



#### ALSO BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

Last Summer with Maizon
The Dear One
Maizon at Blue Hill
Between Madison and Palmetto
I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This
From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun
The House You Pass on the Way
If You Come Softly

Lena

Miracle's Boys

Hush

Locomotion

Behind You

Feathers

After Tupac and D Foster

Peace, Locomotion

Beneath a Meth Moon

# brown girl dreaming

## JACQUELINE WOODSON

Nancy Paulsen Books An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA)

NANCY PAU LSEN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group Penguin Group (USA) LLC 375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia New Zealand | India | South Africa | China penguin.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

ISBN 978-0-698-19570-7

Version\_1

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

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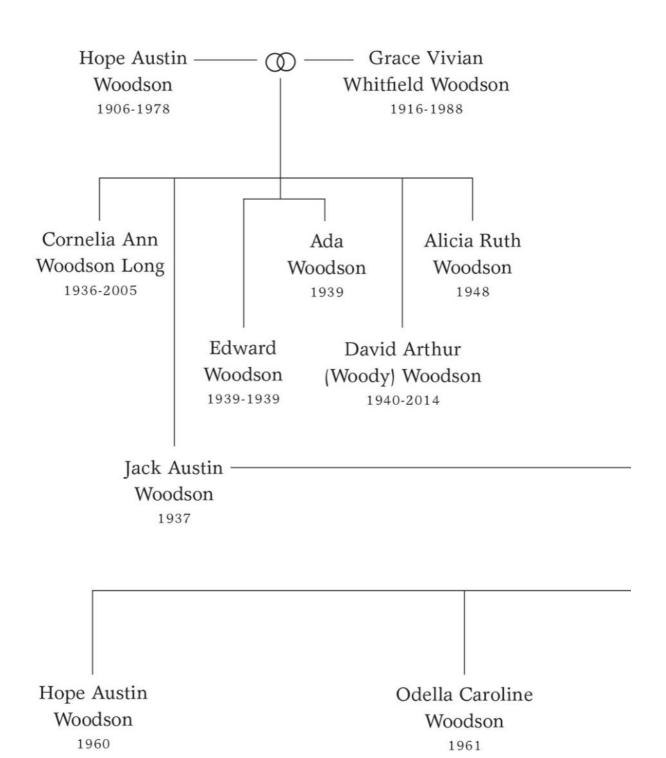
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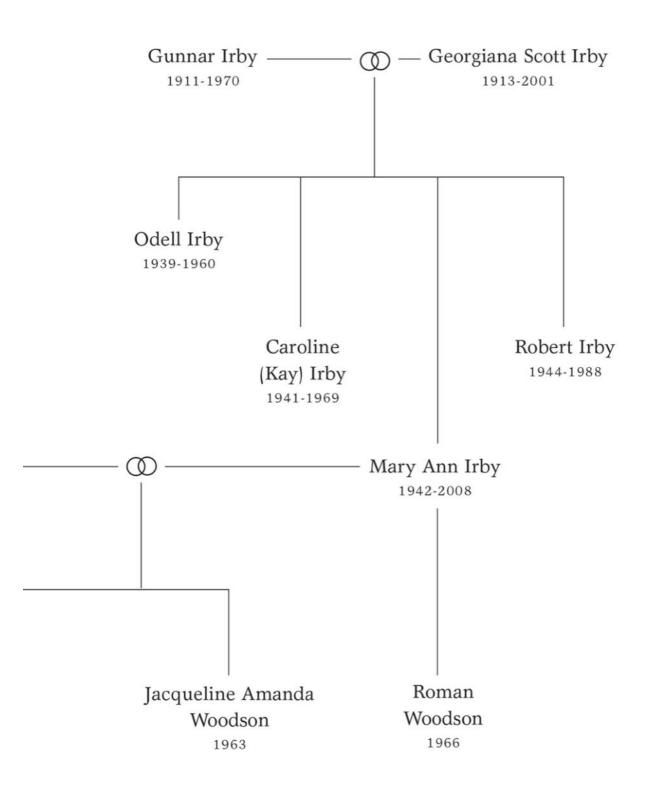
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# WOODSON FAMILY TREE



# 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

## 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  $\dots$ 



## 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.

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.

My father dreamed football dreams,

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.

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.

And then the phone was ringing.

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,

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

but what else is new.

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

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.

It is the South that brings my mother

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

My apologies. Her eyes straight ahead, my mother is miles away from here.

don't look them in the eye. Yes sir. No sir.

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...

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.

We are near my other grandparents' house,

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

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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.

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 hmmm . . . "

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.

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

The South is changing.

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

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.

There is daywork for colored women.

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.

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?

It's morning now and we have floated safely

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

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 . . .

The South doesn't agree

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 Coraandhersisters, their mother left the family, ran off with their church pastor.

Coraandhersisters 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

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.

and the back rooms of stores,

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 toweled 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

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.

Some Fridays, we walk to downtown Greenville where

# **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

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 hmmm...

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



### 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
Coraandhersisters 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.

beneath the pine tree. Purple and gold and strange against the pine-needled ground.

When I step on it,

Coraandhersisters 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

A colorful mushroom grows

shoos Coraandhersisters 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. Coraandhersisters 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,
Coraandhersisters 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, Coraandhersisters 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 Coraandhersisters 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

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.

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

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.

Some days in this new place

#### 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.

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 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

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.

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

So many games, we don't know

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.

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

Says,

#### 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.



#### 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:

It's a long story. It's a good story.

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

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



# 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

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.

For a long time, there is only one tree on our block.

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



# 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



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

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?

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—

When my mother calls,

When my mother calls, *Hope Dell Jackie—inside!* 

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

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

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

Even though so many people think my sister and I

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.

and waiting

## 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

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.

then reading them back, out loud to my mother. This

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

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.

I am not my sister.

#### 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

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.

The Sisters in the Kingdom Hall get six minutes

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

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.

Then one day a new girl moves in next door, tells us

her name is Diana and becomes

### 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,

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

like she's twenty years old.

## 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.

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.

In the morning, we eat our cereal in silence as

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



### 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.

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.

*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-courting, 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 Reagon, thanks for reading this and sitting with me as I fretted over it. Thanks for your music, your guidance, your stories.

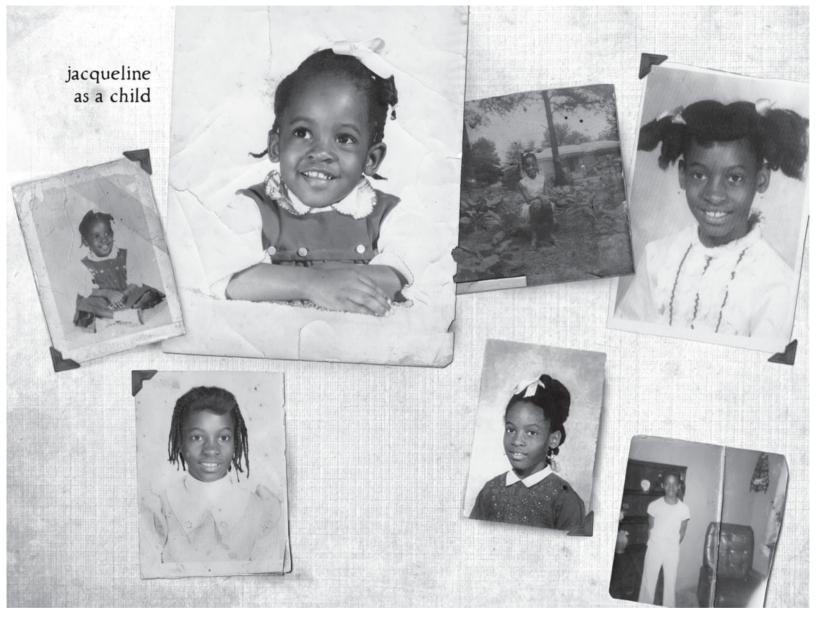
On the Ohio side: a big big thank-you to my aunt Ada—genealogist extraordinaire!—and to my aunt Alicia and my uncle David and, of course, my dad, Jack Woodson.

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.

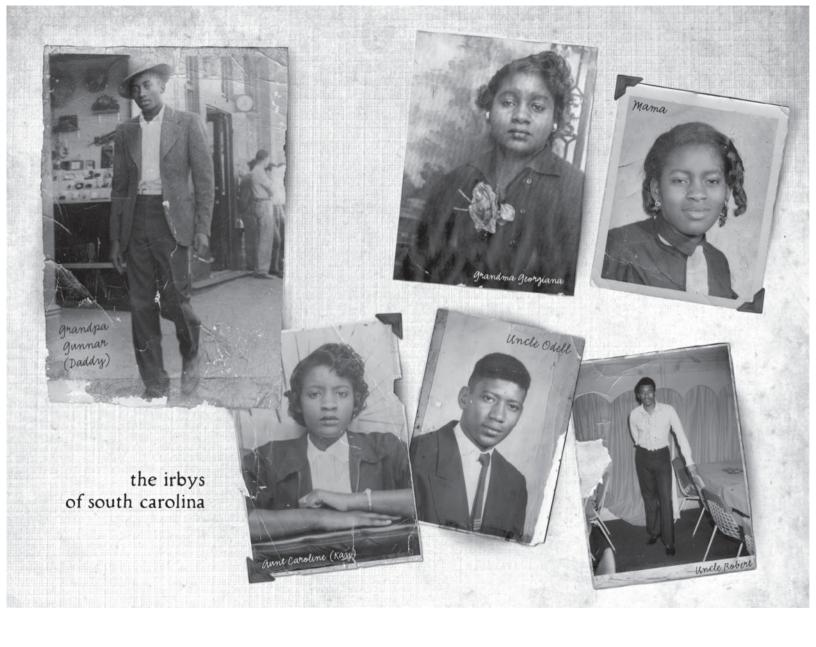
On the Brooklyn and Vermont sides: thanks to my village. So grateful for all of you! In memory: thanks to my mom, Mary Anne Woodson, my uncles Odell and Robert Irby, my grandmother Georgiana Scott Irby, my grandfather Gunnar Irby, and my aunt Hallique Caroline (Kay) Irby.

These thankfuls wouldn't be complete without acknowledging the myriad teachers who, in many different ways, pointed this brown girl toward her dream.









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