

ALSO BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

Harbour Me

Before the Ever After

Last Summer with Maizon

The Dear One

Maizon at Blue Hill

Between Madison and Palmetto

I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This

From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun

The House You Pass on the Way

If You Come Softly

Lena

Miracle's Boys

Hush

Locomotion

Behind You

Feathers

After Tupac and D Foster

Peace, Locomotion

Beneath a Meth Moon

Brown Girl Dreaming

JACQUELINE WOODSON

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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

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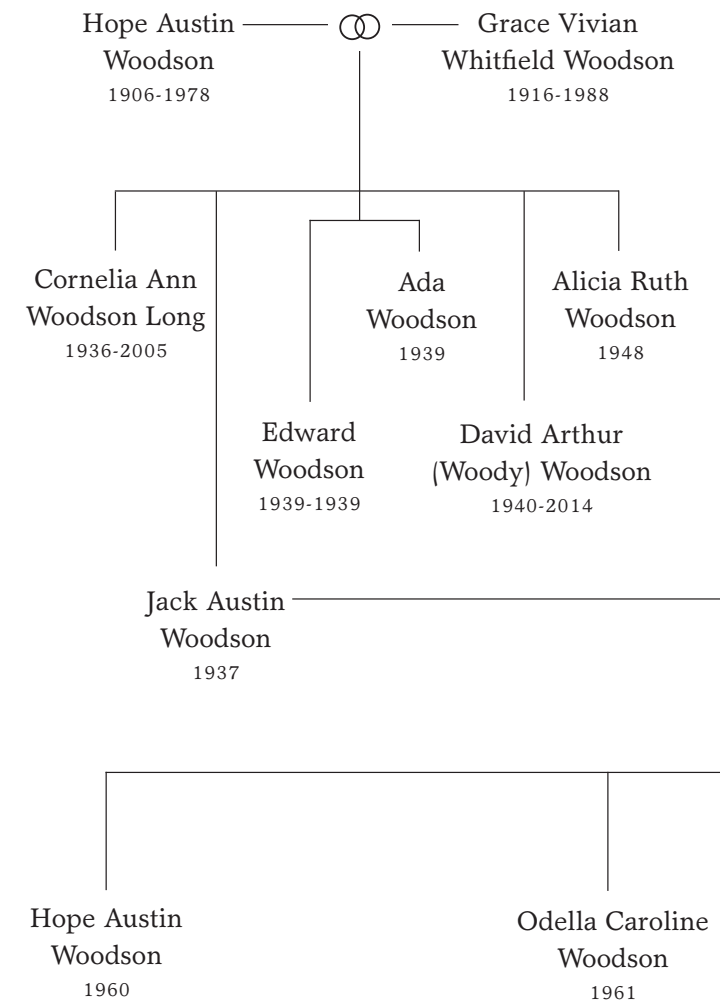
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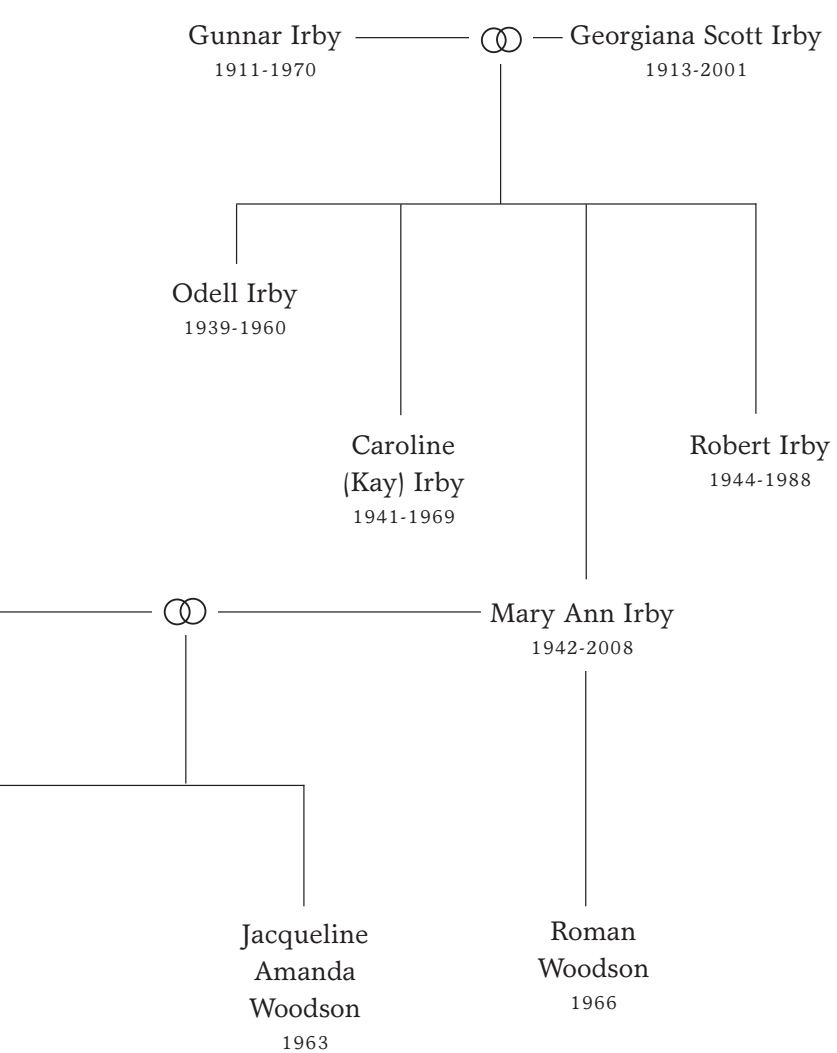
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WOODSON FAMILY TREE



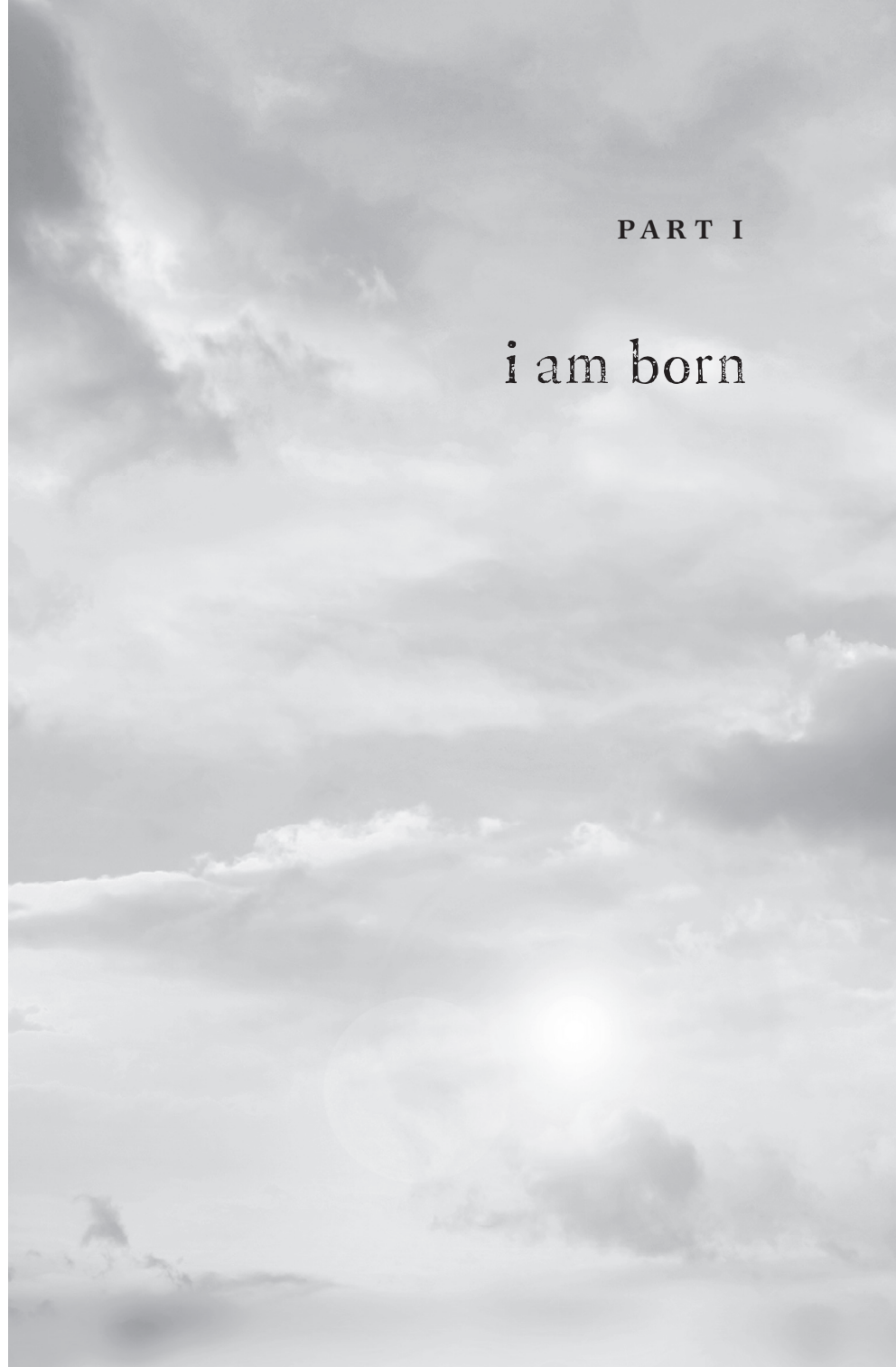
IRBY FAMILY TREE



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

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

– Langston Hughes



PART I

i am born

february 12, 1963

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

between Black and White.

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

I am born as the South explodes,
too many people too many years

enslaved, then emancipated
but not free, the people
who look like me
keep fighting
and marching
and getting killed
so that today –
February 12, 1963
and every day from this moment on,
brown children like me can grow up
free. Can grow up
learning and voting and walking and riding
wherever *we* want.

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

second daughter's second day on earth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She was six years old.

I do not know if I'll be strong like Ruby.
I do not know what the world will look like
when I am finally able to walk, speak, write . . .
Another Buckeye!
the nurse says to my mother.
Already, I am being named for this place.

Ohio. The Buckeye State.
My fingers curl into fists, automatically
This is the way, *my mother said,*
of every baby's hand.
I do not know if these hands will become
Malcolm's – raised and fisted
or Martin's – open and asking
or James's – curled around a pen.
I do not know if these hands will be
Rosa's
or Ruby's
gently gloved
and fiercely folded
calmly in a lap,
on a desk,
around a book,
ready
to change the world . . .

a girl named jack

Good enough name for me, my father said
the day I was born.
Don't see why
she can't have it, too.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the woodsons of ohio

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

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

so

ask any Woodson why
you can't go down the Woodson line
without
finding
doctors and lawyers and teachers
athletes and scholars and people in government
they'll say,

We had a head start.
They'll say,
Thomas Woodson expected the best of us.
They'll lean back, lace their fingers
across their chests,
smile a smile that's older than time, say,

Well it all started back before Thomas Jefferson
Woodson of Chillicothe . . .

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

the ghosts of the nelsonville house

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

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

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

Once, there were so many children here
running through this house
up and down the stairs, hiding under beds
and in trunks,

sneaking into the kitchen for tiny pieces
of icebox cake, cold fried chicken,
thick slices of their mother's honey ham . . .

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

But that was a long time ago.

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

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

grown up and gone now –
but wait!

Look closely:

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

Beside Alicia another picture, my father, Jack,

the oldest boy.
Eight years old and mad about something
or is it someone
we cannot see?

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

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

The children of Hope and Grace.

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

There I am . . .

Beginning.

it'll be scary sometimes

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

1832.

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

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

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

His son was sent to Nelsonville
lived with an aunt

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

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

no one there is like you.

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

football dreams

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

My father dreamed football dreams,
and woke to a scholarship
at Ohio State University.
Grown now
living the big-city life
in Columbus
just sixty miles
from Nelsonville
and from there
Interstate 70 could get you
on your way west to Chicago
Interstate 77 could take you south

but my father said
no coloured Buckeye in his right mind
would ever want to go there.

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

other people's memory

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

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

You came in the late afternoon, my mother said.
Two days after I turned twenty-two.
Your father was at work.
Took a rush hour bus
trying

to get to you. But
by the time he arrived,
you were already here.
He missed the moment, my mother said,
but what else is new.

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

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

no returns

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

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

how to listen #1

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

uncle odell

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

When the phone rang in the Nelsonville house,
maybe my mother was out hanging laundry
on the line or down in the kitchen
speaking softly with her mother-in-law, Grace, missing
her own mama back home.
Maybe the car was packed and ready for the drive
back to Columbus – the place my father
called the Big City – now *their* home.
But every Saturday morning, they drove
the hour to Nelsonville and stayed
till Sunday night.

Maybe right before the phone rang, tomorrow

was just another day.

But when the news of my uncle's dying

travelled from the place he fell in South Carolina,
to the cold March morning in Ohio,
my mother looked out into a grey day
that would change her forever.

Your brother

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

good news

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

my older sister,

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

In South Carolina, the phone rings.

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

Her hand on the phone now, she lifts it
praying silently

for the good news
the sweet chill of autumn
is finally bringing her way.

my mother and grace

It is the South that brings my mother
and my father's mother, Grace,
together.
Grace's family is from Greenville, too.
So my mother
is home to her, in a way her own kids
can't understand.
You know how those Woodsons are, Grace says.
The Woodsons this and the North that
making Mama smile, remember
that Grace, too, was someone else before. Remember
that Grace, like my mother, wasn't always a Woodson.

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

Both know that southern way of talking
without words, remember when
the heat of summer
could melt the mouth,
so southerners stayed quiet

looked out over the land,
nodded at what seemed like nothing
but that silent nod said everything
anyone needed to hear.

Here in Ohio, my mother and Grace
aren't afraid
of too much air between words, are happy
just for another familiar body in the room.

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

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

each winter

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

Sometimes,

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

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

Ohio

is where my father wants to be
but to my mother
Ohio will never be home,

no matter
how many plants she brings
indoors each winter, singing softly to them,
the lilt of her words a breath
of warm air moving over each leaf.
In return, they hold on to their colour
even as the snow begins to fall. A reminder
of the deep green South. A promise
of life

somewhere.

journey

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

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

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

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

greenville, south carolina, 1963

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

Sit up straight, my mother says.
She tells my brother to take his fingers
    out of his mouth.
They do what is asked of them.
Although they don't know why they have to.
This isn't Ohio, my mother says,
    as though we understand.
Her mouth a small lipsticked dash, her back

sharp as a line. DO NOT CROSS!
COLOUREDS TO THE BACK!
Step off the kerb if a white person comes toward you
don't look them in the eye. Yes sir. No sir.
    My apologies.
Her eyes straight ahead, my mother
is miles away from here.

Then her mouth softens, her hand moves gently
over my brother's warm head. He is three years old,
his wide eyes open to the world, his too-big ears
already listening. *We're as good as anybody,*
my mother whispers.

As good as anybody.

home

Soon . . .

We are near my other grandparents' house,
    small red stone,
immense yard surrounding it.
Hall Street.
A front porch swing thirsty for oil.
A pot of azaleas blooming.
A pine tree.
Red dirt wafting up
around my mother's newly polished shoes.

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

the cousins

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

Her cousins all around her – the way it was
    before she left.
The same cousins she played with as a girl.
Remember the time, they ask,

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

And she laughs, remembering it all.

On the radio, Sam Cooke is singing
    'Twistin' the Night Away'.

The cousins have come from as far away as Spartanburg
the boys dressed in skinny-legged pants,
the girls in flowy skirts that swirl out, when they spin

twisting the night away.
Cousin Dorothy's fiancé, holding tight to her hand
    as they twist
Cousin Sam dancing with Mama, ready to catch her
    if she falls, he says
and my mother remembers being a little girl,
    looking down
scared from a high-up tree
and seeing her cousin there – waiting.

I knew you weren't staying up North, the cousins say.
You belong here with us.
My mother throws her head back,
    her newly pressed and curled hair gleaming
her smile the same one she had
    before she left for Columbus.
She's MaryAnn Irby again. Georgiana and Gunnar's
    youngest daughter.

She's home.

night bus

My father arrives on a night bus, his hat in his hands.
It is May now and the rain is coming down.
    Later with the end of this rain
will come the sweet smell of honeysuckle but for now,
there is only the sky opening and my father's tears.
I'm sorry, he whispers.

This fight is over for now.

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

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

No past.

No future.

Just this perfect Now.

after greenville #1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We board the Greyhound bus, bound
for Ohio.

rivers

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

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

as though the river remembers where it belongs
    and what it belongs to,
it circles back, joins up with
    the Ohio again
    as if to say,

I'm sorry.
as if to say,
I went away from here
but now
I'm home again.

leaving columbus

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

without celebration.

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

Only one photograph.

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

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

A woman nearly six feet tall, straight-backed
and proud, heading down
a cold Columbus street, two small children
beside her and a still-crawling baby
in her arms.

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

As though we were simply guests
leaving Sunday supper.