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A pastor's crucifixion

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A PASTOR'S CRUCIFIXION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Tommy Mouton

May 2009

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

A PASTOR'S CRUCIFIXION

by
Tommy Mouton

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
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ABSTRACT

A PASTOR'S CRUCIFIXION

by Tommy Mouton

This novel, as narrated by Matthias, the ten-year-old protagonist, is an interpretation of Christ's last 40 days as devised and dictated by Pastor, the pedophilic antagonist. The novel has been written to highlight the cyclical effects of sexual and physical abuse, and religious oppression and exploitation, as it pertains to the Baptist church.

Biblically stylized, as it is reminiscent of the King James Bible, this novel relies extensively on its use of verbatim and phrasal repetition. The plot has not been written for one to find figurative biblical meaning in each of its devices, as it is not meant to be purely *allegorical*. Rather, the plot is meant to suggest the audaciousness of this well-respected man of God, as he is plagued by his insatiable sexual desires, and ultimately takes up the cross in an attempt to save his congregation from spiritual ruin.

Set in 1988 in an unnamed, unincorporated southwestern Louisiana community, this novel relies heavily on its use of regional vernacular and local color.

DEDICATION

For Deadra, Dale, Susan, and all those whose silence men have built their houses upon.

*Therefore speak I to them
in parables: because they seeing
see not; and hearing they hear
not, neither do they understand.*

Matthew 13:13

*This is the book of generations of Pastor.
In the day that God created man, in the likeness
of God made he him.*

Like I see the trees, I see Grandma Sherry dancing in the fire. And like I see Grandma Sherry dancing in the fire, I see the way Brother holds his head and falls to the ground, like he's a tree that's been cut down, a tree that just falls to the ground, over and over again. And even though I see the way Brother holds his head and falls to the ground, see the way I take off running in the woods that day, I can see this whole black neighborhood and all the people in it: I can see Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly's house across the road with all the trees and pretty flowerbeds; Miss Maudeline's blue and white trailer; Mrs. Larna and Mr. Merchant's yellow house; Mr. Smokey's white house, with his chickens and guineas everywhere, horses and cows; Deacon and Mrs. Meeks' restaurant; Mr. Charlotte's mechanic shop and all the cars parked everywhere in his yard; Mr. Teeth sitting in the swing on his porch, Mrs. Mickey, his wife, walking down the road holding their groceries, turning in their driveway. I can see these roads and all the gravel, the trees and fields.

And even as I turn my head and look way past Pastor's yard, way close by his woods, the pine and oak trees, I can see Puppy's dog house, the way he's walking around eating grass, like he's a horse and not a dog; I can see Pastor's little white study, with all its books and shelves inside, his desk, his sofa, the little bathroom and closet, my own self lying there.

If I close my eyes and try real hard, like now, I can see so many, so many people I don't even know. They dance and walk the streets, yell and scream, and say things to me and I say things to them. Some of these people have eyes and mouths and noses, some

don't. Some have ears and hands, feet, some don't. Some have faces, some don't. And even if they don't have faces, eyes to even see, ears to even hear, hands to touch, a nose to smell, a mouth to even taste and speak, I hear the way they say things to me and I say things to them and they say things to each other and all I know is—I can't always understand it all.

I'm only ten, and even right now, while I play with my trucks, crash them together, and my little sister, Salem, sits like an Indian beside me and hums her song and combs her doll's hair, I can see some of these people. And like I see these people, I can hear them talking, but I don't know what they are saying. Even if I hear these people and don't know what they are saying, I can hear laughing, Pastor preaching, Sister Marva Belton singing, Mr. Merchant praying. I can hear the birds and the squirrels, the cow's mooing, the horses whinnying, Puppy barking, the cars up and down the roads. And even if I'm hearing cars going by up and down the roads, I can hear the sirens coming—the way they sound so close, the way my heart is starting to beat so hard. I can hear the way Mama cries sometimes, the way Salem says, Stop, stop, no, no, and Cephas still doesn't listen.

Out of all these sounds, though, my heart is what I always hear, what I always feel, what I always listen to. And like I hear it, I can feel the way it hits on my chest so hard and fast, then in my head and stomach, the way my air moves inside of me like warm water, the way my stomach gets so nervous and my eyes start to sting, the way my mouth gets dry, and even though I don't want it to, the way my man gets so hard, the way it grows. My man grows and grows and I start getting that nasty feeling just moving,

moving, inside of me, like somebody else is living there, telling me what to do, telling me how to feel.

And like I hear and feel all this, I can taste so much: I taste the way Cephas tastes, how Pastor tastes in the evenings, how Sister Pastor's candied squash and fried chicken tastes. Like I taste it, I can smell it. Even now I can still smell the smoke at Grandma Sherry's, smell the rain the day they bury her, smell the way Pastor and Cephas smells when they take their clothes off, the way Mr. Gilray's hogs stink so bad, the grass and dead leaves. I know there are things I'm not supposed to think about, I'm not supposed to see, things I'm not supposed to feel, I'm not supposed to taste. But even if I close my eyes and try my hardest, start thinking about Jesus, like Pastor says, see Him on the cross, see His face and hair, the nails in His feet and hands, His arms spread so wide, I still can't stop it, can't help it.

Even right now, as my trucks jump this little dirt ramp and Salem keeps humming and combing her doll's hair, I can hear a woman screaming, a car passing down the road, gravel crunching beneath its tires, the sirens getting closer. And even though I'm hearing Miss Maudeline screaming and the sirens getting closer, Puppy howling, sounding like he's a wolf, I can see Brother running out of Miss Maudeline's house, the way he jumps from the wooden porch, misses her steps, and runs around the trailer, pulling up his pants. I see the way she holds her knife in one hand, her dress in the other and goes down the stairs like they're not even there. And like I see the way Miss Maudeline holds her knife in one hand, her dress in the other, and moves so fast down the stairs, I can feel the way my heart is beating so fast, the way the air is leaving my body and my stomach is so

nervous, the way I feel something is in my throat, but even if I open my mouth, want to yell so loud, nothing is coming out.

Andrew! Andrew! Mama is yelling. I can hear the way Mama slams into Pastor's storm door, the way she runs so fast and her bare feet are like little hands clapping, clapping, against the cement. I can see the way Pastor is running behind Mama in his purple robe, Sister Pastor behind him, the way the police car turns into Miss Maudeline's driveway, the way dust is flying, and the policeman jumps out of the car and it is still rolling some, the way he pulls his gun and points it, points his gun, even if he doesn't know what he's pointing at, and his head is moving from right to left, the way another police car turns into the driveway and another policeman jumps out and does the same as the other one.

That's a baby! That's a baby! That's *my* baby! Miss Maudeline is yelling. I can see the way people are coming out of their houses, running down the road, looking. I can feel my feet want to move but can't. I can taste the way the blood tastes in my mouth every time I swallow, like I've been running in the cold, but I'm here, here in Pastor's driveway and can't move. Like I'm tasting blood in my mouth, I can hear the first policeman saying, Put the knife down, ma'am, put the knife down! I can see the way Miss Maudeline is crying, the way she throws her arms up, the way she is still holding the knife, the way Pastor is holding Mama and Sister Pastor is holding Salem. I'll cut his dick! I'll cut his dick! Miss Maudeline is saying. And every time she says this, I hear the way Mama cries louder, like all the dogs in the neighborhood howl when the sounds hurt their ears, like Puppy is howling now.

I see the way the ambulance turns into Miss Maudeline's driveway, the way the dust is flying and floating, like the smoke that day, and the people from inside the ambulance are getting out with their orange tool chest things and running toward the trailer, going inside. I see the way Mr. Smokey is sitting atop his black horse and a car, a car I don't even know, is parking on the road, on the road by Mr. Smokey and his horse. That child's a baby! Miss Maudeline says. She's a baby!

I can see Berna, Miss Maudeline's daughter. And like I see her, I know Brother hurt her. And like I know Brother hurt Berna, I feel the way my heart is still beating so fast, the way my hands are shaking and my eyes are stinging because I want to cry but nothing is coming out.

I feel the way I want to cry, want to move from where I am. I see the way the first policeman grabs Miss Maudeline, the way she throws her arms around him and hugs him, holds onto him like he's her husband, but he's not, he's a policeman that's trying to help her. I hear the way he asks her, Where is he, ma'am? Where is he? Miss Maudeline isn't answering him. I see the way she keeps holding on to him. And even while she's holding on to him, I hear the way she says, He's under the trailer, and points and cries some more, He's under the trailer.

The policeman is letting Miss Maudeline go. I see how he is running and pointing his gun, the way the other policeman goes by her and her legs give out and he helps her to the ground, sits her on the ground like she's a big bag of clothes, a big bag of leaves or something. The policeman is pointing his gun and walking closer by the trailer, looking back at the other policeman. Even though it's not night yet, I see the way he takes out his

flashlight, stoops and starts shining his light under the trailer. Does he have a weapon, ma'am? The policeman that's shining the light says. Does he have a knife?

Miss Maudeline doesn't say anything at first, like she's thinking, thinking and can't say anything. I hear the way it's quiet, because everyone else is listening. I see the way some of them have their mouths wide open and some with their hands over their mouths, some with their hands in their pockets, some with their arms folded. I can hear the way Miss Maudeline says, He's got a dick, He's got a *dick*! I can see the way she cries so loud against the policeman's shoulder and Mama cries so loud against Pastor's shoulder and everyone is looking at one another, not knowing what to say, what to do.

This is what I see and hear—what I feel. Even with all these people everywhere, even with Cephas smiling like he always does, holding his old basketball, even with the wind blowing, I can still see the way Brother falls to the ground that day, falls to the ground like a tree once cut down, like a fire that talks, dances like Grandma Sherry dances, screams in my mind, while I still try to make my feet move from this place, try to make my eyes see something else, something I'm supposed to see, hear something I know I'm supposed to hear, feel what I know I'm supposed to feel—not this, no, not this.

Day One

The sun is coming up and a rabbit is eating in Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly's yard and Mama and Sister Pastor are standing across the road and Sister Pastor's arm is wrapped around Mama's waist and Mama's arms are folded at her stomach and she is crying. Salem and me are in line, waiting for the bus, and everyone, Wilson, SamPaul, and even Emile, my best friend, is looking back at us, whispering to one another.

Puppy is barking and SamPaul and Wilson are picking up rocks from the road and throwing them. I hear the way one of the rocks hits the Stop sign, and another hits a mailbox, the way the sounds echo and Sister Pastor says,

SamPaul, Wilson, ya'll put them rocks down. Too early in the morning for such noise.

Wilson and SamPaul are putting their rocks down, wiping their hands on their pants, looking back at Salem and me again. I see the way they whisper some more and I look across Miss Maudeline's yard and see that her lights are still out, like no one is home this morning.

The bus is finally coming, finally stopping, and the brakes are squeaking and loud and everyone, even Salem and me, are picking up our booksacks and putting them on our shoulders. Mama unfolds her arms and waves at us and puts her hand to her mouth and Salem waves, and I wave and Sister Pastor waves and hugs Mama with both arms because Mama is crying still.

Mrs. Anne opens the doors and we're moving so we can get on. It's cold some and my legs feel like they don't want to move, but I make them anyway. Salem grabs the rail and pulls herself up the stairs and I do the same, and when I'm at the top, Morning, Mrs. Anne says to me and, Morning, I say to her, and I can see the way so many people are looking at Salem and me, looking at us, starting to whisper. I can see how some of them are smiling and laughing. I see how Mrs. Anne looks up in her mirror, where she can see everyone.

Keep it down back there, Mrs. Anne says. I ain't for no foolishness this morning.

When Mrs. Anne says this it gets a little quiet—then everybody starts talking and whispering some more. I am putting my head against the seat and I see the way Salem is looking out of the window, looking like she is thinking, like she is sad. I can feel the way my head is vibrating against the seat, the way it's bouncing, the way my stomach is getting so nervous again.

This bus is loud. Everyone is talking and whispering. I can hear the way Bayless and Peanut are talking, the way they are saying Brother is hurting Berna, the way they are saying he is doing it to her, even if she is younger than him, even though she is Salem's age. I feel the way I am getting mad because they are talking about Brother. And even though I don't want to, even if I don't want people talking about Brother, even if I don't want to see yesterday, the way there are so many people outside, the way Miss Maudeline and Mama are crying, I can see it.

I can hear the way there's screaming. I can see so many eyes looking, the way their mouths are talking. I can see the way the policeman is pointing his gun, the way the

other one is holding Miss Maudeline and she's holding him and she won't let him go, won't let him leave. I don't want to see this. I know I want to see something else. And even if I'm trying to see Jesus on the cross, see His arms stretched wide, the nails in His feet and hands, the thorns around His head, I can't. Even if I'm trying, even if my head is hurting, I can't see Jesus— can't see Jesus no where on the cross, no where in my head, no where on this bus. Yesterday is all I see—all I hear, and it's making me scared.

The halls are loud and people are running so they can be in class before the bell rings. Some of the teachers that are standing outside of their rooms are yelling, Walk! Not so fast! Slow down!

Bye Matt, Salem says, and waves and I wave to her and she takes off running to her class, and her booksack is bouncing on her back, bouncing as she is running.

I'm walking and this hall is so green, so loud. The light from outside is shining through the doors' windows, shining on the floor and my teacher, Mrs. Fuller, is standing, holding the door open, smiling and talking to Miss Franklin. I see the way Mrs. Fuller has something in the middle of her forehead, something black, the way it looks like marker. And like I'm seeing Mrs. Fuller's head, seeing the way there is black there, I know what it is. It's not marker—it's ashes, ashes because today is Ash Wednesday.

Mrs. Fuller is still smiling and Mitchell is walking past me, going in class.

Good morning, Mitchell, Mrs. Fuller says to him.

Morning, Mitchell says to her, and goes in the classroom.

Like I hear the way Mitchell speaks to Mrs. Fuller, see the way he goes in the classroom, I see the ashes, the way they are looking like a cross. I remember them. I remember the way Mama is getting her ashes from St. Augustus, our old church, before we are coming to live with Pastor. And like I can see Mama, see the ashes on her head, see the way she keeps them there all day, I can hear the way Pastor is saying, You ain't Catholic no more. You under my roof, you're Baptist now. I can see the way Mama is washing her face, the way she's washing off her ashes. I can hear the way she's crying. And even though Pastor is making Mama wash the ashes off her head, I can see the way she is holding her rosaries, hear the way she's saying her Hail Marys in the morning and at night, crying because she doesn't want to be Baptist, doesn't want to have to go to Pastor's church, down to the Faithway.

Mrs. Fuller is holding out her hand. She smiles at me and I don't smile at her. And then she doesn't smile and her face looks like she's sad now. I can hear the way she says, Morning, Matt, and holds her hand so I can touch it. Like I see the way Mrs. Fuller is holding her hand, I feel how warm it is when I grab it. I feel the way she's so warm when she hugs me. I smell the way her perfume smells, the way her breath smells like coffee. Don't worry, Matt, Mrs. Fuller says, we're going to have a good day today. And like I hear the way Mrs. Fuller says this, I feel how my stomach is turning and turning, feeling like something is moving around in it, feeling like I'm having to go to the bathroom again. My feet don't want to move. I know the way I want to be home with Mama, home so I can see if Brother is coming home today, if Brother is alright.

I'm sitting in my desk, looking at the blackboard, where Mrs. Fuller is writing the date: February 17, 1988. I'm seeing the way she's starting to write something else, something I can't see because I see the way everyone is looking at me and not at the board, where Mrs. Fuller is with her back turned, writing. I can see Dustin sitting next to me, Karly sitting next to Dustin and Brant, and Rusty is sitting next to Mitchell, and Mitchell is sitting next to Chet, and Chet is by Mrs. Fuller's desk, and Clay is sitting way towards the back by Mitchell, and Tabitha, the girl I like, is sitting close over by me.

And even though I can see all of my classmates, see their Mardi Gras beads, all green and purple and gold, their bags of candy by their booksacks and lunchboxes, the way Mitchell is so happy he is finding the baby in the King Cake the other day, the way Dustin is throwing Clay a piece of candy and Karly is chewing on her gum, even if we're not supposed to chew gum in class, I can still see yesterday. I can still see the way the police car and ambulance ride off with Brother and Berna. I can hear the way people are talking, saying, I told you, I told you that boy wasn't right; I don't know what make him do such a thing, indeed I'd cut his dick.

And like I hear the way people say this, even though they talk low to one another, talk so Mama and Pastor and Sister Pastor, Miss Maudeline don't hear, I see this morning, before we catch the bus, while we are still in the house.

Pastor is reading his paper and drinking his coffee. Mama is standing by him, looking at him, looking at him because she's mad. I hear the way Mama says to Pastor, I need to see my baby, and her voice gets nervous, like something is in her throat, stopping her from talking. I hear how Mama starts crying, the way she's saying, Do you hear me,

Solomon? And Pastor keeps reading his paper. I see the way Mama looks at Sister Pastor, and Sister Pastor is holding her bible open and hunches her shoulders, like she doesn't know what to say, and her eyes get watery, like she wants to cry, and still doesn't know what to say. Like I hear the way Sister Pastor doesn't say anything to Mama, I see the way Mama leaves the den and goes to the back. I hear the way Sister Pastor says, Solomon! Pastor doesn't answer her. He keeps reading his paper, taking another sip of his coffee. Sister Pastor sets her bible on the coffee table and gets up and goes to the back to be with Mama, saying, even if it's low, even if she's saying it to herself, I ain't ever met such a stubborn man, filled with the Spirit. And like I see and hear this, I feel how my stomach is so nervous, the way Pastor is putting down his paper and looking at Salem and me, looking at us and starting to smile, smile, even though we are not smiling at him. And even as I see the way Pastor is smiling at us, I can see the way it is last night. I can see how it's late and I have to go to the bathroom. I can still hear the way the front door closes and Pastor's van starts up. I see the way I'm standing in the living room, looking out of the window, seeing the way Pastor's van is rocking and rocking, like a boat on water because there are so many potholes in Miss Maudeline's driveway. And like I see this, I hear the way someone is calling my name.

Matthias, Matthias? Mrs. Fuller is saying. Do you have anything to add?

Add? I say.

Is there anything you would like to share this morning?

Ma'am? I say.

I can see the way everyone is looking at me and I don't know what Mrs. Fuller is asking me, what she is wanting me to say. And like I see everyone is looking at me, I feel how my heart is beating so fast, the way my stomach is getting so warm and nervous because Clay and Rusty and Dustin, everyone except Tabitha and Mitchell, is laughing at me.

I don't like it when they laugh at me. And like I know I don't like it when people laugh at me, because it makes me feel too shame, too shy, I hear the way Clay says, Stupid, and laughs some more, and looks at Dustin and Rusty. Clay, Mrs. Fuller says, and shakes her head. I see the way she walks over by her desk and drinks from her mug. I feel the way I'm shaking, the way my eyes are stinging, the way my breath is leaving. I can feel myself standing up. I'm walking towards Clay. I can feel the way my breath is leaving some more and my heart is beating faster. I see the way Clay is not moving, the way he's looking at me, the way he's waiting. I'm hearing the way Mrs. Fuller is saying, Matt, you better not. And even if I hear Mrs. Fuller is saying this, I feel the way I'm grabbing Clay, the way I'm holding on to him. I feel the way he's grabbing me, the way he's pushing me, pushing me and I'm falling back, falling against the ground.

I am on the floor. Clay is on top of me. I am holding him. He is hitting me. His face is red. I can feel the way he hits me in the stomach, the way I'm losing my breath some more, the way I can't breathe, the way I can't talk, the way I'm not having my breath, feeling like I'm choking.

I can't breathe. I'm trying, but I can't. I can hear the way Mitchell is screaming and yelling. Mrs. Fuller is grabbing and pulling me. I feel how my breath is coming

back. I feel the way Mrs. Fuller's nails are in my arms and it feels like my arms are bleeding, bleeding because her nails are there, squeezing so tight. Tears are coming down my face. I taste how warm and salty they are in my mouth. I can see Mr. Farrow, the Principal, grabbing Clay and holding him back, how everyone is looking at me, looking at me like it's yesterday, like I'm Brother and it's yesterday and they can't take their eyes off me, watching me, watching, even if I don't want them to, don't want them watching me because it's making me feel too shy, way too shamed, way too scared.

Sister Pastor and Salem are putting burgundy bibles and white hymnals on the backs of the pews. Cephas is looking at me and the church's doors are opening and Mrs. Marva Belton, Deacon and Mrs. Jimison, Mrs. Larna and Emile, Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly are coming in. They are loud and talking and hugging one another. Sister Pastor is hugging Emile, and he is smiling when she is pinching his cheek. Mama is in the front sitting at the collection table reading her bible, looking sad still.

Evening, Sister Pastor, everyone is saying.

Evening, pretty girl, Deacon and Mrs. Jimison are saying to Salem. Ain't she just as cute this evening. Salem smiles and puts another hymnal on the back of the pew.

Hey, Matt, Emile says to me and sits down. I see the way Mr. Curly is coming. His hat is off and his head is bald and shiny. I can smell his cologne.

How goes it, Matt? Mr. Curly says.

Fine, I lie to him.

Mrs. Reba goes over to Mama and hugs her and Mama doesn't stand up, stays seated. Then Mrs. Marva Belton goes over to Mama and Deacon Jimison is talking to Cephas, telling him it's alright his team didn't do so good this season and Cephas is spinning his old basketball on his finger, even if he's in church, even when Deacon Jimison is talking to him.

Mr. Curly takes off his jacket and walks to the front by Mrs. Reba and Mama and Mrs. Marva Belton. Mrs. Jimison is still talking to Sister Pastor.

Matt, I hear Mr. Curly say.

Huh, I say.

You get Pastor's water?

No sir, I say and Emile looks at me and I look at him.

Well ya'll come on and I'll help you.

Like I hear the way Mr. Curly says this, I know I don't want to get Pastor's water. I know I don't like having to get Pastor's water and bring it to the pulpit, even if Mr. Curly is always helping. I don't like being Pastor's helper, having to get this and that, even when he's asking me, even though he's saying God is blessing me, God is blessing me because I'm being obedient, being good to God and him all at the same time.

Salem is combing her doll's hair and I'm setting Pastor's water down on his podium thing and Emile is looking at me, but he's not in the pulpit like me. He's standing on the stairs by Mrs. Jimison's piano. I can hear the way Pastor is saying, The pulpit ain't no place to be playing, no place to be in if you ain't a preacher. And like I'm hurrying up

and putting this water down, so I don't be in this pulpit too long, I see how there's a man talking to Mama and he's dressed in a suit and a tie and he has a mustache and his hair is long and straight to his shoulders, like a woman's. I see the way Mama is looking at the man, the way she is listening to him. And even though I'm looking at the man, seeing how he's dressed, seeing how his hand is on Mama's shoulder, I'm knowing I don't know who he is. And like Mama smiles at the man, even if she hasn't smiled since they took Brother, even if her smile is looking sad some, I see the way her and the man are walking by the front door, the way the man is opening the door for Mama and they are walking outside. Cephas is spinning his basketball again. I'm walking towards the front doors. I hear the way Emile says, Where you going, Matt? I keep walking. I see the doors are open and it's dark outside and cool some. Mrs. Marva Belton is sitting by Sister Pastor and they are talking and Mrs. Jimison is sitting at her piano, flipping through her book, trying to find a song. I see the way Emile keeps looking back at me. I see how Mrs. Reba is taking a white towel and passing it over the windowsills, dusting. I can see how the man is opening his car door, the way he is giving Mama a small piece of white paper. Mama is holding the paper in her hand, trying to look happy. And like I see Mama is trying to look happy, see how the man is getting in his car, I see the way Mr. Merchant is leaning in his car and getting something. And even if I thought Mr. Merchant was with Pastor, in Pastor's office, I see the way he's holding something that looks like a bag. Mr. Merchant is looking in his bag and looking at Mama and the man. The man is getting in his car. I hear the way his car doesn't even make a sound when he turns it on, because it is looking new. He closes his door. Mr. Merchant closes his door

too. The man is driving off and Mr. Merchant is looking at Mama, holding his black bag, looking at Mama all at the same time because I know Pastor is telling him to.

Mama is holding the paper, thinking. I see the way Deacon and Mrs. Meeks are coming, the way Mrs. Meeks is parking their van because Deacon Meeks isn't driving because he's not having legs anymore, because Sister Pastor is saying he's getting the sugars and the doctors are having to cut them off.

Mrs. Meeks is going around the van and getting Deacon Meeks out, and Fatima, their granddaughter, Salem's best friend is getting out too. I see the way Mrs. Meeks is pushing Deacon Meeks. I see how Mr. Lee Jimison, Deacon Jimison's son and his wife and their sons, Sherman and Severette, are getting out of their car. I hear the way Mama says, What you doing in that door, Matt? Nothing, I'm saying to Mama. Nothing, Mama says, trying to sound happy, even if she's been so sad, even though I've been sad, too. Who that man was, I say. I feel the way Mama puts her arm on my shoulder. The man gonna help bring your brother home, Mama says. And like I hear the way Mama says this, I feel how my stomach gets nervous, the way I smile, the way I see yesterday, the way Pastor is holding Mama and bringing her back across the road from Miss Maudeline's and Mama is not going in the house, just standing outside in Pastor's driveway, looking at Miss Maudeline's, looking like it's something won't let her stop looking that way, something won't let her go inside of Pastor's house, something won't let her, even if it's dark out and cold some.

The music is playing. Church is starting and Mrs. Jimison is singing and Emile is sitting by me and Salem is sitting by Mama. I hear the way everyone is singing:

*No, never alone, no, never alone
He promised never to leave me,
Never to leave me alone...*

We're not singing anymore. But even since we're not singing anymore, I hear the way people are humming and it sounds good, the way Mrs. Jimison is pressing the piano's keys. People are swaying, side to side. I see the way some of them have their eyes closed. I hear the way Mr. Merchant says, Let us pray, and he and Deacon Jimison are getting on their knees in the front, by their chairs, and Deacon Meeks is not getting on his knees, just staying seated in his wheelchair, bowing his head, keeping his hands in his lap. And like I'm seeing Deacon Meeks is in his wheelchair and Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are on their knees, I hear the way Mr. Merchant starts praying: Father, God, the head of my life, Bless you, Lord, have mercy, for we are nothing without you, dear Jesus. For Lord, God, you know us better than we know ourselves. You told the sun to rise this morning and it did and you told it to lay down tonight and it obeyed. Father, have your will.... Deacon Meeks is starting to pray: Heavenly, Father, you have brought us from the early existence of our lives, here to this moment, a moment we neither knew nor seen, our strength in times of storm, our rock on the sands of life, keep us, precious Lord. Let us build our lives on your rocks. Let us not falter, Father....

I feel the way Emile is kicking my shoe and I'm kicking his and Mama is slapping my leg and Deacon Jimison is starting to pray: Father, we bless your name. We come as humbly as we know how. You are the shepherd and we are your sheep. We come here

this evening, bowing to your throne, asking for your sustenance, asking for you to feed, provide for our needs, 'cause we can't do it on our own. For, God you said where two or three assemble, you'd be in the midst. Pass by this way this evening, heavenly Father, pass by here and show yourself....

Mr. Merchant, Deacon Meeks and Deacon Jimison are not praying anymore. Pastor is standing in his pulpit. He is wearing his robe, standing behind his podium. And even as Pastor is standing behind his podium, I see the way he's opening his bible, turning on his light. I see how he's fixing his glasses, the way he's looking around. Now, turn to your neighbor and tell them that God is good, Saints. God is good, I'm saying to Emile, and he's smiling at me and I'm smiling at him and he's saying, God is good, to me and I'm seeing the way Cephas isn't saying anything to Mr. Curly, even if Mr. Curly is talking to him.

Salem is going sit by Fatima. I see the way Pastor is smiling and shaking his head. Now turn back to your neighbor, Saints, and tell them, if you ain't a believer, I'm gonna help you believe; if you don't know how to pray, I'm gonna help you pray; if you think God ain't been good to you, I'm gonna show you how good He's been to me.... And like I say this to Emile, even if I'm forgetting the words, I see how everyone is smiling at one another, shaking their heads. I hear the way Pastor says, What we fixing to embark on ain't gonna be easy, Saints, for Satan is busy and ever-present. I see the way some people are looking at Mama, the way they are talking. I see the way they turn their heads when Mama looks at them. I hear the way some people say, I know that's

right, sure you right, and wave their hands. And even when people are saying this, I hear how Pastor says, That old Satan ain't took a day off then and he ain't gonna take one off now, for he ain't in the pleasing business, but we gonna make it, Saints....

Pastor takes his handkerchief and wipes his mouth. I see the way he blows his nose, the way Mrs. Marva Belton and Mrs. Meeks wave their hands and say, Yes, Lord! And like I hear them say, Yes, Lord, I hear the way Pastor says, It's a mighty thin line between heaven and hell, life and death, between the cemetery and your bed. Pastor stops and looks at everyone, looks at me and Emile, then smiles and says, We got to test our faith tonight, Saints. People are looking around like they are not knowing what Pastor is saying. I see the way Salem is holding her doll and Fatima is looking at a white hymnal. I see the way Pastor takes his handkerchief and wipes his mouth again, then takes off his glasses and wipes them with his handkerchief and puts them back on. Well, Pastor says. How many of you hold your breath before? People are looking around, like they don't know what Pastor is asking again. Don't go and find yourself bashful tonight, folks, Pastor says, and smiles. Then I see the way people hold up their hands like we do in school and put them down again. Everyone is looking at Pastor, waiting for him to say something else. Put your hand over your nose and mouth and hold your breath this evening, Saints, Pastor says. I see the way people look at one another, the way Emile looks at me because he's confused and I'm confused too, not knowing what Pastor is saying. Come on, Saints, he says. We fixing to go into the wilderness, and if you ain't trusting, leaning and depending, you ain't gonna make it. You might as well let the wolves get you now. Trying times is ahead I tell you....

Everyone is looking around, looking like they don't know what to do. They are whispering to one another. I hear the way Pastor says, Now you gonna hold it for as long as you can. Come on, Saints. Don't go to fretting now. If you thinking that breath is yours, go on and try me tonight. Go on and see what you control in this life. Nary a thing, I tell you.

And even if I don't want to hold my breath, I feel my stomach is getting so nervous. Emile is looking at me and I'm wondering if he's nervous, too. And like I see Emile looking at me, I feel the way I bring my hand up to my face, the way my heart is beating. I see the way I'm holding my breath under the water in the bathtub sometimes, the way Salem and Fatima are looking at Mama and putting their hands to their face, the way Mama is not doing anything, just sitting, and patting her foot, shaking her leg, looking at Pastor, looking at him because she's mad with him. I'm closing my eyes. I am starting to hold my breath.

I see the way yesterday looks. I still see the way Mama just cries and cries and falls to the ground. I feel the way my heart is beating now, the way something is moving around in my stomach, the way I'm holding my breath and can't breathe. I feel the way my throat is tight, the way my stomach is warm. And like I feel how my stomach is getting warm, how I can't breathe, how I can't breathe when Clay kicks me in my stomach and I'm trying, trying to catch my breath, I see last night, the way Pastor is picking up Miss Maudeline and it's late, and there are two other cars in her driveway, and I'm standing in the living room, wondering where he's going, why he's picking Miss Maudeline up, picking her up and it's so late. And like I see yesterday, feel how I'm

catching my breath, how my heart is beating, I hear the way people are shouting, the way some people are crying, saying, Yes, Jesus! Have mercy, Jesus! Yes, Lord! Thank you, Lord! Bless You!

I'm opening my eyes. I see how blurry it is, the way it feels like my eyes have been asleep. I hear the way Mrs. Jimison is starting to play the piano so fast, playing the Holy Ghost song. I feel how fast my heart is beating, the way my breath is coming back, coming back and I'm breathing. I see the way people are getting up and dancing, dancing like it's Sunday and not Wednesday, catching the Holy Ghost, singing and dancing, dancing because Pastor says it's a mighty thin line, a mighty thin line between Heaven and Hell, life and death, between the cemetery and our beds, this life and the next.

Day Two

We are just getting home from school. It is cold today and my nose is running and we're waiting outside, Mama, Salem, and me. Mama says we're going see Brother, see him before Pastor gets home. And like I'm happy we're going see Brother, going see if he's alright, I feel the way my stomach hurts, the way it feels like I have to go again.

Your stomach still bothering you, Matt? Mama asks.

Yes ma'am, I say.

And like I say this, I hear the way Mama takes a deep breath, then says,

I'm gonna have to see if I can take you to the doctor.

I don't want to go to the doctor.

Well, how expect your stomach to stop hurting?

I don't know, I say.

Or else you'll have to take some more Milk of Magnesia.

Ugh! Salem says, sticking out her tongue.

I don't want no nasty-tasting Milk of Magnesia, I say.

Huh, Mama says and rolls her eyes and smiles. And like Mama rolls her eyes and smiles, I know I don't like Milk of Magnesia, the way it's making me want to throw-up, tasting so nasty like chalk and water, even if it's making me go and go.

Probably ain't nothing but worms.

Worms, I say.

Yes, son.

I don't have worms, I say.

Ain't no telling, Matt, Mama says. Worms is real. They sure are. They can get inside you and make you sick as anything.

When Mama says this, I feel the way I'm mad. I see the way we are getting worms to go fishing from under Deacon Meeks' mulberry tree, the way some of the worms are brown and long and some are small and slimy and bleed when we put them on the hooks, bleed and our fingers are so sticky with blood. I can see the way some are even fat and white, the way the fish are liking these the best because they're so juicy and the fish are just loving them so much, even if they're getting caught on our hooks, the way we're taking them home and getting our spoons and taking off their scales, like shaving ice, frying and eating them, even though I'm knowing I'm not having these kinds of worms living in my stomach, even though my stomach keeps hurting and hurting.

The man is turning into Pastor's driveway. It's the same man's car from yesterday, from church. And like I see it's the same man's car, the way it's looking new and clean, I see the way he parks it, the way he gets out, even though it's so quiet and still running. I see how he's wearing a suit, the way his shoes are shiny.

Afternoon, the man says, smiling at us. He has a gold tooth on the side.

Evening, Mama says, and takes a breath. This is Salem and Matt, Mama tells the man, and he smiles at us some more. He shakes Salem's hand and says, Hi, pretty girl, and Salem smiles, and says, Hi, holding her doll. I feel the way the man shakes my hand.

I see the way he has two gold rings on his fingers. I smell the way his cologne smells good.

I'm Mr. Prudhomme, he says. When Mr. Prudhomme says this, while he's smiling, I see his gold tooth on the side again, the gold rings on his fingers. I hear the way he says, Now let's see if we can't get Andrew home this evening.

Mr. Prudhomme is opening the doors for us and I can see Mr. Curly sitting under his carport, the way he's looking, the way he's waving, the way we're getting into the car, the way we're leaving, driving on so much gravel, going to see Brother.

We're riding and Mama and the man are talking and I'm looking out of the window. I can still see this morning. I can still taste the way Sister Pastor's biscuits taste when I put jelly on them, then put my bacon on my biscuit and make a sandwich. And like I taste how good my biscuit tastes, I see the way me and Salem are sitting at the table and Brother is not with us. And even though we are not seeing him yet, I see the way I'm seeing him in jail, seeing him eating just bread and water, seeing the way other people trying to hump on top of him, trying to beat him up. Mama is coming into the kitchen and her eyes are still looking like they've been crying. Then I see how Pastor comes into the kitchen too and says, Morning, children, and smiles and gets his coffee cup out off the cabinet, then walks over to where the coffee is. I can smell the coffee, how good it smells in the house every morning and evening. I can see the way Mama is looking at Pastor but he doesn't see her because his back is turned. And like I see Pastor, I see the

way Mama folds her arms. I hear how she pats her slipper on the floor and just keeps doing it, patting her foot, patting, trying to get Pastor's attention.

Like I hear the way Mama's foot is just patting on the floor, I taste the way my biscuit tastes again. I see the way Salem takes a bite of hers too. Then I see the way Pastor turns around slow, like he knows Mama's been looking at him, like he's knowing someone is watching him. Pastor looks at Mama, like he's mad, like he's thinking. Mama is looking up at him. I see the way he's wearing his purple robe with his black church shoes. Even if I see the way Pastor is looking like he's thinking about something, holding his coffee cup, I see the way he turns and takes a sip of his coffee. And then I hear how Mama says, You just gonna leave him there? Pastor doesn't say anything. And even though I hear the way Mama says this, I see the way Pastor smiles. Mama keeps patting her foot and unfolds her arms and says, Well? And then Pastor holds his coffee to his lip but doesn't drink it and blows on it. I see the way he's taller than Mama and his belly is big and he starts moving toward Mama like he's a big purple curtain that's closing, closing, and Mama is a small window that's being covered by the curtain.

Mama's standing still, looking like she doesn't know what Pastor's about to do. Well, what? Pastor says. He can't just stay down there, Mama says. And like Mama says this, Pastor says, He ain't got a choice. No choice? Mama says. He's my child, Solomon. He can't come back here, Pastor says. I got a flock to tend to. Your flock is as important as my son? Man of God can't have the devil living up under his roof, no indeed he can't—Ain't God like. I see the way Pastor drinks his coffee some more.

Mama's eyes are getting water in them. I see the way it looks like she's thinking, like she's got to say something fast before she can't say it again, before she forgets. Then I hear the way Mama says, Well me and my kids got to find another place to stay. Unh, huh, Pastor thinks. Where you gonna go? He says. And even if Pastor is saying this, I see Mama's eyes move, like they're confused. Somewhere, Mama says. And like Mama says this, I see how Sister Pastor is just standing there now, looking at Pastor, looking at him because she's mad with him. Then I hear the way Sister Pastor says, You don't have to go, Livvy. You and these children don't have to leave, she says, and looks at Pastor. Baby, ya'll don't have to go. You're always welcome here.

I can feel how Sister Pastor puts her hand on my shoulder. It's gonna all work itself out. Sister Pastor puts her hand and rubs on Mama's back. Come on children, Mama says. Then I hear the way Pastor says, Go on and call Prudhomme. And like I hear Pastor say this, see the way he looks at Sister Pastor, then Mama, I see how Mama looks at him, the way she rolls her eyes. Now, darling—Sister Pastor says. Mama jerks her shoulder away from Sister Pastor's hand. Come on, Mama tells us again and walks down the hall.

We're in our room and there's Mama and Salem's bed and me and Brother's bunk beds. Mama just starts pulling clothes from out of the closet, clothes that all kind of people give us, some clothes that Mama and Sister Pastor buy for us. Like I see these clothes, I see the way Mama throws them on her bed. I hear the way Mama says, Get me that bag from up under my bed, Matt. Where, I say. Up under the bed, Mama says and keeps pulling clothes out of the closet so fast, fast like she's fighting them. I am getting

on my knees getting the bag from under the bed. There are so many boxes and shoes. And when I'm getting the bag, feeling the way it's empty, I see the way Mama is still fighting the clothes. Even though I'm watching Mama fighting the clothes, I'm already knowing something. I'm knowing we don't have a place to go. I'm knowing we can't ever leave Pastor's. I know what Brother do to Berna, that Mama wishes we didn't live here, that we always try to leave but never can, never can, because Pastor never lets us, even when we walk out of the house, go down the road some, even when Mama tries her hardest, tries with all her might, but still never can.

This building is big and gray and there are fences all around with barbed wire, and police cars and two buses and vans parked everywhere. Here we are, Mr. Prudhomme says, parking the car. Then I see the way he looks at Mama and says, It's going to work out, and Mama is trembling and she looks scared. And like I see the way Mama looks scared and nervous, I see how Mr. Prudhomme grabs her hand and holds it. And when Mr. Prudhomme grabs Mama's hand, I see the way she doesn't look at him, even if he's looking at her. Then I see the way Salem looks at me and I look at her and hunch my shoulders, hunch them because I don't know what Salem is asking me with her eyes, what she wants me to tell her.

We are out of the car and walking, walking towards the building. It's still cold and the wind is blowing and I sniffle so my nose doesn't run, doesn't run so I don't have to blow and blow, and get a sore there. But even if I sniffle, my nose still starts running. And like my nose is running, I wipe it with the back of my hand, with some of my sleeve.

And like I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, Mr. Prudhomme is opening the door for us. Mama and Salem are going in and I'm going in, then Mr. Prudhomme is following us.

There are people sitting down in chairs and there's a hall and there are doors and windows, like rooms are all along the hall, like at our school, but I know this is not a school. I know this is a jail, a jail where they are keeping Brother, where he is probably only eating bread and drinking some water, even if he wishes Mama and Sister Pastor, Grandma Sherry, even if she's gone, are cooking fried chicken and potatoes and pork chops and stuff, okra and red beans like he is liking.

There's a counter and there are people in police uniforms standing behind it. I see the way the people that are sitting in the chairs are looking at us, the way a little boy, younger than Salem, is playing with his cars, making them go and go, around the table and on the table's legs and floor. A policeman is walking a boy out of a door, and the boy is dressed in all white, white shirt and pants and shoes, and they are going into one of the rooms. And since we are standing by the counter, I hear the way a man says, Ma'am you can come back now, and the woman and the little boy, the little boy and his cars, are following the policeman. When this woman and the boy are gone, there are still other people sitting in the chairs, sitting, looking like they're tired, so tired waiting on whoever they are waiting on.

A woman is standing behind the counter. I hear the way Mr. Prudhomme says, Evening, Marcy, and the woman says, Evening, Prudhomme, and she smiles at Mama, Salem, and me. Then I hear the way Mr. Prudhomme says, I'm here for one of my

clients. And like I hear the way Mr. Prudhomme says this, I hear the way Marcy says, Who about? Andrew Ephraim, Mama says. And like I hear Mama say this, I see the way the woman looks like she's thinking, then says, Hmm, putting her finger to her lips. And like I see the way Marcy puts her finger to her lips, I see the way she picks up a big book and starts flipping through the pages. A phone is ringing. A phone is ringing and a man sitting behind a desk is answering it. And like I hear the way the man is talking, the way his voice is deep, I hear the way Mama is breathing. I feel how my stomach is getting nervous. And like I feel the way my stomach is nervous, I see the way the woman closes the book. I hear the way she says, Excuse me, Prudhomme, ma'am, and turns and walks toward the back of the office and goes through a door, a door that swings. I see how Mr. Prudhomme looks at Mama and Mama looks at him like she doesn't know what is happening. I see the way Salem looks at me. I see how some of the people sitting down are looking at us too.

Salem is looking at me and Marcy is coming back. Even if she's not to the counter yet, I hear the way she says, Prudhomme, I'm afraid he's not here. Not here? Mr. Prudhomme says. Do what? Mama says. Looks like he got transferred, Marcy says. Transferred, Mr. Prudhomme says. Transferred where?

Marcy doesn't say anything at first. I see the way her face is red now. I see the way people are looking, listening. I hear the way Marcy says, New Calvary. New Calvary, Mr. Prudhomme, says. New Calvary? Mama says. And who authorized the transfer? Mr. Prudhomme asks her. My Lieutenant says a Pastor Solomon Brackens came by last night with a woman, a Miss Myrtle Maudeline, and apparently the woman

said she wasn't pressing charges, but agreed with the good Pastor Brackens that they'd send him to New Calvary.

Mr. Prudhomme is breathing hard. I see the way he's thinking. I see how he's biting his lip like Mama does when she's mad, when she's thinking. I see the way Mama is shaking her head because she can't believe Marcy is saying what she's really saying. I see the way Mama's holding onto the counter. I hear the way Mama starts pounding her fist against the counter, the way she's starting to cry, even though people are watching, even though they are listening. Mama is leaning over, like someone is kicking her in the stomach and she's losing her breath. I see the way Mr. Prudhomme puts his arm around Mama's shoulders. I see the way Mama puts her hands to her face and cries, cries with her hands to her face, cries and my stomach is so nervous, nervous, and Salem is looking at me, and other people are looking at us, and Mama is crying, crying on Mr. Prudhomme's shoulder, crying on his shoulder like he's our daddy, like he's our father, a father that's never been dead and gone for so long.

Day Three

It is Friday and there are clouds in the sky and they are black and my stomach is hurting because I'm hungry. Today is Fasting Friday, like Pastor says, and we haven't eaten since last night, even though everyone is eating at school today, eating fish sandwiches and fries, fruitcups and cookies, and everything is smelling so good and my stomach is just turning and turning, cramping and cramping, feeling like I have to go to the bathroom, but I know I don't, because I'm just hungry. We can't eat until after six, until after Mama and Sister Pastor finish cooking dinner. And even though I'm hungry, even though I'm ready to eat, I can hear the way cars are driving on the gravel, the way Puppy is barking, barking because he's hungry too, because Pastor hasn't fed him either. And like I hear the way Puppy is barking, see the way Pastor is sitting outside his study reading, I can still see last night, last night when we are getting home and Mr. Prudhomme is dropping us off.

Sister Pastor is coming outside as soon as we are getting out of the car. Ya'll alright? she is saying. I was worried to death. I can see the way she's hugging Mama and Mr. Prudhomme is standing by his car. And after Sister Pastor is hugging Mama, she is walking over to Mr. Prudhomme and saying something to him, something quiet so we can't hear. Then I hear the way Mr. Prudhomme says, Well, Sister, I intend to help. That's what I want to do. That's all I'm trying to do. And New Calvary ain't a place for anybody.

And like I hear Mr. Prudhomme say this, I hear how he's talking to Mama while we're driving, how he's saying, after Mama asks him what's New Calvary, I'm hearing the way he's saying it's a reform school, even if I don't know what a reform school is, even if I've never heard of New Calvary. Then I'm hearing the way he's telling Mama they've been shut down and reopened, shut down and reopened, ever since they open. For what, Mama is saying, and Mr. Prudhomme is saying, For less than humane practices. And when Mr. Prudhomme is saying this, Mama is looking out of the window, thinking and I'm thinking too, wondering what Mr. Prudhomme is talking about.

I see the way Mr. Prudhomme is driving off, and we're going in the house. Pastor is sitting in his chair looking at T.V. And even though we're just getting in the house, I hear the way Mama's saying, You couldn't talk to me? Pastor just keeps looking at the T.V. and doesn't answer Mama. And then I see the way Sister Pastor has a hand on Mama's shoulder again and says, It's gonna be alright. And Mama says, No it's not, Sister Pastor. Sister Pastor doesn't say anything. Mama is looking at Pastor. You couldn't talk to me? Pastor is sitting up in his chair. I see how he's standing up now. I see how he looks down at Mama and says, He'll be well-taken care of there. Not from what I hear, Mama says. I need to see my son, Solomon. He'll get what he needs there, his studies, the Word, everything. I'll see to it. Awful shame what he did to that little girl.

When Pastor says this, I see the way Mama thinks, the way it's like Pastor is slapping her face and she is losing her breath and she's thinking and can't talk. And like I see the way Mama thinks, the way she loses her breath, I see the way she shakes her

head and starts crying. Mama is crying and Pastor is saying, You'll see him on the first Saturday of each month. Once a month is all they do, no phone calls. Mama doesn't look at Pastor. I see how she starts walking toward the back. I see the way I can see Berna, the way Brother is on top of her, the way Brother is running out of Miss Maudeline's house and pulling up his pants, pulling up his pants because he is hurting Berna, pulling up his pants because he's too shamed, too scared to let Miss Maudeline see his man, even though I know he's letting Berna see it, even though I know she's not ever wanting to.

I'm so hungry. Pastor is standing in the doorway of his study now. I hear the way he's telling me to come on so I can get my lesson. And since I'm hearing Pastor say this, I'm knowing I don't want to get my lesson today. I don't like getting my lesson from Pastor. And like I know I don't like getting my lesson from Pastor, I feel the way I'm starting to walk, walking so I can get my lesson, even if I'm not wanting it. I feel the way I'm walking, the way it's still cool, even though I have my jacket on. I feel the way it's like I'm moving in slow motion. Even though it feels like I'm moving in slow motion, I can see Pastor holding the door open, the way Puppy is digging in the ground, the way the neighborhood looks quiet now, the way Emile is not outside, no cars going up the road or nothing. I can see the way Pastor is smiling, the way's he's rubbing on his belly. I can see myself lying there, lying in Pastor's arms, even if I'm not there yet, getting my lesson, lying in Pastor's arms.

I am sitting on the floor. It is cold in here. Pastor is looking at me. I smell the way it smells in here, old, like good air doesn't hardly ever get in here, even though Pastor stays back here, has been back here counting down his forty days. And even if I'm smelling how it smells in here, like wet and outside, I see the way Pastor is handing me my bible and I'm opening it. Pastor is sitting back down behind his desk, looking at me, putting his feet on his desk. And like I'm seeing the way Pastor is sitting at his desk, the way his legs are there, I'm hearing the way he asks me, You remember where you stop last? Yes, I say, and pull up my bible marker and turn the page. Even though Pastor is asking me if I know where I left off, I'm knowing I lie to him, because I'm not always reading my bible, even when I'm opening it, even when he is sitting right there, even though I'm knowing I can't always concentrate. And like I know I can't concentrate, there is so much going on in my mind. I see the way people are talking and doing it to each other, doing it to me and Brother is running and I am running and Salem is saying, stop, stop, and Cephas isn't stopping, and my head so busy, so busy with all kinds of thoughts, like so many movies and radio music playing in my head, playing in my mind, making me scared, all at the very same time.

I can see Genesis. I'm seeing how God first made the world, seeing how Adam begat Seth, how Seth begat Enos, seeing how even if this bible is supposed to mean one thing, it is meaning something else to me, something I'm not always understanding. Even if the person who wrote this bible is saying that Enos is living eight hundred and seven years, I'm not believing him. I'm knowing the way no one can live eight hundred and seven

years, even though this bible is saying so, even if Pastor is telling me I better believe, not question, believe and do God's will.

One of my eyes is trying to read. I'm seeing how out of my other eye, how Pastor is putting his bible down on his desk, taking down his feet, how he's taking off his glasses, and he's standing up and going look out of the window, towards the road, then walking to the door and looking out of the window towards the house, then coming to sit on his sofa by me, where I am on the floor.

Pastor is rubbing his hand across my back. I feel the way it is like warm water is going all in my stomach, all down by my man. My mouth is dry. And like I feel this, I see the way Pastor grabs my bible and closes it. And like I'm seeing how Pastor is closing my bible, I still feel the way he's rubbing my back, the way my head is coming up and my eyes are looking at Pastor's face, then into his eyes. I'm seeing Pastor's eyes, seeing how they are dark, dark like marbles, seeing how he's just looking at me, hearing how he's breathing. And like I'm hearing Pastor breathing, I'm knowing what I see in Pastor's eyes, because I'm always seeing it, every time before he makes me do what he wants me to do. I'm seeing the way Pastor is telling me something with his eyes, the way they are growing and he's telling me and I'm not always knowing what they're saying, even if I'm knowing how they are making me feel, making me scared.

And even though I'm looking in Pastor's eyes, I'm feeling the way he is grabbing my hand and pulling me up so I can sit next to him on the sofa. I'm feeling the way he is taking the same hand he is pulling me up with and putting it between his legs on his man. I am touching Pastor's man. And even if my hand is on Pastor's man, I feel the way my

stomach is hurting because I'm hungry and tired of fasting. And like I feel the way I'm hungry and tired of fasting, I hear the way my stomach is growling. My stomach is growling, and I hear the way I'm saying, My stomach keeps hurting. I feel the way Pastor puts his hand on my stomach and rubs it, the way his hand is cold, cold, even if he's rubbing my stomach, under my shirt. I hear the way Pastor says, We gonna have to get that old belly of yours checked out. Mama says I got the worms, I say. And like I say this, I hear the way Pastor says, Ain't no telling, and keeps rubbing my stomach, rubbing, way down close by my man.

My hand is still on Pastor's man. And even while my hand is on Pastor's man, I hear the way he's breathing so hard. I hear the way he grinds his teeth, then breathes some more. And like I'm hearing the way Pastor is breathing, the way he's grinding his teeth, I see the way his stomach is moving up and down, up and down. My hand is on Pastor's man and it's growing. And then I'm feeling the way it's moving under his robe.

And like I'm feeling how Pastor's man is moving and growing, I'm hearing the way Pastor is asking me, You been bad, haven't you? And like I hear the way Pastor is asking me this, I know I haven't been bad. But even though I know I haven't been bad, I hear the way I'm saying, Yes, sir. Then I'm hearing how Pastor is saying, What have I told you about being bad? And even if I'm nervous, even if my stomach is just turning and turning, growling and growling, I'm hearing the way I'm saying, That I'm not supposed to. Then I'm feeling how Pastor is moving my hand on his man some more, hearing how he is breathing, smelling the way his breath smells. Like I'm smelling

Pastor's breath, feeling how his man is wet, I'm seeing the way he's standing up and raising up his robe, then sitting back down, taking out his man.

I'm seeing Pastor's man. I'm seeing the way his man is long. I feel the way my man is growing too. I'm knowing that Pastor wants me to taste his man. And even though I know Pastor wants me to taste his man, even if I don't want to be here, I hear the way he says, Taste and see. For it is good. I'm seeing the way he's moving his man, shaking it, seeing how it's getting bigger, the way it's growing, feeling the way my own man is growing some more.

Like I'm smelling the way Pastor's man smells, I'm tasting the way his man tastes, knowing I'm not liking it, knowing that I'm not supposed to be doing this. And even if I'm knowing I'm not supposed to be doing this, I'm feeling the way my own self is getting up and walking out of Pastor's study. I'm seeing the way my other self, my real self is staying and tasting on Pastor's man, making Pastor feel so good, while I'm feeling scared, feeling the way I don't want to be here, don't want to be with Pastor, always having to learn my lesson, always having to taste and see the awful goodness.

Day Four

Sister Pastor, Mama, and Salem are cleaning house this morning. Pastor is talking with Mr. Curly, even though Mr. Curly is across the road, putting gas in his riding lawnmower. The cartoons have gone off and I'm outside riding my bike up and down the driveway. I'm stopping, stopping because my chain is off again, and I'm rolling my bike back over by the carport, over where I can flip it over and put my chain back on. Mr. Gilray is coming from the side of Pastor's house. I see the way he is carrying his chainsaw, smoking a cigarette, and Mr. Merchant and Emile are walking across the road and Deacon Meeks is rolling in his wheelchair across the road, even if it's gravel, even though Mrs. Meeks is not pushing him this morning.

Hey, Matt, Emile is saying to me.

Hey, Emile, I'm saying to him.

I feel the way this chain feels, the way it's so greasy.

Morning, Pastor, Mr. Gilray and Mr. Merchant, and Deacon Meeks are saying.

I see the way Mr. Curly is walking over by Mrs. Reba's flowerbeds with his weedeater now.

You sho you wanna do it? Mr. Merchant says.

Ain't got much choice, Deacon, Pastor says. Need a cross, don't I?

Deacon Meeks is out of breath, breathing hard. I see the way he's sweating, the way he's taking out his handkerchief and wiping his forehead. I'm feeling the way I'm sometimes feeling sorry for Deacon Meeks because he doesn't have legs anymore. And

even if I'm feeling sorry for Deacon Meeks because he doesn't have legs anymore, ever since he's having the sugars, I'm hearing the way Mr. Gilray is saying, Pastor, you could have gone down there to the lumberyard and bought the wood you need. Pastor is smiling and shaking his head.

It's a lot of things I *could* do, Pastor says, sure enough. He smiles some more. That's a right of all of us. But sometimes as Christians, it's in us doing the right thing, the *harder* thing, even when there's much simpler ways of going about it. Mr. Gilray is listening.

Jesus ain't had to do what he did for any of us. He could have taken the easy road. He ain't ever cut no corners, Pastor says. But because his Father obliged Him, He knew He had to do what He had to do.

Even if I hear the way Pastor sounds, like he's preaching, like it's Wednesday or Sunday, I hear the way Mr. Gilray says, I hear you, Pastor, and laughs, and takes another puff of his cigarette and blows the smoke into the air, and looks like he's thinking.

Ain't that right? Pastor says, smiling.

Sho 'nough you right, Mr. Gilray says.

Mr. Gilray's cigarette is small, almost by the yellow, by his lips. There are hardly any ashes left, and he's closing one of his eyes. I can smell the gas from the chainsaw. I can smell the way it's smelling when Emile, Sergeant, SamPaul, Wilson, and me are smelling it sometimes when we are playing, the way it smells good. I can feel the way I'm getting dizzy when I'm smelling too much. I can see the way Wilson's mama is whipping him the day he's throwing-up and she's saying he's drunk and high. I can hear

the way she's saying, I better not find out you getting high like your daddy. Damn gas will kill you. And even if Wilson is listening to his mama, even if she is crying, crying because she's talking about his daddy, crying because his father is leaving, I'm hearing the way Mama is saying my father is leaving, leaving one day and never coming back.

Well, what the wife think about this? Deacon Meeks says.

I figure it ain't nothing she can think, Pastor says. She knows I'm in the saving business and that's the way it is. This tree come down today and I'll plant another one where it stand. Sure it'd been nice to have an olive tree but this cedar will do. I ain't about knowed an olive to grow in Louisiana anyhow. Too wet.

And like I see the way Pastor is looking at the tree, the way his hands are on his hips, I hear the way Mr. Gilray says,

Could have got some rail ties.

Rail ties? Mr. Merchant says, even if he's been quiet, looking at the tree.

Sho, Mr. Gilray says.

Rail ties be too heavy, 'Ray, Mr. Merchant says. Mr. Gilray thinks, then laughs.

Come April I got to carry that cross, Pastor says. This here way we'll know what we getting.

The men are thinking. Emile is helping me with my chain. I can hear the way he's breathing, see the way the oil is black on his fingers.

You got the place? Deacon Meeks asks.

A few kinks, Pastor says, ain't nothing I can't iron out though. You know white folks ain't giving nothing away. They don't care if you into saving souls are shelling peas, they ain't gonna make it easy for you.

Speaking of white folks, Mr. Gilray says, what you think about Swaggart? They got him, huh?

Even though I'm fixing my chain and it's almost on, I see the way Pastor looks confused at first, like Mr. Gilray is asking him something he's not supposed to ask him.

That's how it happens to you, Pastor says. He done his playing and now it's time for him to give an account. He's got to lay in that bed.

Seems he been laying in too many of them, Mr. Gilray laughs.

They 'bout won't do nothing to him, Mr. Merchant says.

Sure they will, Deacon Meeks says. He done lost that church.

You think so? Mr. Merchant says.

Sure he done lost it.

He'll be confessing tomorrow, televised, Pastor says.

We'll see, Mr. Merchant says.

He done lost that church, Deacon Meeks says, pushing his wheels on his chair, going in the grass, following Pastor and Mr. Merchant and Mr. Gilray over by the tree.

Even if the clouds are still gray and it's cool, even if my chain is on and my hands are dirty and oily, black, and I'm riding my bike again, even if Mr. Merchant is telling Emile to stay where he is, not to move, I'm hearing how Mr. Gilray is starting his chainsaw. I

hear how it sounds like someone is yelling, even if I know it's a chainsaw and there is no one yelling this morning.

I see the way Mr. Gilray is holding the saw, the way smoke is coming from it, the way he's pressing on the button and the saw is getting louder and quiet, louder and quiet, every time he presses the button. Mr. Gilray is bending his legs. I see how Pastor and Mr. Merchant and Deacon Meeks are watching. I see the way Mr. Gilray is pressing the saw into the tree. I hear how Puppy is barking, even if the chainsaw is going, cutting into the tree, just going and going, and sawdust is flying and flying, and the tree is leaning and leaning, and Mrs. Larna is standing under her carport, her hands on her hips, watching. When the tree is leaning and leaning, and Mr. Gilray is pulling the saw from the tree, I hear the way he is saying, Timber! and Pastor and Deacon Meeks and Mr. Merchant are standing back and Emile and me, even Cephas, Mr. Curly and Mrs. Reba are watching the tree just falling to the ground, falling to the ground, because it's a big old tree that's falling, the biggest cedar tree I've ever seen cut down.

Emile and me are feeding Puppy because I'm forgetting to when I'm first coming outside this morning. The clouds are leaving and the sky is getting blue and it's warming up. Puppy is wagging his tail, wagging his tail so fast, jumping up and down.

Dang, he jump high, Emile is saying.

I know, I say. I feel the way I'm nervous. I know how I don't like feeding Puppy because he's always knocking me down, getting me dirty, scratching me with his nails.

Puppy is jumping, running around in circles, happy. Even though he is old, older than me, Pastor says, Puppy has some gray hair under his mouth and is always jumping, running, like he's so young, so young and happy, never getting tired.

I am setting down his food. It's smelling good, smelling like you can eat it, like the man in the movie, always eating his dog's food. Puppy is smelling his food. He is jumping on me again. I don't like it when Puppy jumps on me. His nails are long. They are cutting me. He's licking my chin. I wipe my chin. Emile is laughing.

Get down, I say. Puppy is getting down, smelling his food again, and starting to eat. Puppy is shaking, shaking, like he's so nervous, eating, because Pastor is forgetting to feed him yesterday and he's so hungry and tired of fasting and he is eating so fast, not even chewing, swallowing his food, eating so fast, swallowing, because he doesn't have all his teeth.

Why he always eating so fast, Emile is saying.

I don't know, I'm telling him. He's always hungry, I say.

Puppy is almost finished, licking his bowl and it's moving and he's just licking and licking. I'm hearing the way Pastor is whistling.

Let him off, Pastor is saying. Let him run some.

Puppy is jumping on me again.

Get down, I say, get down. My heart is beating fast. My mouth is dry. Puppy is down. I'm unhooking his chain. Puppy is off his chain and running, running around, looking so happy, so happy to be off his chain.

I can see the way Pastor is standing in his robe and his robe has sawdust all on it. And even if Pastor's robe is dirty and has sawdust all on it, I'm seeing the way it's reminding me of our old church, with our old priest, our old Father. I can see the way Father Palermo is white and Pastor is black. I can see the way Father Palermo's robe is white and Pastor's is purple, with gray and two black crosses. I can see the way we used to come to Pastor's church sometimes with Grandma Sherry. And like I see the way we're coming to Pastor's church with Grandma Sherry, I can see how most of the time Mama is taking us to St. Augustus and we're coming right home, but when we're going to Pastor's church we're staying all day, because church is lasting long and sometimes we are eating afterwards. Even though our church is not lasting long, I'm seeing how when I get in Pastor's church I want to get on my knees and pray, then stand up and say my Hail Marys, even if I don't know them all, all the words, even if Mama is trying to teach us. I can hear the way they are not saying their Hail Marys in Pastor's church like at St. Augustus. And like I know they don't say their Hail Marys at Pastor's church, I'm hearing how Mama says, before the fire, I can start going to catechism, but when the fire comes, I don't get to go. And when I come to Pastor's church, when we move here, I take communion for the first time, even Salem, even if she hasn't gone to catechism yet either. I can hear the way Mama is mad, telling Pastor we haven't been to catechism and he's saying, It doesn't matter, and Mama is saying, Yes it does, and they are arguing and arguing and Mama is crying because she's so mad.

And since Salem and me are taking communion for the first time, I can taste the way the juice tastes, so sweet, the sweetest grape juice, even though I'm thinking it is

wine. I can see the way Brother smiles, because he's happy for us, because he's already finishing catechism and taking his First Communion. I can see how every Sunday Brother is taking communion with Mama, drinking out the big silver cup everyone else is drinking from, even if we're drinking out of small cups at Pastor's and throwing them away when we're finished, even if Father Palermo is never throwing away the big silver cup at St. Augustus.

And even when I'm seeing Brother is so happy taking his communion with Mama, I can see the way he is happy watching Salem and me. I can see, even if we never been in a play at St. Augustus, how when we move here with Pastor he wants us to be in all of the plays, to sing in the choir, to do everything he wants us to do, even though we are not wanting to. I'm hearing how some days Pastor is talking about the Catholic church, saying how he doesn't know how people go there with it being so boring and all, then saying Baptist know how to worship, Baptist know how to praise the name of Jesus. And then I'm seeing how Mama is getting mad when Pastor is saying this, seeing how she is rolling her eyes, and sometimes walking out of the room, seeing how I know what she's thinking in her head. I know Mama is thinking Pastor doesn't know what he's talking about because that's what I'm thinking myself. And when Fridays are coming, I'm knowing I don't like to fast. And like I'm knowing I don't like to fast, because I get too hungry, I'm seeing how when we live with Grandma Sherry, Grandma Sherry is sometimes cooking her own food, because she's not Catholic, and can eat meat on Fridays if she wants. I'm seeing how sometimes, even though she can eat meat on Fridays, she's having fish and all kind of other stuff, shrimps and crabs, all kinds of

seafood, and we're just eating and eating, all eating together. And like I taste the way Grandma Sherry's fish tastes, I hear the way I ask Mama why we have to eat all this seafood on Fridays and how she just tells me, 'Cause that's what we're supposed to do, and I say, But why? But why, and Mama just keeps telling me the same thing over and over, 'Cause that's what we're supposed to do, because we're Catholic and that's just what we're supposed to do.

Mr. Gilray is rubbing Puppy's belly and Puppy is lying on his back, lying in the grass, and Mr. Merchant is raking the rest of the small limbs and branches, and even if I don't want to, I see the night they take Brother. And like I'm seeing the night they take Brother, the way I'm taking a bath, I'm knowing that I didn't give anything up, that I didn't give anything up for Lent. And like I know I didn't give anything up for Lent, I see how I'm sitting in the bathtub and I'm crying and I still hear Mama crying in the room, the way she is sniffing. I feel the way I'm closing my eyes and thinking about what I'm going to give up. And even if I can't think of anything, how nothing is coming to my mind, how there's nothing I can give up, I can hear how Grandma Sherry is saying, Think of something you know is keeping you from your God, child. I hear the way she's saying, If it's lying, then give it up, if it's stealing, give it up. I'm seeing how I just keep sitting, thinking and crying at the same time, thinking and wishing I could give up keeping secrets. That's what I'm going to try to do, tell the secrets I know. Tell them, even if I'm going to get in trouble, even if I know secrets aren't supposed to be told, even if I know it's so hard keeping them, keeping them, because they're lies, And lies,

Grandma Sherry says, Makes us ugly, so ugly they can make us until we don't hardly know what to do with ourselves.

There is no more tree and the sky looks like it's closer now, like it's sitting on the hill where the tree once was. And like I see the way the sky looks so close where the tree used to be, I'm wondering how the sky gets so blue and today is just so pretty, even though there were so many clouds earlier. I'm feeling how my arms are itching because Emile and me are dragging all these big limbs to the trash pile. I'm knowing if Pastor lets us, we're going to build us a fort under the oak tree, and Sergeant and SamPaul and Wilson, are going to come and play with us. And when they come and play with us, I know, even though I'm not supposed to, even though I'm not supposed to think about us playing house together, because we're boys and boys are not supposed to play house together, even if Emile and me are playing sometimes, even if we're on top of one another just playing house, this is what I'm thinking about.

Mr. Merchant is holding a long piece of wood to Pastor's back and Mr. Gilray is standing by him, holding a pencil in his hand.

We got to cut it right there, Mr. Gilray says, and takes his pencil and moves it across the wood.

What you think, Pastor? Mr. Merchant says, holding the wood and Pastor is looking, then he's turning around, touching the wood, looking at it.

Just long as it sits up there on my back, it oughta do.

Like I'm hearing the way Pastor is saying this, I'm seeing how the tree looks now, like it's something else, something else that never stood on the hill and looked like a tree in the first place. And even since I'm trying to see what the tree looked like before they cut it down, the way Pastor's yard looked, how it looked everyday I saw it, I still can't. And like I can't see what the tree looked like, I'm smelling the way all this sawdust smells, like some kind of sweet candy, how that's what Pastor says cedar smells like, like sweet candy. Even if I'm smelling this cedar, I'm still wondering why Pastor wants to carry the cross, why he says we're going to do this play in the first place, why he thinks people need to see how Jesus died in real life, even if they've seen the movie so many times before, even if they've read their bibles and know for themselves, know for themselves that Jesus took up the cross and died one day, died so that we could live, live and be free, so free, and never have to worry, even if I'm always worrying, even though I'm always scared, even though I'm seeing the way Sister Pastor and Mama and Salem are getting home, the way they are looking, the way they are confused, looking at the hill, the sky, the place where the tree used to be.

Sunday

But which of you pastors, having a boy playing against the heat of summer, amid the woods, against palmetto and ferns, will summon him to your study, after all of the boys of this place have gone on home? And it is in this place where there is no one but the two of you and you will tell this boy, Go and sit down? And will not you say to this boy, Prepare yourself for the awful goodness that I may do with you as I please, have you sit against my knee and whisper into your young ear, kiss the length of your neck and say, It is sweet? And will not there be an utterance, for the boy feels the licentious joy as his pastor's lips touch his own for the very first time and the boy feels, knows there is some new thing, moving within this man's garments, moving as that of a secret through time and space? And after the pastor has carried this boy into his secret place, bedded him down as a man does his wife, the boy knows not whether to run or hide, laugh or cry, for it is only now that he is unprofitable and he has merely done that which was his duty to do.

Day Five

I am waking up. I'm feeling like I'm still asleep, like I'm still asleep and dreaming, but I know I'm not. I know I'm awake and can't sleep. I know I don't want to go to school, even if it's morning, even though it's time to get up. But even though I'm knowing it's time to go to school, it's time for me to get out of bed, I feel the way I can't move, like these covers are a whole bunch of people that are lying on top of me and won't let me up, won't let me move. And even when I am looking at these covers, knowing they are not people holding me down, that they are covers and they feel so warm when I am under them, I'm seeing that day, even if I don't want to. I'm seeing that day and I can't help it. Even if I am thinking about what the doctor told me, told me to think about something happy, to go someplace where I am happy, I can't. I can't ever see where I am happy; can't ever go there. All I see is that morning. I am that morning.

I am getting out of the bed and Mama is making us breakfast and Grandma Sherry is getting up for a little while to eat some soup and crackers but she is sick and she can't stay up that long so she is going back to sleep, and Mama is telling us not to bother her. And after I eat my breakfast, I am seeing how the trashcan is just full. I'm hearing how I'm telling Mama I want to burn the trash but she says I can't because I'm too small and I tell her I'm not but she tells me I am and I better not keep worrying her about it. Mama is going into grandma's room to check on her and I hear the way grandma coughs and coughs and Mama says she's going to have to go and get her some medicine from the store and then grandma is saying something about making her own self something, once

she gets up the next time. Brother and me are playing and then we are making noise and Mama is telling us that we better not wake up grandma and we just keep on playing, playing because that's what we like to do. And then I am hearing Mama say that she's going to the store and we better not leave the house. Mama is getting into the car and taking Salem with her and Brother and me are staying home with Grandma Sherry.

And when Mama is leaving, I'm hearing how Brother is saying he's leaving, that he's going to Isaiah's house and I'm telling him he better not unless he wants to get in trouble but he's not listening. And like I'm seeing Brother is not listening to Mama, even though I'm lying in this bed, lying here and I don't want to keep thinking all this, I'm seeing we are here at Pastor's. The morning is cold and Brother is happy and I'm happy too, because I'm wanting to go hunting with Brother and Cephas. And like I'm thinking I'm going hunting with Brother and Cephas, I'm seeing how Pastor is up and Cephas is up and Brother is up and I'm starting to get dressed too. I'm feeling how cold it is and I'm looking outside and the ground is so white, white like it's been snowing. I hear the way Pastor's saying that it's not snow, that it's frost. Then I'm seeing how Brother is dressed and Cephas is dressed, and Mama and Sister Pastor and Salem are not dressed, still in their robes and nightgowns, and Pastor is not dressed, either, still in his houserobe and slippers. Then I'm hearing Pastor say he's not going with them, that he has work to do. And like Pastor is saying he has work to do, I'm hearing Mama ask Pastor if Cephas knows what he's doing and Pastor is smiling at Mama and telling her that he does, that he's teaching Cephas how to be careful when he is hunting, when he is having a gun. Mama is smiling at Pastor and Pastor is winking at her. Can I go? I am asking. I'm

hearing how Brother says, No, you're too young, and I'm saying, No I'm not, and Mama is saying, Your brother's right, and I'm knowing Brother is only three years older than me. And then I'm feeling how I'm getting mad and then I'm starting to cry.

I can see the way Pastor is handing Cephas the gun, the way Brother is smiling, the way Cephas is smiling at Brother and I'm crying. And like I'm seeing this, seeing that day, knowing I want to forget, knowing I want to see something else, I can't. I want to see and think of something happy but I can't. Right now all I see is those days. Those days are all I see and they make me feel like these covers are a whole bunch of people lying on top of me, even if I'm trying to move, even when I'm trying with all my might and can't. And like I feel the way I can't move, feel the way these covers are so heavy, I feel the way I don't want to go to school today, the way my stomach is hurting and hurting, like something is in there, moving around, the way I just want to lie here, lie here, and go to sleep, sleep so long and not wake up.

Day Six

Mrs. Fuller is cleaning off her desk. We are about to go to the library and Tabitha and Karly are erasing the blackboard. My books are underneath my desk and I'm sitting, looking at my math paper, looking at the numbers, seeing how they don't always make sense to me, even when they used to, even though they always did before we come to live with Pastor because I'm always making good grades, always knowing my numbers.

Even though they are almost finished erasing the blackboard, I see the way Karly is taking Tabitha's eraser, and because Mrs. Fuller is not looking, because her back is turned, Karly is slapping the erasers together and white chalk smoke is just going in Tabitha's face and in the air and everyone is laughing and Mrs. Fuller is turning her head so she can see.

No clapping erasers you two, Mrs. Fullers says when she sees the white chalk smoke. Tabitha is smiling and going sit down and Karly is looking scared at first because Mrs. Fuller is taking the erasers from her. If you can't mind yourselves, the two of you will stay in for recess for a week. Everyone is getting quiet because Mrs. Fuller is looking mad. And that goes for the rest of you. They'll be no library today or any other day if you can't behave yourselves.

Karly is looking shy because Mrs. Fuller is looking at her when she is saying this. Tabitha is looking shy too.

Now get your things, Mrs. Fuller says, and line up at the door.

Everyone is grabbing their pencils and notebooks, and even if we're not supposed to, even if we're supposed to walk to be in line, Mitchell is running so he can be first and then Dustin, Chet, Rusty, Clay, and Brant. Mrs. Fuller is blowing her whistle, even if we are inside, even if it's hurting my ears.

There's to be no running, Mrs. Fuller says, you know my line policy. My ears are ringing. They are ringing and I see the way everyone is turning and looking at Mrs.

Fuller like they are not running. Then Mrs. Fuller is saying, Now get to the back of the line. They are smacking their lips and Mrs. Fuller is saying, Matt, Tabitha, Karly, get in line, you all will be first. And even if I don't like being first, even though I want to stand at the end of the line, I'm doing what Mrs. Fuller is asking me to, lining up, and I'm seeing the way Clay and everyone in the back of the line is looking at me and I don't like when they are looking at me, smiling and pointing, making fun of me.

We are standing outside the library, still in line, and Mrs. Fuller is taking out her key and opening the door. I am going in first and there is no one in the library. It is quiet. The carpet is blue and I'm following Mrs. Fuller and I can hear the way people are laughing and whispering at the end of the line.

Sit here, Mrs. Fuller says, and I sit on the floor, like an Indian, and there is a big T.V. on a stand in the front of us, and there are bookshelves and tables and books and books, so many books, everywhere.

I am sitting on the floor and Tabitha is sitting by me and Karly is sitting by Tabitha and the others, Clay and them, are sitting down, too.

I can't see, Mitchell says.

Me either, Brant says.

I haven't even turned on the television, Mrs. Fuller says.

Can I move? Mitchell says.

Yes, Mrs. Fuller says and turns on the T.V. and there is so much static sounding.

Me too, Brant says and Mrs. Fuller nods her head and Mitchell and Brant are coming sit in the front, in front of Tabitha, Karly, and me.

I'm sitting by Tabitha and I'm already feeling the way my heart is starting to beat, beat so fast, how I'm starting to see myself on top of her and we're doing it. I can see the way the lights are going off because the T.V. is coming on and it's so dark in here. I am blinking my eyes and I can feel how my stomach feels so warm, how my hand is moving on Tabitha's leg and her leg is soft. And like I'm feeling how Tabitha's leg is soft, I'm seeing how her leg is so white and my hand is black, because she's white and I'm black and I'm hearing how Mama is saying she better not hear anything about me liking a white girl. Even though I know Mama doesn't want to hear nothing about me liking a white girl, I'm seeing how Tabitha is wearing a skirt and how she is putting her hand on top of my hand. Mrs. Fuller is sitting in the back, close by Clay and them. I can feel the way Tabitha is taking my hand and putting it by her privates, by her underwear. And even if I'm not wanting my hand to move, I'm feeling my hand is moving, and how I'm pulling her underwear to the side, pulling them to the side and I don't know what the T.V. is playing, even though I am looking at it, even if it's just playing and playing.

The T.V. is playing and I can feel hair and skin. I can see the way Tabitha looks at me, the way Karly and Mitchell and Brant are watching the T.V., the way their mouths are open. Then I'm feeling there is wet in her privates. I'm turning to Tabitha again. I can see the way she is not smiling. I can see the way it is like she is thinking. I can see the way it is like her eyes are telling me something, something I'm not always knowing. I'm feeling how I'm moving my finger. I can feel the way, even if I'm a boy, even if he's not supposed to, how Pastor is moving his finger inside of me.

I'm taking my hand from between Tabitha's legs. I'm feeling the way my man is feeling. I'm seeing how Tabitha is watching T.V. and everybody else is so quiet. And like I hear the way everyone else is so quiet, I can hear the way the T.V. is loud but I don't know what it's saying, even if there is music playing, people talking. I can see the way people are doing it to each other. And like I'm seeing the way people are doing it to each other, I'm feeling how I'm bringing my hand up to my nose. My hand is at my nose and I'm smelling how my fingers smell. I can see the way Cephas is smelling his fingers after he is touching Salem. I feel the way I want to wash my hands, wash my hands because my fingers smell like Tabitha's private, like Salem, like something I know I'm not supposed to be smelling. I feel the way my man is moving, the way it's throbbing and throbbing, the way it hurts sometimes, the way it hurts because it just grows and grows for so long and I hope no one is seeing it.

I feel the way my heart is beating. I hear the way this T.V. is loud. I hope I can see Brother, hope he's alright and he's talking so loud, talking like the boy on this T.V., talking like he does when he's in my dreams, when he's happy and talking, in my

dreams, talking and laughing, talking and laughing like he did before we come to live with Pastor, before the bullet went against his head, went against his head and made him sad.

We are off the bus, walking in Pastor's driveway, and Mr. Curly is sitting under his carport, rocking in his chair, waving at us.

How goes it, Mr. Curly says.

Good, we say, and wave at him.

There are no cars in the driveway and Salem and me are looking at one another. I feel the way my stomach turns. My stomach turns and I get nervous, even if Mr. Curly is right there. I see the way Salem stops walking. I don't wanna go in there, Salem says. I don't wanna go. And like Salem says this, I hear the way I say, Me too.

I see how we are sitting outside in the chairs, outside the garage. The bus is passing back and dust is flying and now it's about to go on the back road, over by where Mrs. Anne lives, going drop off the other people.

Cephas just come in, Mr. Curly says, from across the road, still rocking. And when Mr. Curly says this, Salem and me look at one another. And even if we're looking at one another, already knowing Cephas is in the house, even if Salem is looking like she's scared, and my stomach is hurting, I can hear the way Pastor's door opens. I can see the way Cephas is holding his brown basketball at his hip. Like I see the way Cephas is standing, holding his basketball, I hear the way he says, Ya'll come on. I look at Salem and she looks at me again, and we both look at Cephas. Then I hear the way I say,

Where's my Mama, and Cephas says, She's gone. They went clean house. When they coming back, I say. Then Cephas says, Nigger don't worry about it, and opens the door some more. Now ya'll come in here.

And even if Cephas is saying this, I see the way I look over at Mr. Curly and he waves at us. I see the way I look over at Mr. Merchant's and how it looks so quiet too, even if their cars are home and Emile is probably eating a sandwich, starting on his homework. And like I see other people's cars are home, some cars parked over by Deacon Meeks' restaurant, the way Mr. Teeth is leaning over the side of his orange truck and the hood is open, I feel the way my booksack is heavy, the way I pick it up and put it on, the way Salem grabs my hand and we walk so we can be in the house.

My stomach is nervous and Salem is holding my hand. Cephas' shirt is already off. The lights are turned down low. I can see the way Salem and me are already lying there, lying there, even if we are not inside yet.

The lights are turned down low and I hear the way Cephas tells Salem, Go lay down. Salem is going lie on the sofa. And like I see the way Salem is lying on the sofa now, I see the way Cephas sits in Pastor's recliner, the way it rocks. I hear the way, even though he's spinning his basketball on his finger, he tells me to go and lie on top of her, on top of Salem. And like I know I don't want to lie on top of my sister, I don't want to play house, I hear the way he says, Go on, nigger. And then I feel the way my heart beats, the way it feels like the water is moving inside me and it's just going down by my man. This is what I feel since we move here. I'm always feeling the way my man feels,

the way it is growing and I start feeling the way it is moving and moving because we are always playing house.

Cephas slaps me on my tail and it stings and stings. I'm going over by Salem. And even if I'm going over by Salem, I feel the way Cephas is standing behind me, the way he hits me on my tail again and says, Lay down. I'm not moving. Get on her, he says. I am cold.

I am lying on top of Salem, my little sister. I feel the way my man is pressing against my jeans, then by Salem's private. And then I hear the way Cephas says, Kiss her. When Cephas says this, I can see Salem's eyes, the way she looks at me, the way they are scared, the way some water is going in them. I hear the way she is breathing so fast. I am kissing my sister. Cephas' hand is on the back of my head, pushing it down and my lips are kissing Salem's. I feel the way her lips are soft against mine. Salem's lips are soft and I want to cry but I can't. I can smell her breath, hear her breathing, see the way her eyes are closed. I can feel my man is pressing against Salem, pressing into her, pressing into my little sister.

And like I feel the way my man is pressing into my little sister, even if I don't want it to, I feel the way Cephas is pushing his hand on my tail, making me hump up and down, up and down on Salem. I can smell the way it smells because Cephas is pulling down his pants. I see the way he goes to the front door and looks out of the curtains and his pants are down, down around his ankles. I see how his man is hanging because it's long like Pastor's, long, like a secret, how he is grabbing my hand and Salem's hands and making us touch it.

We are touching Cephas' man. I feel the way it is skin, the way it is like my own. I hear the way Cephas says, Taste it. I hear the way he's breathing. I see the way his stomach is breathing in and out, the way his eyes are so white, so white like Pastor's. I see the way he's looking at Salem. Salem opens her mouth. I'm seeing Salem taste the way Cephas tastes.

After Salem is tasting Cephas, I feel the way I'm opening my mouth. I taste the way Cephas tastes. And even if I'm tasting the way Cephas tastes, smelling the way he smells, I'm feeling myself leaving, going so far, while my other self is staying here, staying, doing all this I know we're not supposed to be doing. And like I feel myself leaving, I'm knowing that if Mama knew what Cephas and Pastor do to us, she'd cry. If she knew what Cephas makes us do to each other, she'd die. Even if I'm ten and Salem is six, I'm knowing that I shouldn't have made the fire that day. I'm knowing sometimes, even if I try to forget, that I'm the reason Grandma Sherry isn't here and we've been living with Pastor, Sister Pastor, and Cephas for almost three years. Even though I'm only ten, I know brothers aren't supposed to kiss their little sisters, aren't supposed to lie on top of them, lie on top of them in the evening, in the evening, when the sun is going down and they are supposed to be playing, playing outside, happily, happily, as all the neighborhood children do.

Day Seven

Pastor is not home yet. Today is Wednesday and I know he wants me to study my scriptures before we go to church tonight. Even if Pastor wants me to go over my scriptures in his study, I know I want to play with Emile and Sergeant. And like I know I want to play with them, my friends, even if Pastor wants me to go over my scriptures, Emile and me are walking through the field so we can go over to Mr. Smokey's, Sergeant's grandfather's house, so we can play.

We are in Mr. Smokey's yard and I can smell the way it smells like chickens and poop, everywhere. There is the chicken poop and feathers all in the driveway, in the grass, on the porch, on the chairs, everywhere. There are chickens and guineas walking all around the yard, on Mr. Smokey's porch, under his carport; there are even some in the trees. And like I'm seeing these chickens on the porch, seeing some in the trees, I'm wondering how they get up there, how Mr. Smokey's chickens always get up in the trees, even if people are saying that chickens can't fly.

Like I'm seeing this, feeling the way my stomach is hurting, like I have to go to the bathroom, I'm thinking I can't stay too long because I know what Pastor is saying, not to leave, because I have my lesson and my scriptures to study. And even if I'm knowing what Pastor is telling me, what he wants me do, I know I don't want to do my lesson and my scriptures today; I don't like reading my bible, studying the Word. I just want to play with Emile and Sergeant, play with them because they're my friends, play with them because that's what I like to do.

Sergeant and Emile are both touching me on my shoulder and saying, You're it! They are taking off running and laughing. And after they are running and laughing, I'm running off after them, laughing too, cutting through Mr. Smokey's carport, with all these old horse saddles and tools, and chicken coops, and spider webs, everywhere. I'm getting past Mr. Smokey's carport and running around to the back of the house. I see the way the old tractor is so rusty, the way the wheels are on flats, the way it's not moving for so long, the way we're acting like we're driving it sometimes. I see Mr. Smokey's fighting roosters in their cages. I know the way they can't be with the other chickens because they'll fight them and kill them. I see the way Deacon Meeks is sometimes buying roosters from Mr. Smokey so he can sell them in his restaurant and Mama is saying she doesn't know how people can eat rooster because it is always so tough, never tasting good, never tender, even if you're cooking it for three days.

And even if they think I don't see them, I see the way Emile and Sergeant run by the horse fence. I am breathing hard, catching my breath. I'm taking off again. Emile goes behind a tree. And like I see the way Emile goes behind the tree, and I can barely see him, I act like I'm going the other way. I am not going the other way. I am walking soft, quiet, getting closer by where Emile is. I'm getting my breath back. I am touching the tree, looking around it, feeling the way this bark is rough. Emile is looking the other way. I am breathing so soft, so soft, Emile can't hear me. My heart is beating, filling my chest with air.

You're it, I say, touching Emile's shoulder. Emile is breathing hard. I look into his eyes.

Where's Sergeant? I whisper. Emile makes his eyes move, but I don't know what direction they're moving in. He does it again. He's moving them to the left. I'm turning around and seeing Sergeant run under the gate of the horse fence and I run up to it, then stop.

Sergeant is hiding behind a feed barrel, looking at me.

I'm not going in there, I say, not with no Red Stud.

Red Stud ain't gonna do you nothing, Emile says. Emile goes up under the fence to Red Stud and pats him on his neck. Red Stud is blinking his eyes. Sergeant comes from behind the barrel.

He not gonna do nothing, Sergeant says.

I'm looking at Red Stud. He's an old red horse. I can see his ribs and he's just standing in the mud, and Emile pats him on his back, and his tail is waving, swatting flies, and his ears are twitching.

See, Emile says. He ain't gonna do you nothing,

I'm not going in there, I say. I feel the way my heart is beating, the way I'm breathing. I see the way Red Stud's man is hanging out and it's long. And like I see the way Red Stud's man is out, and it's long, I hear the way Emile says, Ugh, and runs over by the feed barrel and Red Stud's water bucket.

And even if Emile is climbing from under the fence and Sergeant is standing there, I see the way Emile picks up a rock and throws it at Red Stud's man. The rock

misses. Pee is coming from Red Stud's man and it's just going and going, all in the mud, and he's just standing, standing, blinking his eyes, chewing on some hay that's been in his mouth.

Red Stud is still going; and now he is pooping. Sergeant is holding feed in his hand.

Want some? Sergeant says. Emile gets some and then I get some. This feed is sweet, some sweet. I taste the way it tastes, like syrup and sugar, even if it's horse feed. Sergeant puts the rest in his mouth, like he's chewing on tobacco.

And even if Sergeant has Red Stud's feed in his mouth and I'm tasting mine, and Emile is tasting his, Sergeant pulls out his man, then turns so Emile and me can't see it, and I hear the way water is just hitting the ground. Then I hear the way Red Stud whinnies, but because he's old, it sounds like it's hard for him to do. Even if Sergeant is finished peeing, I see the way Emile takes out his man and goes and I take out mine, even if we're turning the other way and I'm going way behind the tree.

After we are peeing, we are spitting so we don't get a sty on our eye, so everybody in the neighborhood won't know we pee outside, pee outside and not spit and get a sty on our eye. I can hear the way Red Stud whinnies again, the way it sounds like he's tired.

I can see the day it is cold and Emile and me are coming to play with Sergeant and Brown Mare's colt is sick and shaking in the stall, sick and lying down. I can feel the way I'm feeling sad for Brown Mare's colt, even if it's a horse. I can see the way Mr. Smokey is digging the hole, the way he's digging and digging, the way there are old tires

stacked by the gate. I can hear the way Mr. Smokey is telling us to go to Mr. Gilray's to borrow another shovel and post-hole digger. I can see the way we are getting to Mr. Gilray's and Mr. Gilray is having to find his shovel and post-hole digger. Even if we're walking back, even if we're throwing us some rocks, hitting the signs, I can see the way there is black smoke coming from by Mr. Smokey's stall. I can see the way there are so many tires stacked on top of the hole. I can see the way the fire is burning and burning, the way I know Brown Mare's colt is burning in the fire, laying beneath all those tires.

I am drinking this water from the faucet. I feel the way it's cool in my mouth, taste the way it's good. Mr. Smokey still isn't home, neither is Pastor. Sergeant is pulling out his black tape recorder, plugging it up.

Ya'll wanna record something, he says, flipping over a bucket.

Yeah, I say. Sergeant is setting the recorder on the bucket.

You got a tape? Emile says.

Already in there, Sergeant says, pressing the button to make it play.

There is nothing playing yet. The recorder is silent.

Ya'll wanna act like we preaching, Emile says, smiling.

I don't care, Sergeant is saying. I'm smiling, because even though I don't like studying my scriptures, even though I don't like studying the Word, I like playing church, every time Sergeant, Emile, and me, SamPaul and Wilson, are playing.

Who wanna go first, Emile says. He and Sergeant are looking at me.

I'll go, I say.

Even if this is not real church, even if we're playing, even if there are chickens and guineas walking around everywhere, I feel the way I'm getting nervous. And then I'm thinking, thinking of what I'm going to say. And like I'm thinking what I'm going to say, hearing the way Pastor preaches, I'm knowing what I'm going to say, what I'm going to start with.

Sergeant starts the recorder. And like I see the way Sergeant starts the recorder, the way he presses the buttons, I see the way Emile is sitting down, smiling, looking at me. I hear the way I say, Morning, Saints, making my voice deep, deep like Pastor's. Like I hear the way my voice is deep, I hear the way Emile and Sergeant say, Morning Reberend. And then I say, The Lord has his eye on you, and I wink at them. And like I say this, winking at them, I point. Like I'm pointing and smiling at them, I feel the way I make my voice deeper and say, If you'se a sinner, raise your hand. They raise their hands. If you know you been doing wrong, raise your hand. They raise their hands again. If God's been good to you let me get an Amen. They say Amen. If God woke you up this morning, say God woke me up this morning.

God woke me up this morning, they are saying.

Now raise your hands if you want to get saved.

Their hands are raised and they are laughing. I am walking over to them. And like I see the way they are looking at me, I hear the way I say, Get thee behind them, Satan, and touch Emile on the forehead, then Sergeant. They are both falling on the ground. I see the way they are making they're bodies jump, jump, like they are fish, like they have the Spirit, like they're in church and they are catching the Spirit.

Like I see the way their bodies are shaking on the ground, like they are fish that have been caught, even if the ground is dirty with spider webs and dust, and smells like chicken poop, I'm feeling the way I'm laughing, feeling the way it's feeling so good in my stomach. My stomach is tickling and I'm seeing how they are shaking their heads from side to side, kicking their feet and saying, Thank you, Lord! Thank you! Thank you, Lord! I'm reaching down and touching them again and they keep kicking and shaking their heads from side to side and laughing, and I'm laughing too and it feels good, feels like somebody's just tickling me all over, tickling me and it feels so good.

Someone is watching me. I can feel there are eyes everywhere, watching me. And like I am feeling someone's eyes are watching me, I'm seeing how I'm looking towards the road. I am seeing the road. I can see the way Pastor is sitting in his van looking at me and his window is rolled down. Pastor is looking at me and I'm seeing Emile and Sergeant sit up. I see the way they turn and look at me, the way they look at Pastor, the way they know I'm in trouble. Then I see the way Pastor gets out of his van and he's got on his robe and they look at him, then they look back at me again. Pastor is standing by his van, looking at me, thinking, smiling now. I can feel the way my heart is beating, the way I know I'm in trouble, the way I want to run, but I know I can't. And like I'm feeling this, I'm knowing I have to leave, knowing that Pastor doesn't like it when I play church, doesn't like it when he tells me to do something and I do something else, something I'm not supposed to, something that makes him mad, something that isn't ever pleasing in his sight.

I am sitting on the floor in Pastor's study and he's sitting in front of me, on a stool, with a belt. Go on back to the beginning, he says. I am turning the pages, going back to the beginning. I am cold. My throat is tight and burning. Now I want you to say them all, he says. And like Pastor says this, I'm feeling I don't want to be doing this. I don't like doing my scriptures. I don't like having to cry in front of Pastor. I don't like it when I feel shamed and shy. And like I'm knowing I don't like to feel shamed and shy, I'm hearing the way Pastor is saying, Start at Genesis. When Pastor is saying this, I'm thinking of what comes after Genesis and what comes after Exodus, and then I'm starting to say: Genesis... Exodus... Leviticus... Numbers....

And like I'm saying Numbers, I'm knowing I don't know what comes next, even if I really know, even if I'm nervous, even if I really know, but can't think. Like I know I'm nervous and can't think, can't think because I'm so nervous and shaking, cold, I'm feeling tears coming down my face, feeling the way I'm so mad. I'm feeling tears in the corners of my mouth. I'm tasting them. Then I'm feeling the way Pastor hits my leg with the belt and says, Say it! Even if I'm crying, I hear the way I say, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, I Samuel.... And then Pastor hits me again, and I feel the way my legs sting, like they are on fire. And even if my legs are stinging, like they are on fire, I'm thinking what's next, what's next, and I say, Ruth, and Pastor shakes his head, and then I say, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings....

I'm feeling how mad I am, the way I'm breathing so fast, how my nose is running, how I'm wiping my nose with my shirt. I'm feeling like I don't want to be here, like I want to be somewhere else. I'm seeing how I'm starting to think about Brother,

how he stopped talking after that day. And I'm feeling like I don't want to talk no more, even if Pastor is talking to me, even if he's hitting me with his belt, even if Mama doesn't know he whips me like this. And like I'm seeing the way Pastor is looking at me, I'm hearing how it gets so quiet in Pastor's office, hearing how he says, Next. I'm not saying anything. My chest is just going up and down, up and down. I see my own self walking out of here but my other self stays sitting down and Pastor just hits me with his belt, hits me and I can't feel it, hits me and I know I'm really not here, that I'm somewhere else, somewhere, somewhere, so far away from here, somewhere where this belt doesn't hurt, doesn't ever make me cry.

Day Eight

The phone is ringing. Pastor is picking it up.

Do what? Pastor is saying. When? Pastor's eyes are big. He's listening. I know something has happened. I'm looking to the back, down the hall, to where Mama and Salem and Sister Pastor are. I can hear the way Sister Pastor's sewing machine is going, the way it's stopping, then going some more.

Let us go, Pastor says. They done broke in the church.

I see the way he grabs his van's keys off the wall. Even if I'm not knowing what Pastor is saying at first, what he's meaning, I'm feeling how my heart is getting scared, how I feel it in my stomach, how I'm feeling scared, scared and don't know why.

Pastor is driving fast and we're turning into the church's parking lot, and this van feels like it's on two wheels, because I'm holding on, even though I have my seatbelt on. And then I'm seeing the policemen that day, how they are turning their cars into Miss Maudeline's driveway, the same way Pastor is turning right now, turning so fast. And like I'm feeling the way I jerk when Pastor stops, because he presses the brakes so hard, I'm seeing how he gets out and runs, even if he's old, even if Mama says he's sixty-five. I see the way he's running to the back of the church by the kitchen. I'm getting out of the van and running too, running to the back of the church.

I'm at the back of the church. Mr. Merchant is standing with two boys, two white boys and they are sitting in chairs. Like I'm seeing how they're sitting down, I'm seeing the way one of them is crying and one of them is not. One has a white towel wrapped

around his hand and it's bloody. And like I'm seeing this white towel wrapped around this white boy's hand, I'm seeing how Pastor is walking around the kitchen, by the tables and chairs, then going into where the stove and icebox is, and looks at the window. And even though I'm seeing Pastor doing this, seeing the way the window is broken, I'm feeling the way I'm walking around, too, looking at everything.

Watch your step, Matt, Mr. Merchant says.

I am looking down and seeing how there is glass on the floor, and I am watching my step, walking on my toes.

Pastor is looking at the window. It is broken and there is glass on the floor, even on the table. I'm seeing blood drops everywhere, on the table, then on the floor. Pastor is taking a deep breath, thinking, his hands on his hips.

You call their parents? Pastor asks.

I was waiting on you, Mr. Merchant says. They like to knock me down coming through the door.

Mr. Merchant is looking at his clothes, making sure he doesn't have any blood on him.

Well, boys, Pastor says, looking down at them, you ready to call your parents? The boy that is not crying is turning red, and he's starting to cry. And what make ya'll do such a thing? Pastor is saying. The boys are not saying anything. Ain't a thing here good lord won't provide for you. He know your needs.

And even if I don't want to, even if I don't know why, I feel the way I'm getting nervous for them. Huh? Pastor says. Ain't a thing here. I see the way the boys hunch their shoulders because they don't know what to say.

Come on, Pastor tells them.

The boys are standing up. They are scared. I know their legs don't want to stand because they are so scared and don't want to call. Like I'm seeing the way they don't want to stand up, I can see the way they're shaking, the way they're so nervous. I can hear the way they are breathing. I see the way their eyes are looking from side to side, like they're trying to figure something out. I can see Pastor walking to the door, leading to the office, and they're following him, following him, even if they're going slow.

Blood is dripping from the towel. Unh, unh, don't go no farther, Mr. Merchant says, putting his hand on the door. The boy is stopping. Have blood everywhere, Mr. Merchant says. And like Mr. Merchant says this, and goes and gets another towel, I hear the way Pastor asks for the boy's phone number. Pastor is mad; he is breathing hard. He pushes up his glasses.

Pastor is dialing some of the number. And then the boy is telling him the rest of the numbers and then Pastor is dialing them and is stretching the phone out to him and the cord is so curly and the boy's eyes are just looking so scared, like he doesn't know what he's going to say. And then I'm hearing how the phone is ringing, how a man is answering it. I hear the way the boy says, Dad, and his voice is shaking. And then he pauses, because he doesn't know what else to say. We're at the church, he says. And even if I can't hear what his father says, I know what his father is asking him. The black

church, the boy says, up the road. And then he's starting to cry some more. Huh, he says, and looks at the other boy, We broke in it. The other boy is looking at him like he's trying to figure out what the boy's father is asking him. Me and Will, the boy says.

Pastor takes the phone from him and says, Sir, I figure it'd be in your best interest to get down here, 'fore I call the law. We're here at the Faith Way. And then I hear the way the man says, even though I'm not on the phone, I know where you are. And then I see the way Pastor hangs up the phone and looks at the two boys because he's mad, looks at them and they are crying, crying, because they know they're in trouble, they're in trouble and the father is on his way.

A loud truck is in the parking lot. I can hear the way it's shutting off. We're walking outside. It's getting dark soon. Two white men are getting out of the red truck, a truck that has big tires, a truck that's up high, high up off the ground. And like these men are getting out of the truck, and because it's so high they are jumping out, I see the way they both look mad, the way they're smoking cigarettes. Another truck is pulling up and there are two white men in the front and two more men sitting in the back and this truck is not as high up as the other one. And then I'm seeing how Pastor puts his hand on the shoulder of the white boy with the cut hand and then he puts his hand on the shoulder of the other one, and stands between them and starts walking toward the men. I'm seeing how the first white man out of the first truck looks at the boy with the cut hand, how the man keeps blinking his eyes. And like I'm seeing this man, I'm seeing how the people in

the other truck are standing by it, leaning against it, with their arms crossed, and they're smoking cigarettes too and some are spitting, chewing on tobacco.

I don't intend on getting the law involved, Pastor says. I just ask you pay for the window.

Like I hear the way Pastor is saying this, I'm seeing how the man is thinking and he still looks so mad, the way he's looking at the boys. The other man, the one that rode with him, spits on the ground, and he chews and chews, then spits on the ground again. And I see how Mr. Merchant looks like he's getting mad every time the man spits. Sister Pastor and Mama and Salem are pulling up. Sister Pastor is opening her door and Mama is opening her door too. I'm seeing how Mama isn't smiling, the way she looks like she's scared. I see the way they are looking at the white men that are standing by the truck and the men are looking at Sister Pastor, Mama, and Salem. Two of the men smile and tap each other, looking at Mama. I feel the way I'm breathing, breathing so hard.

I feel the way Mama's got her arm on my shoulder, the way my stomach is turning and turning. Pastor is taking the men around the church and they are looking at the window. And like they're looking at the window, I'm hearing how the boy's father is saying, even when he's lighting another cigarette, even though it's between his lips and it's going up and down and one of his eyes is closed, I'm figuring I ain't got the money now. And then I'm seeing how Pastor is looking at Mr. Merchant. And then the man is saying, But I'll get it to you. Then I see the way he looks at his son, the way he takes a puff of his cigarette and blows the smoke towards the boy's face.

You ought not have to pay a thing, one of the other men says, and laughs. And like I hear the way the man says this, I'm seeing the way some of the other men grin and laugh, the way their arms are folded, the way they keep spitting on the ground. Don't pay him, another white man is saying, laughing, thinking it's funny. Then I'm seeing how the white man thinks, how he's taking a puff from his cigarette, thinking. And then he grins a little. And then Pastor thinks too, trying to figure out why the man is grinning. And even if Pastor is thinking, I see the way he starts grinning some more. I can feel the way Mama hugs me closer to her. Like I feel the way Mama hugs me closer to her, I feel how she's pulling me, how we're moving back, moving, going inside the church. Sister Pastor and Salem are looking around. It's quiet.

I hear the way the trucks start, the way tires sound like they're spinning, spinning on the gravel in the parking lot, the way some of the white men are yelling, Niggers! Niggers! so loud. And like I hear the way they say this, I feel the way stomach feels like it falls to my feet. My stomach is in my feet. And even if I don't know why, why I'm running, why I'm outside, I see how Pastor and Mr. Merchant are looking at each other, looking, and they are so mad. And I feel the way my heart is beating, how my stomach is feeling. And like I feel this, I see the way Pastor and Mr. Merchant shake their heads, shake their heads from side to side, side to side like they can't believe, can't believe what they've just heard, heard the word nigger, the word that makes them mad, sometimes makes me scared.

Day Nine

It's Friday and I'm hungry. I'm missing school today. Pastor is parking his van. Mama is in the front with him. I'm in the back, feeling the way my stomach feels, hurting and cramping, because I'm so hungry. I see the way Mama isn't looking at Pastor. And like I see the way Mama isn't looking at Pastor, I hear the way a car is pulling up. We are parked along a street, somewhere I don't know, somewhere in town. I see the way Mama turns and looks at me. Who's that, I say. The man, Mama says. And like I say this, I hear the way Pastor says, Sit tight. And then I see the way he taps Mama on the leg and says, Come on.

I see how Mama looks back at me, the way she and Pastor open their doors and get out. I hear the way Pastor's door is loud. I'm looking through the back windows, looking at the man. I know him. And like I'm looking at the man and know him, I see the way he's my barber, Pastor's barber, Mr. Mavis. I feel the way my heart is beating so hard. I see the way Mr. Mavis is standing with his hands in his pockets, looking down at the ground, the way he's taking his hand from his pocket and shakes Mama's hand. Pastor shakes his hand, too.

They are talking but I don't know what they are saying. And even though I don't know what they are saying, even if I don't know how Mr. Mavis is going to be able to help my stomach because he is not a doctor, I see the way he's walking around the van. I hear the way he's opening the side doors, opening the doors and they are quiet. My stomach is so nervous; there are bumps on my arms. I'm shaking, so nervous.

How you, young man, Mr. Mavis says to me. I'm alright, I say, even though I'm nervous, even though my mouth is dry, even though I'm so hungry.

I get off my knees and sit back down on the long seat. Mr. Mavis is stooping, walking toward me. I see there is a lot of grey hair on his head and some of his teeth on the sides are missing. He sits down right next to me. I'm so nervous, nervous, I can't move. He's sitting so close to me and I can't move, can't hear Mama and Pastor outside. And like I can't move, I don't know what Mr. Mavis is going to do to me back here. I can smell the way his hot cinnamon candy smells. I can see the way he is offering me some when I'm at his shop, when he is cutting my hair. I can taste the way the candy is hot on my tongue. I can see the way my tongue is red when I am looking in the mirror.

There are so many little bitty dots in Mr. Mavis' face. I see the way it looks like someone took a needle and just pricked, pricked all in his face. And on his cheeks, I see how he has lines that look like scars going long-ways down his face, long-ways, like a cat or something got a hold of him a long time ago. I am looking at Mr. Mavis, seeing the way there is yellow in his eyes. I see the way his face looks like someone took it off, scratched it up, did anything bad they ever wanted to do with it, and put it back on him, like nothing ever happened.

Lay back, he tells me, putting his hand on my chest. I'm starting to lie back, even though I don't know why, since I don't know what he's going to do to me. I feel the way I'm shaking, shaking like it's cold in here, even though it is not so cold today. Mr. Mavis winks his eye and smiles at me while I'm doing this, smiles while I'm lying back.

I'm looking at the ceiling now; it's all torn up, like the rats or something have eaten it. I am looking at the ceiling, feeling the way Mr. Mavis is reaching his hands, warm hands, not cold hands like Pastor's, up under my shirt. I'm looking at him, feeling the way my heart is thumping in my chest. My eyes are blurry and my head is beginning to hurt. Mr. Mavis's eyes are closed, and his lips are just mumbling, mumbling. It's so quiet in this van, so quiet and I can't hear Mama and Pastor outside. I can't hear any cars going by either. It's just quiet, quiet and my body is shaking, shaking.

Mr. Mavis's eyes are still closed and he's praying. I know that's what he's doing. He's speaking French, praying, just touching, touching around on my stomach and my stomach isn't hurting anymore, isn't trembling.

Sit up, he says in a whisper voice. His eyes are red and watery, like he's about to cry. He's kneeling on the floor and I can still smell his hot cinnamon candy, the way it smells so good.

Mr. Mavis's fist is balled. And like I see the way his fist is balled, I hear the way I'm asking him, Why your fist balled? I see the way there are big veins in his hand, in his fist. He doesn't say anything, like he's frozen in place. His eyes are red, red, and even though I haven't eaten anything, even though I'm not feeling hungry anymore, I can feel something moving around in there.

His fist is big. He's looking straight ahead and I'm shaking, so scared, because I don't know why Mr. Mavis' fist is balled, what he's doing with it.

I feel the way he grabs my right arm, with his left hand, squeezes my wrist and my right hand is opening up. I see the way he's looking me in my eyes, looking at me

and I'm feeling I want to cry, because I don't know what he's doing, what he's doing, grabbing my arm like this, squeezing my hand, and I want to cry.

I'm trying to yell but I can't. I'm trying to pull my arm from him but his grip is too tight. I'm straining and I can't move. I see the way he's bringing his fist up at me. I feel the way I'm closing my eyes, see the way it's dark, feeling the way my body is tightening, waiting for Mr. Mavis to hit me.

Mr. Mavis is holding my wrist. And even as he is holding my wrist, he takes and puts his fist inside my right hand. His fist is in my right hand, and with his left hand, he puts my hand around his fist, like he's shaking my hand or something. I feel the way it's like he's giving me something, something I don't know what it is, something that's scaring me. My mouth can't move, even if I'm trying to move it. I feel the way he puts both of his hands around my fist, the way my heart is beating, the way I'm breathing so hard.

Don't open this fist, he says, looking at me, looking me in my eyes. Don't open this fist until it's time. Not until it's time, he says, and his voice is deep, and shaking.

I can smell the hot cinnamon candy. Mr. Mavis' eyes are looking into mine and he is shaking and sweating. There are tears coming from his eyes and I can hear the way he's breathing so hard, the way he is out of breath, see the way his eyes are red, the way he looks so sad. I have never seen a man look so sad, the way a man cries like Mr. Mavis. I have never felt the way my heart is beating so hard, so hard inside my chest. I have never heard it so quiet before, so quiet, felt the way my fist is so tight, the way I can't move, the way it feels like I'm dreaming, dreaming, but I'm not. I'm not dreaming,

not today, not right now, and my fist is balled, feeling so tight, feeling so strong, and Mr. Mavis' eyes are crying and I am listening, listening, and still can't hear my mama.

I am holding my fist. It is dark in this room and I'm trying to go to sleep but I can't. I can hear the way Mama sniffles, the way Salem asks her if she's alright, the way Mama says, I'm alright, and sniffles some more and tells Salem to go to sleep. Mama tells Salem to go to sleep and I know she's crying; I know she's thinking about Brother, crying and thinking about him, because this is what she does every night now, ever since they take him. I can remember how we fast today, how Mr. Mavis is giving me my fist.

I can still see Mr. Mavis giving me my fist, the way he's grabbing my hand, the way his eyes are crying. And like I'm seeing Mr. Mavis cry today, I can see the way it is dinner, the way everyone is looking at me, looking at my fist. I can still feel how I am nervous because I don't know how I'm going to eat, how I'm going to pick up my fork. I am using my left hand. Even though I am right handed, even if I have never used my left hand to eat before, to hold my fork, I am using it. And even if everyone is looking at me, they are not saying anything, Mama, even Cephas and Pastor, Sister Pastor and Salem.

I am sleepy. I can't sleep, even if I'm trying, even though I want to. I am rubbing on my stomach. I feel the way it's not hurting anymore, the way it feels so good. I feel the way my hand, even though it's my left, is going down by my man. My man is soft. I am touching it, touching my man, pulling on it. I feel the way it is growing, the way it is feeling good.

I can see Tabitha. I am putting my hand between her legs, putting my finger in her privates and my man is growing and she is looking at me, smiling. And like I see myself putting my hand on Tabitha's privates, the way she is smiling at me, feel the way my man is growing, feel the way I pull and pull, see the way the covers are going up and down, even though I don't want to, even if I want to think of something else, I see the way I'm lying on top of Salem, the way we kiss, the way I hump on her, the way Cephas makes us. I see the way I taste Pastor's man.

Mama is coughing. I stop pulling on my man. My fist is next to me. I am so still. I can feel the way I'm breathing, the way it's warm under these covers. Mama is sniffing. She is getting up, taking the covers off of her.

Mama is quiet and getting dressed. She is looking to see if Salem and me are sleeping. I am closing my eyes. It is quiet and dark. I am lying still. The air is filling in my chest. I can hear the way Mama is closing her drawer. I am opening my eyes again, and even if it's dark in this room, I can see Mama is opening the door, the way she's so quiet, the way she's going see Pastor, see him in his study.

And like I'm seeing this, I can feel the way I'm getting cold, even if I was just warm. I am pulling the covers up so I can get warm again.

I am sleepy but I can't sleep, never can since that day.

I can see the way Brother is leaving the house and I'm telling him he better not, better not because Mama is coming right back. He's just walking down the street, walking and not listening to me. The neighborhood is quiet; I am standing on the porch. I can hear how I tell Mama I want to burn the trash, that I want to help her, that I want to

learn how to burn the trash. I am being quiet, so quiet because Grandma Sherry is sleeping. I am going back into the house. I am making sure the door doesn't slam, doesn't wake Grandma Sherry. I'm walking and the floor isn't creaking. I am in the kitchen. I'm seeing the trash and how it's piled up. And like I can see the trash piled up, some on the floor, I can smell how it's starting to stink. I can see the way there are some old eggs and grits from breakfast, chicken bones and rice in there. I want to burn. I want to help Mama, like Brother always is.

I hear the way this room is quiet. I am still cold. I can feel how cold it is that day, the day Brother and Cephas are going hunting. I can see how mad I get when Mama says I can't go, the way she says I'm too young, that I'm too young to go, even though I'm seven. I'm seeing how mad I am, how Mama is asking me if I want to catch a whipping, the way I'm telling her, I don't care, and she is hitting my lips. Brother is just smiling. He is so happy because he is going hunting for the first time, the first time since we come to live with Pastor, Sister Pastor and Cephas.

Cephas is holding the gun, and Brother is asking him what kind of gun it is and he's saying it's a Benjamin. I can see the way Brother smiles some more and then Cephas hands it to him, the way they are walking out of the door.

I am looking out of the window, seeing the way Cephas and Brother are walking across the yard, the way it's so cold, like there's snow on the ground, but it's only frost, and I want to go, I want to go but I can't because Mama won't let me.

And even though I am seeing that day, I can hear the way the phone is ringing. It's late and the phone is ringing. I am sleepy and the phone is still ringing. Mama isn't

back yet, isn't back from Pastor's study, and I'm sleepy, so sleepy and my eyes are heavy, so heavy and I'm warm, so warm now and my fist is tight, so tight, and I'm falling to sleep: falling, falling to sleep and Sister Pastor is answering the phone, answering, saying hello, even if it's late, even if Pastor is in his study, in his study with my mama, and not in the bed with Sister Pastor, his wife, not in the bed, and I'm finally falling to sleep, holding my fist.

Day Ten

It is cold and dark this morning. Pastor is saying it is five-thirty. There is frost on the ground, on the roofs and it's so cold. I am shivering, wearing my gloves, even on my fist. My boots are on my feet, my coat is on my back, and I'm shivering. I am blowing and smoke is coming from my mouth and I am wondering how smoke is coming from my mouth when it's cold, so cold in the morning.

I'm sniffing. My nose is running and I am licking my lip. I lick my top lip and it tastes warm and it keeps running. I'm wiping it with the back of my hand. I can see the way Pastor is wearing overalls, and not his purple robe today, a red flannel jacket and rubber boots. Cephas has his hands in his pockets, his hat is on his head and he looks like he's cold, so cold without his basketball.

We are walking around the back of Pastor's house to Mr. Gilray's. The grass is sounding like we're walking on broken glass, because there is so much frost beneath our feet. I can see the way the fire is so blue underneath the old tubs. I can hear the way tanks that are making the fire are sounding, sounding like an engine is going. I can hear the way the pigs are going, oink, oink, and I'm knowing, even if they are not, that they are about to die, that they are about to get butchered so Mr. Gilray can make his bacon, and cracklin and boudin and chitterlings, headcheese, and stuff. And even though I don't want to be here, don't like watching pigs get butchered, don't like eating headcheese and chitterlings, Pastor says I have to be here, that I can't go home, even if I want to, even if I'm so cold.

Emile and Mr. Merchant are jumping the ditch. And just like me, Emile's got on jeans, a coat and boots, a hat, even gloves. And like Pastor, Mr. Merchant is wearing overalls and a flannel jacket, with rubber boots.

The fire is blue, the water is boiling, the pigs are oinking, and we're over here by Mr. Gilray's. Men are wearing coats and rubber boots and some have on gloves and some don't, and some are wearing hats and some are not. Mr. Gilray doesn't have any gloves on and his hands look cold and ashen but they must not be cold because he's not even putting them in his pockets. Cephas and Mr. Gilray's son, Gerry, are talking because they are the same age, because they play basketball together. And just like I'm seeing Cephas and Gerry talking, Mr. Smokey's truck is pulling up in Mr. Gilray's yard. Mr. Smokey is getting out. I'm wondering where Sergeant is, why he's not with Mr. Smokey. It is Saturday and he must be home asleep, didn't want to be out here in this cold, in this cold, like Emile and me, freezing, so early in the morning.

I wonder why Sergeant didn't come, Emile says, and his voice is shaking and he's sniffling.

He must be home sleep, I say, and I'm shivering, and my nose is still running.

Morning, folks, Mr. Gilray says, and everyone is looking at him.

Morning, everyone is saying, and smoke is coming from everyone's mouths.

What you think about him, Pastor, Mr. Gilray says.

Who about, Pastor says.

Old dirty Swaggart, Mr. Smokey says.

They got him, Pastor says.

I knew that, Mr. Merchant says.

I see the way Mr. Smokey is smiling. And even if Mr. Smokey is smiling, I see the way he makes his face look like he's crying, like he's sad.

I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, forgive me, lord, people forgive, I know not what I do.

Everyone is laughing. Mr. Gilray is bending over because he's laughing so hard. The two other men I don't know are laughing too.

I mean on public T.V., Mr. Smokey says.

He way over there in Baton Rouge and I mean they done put it out there for the world to see, Mr. Gilray says. And sitting up there crying like a baby. Hell, you think I'd get on T.V. and cry like that?

We all got to give an account, Pastor says, and looks at his watch.

Giving a account and shaming the britches out of yourself is two different things, one of the men I don't know says.

I know that's right, Mr. Gilray says.

Now they got to find somebody else to run that church, Mr. Merchant says.

They'll do it, Pastor says.

Well we better get a move on it, Mr. Gilray says. Frost don't wait.

I know that's right, someone is saying.

Cold as shit, someone says.

Cold as hell, Mr. Smokey says.

All the men, even Pastor, are going to the stalls where the pigs are. Emile and me are following. Cephas and Gerry are in the front.

What ones you plan on doing this morning? Pastor asks.

That brown one and the white sow, Mr. Gilray says, pointing.

Her youngsters ain't long sold, huh? Mr. Smokey says.

Sure 'nough, Mr. Gilray says, opening the door to the stall.

The white hog is so big and fat and her belly is so pink and her teats are just hanging.

You ain't worried about her line, Mr. Smokey says.

No indeed. Got plenty line out of her, Mr. Gilray says, patting her on the side with his hand. Damn near half of what you seeing back here is her line. Good old bitch sow this is. Been good to me. Now we gonna really see what she's made of. Mr. Smokey laughs. And Pastor laughs; everyone laughs, even Cephas and Gerry, everyone except Emile and me.

After Cephas and Gerry get the white one on the platform thing, and put her head between the wood, and she is not able to move, can't get loose, they are making Emile and me get in with the brown one.

Go on, Pastor says, smiling, they don't bite.

Get on in there, Mr. Merchant says.

We are getting into the stall. It is cold. My feet are cold too, even if I have two pairs of socks on. My fist is so tight. I can smell the way it smells back here, like nothing but pig poop. And like I smell all this poop and pigs, I can see the way this brown pig is big. I can feel the way I'm scared, the way my stomach is shaking because I'm nervous. I can see the way Emile is looking at me, the way all of the men, even

Cephas and Gerry, are looking at us, the way they are looking at me and I don't like it, don't like it when they look at me. I can see the way the pig looks, how it's not looking at us, how Emile, even though I know he doesn't want to, is getting up against the pig and slaps him and the pig bucks like he's a horse, even if he's a pig, even if no one is on his back. I'm seeing, even if Emile and me are in this stall, how when Mr. Gilray is not home sometimes and we come back here to play, how Emile and Sergeant, SamPaul and Wilson, are riding these pigs and they are bucking and oinking, running and Emile and Sergeant, SamPaul and Wilson, are falling off, and I am laughing, and they are telling me to get on, but I don't want to, don't want to because I'm scared.

Emile is pushing his legs up against the pig and he's grunting now, and I'm doing the same thing. Emile is slapping it and I slap it too, slap it, even if I'm scared, slapping it with my other hand, not with my fist.

I am slapping the pig and he's moving, almost out of the stall. I am keeping my legs against it, like Mr. Gilray and them are saying. I am doing what the men are saying and I can feel the way the pig is moving his body so fast and bumping me.

I am slipping. I am falling, falling on this ground, on this ground with all this pig poop. I am cold, muddy now, some wet on my back.

I am standing, standing like I never fell. I can hear the way the men laugh. And like I hear the way they laugh, I feel the way I am shamed, the way I'm feeling so shy, the way I want to cry, want to cry, even if I'm smiling some. You'da thought they's acid on the ground, as fast he got up, someone says, and everyone is laughing.

I see the way Cephas laughs. I can feel the way I am mad, mad because I don't like it when Cephas laughs at me. And like they are laughing, I hear the way Emile asks me if I'm alright and I say, Yeah. I feel the way I want to hit, want to hit someone with my fist, because my fist is so tight and I'm so mad.

I still feel the way I want to cry, want to cry but I don't. I feel the way I want to run, want to run but I'm staying here. I am staying here, moving this brown pig to the platform thing, making him put his head between the wood, between the wood like the white one, like the white one that can't move, can't run like I want to, can't get loose.

Mrs. Irma, Mr. Gilray's wife, is coming outside. She's wearing a hat, a big coat, and gloves and jeans and black rubber boots. She is walking and there is frost beneath her feet, cold smoke coming from her face.

Don't ruin my headcheese, she says.

Mr. Gilray is looking at Pastor, Mr. Merchant, Mr. Smokey, and the other men and smiling.

Where that gun, 'Ray? Mrs. Irma is saying.

What gun? Mr. Gilray says. Ain't nobody got no gun.

Mr. Gilray looks at the men. They laugh.

I am looking around, looking, seeing if I can see a gun. And even if my eyes look on the big table, where they lay the pigs, where there are some knives and stuff, a sledgehammer, I'm not seeing a gun. And like I'm looking at Mr. Smokey's truck, I can see the way there's no gun in his rack.

There is no gun. I don't see one, anywhere in all this cold, in all this cold that's hurting.

Don't you play with my cheese this morning, 'Ray, Mrs. Irma says.

Woman, ain't nobody thinking 'bout yo' headcheese this morning.

You better, she points her finger, 'less you wanna be sleeping outside with the slop and hogs, in all this cold.

Mrs. Irma hands are on her hips now and she's looking at Mr. Gilray, looking like she's playing, because she's smiling now. The men are looking at her. She laughs and claps her hands. Pastor is smiling, and Mrs. Irma looks at Pastor and says,

Morning, Pastor.

Morning, Smokey, Deacon Doony, Bishop Toms, she says.

Morning, Irma, everyone is saying.

Mr. Smokey picks up his sledgehammer off the table.

This here ain't gone ruin your headcheese, Mr. Gilray says, smiling, but sho 'nough this here will kill the shit out of 'em.

Mr. Doony and Bishop Toms, the two men I don't know, Cephas and Gerry, laugh.

'Cuse my French, Pastor, Mr. Gilray says, with the sledgehammer on his shoulder now.

Don't mind me none, Pastor says.

You better make him mind you, Pastor, Mrs. Irma says. Don't need no backsliding this morning.

I ain't the one he got to worry about, Pastor says. I can't save him no more than he can save hisself.

Good lord done saved me, Pastor. No need worrying.

Him saving you is one thing, believing is another.

Amen, Bishop Toms says. Only one road in, he winks at Mr. Gilray.

Sho 'nough I believe, Mr. Gilray says, walking over by the pigs, the sledgehammer still on his shoulder. Mrs. Irma is watching him.

The sun is coming up and Mr. Gilray is holding his sledgehammer. I feel the way my fist is warm in my glove. I feel the wet and cold on my back. I can see the way the white sow and the brown pig can't move, can't move because their heads are between the wood. I'm feeling the way I'm getting nervous, the way I'm cold. I see the way smoke is coming from my nose, coming from my nose because I'm breathing hard. I can see the way the trees don't have any leaves, the way there is water on their branches, the way some is dripping and falling.

Mr. Gilray is raising his sledgehammer. Gerry and Cephas are standing by him, standing, waiting, holding their knives.

The sledgehammer is coming down, coming down and it's so cold. The sledgehammer is hitting the white sow, hitting her in the middle of her head.

I'm hearing how it sounds, sounding like a hammer against a brick wall, like a cement wall is being hit, being broken down, like a wall that is coming down, coming down like this sow, this sow is falling, falling because her legs are folding beneath her. Then I'm seeing how Gerry is holding his knife in his hand, the way he's punching,

punching the knife into the sow's neck, cutting her throat. And then I'm seeing the way blood is pouring on the platform, hearing the way the water is still boiling in the tubs.

I'm seeing how Mr. Gilray is handing his sledgehammer to Pastor. Pastor is raising the sledgehammer. I'm seeing the way Pastor looks so strong with the sledgehammer in his hands, like he's holding an ax, holding an ax and about to chop wood.

Pastor is raising the sledgehammer high. I can see the way he's concentrating, the way smoke is coming from his nose. I can hear the way Pastor is taking a deep breath. I can see the way the sledgehammer is falling, falling against the brown pig's head. I can hear the way Pastor is breathing out, sounding like he's growling. And this pig, too, like the white sow, is losing its legs beneath itself, losing itself, drowning and can't swim, lying in its own poop.

Cephas is holding his knife, punching the pig's neck. And just like I'm seeing Cephas cut the pig's throat, I'm seeing that day, that day he's in the woods with Brother, the way Brother is falling to ground, falling like he's a tree that's been cut down. And like I'm seeing what Cephas is doing to Brother that day, I'm seeing what we all do to Mr. Smokey's baby pigs that time, even when I didn't want to, when Cephas and Gerry made me, made me, that's why Pastor makes me help now.

I can still see the way we are playing back by the barn and Mr. Smokey's water house, so many of us, playing. I can see the way we're picking up sticks and starting to cut down bushes and weeds, making our trails. I can hear the way someone is saying, There's baby pigs in the water house! And I'm seeing how everyone is running with

their sticks, running, chasing the baby pigs. I can see the way everyone is hitting the baby pigs, hitting them like they are weeds, like they are weeds that need to be cut down. And then I'm seeing how the pigs are all bleeding and dead and everywhere. Then I'm seeing how Mr. Smokey is driving up in his truck, how he's got his gun and some boys are running behind the water house to get away but they can't because they are stopping running when Mr. Smokey is shooting in the air.

I'm seeing the way Pastor and Mr. Merchant, Mr. Gilray, and Smokey are making us dig the graves. I feel the way we are picking up the baby pigs with our bare hands and putting them in the graves. And when we're finished, I'm seeing how Mr. Smokey is getting a bag of lime out the bed of his truck and opening it and spreading it all over the baby pigs' graves and we're all just looking and not saying anything, looking so quiet, quiet like I am now, looking.

A truck is pulling into Mr. Gilray's yard. It is Mr. Charlotte, the mechanic from down the road. And even if it's early in the morning, even if the sun is just starting to come up, I see the way he's smoking his cigarette, the way he's squinting his eye, smoking. Then I see the way Mr. Gilray shakes his head and smiles while everyone else keeps on working. Everyone is working. Mr. Charlotte is standing by his truck. The pigs' heads are hanging on the hooks and they're just so white because they don't have anymore hair on them. Like I'm looking at the heads on the hooks, I'm thinking about Mrs. Irma's headcheese, and thinking how I don't like headcheese when Mrs. Reba is bringing some over to Pastor's and they are putting them on crackers. But even if I know I don't like

headcheese, because it tastes like liver, I hear the way Pastor gets mad when I say I don't like something, when I say I don't eat liver, chitterlings or tripe. I hear the way he says, It's children starving all over the world. I better not hear about you not liking nothing.

The other pigs in the pens are oinking.

I thought you'd be by to see me, 'Ray, Mr. Charlotte says.

Mr. Gilray is cutting the white sow, cutting her in half. He is holding the knife and looks at his watch. He smiles and says,

The morning plenty young, Charlotte.

I just want my money, 'Ray, Mr. Charlotte says, and hunches his shoulders and smokes on his cigarette and blows his smoke into the air. I see the way Mr. Gilray is cutting, the way Mr. Charlotte is thinking.

If I knew you was gonna do me like this, 'Ray, Mr. Charlotte says, flicking his cigarette, I woulda kept that old truck down there with me.

Well, Mr. Gilray says, still cutting.

Been three months, 'Ray.

Mr. Charlotte steps forward and stops. I see the way he looks at Mr. Gilray's hand, the way he looks at the knife. I see the way Pastor stops cutting, how his hands are bloody, how it looks like he wants to raise his head but he doesn't, just stands still and listens.

And like I see Mr. Gilray holding his knife, holding it like you do if you about to throw it or something, I see the way he puts his knife down, the way he picks up a towel and wipes his hands. Mr. Charlotte looks at the knife on the table.

I am nervous; Mr. Gilray looks mad, even though he's trying to smile. Mr. Charlotte looks nervous too.

I don't wanna have to come back this way, Mr. Charlotte says.

Nigger, you threatening me? Mr. Gilray says, and his voice is deep.

Just saying, Mr. Charlotte says, backing, closer by his truck.

Well, what you saying, Charlotte?

Mr. Charlotte is in his truck. His door is still open.

I just want my money, 'Ray, he says, and closes the door, and starts up his truck.

I just want my money.

Well, nigger come and git yo' money if you want it so bad, Mr. Gilray says, picking up his knife. I'm seeing how Pastor is smiling, smiling like I smile when I get nervous, but he's not doing anything, just standing and looking down at the pig. Then I'm hearing, even if my heart is beating fast, the way Mrs. Irma is saying, You ain't pay that man yet, 'Ray? And Mr. Gilray is saying, No, I ain't pay that nigger. And what have I told you about your mouth, Mrs. Irma says. And Mr. Gilray is smiling and then saying, Who he think he is coming up here this morning like he's somebody's sheriff. Two wrongs don't make a right. Heaven can't sleep with hell, Pastor says. Then I'm hearing the way Mr. Merchant says. Go on pay the man. He ain't had to do you a favor, 'Ray, Mr. Smokey says. Hell, he still doing you one.

Mr. Gilray sucks on his teeth and says, I got buyers for my chitterlings and feet, cracklin and things, sausage. He'll get his money. Nigger like that fall every time he

stand. Charlotte ain't got enough backbone to support his ass. I mean fall every time he stand. Nigger like that ain't got legs.

And like I'm hearing Mr. Gilray say this, seeing the way he is getting back to work, seeing the way the sky is turning blue and the frost is going away, I'm feeling like I'm not that cold anymore, feeling the way my fist feels inside my pocket. And like I'm feeling my fist inside my pocket, seeing the way Emile is sitting down, sitting on a bucket, I'm seeing the way Mrs. Irma is washing her chitterlings in her tub, the way she's picking them up, the way they are dripping. I can smell the way it smells like blood and chitterlings. I'm seeing how Gerry is going over to help his mama, going over to help her, help her string her chitterlings, string them across the yard, string them like they're rope, like they're a clothesline, a clothesline in Mr. Gilray's backyard and there are no clothes.

Sunday

And so it is said, So is the kingdom, that a girl should sit against her pastor's bed, with her legs crossed, crossed as her mother has taught her, and her pastor should study his word while his son enters this room as the faintest music plays, and places his hand between this girl's legs and this girl can look into her pastor's eyes and not know from whence such hands have come. For it is the seed now, that does not bring forth the fruit of itself. It is in homes as this one where the children and their fruit are brought forth, and in this very instance, the morning is no longer morning, and there is no more song for girls to sing, and at once, pastors do watch their sons take their sickles to little girls' fields, because their thirst has finally come and they have drank from the waters while there is still much work yet to do.

Day Eleven

The sky is pretty and blue and it's warm today, even though it was cold this morning. This neighborhood is quiet and I can hear the birds. The birds are chasing the squirrels and the squirrels are running in the trees and puppy is barking and barking, digging and digging. I can see the way I'm at school earlier today, hear the way Mrs. Fuller is talking, the way she's asking us, Does anyone know what today is, and people are raising their hands, and Brant and Chet are saying, Monday, today is Monday. Mrs. Fuller is standing by the board and saying, Today *is* Monday, yes, but what's special about today? I can see the way Mrs. Fuller is smiling, blinking her eyes, the way Tabitha raises her hand. I hear the way Tabitha says, The last day of the month. Mrs. Fuller is smiling at Tabitha. Then she's writing what Tabitha is saying on the blackboard with her chalk. I can hear the way the chalk sounds. I feel the way it makes bumps come on my arms, all on my arms, because it sounds like she's scratching her fingernails against the board and it makes me cold, gives me chills. Everyone is looking at the board, thinking. I'm thinking, too. And even if I'm trying to think, trying to figure out what Mrs. Fuller is asking, what she's talking about, I can't. I can't see what Mrs. Fuller is talking about, what she is trying to get us to say. I see the way I'm in Pastor's study, the way Brother is running from Miss Maudeline's. Brother is running from Miss Maudeline's and it's dark in Pastor's house and Cephas is there and Salem, too and I'm seeing the way Mrs. Fuller is writing on the board some more, feeling the way the chalk is making me feel the way she's saying, Today is a leap day. This year is a leap year. When Mrs. Fuller is saying

this, I'm hearing the way Karly is saying, What's a leap day, and Rusty is saying, The day the cow jump over the moon. I'm seeing the way Rusty is jumping out of his seat. I'm seeing the way he is jumping. I'm hearing the way people are starting to laugh, the way Clay is laughing so loud. I hear the way Mr. Fuller is saying, No, no and Karly is turning to look at Rusty and looking at him like she's mad and her face is turning red because I know she's shamed.

And like I hear the way Mrs. Fuller is saying this year has an extra day, so the calendar doesn't get messed up, because the earth is just spinning and spinning around the sun, I feel the way the sun is shining. I hear the way Puppy is barking, the way his chain is sounding, because it keeps hitting his bowl, hitting his bowl like someone keeps tapping a spoon against a pot.

The wind is blowing some, blowing like it wants to talk, like Mama says, blowing like it's happy, like it has something to tell me. I am happy too. Mama says we get to go see Brother Saturday and I am happy. I can see the way the trees are moving from side to side, side to side, they are moving, moving like Grandma Sherry is saying when she is living, before the fire, like they are dancing. And just like I'm seeing this, I'm smelling how sweet the air smells, smells like Mama says, like bees are flying around, flying around all over, talking to one another and their breath just smells so good, so sweet, sweet, like the honeysuckles that grow along Mr. Smokey's fence, by his horses, sweet like the honey Mr. Bee Man is selling when he's dropping off his white houses down the road.

And like I'm smelling the air and it's so sweet, I am seeing that day. I am looking out of the window and Brother and Cephas are walking toward the woods. I can hear the way I'm asking Mama if I can go play outside and she is telling me no, no because it's too cold outside and she doesn't want me to catch a cold. Mama is telling me this and I'm saying I'm not going to go outside, that I'm just going to play in the garage, play in the garage where it isn't that cold. Then I'm hearing how Sister Pastor is telling Mama it's alright for me to go out in the garage. And when I'm outside in the garage, playing, I know I want to go hunting, I want to be with Brother and Cephas.

I am leaving the garage. I am running, even though I know I'm going to get in trouble, running towards the woods, where I see Cephas and Brother going. And like I'm seeing myself running towards where Cephas and Brother are, I see the way I stand in the kitchen and look at the trash and it's so piled up and stinks and I know I want to help, want Mama to be proud of me, proud of me because I burn the trash, burn the trash all by myself. And like I'm looking at the trash, I'm seeing how I'm taking it out of the can. I hear the way I'm being quiet, quiet so Grandma Sherry doesn't wake up. I am taking the trash out the back door to the pile. And when I'm getting to the pile, I'm forgetting I don't have any matches, that I don't have anything to light the fire with. And since I don't have anything to light the fire with, I'm going back into the house, into the kitchen and I'm walking on my tiptoes and the floor is creaking some, creaking and I'm walking slow, as slow as I can, and I'm getting back in the kitchen and starting to look for some matches, for a lighter, in all the drawers and cabinets. And like I am looking for a lighter, I'm knowing that Mama isn't smoking anymore, that there are no more lighters in the

house. I can hear the way Grandma Sherry is saying, A lighter in the house ain't nothing but the devil, just the devil trying to fool your Mama into smoking again.

After I look in all the drawers I look at the stove. I can see the way Mama is rolling a paper bag or paper towels sometimes when she's going to cook and have to light the stove, light the stove and it's just clicking and clicking, and no fire is coming until the paper is making it, and Mama is putting some water from the faucet and putting out the fire and throwing the wet paper away.

And like I'm seeing myself standing in front of the stove, I'm hearing the way a car is driving up. I'm feeling the way I'm breathing. Sister Pastor is getting home. She is driving in the driveway. The sky is still so pretty and I'm wishing I was a bird, like I am a bird that could fly and swim against the sky, and taste the way the wind tastes, even if I'm just flying so high up. And even since I'm wishing I was bird and I am flying, flying so high, flying where no one can reach me, where I can be by myself sometimes, not feel scared and shy, I see the way I see so many people in my head and they are naked and I'm kissing them, and they are kissing me and I'm doing it to them and they are doing it to me. And like I see these people, I feel the way my insides get so warm, the way my man feels. I feel the way Sister Pastor is kissing my cheek, hugging me, the way she's holding my fist, holding my fist and it's tight, holding it, even if she's not Mr. Mavis, the man that give it to me, my fist, my fist that's never been touched, never been touched and held since the day I got it.

Day Twelve

Cephas and me are standing on the side of Pastor's house. Mama is at Deacon Meeks' restaurant working and Sister Pastor is in the house with Salem. Cephas says he has something to show us in the barn, that there is something he wants us to see.

We are standing under Pastor's oak tree on the side of the house and Emile is coming in the driveway. Cephas is waving his hand to Emile and Emile is starting to run, run to where we are. My fist is in my pocket and Emile is running.

What you got to show us? I'm asking Cephas. He is looking over by Mr. Gilray's house and by Mr. Smokey's old red barn that has so much peeling paint and is leaning some.

You'll see when we get there, he says, smiling, patting me on my back.

I feel the way I get nervous when Cephas touches me, the way my hair stands up on my neck, the way my stomach begins to tremble.

Where we going? Emile says. He is smiling too.

To the barn, I say.

We are standing on Mr. Gilray's back porch. There are clouds in the sky and it's cool. There is so much hair on the floor, everywhere, hair because Mr. Gilray is cutting Gerry's hair back here. Gerry is sliding the glass and coming through the door.

Ya'll about ready, he says. And then I'm seeing the way Cephas is looking at Gerry like he wants to tell him something, tell him something that he can't tell him with

his mouth, something he has to say with his eyes, his eyes like Brother is telling me so much.

They oughta be back there, Gerry is saying. They called me 'fore they left.

For real, Cephas is saying, looking happy. Well let's go.

I can see the way Emile is looking at me, the way I'm looking at him. I can feel the way my heart is beating fast. I hear the way Cephas is asking Emile, You got some hair? What? Emile is asking.

Cephas is smiling at Gerry and then asking again, You got some hair? And even though Cephas hasn't asked me this, I'm already knowing what he's talking about, what he's saying. And even since I'm already knowing what Cephas is talking about, even if he's not asking me yet, I'm seeing the way Gerry is pulling down his pants, the way he's showing us all kinds of hair down by his man. You ain't seen a jungle like this before, huh? Gerry is saying. And then he is taking out his man and shaking it, saying, An animal like this, either, and then he is putting it back in his pants, laughing some more. I hear the way Emile is saying, No, the way his voice is getting mad. I can see the way Emile is looking at me, looking at me like he's shy, like he's shy like me, so shy because he's never seen Gerry's man before. And like Emile is saying no, I know I don't have any hair yet either. I know Emile doesn't have any hair because Mrs. Larna makes us take our baths together when I spend the night. I know what Emile's man looks like, the way it feels like my own when I touch it, the way it feels when we play.

Gerry is bending down and picking up hair from the floor. He is handing it to Emile and Emile is looking at me, looking at me and I'm not knowing what to tell him.

And like Emile is looking at me and I don't know what to tell him, don't know what to say, I see the way he's taking the hair. They gonna wanna see your hair, Cephas is saying. Who? Emile is asking. The white girls in the barn, Gerry says.

Even if I don't know them, don't know what they look like, I can see them. I can see white girls. I can feel the way I am happy, the way my stomach is turning warm, the way I'm smiling. I can see Tabitha and Karly. I can see the way Emile is taking and putting the hair in his pants, the way Cephas and Gerry are laughing. I can see the way Cephas is bending down, picking up some hair and handing it to me. I can feel the way I'm getting shy. I can feel my fist in my pocket. Emile is looking at me. They all are. I can see the way I'm putting out my left hand, the way it's reaching, reaching for the hair. I can see the way Emile is putting his hand in his pants, the way he's scratching. It itches, he is saying.

The hair is in my hand. It feels like wool. The hair is so black and it feels like wool, prickly like small thorns. Even though I'm not wanting to because I'm shy, even if I don't like Cephas, I'm putting the hair in my pants, in my pants by my man and I am already itching. The hair is itching and I can feel the way it's sticking me, the way I'm scratching, scratching like Emile. I can hear the way Cephas and Gerry are saying, Ya'll come on, the way they are laughing, looking happy. I can see the way we are leaving, leaving Mr. Gilray's back porch and I'm itching, scratching and itching all at the very same time.

We are walking and I'm seeing the way Cephas and Gerry are looking back over to where Pastor's house is, way over where Pastor's study is, then over by where Mr. Merchant's house is. I can see the way the pine trees are so tall, tall like they reach to the sky. I can see the way the white men are coming, coming with their chainsaws, their big trucks, coming to cut some down, hauling them off. I can hear the way Pastor is saying they are paying Mr. Gilray, paying him for his trees, taking them so they can make paper. And then we're all saying, Emile, Sergeant and me, SamPaul and Wilson, that next year for school we're going to be writing on the same paper that used to be Mr. Gilray's pine trees, used to be trees so tall, tall like the big blue building in town, but now are just paper, paper that's so flat you can write on it, color on it, throw it away, throw it away when you're finished.

And like I see these trees, I can hear the way Pastor is saying white men are coming to pay his daddy for his trees a long time ago. I can hear the way Pastor is saying his daddy is trading some of his land for mules. Pastor is preaching and saying, It doesn't add up, a God-forsaken shame. I can hear the way he is saying his daddy is selling his land anyway, even if it doesn't add up, even though white men are stealing land, stealing land right from under his daddy's feet, right from under his feet and it doesn't add up.

We are passing Mr. Gilray's pig pens. I am itching; my legs are tired; the grass is tall. I can see the way we butcher the pigs the other day. I can see two dogs now. I can see two dogs coming from the trees, carrying something in their mouths, the way they are looking at us, looking at us like they want to run, like they're scared. I can hear the way Gerry is saying, They done dug up them guts. Gerry is saying this and I'm remembering,

remembering how the other day they are making Emile and me take the wheelbarrows and shovels and dig holes, dig holes and bury some of the guts. Gerry is stomping his feet, waving his hands, waving his arms and the dogs are running, Puppy is barking, running on his chain, and the dogs are running so fast, with pig guts in their mouths, and they're just running, looking back and running, their tails between their legs, the guts in their mouths, carrying them like their own babies, dragging against the ground, running so they can hide and eat.

I am itching, scratching and itching like I'm having scabies again. We are in the barn. I can see some cows in the back. There is mud on the ground, and hay. I am looking up the stairs, the stairs where Cephas and Gerry say the white girls are. I can see the cobwebs. I know the way there are chicken snakes back here in the summer. I am itching and I can see the bumps the scabies make, the scars, see them all on my man. I can see the way I'm showing Mama, the way Brother is showing Mama too. Pastor is itching, even Sister Pastor. Mama is taking us to the doctor. Sister Pastor is going too. I can hear the way Sister Pastor is asking Pastor where he thinks the scabies are coming from. I can hear how Pastor is saying he's not knowing. I can feel the way the medicine the doctor is giving us feels, so cool, so cool and white when we put it on our man. And every night after we get out of the tub we are taking and putting the medicine on our man, on our man and they are getting better.

The medicine is working and we're not itching and scratching anymore, feeling the way the scabies are moving under our skin. I can see the way Sister Pastor and Mama

are taking all of the covers off the beds and boiling them, boiling all the towels, boiling them outside in an old tub, like they are boiling crawfish or crabs. And after they are boiling the covers, we are not having anymore scabies. But even now, even now if I look at my man, look at it close enough, I can see the way there are still scars there, scars on my man. I can feel the way the scabies feel, the way this hair feels in my pants, the way I want to take it out, take it out and throw it away, throw it away so I don't have to be itching anymore, thinking about scabies.

Cephas is standing at the top of the stairs, looking down at Emile and me. It is so quiet back here. There are no cows mooing or horses whinnying. Even Mr. Gilray's pigs aren't oinking.

Emile is going up the stairs. I can feel the way I'm scared, the way I don't want to go. I am listening. Emile is going up the stairs and I'm listening. And like I'm listening, I can't hear any white girls; I can't hear anything but some cows mooing now. I'm feeling the way I want to leave, want to go home, go home where Sister Pastor and Salem are.

I see the way Emile is standing at the top of the stairs now, standing, looking back at me. Emile is looking at me, and since I'm scared, since I want to go home, I'm feeling the way I'm taking one step, then another step, keeping my eyes on Emile.

My eyes are on Emile and I can feel the way my foot is catching. My foot is stuck. I can feel the way I'm losing my balance, the way I'm tripping, the way I'm starting to fall. I am falling. I can feel the way my fist is hitting the stairs, the way they are so hard, the way I'm grabbing, trying to hold on with my other hand.

My mouth is hurting. I am lying on the stairs and my mouth is bleeding. I want to cry but I am not. I can taste the way my blood tastes, the way it's all in my mouth. I am holding my hand to my mouth. I can feel the way there is wet in my hand. I can feel the way I want to cry. Emile is looking at me, his eyes so white and open. I can see the way Cephas and Gerry are looking, too. I can see the way Cephas and Gerry are laughing, and Emile is not, the way he's looking scared, scared like he doesn't know what to do. I am moving my hand and I can see the way blood is dripping, dripping from my mouth onto the stairs. My mouth is stinging and bleeding. Emile is coming down the stairs. I'm scared. I am turning, turning, even if Emile is coming down the stairs, turning and running because I'm scared, because I'm hurt, running so I can get home, get home where there is no one chasing me, so I can get home, home where I am hoping Mama already is.

I am lying in bed, feeling the way my lip feels, the way it stings so bad, the way it's throbbing. I can hear the way Sister Pastor is saying I'm lucky I didn't have to get any stitches. I'm hearing how Pastor is asking me what happened, what happened and I'm remembering what Cephas is telling, telling me to say on the side of the house when he is catching me. I can hear the way I'm telling Pastor I was riding SamPaul's big bike and the handlebars are slipping, and because they don't have any grips on them, because they are like a motorcycle's, they are cutting my lip, cutting my lip because the handles are sharp when they don't have grips on them. I'm hearing the way Pastor is telling me I shouldn't ride a bike that is too big for me. And when Pastor is telling me this, I'm

knowing it's not true, not true because I wasn't riding SamPaul's bike. And then I'm seeing how Cephas is catching me in the back of the house, catching and telling Emile and me to take our pants down, take our pants down and get the hair out.

My lip is hurting. I can see the way Cephas is brushing the hair from our pants, feel the way I am itching. I can see the way Cephas is handing us some money, giving us some money so we don't tell. We are not telling. We are having our money and are not telling.

And like I'm seeing this, feeling the way my lip is hurting, the way these covers are warm and my fist is on my stomach, I'm seeing the way it's dark in this room. I'm seeing the way Mama and Sister Pastor are making me go in the bathroom and wash my mouth, wash my mouth out with peroxide. I can see how I'm taking the brown bottle of peroxide and going in the bathroom and Mama is coming too and she's watching and telling me, Don't you swallow it either; it'll make you sick as a dog. Mama is telling me this and I'm getting scared. I'm getting scared because I don't want to swallow the peroxide, swallow the peroxide and get sick as a dog. I am trying to pour it in my mouth. I'm scared. I'm shaking. And because I'm scared and shaking and I'm taking my time, Mama is saying, Boy gimme that bottle. And then she is taking the bottle, taking it from me and telling me to hold my head back. I am holding my head back. I can feel the way my lip is already stinging, even if I don't have any peroxide in my mouth yet. Mama is pouring the peroxide. It is warm. I can feel the way it is in my mouth, in my mouth and it's starting to bubble, sting, burn, almost feeling the way soda is feeling, the way it bubbles on your tongue, bubbles in your mouth. My lip is stinging. I'm making sure I

don't swallow. My neck is hurting because I'm holding it back for so long. My lip is burning. My eyes are watering. I'm spitting the peroxide in the sink. My head is dizzy. There is blood and spit and peroxide all in the sink. I am running the water, running the water and rinsing out the sink, and my lip is stinging, and Mama is asking me if I'm alright and I'm shaking my head yes, yes I am alright, but my lip is burning and burning. I can hear the way Mama is asking me if my teeth are loose. I can feel the way she's putting her fingers in my mouth and checking my teeth and telling me I'm lucky I didn't lose any. I can feel the way her hand is making my lip hurt when she is touching it. I can hear the way she's saying she's sorry. I can hear the way Mama is saying some sugar ought to make it better and she is kissing my lip, kissing my lip and I am smiling.

Even if my lip is stinging, I am trying to go to sleep. And even though I don't know how I'm going to brush my teeth, brush my teeth because I know it's going to sting, I'm falling to sleep. I am falling to sleep and it is feeling good, good because I'm touching my man, falling to sleep, touching my man. I am falling and I am seeing Cephas, seeing him and Gerry, Cephas and Gerry on top of Emile and me, on top of us in the barn, on top of us, lying on a bed of hay.

Day Thirteen

People are looking at me, looking at me because I know my lip is swollen. My lip is swollen and everyone is looking at me. The bell is ringing and people are going to class, going to their classes, looking at me, turning their heads, looking and smiling, looking and frowning. I don't want these people looking at me.

Mrs. Fuller is looking at me too. I don't want to be here, be here, feeling the way everyone is looking at me, feeling the way my lip is hurting still.

I am sitting in my desk. Everyone is talking. Mrs. Fuller is drinking her coffee. My fist is in my pocket. I can hear the way Clay and them are whispering. I can feel the way I'm cold, the way I'm shivering, even though I have my jacket on, even if the heater is blowing and smelling like it is burning. I can feel the way my stomach is nervous, the way I want to run. My stomach is nervous and I can see the way Tabitha and Karly are looking at me. I can hear the way Tabitha is asking me what happen and I'm not saying anything. I can feel the way I want to cry.

I want to cry and I can hear, even though he's whispering, the way Clay is saying, Bubble lip. I can hear the way Brant and Dustin and Rusty and them are laughing, laughing, saying, Bubble lip, bubble lip. I can feel the way my stomach is turning, the way my lip is hurting, the way it's throbbing. I can feel the way I'm breathing, the way tears are coming to my eyes, the way I'm blinking. Tears are going down my cheeks.

I am pulling my fist out of my pocket. I am standing up. I am walking on air. I am walking on air and I can see Clay. I can feel the way I am not myself, not myself

because it's like someone else is doing this, doing this because I'm walking on air, feeling so light.

I am hitting Clay. He is hitting me. I can taste blood. I can taste my blood and I can feel the way I am dizzy, the way I'm dizzy and hitting Clay some more. I am hitting Clay and I can feel the way Mrs. Fuller is grabbing me, the way she's yelling in my ear, Stop it, Matthias, stop it! I can feel the way she is grabbing me, pulling me, grabbing me, and her nails are always in my arms, in my arms and I am hurting, and Clay is crying, red like crayons, holding the side of his face.

I am in the office. I'm seeing the way Mr. Farrow is coming in, how he is looking like he's mad at me. I'm knowing he's going to paddle me. Even though he's not telling me this yet, I know he's going to paddle me, make me learn my lesson.

Mr. Farrow is looking at my lip because it's swollen and it hurts. And like I feel the way my lip hurts, I know how Mr. Farrow's paddle feels. I feel the way it stings, stings on my tail when he is hitting me, when he is making me learn my lesson.

Come on, Mr. Farrow is saying, and other people in the office are looking at me, looking at me because they know I'm in trouble.

I am going into Mr. Farrow's office. My fist is in my pocket; my other hand is by my side. I'm still feeling the way I'm so mad, the way I'm cold, the way I know Mrs. Fuller is going to call Mama. I am cold but I am not feeling like I am walking on air anymore, like I am not myself. Mr. Farrow is closing the door. I'm seeing the way the

secretary, Miss Bridget, is sitting down. She is looking at me. Miss Bridget is looking at my lip.

You've been a bad boy, Mr. Farrow is saying, taking off his glasses and setting them on his desk. He is shaking his head, breathing out, breathing like he doesn't know what to say.

Quite frankly, he is saying, as is, Mrs. Fuller, I'm tired of dealing with you. He is scratching his head where it's getting bald. I can see the way his moustache is big. You can't seem to keep your hands to yourself. He is walking to the corner where his paddle is—his paddle with all the holes in it, his paddle made from a rowboat's oars.

I can hear Pastor, even if he's not here, telling me I'm a bad boy, telling me this in his study. And even when Pastor is telling me I'm a bad boy, even when I know I'm not, I'm saying, Yes, yes, I'm a bad boy, feeling the way my man is feeling, tasting the way Pastor is tasting.

Put your hands on the desk, Mr. Farrow is saying, holding his paddle.

I am putting my left hand on the desk. My mouth is dry. I am taking my fist from my pocket. My lip is throbbing.

Bend over, Mr. Farrow is saying.

I am bending over, putting my tail out. I am looking straight in front of me and I can see the pictures and plaques on the wall and the window out to the street. I can see the way there are cars passing. And like I see cars passing down the street, hear the way Mr. Farrow is breathing, here the way it's getting quiet, I feel the way the paddle is hitting my tail, hitting my tail and it is stinging, feeling like my tail is on fire, stinging so

bad. Mr. Farrow breathes hard again and I can feel the way the paddle hits me again, and I can hear the way it sounds when it hits me, the way it gets quiet afterwards.

My tail is stinging some more. My tail is stinging and I'm crying, even if I'm not looking at Mr. Farrow or Miss Bridget, even though I'm seeing the way cars are passing on the street and there are tears in the corner of my mouth—tears that I am tasting, tears that are salty and I'm tasting them, warm, even though I'm not wanting to, tears that I'm not wanting to be tasting, crying in front of old Mr. Farrow and his girlfriend, Miss Bridget.

Church is starting later. All of the lights are out, except the one over Pastor's pulpit. Pastor is kneeling, reaching under his podium, under his podium where the church's safe is. And like I see the way Pastor is going where the safe is, I can hear the first time he is showing me where it is, the way he's saying, I bet not hear about you telling where this thing is. You're my right hand.

I can see the way he's giving me a dollar, the way I'm putting it in my pocket, the way he's telling me to say I get it for doing my chores, feeding Puppy and helping in the yard and stuff. I can hear the way I'm not telling, the way I'm not ever saying where the safe is, not saying anything.

Pastor is pulling money from the safe. I can see the way he's putting it in an envelope. I can feel the way it's like someone is watching us, watching me, standing here, standing watching Pastor hiding the safe again. I can see the way they are having Grandma Sherry's funeral here. I can see the way Mama, Brother, Salem, and me are

sitting on the front row. I can see the way people are coming up and hugging us, kissing us on the cheeks, on the foreheads, telling us they are sorry. I can see the way they are looking at me, the way some are looking at me and shaking their heads, looking at me, knowing I am burning down the house, even if I'm not wanting to and I can feel the way I am crying, the way I am crying because Grandma Sherry is dying and I am burning down the house. I can hear the way Pastor is preaching, the way Mrs. Marva Belton is singing:

*Precious, Lord,
Take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn...*

Mrs. Marva Belton is singing and Mama is crying so loud because it is sounding so good. Sister Pastor is holding Mama, rocking her, holding her like she's a baby and Mama is crying, crying so loud because Mrs. Marva Belton is sounding so good.

Pastor is holding the white envelope. I can hear the way Pastor is standing, the way his legs are making popping sounds. Come on, he is saying. I can feel the way he's tapping me on my shoulder, the way he's putting his hand behind my neck, the way my heart is starting to beat harder, faster, and we are walking, going back outside.

We are waiting on the man. It is quiet out here. There are birds in the trees. They are not saying anything. Pastor is walking back and forth in the parking lot, walking with his head down, walking like he's thinking about something. And like I see Pastor walking, looking like he's thinking about something, I'm seeing the way there is gravel everywhere in the parking lot, the way there is grass missing from the church's

yard, the way there are tire marks everywhere. I can hear the way the white men's trucks are sounding the day the boys are breaking into the church.

The blue car is driving up. The white man is in it. Pastor is looking at the car then back over by the road. I see Pastor's van, the way Mr. Mavis is grabbing my fist. I feel the way my lip feels, the way it still stings. I hear the way my classmates are laughing, calling me bubble lip. I can see the way Mr. Farrow is paddling me earlier, the way Mama is whipping me when I am getting home.

Pastor is leaning on the white man's door. The window is rolled down. I can hear the way they are whispering. Pastor is looking over his shoulder. The road is long and quiet.

Even though he is wearing his robe, I see the way Pastor is standing straight up now, the way he's moving his hand, reaching, pulling out the envelope.

Pastor is handing the man the envelope. The man is taking it. They are shaking hands and smiling, saying something to one another, something I can't hear what it is. And then the man is driving off out of the parking lot, turning onto the road in his blue car, turning and I am seeing the first time I am seeing them meet, hearing the way Pastor is saying, Roads got to get paved at some point. Roads got to get paved and there ain't nothing else I can do. Ain't a thing I can do but pay the parish's man.

Day Fourteen

School is just starting. I am in the office, waiting on Mr. Vidrine. A little girl is looking sad and knocking on the door.

May I help you? the nurse is saying.

I don't feel good, the girl is saying and starting to cry, rubbing her eyes. The nurse is going over to her and putting her arm around the little girl.

You know your number? the nurse is asking.

Yes, ma'am, the girl says. The nurse is picking up the phone. The girl is dialing the numbers. She's sniffing, dialing all the numbers.

Hello, mama, the girl is saying, and she can hardly talk, because her voice is shaking. I'm not feeling good, she says. Unh, huh, yes, ma'am, my head and stomach.

The girl is crying and the nurse is rubbing her back. Mr. Vidrine is standing in the doorway looking at me. He moves his head so I can come with him. I am going with Mr. Vidrine, going because he's the counselor, the man that talks to me when I am getting mad, the way I am sad when Salem and me are first coming to school here and Brother is going to middle school, after I start the fire and we bury Grandma Sherry and I'm dreaming and dreaming, can't ever sleep at night, can't ever do my work.

We are sitting in Mr. Vidrine's office and I can smell the way the food smells, because we're close by the cafeteria. I can smell the way the rolls are smelling, the way the butter smells, taste the way the rolls are so good, so good with mashed potatoes and gravy. I can see when Christmas is coming and we are having dressing and turkey and

rolls and red velvet cake. I am licking my lips, even though my lip is still tasting like blood, even if it's stinging some. I am hungry, even though I've already had breakfast this morning.

So, Matt, Mr. Vidrine is saying, how are you doing?

I don't know, I say, hunching my shoulders.

Well, Mrs. Fuller is worried about you again, he says, fixing his glasses and crossing his legs. She says your mother is too.

I don't say anything. I see Mama. I see the way she is sad all the time now.

So you've had a hard time keeping your hands to yourself, huh? Mr. Vidrine is saying, getting his paper and pen so he can write. I can see the way I punch Clay, the way he called me bubble lip and everyone started laughing, the way Mr. Farrow paddled me and his secretary, Miss Bridget, kept smiling, smiling like she wanted to laugh. And like I'm thinking this, I feel the way I'm getting mad, the way I'm starting to shake, feeling cold, the way I'm nervous, the way my fist is in my pocket. Does it have to do with the fire, Mr. Vidrine is saying. And even though I'm not wanting to think about the fire, I can see it. The house is burning. And even though I'm getting scared, I can't help it.

I'm hearing how every time Mr. Vidrine sees me he asks me about the fire, even if I know I don't want to think about it, even if I'm feeling good some days, not thinking about the fire, Grandma Sherry, how we come to live with Pastor and Sister Pastor. I'm shaking my head yes, even if I don't know why, why I always get mad, even if I'm trying

to have a good day, trying to be happy, why Mr. Vidrine is always asking me about the fire, even when I'm trying to forget.

And just like I don't know why I shake my head yes, why Mr. Vidrine is asking me about the fire, I'm hearing the way he's saying, Have you been sleeping okay? I am running, hiding. The house is on fire. Yes, I say. But even if I'm saying yes, I know sometimes I can't go to sleep for a long time, that all I do is turn and think and think, and see people, naked people on top of me, me on top of them, and I pull on my man, pull on my man and it feels so good.

Are you feeling tired when you get to school? Mr. Vidrine says. I don't know, I say, sometimes. Do you feel like you get bothered or angry when you're tired, like you want to lash out, hit people? I am hitting Clay. A little bit, I say. I can feel the way I'm tired. I can see the way Mr. Mavis is holding my fist, the way he's crying. Well, I think I'm going to have to talk to your mother about putting you back on your pills, he says, and writes on his paper. And like I'm hearing Mr. Vidrine say this, I'm knowing I don't want to get back on my pills, don't want to have to take them, take them because I don't like my mouth and throat being so dry, the way I'm always sneezing and blowing my nose, the way I'm shaking, the way I'm not hungry, even though I want to eat, even if it's lunch time and I want to eat when everybody else is.

They'll help you sleep better, he says. He takes off his glasses and sets them on his desk. Smells like I'll be eating lunch here today, Mr. Vidrine says and smiles at me. I smile too, because I like the way the cafeteria ladies cook, the way the food always tastes so good. He is rubbing his eyes, putting his glasses back on. I'm also thinking

about putting you on something that'll help regulate your anger, keep you from getting mad all the time, he says. I don't know what he's saying. Even though he's writing and looking down at his paper, he says, To help you stop getting so mad and hitting people, even help you sleep better.

I'm seeing the way after the fire I go to the hospital and they make me sit and talk with the doctors, the police and the counselors. I can see the way they are first giving me some medicines to take. And after I am leaving the hospital, I am having to start taking my medicine all the time to help me sleep, even if I don't want to take any medicine, even if I want to try to sleep on my own. And after I'm taking my medicine and I'm in my old class, with Mrs. Rougeau, my old teacher, I'm seeing how Mama is coming to school one day and we're meeting Mrs. Fuller and Clay, and Dustin, and Mitchell, and Tabitha. And when we're meeting them, I'm hearing how Mama is telling me this is going to be my new class, my new teacher, saying it's okay if I can't keep up with my other class anymore, since my grades are not as good as they used to be, since it's looking like I'm going to have to stay behind another year, stay behind while everyone else is moving ahead of me, even if I'm their same age, even if she's having to keep Brother back, too.

I see the way people from my old class are looking and pointing, calling me dummy, dummy because I'm in my new class. And like I'm seeing this, feeling the way I'm mad, the way I cry when they call me this, I'm seeing how I'm taking my medicine and then some days I'm not taking them when Mama has to go to work early. I'm seeing the way, when I'm taking my medicine, even when Mama is cutting the pill in half, I'm

still getting mad, still wanting to hit people, still thinking about things I know I'm not supposed to be thinking, feeling things I know I'm not supposed to be feeling.

Somebody's got the best of you, Mr. Vidrine says, looking at my lip. I'm feeling the way it's still sore, still stings when I eat, when salt and pepper gets in there. I fell, I say, looking down at my fist in my lap. I can feel, when I touch it, the way my lip is still swollen. I can still taste the blood, see the way I'm falling and running. I feel the way I don't want to have to take my medicine, the way they make me feel, like I'm not myself, not myself, even though Mama and Mrs. Fuller are saying I'm being good, not myself, but just being so good, able to focus on my work, being so good like they are always wanting us to be.

Day Fifteen

This road is long. I can feel the way I am hungry. I can't wait until Mama and Sister Pastor are cooking later on. I can see the river. The houses are built up high, high on stilts and there are stairs everywhere and boats by the houses. Even if Pastor isn't telling me, I know where we're going. We're going to the cemetery, where they bury Grandma Sherry, and I don't want to go because I'm always scared, always feeling like someone is watching me when I'm in the cemetery, when I see the graves where people are buried.

I can see the white cemetery on the left side, where Pastor says they don't bury black people because a long time ago it was against the law to bury black and white people together. I can see the way the white cemetery is sitting on a hill and it is big and has a long white fence around it and looks so clean and pretty. I can see the way boats are on the river, the way some are passing, going fast, and water is flying up, and others are just sitting, sitting with people fishing in them.

Pastor is slowing his van down. We are turning. I can see it's like we are driving in the woods. I can feel the way the van is going side to side because there are potholes on this road that are making this van rock, side to side, like Mr. Merchant's boat does on water. I can hear the way water is splashing, every time the tires hit a hole with water in it. And because Pastor's van is getting muddy, I know he's going to want me to help him clean it, even though I don't want to, because I don't always like helping Pastor.

The grass is tall and so are the trees. It almost looks like it's getting night because the sun doesn't hardly shine back here; there are trees everywhere. And like I see trees are down everywhere, I see the way tombs are everywhere, even if it's some I can't see because the grass and the bushes are hiding them. Pastor is opening his door and it's sounding like his door needs oil on it because it's making all kinds of noise. I'm opening my door and it's not making as much noise as Pastor's.

I can see the way Pastor is walking around, walking, looking like he doesn't know what he's looking for. Pastor is walking and I can see Grandma Sherry, see the way she is smiling when she is living. I can see the casket, the way it's closed, the way they never open it during the funeral, the way Mama is crying and crying, saying, Why God, why!

I'm walking, even if I don't know where I'm going. I can smell the way it smells old and wet back here. I can see the way the mosquitoes are just flying around. I can hear the way they are humming in my ears, saying, Cousin, cousin, cousin, like Pastor says they are always saying. A mosquito is biting me. I am slapping my face. You got him? Pastor is saying. Yes, sir, I say.

I can feel the way my face feels, the way it's already itching and burning. I can feel the bump on my face, feel the way my lip is still sore. I can see the way Pastor is walking around, the way birds are flying. I can see squirrels and their nests, high in the trees, the way there's a swamp, the way I don't see any alligators or nutria rats.

Graves are all busted up. Then I'm hearing how Pastor and Mr. Merchant are saying that white folks are always coming to bust them up, bust them up because they are mean and hateful, don't have anything else better to do.

I can see the writing. I can read the name, even though I'm not always reading good ever since we come to live with Pastor. I can see the way the name reads, Sheriline Marie Foster. The mosquitoes are flying. I am shooing them with my hand. My fist is at my side. I can see the rest of the writing, what it says: Sunrise, August 15, 1928—
Sunset, June, 7, 1985.

I can see the funeral, the way people whisper, the way they look at me. I can see the way Brother is crying, Mama, and Salem. I can feel the way I'm sad, hear the way Mrs. Marva Belton is singing, the way people are waving their hands, standing up, the way some are dancing, catching the spirit. I can see the way Pastor is standing and looking down at one of the graves. I am walking toward him, seeing Grandma Sherry, seeing what she looks like before the fire.

It is warmer today, even though it was cold yesterday. The swamp looks so quiet. I see the way there are some wild ducks in the water. I see the way there are cranes and egrets, too. There are flowers on the grave Pastor is looking at. We didn't bring any flowers with us. And like I know we didn't bring any flowers, I'm seeing how Grandma Sherry's grave had flowers too, even if I know I didn't bring any, didn't bring any to put there. I can see the flowers, white and yellow and blue.

I can see the way this grave is small, small like a baby's. I can see there are brown leaves all on it, the way there are some old bricks. My face is itching. The mosquitoes are still flying around. I can hear the way Pastor is saying, My firstborn, the way he smacks his lips. Pastor's hands are on his waists. I can hear his voice, even if I've never heard it like this, the way it sounds sad, sadder than I've ever heard it before,

sadder than when he preaches sometimes, preaches and cries and wipes his eyes with his handkerchief.

They wouldn't even let me come home, Pastor says, looking at the grave. I don't know what Pastor is saying. And since I don't know who or what Pastor is talking about, I'm not saying anything. And then, even though I'm nervous, even if I don't know what to say, I'm saying, Who? And Pastor is saying, Uncle Sam, and smacking his lips again. I'm thinking, wondering who Uncle Sam is. I'm seeing Uncle Sam. I'm seeing the way he's an old white man on the poster, pointing at people all the time, wearing his hat, pointing at people.

My first born son, Pastor says, shaking his head. He is walking to his van. Let's go, he says to me. I can see the dates on the headstone. I know today is Pastor's son's birthday, even though he is dead, born and died on the same day, a long time ago, way before Mama was born and I'm feeling the way I want to ask Pastor something, but I'm not. I'm hearing the way the van is starting, the way it's quiet in here, so quiet, hearing the way Pastor is crying, the way he is sniffing, crying like he does when he's preaching, crying, taking off his glasses, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief, blowing his nose, saying, Men ought not bury their children before they live, ought not trade a cradle for a casket.

Day Sixteen

We are leaving to see Brother. Pastor, Sister Pastor and me are outside in front of the garage. It is pretty today. There are no clouds anywhere. Pastor's cross is on two sawhorses and he's sanding it, sanding it by hand. Mr. Curly is cutting his grass again. Mama and Salem are inside packing our lunch. I can hear the way the phone is ringing last night, ringing and ringing and I can't sleep and Sister Pastor and Pastor are talking, and then Sister Pastor is crying and Salem is asking Mama what's wrong and Mama is telling her to go back to sleep and Salem is sleeping and Mama is sleeping and I'm finally going to sleep too.

It just ain't safe, Sister Pastor says, holding her keys, her purse on her shoulder.

Don't have a choice, Pastor says, sanding, not looking at Sister Pastor.

Sure you do, Sister Pastor says.

Not when it come to saving souls, Pastor says. He stops and folds his paper some more. He is sweating. He leans and stretches his back. My flock needs tending. I can't let them keep me from that.

At what cost, Solomon? Sister Pastor says.

At *any* cost, Pastor says, sweat dripping from his nose onto the cross.

Ought not of run it in the paper, Solomon. Word of mouth would have done.

Any word caught in the wind here lands on folks' tables. You know it doesn't take much.

I hear the way Pastor doesn't say anything, the way he breathes out, the way he keeps sanding and doesn't say anything, the way the sandpaper is sounding against the cross.

Mama is holding the lunch basket. Salem is holding Mama's purse on her shoulder. I see the way she's smiling, happy to be holding Mama's purse, the same way she is smiling when she is wearing Mama's heels, playing dress-up in the room. I can smell the way the food smells so good, fried chicken, rice dressing and potato salad, green beans and cake. I can smell the way the cake smells so sweet when Sister Pastor is baking it. Mama is happy we are going to see Brother. I can see the way she is looking at Pastor. Pastor doesn't look at Mama; he wipes his head. Sawdust is everywhere on his hands and clothes, even in his face. I can see the way Mr. Curly is riding his lawnmower by the ditch and Mrs. Reba is pulling weeds, wearing her big hat. Even though Mr. Curly is cutting grass and his lawnmower is loud, leaning because he's almost in the ditch, I can see the way he waves at us, the way Mama and Sister Pastor wave back at him. Cephas is opening the door.

Bye, mama, he is saying, holding the milk carton. He is drinking from it. He stops. His lips are white. Can you stop and get some more milk? he says.

Don't have a choice now, Sister Pastor says, you drinking out the carton like that. Cephas smiles and Sister Pastor goes and kisses him on the cheek, kisses him like he makes me kiss Salem, sweet like this cross smells, like peppermint candy, sweet like dead cedar.

This road is turning and turning. The ditches are full of water. Sister Pastor says she thinks we're almost there. There are fields and fields with tall grasses, with cows and bales of hay in some of them, and even tractors parked. I don't see any houses though. It looks like no one lives out here. There are two cars behind us and the road is turning again. There is a big gate. It is open. There are two men standing at the gate. One is holding a clipboard and the other is sitting on the hood of a car with his arms folded, chewing on a long piece of grass. I can feel the way I am happy, smiling, looking at Salem. I can see the sign, the way it says, New Calvary School. Mama turns back to Salem and me and smiles because she's so happy. I am holding my fist in my lap. It looks bigger than it did when I first got it. I can see the way Salem is looking at it. The man is walking to the car. Sister Pastor is rolling her window down.

Who about? the white man is saying.

Andrew Ephraim, Mama says, leaning over by Sister Pastor. I can smell the way Mama and Sister Pastor's perfume smells.

The man looks at his clipboard and moves his pencil and checks something off.

New with us, the man says and smiles.

Sure enough, Sister Pastor says.

Visitation is two hours, he says. Lunch first, then service. He gives Sister Pastor a paper. Go on through. Drive slowly.

This road is long and bumpy. There are still so many big fields everywhere, on each side of us, so much fence and barbed wire. I can see there are six white houses. There is a long white church, a tall steeple, taller than the one at Faith Way. There is a

big red barn way in the back of the church, not leaning and ugly like Mr. Smokey's.

There are cars parked and people walking. I can see the white robes. Boys and girls are walking around in white robes, holding bibles. Some of them are being hugged by other people, other people just like us. I am looking for Brother. I don't see him. Sister Pastor is parking the car. We are getting out. I can see the way Mama is looking, the way she doesn't see Brother.

We are walking. There are red picnic tables everywhere. Some people are putting blankets on the ground and starting to sit; others are putting tablecloths on the tables like they are making beds. Salem is holding Sister Pastor's hand and I'm walking by Mama. We are looking, looking for Brother.

I can see him, even though I haven't seen him in a long time, almost three weeks, even though my stomach is nervous and shaking and feeling so warm, I can see my brother.

Lord have mercy, Mama says, pointing. I hear the way it is like she loses her breath. I see how she puts her hand to her mouth, the way there is so much water in her eyes. I am looking at Brother. I can see my older brother, Andrew. I can see the way he is looking the way he is shy. I can hear the way Salem says, Look! Salem is pointing. Mama is looking, not moving yet, not moving because her feet won't let her, even though I know she wants them to.

Salem takes off running. Mama starts walking. She keeps her hand over her mouth and is walking faster. I can see the way Brother is standing by the church and Salem is running to him, the way Sister Pastor is putting her arm around Mama.

Salem is hugging Brother by his waist. He is not hugging her, not smiling, looking shy, shy like I know I am looking. Andrew, Mama is saying. I can see the way he's looking at Mama, the way he looks so sad, the way he looks like he wants to cry. I can see the way he is wearing his white robe and sandals, holding his bible. I can hear the way the wind is talking some.

Mama is hugging Brother. He is starting to hug her, still holding his bible. Mama is crying. Sister Pastor is sniffing. I can feel the way I want to cry too. I can see the way Mama is kissing Brother on his cheeks, kissing and hugging him, holding him like she doesn't want to let go. Come on, Matt, Mama is saying. Come and see your brother. I am walking. Mama is wiping tears from her face. I can see the way Brother is looking at me. And like I see the way Brother is looking at me, I can see the way he looks at my fist. I am not hiding my fist and Brother is looking at it.

I am hugging Brother. And because I am hugging him and he is hugging me, I am feeling like this isn't real, like it isn't happening, like we are not ourselves, like we are watching our own selves doing this. I can see the way Mama is smiling, the way she looks so happy. I can hear the way she says, My children, and wipes her eyes again. I've got all of my children, she says.

Mama is crying, still wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. Sister Pastor is getting a tissue from her purse and handing it to Mama. Mama is wiping her face, taking the lunch basket from Sister Pastor. Sister Pastor is hugging Brother. Long time, Andrew, she is saying. Long time, baby and Sister Pastor kisses Brother on

the cheek. Let us eat, Mama is saying. Time doesn't wait, she smiles, let us eat my children.

We are walking, finding us a place to sit. I can see the way Brother is walking, the way he is limping, the way Mama has her arm on his shoulder. Your leg bothering you, Mama is saying. Brother isn't answering her. It'll be alright, baby, I don't expect you to talk, Mama says. I'm so happy to see you.

Brother isn't talking. We are finding a place to sit. People are sitting next to us and they are talking and looking happy and eating, looking so happy, happy seeing these boys and girls in these white robes.

Mama is making our plates. Brother is sitting across from me. They been feeding you well, Mama says. I can see the way Brother's eyes look, the way he's thinking about something, something that Mama isn't asking him, something he can't say. Well you look good, Mama is saying. Need a haircut but you look good.

I can see the way Brother's hair is getting long, the way it's tall, taller than mine, the way it's curly some. I can see the way Mama is setting his plate in front of him and it has so much food on it. I can see the way Brother is always eating so much before that day, before he and Cephas are going hunting. I can see the way he's not liking to eat as much after that day, the way he's hardly ever talking. I can see the way he's running from Miss Maudeline. I am not seeing Berna since that day.

This food smells good. I can smell the chicken and rice dressing, potato salad and green beans. Rolls are just as pretty, Sister Pastor says. I can see the way Mama is sitting down, the way some people are throwing Frisbees and others are playing catch

with baseballs and gloves and others are still eating and talking. I can hear the way Sister Pastor is saying, Let us pray. I can feel the way it is like people are watching us. I can feel the way the sun is so warm. I can see Brother, the way he's looking at me, looking at my fist, not closing his eyes. I am closing mine, feeling the way Brother is watching me and I can hear the way Sister Pastor is saying, We thank you, father, God, for this meal and our means, for this gathering. For those who don't have, won't you bless them? And for those that have plenty, make them generous. Won't you wrap your loving arms around Andrew in these times of storms? Be his light. Be his shelter, dear God. Again, bless this food, father, God, for our help comes from you. Let us lean not on our own understanding. Help us, lord. In your loving son's name, we pray, Amen.

Amen, I am saying, even though I don't know why we have to say it, have to say it every time we pray. Salem is starting to eat, Mama and Sister Pastor too. Brother is not starting to eat yet. Mama is looking at him. Give it a try, Mama says. She rubs his back. I know you love chicken and dressing. Brother is picking up his fork with his left hand, picking up his fork, holding it like I am holding mine now, ever since I got my fist. His right hand is on his bible. He is taking a bite, looking so sad.

The teachers still come out, Sister Pastor is saying. Mama is wiping her mouth with a napkin, chewing. Brother is shaking his head, yes. You doing okay, your grades, Mama is saying. And even if he's been looking so sad, so sad ever since we come here, I'm seeing the way Brother is starting to smile. I'm feeling the way I am smiling too. And like I'm smiling, I can feel someone is watching me.

There is a white man, in a white robe, standing at our table. Afternoon, the man is saying. Afternoon, Mama and Sister Pastor are saying, wiping their mouths with their napkins, finishing chewing their food. I can see the way Brother puts his head down and doesn't look at the man. I can see the way he looks so shy in front of this man, the way he's not smiling anymore. I can see the way Brother's hand is on his bible, the way he's not moving it, the way it is like he is seeing someone he is not wanting to see, like I am seeing Cephas because I am knowing he is hurting me.

Long time no see, the man says to Sister Pastor and kisses her on the cheek. Long time, Sister Pastor says to him. I see the way the man puts his hand out so Mama can shake it. Mama shakes his hand. I'm Pastor Fordham, the man says. Word is I run this place, he laughs. Livvy, Mama says. Livonia Ephraim, she wipes her mouth again. I see the way he looks at Salem, the way he looks at me and says, So who do we have here? Salem and Matthias, Mama says. He shakes Salem's hand, then touches her nose. Salem smiles at him. Precious gal, he says. Even if my fist is on the table, I give him my left hand. I see the way he looks at me, looks at me like I'm doing something wrong. I hear the way Mama says, Offer Pastor Fordham your right hand, Matt. I look at my fist. I remember what Mr. Mavis is telling me. I can't open it. I'm scared. I can't open my fist. Man shakes with his right hand, Mama says. I feel the way Pastor Fordham is looking at me. I see the way his beard is white, the way his hair is so white on his head. I see the way his eyes are blue, the same as the veins in his hands.

Very fine, Pastor Fordham says and pats me on the shoulder. I see the way Brother's head is still down, looking at his food, his hand still on his bible.

Tell Solomon I'll catch him next go'round, he says. We'll tour, briefly, after lunch. Fine boy, he says, winking at Mama and nods his head. Mama smiles because she's happy and Pastor Fordham walks away, walks against the grass in his white robe and the sun is so warm today, and Brother is holding his hand on the bible and I'm knocking my fist against the white Frisbee that's almost landing on our red table.

We are in the church. I can see the way Brother and the other boys and girls are standing in the front, standing, getting ready to sing. I can see where Brother is staying, where he is sleeping. I can see there are beds in the white house. I can see the way, in front of each bed, there is chest, a footlocker, Mama is calling it. I can see the way the place is so clean because all of the beds are made. I can see the way people are sitting on their beds, the way people who come to visit them are talking to them and laughing and smiling, so happy, giving them gifts and bags of snacks and stuff. I can see the way some of the boys and girls are just sitting on their beds and no one is talking to them. I know no one is visiting them today. I can see the way they look so sad, so sad like Brother is looking, even though we're visiting him. I can see the way Mama is giving Brother tooth paste and deodorant, and underclothes and stuff. Brother is putting it in his footlocker. I can see the way there is a bible on his pillow, on everyone's pillow, even if they are holding one, taking one with them everywhere they are going. I can see the way, when Brother is at Pastor's, he's never reading his bible, and I'm not liking to read mine, even when Pastor is making me.

Everyone is standing in their white robes. The man from the gate is playing an organ. Brother is standing with the others, even though he's the only black at this school, singing in the choir. I can see the way Mama is looking at him. I can see the way he is looking so sad, so sad holding his bible. The organ is playing. Pastor Fordham is standing in the front of them. He is directing them, directing them like Mrs. Jimison does with us at church, when we're singing in the choir. The organ is sounding pretty, vibrating this whole church, vibrating in my chest. I am feeling sad. Mama and Sister Pastor are moving side to side, listening to the music because it's sounding so good. I can hear the way this organ is sounding like the one at St. Augustus. And even though we are not at St. Augustus anymore, even if Pastor says we're not Catholic, not Catholic ever since we come to live with him, I can hear the way this music sounds, the way it's making me feel. I can see the way Salem is combing her doll's hair. I can hear the way the boys and girls are starting to sing. I can see Brother. Brother is singing. I can see the way he's singing, singing with the others, singing and sounding so good, better than our choir, like Mrs. Marva Belton sings so good, sings and makes my stomach tremble, tremble because I'm scared and happy, scared and happy all at the same time, watching Brother sing, even though I know he's sad, knowing what Cephas is doing to him, what Pastor is doing to me.

Sunday

He spoke also this parable: A certain man met a certain woman, and having married, having dreamed of children and the life they would make, it was in the morning, this very third time, that the man had gone to his wife and asked her whether this child had stayed and his wife told him no, for this season too was fallow. Then said the man to his wife, What is it, woman, for I have come seeking my children and still there are none? Have I not pleased you? Am I not man? And in the only answering this woman knows, she says nothing, for there is no one thing a woman who does not bear fruit can tell such a man. In the evenings this woman pleads with her man for this one last time and he obliges, for what is life, he believes, without his own little children. And again the man comes to his wife in the morning, finding her overjoyed because the child has stayed and this man is too overjoyed and the two of them labor in making arrangements. But it is in the spring that a man finds himself away from his home, and this man's uncle won't grant him leave and this man and woman's son comes to this world and does not breathe, and the arrangements this man and woman have made are no longer of this world; and a man and woman must venture into their own gardens and tarry against the seasons where there will never be any fruit to keep for the self.

Day Seventeen

Salem and me are getting home and I am opening the door. Mama and Sister Pastor must be cleaning house today and Pastor must be at the church or the hospital.

This house is quiet. I don't see Cephas. Salem is setting her booksack down by the sofa. It is quiet in here. Shhh, I tell Salem, putting my finger to my lip. My lip is not hurting anymore, not hurting because it's almost healed. Why? Salem says, looking like she's mad. Cephas might be here, I say. Oh, Salem says, and starts looking around, looking around like she's thinking, looking like she's wondering if Cephas is here.

And like I'm seeing Salem being quiet, the way she's looking down the hall, I see the way I'm getting on top of her, even if I'm really not, even though I'm seeing this. I'm on top of Salem. Cephas is on top of me. I am looking out of the blinds. It is quiet outside. No one is coming.

I can feel the way my heart is starting to beat so hard, the way I'm getting nervous, how my mouth is getting dry. I can feel something is moving down by my man, moving and it is feeling good, moving because it is going in my stomach.

It is so quiet in this house. I can feel the way it's like someone is watching us, watching us, even though I know no one is here.

Cephas' room is empty. Sister Pastor and Pastor's room is empty. Our room is empty too. I can feel the way my legs are light, the way my heart is just beating so hard, thumping in my chest. I'm seeing the way I'm on top of Salem. Salem is running through the hall. She is looking out of the big window in the dining room. I am looking

out of the window too. There are no cars driving down the road, no one walking, no one outside by Emile's house, no one by Deacon Meeks' restaurant.

Want to play house, I am saying, even though I don't know why I'm saying this. Salem is shaking her head, shaking her head because she doesn't want to play. I wanna watch cartoons, she says. And then she runs to the living room and I run after her.

I feel the way my man is moving, the way it feels like warm air is going inside my stomach, the way it is tickling. Salem is sitting on the sofa. I am going by her, going, even if I don't want to, even if she's my little sister and I'm going by her.

Salem is looking at me. My mouth is dry. I am needing water. Why you holding your fist like that, she says. I'ma tell Mama, she says. You better not.

I am holding my man. Salem is seeing my man. She is standing up. You better not, Matt. I feel the way I push her, the way she is falling on the sofa. I am on top of her.

Stop, it, Matt, stop it! Salem is saying.

I can feel the way I'm not myself, the way it's like someone else is inside me, making me do this. I can feel the way Salem is hitting me in my lip, the way it's stinging so bad. I can see the way she's holding her fist, looking at it. I can taste there is blood in my mouth, feel the way my lip is hurting, the way I'm blinking my eyes, the way they are watering.

I'm feeling the way I'm getting mad, the way I'm breathing, breathing so fast. I see the way Salem is looking scared. And even if I don't know why, why Mr. Mavis is balling my fist, why it's so tight, why I can't ever open it, I see the way I'm hitting Salem in the stomach, the way she's falling back against the sofa holding her stomach.

Salem is holding her stomach. She is crying. I am feeling like I am falling. I can feel the way I'm sorry. I can hear the way Salem says, I'm telling, the way she's crying. I can feel the way my lip is stinging, taste the way I'm still tasting blood in my mouth.

I can hear Pastor's van driving up. I can feel the way I'm getting cold, the way my stomach is falling. Shh, shh, I'm telling Salem. Don't cry, I'm saying, don't cry, and I am looking into her eyes.

I am looking out of the blinds, out of the door. I am running to turn on the lights. I'm running back to the door and looking out of the blinds, seeing how Pastor is parking his van under the carport by the garage.

Don't tell, I'm saying. Don't tell Pastor, I'm telling Salem. She is still holding her stomach. I am going in my pocket. I can feel the way this money feels. I am holding it. Here, I say. Salem is looking at the money. She is moving one of her hands from her stomach. She is taking the money. I am paying my sister, paying her, even when she's wiping her tears from her cheeks.

Pastor is whistling, whistling his song, whistling like the man on T.V. when he and the boy are going fishing. I can hear the way his keys are jingling. And even if I'm hearing the way Pastor is whistling, the way his keys are jingling, I'm feeling the way my heart is beating, the way I'm so nervous, the way I'm just sitting down on the sofa, the way Pastor is opening the door, the way I'm looking at the T.V. There are cartoons on but I don't know what they are. Pastor is opening the door. Evening, Pastor is saying. Beat me home, huh?

I'm shaking my head, yes. I can't move. Salem is holding her stomach. She is sniffing. Pastor is looking at Salem, then at me. I'm shaking. What's wrong, sweetness, Pastor is saying to Salem, walking over by her. She is looking at me. I'm hearing the way Pastor is saying, Your stomach? I see the way he's putting his hand on Salem's stomach. I hear the way Salem says, Matt hit me, the way she's crying some more because I know she's sad.

There is ringing in my ears, like a bell is sounding. And like I hear there's ringing in my ears, I see the way Pastor is coming over by me, the way he's wearing his robe. Stand up, he says. I am standing up, feeling the way my legs are feeling so tired, the way they don't want to move. I'm seeing the way Pastor is holding his bible in one hand, the way I can smell Pastor's cracklin, the way I see the little brown bag, with its grease stains on it.

Pastor's big, black bible is hitting my tail like Mr. Farrow's paddle. My tail is hurting. I can feel the way I want to cry but I'm not. You better hope your Mama don't find out, Pastor says. My tail is burning. I can see the way Pastor is holding his bible, the way he's walking to the kitchen. I can see the way Salem is looking at me, the way I'm feeling sorry, the way I want to run, the way I want to run and hide, stop feeling the way I'm feeling so sad all the time, feeling like I'm not myself, like there is someone else living in me, someone else living, making me do all this, all this that is making me scared, all this that is hurting my little sister.

I can taste the way Sister Pastor's tea cookies taste, the way they are tasting so good with my milk. Pastor hasn't told Mama I hit Salem. I can see the way he is playing house with us and giving us money so we don't tell, after he is eating his cracklin, before Mama and Sister Pastor are getting back from cleaning house. The doorbell is ringing. I see how Sister Pastor is opening the door.

Good evening, Sister Pastor says.

Evening, I hear a man and woman say.

Come on in, Sister Pastor says, been expecting you.

The man and woman are coming in. They are smiling. The man is taking off his cowboy hat. I can smell his cologne, the way it smells like Pastor's does.

Come on to the back, Sister Pastor says, showing them the way.

Pastor is standing in his robe, holding a small bible, smaller than the one he is hitting me with. Like I see the way Pastor is standing in his robe, I see the way he shakes the man's hand. And then he shakes the woman's.

Matthias? Pastor is saying.

Sir? I say, walking through the kitchen.

I see the way all the lights are on in the dining room, the way it's so bright in here, the way the carpet is green.

I see the way the woman's dress is pretty with all kinds of flowers on it and she has high heels on and is almost taller than the man, even if he's wearing cowboy boots and jeans that are tight.

You bring the rings, Pastor says. The man and woman are holding black boxes, taking out the rings. They are happy.

Matt? Pastor says.

Huh? I say, smelling the way the woman's perfume smells good like Mama's and Sister Pastor's perfume.

Matthias will hold your rings, Pastor says. They are turning to me, looking down at me, smiling. I am licking my lip. It is hurting a little.

He's so cute, the woman says. Sister Pastor smiles at the woman. Mama and Salem are coming down the hall.

I am holding these rings. My fist is at my side. I can't open it. The rings are gold and shiny. The man and woman are looking at Pastor. The man's hair is curly and shiny. Pastor is opening his bible. I'm on top of Salem. She is hitting me. I am hitting her.

God created man and woman in His likeness. From Adam's rib he made Eve, his helpmate.

Sister Pastor, Mama, and Salem are smiling. Mama looks like she's thinking.

Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife? Pastor says.

Yes, the man says.

And do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband.

Yes, the woman says.

I can hear the way her voice sounds like she wants to cry, the way Brother is singing in the choir, the way he is looking so sad when we are leaving, the way Mama is crying on the way home.

The rings, Pastor says. The man and woman are getting the rings, even though I don't know who they are, even if I don't know why they are getting married in Pastor's house and not at church.

I see the way they are putting the rings on each other's fingers. And like I see the way they put their rings on each other's fingers, I see the way the woman looks at her hand, the way she smiles, the way the man smiles.

You may kiss, Pastor says.

And like I see the way this man kisses this woman, the way they love each other, the way they are married now, I see the way Pastor is kissing Salem earlier, the way I'm standing by the door, standing, watching out for Mama and Sister Pastor, the way Pastor is kissing Salem, smiling, kissing her, kissing Salem just like this man is kissing this woman.

Day Eighteen

It is dark this morning. The sun is not coming out because it's storming and storming. The sky is black and rumbling. I can hear the way it's thundering, the way the lightning is cracking, cracking like Mr. Smokey's whip. I see the way the lightning flashes in the windows. And like I see how the lightning flashes, like a big cigarette lighter is being lit, I feel the way I don't want to go to school today, the way I'm so tired, the way I want to sleep.

We are in the garage, waiting on the bus. The rain is falling like cows and horses, like Grandma Sherry is saying, not cats and dogs. The school bus is passing. Water is flying high in the air. The ditches are full. The roads are muddy.

Ya'll stay close by me, Mama says. She opens the umbrella. Salem is standing close in front of Mama and I'm standing on her side.

You sure you got them? Sister Pastor says.

I got them, Mama says.

The rain is falling hard on the umbrella. My feet are getting wet and so is my shoulder. I see the way Wilson is getting out of his mama's car, parked by the Stop sign by Mr. Curly's. Emile is running, holding his umbrella. Mrs. Larna is standing in the doorway waving.

Salem is wearing her raincoat and rubber boots. She stops walking.

What you doing, child? Mama says. Salem stomps her foot in the water and water splashes on Mama and me, splashes like when the bus is passing and hitting the water.

Don't do that, child, Mama says. Already liable to catch a cold as is. Ain't a time for playing this morning.

The bus is coming. I can see the way the lights are shining down the road by Mr. Teeth, the way the rain is falling in front of the lights. I hear the way the bus sounds, louder than Pastor's van. And even if I see the bus, I see the way Emile is standing in line, the way Wilson is getting in line too, the way SamPaul is running and Mrs. Meeks is dropping Fatima off. I see the way it is so quiet over by Miss Maudeline's, the way there is a light on, but no one is coming outside.

The bus is pulling up. The lights are shining through the rain, through the darkness.

Have a good one, Matt, Mama says. Don't get your hair wet, she says to Salem.

I'm not, Salem says, and waves at Mama.

My shoes are muddy. It doesn't even look like there's gravel on this road anymore, nothing but mud, just mud and water everywhere.

I am sitting down. Salem is sitting next to me. I'm by the window. I see the way Mama is running, holding her umbrella, running back to Pastor's. And when I'm sitting down, I see the way Mama is standing under the garage looking at us.

The ditches are overflowing. Water is moving so fast in them. I hear how it's so loud on this bus because everyone is talking.

Quiet down, Mrs. Anne says. Enough commotion with this weather as is. Then I hear the way it's getting quiet but people are still talking. I see the way Salem is looking, the way her fingers are making circles and circles, like she's drawing so many circles on the back of the seat. I'm seeing the way I hit her, the way Pastor hit me, the way Salem doesn't tell Mama. I see the way I'm not myself, the way I'm feeling like I'm not myself, floating when I'm walking, floating like I'm not myself and not knowing what I'm doing.

I can see this word but I can't say it. Even if I try, I can't say it. My heart is beating fast and I can't say this word. I am feeling like I want to cry, knowing I used to know so many words, was able to read better than I'm reading now, because I'm always getting nervous, nervous because people are watching me, laughing when I read. I see the way the lights flicker.

I hope the lights go out, Rusty says.

Me too, Clay says.

Mrs. Fuller is sitting at her desk. I hear the way a big thunder sounds, the way the room and lights rattle, vibrate like something blew up.

Tabitha screams. The room is dark. We are sitting in the dark. Mitchell is running over by Mrs. Fuller. He is hugging her. I hear the way a drawer is opening.

Stay seated, Mrs. Fuller says. She is hugging Mitchell because he's scared. Her drawer is open. She is shining her flashlight. There is a little light coming through the window, even if the flashlight is shining.

The boogie man is coming, Clay says.

Don't start that, Clay, Mrs. Fuller says, with Mitchell holding on to her waist.

I'm not afraid of the boogie man, Rusty and Dustin say. Brant, Karly, and Chet are not at school today.

Mrs. Fuller is opening the door and looking down the hall. I hear the way people are talking in the hall.

Let's go, Mrs. Fuller says. Leave your things.

I don't wanna go in the hall, Rusty says. I wanna stay in here.

Yeah, Clay says.

You don't have a choice, Mrs. Fuller says, unless you feel like spending it with Mr. Farrow in the office.

I am taking my fist from my pocket. We are sitting in the hall. The thunder is rumbling. It is dark and loud. Mrs. Fuller is saying a tornado is coming. Clay, Rusty and Dustin are sitting together. Mitchell is still holding on to Mrs. Fuller. Tabitha is sitting by me. I see the way the teachers' flashlights are shining, like little car lights, moving around all in this hall.

I can see there are people in my head but I can't see what they look like. They are lying on top of me. Brother is on top of Berna and the house is on fire. I can feel the way Tabitha is taking my hand and putting it in her lap. Her eyes are looking at mine. She is not smiling. I can feel my man. And even if it's dark in this hall and loud and people are everywhere, I can see the way I'm looking across the hall. I can see the way a boy has his hand in a girl's lap just like mine is in Tabitha's. I can see the way they are

looking around, looking so the teachers don't see them, even if they don't see me looking right at them. I can hear the way thunder is growling, growling like a big dog in the sky, the way the lighting is cracking, cracking like a big whip, the biggest whip and the rain is falling and falling, and it's so dark in here and I know we're going home for the day and not coming back.

The rain is still falling. Pastor's yard is flooded, the ditches and the roads, too. Mama and Sister Pastor are cooking. I can smell the way the food smells so good, cooking on the stove. I can see there is meat frying in the black skillet. There are onions frying all on top of the meat and it smells good. I can hear the way it's sizzling.

What's that, I ask Mama and Sister Pastor.

Steak, they both say, and look at one another.

I'm hungry, I say, and lick my lips, even if my bottom lip is still sore.

Be ready shortly, Mama says.

Pastor is listening to the radio and reading his bible. Cephas is coming down the hall, holding his old basketball on his hip.

Dang that smells good, mama, Cephas says, and kisses Sister Pastor on the cheek. And even though he's in the kitchen, even if the food is cooking and smelling good, I see the way he bounces his basketball.

You done lost your mind this evening, Sister Pastor says, looking at Cephas. Cephas puts the ball back on his hip. Sister Pastor is putting a lid on the skillet with the meat and grabbing a towel and wiping her hands.

Be ready in a minute, Sister Pastor says, soon as the cornbread's done.

Cephas takes his ball from his hip and spins it on his finger, walks and spins and spins, while he's going back to his room.

Mama is setting the table.

Can I help, Salem says.

Come on, and Mama gives her some forks and knives.

Sister Pastor takes the lid off and flips the meat.

Why you hold your hand like that, Matt? she asks me.

Huh, I say.

That fist of yours? Sister Pastor says. If I ain't know any better I'd think you had it out for me. She smiles.

No ma'am, I say.

I see the way Sister Pastor is stirring the beans now, the way she tastes them.

Matt, Pastor says.

Sir, I say.

Pastor is sitting in his chair. I see the way he turns his radio down. He is holding his bible. I see the way he looks at me, the way I'm standing in front of him. I feel the way I'm feeling shy looking at Pastor.

Come Good Friday, they'll crucify me, Pastor says, and sucks his teeth and laughs. What you think about that, huh?

I don't know I say, and shrug my shoulders.

Black Jesus, he says, and opens his bible and leans back in his recliner. Ain't popular round here, but I got to do it. Folks need to see the real story, the real crucifixion.

Even if Pastor is saying this, I don't know what he's talking about. And like I don't know what Pastor is talking about, I hear the way Sister Pastor says, Supper's ready. I'm running.

Go on back, Mama says. Carry yourself. You know there ain't no running in this house.

I am going back, seeing the way Pastor is getting out of his chair.

Everyone is sitting. And like I'm seeing where everyone is sitting, I'm seeing where Brother used to sit, between me and Mama, by Sister Pastor. I smell the way this food smells. I see the way this steak looks so good with all these onions on it, the way I like onions, the way I can't wait to taste them.

Let us pray, Pastor is saying. We are bowing our heads. We are all holding hands and I can feel the way Mama's hand feels. And like I'm feeling how Mama's hand feels, so warm, I'm hoping Pastor doesn't say a long prayer, because I hate it when he prays so long, prays when he knows we're so hungry and the food is smelling so good and starting to get cold.

Heavenly father, we thank you for this meal, Pastor is saying. May it nourish our bodies, and may your will be done, both in heaven and in earth, for we are the sheep and you the shepherd, praise be to you... Amen.

Even though I'm glad Pastor didn't pray too long, like he always does, I feel how my mouth is ready for this food, how it smells so good. I see the way I'm picking up the fork with my left hand, the way I'm keeping my fist under the table.

I am smelling my food. Mama slaps my hand. What have I told you about smelling everything, Mama says. It smells so good, though, I say.

I'm eating some rice and beans. I taste the way it's good, the way the pepper is starting to burn my mouth. I'm reaching for my juice. Don't you touch that juice, Mama says. But my mouth is hot, I say. Them beans ain't that hot, Mama says. Let that child, drink, Livvy, Sister Pastor says.

I'm seeing the way Mama is rolling her eyes at Sister Pastor. I'm feeling the way this juice is cooling my mouth, the way it's tasting sweet. I'm getting some more beans and rice. I hear how Pastor is smacking. I'm cutting some of my meat with my fork, even when it's hard to do because I'm not using a knife, even when I'm using my left hand. And then I'm making my meat go in my rice and beans, the way I like it, meat with my rice and beans.

My fork is in my mouth and my food is so warm. I taste the way the meat tastes, the way it's tasting like blood, the way it's like blood, so much blood when I'm chewing. I see the way Mama and Sister Pastor are looking at me, the way they look at each other, the way they smile.

Ugh! I say. This liver! Ugh!

They are laughing at me. I am hating liver. Never liking it. Never liking my meat to be tasting like blood, like it is iron, even if it's having onions on it, even though

they are saying gizzards are in dressing and I'm liking dressing and not complaining that much.

I see the way I'm throwing my fork down, the way rice and beans are going all on the table, even on the carpet. I am pushing my chair back, pushing the table. I see the way my glass of juice is falling on the table, the way juice is going on the carpet, dripping.

I'm running, feeling the way Pastor is grabbing me. And like Pastor is grabbing me, I feel the way my arm is hurting, the way he's squeezing my arm. Pastor is standing up. I feel the way he is hitting and hitting me with his hand. I feel the way I'm breathing, the way I'm mad, mad because Pastor is hitting me, mad because Mama and Sister Pastor are tricking me.

You don't have to hit him like that, Mama is saying. I see the way she's coming by me, the way she's mad, the way she's looking at Pastor. He's got to learn to control his self in my house, Pastor says, still holding my arm. He didn't tell you how he hit Salem, did he?

Mama looks at me and then at Salem and Sister Pastor looks at Salem and then at me. Do what? Mama says. Sure did hit her, Pastor says. Had her crying her little eyes out.

Mama is grabbing my arm. You hit your sister, Matt? You hit her? He hit you Salem? Salem is shaking her head yes because she is shy. She is looking like she is about to cry, even though she is chewing her food.

Mama looks at me like she can't believe. I feel the way she's hitting me. What have I told you, huh, what have I told you? I can hear the way Salem is starting to cry. I feel the way Mama is pushing my arm, letting me go. I feel the way my legs and tail are burning.

Now you go back there in that room and I don't wanna hear another word from you the rest of the night, the rest of the night, you hear? Mama's face is red. I'm breathing hard, feeling the way I'm mad, the way I want to run away and not be here.

I can hear the way Mama is opening the door. I can see the way she's looking at me, looking at me like she's still mad. She is closing the door. Ain't your sister's fault what happened, Matt, Mama says, looking at me. Ain't nobody's fault but your own, she's pointing at me. Nobody's but yours, Matt. I told you not to. I told you, Mama says and she's starting to cry. I told you but you wouldn't listen. Mama looks like she can't breathe.

I'm feeling the way I'm starting to cry, the way I'm sad, the way my nose is running. I'm sorry, Matt, Mama says. I'm sorry, she's coming by me, sitting on the bed. I can feel the way she grabs my fist. You've got to stop fighting, Matt. You've got to stop it. Fine time you let it go. You got to let it go, Matt.

I can feel the way my tears feel, the way I'm tired, the way I want to lie down and go to sleep. I hear the way it's thundering outside, see the lighting flashing, flashing outside like there's a fire, a fire is outside, a fire in my mind, and I am always the one lighting it.

Day Nineteen

Church is over. People are standing around talking. I see the way Cephas keeps looking at me. I feel the way my tail feels, the way it's hurting. And like I feel the way my tail is stinging because it feels like it's cut, I hear the way Pastor says,

We don't need 'em then. They didn't show to revival or appreciation, all on account of the movement we trying to do, we don't need 'em. I ain't ever been one to run behind folks, ain't gonna start now.

I see the way Mrs. Marva Belton is rolling her eyes.

Appreciation is a time we usually bring in a little money, Pastor, Mr. Merchant says.

Sure is right, Mrs. Marva Belton says.

And last I check a couple hundred dollars ain't gonna cut it. 'Fore the month's end they liable to be down here cutting out the lights, Mr. Merchant says. Pastor is thinking.

You said it yourself Pastor. A thing like this take money. And the way I'm looking at it, I don't think we got it, Deacon Jimison says. Seem like as fast as it come in it goes out, and I don't know where. We losing money, Pastor.

Mr. Merchant is looking like he's thinking, Deacon Jimison and Meeks too, even all the women.

We ain't a charity church. Never was. Ain't about to start. We ain't looking for no handouts, Pastor says.

Well sometimes a helping hand is what you need, Pastor, Mrs. Marva Belton says. People are shaking their heads, agreeing with her. Then Pastor is thinking some more.

Well a bunch of bickering ain't gonna solve it, Sister Pastor says.

No lord, Deacon Meeks says.

Indeed, Deacon Jimison says.

We just gonna have to buckle down, get to leaning and depending, Sister Pastor says. Pastor smiles at Sister Pastor.

Apple don't fall far from the tree, Pastor says and winks at Sister Pastor.

And what about the roads? Mrs. Jimison says.

Sure you right, Deacon Jimison says.

Liable be slogging through a mud swamp time this storm's over.

Been taken care of, Pastor says. Can't do it with the rain, but the first good spell of sun, early spring to early summer, we should have us something.

Spring near here, Mrs. Meeks says.

Sure need it, Deacon Meeks says.

Been needing it, Mr. Curly says.

God knows it, everyone says.

I see the way Mama is ready to go, the way the lights flicker, like they are about to go out, like we are at school. I see the way everyone is thinking, and there is a big thunder. I see the lighting. I see the way the lights are going out, the way the lights are out in the church and everyone is thinking, thinking with the lights out and my tail is hurting and Cephas is looking at me, smiling through all this darkness.

We are home from church and there is blood in my underwear. And like I see there is blood in my underwear, I can see the way we're at home earlier, earlier before we're going to church. I can see the way Mama is in the kitchen with Salem and Sister Pastor and Pastor is in the front and Cephas is telling me to come and play the video game in his room. And even though I don't want to play in Cephas' room, play the video game, he's telling me he's going to tell Mama what I'm doing with Salem, that I'm humping on top of her. And even if he's telling me this, I'm knowing he's the one making me hump on top of Salem. I'm knowing he's the one making me come in his room, making me close the door. I feel the way he's touching me, the way he's getting on top of me, the way it's hurting, the way it's hurting so bad, hurting, and there is blood in my underwear.

Time to clean up, Mama says. And when Mama is saying this, I'm looking at the red in my underwear, because I'm sitting on the toilet, trying to go. And like I'm looking at the red, because there are spots everywhere, I'm getting up, flushing and washing my hands so I can go to the room so I can take them off, so I can hide them from Mama. Salem is already in the room. I'm feeling the way I'm nervous, the way I'm feeling cold. Mama is coming in the room. And even though he is not in here, I can hear the way Cephas is playing his video game, the way his T.V. is loud.

I'm taking my bath first, Salem says. So, I say. I can hear Mama is running the water. Get your clothes, Mama tells Salem. Salem is getting her clothes off the bed. Mama is coming to the bedroom. She is taking Salem's shirt off. I see the way Salem is standing in her underwear with no shirt on. I see the way she's running to the bathroom,

because it's connected to our room. And even though I'm turning my head away, even if the door is open, I see the way Salem is naked now. She is getting in the tub. I don't see her, even though I'm seeing how we used to take our baths together but when we are getting bigger, I hear the way Mama is saying I can't take my bath with Salem anymore, that saving water doesn't have anything to do with what she's talking about.

Mama is coming back in the room, holding Salem's underwear, going put them in the hamper. I hear how water is splashing in the bathroom, the way Mama says, Go on and start taking them clothes off. And even when Mama is saying this, I'm acting like I don't hear her, because I'm going sit on the bed, and taking off my socks.

I'm taking off my socks and Mama is straightening up, picking up the clothes basket and starting to put the clean clothes in the dresser's drawers. And like Mama is putting clothes in the dresser's drawers, she's getting hangers and putting some shirts and pants in the closet. And when she's hanging up her skirt and apron, the one she wears over to Deacon and Mrs. Meeks' restaurant, I hear the way she says, Can't wait to stop having to wear you, and she hangs it in the closet.

I'm still sitting on the bed with my shirt and socks off. I feel the way my tail is stinging, the way my stomach is so nervous, the way I don't want Mama to see my underwear. And like I'm still sitting here in my pants, I see the way Mama goes back into the bathroom. And then she says, Come on, child, let's make it, don't have all night to be washing our tails. I hear water is dripping, then splashing some more.

Go on and take them pants off, Mama says. And even though Mama is saying this, I'm still not moving, acting like I don't hear her. I can see the way Pastor is

whipping me yesterday, how Mama is mad, how she cries and tell me she's not going to let him whip me like that anymore, the way she's saying it's my fault.

Salem is getting out of the tub. I hear the way it's draining. I'm seeing the way she is wiping herself off, the way she's wrapping the towel around herself like Mama is teaching her. Didn't I tell you not to let it out, child, Mama says, and the water isn't draining anymore. Mama is running some more water.

Come on, Matt, Mama says. Water ain't made to warm itself. Go on and make it in there.

I'm getting off the bed. I feel the way this carpet feels beneath my feet. And like I'm feeling this carpet beneath my feet, seeing how bright it is in this bathroom since Mama is changing the light bulb earlier, I'm seeing how the water is in the tub, how there are some bubbles.

Go on and get in there, Mama says. You ain't got nothing I ain't seen or want. And when Mama is saying this, I'm still feeling the way my stomach feels, the way I'm so nervous, so scared, the way my heart is beating in my chest. I feel the way my fist is so tight. I feel the way my head is starting to spin, the way I'm starting to get dizzy. You got cat in you tonight, son? Mama says and I don't say anything. Water ain't gonna hurt you. Get in there.

Mama is not leaving. She's standing, looking at me. I feel the way I'm breathing, the way my hand, even my fist, are moving to my waist and I'm starting to pull down my pants and underwear. And like I'm pulling down my pants and underwear, I'm seeing the way I'm closing my eyes so I don't have to look at Mama. My eyes are closed; I

don't have my balance. I'm waiting for Mama to say something. Mama is not saying anything. My pants and underwear are around my ankles. I'm stepping out of them. And like I'm stepping out of them, I'm opening my eyes, getting my balance back. And even though I'm opening my eyes, even if I'm so scared, I'm seeing how Mama isn't standing there anymore.

I can hear the way Mama is in the room. I am hurrying and hiding my underwear under my pants. And like I'm hiding my underwear under my pants and getting in the tub, feeling how warm the water is, I'm feeling how my tail is stinging in this water.

Mama is coming in the bathroom. I am kneeling in the water. Mama is looking at herself in the mirror. Rain supposed to stop by morning, she says. Ya'll got to be ready for school. I'm quiet, not saying anything, feeling how my tail is feeling, seeing the way Cephas is on top of me.

Mama is picking up her brush and brushing her hair. I see the way she turns, then bends down and picks up my pants. My heart is thumping in my chest. It feels like I can't move, like I can't breathe.

I see the way Mama is leaving the bathroom, the way I'm picking up the soap, starting to wash myself, even though my tail is stinging, even if my lip is not hurting, even if my fist is balled so tight.

Matthias! Mama says. I am drying off. I am stopping. My heart is feeling like it is falling. Mama is coming back into the bathroom. She is holding something in her hand.

I can feel the way my head is so dizzy. My eyes are getting blurry. It is feeling like my ears are stopped up, and my heart is beating so hard and fast and my chest is burning.

Mama is crying. She is holding my underwear and crying. Salem is standing by her. I am wanting to cry too, knowing why Mama is crying, knowing I couldn't hide it.

Who do this, Matt? Mama says.

I can feel the way she grabs my shoulders, the way she's squeezing them, the way her nails are in my shoulders.

Who do this, Matt? Her eyes are big. Her vein is in the middle of her forehead. She is sweating. Who do this? She says again. Salem is looking sad too. And even if I don't say anything, even though I point toward Cephas' room, I hear the way Mama says, He do this, Matt, then she shakes her head, like she can't believe it. He do this? She bites her lip and can't believe it.

Tears are falling from her eyes. Mama is holding onto the counter because it looks like her legs are giving out. Then she is closing the toilet seat and sitting down, sitting down holding my underwear, sitting because I know her legs are so weak and she can't stand.

Little boys ain't supposed to have blood in their underwear, Mama keeps saying, crying, beating her fist against her leg. And even if I'm trying not to, I feel the way tears are coming down my face. I hear the way the rain is just starting to fall harder and harder outside. I'm feeling the way I'm scared and Mama is hugging us, hugging us, saying, I shoulda known, I shoulda known. And like Mama is saying this, I hear the way there's a knock on the bathroom door, and Sister Pastor is saying, Ya'll alright in there, and Mama

is sniffing and saying, We fine, we alright, and Sister Pastor is saying, Just checking, and it's getting so quiet, quiet while we're crying, while it's raining so hard outside, quiet and Mama is holding Salem and me so tight like she can't ever let us go.

Day Twenty

I don't want to go to school today. It's still raining some. I am so tired. I want to sleep. I am hardly sleeping last night. I can still see the way I sleep with Mama and Salem last night. I can hear the way Mama is saying we have to stay close by her now, that we can't leave her sight. I can feel the way Mama is hugging us and hugging us, crying and crying, almost until it's time to wake up this morning. I can hear the way she's whispering, praying, asking God to give her the strength, show her the way, provide us a place to stay, somewhere else to go.

I can see the way we are in the bathroom last night and Mama is hugging us and saying, I shoulda known, I shoulda known. And then she's crying some more. And then Sister Pastor is coming back again and knocking on the door and asking if we're alright and Mama is saying we're alright and Sister Pastor is going back to the front again. And after Mama is saying this, telling Sister Pastor she's alright, and it's quiet in the bathroom, I'm seeing how Mama is standing up, how she is breathing so hard, how she looks mad like a dog, a dog that wants to bite. And like I see last night, how Mama is mad like a dog, I'm seeing the way she is going to the bedroom door, the way she is looking down the hall, the way she is closing the door and coming back to us. I'm seeing how we are going in the bedroom and all I have is the towel still wrapped around me and Salem has her nightshirt on. Then Mama is wiping her eyes with the back of her hands and she's still holding my underwear, still looking so mad. And then Mama is going over to the dirty clothes hamper, and she's starting to take out all of the clothes, throwing them

everywhere, everywhere like she's fighting them again. Then she's looking at Salem's underwear, and smelling them. Then she's going to the dresser, even if there are clean clothes there, even if she just washed them, going through the underwear and clothes, looking at them and smelling them.

Mama is whispering. I can hear the way she's just whispering and whispering to herself, but I can't hear what she's saying, but she's just whispering and whispering and sweating all in her face and Salem and me are sitting on the bed, watching her, quiet because we don't know what to tell her so she can stop whispering to herself, so she can stop fighting clothes, fighting clothes all night long.

The sun is coming up. There is some blue in the sky, even though there are still some dark clouds. The rain is stopping. I can see Brother. I can see Cephas. I can see that day. I can see them in the woods, the way I'm running. I can still see how white the ground is, feel how cold it is, so cold and all I have on is my little jacket. I can see the way I'm at home, with Grandma Sherry, and I'm standing at the stove, lighting the paper towel. I can see how fast the paper towel is catching on fire, the way it is falling on the floor and I'm stomping on it, the way I'm picking it up and I'm going to the sink and putting some water on it. And like I'm putting some water on the paper towel, I get another piece and light it. It catches fast and falls on the floor too but is not on fire. And even though some of the paper towel is all black and burnt and is falling on the floor, I'm starting to walk so fast on my tippy-toes, so I can get out the backdoor, even as some black ashes are still falling on the floor when I'm walking, tip-toeing out of the backdoor.

I can see the back of the house, all the cobwebs and ivy. I can smell the way the paper towel smells. I can see the way the leaves are on the trees and the grass is high because the man didn't cut it, and the mosquitoes are just flying around.

I am holding the paper. The mosquitoes are trying to bite me. I can see there is some orange on the paper towel. I can see the way I'm making the fire touch some of the toilet tissue in the pile. The tissue is catching. I am blowing on it. I can see how Mama and Brother are blowing on the fire when they burn it. I am blowing too. Ashes are starting to fly, fly like they are in slow motion.

The pile is catching. I can smell how the old food smells. I can see the old rice and chicken bones and beans and stuff.

I am looking out of the window. There is mud on the road. I am running to the woods, in the cold. I can see the way I'm getting at the edge of the woods. I can feel how it's so cold. I can feel the way my heart is beating, the way smoke is coming from my nose and mouth. I am stooping down low, looking back at Pastor's house, hoping Mama's not coming to look for me. I can feel the way my hands are so cold, the way they are feeling like they're freezing.

I can see Brother and Cephas. I can see the way they're looking up in the trees, looking for squirrels. I can see the way Cephas is holding the gun on his shoulder. And like I can see Cephas holding the gun, I can see the way I'm still stooping low, the way I'm going in the woods, the way it's so cold. I can see the way so many trees don't have leaves on them, the way everything is looking like so many twigs, like even if you touch

the big trees, they'll just break and fall to the ground so easy. Someone is watching me. Mama is touching my shoulder.

Didn't I tell you not to leave that room, Mama says. She looks like she's been crying. Sister Pastor is cooking breakfast.

How you feel this morning? Mama is asking me. I'm okay, I say. And then Mama is thinking. You're not hurting back there, are you, she says. I am shaking my head. I'm not hurting.

I am looking at Mama and I'm knowing something. I'm knowing that Mama loves me. I know the way she loves Brother, Salem and me so much, the way she loves Grandma Sherry, even if she's not here.

I see the way there is gray tape and safety pins on the bed. I don't know what Mama is going to do with this stuff. Come on, Mama is saying. She is sitting on the bed.

I am standing in front of Mama. Pull your pants down, she tells me. What? I say. Pull 'em down, she says again. Mama is not smiling, just looking so serious. I am unbuttoning my pants and pulling them down. Not your underwear she says. I can see the way Salem is looking at me.

Mama is grabbing the safety pins. She is holding one, putting the other between her lips, between her teeth. I can hear the way she is not having all of her breath. Come closer, she says, and grabs my underwear, then takes the safety pin she is holding, folds my underwear and puts the safety pin through it. I feel the way my underwear are tight on this side. I see the way my stomach is moving. I see the way she's taking the safety

pin from between her lips, her teeth, and doing the other side, and my underwear are getting tighter around my waist.

Mama is doing the same to Salem. And even though I don't want to look at Salem, I'm looking at her, feeling the way I can't help it, even if I try, even if she's my sister. Mama is getting the tape. I smell the way bacon is smelling, the way Sister Pastor is cooking. Final touch, she is saying. I'll know for sure now, she says. Mama is taking and putting the tape, wrapping it around my waist, around my waist so tight, then she's wrapping it around Salem's waist. I can hear the way Mama is breathing harder, the way she is sounding like she's tired, like she's been running and she's so tired. I can hear the way the tape is tearing, see the way Pastor is wrapping it around his house slippers when they are getting old and he is not wanting to buy new ones.

If you need to go, Mama is telling me, you take your man and pull him out the front, out here. She is touching where my man is. And then she is saying, If you have to number two, you just have to hold it till you get home, you understand? And then I'm shaking my head because I'm understanding what Mama is saying. And then she is saying the same thing to Salem. And then she is telling Salem, If you have to go, I want you to sit and pull them to the side, you hear me? I see the way Salem is looking shy, like she doesn't understand what Mama is saying. Mama is opening her robe. She is pulling her panties to the side, showing Salem and Salem is smiling. I see there is so much hair down by Mama's private. I see the way Salem is shaking her head because she understands Mama now.

You don't need that much room, Mama says. I can feel the way my underwear are so tight, the way they are just squeezing and squeezing around my waist. I'm hearing the way Sister Pastor is saying breakfast is ready, smelling the way I can smell biscuits, the way they are buttery. I see the way Salem is looking at Mama. I feel the way Mama is holding our hands, the way I'm holding my fist, the way we're walking, walking down the hall, and our waists are so tight, so tight so no one can get it, hurt us, even when they are trying their hardest.

Day Twenty-One

The elevator's numbers are counting up. I am feeling the way I am dizzy, the way I'm hungry because it's Friday. I'm feeling the way my underwear are so tight around my waist. I see the way Pastor is making me come to the hospital with him as soon as I'm getting home from school. I hear the way Mama is saying she wants me to stay home but Pastor is making me come, even though I don't want to, even if Mama is wanting me to stay home so I can be close by her.

The elevator is stopping. I am almost falling. We are on floor six. Pastor walks out, and I walk out too, even though I'm dizzy, even if my head is spinning and I'm feeling like I'm sick. I see the way Pastor is holding his black communion box. I smell the way this hospital smells, like sick people, medicine and pee. I don't like coming here because all we do is pray and pray, and I have to read scriptures and give communion. Even though I want to tell Pastor I hate the way the old people look, like they are about to die, all skinny and wrinkled, looking like they don't want to live, like they want to die and not be here, I'm not saying anything.

And like I know I don't like the way this hospital smells, the way the old people look, I hear the way the nurses are saying, Evening Pastor. I see the way they look at me and smile and say, How you doing, Matt? I feel the way one of the women is pinching my cheeks. Boy you get cuter every time I see you, she says. I feel the way I'm shy when she tells me this. I see the way she is pretty.

We are going in one of the rooms. I can see the way the room is so white, the way the T.V. is hanging from the wall, the way light is coming through the window. I see the way Pastor is going and standing over the bed where the old man is. The old man is looking at me. He smiles. I smile at him, even though he's so old, even if he has a tube in his nose and one in his arm. I see the way he doesn't have any teeth, the way his skin is wrinkled, wrinkled and just hanging.

Pastor shakes the man's hand and shows him his Chaplain badge.

Haven't been baptized before, huh? Pastor says. The man is looking at Pastor.

No, sir, he says to Pastor, and his voice is weak, sounding like he's hoarse.

I see the way the man is wiping his eyes, the way he has no teeth and keeps moving his mouth like he's chewing on something. Pastor is looking like he's thinking.

Go run me some water, Pastor says.

Sir, I say.

Run some warm water in the tub, Pastor says.

And even though I'm hearing Pastor say this, I'm still wondering why he's telling me to do this, why he's wanting me to run some water in the tub.

Go on, he says.

I'm feeling how I'm starting to get nervous, the way I'm turning and looking, seeing the door to the bathroom. I see the way Pastor is holding the man's hand.

I'm walking in the bathroom, turning on the light. It smells like pee in here. I see the way there are some yellow bedpan things stacked on the floor. I see how this bathtub is so clean, like it never gets used. I'm turning the knob and the water is cold. And then

I'm turning it some more and the water is getting warmer. And when the water is warm enough, I pull the thing to keep the water from letting out.

The tub is filling with water. I am going back in the room. I can see the way Pastor is praying with the man. I can see the way the man's eyes are closed and he is looking like he's asleep, asleep and his chest is moving up and down. I'm feeling the way the waters are feeling when Pastor is baptizing Salem and me. I can hear how Mama is saying we're being christened when we are babies and we don't need to be baptized Baptist, because she is wanting us to be baptized Catholic, after we are going to catechism.

When Pastor is baptizing us, I'm hearing the way Mama is fussing with him. I'm seeing how Mama is mad, how she's starting to cry. I can hear the way Pastor is telling Mama she's lucky he isn't baptizing her. I'm seeing the way it is like Pastor is cursing Mama when he is saying this because she is looking like she can't believe, can't believe he is telling her this. I'm feeling the waters, the way I'm under them, the way Pastor is pulling me up. I'm seeing the way everyone is looking, the way they are smiling and clapping and praying. I can feel the water in my ears, the way I can't hear, the way the waters are like swimming pool water and I can't swim.

Amen, Pastor is saying. I can hear the way the water is still running. Go check your water, Pastor says. The water is high, high like we used to make it when we're acting like we're swimming in the tub at Grandma Sherry's, holding our breath. I'm turning the water off. And after the water is off, I'm going back in the room.

Pastor is taking the white covers off the old man. I can see how his legs are so skinny. Come grab this monitor, Pastor says. I see the way he takes the tube from the man's nose and sets it on his pillow.

I'm grabbing the monitor thing and the thing that's having the water bag hanging on it. Just roll them, Pastor says. Pastor is bending down. He is picking up the man, holding him in his arms. I feel the way I am rolling the monitor and water thing. I see the way Pastor is walking with the man, holding him in his arms, the way the old man's arms are wrapped around Pastor's neck, the way his legs are hanging and his tail is out, the way his toenails are so long and yellow.

Pastor is turning to the side so he can fit the man through the door. I'm pushing the machine and the water thing closer so they can reach the man. Pastor is putting the old man in the water. I see the way the water is almost out of the tub. I hear the way the old man is breathing. I see the way his eyes are closed, the way his arms are folded at his chest, the way it is still looking like he is chewing on something.

Pastor is kneeling on the floor, holding the back of the man's head. I can see the way he is pulling out his white handkerchief, the way he's folding it. Make sure the door is closed, Pastor says. And then I'm going and looking down the hall. Some nurse women are sitting behind a desk. I am pulling the door, making sure it is closed all the way.

Pastor is holding his handkerchief to the man's face. I can hear the way the man is breathing hard. I can see the way he's shivering in the tub.

The man is closing his eyes. His arms are folded across his chest. Pastor is looking down at the man. Repent and be baptized, Pastor is saying, holding the man's head and putting him under the water and pulling him back up. I can see the way the man breathes out, catching his breath, the way he smiles, even if he doesn't have any teeth, even though some water is going in his mouth.

God bless you, Pastor, the man is saying and his hands are shaking and patting Pastor in the face, patting Pastor and Pastor is lifting him from the water and water is dripping from his body.

Pastor is opening his communion case. The old man is shivering cold, lying down. I see the way Pastor is pulling out his bottle, the little cup, the little bread circles.

In the same manner He broke it and said, take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you, Pastor says, looking down at the man. This do in remembrance of me. And after he says this, he gives the little bread circle to the man. I see the way the man tries to chew but he doesn't have any teeth, so he just chews and chews with his gums. And even when the man is just chewing and chewing with his gums, I'm seeing how Pastor is taking the little bottle, the way he's holding the cup.

This is my blood, which has been shed for you, Pastor says. Pastor is sweating. Drink this cup in remembrance of me and tarry no more.

And like Pastor is saying this, pouring the grape juice in the cup, and putting it to the man's trembling lips, and the man is drinking, I see the way the old man is crying, the way he's still chewing on the bread, the way he's closing his eyes, tired, chewing, happy

to be baptized for the first time, happy to be eating and tasting, taking the juice and bread for the very first time.

Pastor is driving and I'm ready to go home. I am hungry and I'm ready to go home, feeling the way my underwear are so tight and I want to take them off. I see the way Pastor is turning at the light, going the other way, the other way from where we go home. And since we're turning and going the other way, I'm seeing how the trees are so tall, and then I'm seeing the river. And when we're passing the river and the road just keeps turning and turning, I'm seeing the way Pastor is turning into a driveway. And when Pastor is turning into the driveway, I'm knowing this house, seeing the way it's yellow and dirty and has junk cars parked everywhere and the grass is tall, so tall like no one lives here. I can see what the old woman looks like, the way her skin is so dark and her eyes are so white. I can see how dirty her house is, how many cats she has, how it stinks and there are roaches crawling everywhere.

Almost thought you wasn't gonna make it, Pastor, the woman says, and her voice sounds French like Mr. Mavis'.

Oh, como sava, Pastor says.

Sava bien, the woman says.

Had to go on over to the hospital, Pastor says.

Charity? the woman asks.

Sure enough, Pastor says.

I can see there are boxes and pillows and clothes piled up everywhere in this woman's house. I can see a cat sitting up high on one of the boxes. And even though she's not at the hospital, I see the way the woman is lying in a hospital bed, even if she's in her living room, even when two cats are lying next to her, and she's stroking them. Then I see how there's a cat looking out the window, looking like it's not real. And even if I'm ready to go home, I'm seeing how Pastor is taking out his black communion case, how he's giving it to me.

I feel the way this case feels, the way it's not heavy.

Como sava, the woman is saying to me and I'm not knowing what to say, the way I'm feeling shy, because I'm not taking French yet, even though Pastor is speaking it. Been okay, child? she says, and I shake my head yes. Got some cookies in there, she says.

And even though I know I like cookies, even if I know I'm not supposed to say no when someone is offering me something, I know I don't want any of her cookies because her house is so dirty.

Hear tell you gonna do it, Pastor, the woman says.

Indeed, Pastor says, and smiles, like he's proud. White folks been calling and threatening, but I ain't worried. And when Pastor is saying this, I'm seeing the way he's thinking. Devil is busy. Jesus wouldn't have come off the cross if they paid him. I ain't coming down, either. I'm hearing the way the phone is ringing at home, the way Sister Pastor is crying. I hear the way Pastor says,

Ready, Matt?

Even though I'm not ready, even if I don't want to do this, I'm saying I am, saying I'm ready. And like I'm hoping I don't forget my scriptures, I feel how my underwear are still so tight around my waist, the way my fist is balled. I am opening the case with my left hand, feeling the way Pastor is watching me, watching my fist. I am taking out the bottle and the little glass and the bread. I'm nervous. I am feeling cold. And even though I know I don't want to preach, be a preacher like Pastor when I grow up, I'm saying what Pastor is wanting me to say, feeling the way my voice is shaking.

Take this, I say. This is my body, which is broken for you. I'm shaking. This do in remembrance of me.

And like I finish saying this, I see the way the old woman has her eyes closed, the way she's holding her mouth open, the way her tongue is pink, and some of her teeth have gold on them. And like I see the way she's holding her mouth open, I put the bread on her tongue. She is chewing the bread. I take the bottle of juice with my left hand, and with my fist, I set the little glass on top of my fist. I see the way Pastor is watching my fist, the way he's smiling, the way I'm pouring the juice. I feel the way I'm making sure I'm not wasting it, the way I'm being so still so the glass is not falling.

For as often, I say. And I don't know what's next. I'm scared and I don't know what's next. I see the way Pastor is looking at me, the way I'm feeling the way my stomach is trembling, the way Pastor is waiting. I am thinking, looking at the glass, thinking, but I don't know the words, don't know what's coming next. There are so many words and I don't know them, even if I'm trying to see them, see the way they are looking in my bible, see the pages they are on.

I am starting over. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, I say, Ye do show the lord's death till He comes.

I'm handing the cup to the woman. She is drinking like the old man, taking her communion, taking her communion and I'm happy, happy I'm remembering my scriptures, happy Pastor is telling me, Good job, the way he's patting my back, the way I'm scared because this old cat is just rubbing up against my leg, rubbing against my leg and won't leave me alone.

Day Twenty-Two

Pastor, Mr. Merchant, and Deacon Jimison are taking the cross out the back of Mr. Merchant's truck and taking it to the back of the church. I see the way the three of them are holding the cross, the way it looks heavy, the way they are putting it through the door, being careful. I see the church's gravel and grass is all torn up, the way tire marks all through it. I see the way Pastor is sanding the cross some more, staining it, the way it's so brown now and not looking like it's a cedar anymore, not looking like it did the day it's falling, falling to the ground and not a tree anymore, not smelling like candy.

I see the way they are leaning the cross against the wall in the back. There are still drops of blood on the floor from where the boy cut his hand. I can see the boy, see the way he's scared, the way he doesn't want to call his father. Pastor is holding his hands on his hips, looking at the cross. I can see the way Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are looking at it too.

Go on to the front, Pastor says. I am going to the front.

I see the way so many people are coming to practice, even though it's Saturday, because it's so many people. Emile is standing by Mrs. Larna and Mrs. Larna is talking to Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly. I can see the way Mrs. Jimison is putting her purse on top of the piano. She is opening the piano. I can see the keys. I see the way Mrs. Marva Belton is here, Deacon Meeks and Mrs. Meeks, Mama and Sister Pastor. I see the way SamPaul and Wilson are sitting by their mamas. I see the way Fatima and Salem are sitting by Brandson, Mrs. Marva Belton's grandson. And then I see the way Sherman

and Severette are sitting by each other, because they are twins and are always sitting by one another, never being apart.

Pastor and Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are coming in the front.

Come on, ladies and gentlemen, Pastor is saying. All the women are looking at Pastor. I see they are holding bags, looking like so many clothes are in them.

Where they going? Emile asks me.

I don't know, I say.

I see the way all of the grownups are going to the back, except Mrs. Jimison, because she's standing by her piano. I see the way Deacon Meeks is rolling his wheelchair, going to the side door, so he can go to the back, because he can't get up the stairs by the choir stand and pulpit that goes to the back. I see the way Mrs. Meeks is opening the door for her husband, the way she's holding on to his wheelchair. I see the way Mama winks at me and I smile at her, smile because I know Mama loves me, because I know she's been sad.

Come, children, Mrs. Jimison says. Time doesn't wait.

I don't want to be in this play, I tell Emile. And like I tell Emile this, I hear the way he says,

Me either. Then I'm seeing the way he folds his arms, looking like he's mad, like he doesn't want to be here. And when Emile is folding his arms and looking mad, I hear the way Mrs. Jimison says,

I'm not gonna bite. Pastor gave ya'll the easy part. All you have to do is sing.

Sing? SamPaul says.

I ain't singing no solo, Wilson says.

No solo, child, Mrs. Jimison says. We're singing together. It ain't that bad, children.

They ain't killing me, Wilson says.

Who's talking about somebody killing for singing, Mrs. Jimison says.

Mama says white people don't want Pastor to do it, say they talking about killing him.

I see the way Mrs. Jimison looks like she's thinking. I see the way she laughs.

Nobody talking about killing, son. And like Mrs. Jimison says this, I hear the way the phone is ringing. I hear the way Pastor is telling the old woman they are calling, threatening him. I hear the way Pastor says he's not worried.

Now come on, Mrs. Jimison says. We'll be doing it together, and I'll help out. I can see the way Salem, Fatima, and Brandson are smiling at one another, the way Sherman and Severette are looking, the way Wilson and SamPaul are sitting down.

Come back round here, Mrs. Jimison says and gets Wilson and SamPaul to stand up again.

We are all standing around the piano. Mrs. Jimison presses some of the keys. SamPaul and Wilson are shaking their heads because they don't want to sing. I can see the way Brother is singing in the choir, the way he's singing, even though he's sad, even if he's not talking, even if he's wearing all white, holding his bible. I see the way Mama and Sister Pastor are crying, crying because the song is sounding so good and they are moving from side to side, watching Brother sing. I can see the way when we are getting

home that day and Pastor is asking how it was, how Brother is doing, how Mama is sad and not saying anything and going to the room and starting to cry. I hear the way Pastor is saying, It'll do him some good being there. A shame what he did to that girl. And like I hear this, I see the way Sister Pastor is looking at Pastor, looking because she's mad, because she knows he shouldn't have said what he did, shouldn't be so mean sometimes. I hear how Sister Pastor tells Pastor he should apologize and Pastor is ignoring her, not saying anything.

This is how it goes, Mrs. Jimison says, and begins playing the piano. I hear the way she sings:

*The blood that Jesus shed for me,
Way back on Calvary,
The blood that gives me strength
From day, to day,
It will never lose
Its pow'r...*

Mrs. Jimison is humming. I hear the way it's sounding so good. Now let's try it, she says. And when Mrs. Jimison is saying this, I see the way Cephas is on me, the way he's holding my fist, the way I can't move, can't hit him, even though I want to. I can see the red in my underwear. I can hear the way someone is calling my name, the way someone is looking at me. Matt, Mrs. Jimison is saying. Huh, I say. You with us, she says. And even though I don't know what Mrs. Jimison is saying, I hear the way she is playing the music. I hear the way, even if we don't know all the words, even if Mrs. Jimison is helping us, how this piano is sounding good, how we're starting to sing. I see the way

Mama and Sister Pastor are coming from the back, the way they are wearing long gowns and their heads are wrapped, the way they are wearing purple and white and gold. I see the way they are walking so slow, walking, moving their arms in the air like they're dancing, looking back to where they are coming from. I see Wilson and SamPaul's mamas are coming out, the way they are dressed in long gowns, too, moving like they are dancing. I see the way Mrs. Marva Belton is dressed in purple, the way she's walking, walking so slowly, doing her dance. I can see the way Brother and all of the other boys and girls are singing, the way Pastor Fordham is directing them. I can see the way Brother is wanting to come with us, the way Pastor Fordham is having his arm around Brother's shoulder like Pastor is having his arm around mine sometimes. I can see Pastor. I can see the cross. I can see the way Pastor is holding the cross, carrying it on his back, the way he's wearing the crown of thorns around his head, the way Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison, Mr. Curly and Deacon Meeks are coming, the way Pastor is looking like he's crying, crying, carrying the cross, looking like he's Jesus, the blackest Jesus we all have ever seen before.

Sunday

And when a strong boy stands amid the woods on the coldest day for the very first time he is glad, pointing his finger, seeing the animals run wildly against the trees, his breath's smoke against the cold. This boy does not arm himself, for he believes his goods are in peace and there is nothing to make him think otherwise. But when the stronger boy does arm himself, standing amid the cold and kisses a strong boy's neck and this strong boy's body is rendered helpless, retreats back into itself, for he has not felt such awful goodness in his young life, this strong boy knows only to tell that which has been done to him. But when a stronger boy fears their knowing he does only what he feels and cuts down a once strong boy and this strong boy feels such pressure at his temple and falls against the twilight in his pastor's wood and feels how his flesh pours from its source, feels as though he moves, takes flight through time and space because the stronger boy has taken from him that which he was entrusted and has gone into the world and has divided it evenly amongst all of the others.

Day Twenty-Three

The rain has stopped. We're getting home from school. I see the way it's some water left in all the ditches, the way the roads are muddy and there is hardly any gravel left on them. I see the way the crawfishes just build their houses and they're just everywhere, everywhere in Pastor's yard, like little mud castles, all round, like little mud doughnuts just stacked high on top of each other.

Emile, Sergeant and SamPaul are over. Pastor is in his study. I see the way they smile when they see me. And like I see them smiling, I see the way Sergeant has on his rubber boots, the way he's carrying a green net. I see the way Mama is sitting out by the garage watching me, the way Salem is sitting by Mama, combing her doll's hair, acting like she is drinking from her teacup. And even though Salem is combing her doll's hair, I see the way she's putting some clothes on the doll. Mama is thinking about something. I know she's thinking about Brother, what Cephas does to me. I see the way when we are getting home, Mama is taking our tape and safety pins off of our underwear. I feel the way my waist isn't hurting anymore.

Ya'll ready, Sergeant says.

Yeah, we say, Emile, SamPaul and me.

Sergeant is standing at the ditch holding his net. I can see the way Emile is looking at Pastor's yard, the way it's still so wet, the way crawfish houses are everywhere.

Watch this, Emile says. And when Emile says this, I see the way he takes off running. And when Emile is taking off running, running so fast toward all the houses, I'm seeing the way Sergeant is taking off running too, then SamPaul. I'm seeing the way Emile is sliding on the ground like he's a baseball player, knocking down some of the crawfish houses, the way water is flying, the way he's so muddy. I'm feeling the way I'm taking off running too. I see the way Sergeant isn't sliding, the way he's kicking one of the houses, like he's kicking a football.

I'm running, feeling the way I'm happy, the way it's cool out. I see the way SamPaul is sliding like Emile, the way he's lying on his back in the grass, muddy. I feel the way my shoe is kicking one of the houses, the way it's breaking apart and mud is flying in the air, the way some is getting on my pants, and landing on Emile.

Ya'll leave them things alone, Mama is saying. Emile and Sergeant are looking at each other, then looking at me, then looking at Mama and smiling and saying, Sorry. I feel the way I'm breathing hard, the way I'm out of breath. I'm seeing the way Emile is looking down at one of the broken houses, the way his pants are all muddy and green with grass stains. I'm looking in the hole but I can't see anything because it's dark.

I wonder why we can't see them, Emile says.

'Cause they deep down there, Sergeant says.

Well, how they build them then? I say.

At night, SamPaul says.

No they don't, Emile says.

Yeah they do.

They build them with their claws, Sergeant says.

No they don't, Emile says. They build them in the rain. Emile puts his finger in the hole.

Nigger you crazy, Sergeant says.

Watch your mouth, Little Smokey, Mama says, because she doesn't ever call Sergeant by his name.

I'm sorry, Sergeant says, and looks at me.

I see the way Mama is still thinking, the way she's holding the chair's arms. Emile's finger is still in the hole.

You feel something? SamPaul says.

It'll bite you, I say. And then Emile is taking his finger from the hole and it's covered in mud.

Ugh, dookie, he says, and holds his finger up, and laughs.

Ugh, SamPaul says, and Emile wipes it on him. Quit it, SamPaul says, and pushes Emile and we are going back by the ditch.

We are squatting by the ditch. Emile is washing his hands in the water.

Give me the net, Emile says. I see a big one.

Where? Sergeant asks.

I see the way the water is just moving so fast, the way Emile swoops the net in the water. The water splashes. Emile is moving the net, making it go deeper. I see the way he picks the net up fast, the way there's all kind of mud and grass in the net, rocks too. Emile is holding the net, bringing it to Pastor's driveway. I can feel the way it's not as

cold as it was this morning. And like I feel how it's not as cold as this morning, I see the way Miss Maudeline's house is so quiet, even when there are a couple of cars parked in her yard, even though Berna still hasn't come back to school, or Miss Maudeline doesn't come to church anymore. And like I see Miss Maudeline's trailer, I see the way Emile is just dumping the mud and grass and stuff from his net in the driveway, the way he's taking his finger and going through the mud and grass, the way Sergeant is helping him. I see the way Emile's picking up a clump of mud and grass, the way a big crawfish is just starting to move backwards, the way Emile is just grabbing it by its head.

That's a big one, SamPaul says. I wanna catch me one.

The crawfish's claws are open. Emile is putting his finger by the claws and the crawfish is trying to grab his finger. I see how Sergeant is taking his net and going back by the ditch, the way he's just pushing his net in the water, holding it there, then bringing it up. I can see the way everyone in the neighborhood is going over to Deacon and Mrs. Meeks' restaurant for Good Friday and everyone is eating crawfish and corn and potatoes and fried catfish and we're playing baseball and football and stuff. I see the way Pastor and Mr. Merchant and them are taking the big, purple bags of crawfish and putting them in the tin tubs, the way they're putting their hands, even if the crawfish are alive and big and just stirring the crawfish around, putting water on them. I see the way I'm scared to put my hand in the crawfish but Pastor and Mr. Merchant are making Emile and me. I feel the way I'm so nervous when I'm doing this, hoping the crawfish won't bite me.

Sergeant is dumping his net in the driveway. I see the way there are three big crawfish, even some smaller ones, even some tadpoles, everywhere. Salem is coming

over by us. I hear the way she's saying, Let me see. I see the way Sergeant is picking up one, the way the other one is starting to crawl backwards, the way he's taking it and putting it by Salem, like he's going to make it bite her. You better not, Salem says and starts running. I hear the way Salem is telling Mama that Sergeant is trying to make the crawfish bite her. Little Smokey better calm his nerves, Mama is saying.

I feel the way I'm picking up a crawfish, the way I'm making sure it doesn't bite me. I see the way it only has one claw. And because it has one claw, because it must have lost the other one fighting in the water, I see the way it's still trying to get me, the way it's looking like it's mad. Lets make 'em fight, Sergeant says. Come on, Emile says. I'm feeling the way I'm getting happy, because I like it when we make the crawfish fight.

I see the way Emile and Sergeant are putting their crawfish down. The crawfish are backing up. Sergeant is grabbing his crawfish and Emile is grabbing his too. Get 'em, get 'em, claw 'em, get 'em, they are both saying. I feel the way my heart is beating. I see the way Sergeant's crawfish is grabbing Emile's. Ya'll put them down, Emile says to SamPaul and me. Tag team, Sergeant says. Every crawfish for himself, SamPaul says. I'm picking my crawfish up because he's stuck with Emile's.

Emile is pulling his crawfish from mine. I'm seeing I want to put my crawfish in a house, to see if it goes down the hole. I'm walking back by one of the crawfish houses. I'm setting my crawfish by the hole. I see the way SamPaul and Sergeant are still playing with their crawfish, making them fight. My crawfish is just backing up and going in the

hole. Dang! Emile is saying. I see the way Emile is doing the same thing and his crawfish is disappearing down the hole too.

Sergeant's crawfish is backing up from SamPaul's. Puppy is barking and barking. I hear the way he's running. And even if he's supposed to be on his chain, I see the way Puppy is coming by us. I feel the way he's jumping on me, the way he's licking me, the way his nails are sharp. I'm pushing him off of me. I see the way Puppy is going by the crawfish, the way he's sniffing them, the way he's trying to bite them, even if he's not having teeth. And even when Sergeant's crawfish is backing up, I see the way its claws are open. I see the way it's grabbing Puppy's nose. I hear the way Puppy is yelping so loud. I see the way he's running, shaking his nose and the crawfish won't let go. I hear the way we're laughing. I see the way Salem is pointing, laughing. And even though Mama hasn't been smiling, I see the way she's laughing too. I hear the way Pastor is whistling at Puppy. I see the way he's laughing, holding Puppy's chain. I see the way Puppy is running, the way he's stopping, the way he's eating the crawfish now, swallowing it. I'm seeing the way I'm giving the woman communion. I'm knowing my scriptures, even if Pastor isn't asking me, even if I'm not studying them. I'm knowing Pastor can make us fishers of men, fishers of men if we are asking him, if only we are wanting to be.

Day Twenty-Four

It is loud on this bus. School is over and we're almost home and it's loud. I feel how happy I am because school is over, because I'm ready to take this tape off. I see the way Bayless and Peanut are looking at me. I see how Mrs. Anne is driving, holding the big wheel, looking back in her mirror, then looking back at the road, then looking back in her mirror to where we are. And like I see Mrs. Anne looking back, see the way Salem is sitting by me, I hear the way Peanut says, even if it's loud on this bus, even if I'm ready to get home: Matt and Salem, sitting in the tree, K.I.S.S.I.N.G. . . .

I feel the way it is like I can't breathe, like someone is punching me in the stomach. I feel the way my ears are getting warm, the way my stomach is falling, falling to my feet. I hear the way they are laughing. I see the way Salem is looking at me, looking at me like she's about to cry. I'm putting my head on the seat in front of me. I feel the way tears are in my eyes. I feel the way my fist is balled, the way it's so tight, the way my eyes are starting to sting.

The bus is slowing down. And like I feel the way the bus is slowing down, I hear the way the brakes are loud, the way Bayless and Peanut are whispering. They are smiling, looking at me, acting like they are kissing, pointing to Salem, laughing.

The bus is stopping. I am standing up. Salem is crying. I am letting her go first. I see the way Mrs. Anne is looking back at me in her mirror, holding her hands on the wheel. And like I see this, I feel the way I'm walking slowly. I feel the way my fist is so tight, the way it feels so big. Bayless and Peanut are still looking at me.

I am walking, feeling like I'm moving in slow motion, like I'm not myself. I see the way I'm looking at Bayless. I feel the way I am raising my fist. I'm bringing my fist back. I'm bringing my fist back and I feel the way I'm hitting Bayless in his face. I am hitting Bayless. He is pulling my shirt. I am hitting him. My shirt is tearing and it is almost coming off. I am hitting Bayless.

Mrs. Anne is grabbing me, pulling me off of Bayless. He is holding his eye. I'm breathing so hard, crying. Why you hit him, Matt? Mrs. Anne is yelling in my ear. Huh, Matt? Why you hit him, she is saying. You can't go around just hitting people every time you think you want to. You can't do that on my bus—

Mrs. Anne is holding me. I hear the way the bus is quiet. I see the way everyone is looking at me. I can see the tape. I can see the way Mrs. Anne is looking at the tape. I can see Salem standing in the front of the bus by the stairs, crying, the way Emile is by her. I feel the way the gray tape is wrapped around my waist, wrapped around my waist and everyone is looking at me, looking like they don't know what to say, don't know what's around my waist and Mrs. Anne is not saying anything, just looking, looking like she can't believe what she is seeing.

Even if we are finished eating and Mama is sitting on the bed folding towels, and Salem is helping her, I hear the way the phone is ringing. And like I hear the way the phone is ringing, I hear the way it stops, the way Sister Pastor is picking it up. I see the way I'm hitting Bayless, the way everyone is looking at me, the way Mrs. Anne's mouth is open.

I feel the way I'm so shame. I feel the way I'm scared, the way I don't want to get in trouble.

Evening, Annie, Sister Pastor is saying.

I hear the way Sister Pastor is calling Mama, the way Mama is finishing her folding and setting them on the bed. I see the way she looks at me, the way she walks out of the room. Salem is looking at me too. I see the way she looks scared.

Mama is going in the kitchen. Hello, Mama is saying. Unh, huh, Unh, huh, Mama is saying because she's listening to Mrs. Anne, listening to her tell what I did today. I feel the way I'm scared, the way I want to cry. Thank you, Mrs. Annie. Bye-Bye, Mama is saying and hanging up the phone.

Even though I'm not up there, not in the kitchen, I know Mama is mad because her voice is shaking. I hear the way Sister Pastor is asking Mama what's wrong and she's not saying anything. I see the way I'm going sit on the bed, the way Salem is looking at me. I feel the way I'm getting out of breath, the way it's like my chest is filling with air.

Mama is crying. She is closing the door. I see the way she is looking at me, looking at me like she's tired. I'm sad and scared all at the same time. Mama is going to the drawer where the tape and safety pins are. I feel the way I want to run away, not be here in Pastor's house. And like I feel the way I want to run away, not be in Pastor's house, I see the way Mama is getting an old shirt and wrapping the tape and safety pins in them.

Mama is looking at me. Mama is mad and looking at me. She is coming towards me. Mama is almost running, coming towards me, like she's a mean bull, charging. I

feel the way I'm falling back, the way Mama is on top of me. You give me that fist, Matt, you give it here. You give me that thing.

Mama is trying to open my fist. I feel the way I'm straining, the way Mama's nails are cutting my fingers. You can't keep taking it out on people, Matt, you can't keep doing it, Mama is saying. Now you give me that thing. You give it here right now.

I feel the way I'm crying, the way I'm straining, straining so Mama doesn't open my hand. I can see Mr. Mavis, the way his face is looking, like someone is scratching it up and then giving it to him so he can wear it. I can hear what he's telling me, see the way he's crying. I am not opening my fist. I can feel the way Mama is letting go of my fist, the way she's starting to hit me, hit my legs with her hands, the way she is getting off of me. I can hear the way she's crying, the way Salem is crying. I can feel the way Mr. Mavis is holding my fist and I'm never opening it, feel the way Mama is hitting me some more, hitting me and I'm seeing the way Sister Pastor is grabbing her, grabbing Mama and Mama is breathing so hard, breathing, crying and my fist is still closed and I still can't ever open it.

Day Twenty-Five

I'm standing in line, feeling the way I'm nervous, the way I don't want to get on the bus and go to school. Mama is standing in line too. The bus is pulling up. I see the way Fatima is getting on and SamPaul and Wilson, and Salem is holding Mama's hand. I feel the way Mama is grabbing my wrist, the way she's leading me to the steps. Go on, Mama is telling Salem and Salem is getting on the bus, looking back. Your brother has something to tell Mrs. Anne.

My stomach is turning. Mrs. Anne is looking at me. Sit with Fatima, Mrs. Anne is telling Salem. Bye, Mama, Salem is saying and going sit down. My feet are heavy and don't want to walk. I see the way I'm stepping on the first step, then the next one. I'm standing at the top of the stairs. Mrs. Anne is looking at me, waiting. Everyone is quiet. Go on, Mama is saying. I feel the way I'm so shy, the way I want to cry, the way I'm shaking. I feel the way everyone is watching me. I don't want everyone watching me. I hear the way they are whispering. I am trying to catch my breath, even though I haven't been running. And even though I can see the way Mama is trying to open my fist, even if I can feel how nervous and scared I am, I hear the way I'm saying, I'm sorry, Mrs. Anne. I see the way Mrs. Anne smiles and says, Apology taken. And then I look back down the stairs and see the way Mama looks tired. Then I hear the way Mama says, Sorry, and her eyes are filling with water. I ain't met a nicer person since we come here, Mama says.

And since I'm feeling sad, seeing the way Mama's eyes have so much water in them, I see the way Mrs. Anne looks like she's going to cry too. I'm feeling like I'm

wanting to go to sleep. And then I hear the way she tells Mama, Thank you, then says to me, You'll sit up here by me for two weeks. I can see the way the seat behind Mrs. Anne is empty. I hear the way the bus is still running.

I am sitting down, moving over by the window. Mrs. Anne is closing the door. Mama is going across the road and not looking back. I feel the way we're starting to go, the way we're getting to the curve and the bus is turning. I hear the way people are talking. I feel the way I'm sad. I see the way I am running, the way no one is catching me, the way I'm running, the way I'm in the woods, running, and it's cold, and no one is ever catching me.

It's recess. I'm on the playground. There is a white lady walking towards me. I see the way Mrs. Fuller is walking with her. I'm seeing I know who the woman is now. It's Mrs. Doucet. And then I see the way Mrs. Fuller is pointing at me. I am wanting to run but I'm not.

The bell is ringing and I'm walking with Mrs. Doucet to the office. I see the way people are getting in their lines to go to class. The halls are quiet. I see the way the halls are so dark when the lights are going out, the way it's so loud, the way teachers are blowing their whistles and flashing their flashlights. I can hear the thunder.

We are going in Mrs. Doucet's office. I see the way Mama is sitting in one seat, the way Pastor is sitting in the other. I feel the way my heart is falling, the way the air is leaving my chest. And then I see the way Mr. Vidrine is sitting in the corner, the way

he's holding his clipboard, reading some papers. I feel the way I'm losing my breath some more, the way I need some water.

I am sitting down between Mama and Pastor. Mrs. Doucet coughs. And like I hear the way she coughs, I see the way she looks down at her desk, picks up her coffee mug and takes a sip. I see the way Mama looks so sad, the way she's shaking, even if it's not that cold in here. I hear the way she's breathing. Pastor is not looking at me. He is looking straight in front of him, not looking at me.

Mrs. Ephraim, Mrs. Doucet says, and puts her elbows on the desk, are you aware of why we called you in? Mama is silent at first. Yes, Mama says and her voice is weak. Mama coughs. Matthias' behavior of late has not been, Mrs. Doucet says, looking at Mama, then at me, well, let me put it like this, as favorable as we would like it. Mama shakes her head. I can see the way Pastor is looking at Mrs. Doucet. Between hitting classmates and the incident on the bus yesterday, it seems something needs to be done. And when she is saying this, I see the way she looks at Mr. Vidrine a little. I hear the way Mama isn't saying anything. Mrs. Ephraim, Mrs. Doucet says, are you aware of the gray, she looks down at her paper, moving her glasses so she can see, what Mrs. Anne described as looking like duct tape, wrapped around Matthias' waist and underwear? And when I'm hearing the way Mrs. Doucet is saying this, I see the way Mama shakes her head no. And like I see the way Mama shakes her head no, I see the way Pastor looks at Mama, then looks at me. And then I feel the way, even if I'm not looking at him, Mr. Vidrine is looking at me. I feel the way I don't want Mr. Vidrine looking at me, the way I don't want anyone watching me, making me feels so nervous, so shy.

Is everything alright at home? Mrs. Doucet asks. And even though I hear the way the woman is asking this, I hear the way Mama doesn't say anything at first. I hear the way she takes a breath. I hear the way Mama says, Fine, ma'am, everything's fine, and her voice is still weak. Pastor doesn't say anything either.

Mrs. Doucet, Mr. Vidrine says, for a boy that's gone through as much trauma as Matt has, you know the fire and all, his behavior doesn't surprise me. I am not looking at him. I'm seeing the fire. I can see Grandma Sherry. I am, however, worried that if his behavior escalates, that someone could get hurt. I'm seeing the way I'm hitting Bayless, the way I'm hitting Clay. I can see the way Salem is holding her stomach. I can see my fist, even if I don't want to see it, even though I don't know why Mr. Mavis is giving it to me.

I see the way Mr. Vidrine is standing up, the way he's holding something in his hands. Then I see the way he walks over to by where Mrs. Doucet's desk is, the way he leans on her desk, the way he sets the medicine bottles there. They are orange with white on them.

That's why I think it's best we medicate again, he says, looking at Mama. And then I see the way Mama looks at me, then looks at him, the way tears are coming from her eyes. And like I see the way Mama is crying, the way her lips are trembling, I hear the way Mr. Vidrine says, These are the same ones we had before. I got them from the doctor this morning, higher dosage, though. They should help regulate his behavior. He is showing Mama the bottle. Mama is wiping the tears from her face. And these, he says, as Matt has told me he's still not sleeping, should help him sleep better.

I can hear the way Mrs. Doucet is saying, Mrs. Ephraim, if something is going on, it's perfectly fine to tell us. I can see the way Pastor is looking at Mama, the way he is thinking. I can hear the way Mrs. Doucet is saying, Is everything fine, Pastor? I can see how Pastor smiles, the way he looks Mrs. Doucet in the eyes. I hear the way Pastor breathes out, the way he says, Mighty fine, ma'am. Good lord is mighty fine my way, for He is still on the cross and ain't yet come down.

School is not out yet and we're riding in Pastor's van, going home, Mama, Salem and me. Pastor is driving and I can hear the way it's so quiet in here. I can hear the cars passing by outside. I can see the way Salem is looking at me, holding her booksack on her lap. I see the way Mama is sitting, looking out the window. And even if Pastor is driving, even though Mama is not looking at him, I see the way Pastor's arm is moving so fast. I see the way Pastor is hitting Mama, the way he's putting his hand back on the steering wheel. I see the way Mama holds her stomach, the way Salem looks at me, the way I look at her. I feel the way I can't move, the way it's like I'm stuck in place and can't move from this seat, even if I want to, even if I want to help Mama. I see the way we're turning in the driveway, the way Sister Pastor's car is parked under the garage, the way Salem looks at me, the way Pastor slows down, even if he's not under the carport yet. I feel the way I'm so mad, the way I'm breathing, the way I want to hit Pastor, hit him in the face, hit him with my fist. I hear the way Mama is catching her breath, the way she's breathing, like she's coming back to life, catching her breath, breathing, like she's been dead, breathing, coming back to life again.

I can see Mr. Prudhomme, the way he's wearing a green suit, shiny green shoes, with alligator skin on them, the way his hair is long, like a woman's, the way his rings are gold on his fingers. He is grabbing the microphone. Church and practice are finishing. I can see the way Pastor is looking at Mr. Prudhomme like he doesn't want him to sing. I can see the way Bishop Toms, Mr. Prudhomme's bishop, is smiling like he's proud. I can see the way Mr. Prudhomme's wife is looking at him, the way he's introducing her to Mama earlier. I can hear the way Mrs. Jimison is starting to play the piano. I can see the way Deacon Meeks is sitting in his wheelchair by me. I can see the way he has no legs. I hear the way Deacon Meeks is breathing. I see the way he's smiling. I can hear the piano. Mr. Prudhomme is closing his eyes. He is opening his mouth. I can see his gold tooth. I can hear the words, his voice:

*Because he lives
I can face tomorrow
Because he lives
All fear is gone...*

I can see the way Mama's looking, the way she's crying. I can see the way Pastor is hitting her, the way Mama is holding her stomach. I can hear the way she's breathing when she's catching her breath. I can see the way Sister Pastor and Mrs. Marva Belton are raising their hands, waving them, the way Mrs. Meeks is holding Deacon Meeks' hand. I can hear the way Deacon Meeks is laughing. I can feel the way my stomach is trembling. Deacon Meeks is crying. I can see the way the tears are coming down his face, the way he's not wiping them, the way Mr. Prudhomme is singing. I'm hearing Mr. Prudhomme and feeling the way I'm wanting to cry, cry like Deacon Meeks is, laugh and

cry all at the same time, just like Deacon Meeks is right now because Mr. Prudhomme is singing and singing and it's just sounding so good, so good all within the walls of this place.

Day Twenty-Six

I am blowing my nose and Mrs. Fuller is writing and I am writing with my left hand and I am seeing these words and I am knowing them and I am saying them Freedom and Proclamation and Constitution and Declaration and Independence and I am seeing these numbers and I am knowing these numbers and Tabitha and Karly are talking and Mitchell is writing and Clay and Dustin and Rusty are laughing and I am doing my work and Mr. Vidrine and Mrs. Doucet are coming in the classroom and so is Mr. Farrow and they are closing the door and their shoes are walking on the floor and I am doing my work and they are coming by me and they are looking at Mrs. Fuller and she is looking at them and she is winking her eye and Mr. Vidrine is putting his thumb up and smiling and rubbing me on my head and Mrs. Fuller is smiling and Mr. Farrow's hands are in his pockets and Clay and Dustin and Rusty are not talking and they are doing their work and I am doing mine and Mitchell is hugging Mrs. Doucet and she is hugging him and Mr. Farrow is petting my back and Mr. Vidrine is happy and petting my head some more and Good puppy Clay is saying and Dustin and Rusty are laughing and Knock it off Mr. Farrow is saying and the bell is ringing and the bell is ringing loud and everybody's talking and Good boy Mr. Vidrine and Mr. Farrow and Mrs. Doucet are saying Good boy they are smiling and Good boy I am.

Day Twenty-Seven

I am watching the yellow grader and the dump trucks and Pastor and Sister Pastor and Mr. Merchant and Mrs. Larna and Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly are outside and the sun is shining and it's warm and the birds are on the lines and Puppy is barking and Salem and Fatima are playing and SamPaul and Wilson and Emile are throwing the baseball and I'm watching the dump trucks dump the gravel and drive down the road and dump some more gravel and the grader is pushing and smoothing the gravel and the white man from the church is coming and parking his blue car and shaking everybody's hands and Pastor is shaking his hand and laughing and they are talking and everyone is smiling and the man is saying Get out and vote and they are saying Will do and saying Thank you and Mr. Gilray is putting out his cigarette and Cephas is spinning his basketball and the grader is pushing the gravel and the man in the orange shirt is holding the sign and cars are stopping and the man holding the sign is letting the cars go by and they are passing by the grader and dump trucks and people are waving and smiling and everybody's waving and happy and waving and the gravel is making noise when it is hitting the bottom of the cars and it is Friday and Pastor's barbecue pit is going and he is flipping the meat and having hotdogs and hamburgers and chicken and I'm sneezing and blowing my nose and my throat is scratching and the grader is loud and it is pushing gravel and pushing gravel and everybody is happy and eating and dust is flying and people are laughing and happy and dust is flying and floating and the air is warm and the trucks are loud and the dust is flying and Mr. Charlotte is riding his go kart around the

curve and everyone is pointing and gravel is flying and Mr. Charlotte is going fast and dust is flying and someone is saying Mr. Charlotte is not having brakes and turning and turning and gravel is flying and Mr. Charlotte is flipping against the gravel and flipping and dust is flying and Mr. Curly is running and Mr. Merchant and SamPaul and Wilson and Puppy is barking and Mr. Gilray is laughing and Mama is holding my face and looking into my eyes and saying Lord God no more pills Lord God no more.

Day Twenty-Eight

Mama is looking and not saying anything, looking like she's thinking. Practice is over and people are standing in a circle. I can see Pastor and the cross, the way he's holding it, walking with it, the way Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are acting like they are whipping him. I can hear the way we are singing our song, the way Mrs. Jimison is playing the piano and helping us. Even though it's not Sunday but Saturday, I see how we are about to do the altar call. I hear the way Pastor is taking prayer requests, the way Mrs. Marva Belton is saying pray for her sick husband, the way SamPaul's mama is asking for a job, the way Mrs. Meeks is asking for health. I feel the way Mama is holding my hand. I feel the way her hand is just shaking, the way it's sweating. I feel the way Salem is holding my wrist, the way my fist won't open. And even though my fist won't open, I can hear the way Mama is breathing. I see the way everyone is holding hands, the way they are bowing their heads. And even if Pastor is about to pray, even if everyone's heads are bowed, I hear the way Mama breathes out. I hear the way her lips are smacking, the way she is speaking:

Secrets sometimes seem like they got a mind of their own. Do any and everything they think they want to. You think you gonna do this or that, and fore you know it, they doing something else. Secrets is some of the ficklest things I come to know. But that's the thing I come to know about them, you can hold them for as long as you want but if you ain't careful, they'll half drive you crazy. I've felt like that at times. I ain't crazy, though. Secrets are nasty, ugly things, far nastier than people. I come to know you got to

be careful with them. They ain't nothing to be played with. They'll hurt you. I've been hurt. Hurt a whole lot. See, that's what them secrets of mine have done to me, scarred me up and made me feel so ugly. I ain't hardly ever had a pretty-feeling day in my life, 'cept when each of my children were born. Not even when I married my husband. And he's gone too. I come to know there are two kinds of secrets. There are dead secrets and alive secrets. The dead secrets is the kind of secrets that are small, the kind folks don't hardly pay no notice to. Dead secrets is secrets that don't live, die soon as they touch the air. But them alive secrets—them the ones that keep you up all night. Those are the ones that leave that nasty taste in your mouth and that aching in your stomach, make you pull your hair out, worrying— Lord, blessed father, Pastor is saying. Worrying, Mama is saying. We thank you this evening, Pastor says. Come by here. Show your face.

I can hear the way Mama is stopping talking. For You made us and You know all about us. And even though Pastor is saying this, I see the way everyone is looking at him, the way they are not believing he is stopping Mama from talking. I see the way they are looking at Mama, the way Mama is looking at Pastor, the way she's mad. I hear the way Mama is breathing so hard. I see how her lip is trembling.

I see the way Salem is looking at Mama, the way all the women are shaking their heads like they are not believing, closing their eyes, praying, not believing Pastor is stopping Mama's testimony. I know the way I am having secrets, the way I am having scars, the way I am feeling ugly, the way I'm not knowing my father. I'm knowing the way I want Mama, Brother, Salem and me to have a pretty day, a pretty day that's ours, a pretty day without secrets, one without scars, one that's our very own.

Sunday

What woman having a husband allows him to slip from the shores into the waters as he fishes, where he cannot swim and their sons, two and five, are home, awaiting the two of them, and this woman swims after her husband but the waters are too strong, stealing him from her and she does continue, seeking diligently, swimming and swimming until the day is gone and there is no more light, and no more man to be found? And when she does not find her man, cannot tell her children, her sons, that their father has gone only for a while, this woman searches, unhappily, within the arms of another man and she cannot tell her neighbors, for too little time has passed, that this new daughter is not her husband's and cannot tell this daughter who is her proper father. For it is said that there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one woman that does not tell the truth regarding the husband she has lost.

Day Twenty-Nine

The rain is coming down. A car is pulling up in the driveway. I don't know who it is. The lights are turning off. The doors are opening. Two black umbrellas are opening. I see the way two white women are getting out, the way their coats are long. They are closing their doors. They are holding their purses. I see the way one is holding a clipboard like Mr. Vidrine's. They are disappearing into the garage.

I hear the way the doorbell is ringing. Pastor is opening the door.

Evening, Pastor says.

I am in the kitchen. I see the way the women are standing at the door.

Evening, the women are saying. Sister Pastor is standing by Pastor.

We don't mean to bother, Pastor Brackens, but we got the complaint so we're following up.

Complaint? Sister Pastor says, and fixes her dress.

I can see the way Sister Pastor looks like she doesn't know what the woman is saying.

May we come in? one of the women asks.

Sure enough, Pastor says.

We don't plan to keep you this evening, the other one says, and smiles. They stand at the door, not coming all the way in.

Let me take your coats, Pastor says.

Mighty fine, Pastor, the women say and take off their wet coats.

I see the way Sister Pastor isn't smiling, the way Pastor is taking the women's coats and bringing them to the utility room. I see the way the woman holding the clipboard looks around. I see the way the T.V. is on. I see their purses are still on their shoulders.

Someone is behind me. I feel the way Mama is grabbing my shoulder. Let's make it, Mama says, low, so no one can hear.

Cephas' door is closed. I see the way Mama looks at his door, the way she rolls her eyes, the way she takes a breath. I see the way Salem is sitting on the floor, the way Mama is going and sitting on the bed. Who's that, I say. Mama takes another breath. I see the way Salem is coloring in her book. Social Services, Mama says. I hear the way Salem is trying to read, trying to read but never can, never can even though Mama is always trying to help her.

I'm seeing the way women, just like these women, are coming after we first move in with Pastor. I can see how they are checking, following up, making sure everything is fine. I see the way Pastor and Sister Pastor are smiling and saying everything is fine. I can hear the way Pastor is saying he's just happy to be doing God's will.

I can hear the way the women are talking in the kitchen, the way one of them is saying her mother is having an apron the same color as Sister Pastor's. I can hear the way Sister Pastor is telling her she is making it herself, that she is loving to sew anytime she gets a chance.

Mama is going to the door. I see the way she looks down the hall, then closes it all the way. Salem is coloring and coloring, making her tongue move and move, licking

her lips, concentrating, trying to say the words under the pictures. I hear the way feet are walking up the hall, the way the floor creaks, even if it's having carpet over it. They are stopping. The women are stopping. I hear a knock on a door. Cephas' door is opening. I hear the way the women are saying evening to Cephas. I hear the way Cephas is saying evening to them. He'll be graduating next year, Sister Pastor says. And like I hear the way Sister Pastor says this, I don't hear the women say anything. My oldest graduated last year, one of the women says.

The floor creaks again. They are standing at our door. I feel the way my stomach is getting nervous. I see the way Mama is looking nervous too. I see how Salem is still coloring. I hear the way there's a knock at the door. Even though I know Mama is nervous, I see the way she's getting up to open it, the way she's fixing her dress.

Sister Pastor and the two women are standing at the door. Evening, the women are saying. Evening, Mama is saying. I see the way they look around, looking in our room, seeing the way it's clean. They are looking back at Mama. I see the way Salem looks up and stops coloring. I see how our room is clean, the way our beds are made and the clothes are put away. Pastor is walking in the hallway. I see the way he is standing behind them now.

Even though the women are saying evening and shaking Mama's hand, I hear the way Mama is saying, This is Matthias, and this is Salem. Salem is standing up. So cute, the woman with the clipboard says. I see the way they look at me. I feel the way I shake their hands. I see the way everyone looks at my fist. I know the way I'm supposed to shake with my right hand. The women smile at me. I see the way the woman looks at

her clipboard. I hear the way she says, Where's your other son, ma'am? Mama doesn't say anything. They are looking at Mama, waiting for her to say something. Mama is thinking. I see the way Pastor smiles. I hear the way he says, Away at school. Whereabout? They ask. I see how Sister Pastor is looking at Pastor, the way Mama isn't looking at him. I see the way his mouth moves into a smile. I hear the way Pastor laughs. New Calvary, he says. New Calvary? The women say.

I can see the white houses, the church. I can see the way Brother and the other boys and girls are wearing white robes, carrying their bibles, the way they are eating and always keeping their hands on the bible. I can see the way I'm writing with my left hand, the way I'm keeping my fist in my pocket. I can see the way Pastor Fordham is walking around in his white robe, the way Pastor is walking around in his too. The women frown. I see how they are looking like something is smelling in the room. Not exactly school from what I understand, Pastor, the woman with the clipboard says. Fordham and me go way back, Pastor says.

The women are quiet. I see how they look at one another, the way Sister Pastor looks like she's thinking, like she's not happy. I see how Mama is looking like she's thinking still, holding Salem's hand. I hear the way this room is quiet and the women are looking around, looking like they are ready to go.

We thank ya'll this evening, Mrs. Brackens, Pastor. They hold out their hands. Mighty fine home, the women say, shaking Sister Pastor and Pastor's hand. Sorry for the inconvenience, they both say. I see the way Pastor gets their coats, the way he helps them put them on, the way he smiles at them. I can see the way the rain is still falling,

the way the women are getting in the car, the way the lights and wipers are coming on, the way they are backing out of the driveway and driving on gravel, brand new gravel I know I've seen somewhere before.

Day Thirty

It is dark in this room. I can't sleep, even as I'm closing my eyes, even if I'm trying, I can't sleep. I hear the way Mama and Salem are sleeping, the way they are breathing. I hear the way it's quiet in this house. I feel the way it feels when I pull on my man. I can see Tabitha. I can see the way Cephas is on me, the way I'm on Salem. I can see Pastor. I can feel the way he's touching me. I can taste the way he tastes, smell the way he smells, hear the way he's breathing. I can see the way Pastor is so still, the way he's not moving. I feel the way he's holding my head. I can see the way he's carrying the cross, the way the women are dancing. I can feel my man. I can feel my fist.

I can see Brother and Cephas. I can see Grandma Sherry. I can see her smile, the way she's always happy. I can see the way she's going back to bed, the way I'm outside, the way I'm standing by the pile. I am blowing on the fire. It is starting some more. The ashes are floating in the sky. I can see the way I'm taking a stick and then pushing on the trash, moving the paper around. The whole pile is burning. I can feel the way it is warm. I see the way I'm backing away from the fire. I feel the way I'm happy. And even if it's summer, even if it's hot out, I'm putting my hands to the fire, warming them. I can see the way the smoke is moving in the air, the way it's gray, the way it's black, the way it's disappearing. I can smell the way the plastic is smelling when it is melting. I can hear how glass is popping, the way it's breaking, how the fire is crackling.

These covers are warm. And even though I'm so warm under these covers, I can see the house. I can see the way I'm turning, the way I'm seeing the house. Even though I don't want to, even if I want to see something else, I can see the fire. It is in the kitchen. It is on the curtains, in the window, in the kitchen. I am not moving. I can't move. I'm trying to see something else but I can't. The fire is what I see. The heat is what I feel. I am breathing. I am making my feet move. I can see the way I'm running to the side of the house. There is smoke. There is fire so big. I am running. I can hear the way people are talking, the way they are yelling. I am running. I can see the way they are coming outside. The house is burning. Brother is running. Brother is screaming, yelling, Granny's in the house, Granny's in the house, sleeping!

Everyone is looking. I see the way Mr. Junior is running to the house, the way he's taking a bat and breaking the window. The fire is coming out the window. The fire is the window. Mr. Junior is getting back. I see the way Mama and Salem are driving up, the way Mama is parking. I see the way she is getting out of the car, the way she's crying. I see the way Mama is running towards the house. Mr. Junior is grabbing Mama, grabbing her and they are falling on the ground and Mama is fighting him.

I can hear the sirens. I can hear the way they are getting closer. Everyone is looking, holding their mouths. I can see the way the red fire truck is coming, the way the ambulance is coming too, the way their lights are flashing.

I can see the water. I can see the way the men are spraying the house, the way the fire is so big, the way the hoses are long. I can see the way the firemen are trying to go in but they can't, because the fire is too big. I can feel the way Mama is shaking me, the

way she is slapping me. I can hear the way she is saying, What have you done, what have you done, God, Matthias, what have you done?

I can feel the way I am breathing, the way I can't catch my breath. I can feel the way I am so sad, the way I can't breathe, the way I want to run but can't. I can see the smoke, the way the house is falling. I can hear the way Mama is crying. I can feel the way Mama is hitting me. I can hear the way Brother is saying, Stop, Mama, stop, Mama, please stop. Mama is stopping. She is falling to the ground, crying.

This is what I see. This is what I always hear. Even right now, even though I want to go to sleep, even if I never can, never can since that day, even though I'm so tired, but never can sleep since that day, the fire, Grandma Sherry, the way she dances in the fire, the fire, this is what I feel, what I smell, that day, and this is what I see this night.

Day Thirty-One

I can see the cross, the way it used to be a tree, the biggest tree in Pastor's front yard. I can hear how Pastor is saying it's old, that it's time it come down. I can see the way it's falling, the way Mr. Gilray is cutting it and it's not looking like a tree anymore because it's falling and they are cutting it into so many pieces, the way Mr. Gilray is saying it will make good firewood, and Deacon Meeks is saying, no, it's making good shingles.

The cross is leaning against the wall behind the choir stand. I can see the way Jesus is not on it. I can see the way He is not there. And like I am seeing this cross and Jesus is not there, I can see the cross at St. Augustus. I can see the way it's so big, the way it's going all the way up to the ceiling and the ceiling has so much wood and is pretty, and the cross is just going all the way up there. Jesus is on the cross. Jesus is dying on the cross. I can see the way His arms are spread, the way His hands and feet are nailed. There is blood. I can see the way the blood is going down His side. I can see the thorns, the blood on His head. I hear the way Father Palermo is saying He is dying for our sins. I am not always knowing what sins are. I am not always knowing what they mean, even when Pastor is saying we are going to hell if we are committing them and not asking for forgiveness. I can hear the way I'm asking Mama if I'm sinning, the way she's telling me no, no I'm not. I can see the way I'm in Pastor's study, the way I'm reading my scriptures, reading them, even when I'm not wanting to. I can see the way it

is saying God is loving me and He is giving His son and if I'm believing, I am living always.

I can hear the way Father Palermo is always saying this. I can see the way we are at St. Augustus in the morning, the way people are kneeling, the way they are praying, the way they are crossing their hearts. I can see the stained glass. I can see Mama's rosaries. I can see the way Mama is holding her hands, the way she is eating the bread. I can see the way she's drinking from the cup, the way everyone is sharing. I can see the way I'm putting the bread on the woman's tongue, the way the old man is chewing and chewing, the way he's closing his eyes and chewing. And even though I'm seeing St. Augustus, seeing the cross, I can hear the way everyone is talking, the way they are mad, mad and they are talking:

Don't do a bit of good, Pastor is saying, coming this far and turning back.

Indeed it do if it means our lives, Deacon Jimison says.

You think the good lord turned back, Pastor says.

I know He didn't.

Well then, what you expecting me to do. They scorned him so what you think they'll do to us?

I see the way the women are listening, the way everyone looks like they are thinking.

I just don't know, Deacon Jimison says, and rubs his head.

Don't know what, Deacon, Pastor says, and folds his arms.

Just something about it about don't feel right, Pastor. I mean they come here and break in the church, and what you think they looking for? Who you think put them up to it? Them boys ain't come here on they on accord. They come looking for something.

Yes indeed, Mrs. Jimison says.

Lucky they ain't get nothing, Mrs. Marva Belton says.

Deacon, that happen fore we run it in the paper, Pastor says.

We? Mrs. Marva Belton says, rolling her eyes.

Sure enough, *we*, Pastor says. If they ain't a we in what we's trying to accomplish, I might as well do it myself. Where two or three assemble, my book says.

It'd be fine, Bro. Deacon, Mr. Merchant says, and pats Deacon Jimison on the back. They testing our faith is all. They did it then and they gonna do it now. Seasons change, deacon. White folks don't. You know it.

Lord there's truth, someone says.

I can see the way Mrs. Larna is looking like she's thinking, the way she looks sad.

They call, Mrs. Larna says, almost whispering. Everyone looks at her.

Who? Mr. Merchant says.

White folks, Mrs. Larna is crying. She wipes her face with her hand. Figure the same ones calling Pastor, her voice is shaking and weak.

When? Mr. Merchant asks, looking mad.

Earlier.

Fore we leave the house, earlier?

Mr. Merchant is holding Mrs. Larna's arms, making her look at him.

You got to tell me these things, Larna. You got to tell me this.

I see the way Sister Pastor is going by Mrs. Larna, the way she's putting her arms around her.

I just don't know, Pastor, Mrs. Marva Belton says.

Don't know what, sister? Pastor says. We can talk in circles all night but this thing's got to move forward. We done paid the money.

The money? Deacon Meeks says.

Everyone is looking at Pastor again, like he's saying something they have never heard before.

Ya'll ain't think they let us get in there for free, huh? Pastor says. You know white folks ain't giving nothing away.

Deacon Meeks is shaking his head.

Solomon? Sister Pastor says, still holding Mrs. Larna. Church can't afford that.

Damn Masons, Mr. Merchant says.

I see the way Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly are holding hands.

You could of found another place, Pastor, Deacon Meeks says. Plenty places got stages, got the room you looking for.

Plenty places ain't willing, Pastor says.

We ain't needing much, Pastor. People'll see you and know the point you're making. They know the story. They'll see you taking up that cross and they'll know it, Deacon Meeks says.

Sure they know it, deacon, Pastor says. He is looking at everyone, thinking. Everyone is looking at him. Folks, I told you we was going into the wilderness. Ain't that what I told you? You held your breath. You trusted me. I told you there's a thin line. I told you you was gonna have to trust me, lean and depend. What you think good lord did, huh? You think he sat around not readying himself. No indeed, Saints. He went to the wilderness. He prepared himself. That's what I've been trying to do. He knew the storms was coming. Sure he knew they was raging, Saints. He knew the billows be blowing. Huh, ain't that what He said? You ain't hear what He said in the garden? He knew they'd forsake Him. He knew his own was plotting and wasn't a thing he could do about it. He did His father's will, Saints. What you gonna do? I'm talking about *His* will this evening. Don't you forsake me, Saints, you hear, now don't you go forsaking me this evening.

Day Thirty-Two

I can feel the way it is warm in Pastor's house. I can see the way the T.V. is on. The news is coming on. Pastor is sitting in his chair holding his bible and Mama is sitting in front of Sister Pastor because Sister Pastor is rolling Mama's hair. I can see the way Salem is sitting on the sofa, the way she's taking some of Sister Pastor's pink and green rollers and acting like she's rolling her doll's hair. I can see last night. I can see my dream. I can see the way white men are driving in their trucks, the way they are holding their sticks with fire on them. I can see the way they are in white sheets, the way they are walking up the roads, the way they are standing in front of Pastor's house in a line. I can see the way Pastor is going outside. It is dark and there is fire. I can see the way the men are chasing Pastor, the way he is running, running toward his woods. I see the way Sister Pastor is running and crying and they are chasing her too and she is falling against the gravel and they are getting her.

I can see Grandma Sherry's. I can see the way people are standing outside everywhere. I can feel the way I'm crying, the way I'm breathing so hard. I feel the way I am not myself, the way it is feeling like I am dreaming, like I am somewhere else watching myself, watching all these people. I can see the fire, the way the water is putting it out. I can see her, even though she is not alive, the way Grandma Sherry is dancing. I can see the way she's dancing and happy in the fire. I can see the way the firemen are going into the house. I can see the black bag, the stretcher. I can hear Mama crying, the way Mr. Junior and everyone in the neighborhood are crying and Grandma

Sherry is dancing in the fire, dancing, walking around like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, happy in the fire.

The news lady is talking. Sister Pastor is holding a bobby pin between her lips and rolling Mama's hair around a green roller, then putting the bobby pin through Mama's hair. The roller is holding. I can smell the way the stuff is smelling that Sister Pastor is putting in Mama's hair after she is washing it. I can see the way it's like shampoo in Mama's hair but it is stinking like sewage outside in the ditches. I can hear the way Mama is saying it's burning. I can see how Sister Pastor is washing the stuff out of Mama's hair, the way Mama is wrapping her head in a towel, the way Mama is putting the bag thing on her head and is sitting under the dryer, the way she is doing her word puzzle book.

Sister Pastor is putting another roller in Mama's hair. She is almost finished. I can see the way the news lady is talking. I can see the way the screen is going to a man now. I can see the way it's dark outside where the man is. I can see the gates. I know them. I can see the sign. I know it. I can see the way the man is holding the microphone. Sister Pastor is not rolling Mama's hair anymore. She is stopping because she is seeing what I am seeing, knowing what I am knowing.

I can feel the way my heart is beating, the way my stomach is getting warm. Pastor is sitting up in his chair. I can hear the way it's quiet in Pastor's house, except for the man talking on the T.V. They are at New Calvary. I can see the sign. I can see the way the man that is playing the organ and it's sounding so good that day, is talking to

police. I can see the way there are so many police cars. I can hear the way the newsman is saying that a girl is running away and she's running to someone's house and they are calling the police and they are saving the girl and she is telling them she is living at Pastor Fordham's, New Calvary and she is being hurt by the man that is playing the organ.

I can see the way Pastor Fordham is dressed in white. I can see the way he is standing at the gates. I can see the way news people are standing around him, holding their microphones. I can hear the way he is saying, Go on home, folks, no wrong deeds done here, mere speculation. I can see the way he waves his hand and turns and walks into the darkness. I can hear the way Mama is crying. I can see the way Sister Pastor is holding Mama, the way she's rocking her in her arms, rocking Mama and rollers are falling from Mama's hair, falling to the ground and Pastor is quiet, not saying anything, walking out of the room, and Salem is picking up the rollers, putting them in her doll's hair.

Day Thirty-Three

I can see the way we are walking, Mama, Salem, and me. I feel the way this gravel feels beneath my feet. I feel the way I'm happy because school is letting out for the Easter holiday and we are having a week off and not having to go back to school, where everyone is always picking on me, always making me feel too shy.

I am seeing Pastor's house. I can see the way Sister Pastor is standing by the garage, the way she is looking at us. I can see the way this neighborhood is quiet today.

And even though we are walking, even if this neighborhood is quiet today, even when we are getting to the curve, I can see last night. I can hear the way Mama is getting on the phone and trying to call Mr. Prudhomme. I can see the way she keeps hanging up the phone and dialing again because he's not picking up. I can see the way the news people are at New Calvary. I can see the way the girl is crying, saying the man on the organ is hurting her. I can hear the way Mama is crying when we are in the bed. I can hear the way Pastor is telling Sister Pastor she better not take Mama anywhere, she better not leave the house. I can feel the way I am falling to sleep, the way I'm dreaming.

I can see Mr. Prudhomme. I can see his car. I can see the way his car is parked in front of Pastor's driveway. I can see the way Pastor won't let him come into the driveway. I see the way Pastor is standing, keeping one hand in his pocket, and pointing with the other. Mr. Prudhomme is getting out of his car. His wife is sitting in it. Ya'll stay with Sister Pastor, Mama is saying. I see the way Salem is standing by Sister Pastor. Don't you step foot on my drive, Pastor is saying, pointing to Mr. Prudhomme. Ain't

right what you doing, Pastor, Mr. Prudhomme is saying. Can't hold this woman against her will, Pastor. She's under my roof. She's in my care, Pastor is saying. Cars are passing by and not stopping. I see the way Mama is getting by Pastor. I see the way Pastor is turning and seeing her. I see the way his eyes are big and white. And even if Mama is walking, trying to leave with Mr. Prudhomme, I see the way Pastor is grabbing Mama. I see the way he is holding her, not letting go, the way Mama is starting to fight him. You get your hands off me, Mama is saying. That's my son down there. You get your hands off me. And even though he's wearing his suit, I see the way Mr. Prudhomme is moving by Mama and Pastor. Solomon, Sister Pastor is yelling. Sister Pastor is running. Mr. Prudhomme is grabbing Pastor. Sister Pastor is grabbing Mama. Salem is holding my hand. Pastor is letting go of Mama. Sister Pastor and Mama are falling on the ground. Pastor is hitting Mr. Prudhomme. I see the way Mrs. Prudhomme is opening the car door and getting out because Mr. Prudhomme is on the ground. I hear the way Mama and Sister Pastor are crying. I see the way they are holding each other on the ground. Man can't serve two masters, Pastor says. Mr. Prudhomme is wiping his lip because it's bleeding. I see how his wife is helping him up, the way she's hugging him and crying, helping him up. Won't have the devil under my roof, Pastor is saying, hitting his chest. You the damn devil, Mr. Prudhomme is saying, crying. Man can't serve two masters, Pastor is pointing his gun, and Sister Pastor is helping Mama up and Mr. Curly and Mrs. Reba are coming outside and Mr. Merchant and Mrs. Larna and Mr. Prudhomme and his wife are getting back into their car and they are driving off and

Puppy is licking Mama and Sister Pastor in their face, licking them all over, licking them, even though they are not wanting him to, even if he's liking their tears.

I can see Mr. Smokey's horses in the field, the way they are eating grass. I can see some of the chickens in the road, guineas too, the way they are starting to go in the grass. I can see the way they are getting run over sometimes because they are trying to cross the road. I can see the way the stray dogs are killing the chickens and Mr. Smokey is trying to shoot the dogs with his gun.

Mama is quiet. I see the way she's walking, looking straight in front of her. The sky is clear. I see the way Mr. Smokey is sitting on his porch. Sergeant is sitting by him. Mr. Smokey is waving at us. And like I see the way Mr. Smokey waving, I hear the way he says,

How ya'll doing this evening?

I see the way Mr. Smokey stands up. I see how Mama looks at him, like she's tired.

Fine, Mama says, and keeps walking.

Mr. Smokey steps down off his porch and comes toward us. I see the way Sergeant looks like he's sharpening a stick with his knife. I am wanting a knife like Sergeant but Mama isn't letting me get one.

I see the way chickens are in the trees, the way the guineas are just walking in the yard, pecking the ground. And even when some of the chickens and guineas are pecking the ground, I see the way some of the chickens, the ones with the red on their heads, not

the fighting roosters, are getting on the other chickens and pecking them on the necks and flapping their wings. Like I see the way the guineas are walking around pecking the ground and so many chickens are jumping on each other and pecking each other on the necks, flapping their wings, I see the way Mr. Smokey smiles at us.

Gonna boil some chicken for dinner, Mr. Smokey says. Why don't ya'll come and sit a while?

I see the way Mama thinks, the way she looks up the road, then back toward Pastor's. I see the way Mr. Smokey smiles at Mama. I hear the way Mama breathes out. I see how she smiles.

Sounds good, Mama says, and looks back towards Pastor's and we walk so we can be in Mr. Smokey's driveway, on his porch.

I am out of breath. I can smell the chicken boiling. Sergeant, Salem, and me are running around. I see the way Mama and Mr. Smokey are talking. I hear the way Mama laughs. And like I hear the way Mama laughs, I hear the way Mr. Smokey laughs. I see the way Mama and Mr. Smokey are drinking some beer, even though I'm not seeing Mama drinking anything since we are coming to live with Pastor. I can feel the way I am happy seeing Mama laugh. I can see the way Mr. Smokey is old and Mama is younger than him. I can feel the way I'm catching my breath now. I can see the way Salem is standing on the stool. I can see the way Sergeant is putting a saddle on a sawhorse and helping Salem on. Salem is acting like she is riding a horse, waving her hand, acting like the horse is bucking her. The saddle is slipping. Salem is falling off. That's fun, Salem is

saying, smiling. Put it back on, she says. I see the way Sergeant is laughing, the way he's putting the saddle back on the sawhorse.

Ya'll come and get it, Mr. Smokey says.

Sergeant and me run so we can get something to eat. Wait for me, Salem says. I see the way she is trying to get off the sawhorse, making her leg reach for the stool. I see the way she is getting off, the way she is running. I see the way Pastor is kissing Salem, the way I am hitting her.

Mr. Smokey is turning off the gas on his tank. The blue fire is going out. Mama is smiling. Even though we're outside, even if Mr. Smokey's yard is dirty because there are chickens and old poop everywhere, I smell the way this chicken smells so good. Mr. Smokey grabs some plates and gives us one. What you like, pretty girl? He asks Salem. A leg, Salem says. Mr. Smokey puts a chicken leg on Salem's plate, then some pork'n beans and gives it to her and winks his eye. And like I see the way Mr. Smokey gives Salem a plate and winks his eye, the way meat is looking white because it is boiling, I see the way he puts a leg on my plate with some pork'n beans and gives it to me.

And even when I'm holding my plate, seeing how steam is just coming off my chicken leg, I see the way Sergeant is getting a wing and Mama and Mr. Smokey are getting a breast and thigh and some pork'n beans too.

I see the way my chicken is so white, not looking like when Mama and Sister Pastor are frying it. I see the way Sergeant is getting the seasoning bottle and putting some seasoning on his wing. And even if Sergeant is putting some seasoning on his wing, I see how he puts his finger in the seasoning and tastes it. He keeps licking his

finger. And then Mama puts some seasoning on Salem's chicken and she tastes it and says, Mr. Smokey, this chicken is good. And Mr. Smokey smiles and says, Thank you, precious. And like I put me some seasoning on my chicken, I taste the way this chicken is so good, the way the seasoning tastes. And then I hear how Mr. Smokey says, Sergeant, get your company some juice. And like I hear the way Mr. Smokey says this, I see the way Sergeant sucks his fingers and put his plate down and goes into the house. And then I see the way Sergeant is coming out of the house with a bottle of apple juice, the way he's holding some cups.

Sergeant is pouring us some juice. Mama and Mr. Smokey are drinking their beer. I taste the way this apple juice is so sweet and good. And like I taste the way this apple juice tastes, the way it's so sweet, the way it's cool, the way this chicken is so good, I hear the way Mr. Smokey and Mama are talking and laughing. And like I hear the way Mama laughs, even when she's chewing her food, even if I try not to, I can see Brother. I can see the way I want to know what he's doing, even if I know Pastor Fordham is making him learn his scriptures and sing in the choir, even though he's not wanting to.

And like I'm thinking about Brother, seeing the way we used to run around the house, playing and laughing, telling jokes, I see the way Pastor's house looks. I see the way it's orange and white, with bricks. I see the way Mr. Merchant and Mrs. Larna's house looks, Mr. Charlotte's house and shop. And since I'm seeing the way these houses look, the way this neighborhood is so big, the way there are so many trees everywhere, even though white men are coming to cut them down sometimes, even if Mr. Gilray is

wanting to sell them, I see the way Pastor is coming outside, the way he's looking around. And like I see the way Pastor is looking around, I see the way he turns and goes back in the garage. I feel the way I am stopping eating, the way my lips are burning. I feel the way my stomach is getting warm.

Pastor's van is backing out of his driveway. I see the way another car, a white car is turning the curve. I hear the gravel, the way it's sounding because it's hitting the bottom of the car. Pastor's van is coming this way. I see the way Mama is looking, the way she is seeing Pastor's van. I see the way Mama is not laughing anymore, even though she and Mr. Smokey have been laughing for so long, having fun.

Mr. Smokey is seeing what Mama is seeing. Pastor's van is turning into the driveway. I see the way we are all not eating anymore, the way we are looking, looking at Pastor's van, the way he is parking, the way he is getting out of his van, the way he is walking, the way a chicken is falling from the tree onto Pastor's van, the way Mr. Smokey is pointing, the way Pastor is looking at the chicken walking on his van, the way he is laughing, the way Mama is drinking her some beer, tasting her some beans, eating her some chicken, even though it is Friday and we're supposed to be fasting.

Day Thirty-Four

We are in the woods. It is Saturday. Mama is keeping Salem and me with her at the restaurant, but when so many people are coming in, wanting to eat, wanting to play pool and starting to curse and smoke and drink and stuff, Mama is saying I can go play but I better not go too far. I see the way she is sending Salem to play with Fatima. I can hear the way the men that are playing pool are cursing. I can see the way they are drinking, the way their eyes are yellow, even if their eyes are supposed to be white. I can hear the way they are loud, talking and laughing. I can smell their beer on them. I can see the way Bayless and his mama are crying that day, the day his older brother is playing pool and getting stabbed and dying, dying outside on the grass in front of Deacon and Mrs. Meeks' restaurant. I can see the way the policeman is holding Bayless' mama like the policeman is holding Miss Maudeline. I can see the way she is crying and hitting the policeman, crying and Bayless is holding on to her, holding her, not wanting to let go. I can see the way the yellow tape is all around the restaurant, the way everyone is looking, seeing the way the policemen are taking Bayless' uncle to jail for killing his own nephew, even though Mama is saying he is dying over a pool game and some cigarettes, even if Mama is saying, It ain't nothing but a shame, a low down dirty shame, nothing but a dirty shame it is.

I can see the way we are on this trail, going to the pond, over by Mr. Teeth's. It is cold. I see the way we are all wearing coats, Emile, Sergeant, SamPaul, Wilson and me. I see the way we are stopping.

Think they got some muscadines here, SamPaul says.

Let's see, Sergeant says.

I see the way there are so many trees in these woods. I see there are vines going up the trees, the way they are hanging down, the way we are getting so many muscadines sometimes, eating them and they are tasting like sour grapes and we are sucking on the seeds and just eating so many of them till our mouths are getting so dry because the muscadines are some tart.

Sergeant is grabbing a vine. Emile is grabbing one too. SamPaul and Wilson are grabbing theirs.

Get one, Matt, Emile says. I am looking up. I see the way this vine is going so high in the tree. I feel the way I'm grabbing my vine with one hand. I see the way they are looking at me, the way they all have both their hands on their vine. Let's go, Sergeant says. We all pull. I hear the way some of the leaves are brushing together. And even if some of the trees don't have leaves, I see the way their limbs are moving. I hear the way stuff is falling, hitting the ground. Hear they come, SamPaul is saying. Sergeant is not pulling anymore. He is looking down on the ground. I feel the way this vine is feeling like it is cutting my hand. I'm stopping pulling on it.

Ain't no muscadines, Sergeant is saying.

Let me see, SamPaul says.

Look.

Yeah it is.

Nigger, these acorns, Sergeant says.

I ain't eating no acorns, SamPaul says.

And like I hear the way SamPaul says this, I can see Pastor. I can see the way he's sitting in his recliner, the way he's just cracking and cracking pecans, with his cracker, every time Mr. Charlotte's wife is bringing him some, saving them for Sister Pastor's pie and candy she is making so good. I'm seeing the way Sergeant is cracking the acorns, cracking them like they are pecans, the way they are yellow inside, the way the squirrels are loving to eat them.

Look, Wilson says.

Wilson is pulling on his vine. I see the way he's picking his legs up, holding on, swinging. I hear the way limbs are breaking, the way the vine is breaking. Wilson is falling to the ground. We are laughing. Wilson is rolling on the ground. The leaves are dead. I'm picking up some acorns. Emile is picking up some too. I feel the way I can't throw with my left hand, the way it is like I am not having my balance. I see the way Sergeant is throwing a handful at Emile and SamPaul, the way we are throwing, hiding behind trees, playing war, even though I can't throw with my left, feeling like I'm off balance, feeling the way my fist is still so tight.

We are walking, almost getting to the pond. I can see the way squirrels are running in the trees. I can see Cephas and Brother. I can see the way Cephas is shooting Brother. I can

see the way blood is coming from Brother's head. Something is screaming. Something is fighting. Who's that, someone is saying. I can see a man, the way he's bent over, the way he's fighting something. I can see a gun. Look, someone is saying. I can see it's Mr. Teeth. I can see he's holding something down, hitting it with his gun. I can see the coon. I can hear the way it is sounding like it's a mad dog, like it's a mad dog that's trying to fight, a snake that's hissing and hissing. I can feel the way I'm losing my breath, the way my heart is beating. I can see the way we're all looking, the way Mr. Teeth is fighting the coon, the way he's laughing, hitting it with his gun, the way he doesn't hardly have any teeth in his mouth, the way they are all rotten, the way he is fighting the coon, fighting it, beating it, like Mama is saying he is always fighting his wife, always beating Mrs. Mickey, like he's beating this coon.

The pond is still. There is green stuff all on top the water. There are no fish jumping up or anything. There are no turtles on the logs. We are in the trees. I am not as high as the others. I can smell the way this pine smells. I can see the way these needles are green but the ones on the ground are dead and looking rusty, the way the trees are swaying side to side. I feel the way I'm moving, every time I push against my tree. I can see the way Mr. Teeth is fighting the coon, the way he's hitting it with his gun, the way the coon is not fighting anymore, the way its mouth is bleeding. The coon is dying. I see how Mr. Teeth is holding it up by its legs, the way it is fat. We are looking and not saying anything. Mr. Teeth is smiling and laughing. Right thought he was gonna get the best of

me, Mr. Teeth is saying. Been after him since early. He thought he could get the best of me.

Sergeant is taking out his man. Watch this, he says. Sergeant is holding his man. Even though he's in the tree, I see the way Sergeant is peeing, the way Emile, SamPaul, and Wilson are taking out their mans and starting to pee too. I can hear the way pee is hitting the ground. I am not wanting to take out my man. I don't want them seeing my man, even if Emile is seeing it when I'm spending the night and Mrs. Larna is making us take our baths together, even though we're boys, even if Mama is saying our mans are the same but mine is darker than Emile's because he is lighter skinned than me.

I can feel the way this sap is on my hand. I can feel how sticky it is. I can see the old rusty, yellow tubs when we are by Wilson's house and he is saying his grandpa is making syrup with sugarcane a long time ago. I can taste the way this sap is tasting the first time I'm tasting it, the way it's tasting nothing like syrup, so nasty, not even sweet, even though the ants are liking it, even if they are just tasting and tasting it, liking it so much, bringing it to the ground, bringing it to their queen.

Why you ain't pee, Sergeant says.

'Cause I didn't have to, I say.

Why you hold your fist like that? SamPaul says.

I don't know, I say.

I see the way they are all looking at me. I see how Wilson throws a pine cone in the pond and the water splashes.

Your hand been like that, Emile says.

What you got in it, Sergeant says.

Nothing, I say.

I see the way they are looking at me, looking at my fist. I see the way Sergeant picks up a stick and throws it in the pond.

I'm gonna drink some water, SamPaul says.

Me too, Sergeant says.

What's in there, Emile says.

Nothing, I say. I feel the way my heart is starting to beat against my chest. I see the way Emile is looking at my fist, the way he's smiling, the way his eyes are big. What you got in there, Matt? Nothing, I say and turn my back. And even when I'm turning my back, even if I feel the way there is sap on my other hand, the way it's cold out here, I feel the way Emile jumps on my back. Stop it, I say.

I feel the way he grabs my arm. Emile is holding my fist, riding my back. He is laughing. Let it go, I am saying, Emile, let it go. Let me see, he is saying, Let me see it, Matt. What you got in there?

Emile is getting off my back. He is still holding my fist. I feel the way he is straining. I feel the way I am straining too, the way my fist is so tight, the way it's not opening, even though Emile is trying to open it, trying his hardest. I feel the way I'm getting mad, the way I'm not having all my breath. I hear the way I'm saying, Stop it. I feel the way I am falling. And even though I am falling some, catching my balance, even when my fist is so tight, I see the way my arm and fist are going, the way my fist is hitting Emile, the way he's holding his eye, the way he's looking at me, holding his eye,

like he's about to cry, and I'm holding my fist, shaking, breathing so hard, wanting to get my money so Emile isn't telling, even though I'm not believing I'm hitting Emile, not believing I'm hitting my best friend and he is just holding his eye, not believing, so blind now and cannot see.

Palm Sunday

But what does one think? A certain man had two sons. And when this man had come to his first son, praying: Son, come to this world and live, will you? There was no answer, only death's draft: for it is death in infancy that may please the son and not the father. So when this man had found his second son, been given him from a dying mother's arms, and when this son was just a boy, this man asked him: Son, will you taste and see, for this thing is good? And this son did taste, did not deny his father, went into the world, seeking, doing his father's good deeds. And it is said, which of these two sons has done his father's will: the son that does not come to this world or the son that is made to do that which a man has done unto him?

Day Thirty-Five

Firecrackers are popping. Even though it's not New Years, Fourth of July, I can hear the way it is sounding like firecrackers are popping. I see the way Sister Pastor looks, the way she doesn't know what the sound is because she knows they shouldn't be popping.

What's that, Solomon? Sister Pastor says. I see the way she sets her bible down on the coffee table and stands up.

And even though Pastor just keeps looking at the T.V., even though he's not answering Sister Pastor, I see the way Sister Pastor is going to the door, the way she's opening it some, looking out of it. And like I see the way Sister Pastor is looking out of the door, I hear the way a woman is screaming. I can feel the way my stomach is starting to burn. I can hear the popping sound again. I can hear the way it is sounding like someone is running. I can hear the way it is sounding like someone is breathing so hard, running. Pastor is watching the T.V. He is turning it down. I can see the way Pastor is listening to what's happening outside. I can smell the way Mama is cooking. I can see the way she is showing Salem how to wash the rice. I can hear the way footsteps are running in Pastor's garage. Sister Pastor is stepping back. I see how she is grabbing her chest. And like I see the way Sister Pastor is grabbing her chest, the way she is scared, the way door is opening so wide, I see the way Cephas is falling on the floor. I hear the way the way he's breathing, out of breath, breathing so hard, can't catch his breath.

Cephas is lying on the floor. Pastor is looking scared, like he doesn't know what's happening. Sister Pastor is moving so fast over by Cephas. I see the way Mama is standing in the kitchen, the way she's keeping Salem at her side, the way she's looking like she knows she's seeing something that's making her scared.

There is someone breathing, coming into the garage. I see the way Pastor is going to the door, the way Sister Pastor is kneeling on the floor with Cephas. The door is opening. Mrs. Meeks is holding a gun. I see the way it's silver. I hear the way she's breathing so hard. And like I see the way Mrs. Meeks is holding her gun, feel the way I'm breathing, the way my chest is throbbing and I can't breathe good, the way my stomach is burning, I see the way Pastor is grabbing her arm.

I'll kill him! I'll kill him, Mrs. Meeks is saying. And when Mrs. Meeks is saying this, Pastor is trying to get the gun from her. I see how Salem is standing by Mama, the way she's holding her doll, the way there is wet in her pants. I see how Sister Pastor is holding Cephas, the way Cephas is crying, the way he's scared. And even if Pastor is holding the gun, I see the way Mrs. Meeks is slapping Pastor's face. I'll kill him! Not my baby, she is saying. Not my baby.

I see the way Mr. Meeks is opening the door, even as he's in his wheelchair, even if he's sweating, even if he's sounding like he's out of breath. I see the way Mrs. Meeks is throwing her arms around her husband. I hear the way she is saying, He touched her, he touched her, lord, God he touched her!

And like I hear the way Mrs. Meeks is saying this, I see the way Mr. Meeks is looking, the way he's seeing Pastor holding the gun, the way I'm hearing the way Sister

Pastor is looking, the way she's crying some more, the way Mrs. Meeks is crying too, the way Mr. Meeks is looking at Pastor and breathing so hard, looking, like he can see through Pastor and Pastor is nothing but a window, just a window Mr. Meeks is seeing through, seeing to, right to the other side.

Day Thirty-Six

Even if we've been up since early, even though Mama is crying most of the night, I hear the way it's so quiet in this house. And like I hear the way it's so quiet in this house, I see the way Cephas' door is closed. I see the way he's lying on the floor last night, crying, the way Sister Pastor is holding him, the way Pastor is getting the gun away from Mrs. Meeks. I see the way Pastor is taking out his wallet, the way he's holding his money, the way he's looking at Mr. and Mrs. Meeks, the way he's trying to give it to them. I see the way Mr. and Mrs. Meeks are not saying anything, the way they are looking at Pastor's money and can't believe he is wanting to give it to them. They are not taking the money. I see the way Mrs. Meeks is crying, shaking her head because she can't believe, can't believe Cephas is hurting Fatima, can't believe Pastor is trying to pay her. I see the way they are leaving Pastor's house, the way Mrs. Meeks is pushing Mr. Meeks' wheelchair, the way they are not taking the money.

Even if Mama's in the bathroom taking her bath, even though I'm not supposed to leave this room, even if I'm walking to the front, I smell the way there's nothing cooking. And like I smell there's nothing cooking, even if I'm in the kitchen, even if there's some pots and they're empty on the stove, I see the way Sister Pastor is sitting on the sofa. I hear the way she is saying, Morning, the way she is sounding sad, the way she is sounding like she's sick. Then I see the way she puts her hand to her mouth when she coughs, the way she snuffles again, the way she's holding a white tissue. And like I hear the way Sister Pastor coughs, the way she snuffles, I feel the way it is quiet, the way it is

like someone is watching me. I see the way I am hitting Emile, the way he is holding his eye. Sister Pastor is crying. And like I'm seeing the way Sister Pastor is crying, the way she is sitting on the sofa, I see this is the same way she is crying when we first move here, when Cephas, Brother and me are playing one day.

I see the way we're playing, the way Cephas gets on top of Brother, the way he gets on top of me, the way we get on top of him. And when Cephas is on top of Brother again, I see the way I'm standing by the kitchen, looking so I can see if Sister Pastor is waking up from her nap. And even if it's quiet and Cephas is just humping on top of Brother and I'm feeling the way my man is feeling, the way I'm looking at them, I see the way Sister Pastor is standing by me. I feel the way I am wanting to run but can't.

I see the way Sister Pastor looks at Cephas and Brother, the way she is shaking her head, shaking it from side to side. Cephas? Sister Pastor is saying, because she can't believe what she is seeing. Cephas looks back and gets scared when he sees Sister Pastor. Then I see the way he gets off of Brother and puts his hands over his man, even when he's still wearing his underwear. I hear the way Sister Pastor is breathing, the way Brother is getting up from the sofa, the way he's looking scared. I hear the way Sister Pastor says, You better hope your father doesn't find out, your hear me? Break his heart, son, it'll break your father's heart he finds out.

And like I hear the way Sister Pastor says this, I see the way she is crying, the way she goes into the bathroom. I hear the way Sister Pastor is crying in the bathroom, the way she is blowing her nose. And even though I'm seeing the way Sister Pastor is crying in the bathroom, I see the way she's so happy when we move here, how she says

she loved Grandma Sherry so much, that Grandma Sherry was one of her best friends. I can see the way Father Palermo is coming to visit us at the shelter the day after the fire, the way he's praying with us, the way he's giving Mama and Brother communion, the way they are saying their Hail Marys, the way he is shaking my hand and pinching my cheek, the way he is hugging Salem.

And like I see Father Palermo, I can see Pastor. I can see Sister Pastor, the way they are coming to get us. I can hear the way they are saying they are having plenty of room and are wanting to do God's will and we can stay with them for as long as we want, because Grandma Sherry was one of the nicest, most faithful people they've ever known.

I can feel the way Mama is looking at me. I can see the way Sister Pastor is still crying, the way Mama is coming in the room. Didn't I tell you not to leave that room, Mama is saying. And when Mama is saying this, she is seeing Sister Pastor, the way she's crying. Mama is looking at Sister Pastor.

Mama is sitting by Sister Pastor. I see the way Mama hugs her, the way she whispers something in her ear, whispers, even if I can't hear what she's saying. And like I see the way Mama is just hugging Sister Pastor and whispering something in her ear and Sister Pastor is crying, I see the way Salem is coming, the way she's looking at me and we're looking at Mama and Sister Pastor, the way they are hugging, the way they are crying, wiping each other's faces, crying, hugging, and still don't know what to do.

Day Thirty-Seven

I am holding Salem's hand. I can feel the way it is like there is someone talking to me, telling me to go to the woods. I can see the trees, the way they are moving. I can feel the way Salem's hand is in mine. I can feel the way my heart is beating and my stomach is warm. Even though I'm not seeing anyone, I can feel the way it's like someone is watching me. I can see the way Cephas is making me kiss Salem. I can see the way I am on top of her. I can feel the way it is feeling when I am pulling on my man. I see the way the trees are moving some more. I can feel the wind is feeling so cool. And like I feel the way it's cool, feel the way I'm getting so cold, I see the way the clouds are turning dark. Salem is looking at me. She is wanting to cry. I can feel the way her hand is shaking inside mine. I am losing my breath. I feel the way my man feels, the way it's moving. I am going to the woods. I am moving. I feel the way Salem doesn't move. I see the way she looks at me, the way tears are coming from her eyes now. My little sister is scared.

I feel the way my head is starting to hurt, the way my eyes are starting to sting, the way they are feeling like water is coming in them. My mouth is dry and my man is moving. I am feeling like I am not myself. Even when I am standing here with my little sister, I feel the way it is like I am catching so many chills, the way I am shivering, feeling like I am floating. I can see the way I am leaving myself. I feel the way something is moving outside of me. I see the way, even though I'm staying here, my other self is going to the woods.

It is cold. Salem is sniffing, wiping her eyes. Leave, something is telling me. Leave, and I am going. Leave and I am seeing the day no one is home, just Brother and me and he is going to the woods and he is sad. And even if I'm not knowing Pastor is having a gun, I'm seeing the way Brother is holding Pastor's gun, the way the wind is blowing, the way it is like Brother is listening, listening to the trees, holding the gun. I can see the way he is holding the gun to his head. I can feel how I am shaking, shaking seeing the way Brother is so sad, holding the gun and the wind is moving, moving like now, talking, telling Brother to leave like it is telling me. I can see the way Brother is taking the gun from his head, the way he is listening to the wind, the way he is crying, leaving the woods.

And like I'm seeing that day, seeing this day, I feel the way it is like something is moving me. I feel the way I can't stop it. I see the way I'm walking, the way Salem is running. I feel the way it's starting to drizzle, how my man is feeling like it's not there, like it's leaving me, like it's all gone, and I'm never feeling it feel so good again, feeling the way it's making me do what it's wanting me to do, feeling like I am not myself.

Mr. and Mrs. Meeks and Fatima are never showing up, even if people are asking where they are, even though Pastor is saying he needs a faithful flock, even if Sister Pastor is looking sad. Pastor is carrying the cross. He sets it down and carries it some more, even if he's tired, even if Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are telling him he needs to slow down. I can hear the way Mrs. Jimison and Sister Pastor and Mrs. Marva Belton are singing, the way it's sounding so good, the way they are holding their hymnals, the way

their eyes are closed and their mouths are open and they are singing and singing and it sounds so good. And like I hear the way they sing, see the way they are moving from side to side, I see the way Sister Pastor raises her hands, the way she's holding them up. I hear the way she is crying out, Thank you, Jesus, thank you, lord, the way she is crying.

Pastor is sitting in the pulpit. He is drinking some water. I see the way he is closing his eyes, the way he is resting his head on his chair. I see the way Mrs. Larna is sweeping the carpet. I see how Mama is counting the money from the collection plate and writing in her book. I can see Emile. I can see the way he is not looking at me. I can see the way his eye is looking red. I can hear the way Mrs. Larna is telling Sister Pastor she is thinking he is coming down with the pink eye. I can still see the way I am punching Emile. I can still see how he is holding his eye. I can hear the way Sergeant and SamPaul and Wilson are asking me why I'm punching Emile in the eye. I can feel the way I'm breathing. I can see my fist. I can see the trees, the way Salem is running. The rain is coming down. The wind is moving the trees. I hear the way it is sounding like the wind is talking. I can see the way Mama is standing in the driveway, the way she's looking over to Miss Maudeline's. Mama is going over to Miss Maudeline's. Salem is running and going with her. I see the way Salem is looking back at me, the way she's grabbing Mama's hand, looking back at me, the way they are crossing the road.

I can see Berna. Even though I haven't seen her since that day, when she is on the stretcher, even though I know Brother hurt her, I see the way she is on the porch playing, even if the rain is starting to come down, even if Miss Maudeline is hitting her rugs with a broom like she is whipping men.

Miss Maudeline is looking at Mama. Mama and Salem are stopping walking. And like I see the way Mama is standing there, the way Miss Maudeline is standing there too, I see the way Mama is going to Miss Maudeline. I see the way they are hugging, the way Miss Maudeline is hugging Mama, the way they are hugging and hugging and Salem and Berna are starting to play, hugging, even though Brother is hurting Berna one day, even if Miss Maudeline is sitting on the ground like a big bag of clothes, crying in the policeman's arms, now hugging my mama.

It's thundering outside. The wind is moving the trees. I hear the way Mrs. Jimison is playing the piano still. I see how Emile is sitting, the way he's looking sad. I know I want to talk to him, tell him I'm sorry, because Emile is my only best friend, even if I'm liking Sergeant, SamPaul and Wilson, even though I'm not knowing why Mr. Mavis is giving me my fist, why I am hitting Emile. I can hear the way it's like someone is trying to open the doors. I can hear the wind is blowing hard. I see the way the doors of the church are flying open. I see the way everyone looks, the way Mama stops writing, the way Mrs. Jimison stops playing the piano.

It is quiet. Everyone is looking at the door, looking like they are waiting for someone to come in. I feel the way my stomach is burning, the way my breath is leaving. I see how Pastor and Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are looking, the way Mr. Merchant is walking to the door. I hear the way he's saying, The wind, ain't nothing but the wind, folks, no need to alarm, ain't nothing but the rain and the wind tonight.

Day Thirty-Eight

I can smell the way this gumbo smells, taste the way the sausage and chicken taste so good. I can see the way Pastor isn't eating anything, the way he looks so tired, like he's sick, tired and sick and can't eat. And like I see the way Pastor doesn't eat anything, the way he looks so tired, I hear the way Sister Pastor says, Solomon you've got to eat something.

Even if Sister Pastor's voice doesn't sound happy like it used to, even if Cephas still doesn't come out of his room since that day, I see the way Pastor looks at Sister Pastor, the way he moves his head so slow. I see the way he looks like he's thinking. I see the way he closes his eyes and starts to mumble again. And like I see the way Pastor is mumbling, like he's praying, I hear the way he coughs and coughs and coughs, and it sounds like it hurts. Even if Pastor just keeps coughing and puts a handkerchief to his mouth, I see the way Sister Pastor opens the icebox, the way she pours some water in a glass.

Sister Pastor is giving Pastor the glass of water. He is drinking it. I see the way his throat is moving because the water is going down it. I hear how he breathes like he's out of breath when he finishes drinking. I see how he sets the glass down, closes his eyes and starts praying again.

Even if she is eating slow, Mama is eating some of her gumbo. And after she is eating some more, she is getting the filé, putting it on her gumbo. I am not liking filé. I see the way Mama looks at Pastor, even if he doesn't know she's looking at him, even if

he is having his eyes closed and praying, preparing himself. Salem is blowing on her spoon. Sister Pastor is taking her some crackers and putting them in her gumbo, even if Mama is always saying, Crackers go in soup, not in gumbo. Sister Pastor is eating.

And like I see the way Sister Pastor eats her gumbo, looking like she is thinking, blowing on her spoon, I taste the way this chicken and rice tastes. I see where Cephas' chair is but he's not there.

Sister Pastor gets up from the table. She goes to the kitchen and gets a tray and sets it on the counter and puts a bowl of gumbo, some yams, some crackers, and a cup of water on it. Sister Pastor is thinking, always thinking since Cephas is falling on the floor that night, since Mrs. Meeks is shooting her gun at him.

Sister Pastor is bringing Cephas' food to his room. Even though I see the way Sister Pastor is bringing Cephas his gumbo in his room, I taste the way these shrimp taste, the way the crab and chicken too. I feel the way this gumbo is so warm in my stomach. And like I feel the way this gumbo is just so warm in my stomach, I feel the way my tongue is burning, the way I need some water. I see the way the shrimp man is coming in the summer, the way he's driving his truck around the neighborhood, stopping and selling shrimp to everyone. I see the way Mr. Merchant and Mrs. Reba and Mr. Curly are all buying shrimp, even Mr. and Mrs. Meeks. And when the man is coming to Pastor's I see the way Sister Pastor, even if she is in the yard and she is digging and pulling weeds and Pastor is cutting grass, I see the way they are stopping their work. I see the way the man is coming in the driveway so Sister Pastor can buy some shrimp, so she can fry them and boil them and put them in gumbo and her jambalaya.

I can smell the way the shrimp smells, like fish, even when they're shrimp, see the way they're so big, the way the man is weighing them, putting them in buckets. I hear the way the man is talking some French to Pastor, the way they are laughing, talking French and Sister Pastor is paying the man and before he is leaving, he's putting the shrimp on some ice and Sister Pastor is saying next time he is coming she'll have an étouffée for him with crawfish and his shrimps in it and the man is smiling and saying, Bien, marraine, Bien, Sister Pastor.

I can see how the man is leaving and driving on the back road by Mrs. Anne and Deacon Jimison. And even if he is wanting to sell some shrimp to Deacon Jimison, I'm already knowing the way Deacon Jimison is already having his shrimp. I can see the way there is so much shrimp on the top of Deacon Jimison's house. I can see the way Deacon Jimison and the other men are drying them, walking on top of the roof, drying shrimp, like it's so much sweet candy. I can taste the way the shrimp are salty, the way they are chewy, the way they are tasting spoiled, like Pastor's rice is tasting when he is fixing eggs and rice and letting the rice spoil, saying that is how he's liking to eat it. I can see those shrimps, the way there are so many on the top of Deacon Jimison's house and the sun is hot, so hot, just drying and drying shrimp, and Deacon Jimison is praying, keeping his fingers crossed, hoping the rain isn't coming for another day.

Even if we've finished eating and it's getting late, even if Mama and Sister Pastor and Salem are going to bed, even though Mama isn't wanting me to come with Pastor, I see the way Pastor and me are outside by the woods, even if it's dark, even though I want to

be in the house with Mama, even if I'm not wanting to be by the woods with Pastor, readying myself.

I hear the way the night is sounding, sounding because everything is talking to one another. I feel the way it is like something is watching me in the woods. The mosquitoes are trying to bite me. I see the way Pastor's light is on in his study, the way we are just in there. I see the way Pastor is holding his bible. I feel the way I am holding mine. I see the way the moon is shining. Puppy is quiet. I can see my fist. I can see my bible, the bible Pastor is buying for me when I am coming here. And even though he is not opening his bible, even if Pastor is kneeling on the ground, even if I know the ground is cold, I hear the way he is saying, *Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak....*

I hear the way there are loud trucks coming down the roads. They are coming. I can see the lights, the way they are getting closer. I can see what the trucks are looking like when they are getting under the lights by Mr. Charlotte's, almost by Mr. Smokey's. I can see the way the trucks are sitting up high. I can see the way white men are in them, standing in the beds.

They are turning the curve. I hear the way the gravel is sounding, the way the trucks' tires are sliding on the gravel. Pastor is looking. He is not moving. I am not moving either. I can see the way the fire is coming from the guns. I can hear the way the guns are sounding. Everyone's lights are coming on in their houses. I can hear the way

the men are saying, Nigger-Jew, die, spinning their wheels, Nigger-Jew die, shooting their guns.

I can feel the way Mama is grabbing me. I am falling on the ground. I am getting up, feeling the way I am wanting to run but can't. Even though it's dark, I can see the dust, the way it's going to the lights. I can see the fire from the guns. I see the way Sister Pastor is crying, the way Cephas is running by Pastor, the way Sister Pastor is holding Salem. I see the way Mr. Merchant and Mrs. Larna and Emile, and Mr. Curly and Mrs. Reba are coming out, the way Miss Maudeline and Berna are standing on their porch, watching, the way Sergeant and Mr. Smokey are coming from down by his house, the way Mr. Gilray is holding his gun, and Gerry is holding his too, and Mrs. Irma is holding hers too.

I hear the way it's getting quiet, the way the trucks are leaving the neighborhood way down the other end, past Mr. Teeth's and Bayless and Peanut and them. I see how everyone is looking, holding one another. I see the way Pastor is checking himself, looking down the road, checking himself, making sure he hasn't been shot, making sure he's not dead yet.

Day Thirty-Nine

I can see the stage, the curtain. I can see the way everyone is looking around. I can see there are so many pictures on the walls, the way these walls are all wood. I can smell the way it smells old in here, like good air hasn't been in here for a long time. I can see the way the chairs are already set up. I hear the way everyone is quiet, the way they are looking like they don't want to be here, the way everyone looks sad. Pastor is going to the stage. He is walking up the stairs. And like I see Pastor walking up the stairs, I can see the way he is putting his hands on his hips and looking around, shaking his head, looking at the place.

And after Pastor is looking around, I see the way he is walking, the way he is taking his time. I see the way he is looking like he's thinking. Mama and Sister Pastor and Mrs. Marva Belton and Mrs. Jimison are sitting down. I hear the way they are whispering, talking about last night. I feel how tired and sleepy I am. I feel the way it is warm in the bed with Mama. I hear the way she is crying. I see the way I can see the men, the way they are shooting their guns. I see the way everyone is standing outside hugging one another, the way Mr. Merchant is crying. Even if Deacon Jimison is living on the other side of the gully, by Mrs. Anne, I see the way he's coming. I see the way he's hugging Mr. Merchant, the way Mrs. Jimison is hugging Sister Pastor and Mrs. Larna.

Pastor is coughing. I hear the way he snuffles, the way he tells Mr. Merchant, Ain't nobody but the devil this morning, ain't nobody but the devil. And then I hear the

way Pastor coughs some more, the way he says, Get thee behind me, lord get thee behind me.

Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are moving the cross to the stage. And like I see the cross, I see the way they make it. I see the way Emile and me are hauling branches to the pile. I see the way Pastor is wanting me to light the pile. I feel the way I don't want to light it, the way I'm scared. I hear the way Emile is saying, Why you don't want to light it? I hear the way I'm not answering him. I see the way Mr. Merchant is giving the lighter to Emile. I see the way Emile is starting the fire. I hear the way the branches are crackling and popping. I see the smoke, the way it is going to the clouds and disappearing. I feel the way the fire is warm, the way it is warm and I'm not wanting to be by it, the way I'm not wanting to see Grandma Sherry in the fire.

Sherman and Severette and their parents are coming in, even SamPaul, Wilson and their mamas. I see the way Mama and Sister Pastor and Mrs. Marva Belton and them are holding their clothes. I see the way there's a piano in the corner. I see how Mrs. Jimison is going over to it. I see the way she is taking the cover off of it. I hear the way she presses some of the keys. I hear the way she says, This thing needs tuning. Mrs. Jimison is opening the piano. I see the way Mama and them are going on the stage, the way they are going to the back so they can change, even though I know they are not wanting to.

Mr. Merchant is lying the cross against Pastor's back. And like I see the way the cross is against Pastor's back, I hear the way he coughs again. I see the way he takes his

handkerchief from his back pocket and coughs and wipes his mouth. I see the way he blows his nose.

Too heavy? Mr. Merchant says.

Pastor is tired.

You'll be able to hold it? Mr. Merchant asks, keeping his hand on the cross.

Pastor coughs again.

I see the way Sister Pastor and Mrs. Marva Belton are looking at Pastor.

Pastor you don't look good, Mrs. Marva Belton says.

I hear the way Pastor doesn't say anything. I see the way Mrs. Marva Belton is saying something to Sister Pastor but I don't know what she's saying.

Pastor is dragging the cross. Salem is sitting by Sherman and Severette.

I see the way Emile and SamPaul and Wilson are looking at me, the way they are turning their heads every time they see me looking at them. I hear the way they are whispering. I see my fist. I'm wishing I could open it. I'm hearing the way Mr. Mavis is telling me not to open it, even if I am wanting to. I hear the way Mrs. Larna Merchant is pressing the piano's keys. I see the way she is not working on the piano anymore. I see how we are at home this morning. I hear the way Pastor is telling Cephas he better not leave the house. I see the way Mrs. Meeks is standing in the doorway and Pastor is taking the gun from her, looking like he is wanting to hit her. And even if Mr. and Mrs. Meeks and Fatima don't come to church anymore, don't call Pastor or anything, don't wave when they pass by, just keep looking at where they are going when they are driving, I see the way people are at the restaurant when we are leaving home. I know the way

they are going to boil crawfish and have some people over, even though Cephas hurt Fatima, even if I know they are sad.

I see the way Mama is coming home the next day and saying they are letting her go, the way she is crying. I see the way Cephas is getting up off the floor that night. I see how Pastor is looking at him. And like I see the way Pastor is looking at Cephas, I see the way Sister Pastor walks over to Cephas and holds him some more, the way she looks at him, the way she cries. And even when Sister Pastor is holding Cephas, I see the way she lets him go. I see the way she looks at him, the way she raises her hand, the way Cephas doesn't move. Sister Pastor's hand is slapping Cephas against his face. I see the way he is holding his face. And even if Cephas is holding his face, I see the way tears are coming down, the way they are going to his mouth. I see how his face is trembling, like he's cold. I know the way he is hurting Fatima, hurting her, touching and hurting her, the same way he is hurting Brother, Salem, and me.

Practice is over. We are coming back tonight. I see the way Pastor is holding the cross again, the way Mr. Merchant is laying it against his back, even if they've been doing it all morning, even if Pastor is sick and coughing and so tired.

Pastor coughs again. People are talking. I can hear the way we are singing the song, the way we are sounding good like Brother and the other boys and girls at New Calvary. Pastor is sweating, even though it's not hot in here. I see the way the lights are shining on the stage. I see the way Mr. Merchant is bringing Pastor some water. I see the way he is drinking the water, the way he is catching his breath.

And even though Pastor is drinking his water and catching his breath and trying to move the cross, I see the way he can't carry it anymore. I see the way Pastor is dropping to his knees.

Pastor is on his knees. The cross is on his back. Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are taking the cross, taking it from Pastor. You alright, Pastor, they are saying. Pastor isn't answering them. I see the way they are laying the cross on the floor. Pastor is still on his knees, catching his breath, sweating. I see the way Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are grabbing Pastor under his arms, trying to hold him up. And even if Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison are trying to hold up Pastor, I see the way Pastor is not moving. I see the way he is grabbing his chest, even while Mr. Merchant is holding his other arm. Pastor's head and neck are slumping down. I hear the way they are calling Pastor's name, Pastor! Pastor! Pastor is going to the floor.

Pastor is lying on his back. He is not waking up. Mr. Merchant is pumping on his chest. And like I see the way Mr. Merchant is pumping up and down on Pastor's chest, I feel the way my stomach is warming, the way my heart is beating so fast. I see the way Deacon Jimison is looking. Sister Pastor, everyone is looking. I see the way Mr. Merchant is breathing into Pastor's mouth, pinching his nose and breathing into his mouth, like they are doing on T.V.

Sister Pastor can't move. She is sitting in a chair and can't move. Mrs. Larna is hugging her, rubbing her back. I can hear the sirens coming. And even though I'm hearing the way the sirens are coming, even if we're inside, I see the way Mama is holding Salem, the way she's not moving. I see the way Mr. Merchant is crying,

pumping on Pastor's chest, pumping so he can make Pastor live but Pastor is not waking up, not responding.

The ambulance is leaving. Mr. Merchant is in the back with Pastor. Mrs. Larna is holding Sister Pastor, and Sister Pastor isn't crying, just looking like she can't believe what she is seeing, what is happening this morning, like this is happening to someone else and she just can't believe it.

I can see the cross, the way it's on the ground. I can see the way it's not on Pastor's back, the way no one is holding it, the way it's just lying on the ground. I can see the way the cross is too heavy for Pastor to carry, too heavy for men to hold, too heavy, even though they are wanting to, even if they are trying with all their might and wanting to, too heavy for men to carry.

This room is white. I hear the way Mr. Merchant prays, the way Deacon Jimison prays. And like I hear the way they pray for Pastor, I see the way Sister Pastor is sitting by his bed, looking like she still can't believe. I see the way Pastor looks like he's asleep. I see the way Salem is standing by Mama. Cephas is sitting down, keeping his hands to his face. And even if Salem is standing close by Mama and Mama is close by Sister Pastor and Mrs. Jimison and Mrs. Larna, I see the way Mama looks like she doesn't want to be here, like she wants be somewhere else, somewhere with Brother. I can see the way the white man is coming into the room, the way I know who he is, the way Pastor is giving him the money. I see the way he stands at Pastor's bed, the way he's looking at Pastor. I

see the way his lips move, the way he says a prayer, the way he crosses his chest and kisses his fingers.

Mr. Merchant and Deacon Jimison and the white man are going outside. I hear the way the machine is beeping. I hear the way everyone is breathing. I feel the way it is like someone is watching me in this room, even if no one is, even if Cephas isn't watching me, even while everyone is watching Pastor.

He's going, Mrs. Jimison is saying. I see the way Mr. Merchant and the white man and Deacon Jimison are coming back into the room. I see the way everyone is gathering around Pastor's bed. Pastor's eyes are closed. And like I see the way Pastor's eyes are closed, even as everyone is gathering around his bed holding hands, holding my fist, I see the way Pastor's chest and stomach move up. I hear the way he breathes so loud, taking his breath, taking one big breath.

The machine is sounding. People are breathing out. My heart is beating. Pastor is dying. Pastor is lying on this bed, lying in this room, and dying. I hear the way Mr. Merchant is crying, Deacon Jimison, Mrs. Larna. I see the way Sister Pastor isn't crying, even though Pastor is her husband, even if she's loving him, even if they've been married so long. I hear the way Mrs. Marva Belton begins singing:

*Walk in the light,
Beautiful light,
Come where the dew drops
Of mercy shine bright.
Shine all around us
By day and by night,
Jesus is the light of the world...*

I'm shaking. I can't stop shaking. I feel the way I am cold, shaking, breathing, seeing the way death is looking, hearing the way it is sounding, the way it is feeling, feeling so cold in this room, sounding so quiet.

Day Forty

It is the first Saturday. We are going get Brother from New Calvary. I see the way Mr. Prudhomme is driving, the way his wife is sitting by him, the way Mama is thinking, the way she is having questions, the way she is not asking them yet. This road is long. Mama is looking like she's going to cry, the way she's looking out of the window. I can hear the way she's breathing out, the way she is sounding tired, like she is not having anymore energy.

Mama is taking a deep breath.

Pastor, too? she is asking, still looking out of the window.

I feel the way my stomach is burning, the way the air is feeling in my chest. I know what Mama is asking, what she's saying. I see the way Mr. Prudhomme is looking out of his mirror, back to us, looking, waiting for me to answer.

Yes, ma'am, I say.

Mama doesn't look at me. The fields are passing and we are getting closer. Pastor is dead and I am seeing him lying in the bed, the way we are in his study.

You too, child? Mama asks Salem.

Even though she's my little sister, even if she's only six, I see the way Salem shakes her head.

Yes, ma'am, Salem says.

Mama smacks her lips and breathes out, trying to catch her breath, but I know it's hard for her, because I know it's hard catching my breath some times.

Wasn't no accident, Cephas and Andrew, huh, Matt?

I can see the gate. I can see the man. I can hear the way he's playing the organ. I can see the way Brother is falling to the ground.

No ma'am, I say. I am shaking. I am breathing. He shoot Brother, I shake my head. I go to the woods and run, I say. He shoot Brother.

I feel the way I want to cry, the way my breath is leaving. I hear the way Mama breathes out again. I see the way she puts her head down, the way she brings her hands to her face. I see the way two police cars are pulling behind us. I feel the way Mr. Prudhomme is stopping his car. I hear the way Mama is crying now. I feel the way I still want to cry, the way I can't sometimes. I see the way the policemen are getting out of their cars. I see the way these fields are looking, the way they are going on forever, the way there's barbed wire, the way the fields can't get out.

Easter Sunday

At the same time came one man to a pastor, asking, Of whom do you lust the greatest? And it was then that this pastor had called all the little children, called them and set them in his midst, thinking back to when he too was first called, summoned against the great twilight of his youth, seeing the road, the river, the sea of cane in the distance, felt the breath he had given to his uncle's work all day; and it was against that awesome bed of earth where his very own uncle had lain him down, shown him the awful sweetness, how men do taste when their work is done. And said the pastor, I say to you, it is the child that I covet the dearest, just as a man does his wife, and whomever, I tell you, have not made the children mind, does not know what he misses, for it is the child that one offends that does it better, obeys as the wife does not. And do you not fear, said one man to his pastor, that these children will leave this place and go out into the world and do your will? Do you not fear being drowned in the depths of the sea? How can man worry when he does not know the hour He will come? How can one man worry when his needs are far greater than the life he holds in his hands? If He does hate my hands, let him take them from me and I will no longer enter into my congregation and preach his word. If He does hate my eyes that I have seen what men do to one another, how I have dreamed a dream time and again of naked men and women and children huddled as one, and the bound man that does long for his wife can no more have her than a man who hungers and cannot sit at a table of prepared food in his own home and eat: eat and taste as he wishes; so it is only now when he hungers he feeds on those children in his midst, feeds

on the fruits too long denied him. And as your pastor, I say to you, I do not always fear being blinded by Him, for it is these little children, all their faces as that of His angels that the great will in me must despise until my time does end.

Brother is sitting by me. There are so many people just standing at Pastor's casket, looking at him, standing, taking their time, looking at him. I see the way some of these people, even though I'm not knowing them, are crying, the way they are wiping their eyes with tissues and handkerchiefs, the way Pastor's casket is blue, so blue and shiny. A flag is lying on top of it. I can see the way Pastor is holding his bible, holding it, lying in his casket. I can see Sister Pastor, the way she's dressed in white. I can see Mrs. Larna, Mr. Merchant, Deacon and Mrs. Jimison, Mr. Smokey, Mrs. Marva Belton, the way she's dressed in white too, the way she's wearing a pretty white hat with white feathers. I can see Salem and Mama, the way Mama is dressed in black. I can see how Brother is looking, the way it's like he's looking at something that's so far from this church, somewhere I can't even see, somewhere I can't ever be.

People are whispering. People are looking at Brother and whispering. I see the way some of these people are pointing and looking at Mama and whispering too. I don't know what they're saying, even though I'm watching their lips moving, even though I'm seeing the way they're just talking and talking. And even though I can see them, see the way their mouths are moving, the way their eyes are looking, I don't know what they are saying. I can feel the way my own heart is beating, how it is feeling.

They are about to close the casket. So many people are sniffing. I see the way Cephas is looking, the way he's keeping his head down. I see how two men are wearing their suits and a woman is wearing a dress and they are wearing white gloves, and having gold badges with writing on them on their chests. I see the way the men are standing by the casket. I can see the flowers, so many of them. I see how they are yellow and white

and red, purple, so many colors, colors I don't even know, colors that are all so pretty, even if I don't know their names.

Mama is standing. I'm seeing the way her eyes have been crying, the way she is looking so tired. I see the way people are looking at her still, looking at her, looking like they are wondering why she is standing up.

Mama is going by Pastor's casket. I see the way one of the men with the white gloves puts his hand on Mama's shoulder and looks at her, looks into her eyes. Mama is looking down at Pastor now, thinking. I see the way Mr. Prudhomme and his wife are looking, Mr. Curly and Mrs. Reba. I can see the way there are so many people in Pastor's church, the way people are even standing up, standing along the walls, even in the choir stand, everywhere.

Mama is shaking her head. Pastor is holding his bible. And even though Mama is shaking her head, even if everyone in this church is looking at her, I see the way she raises her hand. I feel the way my stomach is so warm, the way it is like it's falling, like I'm falling. I feel the way I'm breathing in. And like I see the way Mama raises her hand, feel the way I'm breathing in some more, I feel the way my stomach is trembling, the way I'm cold. I can see Mr. Mavis. I can see the way he's looking at me. I can see the way there are scars in his face, the way he's crying, the way he's giving me my fist that day. I can see it. I can see my fist. I can see Mama's hand raised.

Mama's hand is coming down against Pastor's face. I can hear the way Mama's hand is hitting Pastor's face, even though he's dead, even if I know he's cold. I can hear the way everyone breathes in. They are holding their mouths, holding their breath. I can

see the way the casket is shaking, shaking, even though Pastor is lying inside of it. I can see the way one of the men with the white gloves is grabbing Mama, the way Mama is jerking her arm away. I can hear the way people are breathing out, the way they are starting to talk, even though I don't know what they are saying, even if I know they are talking about Mama, talking about her because she is slapping Pastor's face.

Sister Pastor's head is down. Mr. Mavis is still looking at me. Mama is walking. She is tired. I see the way the woman is closing the casket, the way she's looking at Mama over her shoulder, the way everyone is looking at Mama, the way they are talking, the way some of them are standing and looking at Mama. Salem is going to Mama, going to her, carrying her doll. Salem is crying. I feel the way my heart is beating. Brother is looking down at the floor. And even while Brother is looking down at the floor, I see the way his head is turning. I see Brother's eyes. I see the way he's looking at me. I see the way I'm looking at him. I feel the way I'm wanting to cry, wanting to cry but can't. Mr. Mavis' eyes are so red. Mama is grabbing Brother's hand. Brother is looking at my fist. Brother is grabbing my fist. He is putting his hand on my fist. Brother's hand is warm. His eyes are looking into mine. And even though Brother is not hurting my fist, even if I'm not hurting, even if I'm not crying, I feel the way my fist is opening. My fist is opening and I'm seeing the way there is something there, something in my hand, like the smallest white worm, a lie, a dream, something that's been there all my life, all my life and I don't know why.