pile into her arms and hold tight.

Her kiss on the top of my head reminds me  
of all that I love.

Mostly her.

It is late winter but my grandmother keeps  
the window in our room slightly open  
so that the cold fresh air can move over us  
as we sleep. Two thick quilts and the three of us  
side by side by side.

This is all we know now—

Cold pine breezes, my grandmother's quilts,  
the heat of the wood-burning stove, the sweet  
slow voices of the people around us,  
red dust wafting, then settling as though it's said  
all that it needs to say.

My mother tucks us back into our bed whispering,  
*We have a home up North now.*

I am too sleepy to tell her that Greenville is home.  
That even in the wintertime, the crickets  
sing us to sleep.

*And tomorrow morning, you'll get to meet  
your new baby brother.*

But I am already mostly asleep again, two arms  
wrapped tight  
around my mama's hand.

# **roman**

His name is as strange as he is, this new baby brother  
so pale and quiet and wide-eyed. He sucks his fist,  
taking in all of us without blinking.

*Another boy, Hope says,  
now it's even-steven around here.*

But I don't like the new baby of the family.  
I want to send it back to wherever  
babies live before they get here. When I pinch him,  
a red mark stays behind, and his cry is high and tinny  
a sound that hurts my ears.

*That's what you get, my sister says.  
His crying is him fighting you back.*  
Then she picks him up, holds him close,  
tells him softly everything's all right,  
everything's always going to be all right  
until Roman gets quiet,  
his wide black eyes looking only at Dell  
as if  
he believes her.

PART III

followed  
the  
sky's  
mirrored  
constellation  
to  
freedom

# **new york city**

Maybe it's another New York City  
the southerners talk about. Maybe that's where  
there is money falling from the sky,  
diamonds speckling  
the sidewalks.

Here there is only gray rock, cold  
and treeless as a bad dream. Who could love  
this place—where no pine trees grow,  
no porch swing moves  
with the weight of  
your grandmother.

This place is a Greyhound bus  
humming through the night then letting out  
a deep breath inside a place  
called Port Authority. This place is a driver yelling,  
*New York City, last stop.*  
*Everybody off.*

This place is loud and strange  
and nowhere I'm ever going to call  
home.

## **brooklyn, new york**

We did not stay in the small apartment  
my mother found on Bristol Street,  
Brownsville, Brooklyn, USA.

We did not stay because the dim bulb that hung  
from a chain swung back and forth  
when our upstairs neighbors walked  
across their floor, casting shadows  
that made my brother cry  
and suck hard on his middle fingers.

We did not stay because the building was big and old  
and when the bathroom ceiling fell  
into the bathtub, my mother said,  
*I am not Henny Penny and that is not the sky!*

So she called Aunt Kay and her boyfriend, Bernie,  
they borrowed a truck and helped us pack,  
bundled us up in winter coats  
turned off that swinging light

and got us out of there!

# herzl street

So we moved to Herzl Street  
where Aunt Kay and Bernie lived upstairs.  
And Peaches from Greenville lived below us.

And on Saturday nights more people  
from Greenville came by  
*sitting and running their mouths*  
while the pots on the stove bubbled  
with collards and sizzled with chicken  
and corn bread baked up brown  
inside Kay's big black oven.

And the people from Greenville  
brought people from Spartanburg  
and Charleston  
and all of them talked  
like our grandparents talked  
and ate what we ate

so they were red dirt and pine trees  
they were fireflies in jelly jars  
and lemon-chiffon ice cream cones.

They were laughter on hot city nights  
hot milk on cold city mornings,  
good food and good times  
fancy dancing and soul music.

They were family.

# the johnny pump

Some days we miss  
the way the red dirt lifted up and landed  
against our bare feet. Here  
the sidewalks burn hot all summer long.  
Here we wear shoes. Broken bottles  
don't always get swept up right away.

But our block has three johnny pumps  
and a guy with a wrench  
to turn them on. On the days when the heat  
stops your breath, he comes up the block  
pulling it out of his pocket. Then the johnny pump  
is blasting cool water everywhere  
and us and other kids running through it,  
refreshed and laughing.

Even the grown-ups come out sometimes.  
Once, I saw my  
never-ever-barefoot-outside-in-the-city mother  
take off her sandals,  
stand at the curb  
and let the cool water run over her feet.  
She was looking up at the tiny piece of sky.  
And she was smiling.

# genetics

My mother has a gap between  
her two front teeth. So does Daddy Gunnar.  
Each child in this family has the same space  
connecting us.

Our baby brother, Roman, was born pale as dust.  
His soft brown curls and eyelashes stop  
people on the street.  
*Whose angel child is this?* they want to know.  
When I say, *My brother*, the people  
wear doubt  
thick as a cape  
until we smile  
and the cape falls.

**caroline but  
we called her aunt kay,  
some memories**

Aunt Kay at the top of the stairs, her arms open,  
her smile wide  
and us running to her.

Aunt Kay dressed up on a Friday night  
smelling of perfume,  
her boyfriend, Bernie, her friend Peaches.

Aunt Kay in the kitchen with Peaches and Bernie  
passing a blue-and-white box of Argo starch  
back and forth, the hard white chunks of it,  
disappearing into their mouths like candy,  
the slow chew and swallow.

Aunt Kay and Mama and Peaches, in tight skirts  
singing in a band.

Aunt Kay braiding my hair.

Aunt Kay running up the stairs to her own apartment  
and me running behind her.

Aunt Kay laughing.

Aunt Kay hugging me.

Then a fall.

A crowd.

An ambulance.

My mother's tears.

A funeral.

And here, my Aunt Kay memories end.

# **moving again**

After the falling  
the stairs were all wrong to us.  
*Some days I head up there, my mother said,  
forgetting that Kay is gone.*

After the falling  
Bernie and Peaches  
packed their bags, moved out  
to Far Rockaway, telling my mother  
how much Kay loved the ocean.

After the falling  
we took the A train  
to their new apartment, played on the beach  
till the sun went down, Mama quiet on a blanket  
looking out at the water.

Kay was her big sister, only ten months older.  
Everyone always thought they were twins  
so that's what they said they were.

*Couldn't look at one of us, my mother said,  
without seeing the other.*

After the falling  
the hallway smelled  
like Kay's perfume  
whenever it rained

so we moved again  
to the second floor of a pink house  
on Madison Street.  
Out front there was a five-foot sculpture  
made from gray rock,  
ivory and sand. A small fountain sent water  
cascading over statues  
of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.  
People stopped in front of the house,  
crossed themselves, mouthed a silent prayer  
then moved on.

*This house is protected*, the landlord told my mother.  
*The saints keep us safe.*  
*This house is protected*, my mother whispered to us.  
*By the Saint of Ugly Sculpture.*

After the falling  
sometimes I would see my mother  
smiling at that sculpture. And in her smile,  
there was Aunt Kay's smile, the two of them  
having a secret sister laugh, the two of them  
together again.

# **composition notebook**

And somehow, one day, it's just there  
speckled black-and-white, the paper  
inside smelling like something I could fall right into,  
live there—inside those clean white pages.

I don't know how my first composition notebook  
ended up in my hands, long before I could really write  
someone must have known that this  
was all I needed.

Hard not to smile as I held it, felt the breeze  
as I fanned the pages.  
My sister thought my standing there  
smiling was crazy  
didn't understand how the smell and feel and sight  
of bright white paper  
could bring me so much joy.

*And why does she need a notebook? She can't even write!*

For days and days, I could only sniff the pages,  
hold the notebook close  
listen to the sound the papers made.

Nothing in the world is like this—  
a bright white page with  
pale blue lines. The smell of a newly sharpened pencil  
the soft hush of it  
moving finally  
one day

into letters.

And even though she's smarter than anything,  
this is something  
my sister can't even begin  
to understand.

# **on paper**

The first time I write my full name

*Jacqueline Amanda Woodson*

without anybody's help  
on a clean white page in my composition notebook,  
I know

if I wanted to

I could write anything.

Letters becoming words, words gathering meaning, becoming  
thoughts outside my head

becoming sentences

written by

*Jacqueline Amanda Woodson*

## **saturday morning**

Some days in this new place  
there is only a box of pancake mix  
an egg, and faucet water, the hiss  
of those together  
against a black cast-iron pan,  
the pancakes sticking to it  
syrupless but edible and us  
complaining about it wishing like anything  
we were back in Greenville,  
where there was always something good  
to eat. We remember  
the collards growing  
down south, the melons, fresh picked  
and dripping with a sweetness New York  
can never know.  
We eat without complaining  
or whining or asking our mother when there will be  
syrup, butter, milk . . .  
We remember Greenville  
without her, count our blessings in silence  
and chew.

# **first grade**

My hand inside my sister's hand,  
we walk the two blocks to P.S. 106—  
I am six years old and  
my sister tells me our school was once a castle.  
I believe her. The school stretches for a full city block.  
Inside  
marble stairs wind their way to classrooms filled  
with dark wood desks  
nailed down to dark wood floors polished to a high  
and beautiful shine.

I am in love with everything around me,  
the dotted white lines moving  
across my teacher's blackboard, the smell of chalk,  
the flag jutting out from the wall and slowly swaying  
above me.

There is nothing more beautiful than P.S. 106.  
Nothing more perfect than my first-grade classroom.  
No one more kind than Ms. Feidler, who meets me  
at the door each morning,  
takes my hand from my sister's, smiles down and says,  
*Now that Jacqueline is here, the day can finally begin.*

And I believe her.  
Yes, I truly believe her.

## **another kingdom hall**

Because my grandmother calls and asks  
if we're spreading Jehovah's word,  
because my mother promises my grandmother  
she'll raise us right in the eyes of God,  
she finds a Kingdom Hall on Bushwick Avenue  
so we can keep our Jehovah's Witness ways.  
Every Sunday, we put on our Kingdom Hall clothes  
pull out our Kingdom Hall satchels,  
filled with our Kingdom Hall books  
and walk the seven blocks  
to the Kingdom Hall.

This is what reminds us of Greenville,  
the Saturday-night pressing of satin ribbons,  
Hope struggling with the knot in his tie,  
our hair oiled and pulled back into braids,  
our mother's hands less sure  
than our grandmother's, the parts crooked, the braids  
coming undone. And now, Dell and I  
are left to iron our own dresses.

*My hands,*  
my mother says,  
as she stands at the sink, holding a crying Roman  
with one hand,  
her other holding a bottle of milk  
under hot running water,  
*are full.*

My mother drops us off at the Kingdom Hall door,  
watches us walk

down the aisle to where Brothers and Sisters  
are waiting  
to help us turn the pages of our Bibles,  
lean over to share their songbooks with us,  
press Life Savers into our waiting hands . . .

Then our mother is gone, back home  
or to a park bench,  
where she'll sit and read until the meeting is over.  
She has a full-time job now. Sunday, she says,  
is her day of rest.

# flag

When the kids in my class ask why  
I am not allowed to pledge to the flag  
I tell them *It's against my religion* but don't say,  
*I am in the world but not of the world.* This,  
they would not understand.  
Even though my mother's not a Jehovah's Witness,  
she makes us follow their rules and  
leave the classroom when the pledge is being said.

Every morning, I walk out with Gina and Alina  
the two other Witnesses in my class.  
Sometimes, Gina says,  
*Maybe we should pray for the kids inside*  
*who don't know that God said*  
*"No other idols before me." That our God*  
*is a jealous God.*  
Gina is the true believer. Her Bible open  
during reading time. But Alina and I walk through  
our roles as Witnesses as though this is the part  
we've been given in a play  
and once offstage, we run free, sing  
“America the Beautiful” and “The Star-Spangled Banner”  
far away from our families—knowing every word.

Alina and I want  
more than anything to walk back into our classroom  
press our hands against our hearts. Say,  
*“I pledge allegiance . . .”* loud  
without our jealous God looking down on us.  
Without our parents finding out.

Without our mothers' voices  
in our heads saying, *You are different.*  
Chosen.  
Good.

When the pledge is over, we walk single file  
back into the classroom, take our separate seats  
Alina and I far away from Gina. But Gina  
always looks back at us—as if to say,  
*I'm watching you.* As if to say,  
*I know.*

## **because we're witnesses**

No Halloween.

No Christmas.

No birthdays.

Even when

other kids laugh as we leave the classroom  
just as the birthday cupcakes arrive  
we pretend we do not see the chocolate frosting,  
pretend we do not want  
to press our fingertips against  
each colorful sprinkle and lift them,  
one by sweet one  
to our mouths.

No voting.

No fighting.

No cursing.

No wars.

We will never go to war.

We will never taste the sweetness of a classroom  
birthday cupcake

We will never taste the bitterness of a battle.

# brooklyn rain

The rain here is different than the way  
it rains in Greenville. No sweet smell of honeysuckle.  
No soft squish of pine. No slip and slide through grass.  
Just Mama saying, *Stay inside today. It's raining,*  
and me at the window. Nothing to do but  
watch  
the gray sidewalk grow darker,  
watch  
the drops slide down the glass pane,  
watch  
people below me move fast, heads bent.

Already there are stories  
in my head. Already color and sound and words.  
Already I'm  
drawing circles on the glass, humming  
myself someplace far away from here.

Down south, there was always someplace else to go  
you could step out into the rain and  
Grandma would let you  
lift your head and stick out your tongue  
be happy.

Down south already feels like a long time ago  
but the stories in my head  
take me back there, set me down in Daddy's garden  
where the sun is always shining.

## **another way**

While our friends are watching TV or playing outside,  
we are in our house, knowing that begging our mother  
to turn the television on is useless, begging her for  
ten minutes outside will only mean her saying,  
*No. Saying,*  
*You can run wild with your friends anytime. Today*  
*I want you to find another way to play.*

And then one day my mother  
comes home with two shopping bags  
filled with board games—Monopoly, checkers, chess,  
Ants in the Pants, Sorry, Trouble,  
just about every game we've ever seen  
in the commercials between  
our Saturday morning cartoons.

So many games, we don't know  
where to begin playing, so we let Roman choose.  
And he chooses Trouble  
because he likes the sound the die makes  
when it pops inside  
its plastic bubble. And for days and days,  
it is Christmas in November,  
games to play when our homework is done,  
Monopoly money to count  
and checkers to slam down on boards, ants to flip  
into blue plastic pants,  
chess pieces to practice moving until we understand  
their power  
and when we don't, Roman and I argue

that there's another way to play  
called *Our Way*. But Hope and Dell tell us  
that we're too immature to even begin to understand  
then bend over the chessboard in silence, each becoming  
the next chess champ of the house, depending on the day  
and the way the game is played.

Sometimes, Roman and I leave Hope and Dell alone  
go to another corner of the room and become  
what the others call us—*the two youngest*,  
playing games we know the rules to  
tic-tac-toe and checkers,  
hangman and connect the dots

but mostly, we lean over their shoulders  
as quietly as we can, watching  
waiting  
wanting to understand  
how to play another way.

# gifted

Everyone knows my sister  
is brilliant. The letters come home folded neatly  
inside official-looking envelopes that my sister proudly  
hands over to my mother.  
Odella has achieved  
Odella has excelled at  
Odella has been recommended to  
Odella's outstanding performance in

She is gifted  
we are told.  
And I imagine presents surrounding her.

I am not gifted. When I read, the words twist  
twirl across the page.  
When they settle, it is too late.  
The class has already moved on.

I want to catch words one day. I want to hold them  
then blow gently,  
watch them float  
right out of my hands.

# sometimes

There is only one other house on our block  
where a father doesn't live. When somebody asks why,  
the boy says, *He died.*

The girl looks off, down the block, her thumb  
slowly rising to her mouth. The boy says,  
*I was a baby.* Says, *She doesn't remember him*  
and points to his silent sister.

Sometimes, I lie about my father.

*He died,* I say, *in a car wreck* or

*He fell off a roof* or maybe

*He's coming soon.*

*Next week* and

*next week* and

*next week . . . but*

if my sister's nearby

she shakes her head. Says,

*She's making up stories again.*

Says,

*We don't have a father anymore.*

Says,

*Our grandfather's our father now.*

Says,

*Sometimes, that's the way things happen.*

# **uncle robert**

Uncle Robert has moved to New York City!

I hear him taking the stairs  
two at a time and then  
he is at our door, knocking loud until our mother  
    opens it,  
curlers in her hair, robe pulled closed, whispering,  
*It's almost midnight, don't you wake my children!*

But we are already awake, all four of us, smiling  
    and jumping around  
my uncle: *What'd you bring me?*

Our mama shushes us, says,  
*It's too late for presents and the like.*  
But we want presents and the like.  
And she, too, is smiling now, happy to see her  
    baby brother who lives all the way over  
in Far Rockaway where the ocean is right there  
if you look out your window.

Robert opens his hand to reveal a pair of silver earrings,  
says to my sister, *This is a gift for how smart you are.*  
I want  
to be smart like Dell, I want  
someone to hand me silver and gold  
just because my brain clicks into thinking whenever  
it needs to but  
I am not smart like Dell so I watch her press  
    the silver moons into her ears

I say, *I know a girl ten times smarter than her. She gets diamonds every time she gets a hundred on a test.*  
And Robert looks at me, his dark eyes smiling, asks,  
*Is that something you made up? Or something real?*  
In my own head,  
it's real as anything.

In my head  
all kinds of people are doing all kinds of things.  
I want to tell him this, that  
the world we're living in right here in Bushwick isn't  
the only place. But now my brothers are asking,

*What'd you bring me*, and my uncle is pulling gifts  
from his pockets,  
from his leather briefcase, from inside his socks.  
He hands  
my mother a record, a small 45—James Brown,  
who none of us  
like because he screams when he sings. But my mother  
puts it on the record player, turned way down low  
and then even us kids are dancing around—  
Robert showing us the steps he learned  
at the Far Rockaway parties. His feet are magic  
and we all try to slide across the floor like he does,  
our own feet, again and again,  
betraying us.

*Teach us, Robert!* we keep saying. *Teach us!*

# wishes

When he takes us to the park, Uncle Robert tells us,  
*If you catch a dandelion puff, you can make a wish.*  
*Anything you want will come true,* he says as  
we chase the feathery wishes around swings,  
beneath sliding boards,  
until we can hold them in our hands,  
close our eyes tight, whisper our dream  
then set it floating out into the universe hoping  
our uncle is telling the truth,  
hoping each thing we wish for  
will one day come true.

# believing

The stories start like this—

*Jack and Jill went up a hill*, my uncle sings.  
*I went up a hill yesterday*, I say.  
*What hill?*  
*In the park.*  
*What park?*  
*Halsey Park.*  
*Who was with you?*  
*Nobody.*  
*But you're not allowed to go to the park without anyone.*  
*I just did.*  
*Maybe you dreamed it*, my uncle says.  
*No, I really went.*

And my uncle likes the stories I'm making up.

*...Along came a spider and sat down beside her.*  
*I got bit by a spider*, I say.  
*When?*  
*The other day.*  
*Where?*  
*Right on my foot.*  
*Show us.*  
*It's gone now.*

But my mother accuses me of lying.  
*If you lie*, she says, *one day you'll steal.*

*I won't steal.*

It's hard to understand how one leads to the other,  
how stories could ever  
make us criminals.

It's hard to understand  
the way my brain works—so different  
from everybody around me.

How each new story  
I'm told becomes a thing  
that happens,  
in some other way  
to me . . . !

*Keep making up stories*, my uncle says.  
*You're lying*, my mother says.

Maybe the truth is somewhere in between  
all that I'm told  
and memory.

# **off-key**

We start each meeting at Kingdom Hall with a song  
and a prayer  
but we're always late,  
walking in when the pink songbooks are already open,  
looking over shoulders, asking Brothers and Sisters  
to help us find our place.  
If it's a song I like, I sing loud until my sister shushes me  
with a finger to her mouth.

My whole family knows I can't sing. My voice,  
my sister says, is just left of the key. Just right  
of the tune.

But I sing anyway, whenever I can.

Even the boring Witness songs sound good to me,  
the words  
telling us how God wants us to behave,  
what he wants us to do,  
*Be glad you nations with his people! Go preach  
from door to door!*  
*The good news of Jehovah's kingdom—  
Proclaim from shore to shore!*

It's the music around the words that I hear  
in my head, even though  
everyone swears I can't hear it.  
Strange that they don't hear  
what I hear.

Strange that it sounds so right  
to me.

## eve and the snake

The Sunday sermons are given by men.  
Women aren't allowed to get onstage like this,  
standing alone to tell God's story. I don't  
understand why but I listen anyway:

*On the first day, God made the heavens and the earth  
and He looked at it, and it was good.*

It's a long story. It's a good story.  
Adam and Eve got made,  
a snake appeared in a tree. A talking snake.  
Then Eve had to make a choice—the apple the snake  
wanted her to eat  
looked so good—just one bite. But it was the only apple  
in a kingdom full of apples  
that God had said *Don't touch!*

*It's the best apple in all the world,* the snake said.  
*Go ahead and taste it. God won't care.*

But we know the ending—in our heads, we scream,  
*Don't do it, Eve! That's the Devil inside that snake!*  
*He's tricking you!*

But Eve took a bite. And so here we are,  
sitting in a Kingdom Hall  
on a beautiful Sunday afternoon  
hoping that God sees it in His heart to know  
it wasn't our fault. Give us another chance  
send that snake back and we promise

we'll say no this time!

## **our father, fading away**

In all our moving, we've forgotten our family in Ohio,  
forgotten our father's voice, the slow drawl  
of his words,  
the way he and his brother David made jokes  
that weren't funny  
and laughed as though they were.

We forget the color of his skin—was it  
dark brown like mine or lighter like Dell's?  
Did he have Hope and Dell's loose curls or my  
tighter, kinkier hair?

Was his voice deep or high?  
Was he a hugger like Grandma Georgiana holding us  
like she never planned to let go or  
did he hug hard and fast like Mama,  
planting her warm lips to our foreheads where  
the kiss lingered  
long after  
she said I love you, pulled her sweater on and left  
for work each morning.

In Brooklyn there are no more calls from Ohio.  
No more calls from our father or Grandpa Hope  
or Grandma Grace  
or David or Anne or Ada or Alicia.

It is as if each family  
has disappeared from the other.

Soon, someone who knows someone in Ohio  
    who knows the Woodsons  
tells my mother that Grandpa Hope has died.  
At dinner that evening, our mother gives us the news but  
we keep eating because we hadn't known  
he was still alive.

And for a moment, I think about Jack . . . our father.  
But then  
quickly as it comes  
the thought moves on.

*Out of sight, out of mind*, my brother says.

But only a part of me believes this is true.

## **halfway home #2**

For a long time, there is only one tree on our block.  
And though it still feels  
strange to be so far away from soft dirt  
beneath bare feet  
the ground is firm here and the one tree blooms  
wide enough to shade four buildings.  
The city is settling around me, my words  
    come fast now  
when I speak, the soft curl of the South on my tongue  
is near gone.

*Who are these city children?* My grandmother laughs,  
    her own voice  
sad and far away on the phone. But it is  
    a long-distance call  
from Greenville to Brooklyn, too much money  
and not enough time to explain  
that New York City is gray rock  
and quick-moving cars.  
That the traffic lights change fast and my sister must  
hold tight to my hand  
as we cross to where a small man singing  
*Piragua! Piragua!*  
sells shaved ices from a white cart filled  
with bottles and bottles of fruit-flavored syrup  
colored red and purple, orange and blue.  
That our mouths water in the hot sun as we hand him  
our quarters then wait patiently as he pours  
    the syrup over the ice, hands it to us  
in paper cones.

*We'll be coming home soon, Grandma*  
each of us promises.  
*We love you.*

And when she says, *I love you, too*  
the South is so heavy in her mouth  
my eyes fill up with the missing of  
everything and everyone  
I've ever known.

# **the paint eater**

In the night in the corner of the bedroom  
the four of us share,  
comes a pick, pick, picking of plaster  
paint gone come morning.

My younger brother, Roman,  
can't explain why paint melting  
on his tongue feels good.

Still, he eats the paint  
and plaster until a white hole  
grows where pale green paint used to be.

And too late we catch him,  
his fingers in his mouth,  
his lips covered with dust.

# chemistry

When Hope speaks, it's always about comic books  
and superheroes  
until my mother tells him he has to talk  
about something else.  
And then it's science. He wants to know  
everything  
about rockets and medicine and the galaxy.  
He wants to know where the sky ends and how,  
what does it feel like when gravity's gone  
and what is the food men eat  
on the moon. His questions come so fast  
and so often that we forget how quiet  
he once was until my mother  
buys him a chemistry set.

And then for hours after school each day  
he makes potions, mixing chemicals that stink up  
the house, causing sparks to fly  
from shaved bits of iron,  
puffs of smoke to pop from strange-colored liquids.  
We are fascinated by him, goggled and bent  
    over the stove  
a clamped test tube protruding  
from his gloved hand.

On the days when our mother says  
she doesn't want him smelling up the house  
with his potions, he takes his trains apart, studies  
each tiny piece, then slowly puts them together again.

We don't know what it is he's looking for  
as he searches the insides of things, studies  
the way things change. Each whispered *Wow*  
from him makes me think that he  
with his searching—and Dell with her reading  
and even Roman with his trying to eat  
to the other side of our walls—is looking  
for something. Something way past Brooklyn.  
Something  
out  
there.

# **baby in the house**

And then one day, Roman won't get up,  
sun coming in bright  
through the bedroom window, the rest of us  
dressed and ready to go outside.  
No laughter—just tears when we hold him.  
More crying when we put him down.  
Won't eat and even my mother  
can't help him.

When she takes him to the hospital, she comes back  
alone.

And for many days after that, there is no baby  
in our house and I am finally  
the baby girl again, wishing

I wasn't. Wishing there wasn't so much quiet  
where my brother's laugh used to be, wishing  
the true baby in our house  
was home.

# **going home again**

July comes and Robert takes us on the night train  
back to South Carolina. We kiss  
our baby brother good-bye in his hospital bed where  
he reaches out, cries to come with us.

His words are weak as water, no more  
than a whisper with so much air around them.

*I'm coming too,* he says.

But he isn't coming.  
Not this time.  
My mother says there is lead in his blood  
from the paint he finds a way to pick  
and eat off our bedroom wall  
every time our backs are turned.  
Small holes grow, like white stars against  
the green paint, covered again and again  
by our mother. But still, he finds a way.

Each of us hugs him, promises  
to bring him candy and toys.  
Promises we won't have fun down south  
without him.

Each of us leans in  
for our mother's kiss on our forehead,  
her warm lips, already a memory

that each of us carries home.

## **home again to hall street**

My grandmother's kitchen is the same  
big and yellow and smelling of the pound cake  
she's made to welcome us back.

And now in the late afternoon, she is standing  
at the sink, tearing collards beneath  
cool running water, while the crows caw outside,  
and the sun sinks slow into red and gold

When Hope lets the screen door slam,  
she fusses,  
*Boy, don't you slam my door again!* and my brother says,  
*I'm sorry.*

Just like always.

Soon, there'll be lemonade on the porch,  
the swing whining the same early evening song  
it always sings  
my brother and sister with the checker set between them  
me next to my grandfather, falling asleep against  
his thin shoulder.

And it's not even strange that it feels the way  
it's always felt  
like the place we belong to.

Like *home*.

## **mrs. hughes's house**

In Greenville, my grandfather is too sick  
to work anymore, so my grandmother has a full-time job.  
Now we spend every day from July  
until the middle of August  
at Mrs. Hughes's Nursery and Day School.

Each morning, we walk the long dusty road  
to Mrs. Hughes's house—large, white stone,  
with a yard circling and chickens pecking at our feet.  
Beyond the yard there's collards and corn growing  
a scarecrow, black snakes, and whip-poor-wills.

She is a big woman, tall, yellow-skinned and thick  
as a wall.  
I hold tight to my grandmother's hand. Maybe  
I am crying.

My grandmother drops us off and  
the other kids circle around us. Laughing at  
our hair, our clothes, the names our parents  
have given us,  
our city way of talking—too fast, too many words  
to hear at once  
too many big words coming out of  
my sister's mouth.

I am always the first to cry. A gentle slap on the side  
of my head, a secret pinch,  
girls circling around me singing, *Who stole the cookie  
from the cookie jar* and

pointing, as though the song is true, at me.

My sister's tears are slow to come. But when they do,  
it isn't sadness.

It's something different that sends her swinging

her fists when

the others yank her braids until the satin,  
newly ironed ribbons belong to them,  
hidden away in the deep pockets of their dresses,  
tucked into  
their sagging stockings, buried inside their  
silver lunch pails.

Hope is silent—his name, they say, belongs to a girl,  
his ears, they laugh  
stick out too far from his head.

Our feet are beginning to belong  
in two different worlds—Greenville  
and New York. We don't know how to come  
home  
and leave  
home  
behind us.

## **how to listen #4**

*Kids are mean, Dell says.  
Just turn away. Pretend we  
know better than that.*

## **field service**

Saturday morning's the hardest day for us now.  
For three hours we move through  
the streets of Nicholtown,  
knocking on strangers' doors, hoping to convert  
them into Sisters and Brothers and children of God.

This summer I am allowed to knock on my first door  
alone. An old woman answers, smiles kindly at me.  
*What a special child you are*, she says.  
Sky-blue ribbons in my hair, my *Watchtower* held tight  
in my white-gloved hand,  
the blue linen dress a friend of my grandmother's  
has made for me stopping just above my knees.

*My name is Jacqueline Woodson*, I nearly whisper,  
my throat suddenly dry  
voice near gone.  
*I'm here to bring you some good news today . . .*

*Well how much does your good news cost*, the woman  
wants to know.

*A dime.*

She shakes her head sadly, closes her door a moment  
to search beneath a trunk where she hopes  
she's dropped a coin or two.  
But when she comes back, there are no coins  
in her hand.  
*Oh I'd love to read that magazine*, she says.

*I just don't have money.*

And for many days my heart hurts with the sadness  
that such a nice woman will not be a part of God's  
new world.

*It isn't fair*, I say to my grandmother when  
so many days have passed.

I want to go back. I want to give her something  
for free.

But we're done now with that strip of Nicholtown.  
Next Saturday, we'll be somewhere else.  
*Another Witness will go there*, my grandmother promises.  
*By and by*, she says, *that woman will find her way.*

## sunday afternoon on the front porch

Across the road,

Miss Bell has tied a blue-checked sunbonnet  
beneath her chin, lifts her head from her bed  
of azaleas and waves to my grandmother.

I am sitting beside her on the front porch swing, Hope  
and Dell leaning back against the wood beam  
at the top of the front porch stairs. It is as  
though we have always been in this position,  
the front porch swing moving gently back and forth,  
the sun warm on our faces, the day only halfway over.

*I see your grands are back for the summer,*

Miss Bell says. *Getting big, too.*

It is Sunday afternoon.

Out back, my grandfather pulls weeds from his garden,  
digs softly into the rich earth to add new melon seeds.

Wondering  
if this time, they'll grow. All this he does from  
a small chair, a cane beside him.

He moves as if underwater, coughs  
hard and long into a handkerchief, calls out for Hope  
when he needs the chair moved, sees me watching,  
and shakes his head. *I'm catching you worrying*, he says.

*Too young for that. So just cut it out now, you hear?*

His voice  
so strong and clear today, I can't help smiling.

Soon I'll rise from the porch,  
change out of my Kingdom Hall clothes into

a pair of shorts and a cotton blouse  
trade my patent-leather Mary Janes for bare feet  
and join my grandfather in the garden.

*What took you so long, he'll say. I was about to turn  
this earth around without you.*

Soon, it'll be near evening and Daddy and I  
will walk slow  
back into the house where I'll pull the Epsom salt  
from the shelf  
fill the dishpan with warm water, massage  
his swelling hands.

But for now, I sit listening to Nicholtown settle  
around me,  
pray that one day Roman will be well enough  
to know this moment.

Pray that we will always have this—the front porch,  
my grandfather in the garden,  
a woman in a blue-checked sunbonnet  
moving through azaleas . . .

*Pretty children, Miss Bell says.  
But God don't make them no other kinda way.*

# **home then home again**

Too fast, our summer in Greenville  
is ending.

Already, the phone calls from my mother  
are filled with plans for coming home.

We miss

our little's brother's laughter, the way  
he runs to us at the end of the school day as if  
we've been gone forever. The way his small hands  
curl around ours when we watch TV. Holding  
tight through the scary parts, until we tell him  
Scooby-Doo will save the day,  
Bugs Bunny will get away,  
Underdog will arrive before the train hits  
Sweet Polly Purebred.

We drag our feet below our swings,  
our arms wrapped lazily around the metal links  
no longer fascinated by the newness  
of the set, the way we climbed all over the slide,  
pumped our legs hard—toward heaven until  
the swing set shook with the weight of us lifting it  
from the ground.

*Next summer, my grandfather said, I'll cement it down.  
But in the meantime  
you all swing low.*

Our suitcases sit at the foot of our bed, open  
slowly filling with freshly washed summer clothes,  
each blouse, each pair of shorts, each faded cotton dress  
holding a story that we'll tell again and again

all winter long.

PART IV

deep  
in  
my heart,  
i do  
believe

# family

In the books, there's always a happily ever after.  
The ugly duckling grows into a swan, Pinocchio  
becomes a boy.  
The witch gets chucked into the oven by Gretel,  
the Selfish Giant goes to heaven.  
Even Winnie the Pooh seems to always get his honey.  
Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother is freed  
from the belly of the wolf.

When my sister reads to me, I wait for the moment  
when the story moves faster—toward the happy ending  
that I know is coming.

On the bus home from Greenville, I wake to the almost  
happy ending, my mother standing at the station, Roman  
in his stroller, his smile bright, his arms reaching for us  
but we see the white hospital band like a bracelet  
on his wrist. Tomorrow he will return there.

We are not all finally and safely  
home.

# **one place**

For a long time, our little brother  
goes back and forth to the hospital, his body  
weak from the lead, his brain  
not doing what a brain is supposed to do. We don't  
understand why he's so small, has tubes  
coming from his arms, sleeps and sleeps . . .  
when we visit him.

But one day,  
he comes home. The holes in the wall  
are covered over and left  
unpainted, his bed pulled away from *temptation*,  
nothing for him to peel away.

He is four now, curls long gone, his dark brown hair  
straight as a bone, strange to us but  
our little brother, the four of us again  
  
in one place.

# maria

Late August now  
home from Greenville and ready  
for what the last of the summer brings me.  
All the dreams this city holds  
right outside—just step through the door and walk  
two doors down to where  
my new best friend, Maria, lives. Every morning,  
I call up to her window, *Come outside*  
or she rings our bell, *Come outside*.  
Her hair is crazily curling down past her back,  
the Spanish she speaks like a song  
I am learning to sing.  
*Mi amiga, Maria.*  
Maria, my friend.

## **how to listen #5**

*What is your one dream,  
my friend Maria asks me.  
Your one wish come true?*

# **tomboy**

My sister, Dell, reads and reads  
and never learns  
to jump rope or  
play handball against the factory wall on the corner.  
Never learns to sprint  
barefoot down the block  
to become  
the fastest girl  
on Madison Street.  
Doesn't learn  
to hide the belt or steal the bacon  
or kick the can . . .  
But I do and because of this  
*Tomboy* becomes my new name.  
My walk, my mother says,  
reminds her of my father.  
When I move long-legged and fast away from her  
she remembers him.

# game over

When my mother calls,  
*Hope Dell Jackie—inside!*  
the game is over.

No more reading beneath the streetlight  
for Dell. But for my brother and me  
it's no more *anything!* No more  
steal the bacon  
coco levio 1-2-3

Miss Lucy had a baby  
spinning tops  
double Dutch.

No more  
freeze tag  
hide the belt  
hot peas and butter.

No more  
singing contests on the stoop.

No more  
ice cream truck chasing:

*Wait! Wait, ice cream man! My mother's gonna  
give me money!*

No more getting wet in the johnny pump  
or standing with two fisted hands out in front of me,  
a dime hidden in one, chanting,  
*Dumb school, dumb school, which hand's it in?*

When my mother calls,  
*Hope Dell Jackie—inside!*  
we complain as we walk up the block in the twilight:  
*Everyone else is allowed to stay outside till dark.*  
Our friends standing in the moment—

string halfway wrapped around a top,  
waiting to be tagged and unfrozen,  
searching for words to a song,  
dripping from the johnny pump,  
silent in the middle of *Miss Lucy had a . . .*

The game is over for the evening and all we can hear  
is our friends'

*Aw . . . man!!*

*Bummer!*

*For real?! This early?!*

*Dang it!*

*Shoot. Your mama's mean!*

*Early birds!*

*Why she gotta mess up our playing like that?*

*Jeez. Now*

*the game's over!*

# **lessons**

My mother says:

*When Mama tried to teach me*

*to make collards and potato salad*

*I didn't want to learn.*

She opens the box of pancake mix, adds milk  
and egg, stirs. I watch  
grateful for the food we have now—syrup waiting  
in the cabinet, bananas to slice on top.

It's Saturday morning.

Five days a week, she leaves us  
to work at an office back in Brownsville.  
Saturday we have her to ourselves, all day long.

*Me and Kay didn't want to be inside cooking.*

She stirs the lumps from the batter, pours it  
into the buttered, hissing pan.

*Wanted to be with our friends  
running wild through Greenville.*

*There was a man with a peach tree down the road.  
One day Robert climbed over that fence, filled a bucket  
with peaches. Wouldn't share them with any of us but  
told us where the peach tree was. And that's where we  
wanted to be  
sneaking peaches from that man's tree, throwing*

*the rotten ones  
at your uncle!*

*Mama wanted us to learn to cook.*

*Ask the boys, we said. And Mama knew that wasn't fair  
girls inside and boys going off to steal peaches!  
So she let all of us  
stay outside until suppertime.*

*And by then, she says, putting our breakfast on the table,  
it was too late.*

# trading places

When Maria's mother makes  
*arroz con habichuelas y tostones*,  
we trade dinners. If it's a school night,  
I'll run to Maria's house, a plate of my mother's  
baked chicken with Kraft mac and cheese,  
sometimes box corn bread,  
sometimes canned string beans,  
warm in my hands, ready for the first taste  
of Maria's mother's garlicky rice and beans,  
crushed green bananas  
fried and salted and warm . . .

Maria will be waiting, her own plate covered in foil.

Sometimes  
we sit side by side on her stoop, our traded plates  
in our laps.

*What are you guys eating?* the neighborhood kids ask  
but we never answer, too busy shoveling the food we love  
into our mouths.

*Your mother makes the best chicken,* Maria says. *The best  
corn bread. The best everything!*

*Yeah,* I say.

*I guess my grandma taught her something after all.*

# writing #1

It's easier to make up stories  
than it is to write them down. When I speak,  
the words come pouring out of me. The story  
wakes up and walks all over the room. Sits in a chair,  
crosses one leg over the other, says,  
*Let me introduce myself.* Then just starts going on and on.  
But as I bend over my composition notebook,  
only my name  
comes quickly. Each letter, neatly printed  
between the pale blue lines. Then white  
space and air and me wondering, *How do I*  
*spell introduce?* Trying again and again  
until there is nothing but pink  
bits of eraser and a hole now  
where a story should be.

## late autumn

Ms. Moskowitz calls us one by one and says,  
*Come up to the board and write your name.*  
When it's my turn, I walk down the aisle from  
my seat in the back, write *Jacqueline Woodson*—  
the way I've done a hundred times, turn back  
toward my seat, proud as anything  
of my name in white letters on the dusty blackboard.  
But Ms. Moskowitz stops me, says,  
*In cursive too, please.* But the *q* in Jacqueline is too hard  
so I write *Jackie Woodson* for the first time. Struggle  
only a little bit with the *k*.

*Is that what you want us to call you?*

I want to say, *No, my name is Jacqueline*  
but I am scared of that cursive *q*, know  
I may never be able to connect it to *c* and *u*  
so I nod even though  
I am lying.

# the other woodson

Even though so many people think my sister and I  
are twins,

I am the other Woodson, following behind her each year  
into the same classroom she had the year before. Each  
teacher smiles when they call my name. *Woodson*, they  
say. *You must be Odella's sister.* Then they nod  
slowly, over and over again, call me Odella. Say,  
*I'm sorry! You look so much like her and she is SO brilliant!*  
then wait for my brilliance to light up  
the classroom. Wait for my arm to fly into  
the air with every answer. Wait for my pencil  
to move quickly through the too-easy math problems  
on the mimeographed sheet. Wait for me to stand  
before class, easily reading words even high school  
students stumble over. And they keep waiting.

And waiting  
and waiting  
and waiting

until one day, they walk into the classroom,  
almost call me Odel—then stop  
remember that I am the other Woodson

and begin searching for brilliance

at another desk.

## writing #2

On the radio, Sly and the Family Stone are singing  
“Family Affair,” the song turned up because it’s  
my mother’s favorite, the one she plays again and again.

*You can’t leave ’cause your heart is there,* Sly sings.  
*But you can’t stay ’cause you been somewhere else.*

The song makes me think of Greenville and Brooklyn  
the two worlds my heart lives in now. I am writing  
the lyrics down, trying to catch each word before it’s gone

then reading them back, out loud to my mother. This  
is how I’m learning. Words come slow to me  
on the page until  
I memorize them, reading the same books over  
and over, copying  
lyrics to songs from records and TV commercials,  
the words  
settling into my brain, into my memory.  
Not everyone learns  
to read this way—memory taking over when the rest  
of the brain stops working,  
but I do.

Sly is singing the words  
over and over as though  
he is trying  
to convince me that this whole world  
is just a bunch of families  
like ours

going about their own family affairs.

*Stop daydreaming*, my mother says.

So I go back to writing down words  
that are songs and stories and whole new worlds  
tucking themselves into  
my memory.

## **birch tree poem**

Before my teacher reads the poem,  
she has to explain.

*A birch*, she says, *is a kind of tree*  
then magically she pulls a picture  
from her desk drawer and the tree is suddenly  
real to us.

“*When I see birches bend to left and right . . .*” she begins  
“*Across the lines of straighter darker trees,*  
*I like to think*

and when she reads, her voice drops down so low  
and beautiful  
some of us put our heads on our desks to keep  
the happy tears from flowing

—“*some boy’s been swinging them.*  
*But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay*  
*As ice-storms do.*”

And even though we’ve never seen an ice storm  
we’ve seen a birch tree, so we can imagine  
everything we need to imagine

forever and ever

infinity

amen.

## **how to listen #6**

When I sit beneath  
the shade of my block's oak tree  
the world disappears.

# reading

I am not my sister.

Words from the books curl around each other  
make little sense  
until

I read them again  
and again, the story  
settling into memory. *Too slow*  
the teacher says.

*Read faster.*

*Too babyish*, the teacher says.

*Read older.*

But I don't want to read faster or older or  
any way else that might  
make the story disappear too quickly from where

it's settling  
inside my brain,  
slowly becoming  
a part of me.

A story I will remember  
long after I've read it for the second, third,  
tenth, hundredth time.

## stevie and me

Every Monday, my mother takes us  
to the library around the corner. We are allowed  
to take out seven books each. On those days,  
no one complains  
that all I want are picture books.

Those days, no one tells me to read faster  
to read harder books  
to read like Dell.

No one is there to say, *Not that book*,  
when I stop in front of the small paperback  
with a brown boy on the cover.  
*Stevie.*

I read:  
*One day my momma told me,*  
“*You know you’re gonna have  
a little friend come stay with you.*”  
*And I said, “Who is it?”*

If someone had been fussing with me  
to read like my sister, I might have missed  
the picture book filled with brown people, more  
brown people than I’d ever seen  
in a book before.

*The little boy’s name was Steven but  
his mother kept calling him Stevie.  
My name is Robert but my momma don’t*

*call me Robertie.*

If someone had taken  
that book out of my hand  
said, *You're too old for this*  
maybe  
I'd never have believed  
that someone who looked like me  
could be in the pages of the book  
that someone who looked like me  
had a story.

## **when i tell my family**

When I tell my family  
I want to be a writer, they smile and say,  
*We see you in the backyard with your writing.*  
They say,  
*We hear you making up all those stories.*  
And,  
*We used to write poems.*  
And,  
*It's a good hobby, we see how quiet it keeps you.*  
They say,  
*But maybe you should be a teacher,  
a lawyer,  
do hair . . .*

*I'll think about it,* I say.

And maybe all of us know

this is just another one of my  
stories.

# **daddy gunnar**

Saturday morning and Daddy Gunnar's voice  
is on the other end of the phone.

We all grab for it.

*Let me speak to him!*

*My turn!*

*No mine!*

Until Mama makes us stand in line.

He coughs hard, takes deep breaths.  
When he speaks, it's almost low as a whisper.

*How are my New York grandbabies*, he wants to know.

*We're good*, I say, holding tight to the phone  
but my sister is already grabbing for it,  
Hope and even Roman, all of us  
hungry for the sound  
of his faraway voice.

*Y'all know how much I love you?*

*Infinity and back again*, I say  
the way I've said it a million times.

*And then*, Daddy says to me, *Go on and add  
a little bit more to that.*

## hope onstage

Until the curtain comes up and he's standing there,  
ten years old and alone in the center of the P.S. 106 stage,  
no one knew  
my big brother could sing. He is dressed  
as a shepherd, his voice  
soft and low, more sure than any sound I've ever heard  
come out of him. My quiet big brother  
who only speaks  
when asked, has little to say to any of us, except  
when he's talking about science or comic books, now  
has a voice that is circling the air,  
landing clear and sweet around us:

*"Tingalayo, come little donkey come.  
Tingalayo, come little donkey come.  
My donkey walks, my donkey talks  
my donkey eats with a knife and fork.  
Oh Tingalayo, come little donkey come."*

Hope can sing . . . my sister says in wonder  
as my mother  
and the rest of the audience start to clap.

Maybe, I am thinking, there is something hidden  
like this, in all of us. A small gift from the universe  
waiting to be discovered.

My big brother raises his arms, calling his donkey home.  
He is smiling as he sings, the music getting louder  
behind him.

*“Tingalayo . . .”*

And in the darkened auditorium, the light  
is only on Hope  
and it's hard to believe he has such a magic  
    singing voice  
and even harder to believe his donkey  
is going to come running.

## **daddy this time**

Greenville is different this summer,

Roman is well and out back, swinging hard. Somewhere between last summer and now, our daddy cemented the swing set down.

Roman doesn't know the shaky days—just this moment, his dark blue Keds pointing toward the sky,

    his laughter and screams, like wind through the screen door.

Now my grandmother shushes him,  
Daddy resting in the bedroom, the covers pulled up  
    to his chin,  
his thin body so much smaller than I remember it.

*Just a little tired*, Daddy says to me, when I tiptoe in with chicken soup,  
sit on the edge of the bed and try to get him  
to take small sips.

He struggles into sitting, lets me feed him  
small mouthfuls but only a few  
are enough. *Too tired to eat anymore.*  
Then he closes his eyes.

Outside, Roman laughs again and the swing set whines with the weight of him.

Maybe Hope is there, pushing him  
into the air. Or maybe it's Dell.  
The three of them would rather be outside.

*His room smells*, my sister says.

But I don't smell anything except the lotion  
I rub into my grandfather's hands.  
When the others aren't around, he whispers,

*You're my favorite,*  
smiles and winks at me. *You're going to be fine,*  
*you know that.*

Then he coughs hard and closes his eyes, his breath  
struggling to get  
into and out of his body.

Most days, I am in here with my grandfather,  
holding his hand  
while he sleeps  
fluffing pillows and telling him stories  
about my friends back home.

When he asks, I speak to him in Spanish,  
the language that rolls off my tongue  
like I was born knowing it.  
Sometimes, my grandfather says,  
*Sing me something pretty.*

And when I sing to him, I'm not  
just left of the key or right of the tune  
He says I sing beautifully.

He says I am perfect.

## **what everybody knows now**

Even though the laws have changed  
my grandmother still takes us  
to the back of the bus when we go downtown  
in the rain. *It's easier*, my grandmother says,  
*than having white folks look at me like I'm dirt.*

But we aren't dirt. We are people  
paying the same fare as other people.  
When I say this to my grandmother,  
she nods, says, *Easier to stay where you belong.*

I look around and see the ones  
who walk straight to the back. See  
the ones who take a seat up front, daring  
anyone to make them move. And know  
this is who I want to be. Not scared  
like that. Brave  
like that.

Still, my grandmother takes my hand downtown  
pulls me right past the restaurants that have to let us sit  
wherever we want now. *No need in making trouble*,  
she says. *You all go back to New York City but*  
*I have to live here.*

We walk straight past Woolworth's  
without even looking in the windows  
because the one time my grandmother went inside  
they made her wait and wait. *Acted like*  
*I wasn't even there.* It's hard *not* to see the moment—

my grandmother in her Sunday clothes, a hat  
with a flower pinned to it  
neatly on her head, her patent-leather purse,  
perfectly clasped  
between her gloved hands—waiting quietly  
long past her turn.

## **end of summer**

Too fast the summer leaves us, we kiss  
our grandparents good-bye and my uncle Robert  
is there waiting  
to take us home again.

When we hug our grandfather, his body  
is all bones and skin. But he is up now,  
sitting at the window, a blanket covering  
his thin shoulders.

*Soon, I'll get back to that garden, he says.  
But most days, all I want to do  
is lay down and rest.*

We wave again from the taxi that pulls out  
slow down the drive—watch our grandmother,  
still waving,  
grow small behind us and our grandfather,  
in the window,  
fade from sight.

# **far rockaway**

Robert only stays long enough  
for my mother to thank him  
for buying our tickets  
for getting us home.

He does a fancy turn on his heel, aims  
two pointer fingers at us  
says, *I'll catch up with all of you later.*

We tell him that he has to come back soon,  
remind him of all the stuff he's promised us  
trips to Coney Island and Palisades Amusement Park,  
a Crissy doll  
with hair that grows, a Tonka toy, *Gulliver's Travels*,  
candy.

He says he won't forget,  
asks us if he's a man of his word and  
everyone except my mother  
nods.

Hard not to miss my mother's eyebrows,  
giving her baby brother a look,  
pressing her lips together. Once,  
in the middle of the night, two policemen  
knocked on our door, asking for Robert Leon Irby.  
But my uncle wasn't here.

So now my mother takes a breath, says,  
*Stay safe.*

Says,  
*Don't get into trouble out there, Robert.*

He gives her a hug, promises he won't  
and then he is gone.

## fresh air

When I get back to Brooklyn, Maria isn't there.  
She's gone upstate, staying with a family,  
her mother tells me, that has a pool. Then her mother  
puts a plate of food in front of me, tells me  
how much she knows I love her rice and chicken.

When Maria returns she is tanned and wearing  
a new short set. Everything about her seems different.  
*I stayed with white people, she tells me. Rich white people.*  
*The air upstate is different. It doesn't smell like anything!*  
She hands me a piece of bubble gum with BUBBLE YUM  
in bright letters.  
*This is what they chew up there.*  
*The town was called Schenectady.*

All the rest of the summer Maria and I buy only  
Bubble Yum, blow  
huge bubbles while I make her tell me story after  
story about the white family in Schenectady.

*They kept saying I was poor and trying to give me stuff,*  
Maria says. *I had to keep telling them it's not poor*  
*where we live.*

*Next summer, I say. You should just come down south.*  
*It's different there.*

And Maria promises she will.

On the sidewalk we draw hopscotch games that we  
play using chipped pieces of slate, chalk  
*Maria & Jackie Best Friends Forever* wherever  
there is smooth stone.

Write it so many times that it's hard to walk  
on our side  
of the street without looking down  
and seeing us there.

## **p.s. 106 haiku**

Jacqueline Woodson.  
I'm finally in fourth grade.  
It's raining outside.

# learning from langston

*I loved my friend.*

*He went away from me.  
There's nothing more to say.  
The poem ends,  
Soft as it began—  
I loved my friend.*

—Langston Hughes

*I love my friend  
and still do  
when we play games  
we laugh. I hope she never goes away from me  
because I love my friend.*

—Jackie Woodson

# the selfish giant

In the story of the Selfish Giant, a little boy hugs  
a giant who has never been hugged before.

The giant falls  
in love with the boy but then one day,  
the boy disappears.

When he returns, he has scars on his hands and  
his feet, just like Jesus.

The giant dies and goes to Paradise.

The first time my teacher reads the story to the class  
I cry all afternoon, and am still crying  
when my mother gets home from work that evening.

She doesn't understand why  
I want to hear such a sad story again and again  
but takes me to the library around the corner  
when I beg  
and helps me find the book to borrow.

*The Selfish Giant*, by Oscar Wilde.

I read the story again and again.  
Like the giant, I, too, fall in love with the Jesus boy,  
there's something so sweet about him, I want  
to be his friend.

Then one day, my teacher asks me to come up front  
to read out loud. But I don't need to bring  
the book with me.

The story of the Selfish Giant is in my head now,  
living there. Remembered.

*“Every afternoon, as they were coming from school,  
the children used to go and play in the Giant’s garden . . .”*  
I tell the class, the whole story flowing out of me  
right up to the end when the boy says,

*“These are the wounds of Love . . .  
“You let me play once in your garden, today you shall  
come with me to my garden, which is Paradise . . .”*

*How did you do that, my classmates ask.  
How did you memorize all those words?*

But I just shrug, not knowing what to say.  
How can I explain to anyone that stories  
are like air to me,  
I breathe them in and let them out  
over and over again.

*Brilliant! my teacher says, smiling.  
Jackie, that was absolutely beautiful.*

And I know now  
words are my Tingalayo. Words are my brilliance.

## the butterfly poems

No one believes me when I tell them  
I am writing a book about butterflies,  
even though they see me with the *Childcraft* encyclopedia  
heavy on my lap opened to the pages where  
the monarch, painted lady, giant swallowtail and  
queen butterflies live. Even one called a buckeye.

When I write the first words  
*Wings of a butterfly whisper . . .*

no one believes a whole book could ever come  
from something as simple as  
butterflies that *don't even*, my brother says,  
*live that long.*

But on paper, things can live forever.  
On paper, a butterfly  
never dies.

# six minutes

The Sisters in the Kingdom Hall get six minutes  
to be onstage. In pairs. Or threes.

But never alone.

We have to write skits  
where we are visiting another Sister  
or maybe a nonbeliever. Sometimes  
the play takes place at their pretend kitchen table  
and sometimes, we're in their pretend living room  
but in real life we're just in folding chairs, sitting  
on the Kingdom Hall stage. The first time  
I have to give my talk I ask if I can write it myself  
without anyone helping.

There are horses and cows in my story even though  
the main point is supposed to be  
the story of the resurrection.

*Say for instance, I write,  
we have a cow and a horse that we love.*

*Is death the end of life for those animals?*

When my mother reads those lines,  
she shakes her head. *You're getting away from the topic,*  
she says. *You have to take the animals out of it, get right*  
*to the point. Start with people.*

I don't know what I am supposed to do  
with the fabulous, more interesting part of my story,  
where the horses and cows start speaking to me  
and to each other. How even though they are old  
and won't live much longer, they aren't afraid.

*You only have six minutes, my mother says,  
and no, you can't get up and walk across the stage  
to make your point. Your talk has to be given*

*sitting down.*

So I start again. Rewriting:

*Good afternoon, Sister. I'm here to bring you some  
good news today.*

*Did you know God's word is absolute? If we turn to John,  
chapter five, verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine . . .*

promising myself there'll come a time  
when I can use the rest of my story  
and stand when I tell it  
and give myself and my horses and my cows  
a whole lot more time  
than six minutes!

## **first book**

There are seven of them,  
haikus mostly but rhyming ones, too.  
Not enough for a real book until  
I cut each page into a small square  
staple the squares together, write  
one poem  
on each page.

*Butterflies by Jacqueline Woodson*  
on the front.

The butterfly book  
complete now.

## **john's bargain store**

Down Knickerbocker Avenue is where everyone  
on the block goes to shop.  
There's a pizzeria if you get hungry,  
seventy-five cents a slice.  
There's an ice cream shop where cones cost a quarter.  
There's a Fabco Shoes store and a beauty parlor.  
A Woolworth's five-and-dime and a John's Bargain Store.  
For a long time, I don't put one foot inside Woolworth's.  
*They wouldn't let Black people eat at their lunch counters  
in Greenville*, I tell Maria.  
*No way are they getting my money!*  
So instead, Maria and I go to John's Bargain Store where  
three T-shirts cost a dollar. We buy them  
in pale pink, yellow and baby blue. Each night  
we make a plan:  
*Wear your yellow one tomorrow*, Maria says,  
*and I'll wear mine.*  
All year long, we dress alike,  
walking up and down Madison Street  
waiting for someone to say, *Are you guys cousins?*  
so we can smile, say,  
*Can't you tell from looking at us?!*

# **new girl**

Then one day a new girl moves in next door, tells us  
her name is Diana and becomes  
me and Maria's Second Best Friend in the Whole World.  
And even though Maria's mother  
knew Diana's mother in Puerto Rico,  
Maria promises that doesn't make Diana *más mejor*  
*amiga*—a better friend. But some days, when  
it's raining and Mama won't let me go outside,  
I see them  
on the block, their fingers laced together,  
heading around the corner  
to the bodega for candy. Those days,  
the world feels as gray and cold as it really is  
and it's hard  
not to believe the new girl isn't *más mejor* than me.  
Hard not to believe  
my days as Maria's best friend forever and ever amen  
are counted.

# **pasteles & pernil**

When Maria's brother, Carlos, gets baptized  
he is just a tiny baby in a white lace gown with  
so many twenty-dollar bills folded into fans pinned  
all over it  
that he looks like a green-and-white angel.

Maria and I stand over his crib  
talking about all the candy we could buy with just one  
of those fans. But we know that God is watching  
and don't even dare touch the money.

In the kitchen, there is *pernil* roasting in the oven  
the delicious smell filling the house and Maria says,  
*You should just eat a little bit.* But I am not allowed  
to eat pork. Instead, I wait for *pasteles* to get  
passed around,  
wait for the ones her mother has filled with chicken  
*for Jackie, mi ahijada*, wait for the moment when  
I can peel the paper  
away from the crushed-plantain-covered meat,  
break off small pieces with my hands and let the  
*pastele* melt in my mouth. *My mother makes the best*  
*pasteles in Brooklyn*, Maria says. And even though I've  
only eaten her mom's, I agree.

Whenever there is the smell of *pernil* and *pasteles* on  
the block, we know  
there is a celebration going on. And tonight, the party  
is at Maria's house. The music is loud and the cake  
is big and the *pasteles*

that her mother's been making for three days are

absolutely perfect.

We take our food out to her stoop just as the grown-ups  
start dancing merengue, the women lifting their long dresses  
to show off their fast-moving feet,  
the men clapping and yelling,  
*Baila! Baila!* until the living room floor disappears.  
When I ask Maria where Diana is she says,  
*They're coming later. This part is just for my family.*

She pulls the crisp skin  
away from the *pernil*, eats the pork shoulder  
with rice and beans,  
our plates balanced on our laps, tall glasses of Malta  
beside us.  
and for a long time, neither one of us says anything.

*Yeah, I say. This is only for us. The family.*

## curses

We are good kids,  
people tell my mother this all the time, say,  
*You have the most polite children.*  
*I've never heard a bad word from them.*

And it's true—we say *please* and *thank you*.  
We speak softly. We look adults in the eyes  
ask, *How are you?* Bow our heads when we pray.  
We don't know how to curse,  
when we try to put bad words together they sound strange  
like new babies trying to talk and mixing up their sounds.

At home, we aren't allowed words like  
*stupid* or *dumb* or *jerk* or *darn*.  
We aren't allowed to say  
*I hate* or *I could die* or *You make me sick*.

We're not allowed to roll our eyes or  
look away when my mother is speaking to us.

Once my brother said *butt* and wasn't allowed  
to play outside after school for a week.

When we are with our friends and angry, we whisper,  
*You stupid dummy*  
and our friends laugh then spew curses  
at us like bullets, bend their lips over the words  
like they were born speaking them. They coach us on,  
tell us to *Just say it!*

But we can't. Even when we try  
the words get caught inside our throats, as though  
our mother  
is standing there waiting, daring them to reach the air.

# afros

When Robert comes over with his hair blown out into  
an afro, I beg my mother  
for the same hairstyle.

Everyone in the neighborhood  
has one and all of the black people on *Soul Train*. Even  
Michael Jackson and his brothers are all allowed to wear  
their hair this way.

Even though she says no to me,  
my mom spends a lot of Saturday morning  
in her bedroom mirror,  
picking her own hair  
into a huge black and beautiful dome.

Which  
is so completely one hundred percent unfair  
but she says, *This is the difference between  
being a grown-up and being a child*. When  
she's not looking, I stick my tongue out  
at her.

My sister catches me, says,  
*And that's the difference*  
*between being a child and being a grown-up*,  
like she's twenty years old.

Then rolls her eyes at me and goes back to reading.

# graffiti

Your tag is your name written with spray paint  
however you want it wherever you want it to be.  
It doesn't even have to be  
your real name—like Loco who lives on Woodbine Street.  
His real name is Orlando but everyone  
calls him by his tag so  
it's everywhere in Bushwick. Black and red letters and  
crazy eyes inside the Os.  
Some kids climb to the tops of buildings, hang  
over the edge  
spray their names upside down from there.

But me and Maria only know the ground, only know  
the factory on the corner with its newly painted  
bright pink wall. Only know the way my heart jumps  
as I press the button down, hear the hiss of paint, watch  
J-A-C- begin.

Only know the sound of my uncle's voice,  
  
stopping me before my name is  
a part of the history—like the ones on the roofs  
and fire escapes and subway cars. I wish  
I could explain.  
Wish I had the words  
to stop his anger, stop the force of him grabbing my hand,  
wish I knew how to say,  
*Just let me write—everywhere!*

But my uncle keeps asking over and over again,

*What's wrong with you?  
Have you lost your mind?  
Don't you know people get arrested  
for this?*

*They're just words, I whisper.  
They're not trying to hurt anybody!*

# music

Each morning the radio comes on at seven o'clock.  
Sometimes Michael Jackson is singing that A-B-C  
is as easy as 1-2-3  
or Sly and the Family Stone are thanking us for  
letting them  
be themselves.  
Sometimes it's slower music, the Five Stairsteps  
telling us  
things are going to get easier, or the Hollies singing,  
*He ain't heavy, he's my brother*  
*So on we go . . .*

My mother lets us choose what music we want  
to listen to  
as long as the word *funk* doesn't appear anywhere  
in the song.  
But the summer I am ten, *funk* is in every single song  
that comes on the cool black radio stations. So our  
mother makes us listen  
to the white ones.

All afternoon corny people sing about Colorado,  
about everything being beautiful  
about how we've only just begun.  
My sister falls in love  
with the singers but I sneak off  
to Maria's house where  
safe inside her room with the pink shag carpet  
and bunk beds,  
we can comb our dolls' hair and sing along when

the Ohio Players say,  
*He's the funkiest  
Worm in the world.*

We can dance  
the Funky Chicken, tell imaginary intruders  
to get the funk out  
of our faces. Say the word so hard and so loud  
and so many times,  
it becomes something different to us—something  
so silly

we laugh just thinking about it.

*Funky, funky, funky,*  
we sing again and again until the word is just a sound  
not connected to anything  
good or bad  
right or wrong.

# rikers island

When the phone call comes in the middle of the night,  
it isn't  
to tell us someone has died. It's Robert  
calling from a prison called Rikers Island.  
Even from my half-asleep place,  
I can hear my mother taking a heavy breath, whispering,  
*I knew this was coming, Robert. I knew you weren't  
doing right.*

In the morning, we eat our cereal in silence as  
our mother tells us  
that our uncle won't be around for a while.  
When we ask where he's gone, she says, *Jail*.  
When we ask why, she says,  
*It doesn't matter. We love him.*  
*That's all we need to know and keep remembering.*  
*Robert walked the wide road, she says. And now  
he's paying for it.*

Witnesses believe there's a wide road and a narrow road.  
To be good in the eyes of God is to walk the narrow one,  
live a good clean life, pray, do what's right.  
On the wide road, there is every kind of bad thing anyone  
can imagine. I imagine my uncle doing his smooth  
dance steps down the wide road,  
smiling as the music plays loud. I imagine  
him laughing, pressing quarters into our palms,  
pulling presents for us from his bag, thick gold  
bracelet flashing at his wrist.  
*Where'd you get this?* my mother asked, her face tight.

*It doesn't matter, my uncle answered. Y'all know I love you.*

*You doing the right thing, Robert? my mother wanted  
to know. Yes, my uncle said. I promise you.*

It rains all day. We sit around the house  
waiting for the sun to come out so we can go outside.  
Dell reads in the corner of our room. I pull out  
my beat-up composition notebook  
try to write another butterfly poem.  
Nothing comes.

The page looks like the day—wrinkled and empty  
no longer promising anyone  
anything.

# **moving upstate**

From Rikers Island, my uncle is sent  
to a prison upstate we can visit.

We don't know what he'll look like, how  
much he'll have changed. And because our mother  
warns us not to, I don't tell anyone he's in jail.

When my friends ask, I say, *He moved upstate.*  
*We're going to visit him soon.*

*He lives in a big house,* I say. *With a big yard and everything.*

But the missing settles inside of me. Every time  
James Brown comes on the radio, I see Robert dancing.

Every time the commercial for the Crissy doll comes on  
I think how I almost got one.

*He's my favorite uncle,* I say one afternoon.

*He's our ONLY uncle,* my sister says.  
Then goes back to reading.

## **on the bus to dannemora**

We board the bus when the sun is just kissing the sky.  
Darkness like a cape that we wear for hours, curled into it  
and back to sleep. From somewhere above us  
the O’Jays are singing, telling people all over the world  
to join hands and start a love train.  
The song rocks me gently into and out of dreaming  
and in the dream, a train filled with love goes on and on.

And in the story that begins from the song, the bus  
is no longer a bus and we’re no longer going to  
Dannemora. But there is food and laughter and  
the music. The girl telling the story is me but  
not me at the same time—watching all of this,  
writing it down as fast as she can,  
singing along with the O’Jays, asking everyone  
to let this train keep on riding . . .  
“riding on through . . .”

and it’s the story of a whole train filled  
with love and how the people on it  
aren’t in prison but are free to dance  
and sing and hug their families whenever they want.

On the bus, some of the people are sleeping, others  
are staring out the window or talking softly.  
Even the children are quiet. Maybe each of them  
    is thinking  
their own dream—of daddies and uncles, brothers  
    and cousins  
one day being free to come on board.

*Please don't miss this train at the station  
'Cause if you miss it, I feel sorry, sorry for you.*

# **too good**

The bus moves slow out of the city until we can see  
the mountains, and above that, so much blue sky.

*Passing the mountains.*

*Passing the sea*

*Passing the heavens.*

*That's soon where I will be . . .*

A song comes to me quickly, the words moving through  
my brain and out of my mouth in a whisper but still  
my sister hears, asks who taught it to me.

*I just made it up, I say.*

*No you didn't, she says back. It's too good. Someone  
taught that to you.*

I don't say anything back. Just look out the window  
and smile.

*Too good, I am thinking. The stuff I make up is too good.*

# dannemora

At the gate of the prison, guards glare at us, then slowly  
allow us in.

My big brother is afraid.  
He looks up at the barbed wire  
puts his hands in his pockets.  
I know he wishes he was home with his chemistry set.  
I know he wants to be anywhere but here.  
Nothing but stone and a big building that goes so far up  
and so far back and forth that we can't see  
where the beginning is  
or where it might end. Gray brick, small windows  
covered with wire. Who could see  
out from here? The guards check our pockets,  
check our bags, make us  
walk through X-ray machines.

My big brother holds out his arms. Lets the guards pat him  
from shoulder to ankle, checking  
for anything he might be hiding . . .  
He is Hope Austin Woodson the Second, part of a long line  
of Woodsons—doctors and lawyers and teachers—  
but as quickly as THAT! he can become  
a number. Like Robert Leon Irby is now  
so many numbers across the pocket  
of his prison uniform that it's hard  
not to keep looking at them,  
waiting for them to morph into letters  
that spell out  
my uncle's name.

## **not robert**

When the guard brings our uncle to the waiting room  
that is filled with other families  
waiting, he is not  
Robert. His afro is gone now,  
shaved to a black shadow on his perfect skull.  
His eyebrows are thicker than I remember, dipping down  
in a newer, sadder way. Even when he smiles,  
opens his arms  
to hug all of us at once, the bit I catch of it, before  
jumping into his hug, is a half smile, caught  
and trapped inside a newer, sadder  
uncle.

# **mountain song**

On the way home from visiting Robert,  
I watch the mountains move past me  
and slowly the mountain song starts coming again  
more words this time, coming faster  
than I can sing them.

*Passing the mountains  
Passing the sea  
Passing the heavens  
waiting for me.*

*Look at the mountains  
Such a beautiful sea  
And there's a promise that heaven  
is filled with glory.*

I sing the song over and over again,  
quietly into the windowpane, my forehead  
pressed against the cool glass. Tears coming fast now.  
The song makes me think of Robert and Daddy  
    and Greenville  
and everything that feels far behind me now, everything  
that is going

or already gone.

I am thinking if I can hold on to the memory of this song  
get home and write it down, then it will happen,  
I'll be a writer. I'll be able to hold on to  
each moment, each memory

everything.

## **poem on paper**

When anyone in the family asks  
what I'm writing, I usually say,  
*Nothing*  
or  
*A story*  
or  
*A poem*  
and only my mother says,  
*Just so long as you're not writing about our family.*

And I'm not.

Well, not really . . .

*Up in the mountains  
far from the sea  
there's a place called Dannemora  
the men are not free . . .*

# daddy

It is early spring  
when my grandmother sends for us.

Warm enough to believe again  
that food will come from the newly thawed earth.  
*This is the weather, my mother says, Daddy loved  
to garden in.* We arrive  
not long before my grandfather is about to take  
his last breaths,  
breathless ourselves from our first ride  
in an airplane.

I want to tell him all about it  
how loud it was when the plane lifted into the sky,  
each of us, leaning toward the window,  
watching New York  
grow small and speckled beneath us.  
How the meals arrived  
on tiny trays—some kind of fish that none of us ate.  
I want to tell him how the stewardess gave us wings  
to pin to our blouses and shirts and told Mama  
we were beautiful and well behaved. But  
my grandfather is sleeping when we come to his bedside,  
opens his eyes only to smile, turns so that my grandmother  
can press ice cubes against his lips. She tells us,  
*He needs his rest now.* That evening  
he dies.

On the day he is buried, my sister and I wear white dresses,  
the boys in white shirts and ties.

We walk slowly through Nicholtown, a long parade  
of people  
who loved him—Hope, Dell, Roman and me  
leading it. This is how we bury our dead—a silent parade  
through the streets, showing the world our sadness, others  
who knew my grandfather joining in on the walk,  
children waving,  
grown-ups dabbing at their eyes.

*Ashes to ashes*, we say at the grave site  
with each handful of dirt we drop gently onto his  
lowering casket.

*We will see you in the by and by*, we say.  
*We will see you in the by and by*.

## **how to listen #7**

Even the silence  
has a story to tell you.  
Just listen. Listen.

PART V

ready  
to change  
the  
world

## **after greenville #2**

After Daddy dies  
my grandmother sells the house in Nicholtown  
gives the brown chair to Miss Bell,  
Daddy's clothes to the Brothers at the Kingdom Hall,  
the kitchen table and bright yellow chairs  
to her sister Lucinda in Fieldcrest Village.

After Daddy dies  
my grandmother brings the bed our mother was born in  
to Brooklyn. Unpacks her dresses  
in the small empty bedroom  
downstairs,  
puts her Bible, *Watchtowers* and *Awakes*,  
a picture of Daddy  
on the little brown bookshelf.

After Daddy dies  
spring blurs into summer  
then winter comes on too cold and fast,  
and my grandmother moves a chair to the living room  
window  
watches the tree drop the last of its leaves  
while boys play skelly and spinning tops in the middle  
of our quiet Brooklyn street.

After Daddy dies  
I learn to jump double Dutch slowly  
tripping again and again over my too-big feet. Counting,  
*Ten, twenty, thirty, forty* deep into the winter until  
one afternoon

gravity releases me and my feet fly free in the ropes,  
*fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety . . .*

as my grandmother watches me.  
Both of our worlds  
changed forever.

# **mimosa tree**

A mimosa tree, green and thin limbed, pushes up through  
the snow. My grandmother brought the seeds with her  
from *back home*.

Sometimes, she pulls a chair to the window, looks  
down over the yard.

The promise of glittering sidewalks feels a long time  
behind us now, no diamonds anywhere to be found.

But some days, just after snow falls,  
the sun comes out, shines down on the promise  
of that tree from *back home* joining us here.

Shines down over the bright white ground.

And on those days, so much light and warmth fills  
the room that it's hard not to believe  
in a little bit

of everything.

# **bubble-gum cigarettes**

You can buy a box of bubble-gum cigarettes for a dime  
at the bodega around the corner.

Sometimes, Maria and I walk there,  
our fingers laced together, a nickel  
in each of our pockets.

The bubble gum is pink with white paper  
wrapped around it. When you put it in your mouth  
and blow, a white puff comes out.  
You can really believe  
you're smoking.

We talk with the bubble-gum cigarettes  
between our fingers. Hold them in the air  
like the movie stars on TV. We let them dangle  
from our mouths and look at each other  
through slitted eyes  
then laugh at how grown-up we can be  
how beautiful.

When my sister sees us  
pretending to smoke, she shakes her head.  
*That's why Daddy died*, she says.

After that  
me and Maria peel the paper off,  
turn our cigarettes into regular bubble gum.  
After that  
the game is over.

# **what's left behind**

*You've got your daddy's easy way,  
my grandmother says to me, holding  
the picture of my grandfather  
in her hands. I watch you with  
your friends and see him all over again.*

*Where will the wedding supper be?  
Way down yonder in a hollow tree . . .*

We look at the picture without talking.  
Sometimes, I don't know the words for things,  
how to write down the feeling of knowing  
that every dying person leaves something behind.

I got my grandfather's easy way. Maybe  
I know this when I'm laughing. Maybe  
I know it when I think of Daddy  
and he feels close enough  
for me to lay my head against his shoulder.

*I remember how he laughed, I tell my grandmother  
and she smiles and says,  
Because you laugh just like him.  
Two peas in a pod, you were.*

Two peas in a pod we were.

# **the stories i tell**

Every autumn, the teacher asks us to  
write about summer vacation  
and read it to the class.

In Brooklyn, everybody goes south  
or to Puerto Rico  
or to their cousin's house in Queens.

But after my grandmother moves to New York,  
we only go down south once,  
for my aunt Lucinda's funeral. After that,  
my grandmother says she's done with the South  
says it makes her too sad.

But now  
when summer comes

our family gets on a plane, flies  
to

Africa  
Hawaii  
Chicago.

*For summer vacation we went to Long Island,  
to the beach. Everybody went fishing and everybody  
caught a lot of fish.*

Even though no one in my family has ever been

to Long Island  
or fished  
or likes the ocean—too deep, too scary. Still,  
each autumn, I write a story.

In my writing, there is a stepfather now  
who lives in California but meets us wherever we go.  
There is a church, not a Kingdom Hall.  
There is a blue car, a new dress, loose unribboned hair.

In my stories, our family is regular as air  
two boys, two girls, sometimes a dog.

*Did that really happen? the kids in class ask.*

*Yeah, I say. If it didn't, how would I know what to write?*

## **how to listen #8**

*Do you remember . . . ?*

someone's always asking and  
someone else, always does.

## **fate & faith & reasons**

*Everything happens for a reason,* my mother says. Then tells me how Kay believed in fate and destiny—everything that ever happened or was going to happen couldn't ever be avoided. The marchers down south didn't just up and start their marching—it was part of a longer, bigger plan, that maybe belonged to God.

My mother tells me this as we fold laundry, white towels separated from the colored ones. Each a threat to the other and I remember the time I spilled bleach on a blue towel, dotting it forever. The pale pink towel, a memory of when it was washed with a red one. Maybe there is something, after all, to the way some people want to remain—each to its own kind. But in time maybe everything will fade to gray.

*Even all of us coming to Brooklyn,* my mother says, *wasn't some accident.* And I can't help thinking of the birds here—how they disappear in the wintertime, heading south for food and warmth and shelter. Heading south to stay alive . . . passing us on the way . . .

*No accidents,* my mother says. *Just fate and faith*

*and reasons.*

When I ask my mother what she believes in,  
she stops, midfold, and looks out the back window.

Autumn

is full on here and the sky is bright blue.

*I guess I believe in right now, she says. And the resurrection.  
And Brooklyn. And the four of you.*

## **what if . . . ?**

Maria's mother never left Bayamón, Puerto Rico,  
and my mother never left Greenville.

What if no one had ever walked the grassy fields  
that are now Madison Street and said,  
*Let's put some houses here.*

What if the people in Maria's building didn't sell  
1279 Madison Street  
to Maria's parents  
and our landlord told my mom that he couldn't rent  
1283  
to someone who already had four children.

What if the park with the swings wasn't right across  
Knickerbocker Avenue?

What if Maria hadn't walked out of her building  
one day and said,  
*My name is Maria but my mom calls me Googoo.*  
What if I had laughed instead of saying,  
*You're lucky. I wish I had a nickname, too.*  
*You want to go to the park sometime?*

What if she didn't have a sister and two brothers  
and I didn't have a sister and two brothers  
and her dad didn't teach us to box  
and her mother didn't cook such good food?

*I can't even imagine any of it*, Maria says.

*Nope*, I say. *Neither can I*.

# bushwick history lesson

Before German mothers wrapped scarves around  
their heads,  
kissed their own mothers good-bye and headed across  
the world  
to Bushwick—

Before the Italian fathers sailed across the ocean  
for the dream of America  
and found themselves in Bushwick—

Before Dominican daughters donned quinceañera  
dresses and walked proudly down Bushwick Avenue—

Before young brown boys in cutoff shorts spun their  
first tops and played their first games of skelly on  
Bushwick Streets—

Before any of that, this place was called *Boswijck*,  
settled by the Dutch  
and Franciscus the Negro, a former slave  
who bought his freedom.

And all of New York was called New Amsterdam,  
run by a man  
named Peter Stuyvesant. There were slaves here.  
Those who could afford to own  
their freedom  
lived on the other side of the wall.

And now that place is called Wall Street.

When my teacher says, *So write down what all of this means to you*, our heads bend over our notebooks, the whole class silent. The whole class belonging somewhere:  
Bushwick.

*I didn't just appear one day.  
I didn't just wake up and know how to write my name.*

I keep writing, knowing now  
that I was a long time coming.

## **how to listen #9**

Under the back porch  
there's an alone place I go  
writing all I've heard.

# **the promise land**

When my uncle gets out of jail  
he isn't just my uncle anymore, he is  
Robert the Muslim and wears  
a small black *kufi* on his head.

And even though we know  
we Witnesses are the chosen ones, we listen  
to the stories he tells about  
a man named Muhammad  
and a holy place called Mecca  
and the strength of all Black people.

We sit in a circle around him, his hands  
moving slow through the air, his voice  
calmer and quieter than it was before  
he went away.

When he pulls out a small rug to pray on  
I kneel beside him, wanting to see  
his Mecca  
wanting to know the place  
he calls the Promise Land.

*Look with your heart and your head, he tells me  
his own head bowed.  
It's out there in front of you.  
You'll know when you get there.*

# **power to the people**

On the TV screen a woman  
named Angela Davis is telling us  
there's a revolution going on and that it's time

for Black people to defend themselves.

So Maria and I walk through the streets,  
our fists raised in the air Angela Davis style.

We read about her in the *Daily News*, run  
to the television each time she's interviewed.

She is beautiful and powerful and has  
my same gap-toothed smile. We dream  
of running away to California  
to join the Black Panthers  
the organization Angela is a part of.

She is not afraid, she says,  
to die for what she believes in  
but doesn't plan to die  
without a fight.

The FBI says Angela Davis is one of America's  
Most Wanted.

Already, there are so many things I don't understand, why  
someone would have to die  
or even fight for what they believe in.

Why the cops would want someone who is trying  
to change the world  
in jail.

*We are not afraid to die,* Maria and I shout, fists high,  
*for what we believe in.*

But both of us know—we'd rather keep believing  
and live.

# **say it loud**

My mother tells us the Black Panthers are doing  
all kinds of stuff  
to make the world a better place for Black children.

In Oakland, they started a free breakfast program  
so that poor kids can have a meal  
before starting their school day. Pancakes,  
toast, eggs, fruit: we watch the kids eat happily,  
sing songs about how proud they are  
to be Black. We sing the song along with them  
stand on the bases of lampposts and scream,  
*Say it loud: I'm Black and I'm proud* until  
my mother hollers from the window,  
*Get down before you break your neck.*

I don't understand the revolution.  
In Bushwick, there's a street we can't cross called  
Wyckoff Avenue. White people live on the other side.  
Once a boy from my block got beat up for walking  
over there.  
Once there were four white families on our block  
but they all moved away except for the old lady  
who lives by the tree. Some days, she brings out cookies  
tells us stories of the old neighborhood when everyone  
was German or Irish and even some Italians  
down by Wilson Avenue.  
*All kinds of people*, she says. And the cookies  
are too good for me to say,

*Except us.*

Everyone knows where they belong here.  
It's not Greenville

but it's not diamond sidewalks either.

I still don't know what it is  
that would make people want to get along.

Maybe no one does.

Angela Davis smiles, gap-toothed and beautiful,  
raises her fist in the air  
says, *Power to the people*, looks out from the television  
directly into my eyes.

# maybe mecca

There is a teenager on our block with one arm missing,  
we call him Leftie and he tells us  
he lost his arm in Vietnam.

*That's a war*, he says. *Y'all lucky to be too young to go.*  
*It doesn't hurt anymore*, he tells us when we gather  
around him.

But his eyes are sad eyes and some days he walks  
around the block  
maybe a hundred times without saying anything  
to anyone.

When we call, *Hey Leftie!* he doesn't even look our way.

Some evenings, I kneel toward Mecca with my uncle.  
Maybe Mecca  
is the place Leftie goes to in his mind, when  
the memory of losing  
his arm becomes too much. Maybe Mecca is  
good memories,  
presents and stories and poetry and *arroz con pollo*  
and family and friends . . .

Maybe Mecca is the place everyone is looking for . . .

*It's out there in front of you*, my uncle says.

I know I'll know it  
when I get there.

# the revolution

*Don't wait for your school to teach you, my uncle says,  
about the revolution. It's happening in the streets.*

He's been out of jail for more than a year now and his hair  
is an afro again, gently moving in the wind as we head  
to the park, him holding tight  
to my hand even when we're not crossing  
Knickerbocker Avenue, even now when I'm too old  
for hand holding *and the like*.

The revolution is when Shirley Chisholm ran for president  
and the rest of the world tried to imagine  
a Black woman in the White House.

When I hear the word  
*revolution*  
I think of the carousel with  
all those beautiful horses  
going around as though they'll never stop and me  
choosing the purple one each time, climbing up onto it  
and reaching for the golden ring, as soft music plays.

*The revolution is always going to be happening.*

I want to write this down, that the revolution is like  
a merry-go-round, history always being made  
somewhere. And maybe for a short time,  
we're a part of that history. And then the ride stops  
and our turn is over.

We walk slow toward the park where I can already see  
the big swings, empty and waiting for me.

And after I write it down, maybe I'll end it this way:

My name is Jacqueline Woodson  
and I am ready for the ride.

## **how to listen #10**

Write down what I think  
I know. The knowing will come.

Just keep listening . . .

## a writer

*You're a writer*, Ms. Vivo says,  
her gray eyes bright behind  
thin wire frames. Her smile bigger than anything  
so I smile back, happy to hear these words  
from a teacher's mouth. She is a feminist, she tells us  
and thirty fifth-grade hands bend into desks  
where our dictionaries wait to open yet another  
world to us. Ms. Vivo pauses, watches our fingers fly  
*Webster's* has our answers.

*Equal rights*, a boy named Andrew yells out.

*For women*.

My hands freeze on the thin white pages.  
Like Blacks, Ms. Vivo, too, is part of a revolution.

But right now, that revolution is so far away from me.  
This moment, this *here*, this *right now* is my teacher  
    saying,  
*You're a writer*, as she holds the poem I am just beginning.  
The first four lines, stolen  
from my sister:

*Black brothers, Black sisters, all of them were great  
no fear no fright but a willingness to fight . . .*

*You can have them*, Dell said when she saw.  
*I don't want to be a poet*.

And then my own pencil moving late into the evening:

*In big fine houses lived the whites*

*in little old shacks lived the blacks  
but the blacks were smart  
in fear they took no part.  
One of them was Martin  
with a heart of gold.*

*You're a writer, Ms. Vivo says, holding my poem out to me.*

And standing in front of the class  
taking my poem from her  
my voice shakes as I recite the first line:

*Black brothers, Black sisters, all of them were great. . . .*

But my voice grows stronger with each word because  
more than anything else in the world,  
I want to believe her.

## **every wish, one dream**

Every dandelion blown  
each *Star light, star bright,*  
*The first star I see tonight.*

My wish is always the same.

Every fallen eyelash  
and first firefly of summer . . .

The dream remains.

*What did you wish for?*  
*To be a writer.*

Every heads-up penny found  
and daydream and night dream  
and even when people say it's a pipe dream . . . !

*I want to be a writer.*

Every sunrise and sunset and song  
against a cold windowpane.

*Passing the mountains.*

*Passing the sea.*

Every story read

every poem remembered:

*I loved my friend  
and  
When I see birches bend to left and right  
and  
“Nay,” answered the child: “but these are the wounds of Love.”*

Every memory ...

*Froggie went a-courtin’, and he did ride  
Uh hmm.*

brings me closer  
and closer to the dream.

# **the earth from far away**

Every Saturday morning, we run downstairs  
to the television. Just as the theme song  
from *The Big Blue Marble* begins, the four of us sing along:

*The earth's a big blue marble when you see it from out there.*

Then the camera is zooming in on that marble,  
    the blue becoming  
water, then land, then children in Africa and Texas  
    and China  
and Spain and sometimes, New York City! The world  
close enough to touch now and children from all over  
right in our living room! Telling us their stories.

*The sun and moon declare, our beauty's very rare . . .*

The world—*my* world!—like words. Once  
there was only the letter *J* and my sister's hand  
wrapped around mine, guiding me, promising me  
infinity. This big blue marble  
of world and words and people and places  
inside my head and

somewhere out there, too.

All of it, mine now if I just listen

and write it down.

# **what i believe**

I believe in God and evolution.  
I believe in the Bible and the Qur'an.  
I believe in Christmas and the New World.  
I believe that there is good in each of us  
no matter who we are or what we believe in.  
I believe in the words of my grandfather.  
I believe in the city and the South  
the past and the present.  
I believe in Black people and White people coming  
together.  
I believe in nonviolence and "Power to the People."  
I believe in my little brother's pale skin and my own  
dark brown.  
I believe in my sister's brilliance and the too-easy  
books I love to read.  
I believe in my mother on a bus and Black people  
refusing to ride.  
I believe in good friends and good food.

I believe in johnny pumps and jump ropes,  
Malcolm and Martin, Buckeyes and Birmingham,  
writing and listening, bad words and good words—  
I believe in Brooklyn!

I believe in one day and someday and this  
perfect moment called *Now*.

# **each world**

When there are many worlds  
you can choose the one  
you walk into each day.

You can imagine yourself brilliant as your sister,  
slower moving, quiet and thoughtful as your older brother  
or filled up with the hiccupping joy and laughter  
of the baby in the family.

You can imagine yourself a mother now, climbing  
onto a bus at nightfall, turning  
to wave good-bye to your children, watching  
the world of South Carolina disappear behind you.

When there are many worlds, love can wrap itself  
around you, say, *Don't cry. Say, You are as good as anyone.*  
Say, *Keep remembering me.* And you know, even as the  
world explodes  
around you—that you are loved . . .

Each day a new world  
opens itself up to you. And all the worlds you are—  
Ohio and Greenville  
Woodson and Irby  
Gunnar's child and Jack's daughter  
Jehovah's Witness and nonbeliever  
listener and writer  
Jackie and Jacqueline—

gather into one world

called You

where You decide

what each world  
and each story  
and each ending

will finally be.

## author's note

Memory is strange. When I first began to write *Brown Girl Dreaming*, my childhood memories of Greenville came flooding back to me—small moments and bigger ones, too. Things I hadn’t thought about in years and other stuff I’ve never forgotten. When I began to write it all down, I realized how much I missed the South. So for the first time in many years, I returned “home,” and saw cousins I hadn’t seen since I was small, heard stories I had heard many times from my grandmother, walked roads that were very different now but still the same roads of my childhood. It was a bittersweet journey. I wish I could have walked those roads again with my mom, my grandfather, my uncle Robert, my aunt Kay, and my grandmother. But all have made their own journey to the next place. So I walked the roads alone this time. Still, it felt as though each of them was with me—they’re all deeply etched now, into memory.

And that’s what this book is—my past, my people, my memories, my story.

I knew I couldn’t write about the South without writing about Ohio. And even though I was only a baby when we lived there, I have the gift of my amazing aunt Ada Adams, who is a genealogist and our family historian. She was my go-to person and filled in so many gaps in my memory. Aunt Ada took me right back to Columbus. During the writing of this book, I returned to Ohio with my family. Aunt Ada took us on a journey of the Underground Railroad, showed us the graves of grandparents and great-grandparents, told me so much history I had missed out on as a child. Aunt Ada not only showed me the past but she also helped me understand the present. So often, I am asked where my stories come from. I know now my stories are part of a continuum—my aunt is a storyteller. So were my mom and my grandmother. And the history Aunt Ada showed me—the rich history that is *my* history—made me at once proud and thoughtful. The people who came before me worked so hard to make this world a better place for me. I know my work is to make the world a better place for those coming after. As long as I can remember this, I can continue to do the work I was put here to do.

On the journey to writing this book, my dad, Jack Woodson, chimed in when he could. Even as I write this, I smile because my father always makes me laugh. I like to think I acquired a bit of his sense of humor. I didn’t know him for many years. When I met him again at the age of fourteen, it was as though a puzzle piece had dropped from the air and landed right where it belonged. My dad is that puzzle piece.

Gaps were also filled in by my friend Maria, who helped the journey along with pictures and stories. When we were little, we used to say we’d one day be old ladies together, sitting in rocking chairs remembering our childhood and laughing. We’ve been friends for nearly five decades now and still call each other My Forever Friend. I hope everyone has a Forever Friend in their life.

But at the end of the day, I was alone with *Brown Girl Dreaming*—walking through these memories

and making sense out of myself as a writer in a way I had never done before.

I am often asked if I had a hard life growing up. I think my life was very complicated and very rich. Looking back on it, I think my life was at once ordinary and amazing. I couldn't imagine any other life. I know that I was lucky enough to be born during a time when the world was changing like crazy—and that I was a part of that change. I know that I was and continue to be loved.

I couldn't ask for anything more.

# thankfuls

I am thankful for my memory. When it needed help on the journey, I am also thankful for my fabulous editor, Nancy Paulsen. More help came from Sara LaFleur. This book wouldn't be in the world without my family, including Hope, Odella, and Roman, Toshi, Jackson-Leroi, and Juliet—thank you for your patience and thorough reading and rereading. Thanks to my forever friend, Maria Cortez-Ocasio, her husband, Sam, and her daughters Jillian, Samantha, and Angelina. Even her grandson, Little Sammy. And of course, her mom, Darma—thanks for feeding me so well over the years.

Toshi Reagan, thanks for reading this and sitting with me as I fretted over it. Thanks for your music, your guidance, your stories.

On the Ohio side: a big big thank-you to my aunt Ada—genealogist extraordinaire!—and to my aunt Alicia and my uncle David and, of course, my dad, Jack Woodson.

On the Greenville side: big thanks to my cousins Michael and Sheryl Irby, Megan Irby, Michael and Kenneth Sullivan, Dorothy Vaughn-Welch, Samuel Miller, La'Brandon, Monica Vaughn, and all my other relatives who opened their doors, let me in, told me their stories!

In North Carolina, thanks so much to Stephanie Grant, Ara Wilson, Augusta, and Josephine for that fabulously quiet guest room and dinner at the end of the day for many days until this book was close to being in the world.

On the Brooklyn and Vermont sides: thanks to my village. So grateful for all of you!

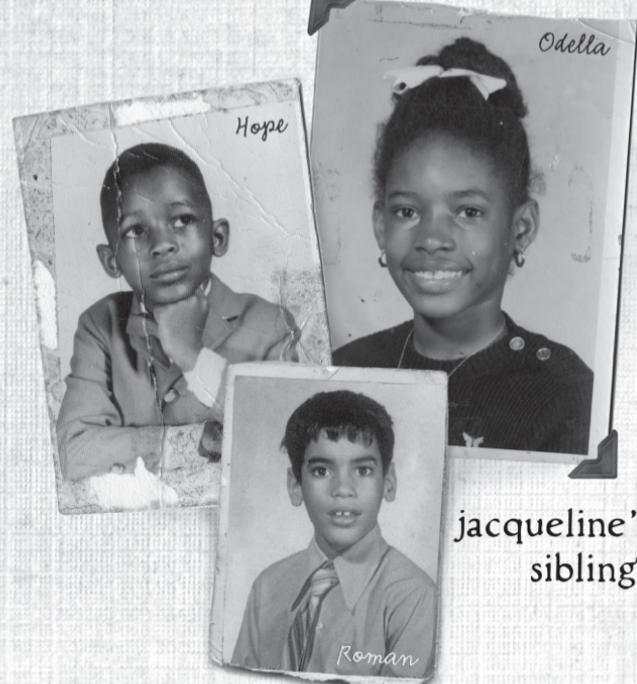
In memory: thanks to my mom, Mary Anne Woodson, my uncles Odell and Robert Irby, my grandmother Georgiana Scott Irby, my grandfather Gunnar Irby, and my aunt Hallique Caroline (Kay) Irby.

These thankfuls wouldn't be complete without acknowledging the myriad teachers who, in many different ways, pointed this brown girl toward her dream.

jacqueline  
as a child



jacqueline's  
parents

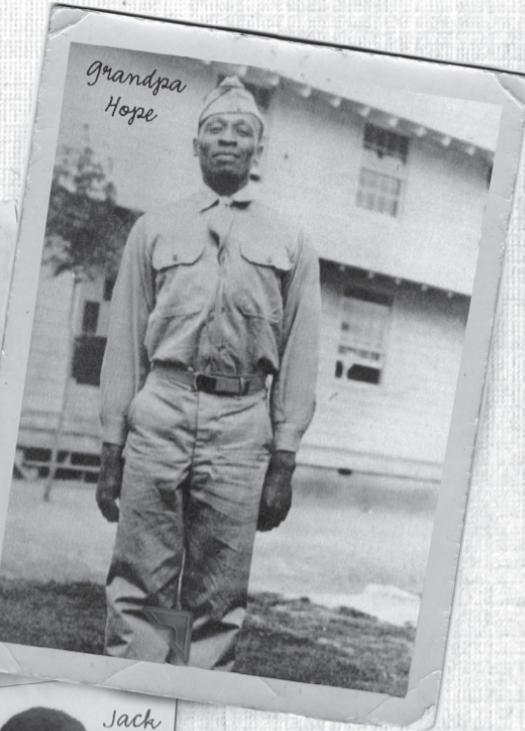


jacqueline's  
siblings

the woodsons  
of ohio



grandma grace



Grandpa  
Hope



Jack



Uncle David



Aunt Ann



Aunt Alicia



Aunt Ada



the irbys  
of south carolina

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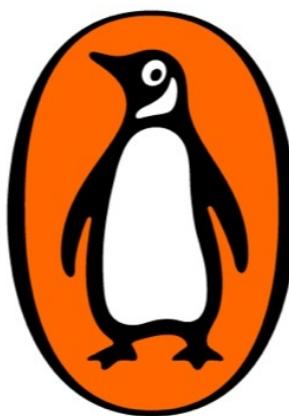
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